

On Hope

An interview with Wayne Visser by Susan Goldsworthy

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What does hope mean to you?

For me, it's expectation of resilience in the face of changing circumstances. And being able to see that there is always a positive response to any situation. Hope is not entirely grounded in the situation, but is actually an attitude to whatever situation may arise.

Do you see a connection between hope and despair?

Yes. I think that despair is when you fail to either experience that resilience or see a future that is worth contributing to or working towards. It is certainly a contrast to despair. And despair nullifies hope, or at least dampens hope.

Is hope sort of necessary to lift you from despair?

I think it's even more fundamental than that. At some level, without hope, we die. And that's not necessarily physically, but our spirit dies. Our emotional state deteriorates and, ultimately, that can lead to suicide. But hope is that fundamental. If you don't see a way for your life or the future to be first tolerable and then better than it is today, then life gets pretty tough.

It's sounding like you see hope more as a necessity than a choice?

Yes. I think as human beings we're always drawn to hope, looking for hope. We use it as a way to survive and thrive. At the same time, when we're in situations where we're confronted with challenges, it can become a conscious choice to choose hope rather than despair.

Paulo Freire calls it an existential necessity of human nature.

I would agree with that. It's fundamental in that way. It is intrinsic to being human. But at the same time, there are some that have developed the habit of cultivating hope or tuning into an attitude of hope better than others.

Do you see it as more of as an emotion or as an energy or as a rational thing?

I would describe it as an outlook.

And is that emergent or is that conscious?

I think it's an interplay between the inner and the outer. Between the world that's confronting us and our sense of self and of our future self. And it's the interplay between those two things. It's probably not wholly rational or wholly emotional. It's a whole person experience which I would best describe as a perspective. It's almost a world view, or a lens through which we can view the world.

Could you share a story or experience from your life when hope's been essential for you?

I think the most obvious is having to get through the South African transition from apartheid to democracy. At numerous points, there had been a prevailing sense of hopelessness in the country. First, before the transition when things got pretty chaotic and there was a lot of violence and uncertainty. Then, perhaps not surprisingly, during the transition there was euphoria. But then a few years after, the country sank back into a state of pessimism because, of course, the social challenges and cultural challenges are immense. So we had a political miracle, but we didn't have an immediate social or economic miracle. I actually wrote a book about this called *South Africa: Reasons to Believe*, which was about bringing hope back to South Africa in the wake of the euphoria having subsided.

For you personally in that process, how does hope arise? When hope arises, for you, how does that happen? How would you describe that feeling or awareness or process?

Well, I pick up on the prevailing mood and the daily news and what's going on around me. And then I feel it as a challenge. Is it something I'll buy into? Is it something I accept? Or is it something that I feel I want to transcend or I want to even fight against. And so, I suppose it emerges as a felt need – something's that needed for the situation in order to uplift myself or those around me. You probably saw one of my recent poems, [Be an Optimist](#)?

Yes, I did.

Here I'm saying you choose to be an optimist or you choose to be hopeful, not because everything's fantastic but simply because it's a better way to be in the world. It's more productive. It's more effective. It's more joyful. And from that sense, it seems like a logical choice. It's not always easy.

Do you see a connection between action and activism and hope?

Yes. I do think that one of the best ways to kindle hope is to be active in working on solutions or on things that bring positive change. It's often when we feel completely disempowered that we are hopeless. But this is where I've always been inspired by the work of Viktor Frankl, saying that even when everything else is taken away from you, you always have the choice, in the end, about the attitude that you adopt in response to what's happening around you. I don't know if you came across it, but my PhD research was on meaning as a motivator for people working on sustainability?

Can I find it online somewhere?

Yes. I turned it into a book called *Making a Difference*. There I show that, looking at it from an existential psychology perspective, there is a real connection. Working on sustainability, which is one form of working on solutions to make things better, is extremely motivating. And the motivation is also linked to hope.

You mentioned change. So do you see it connected or necessary for change at both the individual and collective level? Is hope necessary at all? Is it a spur, a catalyst, a part, a product of change, in order to have change in the individual and collective level?

I think hope is necessary in order to take individual action that is meant to create change. And I think that hope is easier when you can see or be part of a movement that is creating societal change. But I think it's dangerous or misleading to make hope dependent on the positive social change, because we can always go backwards. There are always things that are going wrong in the

world. And there are always ways in which, despite our best efforts, things don't change for the better. And so we have to find a way to be hopeful in the face of that.

Sort of 'hope beyond hope'?

Yes. I have a recent experience of this. Normally, I'm extremely hopeful or positive. I get asked often, when I speak at conferences and so on, are you an optimist about the future? It's such a common question. And the way I answer it is always: If I look at the facts and the trends, then I'm pessimistic because so many things are going in the wrong direction, still, despite our best efforts. But if I look at all the people working on positive change, and I look at the innovations and the breakthroughs that are happening and the possibilities, then I have to be optimistic. And linked to that is my understanding of how change happens.

Can you say more about how change happens?

Well, looking from a systems thinking perspective, change happens with tipping points. So you get a lot of resistance, it's very, very gradual to begin with, but then at a certain point, the system flips or goes exponential and rapid change happens. That's what I saw in South Africa. That's what I lived through. But I've seen it with other things as well. We see it now. Two very real examples. One, what's happening with the Climate Strike movement linked to the Extinction Rebellion ...

Greta Thunberg with the school kids ...

Exactly. And the other is what's happening on plastics; the move against single plastics especially. And also what's happening on the move to plant-based diets. It's moving extremely quickly with veganism rising up from almost nowhere.

But then I would be dishonest to say that I never get bogged down. The one thing that hit me really hard very recently was the BBC documentary, *Climate Change the Facts*, with David Attenborough. Here's a case where I know many of the facts already and I've been watching this space for a long time. So I was very surprised that it hit me so hard. But I really struggled then. I suppose I fell into despair. I've had to work quite hard to then remind myself of the reasons why I'm hopeful. And a lot of that links back to the possibility of how quickly change can happen positively as well as negatively – and also innovation can really bring us solutions that we haven't even dreamed of yet.

What was it about the documentary that hit you?

Well, I think that's a lot to do with what I care about and why, for example, I became a vegetarian 30 years ago and vegan three years ago. For me, a big part of it is animal welfare. I mean, another part is the environmental impacts and there's a health dimension. But I have a strong compassion for animals. And so one of the parts of the documentary is the part with the bats in Australia, which was devastating, 11,000 of them. They just died from heat exhaustion and dehydration. So I think it's seeing that which makes it so real. Of course, I know the facts and I know the trends and I know biodiversity's being impacted. But when you see a specific example of this kind of fatality that is happening more and more often, I just found that it hit me at an emotional level.

How do you get back into a hopeful state? Because I agree with you, when you're working in this field, the more you look at it, it's very easy to get into a despaired state. And especially when you have Trump and you have Brexit ...

It isn't a kind of "snap out of it" approach, at least not for me. I find it helps to express the anxiety with people you trust, or in often my case, to express it creatively. So there was a short patch

where you see skulls appearing in my art. So I think it's important, almost in the sense of grieving. You have to say, "Well, I feel this and this is a real emotion. And it's justified." And then it's to keep working on solutions and tuning into the people who are making a difference. And reminding myself how change happens. And looking at the movements where you see these positive tipping points. And so slowly, the mood shifts and you get yourself out of it.

Would you say hope is something that comes slowly and quietly or rather loudly? How does it appear? Is it sort of stage left, creeping in and then? Or is it ta-da? How would you describe the appearance of hope?

I think it depends on your starting point, but if you're in a place of despair or darkness then hope is like that flicker of light. So it does start small, but it can be very dramatic when you spot it and you know that, okay, so this is the pathway out, or at least that I can start moving in a direction that's towards the light. So it can be a spark which is quite dramatic, but then the journey out is slow. And it's a constant journey because you get knocked back. So even if you're generally hopeful, things happen like Brexit or whatever, and you think: what's going on in the world?

Are we distracting ourselves from the real issues, or in denial?

It's a reality check. Because if I'm honest, I think part of hopefulness is also surrounding ourselves with a bubble – it's like a protective layer. So we do shield ourselves from all the bad news to maintain this positive outlook. And so sometimes you just get that reality check. And maybe that's also important as a counterbalance.

Do you see a connection between leadership and hope?

Yes. For transformational leaders, hope is what causes people to follow. The reason people followed Mandela is because he gave them hope. Of course, it's not like that for all leaders. You get different styles of leadership, and you can have an autocratic leader who's using fear rather than hope. But for the ones that are really purpose-driven, which is becoming far more prevalent in business, we see some great examples. And it is because we know very well, people want to be part of making a difference. And so the leader tunes into that and shows people that, through this organization, they can add their positive impact.

In that sense, do you see hope as relational and infectious?

Definitely infectious. Hope spreads, that's for sure. But it's also a battle. I think this is why the mythologies of the world, forever, have had the good versus evil narrative. It's the same with hope versus despair. So you're always competing against the naysayers.

Can hope be negative as well as positive? The early Greeks viewed hope as an ill, so it didn't escape Pandora's box. There is false hope that things can be different, or you can have hopes for negative outcomes that are not useful for mankind.

At a personal level, hope is just the expectation of what you see as a preferable outcome. And from somebody else's perspective, that could be a very negative outcome. Hitler hoped that his Third Reich would be successful or his Aryan race would take over the world. At the same time, I do think that for the most part, it's about people seeing their lives getting better.

The flourishing of both, in the human and society ...

Yes. And it probably also explains Trump and Brexit. That's a manifestation of people who lost hope because their lives didn't get better for a generation. And they felt like the only people benefiting from globalization and from all the changes going on in the world were the elite. And so, I think that's interesting. On the issue of false hope, there is naivety, which we could say is related to hope, but hope in the face of something completely unrealistic. But even then, I don't know that it matters.

Frankl would say there is a difference, between those that retain some sense of hope or a positive attitude versus those that didn't. Even in the moments of worst situation imaginable.

Yes. But even if it's naivety, it depends on what perspective you're looking from. If you're looking at it from the collective perspective, to say, has this hope resulted in a better outcome for others? Then you can have certain people who are hopeful for certain things. And you can look from the outside and say, well, that was ridiculous. And that was naivety, not a kind of useful hope. But then from the perspective of the individual, maybe it doesn't matter.

Maybe Mandela's hope would have been seen as naive and ridiculous when he was in prison. If he said, "I see a world where I'm President of a united South Africa," people are going, "You're nuts".

Right. And we'll all have a different view on this. From my perspective, I think it's a naive hope to expect that God will solve our problems or intervene or be on our side in a war. But from a subjective individual point of view, it's still a positive emotion that allows people to live in a more affirmative way, and to cope sometimes. So it's still a positive experience for them.

Do you see hope in terms of time? If you think about the times that you felt hope, is it present tense? Is hope in the present? Is it also in the future? How would you describe hope in the sense of where it exists in time?

I think that hope is always, in my experience, related to the future expectations. It can only be experienced in the present, but I think it's always created by or in anticipation of something changing in the future; being better in the future.

And if you thought about the movement of hope, is it a forward movement? Is it an upward movement? How would you view it? As hope, as it was moving?

I think we're playing with metaphysics if we do this, but I think it's forward and upwards and inwards is how I would see it.

And inwards as well?

Yes. Because for me, hope is also about connecting to a sense of self, of wholeness as a person, and of resilience as an individual. So it requires a tuning in as well as a moving forward or moving up.

Sort of tuning into the Buddha nature within us; the more deep, spiritual part.

Yes. It's a mindfulness, is how I would describe it. And that doesn't have to be spiritual. It can just be being mindful of who you are and how strong and resilient you are. Things you've faced, challenges you've managed to overcome. So I suppose it is a grounding to your own life experience and your own identity, a reminder of how you're able to cope because you've coped before. But also

in the mindfulness sense of becoming quiet, just trying to quiet the noise and see through the clutter and reach a point of centeredness where you're able to make less panicked or swayed decisions.

A couple of weird questions for you. If it was a colour, what colour would it be for you? What colour is hope?

The one that flashed in my mind, as you said it, was yellow, which I think is probably a common association. Brightness. But then if I reflect a bit more deeply, green figures quite strongly because of my work and where I find my own inspiration. That's sort of *shinrin-yoku*, forest bathing. My place of sanctuary or peace is always in the forest. And where I see a lot of the despair is the loss of life on earth and that's a loss of the green on the planet. I associate a greening of things, of the earth, of the space around us, of our homes, as being something I would find hopeful, representing life and fertility and growth.

And if it was an item of clothing, what would it be?

Here, the first thing that came to mind was shoes. Because for me, hope is the ability to take control of your own actions and to move towards something that you're trying to achieve. And so the ability to step out. And funny enough, I saw more like sandals. It's probably because I was just looking at a vegan fashion boutique and they had Birkenstocks.

So two more weird ones. If it was a creature, either living or mythical, what would it be?

I'm going to resist the temptation to go for bird. I've always had a strong link to elephants. They've become sort of a totem for me over the years, and I've written a lot about it as well. In my first book, I used elephants as a metaphor for the kind of organizations that we should be shaping up. And so, I find elephants very inspiring. I would hang onto them as a symbol of hope. I would be hopeful if we could behave more the way that elephants do – they are, of course, highly intelligent; they're matriarchal; they communicate all the time infrasonically; they're very social and community-oriented; and they're associated with wisdom.

What metaphor best illustrates hope for you?

That's an interesting one. Origami. I was thinking of origami cranes because they've been associated with the aftermath of Hiroshima. Since then, there's just been millions and millions of these paper cranes made, mainly by the Japanese themselves, whenever they commemorate and remember. But also, thousands of others send these cranes as well. Of course, there's the symbol of the bird again. And then rising, literally, from the flames in this case. But to me, it's that expression of an inextinguishable hope following the worst possible catastrophe you could imagine. So if human beings can still respond in this way, that in itself is a symbol of hope.

What stimulates hope for you?

Probably at the risk of repeating myself now, but for me, whenever I see compassionate people who are making a difference to the lives of others, both human and non-human, that always gives me hope in humanity. But then for me, of course, it's a lot more focused in my work. So it's when I see breakthrough technologies and innovators and innovations that look like they could bring scalable solutions to many of our problems. It's when I see movements, social movements, such as those we've mentioned, really starting to catch fire, to take off. Seeing those movements and how rapidly they can happen. It just reaffirms that belief in how change can happen, that tipping points are not always negative.

So tipping points don't always have to be negative ones?

Yes. That would be the larger philosophical point. What gives me hope is this deeper and deeper understanding of life as an interconnected whole. Systems thinking. I just started writing a book called *Holism*, where I'm going to really explore that in more detail. So to understand that even if, individually, we don't feel like we make a huge impact, when groups are moving in a common direction, they can sway a whole group. This is the idea of flocking. That gives me hope.

Would that link to what your hopes are for yourself?

I think for myself, they're far more selfish [laughter]. The three words I've put at the top of my biography are *idea-monger*, *storyteller*, and *meme-weaver*. So my hopes for myself are to do those three things more effectively. I've written, I think it's 29 books now. I lose count. So one hope would be to have one book that really goes viral and becomes a global best-seller, because then it's linked to my sense of making an impact, which is where a lot of my hope comes from as well. So most of those kinds of hopes for myself are about a belief that ideas can change the world. They're not the only thing that changes the world, but if you package ideas right, and you tell them as stories, they can become memes, sort of social DNA, and then the world can change. And so I want to be part of that kind of change.

And what are your hopes for humanity?

It's definitely something about living in a more interconnected way and creating a fairer society. And being more compassionate. Because as a civilization, I think we have some terrible blind spots on that.

Where do you feel hope, physically?

Somewhere rising up in the chest area. Something like that.

Do you think hope can be learned?

I think recognizing and kindling hope as a habit can be learned. But I think hope itself is endemic and inherent to human beings. So everyone has hope, and you don't have to try very hard to teach people. But I think it's more having the discipline of hope by which I mean, the habit of hope. Maybe there are some techniques or some tips that people can share with others.

It links back to what you said about resilience. You see it as very tightly linked, coupled with resilience.

Yes. And linked also to applying or tuning into hope. It doesn't come so naturally, necessarily, so that's where having some reminders or some techniques or some sort of aphorisms to live by can help.

What do you see is the difference between optimism and hope?

I'm more critical of optimism because the way most people see optimism is something more like being positive no matter what and always seeing the bright side; ignoring the facts or the reality, being blind. So in this sense, I align far more with Hans Rosling, who wrote *Factfulness*. He always talks about being a *possibilist* rather than an optimist. And that's how I see it as well. It's the belief

that things are possible, which to me is far closer to hope than to optimism. So it's to be able to see through or get through the noise and see through the clutter.

And what reflections do you have about hope, based on this conversation?

Well, I think it's wonderful that it's being approached as a line of inquiry, because I do think it is so fundamental, and I would love to see more of it put back into the work that I do, and the scholarship around the work that I do. In general there's a lack of work on the psychology, including the links between psychology and sustainability. I think hope is one really important element of that.

It just triggers for me another realization I had at some point, which is that sometimes despair comes from putting other people in our shoes, or believing that what we see as a loss or as a negative situation will be the same for others. So here I'm thinking especially about the generational perspective, that we can get very sad about everything that we've lost in the world, and species going extinct. But actually, the younger generation, because they might never have experienced it, they don't feel any sense of loss.

Kind of like the Dodo. I mean, we know it went extinct, but we never knew it anyway, so ...

Yes. I had two insights from others on this. One from George Monbiot, who calls this 'shifting baseline syndrome'. The England that the people are trying to protect and get all emotional about is actually a highly degraded farming environment. I mean, it's fields of sheep grazing pasture, which is nothing like nature as it truly was. But because that was their baseline, that's what they grew up with, that's what they want to protect.

The other was from another author, whose work I love and who I got to know a little bit and met a few times, Charles Handy. And you know his book, *The Hungry Spirit*, is about meaning and purpose. One of the things that he said to me in an interview was that he grew up at the time of the First World War. And he said, "People looking back and say, 'that must have been terrible'. Actually, the spirit at the time, at least in the lead up to the war, was excitement. We were going to defeat a terrible enemy of freedom." So we impose our imagination on something, when people experiencing it may experience it very differently, even if it seemed like a dark period of history.

South Africa had a long, dark period. And then even now, it's still got lots of troubles. But for quite a few years, they were in the top three of the most optimistic countries in the world, which is crazy if you look at the problems. I mean, it is now the most unequal society in the world. But sometimes the way people experience it is different. So we have to be careful. My main point was that we should be careful when feeling despair over how other people might be experiencing things. And realize that it's probably more a loss for us than for a next generation who will experience something else.

That's a really interesting. That's a different perspective. Well, wonderful. Thank you so much. I really appreciate it. It's been fabulous.

Article reference

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