

A Brief History of Hope in the Modern West

My generation has grown up in a world where the real possibility of massive destruction of the planet was plausible every day. As a child in the late 1960s and '70s, I would awaken each morning with a sense that it could be our last, for it all might disappear with one press of a button. Throughout my generation, the Doomsday Clock, now at five minutes to midnight,¹ has stood as a symbol of the time in which we live. It is a reminder of how close we are to self-inflicted global disaster and how powerless the average citizen feels to do much about it. It tells us that future destruction is just minutes away. Only through the stories of parents and grandparents can my generation imagine a planet without disaster hanging over it on a massive scale. Living in the context of such global threat is a truly novel phenomenon in history and raises many questions about the possibility to hope in a time such as ours. While other eras and contexts have faced struggles in purpose, meaning, and the possibility of hope, there is something new in the struggle to hope in the face of such global destructive possibilities, especially as this relates to the narrative of hope in the modern West.

What does hope mean these days when it is difficult to find our bearings in the present, much less in the future? What does hope mean when economies are collapsing, when more and more people live in poverty and violence, when our vulnerability as societies has been torn open by the unpredictability of terrorism, when helplessness in the face of the world's problems has become a way of life for many? How can we hope when there no longer seems to be a way for us to share dreams and to speak collectively about the possibilities for a better

1. The Doomsday Clock is a symbolic clock, overseen by the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* at the University of Chicago. The most recent resetting, at five minutes to midnight, was made on January 14, 2013. See www.thebulletin.org.

future? Some have suggested that we have come to the end of hope: that people today have lost a sense of a transcendent vision for the future, a shared sense of meaning and a commitment to common ends. The larger institutions that formerly shaped our shared sense of identity, purpose, and meaning—the church and the governing bodies—no longer earn our trust. This loss, they argue, has resulted in an inability to hope.²

Related to this, we are at a time when cultural critics, postmodern thinkers, and increasingly the public at large are suspicious of metanarratives, the grand stories that seek to articulate a larger meaning within which we find ourselves. “That is not my experience,” is a common refrain in reaction to perceived attempts to speak on behalf of any collective *we*. The concern is that metanarratives attempt to normalize human *experiences* into a universal human *experience* such that many people are rendered invisible, many voices are silenced. The postmodern critique of metanarratives grows from a commitment to resist the oppression of such totalizing narratives as this is played out in the stories we tell about ourselves—who we are and what we are made for. This rejection of metanarratives has been profoundly important for opening up space for people and communities to name and claim their own stories and meanings, and it powerfully resists oppressive ways of thinking, speaking, and being, but many believe this rejection also has profound implications for hope and hopelessness and how these are lived out in our midst.

Andrew Delbanco argues that “human beings need to organize inchoate sensations amid which we pass our days—pain, desire, pleasure, fear—into a story. When that story leads somewhere and helps to navigate through life to its inevitable terminus in death, it gives us hope. And if such a sustaining narrative establishes itself over time in the minds of a substantial number of people we call it culture.”³ Following Delbanco, Emily Griesinger and the authors whom she represents insist that narratives frame our sense of meaning and enable ways to interpret fundamental questions of existence: “Who am I? Why am I here? Given life’s difficulties—evil, suffering, death—how shall I respond, act, live?”⁴ Yet we find ourselves at a time when all narratives that seek to point to larger meanings and shared experience are viewed with suspicion and deconstructed before their meanings can be absorbed. How can hope exist when there is no way to understand our lives within a larger narrative than that of our own

2. See Emily Griesinger and Mark Eaton, eds., *The Gift of Story: Narrating Hope in a Postmodern World* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006); Andrew Delbanco, *The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

3. Delbanco, *The Real American Dream*, 1.

4. Griesinger and Eaton, *The Gift of Story*, x.

making, when there is no means by which to shape shared expectancy into the future?

There are others who come at the failure of hope from a different perspective. They agree that hope has come to an end in modernity, but this failure, they argue, marks the end of a false version of hope and opens the possibility for truer and deeper hope to emerge. Douglas John Hall is persuasive in his insistence that the end of hope as is has been known in modernity actually opens up space for authentic hope to be discovered. Following Kierkegaard and others, Hall identifies the crisis of hope in terms of the relationship of present experience to future expectation. Since images of the future have been darkened by the threats under which we live, there is no way to see into the future, so there is no way to live with hope in the present. Hopelessness abounds precisely because we have no way to hope outside the narrative of modernity and its story of progress through human agency that guides us into the future. The fact that hope as espoused in the modern metanarrative has been found out (so to speak), he argues, is better than living in the falseness of modern hope that could never be realized. In deconstructing modernity's triumphalistic narrative of hope by way of the theology of the cross, he explores possibilities of true hope that emerge in the face of the fragility, vulnerability, and brokenness of human life and history.⁵

Some philosophers, theologians, and literary critics have tracked the emergence of the metanarrative of modernity.⁶ Much has been made of modernity's shift away from premodern ways of seeing the world and how this has affected notions of hope as it is understood collectively. The general story of hope in the West goes something like this: With modernity, there was a gradual but vast shift away from the enchanted universe of premodernity and to scientific methods that prioritized what could be measured by humans. No longer was truth (or hope, for that matter) considered to reside in a transcendent dimension that was unknowable except by faith mediated through the church. In modernity, truth became accessible primarily through scientific

5. See Douglas John Hall, *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989).

6. See, for example Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart, *Hope against Hope: Christian Eschatology at the Turn of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); Delbanco, *The Real American Dream*; George Grant, *Time as History*, 1969 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995); Griesinger and Eaton, *The Gift of Story*; Hall, *Thinking the Faith*; Flora Keshgegian, *Time for Hope: Practices for Living in Today's World* (New York: Continuum International, 2006); Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: Norton, 1991); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

reason. Indeed, within modernity, there were some reactions to the prioritizing of reason over other aspects of human experience; in particular, some emphasized feeling,⁷ and others doing.⁸ But one way or the other, in modernity it became a given that truth could be *discovered* through human effort, ingenuity, and experience. This shift from premodernity to modernity has been described as a movement wherein the eternal transcendent dimension of premodernity was eclipsed from the knowing and experience of modern reality.⁹ Religion—or understandings of reality that included dimensions beyond that which is perceivable, understandings of reality that bound the world together—was relegated to the private sphere, no longer part of shared public discourse or thought.

Scientific methods sought to demystify the world, seeking out truth that could be found by human abilities in facts that were waiting to be discovered. As human use of scientific reason developed, new things and new ways of using things were discovered. Gradually the world—once a place of fierce beauty, awe, and terror—came to be known primarily for the resources it offered for human consumption and comfort. Forests, lakes, rocks, and fields became valuable primarily as resources for human use through technology and science, not as part of creation, loved into being by a gracious Creator. Some have described this as the dominance of “technological reason,”¹⁰ wherein the truth, beauty, and goodness of a thing could be understood only in terms of the thing’s utility and usefulness. Human control and mastery over these things, now called *resources*, enabled science to manipulate nature in order to make new and better things that would enable human progress into the future. Human control and mastery over the human condition itself would also enable this progress.

What does this have to do with hope? Basically, with the modern eclipse of transcendence, notions of collective hope became associated with what is possible through human agency and mastery. Rather than hope being placed outside history, in a transcendent God who would make all things right at

7. Generally, in theological circles, Friedrich Schleiermacher is associated with the focus on feeling as an essential aspect of human experience through which humans can know and can access truth. He is embedded within the larger Romanticism movement of Europe during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As well, he is an important part of the pietism movement within the Reformed German church of that time.

8. Generally, Karl Marx and other revolutionary movements are associated with a priority placed on action, doing, and making change happen.

9. See, for example, George Grant, *Philosophy in the Mass Age* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995, repr., 1959).

10. See, for example, George Grant, *Technology and Justice* (Toronto: Anansi, 1986). See also Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Vintage, 1969).

the end of time, in heaven or in a renewed earth (as the case may be), hope was placed firmly in history and humanity's ability to make history happen—to create a better future. *Hope within history* meant that hope was considered to be a human-directed endeavor rather than a transcendent reality. It meant that hope would be powered by human dreams of the future that, in turn, would propel people forward in action. Hope's object was concrete, measurable, and outcome based. Hope's mechanism was human agency. Hope's means and assurance were mastery over human and nonhuman nature to bring the future into being.

Perhaps the most helpful shorthand way to unpack the relationship between hope and history as it has been construed in modernity is to draw on Karl Marx and his oft-cited critique of religion. Marx argued that religion functioned as the “opiate of the people.”¹¹ What he meant by this is that with religion, humans place their hope in divine agency to grant eternal salvation in an afterlife, rather than placing hope in the power of people to change their circumstance in the here and now. He was particularly critical of the pie-in-the-sky promise of heavenly reward for earthly obedience, which kept people subservient to the powers that be and enabled oppression, suffering, and the status quo to continue unchecked. Marx, representing strong currents in modernity, sought to situate hope firmly in history, as the product and goal of human agency and desire to change the world.

Assumptions of progress became embedded within the modern narrative of hope. The philosopher Hegel is among those most commonly associated with giving voice to this notion of progress. Marx built on Hegel's work by emphasizing humans as agents and masters of history, rather than Hegel's spiritualized historicism that identified a Spirit-led progressive movement in history in which Spirit was working its purposes through humanity.¹² Modern ideas of hope in history imagined a progressive linear notion of time into the future wherein things would get better and better. Knowledge would build on knowledge, science on science, until we would create a world resembling something like heaven on earth or utopia. There was a sense of inevitability about it. What has been coined the “religion of progress”¹³ enabled people to

11. This is a phrase coined by Marx in introduction to *A Contribution to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, in *German-French Annals* (Paris, Deutsch Französische Jahrbücher, 1844).

12. See G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller with foreword and analysis by J. N. Findlay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

13. See Harris Athanasiadis, *George Grant and the Theology of the Cross: The Christian Foundation of his Thought* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 141. George Grant and those influenced by Grant use the term “religion of progress” frequently to refer to the religion that plays the flatterer of modernity.

think of hope in terms of optimism—optimism about the future and optimism about the ends toward which human beings are capable.

Several thinkers, writing at the end of modernity, argue that the major problems with the modern narrative are manifested in its assumptions about who people are and what humans are made for, based on a universe without God.¹⁴ Because the narrative is wrong about this, it cannot help but turn in on itself, which is something, they argue, we can see happening all around us, recognizable in the “data of despair.”¹⁵ The modern dream assumes an optimistic view of human nature and history and posits that humans exist to be masters of the world and that the goal of human life is to master and change the world, that it might more fully become what we want it to become—whether that means the kingdom of God, the perfect socialist state, or the ideal democracy. Because there was optimism about the human condition and history, it was appropriate to place hope in human and historical terms. It was not a problem for humans to be masters of the earth, because of the optimistic view of the human condition. It was not a problem for progress to be the natural way of history, because of the optimistic view of history. This identity as masters included the idea that all that exists is intended to be mastered by humans to be used for human purposes. Such purposes would inevitably feed the flourishing of all of life on the planet and beyond.

Some have noted that North America more than any other region in the world has internalized this modern dream in its self-understanding;¹⁶ consequently, at the end of modernity, this region is facing a greater crisis with the fragmentation of this dream. This is particularly evident in the crisis of hope in North America. Part of the North American version of the modern dream is to see itself as the “New World” full of endless possibilities—a promised land. This New World mythology and the way it feeds modern notions of hope are perpetuated in every generation with the arrival of new immigrants and refugees seeking a better life. At the same time, however, the New World myth has been a powerful narrative that has silenced those who have not experienced a promised land: the first peoples, whose land and ways of life were stolen by those claiming it as the New World, and those brought to North American shores by force to work as slaves. The breaking down of the

14. Some examples include the work of Douglas John Hall, George Grant, Christopher Lasch, and others.

15. Douglas John Hall uses this term throughout his corpus. See for example, Douglas John Hall, *The Reality of the Gospel and the Unreality of the Churches* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 176.

16. See George Grant, “In Defence of North America,” in *Technology and Empire* (Toronto: Anansi, 1969), 17–19; Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 11–12, 77ff.

dominant metanarrative has enabled other stories to come forward while also raising important questions as to the possibilities for shared narratives of hope in the North American context.

Certainly the history-making impulse of modernity to change the world has brought incredible benefits to many humans on several fronts: medical treatments, housing, access to water, electricity, and transportation. As well, this modern version of hope has inspired efforts to develop technologies and economic plans that seek to diminish suffering and to move toward a goal of human flourishing for all. This history-making spirit has opened up possibilities for democracy and how we govern ourselves. Yes, placing our hope in history and in the achievements of human agency has served many humans in many ways.

However, as the Doomsday Clock demonstrates, we also find ourselves in the second decade of the twenty-first century having lived the most violent of centuries, having produced the most violent of weapons, having ravaged the earth in ways that may be irreparable. The grand hopes of modernity's dream have been dashed by the massive suffering of the last century and by the oppressive silencing of many. Modernity's hope in human achievement has been crushed by the cries from gas and torture chambers, from refugee camps and war zones, from tar sands and nuclear meltdowns. The same history-making spirit that promised an end to suffering through human ingenuity and science has brought on suffering on a grander and more global scale. The metanarrative of hope in history has fallen in on itself, and we find ourselves as a species surrounded by the fragments of modernity's dream.

When hope is at its end, how then do we hope? This is a question to which many thinkers and people of faith have given their minds. As suggested earlier, Douglas Hall responds to this question by shifting the focus. He explores how the present experience of hopelessness marks the beginning of the possibility for authentic hope. For him and other theologians of the cross, the character of hope for our context is recognizable at the end of hope, waiting at the foot of the cross, trusting the One who brings new life unexpectedly when all hope is dead.¹⁷

17. Others who follow a similar argument include George Grant, *Technology and Justice*; Alan E. Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); Pamela R. McCarroll, *Waiting at the Foot of the Cross: Toward a Theology of Hope for Today* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014); Jürgen Moltmann, *The Theology of Hope*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1965); Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010); Sharon G. Thornton, *Broken yet Beloved: A Pastoral Theology of the Cross* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2002).

In considering the possibility of hope for today, Canadian theologian, activist and writer Mary Jo Leddy has described the situation something like this: In modernity, we thought history was a road map. Looking down, we saw the complete story—we could see where we were headed, and we knew how to get there. The road map showed us. Hope was pervasive. The road ahead was clear. Now we have discovered that we are not actually looking down from above, but rather we are embedded in the world, walking at night, without a road map, and we are not sure where we are heading. We have only a small flashlight that can show us where to place our next step, but that is it. Hope, she describes, is small but present in the light of the flashlights, the willingness to trust, to talk to each other, and to take steps in the dark.¹⁸

Philosopher Jonathan Lear in his book *Radical Hope* explores the character of hope through reflection on the life of Plenty Coups, the last chief of the Crow nation, at the time when everything fell apart and nothing made sense anymore. Lear considers the possibility of hope in the face of absolute abyss and cultural devastation of the Crow nation. Later in life, when Plenty Coups describes the destruction of the lives of his people, he says, “When the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground and they could not lift them up again. After this,” he says, “nothing happened.”¹⁹ It is precisely this point—that of a people faced with the end of their way of life—that prompts Lear’s exploration of hope. “After this nothing happened.” He asks, “How should we face the possibility that our civilization might collapse?”²⁰ How can we live with the meaning of this kind of vulnerability of the human condition? Lear considers hope as it exists invisibly beneath narratives of meaning, in the very beingness of what is and a waiting upon what will be. He considers how, in the face of cultural devastation and disorientation that is part of the experience of living today, we can draw from the life of Plenty Coups a way to hope in the face of the abyss and the devastation of life.

These images of hope conjure up some distinct though related elements regarding the character of hope for the living of these days: hope is seen in the posture of waiting at the foot of the cross, in a flashlight, in steps and conversation in the dark, in surviving and existing in the midst of abyss. All of these images of hope share a focus on trust and faith, on being and

18. Mary Jo Leddy’s image is unpublished and presented as part of her lecture at the 2010 Kairos Conference. The metaphor and description is used with permission.

19. Quoted from Frank B. Linderman, *Plenty-Coups: Chief of the Crows* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), 308–309. Quoted in Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 2.

20. Lear, *Radical Hope*, 2.

embeddedness, on humility and a much smaller scope of vision than that previously assumed. They all share a focus on hope—hope that starts in infinite particularity, hope that *is what it is* and does not need to feed some larger knowable totality of hope.

What Hall, Leddy, and Lear describe imagistically in terms of the shift from grand narratives of hope to more tentative, humble, trust-based narratives is reflected in the methodological shift taking place within disciplines across the academy and in public discourse. The common response to the breakdown of metanarratives is to develop more local, embedded, particular narratives that invite difference and plurality of meanings and take seriously the diversities of social context, experience, relationships, and so on. A central theological assumption of this methodological shift presupposes that as humans, embedded in creation, we cannot have (nor do we need) access to a “big picture” narrative of human life and history. Rather, this shift intimates that it is in the smaller narratives—the stories of communities, families, and individuals—that possibilities of transcendence, of otherness meeting otherness, are revealed in all sorts of veiled particularity. Indeed, the narratives within which we live are important, for they shape our sense of identity, purpose, and meaning in life. The methodological shift is to more porous, dialogical narrative possibilities that open to otherness and difference and to the unexpected possibility of transcendence.

In terms of hope, implicit in this methodological shift is the affirmation that the end of modernity’s metanarrative of hope does not mean that hope ceases to exist. Indeed, people of faith affirm that hope has a transcendent source that will ultimately defy totalizing attempts to master it, even stories of its end. Instead, the end of this metanarrative invites us to dig deeply into multiple narratives that reflect hope’s diverse and dynamic presence and movement in life—present and past, in stories of human experience, in theology and the social sciences, and in sacred texts. It is in recovering smaller, more local and multiple narratives that the contours of hope can emerge as complexity that defies all totalizing attempts. Such complexity, ambiguity, and even contradiction together point beyond to a transcendent source of hope that cannot be mastered or narrated by human agency but nonetheless can be recognized in stories of human lives.

The multiplicity of meanings present in understandings of hope in the pastoral and practical theological literature, outlined in chapter 2, point to the multivalence of hope and the extent to which hope becomes possible and present in lived experience in ways that defy all attempts to delimit and circumscribe it. Further, the narratives of hope outlined in chapters 3 through 7 present concrete and, at times, conflicting ways hope is experienced in life. By

inductively focusing on very particular narratives of hope in the face of endings and crises, this book responds to the crisis of hope in modernity, suggests of a way forward for research and writing on hope, and also seeks to inspire readers to interrogate their own narratives for hope's presence in unexpected moments and situations.