Looking into Darkness

On January 18, 1915, six months into the First World War, as all Europe was convulsed by killing and dying, Virginia Woolf wrote in her journal, “The future is dark, which is on the whole, the best thing the future can be, I think.” Dark, she seems to be saying, as inscrutable, not as terrible. We often mistake the one for the other. Or we transform the future’s unknowability into something certain, the fulfillment of all our dread, the place beyond which there is no way forward. But again and again, far stranger things happen than the end of the world.

Who, two decades ago, could have imagined a world in which the Soviet Union had vanished and the Internet had arrived? Who then dreamed that the political prisoner Nelson Mandela would become president of a transformed South Africa? Who foresaw the resurgence of the indigenous world of which the Zapatista uprising in southern Mexico is only the most visible face? Who, four decades ago, could have conceived of the changed status
of all who are nonwhite, nonmale, or nonstraight, the wide-open conversations about power, nature, economies, and ecologies?

There are times when it seems as though not only the future but the present is dark: few recognize what a radically transformed world we live in, one that has been transformed not only by such nightmares as global warming and global capital, but by dreams of freedom and of justice—and transformed by things we could not have dreamed of. We adjust to changes without measuring them, we forget how much the culture has changed. The US Supreme Court ruled in favor of gay rights on a grand scale last summer, a ruling inconceivable a few decades ago. What accretion of incremental, imperceptible changes made that possible, and how did they come about? And so we need to hope for the realization of our own dreams, but also to recognize a world that will remain wilder than our imaginations.

Twenty-one years ago this June, a million people gathered in New York City’s Central Park to demand a nuclear freeze. They didn’t get it. The freeze movement was full of people who believed they’d realize their goal in a few years and then go home. They were motivated by a story line in which the world would be made safe—safe for, among other things, going home from activism. Many went home disappointed or burned out, though some are still doing great work. But in less than a decade, major

nuclear arms reductions were negotiated, helped along by European antinuclear movements and the impetus they gave the Soviet Union’s last prime minister, Mikhail Gorbachev. Since then, the issue has fallen off the map and we have lost much of what was gained. The United States never ratified the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which could have put an end to nuclear weapons development and proliferation. Instead, the arms race continues as new nations go nuclear, and the current Bush administration is planning to resume the full-fledged nuclear testing halted in 1991, to resume development of a new generation of nuclear weapons, to expand the arsenal, and perhaps even to use it in once-proscribed ways. The activism of the freeze era cut itself short, with a fixed vision and an unrealistic timeline, not anticipating that the Cold War would come to an end at the close of the decade. They didn’t push hard enough or stay long enough to collect the famous peace dividend, and so there was none.

It’s always too soon to go home. And it’s always too soon to calculate effect. I once read an anecdote by someone involved in Women’s Strike for Peace (WSP), the first great antinuclear movement in the United States, the one that did contribute to a major victory: the end, in 1963, of aboveground of nuclear testing and so, of the radioactive fallout that was showing up in mother’s milk and baby teeth (and to the fall of the House UnAmerican Activities Committee, the Homeland Security Department of its
day. Positioning themselves as housewives and using humor as their weapon, they made HUAC’s anticommu-
nist interrogations look ridiculous.) The woman from 
WSP told of how foolish and futile she had felt standing 
in the rain one morning protesting at the Kennedy White 
House. Years later she heard Dr. Benjamin Spock—who 
had become one of the most high-profile activists on the 
issue—say that the turning point for him was spotting a 
small group of women standing in the rain, protesting at 
the White House. If they were so passionately com-
mitted, he thought, he should give the issue more consid-
eration himself.

Causes and effects assume history marches forward, but 
history is not an army. It is a crab scuttling sideways, a drip 
of soft water wearing away stone, an earthquake breaking 
centuries of tension. Sometimes one person inspires a 
movement, or her words do decades later; sometimes a 
few passionate people change the world; sometimes they 
start a mass movement and millions do; sometimes those 
millions are stirred by the same outrage or the same ideal 
and change comes upon us like a change of weather. All 
that these transformations have in common is that they 
begin in the imagination, in hope. To hope is to gamble. 
It’s to bet on the future, on your desires, on the possibility 
that an open heart and uncertainty are better than gloom 
and safety. To hope is dangerous, and yet it is the opposite 
of fear, for to live is to risk.

Hope in the Dark

I say all this to you because hope is not like a lottery 
ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky. I say 
this because hope is an ax you break down doors with in an 
emergency; because hope should shove you out the door, 
because it will take everything you have to steer the future 
away from endless war, from the annihilation of the earth’s 
treasures and the grinding down of the poor and marginal. 
Hope just means another world might be possible, not 
promised, not guaranteed. Hope calls for action; action is 
impossible without hope. At the beginning of his massive 
1930s treatise on hope, the German philosopher Ernst 
Bloch wrote, “The work of this emotion requires people 
who throw themselves actively into what is becoming, to 
which they themselves belong.” To hope is to give yourself 
to the future, and that commitment to the future makes the 
present inhabitable.

Anything could happen, and whether we act or not has 
everything to do with it. Though there is no lottery ticket 
for the lazy and the detached, for the engaged there is a 
tremendous gamble for the highest stakes right now. I say 
this to you not because I haven’t noticed that this country 
has strayed close to destroying itself and everything it once 
stood for in pursuit of empire in the world and the erad-
ication of democracy at home, that our civilization is close 
to destroying the very nature on which we depend—the 
oceans, the atmosphere, the uncounted species of plant 
and insect and bird. I say it because I have noticed: wars
will break out, the planet will heat up, species will die out, but how many, how hot, and what survives depends on whether we act. The future is dark, with a darkness as much of the womb as of the grave.

In this book, I want to propose a new vision of how change happens; I want to count a few of the victories that get overlooked; I want to assess the wildly changed world we inhabit; I want to throw out the crippling assumptions with which many activists proceed. I want to start over, with an imagination adequate to the possibilities and the strangeness and the dangers on this earth in this moment.

Other Ways of Telling

In a photograph, four men lift a two-year-old girl from the rubble of the May 2003 Algerian earthquake as if they were midwives delivering her into the world. The camera of the photographer, Jerome Delay, peers down so that we see mostly the top of the men’s heads and their outstretched arms. The girl, Emilie Kaidi, looks up with a grave and open face, ready to be born again into this world that nearly buried her. A lock of black hair cuts across one wide eye to touch her mouth. The photograph isn’t really news; the earthquake that killed more than 1,400 Algerians was only a small item here; what happened to her was neither caused by nor overtly affects our own actions. The photograph was probably on the front page of the San Francisco Chronicle because it’s such a beautiful composition and because the expression on her face is so miraculous, this trust and seriousness from a girl who survived because she called for her mother for two days. It was her cries that let these volunteers from Spain whose hands look so huge locate her.
And when I look at the photograph now, yellowed from months on my refrigerator, I realize that it struck me because of another image that was everywhere that April of 2003: the photograph of Ali Ismaail Abbas, the twelve-year-old Iraqi boy who lost his father, his pregnant mother, fourteen other family members, and both of his arms to American bombing in Baghdad. He, too, had a beautiful face and seemed strangely composed in the most widely seen photograph, looking back at us—from whom came the bombs to mutilate him and make him an orphan. And in the photographs he was alone, though someone must have pulled him, too, from the rubble.

The photograph of Ali Abbas was news. The photograph of Emilie Kaidi was not. What happened to him happened because of politics, because news is about what went wrong, because he tells us about our own effect in the world as she does not. He became an emblem of what we know, of barbarism and brutality, but what is she an emblem of? Surprise? Trust? Hope? The philosopher Alphonso Lingis says, “Hope is hope against the evidence. Hope arises in a break with the past. There is a kind of cut and the past is let go of. There is a difference between simple expectation and hope. One could say ‘because I see this is the way things are going, this is the way things have developed, I expect this to happen’; expectation is based on the pattern you see in the past . . . . I think that hope is a kind of birth—it doesn’t come out of what went before, it comes out in spite of what went before. Abruptly there’s a break and there’s an upsurge of hope, something turned toward the future.”

Cynicism and despair are predicated on a prophesy of more of the same, or of decline and fall. Every generation believes it has arrived at some final state of awareness about justice, about politics, about possibility, and then that state implodes or is swept aside, critiqued from a recently unimaginable standpoint. Ours will be, too. There are problems of expectation and of focus.

Survival demands that you notice the tiger in the tree before you pay attention to the beauty of its branches. The one person who’s furious at you compels more attention than the eighty-nine who love you. Problems are our work; we deal with them in order to survive or to improve the world, and so to face them is better than turning away from them, than burying them and denying them. To face problems can be an act of hope, but only if you remember that they’re not all there is. Some bomb, some dig.

Some of it is a matter of how we tell our stories, the problem of expectation. On April 7, 2003, a few days after American bombs landed on Ali Abbas and his family, several hundred peace activists came out at dawn to picket the gates of a company shipping armaments to Iraq from the docks in Oakland, California. The longshoreman’s union had vowed not to cross our picket line. The police arrived in riot gear and, unprovoked and unthreatened, began firing wooden bullets and beanbags of shot at the
activists. They had been instructed to regard us as tantamount to terrorists: “You can make an easy kind of a link that, if you have a protest group protesting a war where the cause that’s being fought against is international terrorism, you might have terrorism at that [protest],” said Mike Van Winkle of the California Justice Department. “You can almost argue that a protest against that is a terrorist act.” Three members of the media, nine longshoremen, and fifty activists were injured. I saw bloody welts the size of half grapefruits on the backs of some of the young men—they had been shot as they fled—and a swelling the size of an egg on the jaw of a delicate yoga instructor. Told that way, violence won.

But the violence also inspired the union dock workers to form a closer alliance with antiwar activists and underscored the connections between local and global issues. On May 12, we picketed again, with no violence. This time, the longshoremen acted in solidarity with the picketers and, for the first time in memory, the shipping companies cancelled a work shift rather than face protest. Told that way, the story continued to unfold, and we grew stronger.

And there’s a third way to tell it. The April 7 picket stalled a lot of semi trucks. Some of the drivers were annoyed. Some—we talked to them—sincerely believed that the war was a humanitarian effort. Some of them—notably a group of South Asian drivers standing around in the morning sun looking radiant—thought we were great.

After the picket was broken up, one immigrant driver honked in support and pulled over to ask for a peace sign for his rig. I stepped forward to pierce holes in it with my pocket knife so he could bungee-cord it to the truck’s chrome grille. We talked briefly, shook hands, and he stepped up into the cab. He was turned back at the gates. They weren’t accepting deliveries from antiwar truckers. When I next saw the driver, he was sitting on a curb all alone behind police lines, looking cheerful and fearless. Who knows what has or will come of the spontaneous courage of this man with a job on the line?

Ali Abbas was, thanks to the intervention of an Australian journalist, flown to Kuwait and then to Britain for better medical care and prosthetic arms, and chances are good that he will live abroad. The face of a war lives on after the war, as did that girl-child who ran screaming, her flesh burned from American napalm, in what became one of the definitive images of the Vietnam war. The world is full of atrocities now, and it would be criminal to turn our backs on them. Emilie Kaidi’s story is not a way to ignore Ali Abbas’s story but to move toward it, as the Spaniards moved toward her voice in the ruins; he is news, she is not; together they might be history.

This book tells stories of victories and possibilities because the defeats and disasters are more than adequately documented; it exists not in opposition to or denial of them, but in symbiosis with them, or perhaps as
a small counterweight to their tonnage. In the past half century the state of the world has declined dramatically, measured by material terms and by the brutality of wars and economies. But we have also added a huge number of intangibles—rights, ideas, concepts, words to describe and to realize what was once invisible or unimaginable—and these constitute both a breathing space and a toolbox, a toolbox with which those atrocities can be and have been addressed, a box of hope.

I want to illuminate a past that is too seldom recognized, one in which the power of individuals and unarmed people is colossal, in which the scale of change in the world and the collective imagination over the past few decades is staggering, in which the astonishing things that have taken place can brace us to enter that dark future with boldness. To recognize the momentousness of what has happened is to apprehend what might happen. Inside the word _emergency_ is emerge; from an emergency new things come forth. The old certainties are crumbling fast, but danger and possibility are sisters.

**Despair and Discontent, or the Wall and the Door**

In _The Principle of Hope_, Bloch declares, “Fraudulent hope is one of the greatest malefactors, even enervators, of the human race, concretely genuine hope its most dedicated benefactor” and speaks of “informed discontent which belongs to hope, because they both arise out of the No to deprivation.” The hope that the Publishers Clearing House sweepstakes award will come to you, that the American dream will come true, that electoral politics will reform itself, is hope that paralyzes people’s ability to rebel, to reject, to critique, to demand, and to make change. False hope can be a Yes to deprivation, an acquiescence to a lie. Official hope can be the bullying that tells the marginalized to shut up because everything is fine or will be. In its dilute forms, false hope is not so far from despair, for both can be paralyzing. But despair can also be liberating.

Blind hope faces a blank wall waiting for a door in it to open. Doors might be nearby, but blind hope keeps you from locating them; in this geography, despair can be
The poet and polemicist June Jordan once wrote, “We should take care so that we will lose none of the jewels of our soul. We must begin, now, to reject the white, either/or system of dividing the world into unnecessary conflict. For example, it is tragic and ridiculous to choose between Malcolm X and Dr. King; each of them hurled himself against a quite different aspect of our predicament, and both of them, literally, gave their lives to our ongoing struggle. We need everybody and all that we are.” Jordan asks us to give up the dividing by which we conquer ourselves, the sectarianism, the presumption that difference is necessarily opposition. So does the activism of the moment.

That arrival of the millennium I tried to delineate could be told another way, as the departure of the binaries and oppositions by which we used to imagine the world. The end of the Soviet Bloc meant that capitalism and communism no longer defined a world of difference or a political standoff that had long been described as East
versus West. The Zapatistas came along five years later with a politics that was neither capitalist nor communist, but implicitly positioned them together as means of displacing power from the individual, the community, the local. Opposition is often illusory: the old distinction between Aristotelians and Platonists, for example, overlooks how similar these two camps might be to a Taoist or a shaman. Gender, once imagined as a pair of definitive opposites, has been reimagined as a continuum of affinities and attractions.

Another binary that has become outdated is Right and Left. Though these terms are still deployed all the time, what do they define? They derive from how the French National Assembly seated itself a few years after the revolution of 1789: the more radical sat on the left, and thus radicals have been leftists ever since. Seating arrangements, however, have changed since the eighteenth century. They've changed a lot in the last fifteen years. Or perhaps we've all stood up at last and begun to move to somewhere new, somewhere unknown. The term “leftist” carries with it a baggage of socialism, utopianism, and sometimes authoritarianism that no longer delimits (and never quite did) what radicals and revolutionaries might be. Anarchists and communists can be far more different than Platonists and Aristotelians. And there are a lot of people who might embrace every item in a leftist platform except identification with the Left and its legacy.

As the Bush administration moves from what might be conventionally thought of as right-wing to something a little more totalitarian, there are dissenters on the Right who care about privacy and liberty, and occasional conservatives who actually want to conserve things. There have been strange moments before, such as Al Gore arguing for NAFTA and Ross Perot arguing against it; Arizona Republican senator John McCain fighting political corruption; animal-rights activists pursuing anti-environmental goals; feminists supporting anti-First Amendment restrictions on abortion protesters and pornography. All these suggest that there are far more than two political positions, and that the old terminology only blinds us.

I've often wondered what alliances and affinities might arise without those badges of Right and Left. For example, the recent American militia movements were patriarchal, nostalgic, nationalist, gun-happy, and full of weird fantasies about the United Nations, but they had something in common with us: they prized the local and feared its erasure by the transnational. The guys drilling with guns might've been too weird to be our allies, but they were just the frothy foam on a big wave of alienation, suspicion, and fear from people watching their livelihoods and their communities go down the tubes. What might have happened if we could have spoken directly to the people in that wave, if we could have found common ground, if we could have made our position neither Right nor Left but
truly grassroots? What would have happened if we had given them an alternate version of how local power was being sapped, by whom, and what they might do about it? We need them. We need a broad base. We need a style that speaks to far more people than the Left has lately been able to speak to and for.

And without going too far into the ninety-car pileup the late sixties resembles to one who was playing with plastic horsies during that era, it does seem that the countercultural Left hijacked progressive politics and made it into something that was almost guaranteed to alienate most working people. I grew up in that Left, encouraged to despise “rednecks and white trash”—the racism of some working-class white southerners became a handy excuse for the middle class elsewhere to carry on class war while feeling progressive. Activists are still trying to shed the stereotypes the media made out of the white-radical sixties, the image in which all of us activists are spoiled, sneering, unpatriotic, and sometimes violent hotheads. Of course, all activism nowadays is indebted to the other versions of what the sixties was, from the highly visible civil rights movement to the many grassroots activists who are still active.

This is part of what made Seattle so significant in 1999: the unions represented at least some rapprochement of blue-collar industrial America to environmentalists, anarchists, indigenous activists, and farmers from Korea to France. Farmers around the world are being ravaged by free trade, which has radicalized many of them and created new alliances, new activism, movements such as the hundred-nation coalition Via Campesino, with its hundred million members. The activist-theorist John Jordan points out that just as a wonderful coalition was born when Mexican leftists went into Chiapas and found common ground with the indigenous population, so farmer Jose Bové and his peers were revolutionaries who formed similar liaisons in the French countryside. In the American West, something similar has been happening, something that partakes of the same open-mindedness, of the best part of politics’ strange bedfellows, happy in bed together, working out their differences. What gets called the Left has often had as its principal hallmark a sectarian righteousness that is also dissipating to make room for some spectacular new tactics, movements, and coalitions.

At Citizen Alert’s 1996 board retreat in remote Eureka, Nevada, we all ended up drinking at the antienvironmentalist bar, because it was the only one in town with beer on tap. The purple WRANGLERS T-shirts for sale behind the bar spelled out the acronym—Western Ranchers Against No Good Leftist Environmentalist Radical Shitheads. That evening I ended up on a bar stool next to a young rancher in a large hat who thought environmentalists hated him. As it turned out, his family has been ranching in the
area for generations, he was knowledgeable about sustainable and rotational grazing—if not about the nifty new terminology for it—and boasted that his grass grazed the bellies of his cows, unlike all the hit-and-run ranchers nearby he deplored and the mining corporations he deplored more. By the end of the evening I’d convinced him that some environmentalists thought he might be just fine and he was buying me Wild Turkey.

He wasn’t paranoid. The Wise Use and private-property rights movements, like the militias, have done a much better job of reaching out to rural communities than progressives and environmentalists have. For a long time, a lot of environmentalists demonized ranchers. It was a truism that cattle were ravaging the American West until environmentalists in various places realized that sometimes ranchers were holding the line on open space: when ranchers were forced out, development came in. Some cattle-ranching was devastating the landscape; some was being better managed; and new ideas about riparian protection, rotational grazing, fire ecology, and other rangeland management practices have been improving the ways grazing land can be cared for.

Ranch families generally love their land and know it with an intimacy few environmentalists will ever arrive at; some have been there for a century and want to be there for another one. And they, too, like farmers everywhere, are being afflicted by price drops produced by globalization and the industrialization of the rural (the factorylike corporate systems for producing meat, vegetables, and grains). They are a mostly unrecruited constituency of the global justice movement, in contrast to many other countries where farmers are already the backbone. In the past decade, a number of new alliances have formed in the United States, from groups like the Nature Conservancy working with ranchers to create land trusts and conservation easements to environmentalist-rancher coalitions. Widespread coalbed methane drilling in Wyoming has devastated many ranches and pushed Republican ranchers into coalition with environmentalists—as have sprawl, resort development, water crises, and the need to restore depleted land in Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona.

Environmentalists had worked with a purist paradigm of untouched versus ravaged nature. Working with ranchers opened up the possibility of a middle way, one in which categories are porous, humans have a place in the landscape—in working landscapes, not just white-collar vacation landscapes—and activism isn’t necessarily oppositional. This represents a big shift in the class politics of the once awfully white-collar environmental movement, which has been pretty good at alienating people who actually live in the environment and work with the resources in question. For the West, this means the undoing of a huge dichotomy, a huge cultural war, and a reinvention of how change works. For all of us it represents a new kind
of activism, in which coalitions can be based on what wildly different groups have in common, and differences can be set aside; for a coalition requires difference as a cult does not, and sometimes it seems that the ideological litmus tests of earlier movements moved them toward cultism.

Arizona environmentalist-rancher Bill McDonald, cofounder of the Malpai Borderlands Group, may have been the one to coin the term “the radical center,” the space in which ranchers, environmentalists, and government agencies have been able to work together and to see the preservation of rural livelihoods and the land itself as the same goal. The Quivera Coalition in New Mexico is the most visible example, but many small organizations around the West have been working in this center. Lynne Sherrod, who ranches near Steamboat Springs, Colorado, and heads the Colorado Cattlemen’s Agricultural Land Trust, recalls, “The environmentalists and the ranchers were squared off against one another, and while we were fighting, the developers were walking off with the valley. . . . We found out we had a lot more in common than what kept us apart.”

Classical environmentalism is interventionist and oppositional: it uses pressure, law, and lawsuits to prevent others from acting. The radical center, as writer and New Mexico land manager William DeBuys defines it, is “a departure from business as usual,” is “not bigoted. By that

I mean that, to do this kind of work, you don’t question where somebody is from or what kind of hat he or she wears, you focus on where that person is willing to go and whether he or she is willing to work constructively on matters of mutual interest. Work in the Radical Center also involves a commitment to using a diversity of tools. There is no one way of doing things. We need to have large toolboxes and to lend and borrow tools freely. Work in the Radical Center is experimental—it keeps developing new alternatives every step along the way. Nothing is ever so good that it can’t stand a little revision, and nothing is ever so impossible and broken down that a try at fixing it is out of the question.” It’s a hopeful practice, since where litigious activism saw enemies, it sees potential allies. It’s a peacemaking practice, in contrast to the warlike modes of intervention. It isn’t the right answer to everything—nothing is—but it’s a significant new model.

As are the legendary Ohio farm worker-organizer Baldemar Velasquez’s subversive tactics. Velasquez, the founder of the Farm Labor Organizing Council, says, “Number one, I don’t consider anybody opposition. I just consider anyone either misinformed or miseducated or downright wrong-thinking. That’s the way I look at people, and I believe that what we do, getting justice for migrant workers, is the good and right thing in life to do and everyone ought to be on our side.” Velasquez talks directly to those who might be considered “the opposition”
and sometimes brings them over, a tactic that has stood him in good stead in a number of organizing battles—as have his boycotts of Campbell’s Soup and other food corporations. “It’s not what you serve up but how you serve it up,” he told me. “The way you win people over to your side is, try to present the information from some perspective they’re familiar with.”

In one case, he got a lot of children of Christian Republicans in a Toledo religious school to join him by preaching to them from the Bible. An ordained minister, Velasquez “opened up the book right in front of this big assembly of high school and junior high kids, five hundred or so kids in the auditorium, and said let’s see what God’s word has to say... It says that there are three groups of people God watches over jealously in the entire history of scripture, the orphans, the widows, the aliens. And how many of you want to do something about these three groups of people God watches over very jealously?” Every kid in the auditorium raised their hand. Then I asked them to do three things.”

He got them to fast during lunchtime and donate their lunch money to the widow and children of a Mexican farmworker who’d died horribly in this country. He got them to educate their parents and congregations, got eight of the kids to join him in taking the money they’d raised to the family in a Nahua Indian village in the Mexican mountains where they saw firsthand the poverty that sends immigrants to the United States. And then he got more than three hundred of these children of conservative Christians to join him in a protest of the supermarkets selling the pickles that were the subject of a farmworkers’ battle. He won that battle, too, prompting many supermarkets to stop carrying the brand, thereby forcing the pickle growers to keep the crop in Ohio and to treat farmworkers as employees rather than sharecroppers. He’s worked with international labor issues, with environmental justice issues, with the larger networks within which farmworkers toil. But what makes him remarkable is not just this making of connections between issues, but between sides.