

# Hope Is Not a Foolish Notion

by Randy Schutt

*“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us...”*

These lines from Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities* seem particularly appropriate these days.

The United States currently has the most conservative government since the Roaring Twenties with all three branches of government dominated by archconservatives. The Bush administration relentlessly promotes the interests of the super-rich, massive corporations, and America-first militarists while championing the vindictive ideology of social conservatives. The US economy is stagnant as good jobs are lost to low wage countries with appalling human rights records. The warped values of greed, domination, and exploitation infuse our culture. The mass media is saturated with rightwing hate talk, trivial prattle, and brutal violence.

It is a nightmarish time for any decent person.

In this harsh era, the prospects for improving society seem small. The chance that we could ever create a good society grounded in compassion, fairness, and respect for the environment appear very remote.

## And yet...

And yet, it is also a time of enormous promise. In the last 500 years, humanity has made great strides in understanding and solving a vast array of concerns. For the first time since humans first began farming and building cities, humankind may actually have the chance to overcome the problems of poverty, crime, disease, conflict, and prejudice that have continually plagued our civilizations. To take one example, through a long process of experimentation and thoughtful analysis, humanity has now learned how to build sanitary water supplies and sewage systems that enable us to live in close quarters without suffering from diseases like dysentery and without polluting the natural environment. This is a major victory for humankind.

Consider some of the other victories we have achieved in the United States:

- Ended dueling as a means of resolving conflict
- Ended slavery
- Developed an agricultural system that is capable of providing everyone with nutritious food
- Developed building materials and construction techniques to the extent that everyone in society could have good housing

- Developed a system of universal education
- Ended Jim Crow laws
- Built a vast library system that archives humanity’s greatest insights
- Developed vaccines and antibiotics so that disease is no longer a constant, life-threatening danger
- Shifted to treating psychosis as a mental illness rather than as moral depravity
- Enacted universal suffrage
- Built a communication system (including the Internet) that allows people all over the world to exchange information almost instantly
- Created a transportation system that easily enables us to travel to almost any place on Earth

Moreover, humanity has learned how to tackle some of our most difficult problems. Though we have not completely utilized humanity’s understanding, there are now people somewhere in the world who know how to:

- Topple massive military dictatorships using nonviolent methods. For example, just in the last 30 years ordinary people have overcome brutal regimes using nonviolent action in Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union, Hungary, Lithuania, South Africa, Iran, the Philippines, and many other countries.
- Structure society to ensure that everyone’s basic human needs for air, water, food, shelter, safety, healthcare, and transportation are met. Sweden serves as an example of how a society can provide for everyone.
- Help people overcome their racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia and build compassion for others. Consider, as an example, the massive gains that gays and lesbians have made in gaining acceptance in the United States in the last 20 years.
- Help people heal their emotional wounds, even from deep trauma caused by war or torture.
- Raise children so they will become responsible, caring, and confident adults.
- Build cooperative structures so that people can work democratically together.

Indeed, it now appears that every major problem facing humanity has actually been solved at least once, somewhere. Of course, problems are not always solved well. But if someone has found a good solution to all of

these long-standing, difficult problems, then it means humanity does not need to discover anything new and human beings do not need to be perfected. It means that it is actually possible to create a good society if we just apply the solutions where they are needed most of the time, instead of only a tiny part of the time, as we do now.

Obviously, as any activist well knows, this is not a trivial task. There are many large and intertwined obstacles standing in our way, including an adverse power structure that envelops us all, pervasive ignorance, widespread destructive cultural conditioning, and extensive dysfunctional emotional conditioning, compounded by a severe lack of resources available to progressive activists. Still, tackling difficult problems is easier than solving

insolvable puzzles or overcoming insurmountable barriers. Clearly, with enough effort, we can overcome these obstacles.

For most of the last 25 years, those people who favor domination by a few have been in ascendancy over those who seek an egalitarian and cooperative society, making this a very dark time. But in the larger sweep of history, now is a time when centuries of dedicated effort by tens of thousands of social reformers could finally coalesce and make it possible at long last to create a good society. It is a time when humanity finally has the necessary knowledge and skills to be able to create the “beloved community.” We now know how to create a good society. Let’s do it.

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