

# How to stay hopeful in a world seemingly beyond saving

December 8 2023, by Simon Appolloni

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As world leaders embark upon yet another [COP climate conference](#), it can be easy to be cynical, afraid or overwhelmed by the sheer scale of [the impacts that climate change is having \(and will continue to have\), upon our world.](#)

After all, the realities of [rising sea levels](#) and [more frequent and severe](#)

[storms](#) are scary prospects.

However, along with the bad, it is also essential to recognize the good, such as the recent missive from the International Energy Agency indicating that we might still be able to limit global temperatures to 1.5 degrees Celsius due to [record growth in green technologies](#).

Why should we care about good news in a world so clearly doomed? Do these not distract us from more pressing matters? Simply put, a lack of good news is bad for our health and causes many to assume all is lost, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy which hinders effective climate action.

## **A dark world?**

Journalist David Wallace-Wells [opens his book](#) "The Uninhabitable Earth" with the line "It's worse, much worse than you think." This sentiment typifies the constant diet of bad news which over the past decades has instilled fear and anxiety within a great proportion of society, especially the young.

It is manifested as eco-anxiety and explains why in a [recent survey of 10,000 youth](#) and children across the globe, seven percent of the respondents thought the future was frightening with over half feeling helpless or powerless. One in four of these respondents are hesitant to have children for fear of bringing a child into a threatening or doomed world.

If we add to these sentiments research showing that [trust in institutions](#) globally has decreased over the past years then the picture seems even bleaker. However, a 2019 Pew poll in the United States suggested that 71 percent of respondents even have a decline in [interpersonal trust](#).

This reality echoes the symptom of distress that professor of communications George Gerbner coined in the 1970s as "[mean world syndrome](#)." Such a state views violence and self-centredness as being imbedded in society which, not surprisingly, leads to increased fear and mistrust about the world and the future. This scenario is cause for concern for two important reasons.

First, while some level of fear [can spur action](#) it can also lead to [eco-paralysis](#). Eco-paralysis is the hyper anxiety that can leave people feeling hopeless and without agency, sentiments likely felt above by the 10,000 youth.

Such fear can cause more than apathy, as Gerbner warned long ago. It can also leave individuals feeling, as he says, "[more dependent, more easily manipulated and controlled, more susceptible to deceptively simple, strong, tough measures and hard-line postures...\[who\]...may welcome repression if it promises to relieve their insecurities](#)."

An authoritarian world will not be the answer to our climate crisis, for it is precisely [civil society](#) that spurs healthy change.

The second reason for concern over this bleak representation of the world is that such a depiction is not accurate. Yes, it is true—to continue the example above—that worldwide [democracy has eroded](#) in many instances, which is not conducive to a just transition to a post-fossil-fuel world. But democracy has also shown some remarkable successes with regard to civil liberties and [political participation](#) in countries like [South Africa](#), [Indonesia](#) and various other states such as Benin, Botswana, Ghana, Namibia, Mauritius, and Senegal.

These instances should remind us that our negative perceptions of a "mean world" are not always founded, which can foster hope, something we dearly need.

## Negative preconceptions

Howard Frumkin, professor emeritus of Washington University School of Public Health, reminds us that [hope is central to human flourishing](#). Hope, however, is not an easy notion to understand.

Frumkin conceives hope as a perception that we have agency or, more simply, the feeling that we are capable of taking action. Add to this [psychological research](#) showing that [agency can be learned, even emboldened](#), from watching others, and we can see why environmental thinker David Orr defines hope as "[a verb with its sleeves rolled up](#)."

What this tells us is that if we are to address climate change, we will need to hear and witness the myriad stories of individuals and groups who, with agency, are actively pursuing sustainable futures.

Take the work of [Project Drawdown](#), a non-profit organization that uses science-based climate strategies to stop and even reverse climate change. Its findings are noteworthy: chief among the strategies to address climate change is ensuring that girls across the globe receive an education.

Project Drawdown's research shows that with more education [girls are more likely to manage their reproductive health, realize higher wages, have fewer incidences of disease and contribute positively to the nutrition of their families](#). All outcomes which have clear societal, individual and environmental benefits.

Looking at public perceptions of the state of girls' education around the globe reveals an important phenomenon: people doubt such a goal is feasible. A 2018 study consisting of thousands of surveys across the globe found that when asked "[In all low-income countries across the world today, how many girls finish primary school?](#)" most people responded only 20 percent, when in actuality, 60 percent do.

Simply put, our beliefs on the education of girls are not only negative but perilously wrong and this inability to conceive of the goal being possible presents another barrier to effective action on addressing global problems. From girls' education to climate change, negative perceptions of futility and impossibility have serious consequences.

## Staying hopeful

Stating the good news does not mean we deny the bad. The trick in stating the good news is not in ignoring the darker realities of our time, for example, by [pitching naïve or ideological optimism](#) which some think tanks or populist leaders would prefer us to embrace. Such thinking only delays action and maintains a business-as-usual approach to [climate change](#).

We need, instead, to think [dialectically](#). [Dialectical thinking](#) has us hold on to seemingly opposite realities simultaneously, such as the truth of still-too-few girls receiving education and that already 60 percent of girls in low-income countries today are completing primary school [with many working to make that number much higher](#). Or that there can be positive [climate](#) news in a world on fire.

The hope we need today is dark, to be sure. It acknowledges the tragic realities of our time *and* also seeks out, learns from, and champions its successes. It is an active hope upheld by the conviction that reality can be paradoxical, both good and bad.

Engaging in the act of hope can help us become less terrified about the future and more assured in our belief that it is possible to build a better, and more just, world. We would all do well to remember this if, or indeed when, our leaders disappoint us at COP28.

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