

Looking to the Future with Hope

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How can it be possible to retain hope even in the turbulent times of crisis through which we are living? And what do we mean by hope?

I think of hope as the ability to imagine a positive outcome, even if it might not seem the most likely one. True hope is factually and spiritually grounded in reality, and is not based on an unrealistic optimism. Hope is calm, but determined, not a desperate longing for an impossible solution.

There are many possible outcomes to the planetary emergency in which we currently find ourselves. Our hope, and our collective thoughts, prayers and actions can affect the likelihood of these various outcomes.

As a physicist, I see a parallel here with the so-called “many Universes” theory of modern physics. Any measurement that is made can have various possible results, each with its own likelihood. Modern physics suggests that all these various results are possible before the measurement, and it is impossible to predict exactly what the measured result will be beforehand. The process of actually making the measurement collapses the multitude of possibilities to a particular result. In the many Universes view of what is happening, the multitude of possible results correspond to a multitude of parallel Universes in which those results are the ones obtained. It is a mind boggling idea, hard to get one’s head around, and has an almost mystical element to it.

Thinking of the climate and environmental crisis, a multitude of possible paths lie before us, and it is impossible to predict now which path we will take in the future. Hope affirms that some of these possible paths lead to positive outcomes, and could really come about. Indeed, hope helps create the space for such paths to come into being. Our mental and spiritual energy influences the world around us, and actively cultivating realistic hope and praying hopefully for the future helps open up space for a sustainable future to grow into.

A key part of this process is being able to envision an environmentally sustainable, spiritually rich future, in which we feel interconnected with all of God’s Creation. I believe that such a future can truly come about. Let me share some elements of my vision.

In my vision of the future, we will learn to truly work together with Nature rather than allowing our perceived needs dominate those of all other creatures on Earth. We will realize that our lives have been out of balance, and that having to work harder and harder to maintain a basic standard of living is not progress. We will understand that we have been spending too many hours at work, at the expense of time with our families and friends, spending time in Nature, and time for relaxation, contemplation, reflection and connecting with the Divine. We will open more space for imagination and creativity. We’ll be liberated from a crude work ethic that says “working more is better”. We’ll be valued for the quality of our work, not the amount of time we spend at it.

We’ll be spending much less time commuting to and from work. Some people will live close enough to work to get there on foot or by bicycle, while others will be able to do much of

their work from home. Our experience during the current pandemic has shown that much work can, in fact, be done at least as efficiently from home, so this seems a much more realistic possibility than it once might have.

Over the past six months or so, we have seen the role that can be played by technology that enables people at multiple locations to communicate together, such as the Zoom platform that we are using now. We will use such technology to reduce unnecessary and time-consuming travel, and also to promote inclusivity.

The health of our society will be measured in terms of the overall physical and mental well-being of its citizens, rather than using financial measures, such as Gross National Product or rate of economic growth. In fact, the idea of measuring the health of a society based on economic growth, other than for a very limited time, will seem ridiculous – after all, clearly, nothing can keep growing forever. We'll live in a post-growth economy, which will offer us a stable and sustainable economic system that promotes the physical and mental health of its citizens much more effectively than our current growth-driven system.

Our society will be much less unequal. This may seem like it is not particularly related to sustainability, but it is actually a key element to promoting the health, balance and sustainability of our society. It has been shown by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett in their book "The Spirit Level" that the level of inequality in a society is a key factor determining the severity of a very wide range of social problems, such as drug use, teen pregnancy, racism, crime rates and poverty. Inequality is also correlated with diverse health issues, such as rates of physical illnesses, mental health problems, obesity, infant mortality rate, and life expectancy. We have seen the devastating effect that inequality has had worldwide in amplifying the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic: the poorest are most likely to live in crowded, unsanitary conditions where the virus can spread easily, and least likely to be able to effectively take even simple measures to protect themselves from it.

More equal societies have less severe social problems and higher levels of physical health and mental wellbeing – and interestingly, this is true for all people, not just those at the lower end of the income range. For example, both richer and poorer have longer life expectancies in more equal societies. This shows how key a sense of equality is to our physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing, and it is absolutely crucial that our future sustainable society be more equal. It is also interesting that more equal societies tend to have lower levels of carbon emission, be more environmentally aware, and be less consumer driven, suggesting that increased equality can help people regain their sense of a direct physical and spiritual connection with the Earth.

In the future I am imagining, a Universal Basic Income scheme has been introduced, which will pay every member of society an income that is sufficient to cover their basic needs. This may sound like an unrealistic idea, but this is because our perception is distorted by our immersion in an overly competitive, overly individualistic society. In fact, the idea is taken very seriously by many economists and political scientists, such as John Barry, who we heard earlier; indeed, the Spanish government is going down this road and the Irish government has promised to try out an Irish Universal Basic Income pilot scheme within five years. We as citizens may have to work to make sure they deliver on this promise, but the very fact that it is on the table gives me hope.

Our consumer choices will be guided by a desire to keep our ecological footprints lighter in a way that also improves the quality of our lives. We'll buy things that may cost more initially but will last longer, and use sustainable materials to make the things we need – for example, making furniture of wood, which captures carbon. We'll insist that environmentally friendly alternatives to plastic be found, and this will also be driven by the rise in the cost of making plastic that comes about as the fossil fuel industry is ramped down.

We'll eat mostly locally and naturally grown food. We'll be more in touch with the natural rhythm of the seasons, not feeling the need to have every type of food available all year round, and understanding that local food that is in season is the most delicious. Many of us will have some space for a garden, even if only a "square-foot" garden, to help keep us connected to the soil that sustains us. We'll live more simply, but no less richly.

Our energy will come from renewable sources – solar, wind, water, tidal, geothermal. We'll also be leading lifestyles that require us to use less energy. Our homes will be designed to be energy efficient, and to passively keep us comfortably cool in Summer and warm in Winter. We'll live in neighbourhoods designed so that most shops, schools and other public amenities are within walking or bicycling distance, so that we usually don't need to use a car to do our errands. The extra exercise we get will help keep us physically fit and mentally alert. We'll also know our neighbours better, because we are all out and about more on foot, making our communities stronger.

There will be fewer cars on the road, and those that there are will be electric. We'll use well connected public transport, which will also be electric. This will have a transformative effect on our urban areas – less congested streets, much less vehicle noise, and much cleaner air. We've had a glimpse of the positive effect that having fewer, and only electric, vehicles will have on our cities through our experience with lockdown – only once we had far fewer petrol and diesel vehicles on the roads did it become clear just how much noise and air pollution they were creating. The rapidity with which we became re-accustomed to higher levels of traffic once lockdown conditions were eased shows how easy it is to stay with the status quo, but we must remember the reduced congestion, reduced noise and cleaner air of which we had a taste during lockdown, and imagine that becoming the norm.

We'll travel by airplane much less, and flying will be much more expensive. This means seeing friends and family who live far away in person less often, and we'll make use of platforms such as Zoom to keep in touch. Most professional conferences will also be held remotely. Although at first we may feel sad about this, we'll ultimately feel the change has been beneficial, and instead feel sad that we were so irresponsible with our long-distance travel for so long. Perhaps once every few years we will make a long trip to a distant part of the globe, taking time to travel on the surface. We'll be entitled to extra time off work once every say four years in order to take such a trip.

We'll have set aside a considerable portion of the Earth as protected areas where Nature can thrive, and live in cities with green areas where biodiversity is protected locally and regionally. It has been proposed by some that we set aside half of the Earth for Nature, and Sr. Nellie McLaughlin has told us about a proposal to protect 30% of the Earth by 2030. The fact that many may feel that these ideas must be unrealistic provides a profound insight into the extent to which our connection with God's Creation is out of balance. We are one out of about 6.5 million animal species who live on land – we can surely make do occupying half the surface of our planet.

Watching videos made during lockdown of goats wandering through a seaside town and sheep riding on a roundabout in a children's playground makes me wonder whether it just might be possible to share our space amicably with other wild or feral creatures too.

The Earth will be a more peaceful place. The process of working together to limit the increase in global temperatures to 1.5° has shown us that what we have in common is more important than our differences. A more equitable distribution of resources has started to come about, reducing the occasion of war and making people the world over less fearful for the future.

This is just a vision at present – of a creative and joyful future in which we have regained our balance, and we palpably feel our deep spiritual connection with the Earth and with that of God in all living things. There is no denying that much irreparable damage has been done to the Earth, and many species have been lost forever. However, in this vision, we will have willingly agreed to let Nature take her course on a large fraction of our planet's surface, giving her time and space to heal and ultimately to thrive. As our planet heals, so will we, becoming spiritually whole again, and rediscovering our instinctive understanding of the interconnectedness of all living things.

This future is by no means the most likely one at present. But hope is about believing that such a future is possible. Hope is about keeping alive the multitude of possible Universes in which we emerge from our planetary emergency having saved many of our planet's species from extinction, and are living in a new harmony and interconnectedness with all of God's Creation.

The key elements to opening space for a sustainable, spiritually vibrant, well balanced future include the ability to hold a vision of such a future, hopeful prayer, and action at all levels. The idea expressed in James 2:14–26 comes to mind: “faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead”. It is time to act, and we must maintain hope that our individual actions will all add up to something much bigger than ourselves.

Community has a key role to play in connecting and supporting us as we face the challenges ahead. In the Quaker community, our experience with the current pandemic has shown us that we are capable of worshipping online, and of re-energising our structures for supporting the wide range of individuals in our community. It has also shown us that we must take care not to exclude one part of our community while supporting another. When facing the challenge of our planetary emergency, we must work together within and across our communities, including our faith communities, supported and empowered by our churches and other religious bodies. Our worshipping communities have given us an organisation we can connect with to obtain practical and spiritual support during the pandemic. They must also help sustain us as we foster and develop our hope for the future.

We must spread the word that a sustainable and balanced future is possible, start and support conversations about this, sign petitions, engage government and business in whatever ways we can.

The mathematics that can make the spread of the Coronavirus so rapid can also work for us here in a positive way. Imagine this: if each of us were able to convince 5 other people of the real possibility of a better future, and of the need to hold a vision of that future and hope for its realisation, then those 5 people were each to convince 5 more, who each went on to

convince 5 more ... you can see how each of our actions can help move us toward paths leading to a sustainable future in a way that builds with time.

We must allow our creativity to come forth and our imaginations to run free. We must be bold enough to think out of the box. I am hopeful that it will become possible to turn some aspects of the problems facing us into solutions, for example, by using our consumer pressure to encourage businesses to provide sustainable, plastic-free, animal-compassionate products. There will be business incentives for companies to develop new market niches for sustainable products and services, so that a dose of capitalism itself may end up providing part of the solution.

There are many sources of hope, if we are open to new ways of living, and open to the Spirit of God in the world around us. Moving toward a truly sustainable future will take open-mindedness, “out-of-the-box” thinking, creative and responsible development and use of technology, and determination. I believe that, in both practical and spiritual, mystical ways, the more we develop our hope for such a future, the more likely it is to come into being.

Close your eyes and imagine all of humanity spiritually connected with God’s Creation – Mother Earth. Be brave enough to hope that this can be our future.