

# Witnessing Hope in the Long Learning of Solidarity: The Intersection of Hope and Learning in the Remembered Experiences of Canadian Solidarity Activists

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## Recommended Citation

Acton, Janice (2004). "Witnessing Hope in the Long Learning of Solidarity: The Intersection of Hope and Learning in the Remembered Experiences of Canadian Solidarity Activists," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2004/papers/1>

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**Witnessing Hope in the Long Learning of Solidarity:  
The Intersection of Hope and Learning  
in the Remembered Experiences of Canadian Solidarity Activists**

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**Abstract:** Hope, while largely invisible, is profoundly present in transformative learning in social movements. It is valuable for activists to reflect back through the lens of hope on what they witnessed in the past as being “possible” to help them affirm and augment a new sense of meaning and hope today.

**Background and Purpose**

The impetus for this inquiry grew out of my experiences as an activist in the Latin American solidarity movement. Like hundreds of other Canadians during the 1970s and 1980s, I was drawn into the solidarity movement by a compelling sense of wanting to “do something” to end US military intervention and bring about social justice in Latin America. For more than 15 years, this movement comprised my political work, my community—my life. In retrospect, I associate a profound sense of hopefulness with this experience. Some time after leaving the solidarity movement, I became aware of feelings of, not exactly hopelessness, but *less* hope than in the past. In my community-based practice, I became aware of an attitude of negativity and fatalism among many grass-roots workers and activists who spoke about despair, hegemonic forces, and environmental apocalypse—in other words, a world with little future. Although their “can’t do” and “won’t happen” attitude was logical given government cutbacks and organizational fatigue, I sensed a broader political and spiritual dimension to the problem.

Midpoint in my research, the 9/11 disaster occurred, adding a new edge to my research hunch regarding the importance of hope in people’s lives. Where and how, I wondered, was it possible for people to find hope and meaning in today’s world? Was my recollection about hope in the solidarity movement merely an artifact of that time, now packed away along with my Spanish posters and tapes—simply a nostalgia for a lost time? Or, was hope a dormant force that could be reawakened to restore a sense of hopefulness today?

**Looking for Hope in the Literature**

Little attention has been paid in the literature to date regarding the relationship of hope and learning. The philosophical and theoretical trajectory of hope can be traced through several strands of critical pedagogy and emancipatory theory, including transformative, experiential, participatory, dialogical, and witnessing literature, that affirm the whole person, and notions of utopia and dreams of a better world. Hope is implied in the philosophical humanism of early educators concerned with learning as part of life’s quest for fulfillment and meaning, and whose thinking was influential in defining the broad mission of adult education. Hope’s presence is implied in Dewey’s (1944) call for “re-creation of beliefs, ideals, hopes, happiness” (p. 2), Lindeman’s (1982) quickening of the human spirit (p. 120), and Bergevin’s (1984) emphasis upon human potential (p. 29). Several authors call for a new hope to replace the disillusioned hopes of the neoliberal marketplace and traditional Marxism. This new hope is variously described as “educated hope” (Giroux, 2001, p. 235), “dialectical hope” (Harvey, 2000, p. 196), “ultimate hope” (Halpin, 2001, p. 395), “discouraged, but tenacious hope” (Daloz et al., 1996, p. 10) and “fragile, dialogical hope” (Bracci, 2002, pp. 486; 482). Hope that is meaningful has power to pull one back from “the edges of despair” (hooks, 1999, p. 8), to “move the world out of its beaten tracks” (Lasch, 1991, p. 370), and to “render hope practical and despair unconvincing” (Giroux, p. 248). The endurance, persistence, and tenacity embodied in hope

makes it a sustaining force to continue one's efforts year after year (Frankl, 1982; Bloch, 1986). Hope has the power to restore and regenerate, although "regeneration" does not simply mean a return to the past, but to "something new ... as before, but better" (Marcel, 1962, p. 67).

Hope offers liberation from foreclosed fatalism. Where despair is imprisoned within a predictable and linear time, hope appears as "a piercing of time" (Marcel, 1962, p. 53). A revitalized hope "directed toward the future in trust" (Lasch, 1991, p. 536) stands in contrast to nostalgia, which implies a past frozen in time. Therefore, the act of witnessing, which helps to construct radical new truths out of a retrieved past (Felman & Laub, 1992; Ropers-Huilman, 1999; Simon, Rosenberg, & Eppert, 2000) can give hope by renewing "possibilities for constructing self and community" (Ropers-Huilman, p. 22). Freire is central to much of the Marxist and Judeo-Christian discourse on critical hope. His dream of democratic possibilities offers a means out of the "dead end" of postmodernism's pessimism and denial of utopia (Gaudio and de Alba, 1994, p. 135). As Peters and Lankshear (1994) note, one of Freire's enduring qualities is his view of humanity as "ultimately in control of history" (p. 187). For Freire (1994), the key task of the educator is to "unveil opportunities for hope" (p. 9). This is not to say that Freire denies despair and failures of the past: "To the tumult of the soul belongs also the pain of the broken dream, utopia lost" (p. 31). However, he argues, while humans can *survive* without hope, they *cannot thrive* or live meaningfully without it: "We need critical hope the way a fish needs unpolluted water" (p. 8).

Critical hope is inseparable from struggle. Freire (1994) sees hope as an "ethical quality ... [and] one of the mainstays" (p. 8) of the struggle, without which it would quickly dissipate into "hopelessness and despair" (p. 9). Horton (1990) comments that only people with a sense of hope can engage in struggle (p. 116), a sentiment echoed by Hall (1983) who observes that a new future cannot be created by "a hopeless people" (p. 219). Hope, is "more verb than noun" (Lappé and Lappé, 2002, p. 136). Hope cannot transform itself by "dint of raw hoping" (Freire, p. 9). Individuals must make their dream happen, "produce it" (Freire, p. 101).

### **Flesh-and-Blood, Indelible Learning**

My qualitative inquiry involved 7 activists with whom I had worked or had some acquaintanceship in the solidarity movement. Their involvement ranged from 5 to 20 years in the movement. In the dual role of researcher/participant, I gathered data through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, and subsequent informal communication. I used a collaborative approach that attempted to honour the way we had worked together in the past. The interview questions focused on what participants remembered learning from their solidarity experiences, how, and if, they remembered hope as part of those learnings, and how it felt to remember these experiences.

I discovered that hope was not a concept any of the participants remembered having "dwelt on" in the solidarity movement. However, upon "second thought" they realized that it had been an ingredient of their most significant learning moments. Hope was part of their flesh-and-blood, or whole person learning associated with what they had *perceived*—what they saw, heard, felt, smelled, and tasted. That learning, several participants recalled, subsequently became part of the indelible pool of learnings, practical wisdom, and political savvy they still unconsciously draw upon today: "It went so deep, very deep, it will always be there."

### **An Intimate and Caring Point of Entry**

Hope proved to be an effective tool of inquiry. The hope-oriented research questions helped participants to "innovatively" reflect upon their "entrapped" learning (Jarvis, 1987, pp. 187-188). Because of its unfamiliar or "haven't thought much about" quality, hope presented participants with an unusual framework of reflection, supporting Cranton's (1994) conclusion

that good critical questioning “creates a sense of disequilibrium” that can trigger transformative learning (p. 173). Hope offered a point of entry through which it was possible, in a caring and compassionate way, for participants to re-think what they had witnessed in their complex learning that had taken place in the heat of solidarity struggles.

Prior to this research, none of the participants had found a way to critically reflect on their activist experiences. Freire (1998) observes that only a praxis based upon critical reflection can potentially “transform reality” (p. 81). The hope-oriented questions were, in some cases, transformative by helping participants to tap into learning that was deeply embedded in forgotten and resistance memories. Hope’s implied intimacy helped to open doors into the multiple dimensions of what participants learned. Hope was integral to learning about popular education and other process learning that placed emphasis on trusting others, and on the “expertise within” rather than “outside experts.” Hope was part of relational learning and part of participants’ feelings of connectedness with others.

By being a witness, or *porta voz* (carrier of the voice) to the struggles of the Latin American people who were living in the midst of war and underdevelopment, the participants found a profound sense of meaning: “That’s where the hope is—the change that’s possible when everyone has a role to play in the bigger picture, when everyone contributes to that change.” Witnessing the Latin American people’s capacity to sustain hope and bring about societal transformation in dire circumstances, convinced Canadian activists that creating a new society was possible: “Yes, I did hope, because I saw it around me. It wasn’t an abstract dream. I saw it with my own eyes. It was happening!”

### **Making the Invisible Visible**

Hope played a multifaceted role in participants’ transformative learning in solidarity. My findings suggest that hope was an ally or co-efficient with transformative learning, functioning as a continuous loop, weaving in and out of experiences that ranged from exhilaratingly hopeful to despairing. Hope was a motivating factor in activists entering the solidarity movement. It sustained them during long years of activism, and in some cases, influenced their decisions to leave. Looking back through the lens of hope on these experiences had a kind of value-added or re-valuing effect, reminding participants of the moral and ethical rudders they learned in the past, and which they still use to navigate through their lives today.

This research was especially helpful to those who had undergone painful experiences, by helping them to re-think or re-frame their “shattered hopes.” One participant told me that the research offered her “an amazing opportunity, a gift...I never wanted to go into therapy to talk about what happened” In the process of preparing for her interview, this participant was reminded of the many positive things that happened in the midst of “all the awful things.” She realized that her transformation had taken place precisely *because* she had thrown herself completely, and hopefully, into the solidarity movement: “I realized that if you go into learning with hope, then that degree of hope will transform your learning, and that learning will transform you. I learned so much more than if I had just struck in my big toe and said, ‘OK, I’ll just do this on Tuesday nights.’”

Participants’ recollections that, in the solidarity movement, hope was never fixed or static, but continually changing and dynamic, helped them to re-frame their “mixed feelings” about hope today. As suggested by Kovan and Dirkx (2003), the process of juggling hope and despair (p. 116) enhances individuals’ sense of meaning. The hope-oriented questions allowed participants to tap into their “whole body” and “real life” learning that took place in the context of their “extra-rational” (E. Taylor, 1997, p. 48) transformation, and to cull through these

experiences in a more curious and balanced way. Hope appeared to function as a “value construct,” or “reference axes” enabling participants to “place and sequence events into arrays and scales, to distinguish among elements of those events and group them by distinguishing polar opposites” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 52).

Bringing into focus the elusive memories of learning associated with what had been sustaining, life-giving, and filled with “human-ness,” had the effect of *making visible* the otherwise *invisible* presence of hope. Participants frequently described their most hopeful learning through metaphors of sight or vision (“throwing new light on,” “looking through the lens,” “lifting the veil,” “taking the blinders off”). These images suggest that the relationship between hope and despair might be more one of *chiaroscuro* than one of contradiction. I am left wondering if the despair some activists attest to feeling today isn’t so much the result of a total absence of hope, but rather, an inability to *see* hope? As Lappé and Lappé’ (2002) note, “we humans can’t do what we can’t imagine” (p. 18).

### **Creating a New Space for a New Paradigm**

Although the participants in this research have made breaks from their previous activist lives in the Latin American solidarity movement, their reflections on the synergy of their learning and hope reminded them about their commitment to “something bigger.” The participants recalled their dreams and hopes for a better world—self-determination, democracy, social justice—are things they still feel a deep passion and desire for today. These hopeful learnings appear to have helped them to sustain their commitment to social and political change long after their departure from the solidarity movement *per se*, albeit in an altered form of activism which better “fits” who they are today, and within a revised paradigm of change.

My findings affirm that hope *is* a “resource” (Welton, 1993, p. 163) that needs to be recruited into the articulation of a new paradigm of social and political change. As one participant reflected, “To name hope is to create a new space for thinking, making possible the definition of a new politics of hope.” The framework of hope makes it possible to move beyond “privatopias” (Harvey, 2000, p. 239), to create a new space for envisioning alternatives and to construct new “discursive constructions and representations of the world” (p. 244).

Further research is needed to explore the implications of the intersection of hope and learning in social movements. However, future research should focus on activists directly involved, otherwise it is likely to remain “abstract and exhortatory” (Foley, 1999, p. 134), focusing on behaviour rather than meaning.

### **Conclusion**

My findings indicate that hope offers a lens through which it is possible, in a caring and compassionate way, to re-think the solidarity learnings of the past. Remembering past social movement learning in this way helps to open up new spaces for activists to “see another way” (Bracci, 2002, p. 477). A hopeful methodology applied to social movement learning might help to open new spaces for “enlarged thinking” (Bracci, 2002, p. 477), to access the “fluid spaces” (Fenwick, 2000, p. 245) where meaning resides, and to “inspire hope” (Barndt, 1997, p. 4).

On a personal level, this research has offered me a sense of closure I have long sought regarding a meaningful part of my past. In the end, I discovered it was not so much *what* I needed to learn from *my* experiences, as it was *how much* I needed to reflect with others about what I had witnessed with others as part of *our* collective learning. Witnessing others’ stories had the effect of loosening-up and awakening my own forgotten and resistance memories. In the process I discovered that hope, because of its elusive and invisible nature, is best seen and understood when it is “co-created” (Harvey, 2002, p. 102).

Like other participants, I, too, acknowledge feeling less hope today than in the past. But, knowing that I am not alone in this has given me a new sense of hope. Perhaps, as Suoranta (2000) suggests, “the level of well-being for any person is in direct proportion to how near [a] person gets to the established idea of her/his life” (p. 360). By reflecting on a hopeful past in which I came close to my ideals, I was able to recapture some of the sense of hope I associated with that time. Similar processes of hopeful critical reflection might prove to be equally restorative to other social movement activists.

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