



Inspiring Believed-in-Hope as an Ethical Position: Vicarious Resistance & Justice-Doing

Vikki Reynolds, Riel Dupuis-Rossi & Travis Heath

Still 'Amazingly Alive'

My relationship to believed-in-hope and vicarious resistance has been nourished, inspired and shouldered-up by networks of social justice activists, communities of resistance, teams of practitioners, and people I aim to be of use to, across four decades of struggle, activism and community work. The hope I am talking about is not optimism or positivity, but the hard work of trying to resist despair and resist abandoning people to personal suffering and to collective contexts of injustice. My work alongside people who are suffering has informed and transformed me. I owe a huge debt in particular to asylum seekers and refugees who have survived torture and political violence, people who were inmates on Death Row in the USA, and Indigenous people from Turtle Island (North America) who have survived and continue to resist the political violence of colonization, genocide and assimilation. Despite the darkness of this work, and the contexts of mean and hate-filled politics that create the structures of suffering I respond to, I still feel a spirited connection with activist/street poet Bud Osborne's (1999) poem: "Here we are amazingly alive, against long odds and left for dead" (p.9).

In many ways this writing is a response to the many workers across time who have asked how I have resisted burnout and experienced both sustainability and transformation across decades of struggle in community work and activism. I have invited Riel Dupuis-Rossi and Travis Heath to offer critiques and reflections to this writing because of my respect for their ethics and work, and to invite accountability across domains of privilege and power, making space for multiple voices. I know Riel & Travis to have the moral courage to offer expansive critique and invitations to accountability. We did not write together because we do not want to conflate our important differences. I did not want us to speak harmoniously as that would conceal more than our separate but connected voices could reveal. Riel and Travis' solidarity in this project has allowed me to speak more vulnerably, from my broken-hearted places, and offers, I believe, an ethical container to hold witness alongside critique and a true reckoning with power.

I believe that as community workers we are ethically required to bring hope to our relational work with people who are suffering. This is a recursive, un-ending project of engendering hope and bringing hope to the helping relationship. Three decades of supervising teams working and living in the margins with people struggling against structural oppression and exploitation has also taught me that justice-doing, and enacting our collective ethics, is a necessary foundation for a finger-hold on hope and a possible path for sustainability in our work. Building solidarity teams and creating practices for our collective care have proved to be useful tactics across time and struggles. Sustainability is so much more than resisting vicarious-trauma or burnout; it





speaks to the transformations and vicarious resistance we have witnessed and engaged within relationships with people struggling for dignity, safety, and justice in contexts of structural oppression and hate (Reynolds, 2010; Reynolds, 2011a).

As an activist, therapist and clinical supervisor, my work across time has been to bridge the worlds of social justice activism with community work (Reynolds, 2019; Reynolds & Hammoud-Beckett, 2018). The context of my work is supervision and therapy with peers, activists, and other workers responding to the opioid catastrophe, torture and political violence, sexualized violence, mental health, substance misuse, homelessness, legislated poverty and working alongside gender and sexually diverse communities.

My people are from Ireland, Newfoundland, and England, and I am a white settler with heterosexual and cisgender privilege. I am still immersed in the ongoing work of un-settling myself as a white settler (Regan, 2010), despite my intention to be decolonizing in all of my paid and unpaid work. Tuck and Yang (2012) teach that decolonization is not a metaphor, and means commitments to Indigenous land return and Indigenous governance. I aim to be directed in all my activist work and organizing by Indigenous people (Manuel & Derrickson, 2015). As a settler I have set intentions to stay implicated in the ongoing catastrophes (Kouri & Skott-Myers, 2016) of colonization and genocide (Brave Heart, & DeBruyn, 1998) and committed to taking actions.

I position my work as an anti-perfection project to acknowledge that working towards just relations is going to be imperfect because we have not co-created a just society. Engaging in this purposefully messy and imperfect process (Reynolds, 2014a) is informed by queer theory (Butler, 1990), critical trans theory (Spade, 2011), and anti-authoritarian social justice activism (Chomsky, 2005; Buechler, 2005; Shantz, 2011) where we aim to respond immediately to all oppressive and abusive acts. It requires that we take overt positions for justice-doing, defy neutrality, and have the moral courage to face up to and repair the consequences of imperfect actions.

Believed-in-Hope

Fostering believed-in-hope is hard, intentional work. Discerning believed-in-hope from optimism and positivity is important in order to maintain an ethical stance for justice-doing. Hope is not synonymous with optimism (Weingarten, 2000). I am not optimistic; I am very realistic about what is going on in this world, and I am terrified by it. But my terror does not get me stuck, it activates me, as feminist poet Marge Piercy (1982, p. 88) names it, towards a 'just anger':

“A good anger acted upon
is beautiful as lightning
and swift with power.





A good anger swallowed,
A good anger swallowed
clots the blood
to slime.”

Resisting positivity and fostering believed-in- hope is a useful and necessary tactic against despair. Our job alongside people who are suffering is to be the bringers of hope: not to throw up our hands, but to roll up our sleeves. This requires the development of a finely attuned sense of hope, and a tenacious commitment to the moment-to-moment intention to seek out the acts of resistance (Reynolds, 2010; Richardson & Wade, 2008) and moments of justice-doing, no matter how small and trace those may be, and amplify them into a believed-in-hope.

Hopelessness can be a site of privilege. This was a humbling learning for me as a younger activist. I was devastated and empty following my active participation in solidarity struggles with Central and South American countries responding to the dirty wars of the 1980s, which were backed by American imperialism and capitalism. I was bereft, de-energized, hopeless. Then I came across these words from Brazilian scholar and popular educator Paulo Freire (1970): “Hopelessness is a form of silence, of denying the world and fleeing from it. The dehumanization resulting from an unjust order is not a cause for despair, but for hope, leading to the incessant pursuit of the humanity denied by injustice” (p. 72-73). I was confronted with an awareness of how my relationship to hopelessness was inextricably linked to my privileges, especially as a white citizen in the global north. Global south activists, coming from less privileges than I hold, were responding to the darkness as a call to action, requiring them to maintain a hold on hope in precarious contexts. This absolutely inspired me, and lit a fire in me that has kept me of use—a fire I must guard against the systemic privileges that work to extinguish it.

Resisting Despair

The etymology of the word ‘despair’ comes from Latin for ‘without hope’, and is related to spīritus, which means breath or spirit. From this, ‘despair’ can be understood to mean: an absence of spirit. I believe bringing a relational self and a spirited presence to the people we work alongside is an ethical requirement of the work. Un-spirited work is more than merely problematic: it calls to question our ability to do our work ethically, or at all.

Psychology and the helping professions’ commitments to objectivity and neutrality can lead to despair. Professionalism can bring a silencing of all things ‘political’ and ‘religious’. This can easily morph into designing helping relationships that are silent about both power and the sacred. This silencing stance bolsters and reinforces the very conditions of an unjust society that are the root of many people’s suffering. Taking an overt position for justice is itself an act





of resistance against despair; I have found that this is required to care for my own tender relationship with hope.

I spent a decade across the 1980s and 1990s immersed in the death penalty abolitionist struggle; I was involved with multiple groups' efforts to organize international campaigns and direct actions against the death penalty in the USA and internationally. I worked for over twenty men on death row in the USA. All of these men were executed by the state. Many people commiserated with me about these men's deaths, but some of the messages I received implied that I had wasted a decade, or that I could have done more effective and useful work. These invitations to despair were compelling. But I was transformed by my work with those men on death row, those men who offered me two powerful teachings, without which I would not be able to do any of my work that followed. The first is an adage from Death Row activism, that everyone is so much more than the worst thing they have ever done. I did not know this, but twenty men on death row taught me this because they had the courage to reveal themselves to me as human beings: as persons, artists, relational beings, spirited persons, and as men who have enacted violence against women. The fact that I am a woman who has survived violence at the hands of men positioned me as a meaningful witness to these men's connections and belongings to humanity. The fact that I resisted their deaths, not because they were innocent, but because I did not believe any state should allow itself to kill people, held meaning for these men.

Resistance to the death penalty also taught me that the binary of winners and losers is a hope-destroying approach to doing-justice. I do not mean that I had no hope of saving a man's life or that I have abandoned hope of ending the death penalty worldwide; I was adamantly resisting state killings until the last moments of each man's life. But I was not judging the usefulness of our collective resistance on whether or not we were able to stop the oppressive power of the American government's killing machine. Our work was meaningful and useful because we treated people who were deemed inhuman with dignity and respect, and for many of these men that relationship made a significant difference in how they faced death. They knew they were not entirely abandoned, but accompanied by others thus maintaining their connection to humanity, if not to life. Despite the invitation to despair and hopelessness, resisting the death penalty amplified my commitment to resisting despair itself and bringing hope against the darkness, against long odds.

Bringers of hope

It is our collective ethical obligation as practitioners to bring reasonable hope, a believe-in-hope, an embodied hope to our relational work with clients, and not to steal the hope they have. When services and individual workers transgress against people, we actually steal hope from them: either through being 'the help that doesn't help', or transgressing in oppressive ways, such as unethical practice that leads to child apprehension. When we do poor work in a





helping profession, the consequences are not just that we are not useful. Our poor actions make it prudent and intelligent for people to resist further connections with professionalized help, and thereby create barriers to getting life affirming services they need. Our response to the harms caused by other workers has to resist blaming individuals and move into collective accountability. We then act to make repair of the ruptures we have caused as professionals, both individually and structurally. Our job is to step up and create a space in which there is a possibility for hope to grow.

Bringing hope is not the sole realm of workers, as people inspire and transform workers in reciprocal hope-inspiring relationships. When we track ethics in community work we centre the most vulnerable person in the relationship, which is the person we work alongside. At this intersection of power, it is the role of workers to bring hope. Simultaneously, workers need to resist invitations to what Teju Cole (2012) calls the “white saviour industrial complex” which elevates workers and disappears and makes invisible the resistance, wisdom and work of people. As workers we are not the victims or heroes of our work, but required to have enough access to hope in our lives so that we can be the bringers of hope. This is hard work that requires collective care and practices of sustainability beyond self-care.

Shouldering up workers as they respond to peoples’ suffering that is connected to exploitation and oppression requires that I bring hope to the supervisory relationship. My approach to this has been inspired by a teaching I received from a Tibetan monk, who was himself a survivor of torture and political violence. I was working in Dharmasala, India with the exiled Tibetan community at a Centre for Survivors of Torture; my role was to bring innovative practice, and help workers amplify people’s acts of resistance as part of our own resistance, as practitioners, to Psychology’s portrayal of people who have survived torture as traumatized and broken people (Reynolds et al, 2014b). We were constantly responding to tragic losses of life, human suffering, genocide, and torture. In the darkest moments I was flirting with despair, and asked this monk-brother how he kept his hope alive in the darkness, especially when a statistical analysis of our work would say we were not meeting any outcomes and were in fact losing ground. He referenced an adage from his tradition that went along these lines: Things are not this bad because we are doing nothing or are ineffective. Things are this bad and no worse because we are doing everything humanly possible to not have things be worse. I hold this teaching close as a resistance against the tyranny of measurable outcomes and a scarcity of resources amidst an abundance of need. This is especially poignant where I live, in British Columbia: one of the richest Canadian provinces, which has the second highest rate of child poverty and hunger in the country. Shame.

Justice-Doing as a Foundation for Hope

Enacting hope requires an ethical stance for justice-doing, otherwise we might be merely performing optimism, positivity, naivety, or charity. Justice-doing entails more than not





replicating oppressive practices in our relationships with people. It requires the doing of justice with people, engaging the activist project to transform the social contexts in which suffering and oppression occur, and to do this in ways led by people and with accountability to their communities.

Justice-doing means doing dignity with people and witnessing their resistance to abuses of power, both structural and interpersonal. We resist accommodating suffering others to oppressive lives. I remind myself that no one came to this work to harm people, and yet our work can often result in people being trained up to accommodate themselves to poverty, disrespect or racism. To resist accommodating people to oppression, we have to use our collective power to transform the social contexts that make the horrors of oppression and suffering possible (Reynolds, 2019).

When we work in ways that enact our collective ethics for justice-doing—even though the work is hard and heart-breaking—we can have sustainability. The goal of our work is not to avoid heartbreak, but to be able to hold the person we work alongside at the centre even when we are heartbroken. When we work in ways that are unethical, no amount of self-care will keep us sustained, as we will experience spiritual pain, or ethical pain. When we transgress the values and ethics that are the heart of our work, and that drew us to the work, it is not burnout or vicarious trauma we experience, but ethical pain. A collective ethic of justice-doing makes it possible for us to be the people who can bring hope to the helping relationship (Reynolds, 2011).

Solidarity Teams & Sustainability

When I began work with people who had survived torture over three decades ago I knew that I could not keep myself hope-filled, useful and ethical alone. I knew I would need solidarity and I built a Solidarity Team (Reynolds, 2011b) with the intention of keeping me sustained, ethical, spirited, hopeful, and able to practice in alliance with our collective ethics for justice-doing. Solidarity speaks to the interconnectedness of our collective movements towards social justice, and our commitments to resisting oppression on all fronts. A spirit of solidarity makes the interconnectedness of our justice-doing work visible, and speaks to our ethical commitments to recursively carry and sustain each other, and our collective connection to hope.

A Solidarity Team is an intentional group of folks who work as a networked community (Lacey, 2005) that holds the worker up and accompanies them in the sites of ethical struggle and suffering in the work. We bring our solidarity team members into our work in actual and imagined ways. Being held by a networked community allows workers to access more resources and wisdoms on how they can be most useful to people. Instead of thinking of how an ‘expert practitioner’ would intervene, workers can imagine how they might be more useful to this person, and reconnect with their own hope, if a member of their solidarity team was accompanying them with a spirited relationship of solidarity. The role of the Solidarity Team is





to help us resist despair, make ourselves useful, and be the bringers of hope: and no one can do this alone. The Solidarity Team needs to be peopled with folks who have the moral courage to lean in, across our histories of struggle and relationships of respect and dignity, and offer critique. I could not do my work sustainably, or maintain my relationship with hope, without the solidarity of impassioned, brilliant, ethical people who have had the moral courage to lean in and invite me to accountability for the ethics we hold collectively.

Vicarious Resistance and Transformations

Working with people who have survived torture for three decades has not burned me out, and I do not suffer vicarious trauma from it. I sometimes have dark dreams. The world is a dark place, my heart is broken. I have struggled alongside people who are asylum seekers and who have been refused refugee status by my Canadian government. I have been one of the people who has given someone their last hug before they got on a plane to be deported, to be tortured and murdered by their state. That has broken my heart. But that person who survived torture did not break my heart, Canada did. We have denied people refuge in this country, despite the fact that Canada should not be deciding who can seek refuge here (Dupuis-Rossi, 2020). As a nation we have not addressed our own presence as a diversity of settlers on Indigenous territories, which have been unceded and ancestral territories from time immemorial. The Canadian state and its agents have perpetrated political violence and torture and are complicit in race-based genocide of Indigenous women according to the Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (2019). It is not that I do not have a broken heart from working with communities of people who have survived torture and political violence, I do. But I do not believe the notion of vicarious trauma speaks ethically or meaningfully to my experience. The talk, resources, and investment into vicarious trauma are massive, but it makes me question where is the ongoing dialogue about vicarious resistance?

I have had the honour to witness stories of resistance from people who have survived torture and political violence, both abroad and in Canada. These dialogues have moved me, inspired me, transformed, educated, and challenged me. People have moved me to political action. People have made me question my education in psychology and the trauma trainings that label people as damaged on the inside. People have required me to show up for them and with them in ways that stretched my trainings and knowledge. The Chilean community has sharpened my political analysis. The Ogoni men I have worked alongside, who were tortured for environmental activism resisting the international resource extraction industry's pipelines in their territories in Nigeria, expanded my analysis of what activism was and can be. They forced me to make intersectional connections between social justice activism and what Indian physicist and activist Vandana Shiva (2005) calls Earth Democracy. This was breaking new ground three decades ago. These teachings and spirited connections have transformed me and made me more useful as an activist, worker, supervisor, and professor. Witnessing decades of people's resistance against state and capitalist power has moved me and ignited my own fire





for justice-doing. My own relationship with hope has also been enriched by people I work alongside who have been the bringers of hope for me, as our relationships are reciprocal, and I acknowledge that people have also changed and shouldered me up. These are the benefits and gifts I have received from Vicarious Resistance.

As a supervisor I am curious about the ways our work amplifies our hope and transforms us. This has engendered a series of questions:

How has this work amplified your hope: In yourself as a worker? In community? In the possibilities for a more just society?

How are you transformed for having done this work?

What have people contributed to your life, your relationships?

What practices of gratitude and 'giving it back' (AA, 2001) has this work engendered in you?

How are you different in this world for having done this work?

Collaborative Therapy innovator Harlene Anderson (1997) teaches that if we are truly in relationships with people, then we, as practitioners, are also at risk of being transformed. Our work is supposed to transform us, and not leave us untouched or unchanged. This transformation is not best understood as vicarious trauma or burnout, but holds the possibility for bringing us closer to our collective vision for how we need this world to be. We do not want to accommodate people to lives of oppression, and thereby hold up systems of exploitation and oppression. Our vision, as Paulo Freire (1970) unapologetically claims, is to transform ourselves, our societies, and this world in hope-filled ways that are just and sustainable.

A story of hope in unexpected places

I had just returned from a cross-country tour speaking about the opioid catastrophe and trying to promote harm-reduction and dignity-driven practice across many communities in Canada. I was exhausted and stretched. I had a desperate call to meet with a team of Aboriginal workers, who were working alongside Aboriginal mothers to help them navigate the oppressive structures required to maintain their housing and resist the apprehension of their children (Gerlach, Browne & Elliot, 2017). I was honoured to be invited in, and despite jet lag and being very tired I knew I had to respond with action and 'showing up'. People who have survived torture and political violence have taught me that the worst thing is not the torture itself, nor the need to seek refuge and leave their homelands: the real torture is living without your children. Canada has more Indigenous children in state care than during the period of Residential schools, and this contravenes the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007, p.5 Article 7, 2). To enact my commitment to a (trying to be) decolonizing stance, I knew I needed to respond to this team of Aboriginal workers and the





mother-led families they support. But I was not just tired, I was also devastated. I am also connected to a team working in a live-in program for youth of all genders struggling with substances, exploitation and oppression in their lives. A youth who was in the program the previous year had died this day of an overdose. This youth died because recovery is not linear, and because there was no Overdose Prevention Site in their community. Donald MacPherson, the Executive Director of the Canadian Drug Policy Coalition, would say this youth died by bad drug policy (personal communication, 2015). The team was overwhelmed with grief. I was trying to respond on many fronts. It was a long, dark, sleepless night.

I awake fitfully, and as I am preparing to meet with the Aboriginal workers, I am straining to be the bringer of hope. I do my self-care practices of plank and stretching as I try to become embodied. I drink decaffeinated coffee and water. The program's workers are dedicated and skilled, but they have also caused harm to each other and to the Aboriginal mothers. I have no prior relationships with these workers, and I am very aware I am yet another white woman professional showing up with a PhD and prestige bolstered by white supremacy. Hope is hard to find. I arrive early and over-prepared.

To my surprise I am met with a circle of about fifteen workers, all earlier than me, and they are nearing the end of a smudge ceremony. They are already enacting the willingness and vulnerability I will need to be able to invite responsibility and enact repair, which gives my believed-in-hope a place to start. A young worker approaches me and non-verbally invites me to smudge. I am hesitant to engage in spiritual practices not my own, but I have also been mentored to participate accountably when invited in to sacred spaces, and to be careful what I take out. When the young worker has finished brushing me down with an eagle feather, she puts everything aside. Then she comes to me and says kindly, "Do you know who I am?" I say she is familiar but I don't remember where we know each other from, or her name. She says, "You were my therapist" (on the team where we had just lost the youth to the opioid catastrophe). She introduces herself as Sarah-Anne Mitchell (her real name, as she wants to be identified in this writing). She tells me she has twenty years free from drugs, that our program and workers are part of how she got her life together. She also says she has five children, and none of them are apprehended by the government. I feel elated, joyful: full of hope. I ask if we can take a selfie on my phone, and we do. I send it to the youth substance misuse program, where the workers share this story of hope, of how youth can and do find liberation and meaningful lives. We can hold this hope in a tension alongside the heartbreak and rage of the youth who has died. Sarah-Anne says to me, "The creator sent you to us and our families today". I say, "The creator also sent you to me today".

Borrowing the hope of others

Acts of hope-filled solidarity continue to humble me and shoulder me up for this work. We are not meant to do this work alone, nor are we required to rely on self-care and individual





resilience, or some equally obscure personal trait, to keep us alive in the work. There is a fluidity in our collective work that allows for and requires an ebb and flow of hope around and between us. In moments when hope is hard to grasp, it is possible to borrow the hope of others.

When it became undeniable that the present opioid catastrophe was more than a bad run of drugs, and that it was going to be reminiscent of the AIDS pandemic, where people died because they were not dignified as human, I despaired. I was thinking that I could not do this again. I met with a beloved friend from decades-past AIDS activist days. My friend held space for my pain and heartache, but resisted my despair by lending me his hope. He said, “yes Vikki, you can do this again, and you will do this again”. That night he sent me this writing from the Talmud, which is the central text of Rabbinic Judaism and the primary source of Jewish religious law and theology (Steinstaltz, 2009):

“Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief.

Do justly now.

Love mercy now.

Walk humbly now.

You are not obligated to complete the work,

but neither are you free to abandon it.”

Dedication

To Trey Helton, Tara Taylor, Sarah Blythe and the team at the original Overdose Prevention Site, OPS in Vancouver; to Zoe Dodd in Toronto, Stan Kupferschmidt in Ottawa, and all good folks responding to the opioid catastrophe and deaths by bad drug policy who continue to enact and re-create fierce, creative, life-saving acts of resistance that amplify my hope.

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Riel Dupuis-Rossi is a Two Spirit therapist of Kanien'kehá:ka, Algonquin and Italian descent. Riel grew up in their traditional territories, off reserve in Hamilton, ON and Montreal, QC.

Riel has been providing decolonizing and culturally-centered Indigenous trauma therapy to Indigenous adults in the unceded Homelands of the Coast Salish Nations since 2011. Riel holds both a Masters in Curriculum Studies and a Master of Social Work. Riel's clinical specializations are in historical, transgenerational, complex and shock trauma therapy.

Reflection by Riel Dupuis-Rossi

As an Indigenous person, my hope lies in what I have inherited from my Onkwehon: we Ancestors and relatives. As an Indigenous person, my hope lies in the fact that under the layers of collective grief is sacred knowledge of a way of life that upholds, centers, respects and lives in harmony with All of our Relations: the Earth, the Sky, the waterways, the forests, plants, sacred medicines, the mountains, the animals, the water life and the winged ones/birds.

My hope is born of reclamation: the subtle yet powerful act of reclaiming one's right to love as an Indigenous person and of those acts of greater magnitude which include our communities' defense of our lands. These acts, whether they be deeply intimate or greatly political, are the equivalent of moving mountains and changing tides. I see Indigenous Peoples' courage in this respect and this courage unfolds on a moment to moment basis.

My hope is alive in the knowledge that as Indigenous Peoples we have complex governance and kinship systems that are based in philosophies and language systems that reflect deep respect and care for all living things. My hope lies in the fact, that as the Original Peoples of this land, we have the skills, competence, insight, wisdom and the time-honoured experience of how to live in our Homelands in a way that is peaceful, honourable, kind, loving and deeply generous. We are a healthy people and we live this health-despite being subjected to relentless and brutal systemic attack by the Settler State.





The poverty, homelessness, domestic violence, addiction, child abuse, chronic disease, high rates of suicide and chronic suicidality, cultural dislocation, disproportionate rates of incarcerations and alarmingly high rates of child apprehensions are all forms of violent oppression under colonial rule but it is not who we are. They are the impact of 500 years of colonial war against our Peoples: genocidal warfare, forced relocation, reservations, residential schools, criminalization of our ceremonies, dislocation of our traditional governments, the intentional flooding of Indigenous communities with alcohol and drugs, imposed poverty, police brutality and the ongoing abductions and murder of Indigenous women, girls and trans peoples. These symptoms of colonial violence are not ours to own. Our Indigenous histories, philosophies, governance structures, our songs, ceremonies and medicines contain within them knowledge of who we are and it is hopeful and prideful.

Even those who purport to practice anti-oppressive approaches often do not take the time to see us for who we truly are. The directionlessness of settler society, the poverty of capitalism, the emptiness of a market economy, the darkness of institutionalized settler religion, the incompetence of settler governments—all of these get projected onto us as Indigenous Peoples. We are forced to bear the misery, the suffering, the poverty and the criminality of colonial oppression. All of this stands in sharp contrast to the wisdom, wealth and grace of our traditional governance structures, economies, cultures and spiritualities which exist in respectful alignment with All of Our Relations. It is in the inheritance of ancestral knowledge and in the care that it took to pass it down over generations, despite over 500 years of genocidal attack, that I find hope. It is here that I also find truth, courage, integrity, strength, humility, reverence and honour.

We, Indigenous Peoples, are not souls lost in a sea of pain, darkness and despair. We are Onkwehón: we, the Original Peoples of our vast and most sacred territories. We are the inherent and rightful Leaders, Knowledge Keepers, Healers and Ceremonialists of these lands. And the lands upon which we have lived since time immemorial recognize, claim, care for and protect us even as we live, survive and resist the unspeakable violence of ongoing attempted genocide. But the desecration has nothing to do with us and everything to do with how the settler state and its benefactors live and govern. The oppression to which we are subjected is the disease and the criminality of the settler state. Violence, theft, desecration, oppression, darkness and despair is the history of the settler state and its citizens. It is not our history. As Indigenous Peoples, we have histories as old as time itself and it is in this history and its continuity that my hope is inspired.

My hope also lies in the possibility that one day settlers will turn their gaze, with all its unconscious abuse of power, away from us, Indigenous Peoples, and begin to take a good hard look at themselves. My hope lies in the possibility that one day, settlers may realize that their nation and their governments are illegitimate and that no amount of anti-oppressive practice will ever justify their existence. To Indigenous Nations, Canada is an illegitimate, illegal occupying force. It is not an entity that has potential for redress or reconciliation. It is a





presence that is inherently violent and unjust. It is from this clarity that hope can be created. But this will require that even those with anti-oppressive commitments take an honest look at themselves and be truthful about all of the ways that the unearned privileges bestowed upon them by the Settler state are still held onto tightly and with great force.

Travis Heath is an adopted, cisgender man from United States of America of mixed racial background (birth father was Pardo, from Brazil, and birth mother of German and Polish descent). Travis works as a psychologist and professor in Denver, Colorado. Travis has a therapy practice that operates on a radical sliding fee scale, and he works with many people on the margins.

Reflection by Travis Heath

For some time, I have felt exasperated and exhausted by what I've started referring to as "the cult of positivity." Don't like how you feel? Well, only you can choose your attitude. Do you weigh too much? Look at this diet or workout plan. Feeling the stress of your job? Just engage in self-care. This reduces the idea of hope to nothing more than a commodity to be bought and sold. It also positions happiness as the highest end. And it sets up those of us on the margins to feel as though we're never quite good enough.

I'm not interested in finding hope, at least not the way they have defined it. Hope becomes a tool of the colonizer that pulls the wool over our eyes and tries to make us believe we are actually pawns in the neoliberal game of life. If we just work hard enough and study well enough, we too can make our own luck and cultivate the skill of happiness.

I've discovered their hope to be at worst a lie and at best a mirage. It's based on the idea of a republic and a constitution that was never created for me. Hope, just like so many other things, has been co-opted by the machine. How do we take it back? Or is it time to blow it up and start all over again? How do we find hope we can believe in? Might hope be something we have to construct anew with each person we are in conversation with? How does hope on the margins look different than hope in the middle?

As Vikki pointed out, this is certainly not a project that can be successfully navigated from a place of neutrality under the guise of professionalism. People I've been in conversation with have taught me that it takes a kind of fierce humility to locate and elevate the hope we find on the margins. This brings me to a story of a person I share with his consent. He asked that I call him by the pseudonym "Julio." Specifics of the story will also be omitted per his request.

Julio is a 23-year-old man of Mexican descent. His parents came to the United States shortly before he was born. As such, he was a citizen of the United States by birth. He experienced violence in his home growing up as well as overt racism in the small town in which he lived





most of his life. This began to try and steal hope and a lot of other things from him relatively early in life. When he turned 18, he enlisted in a branch of the military. He was off to combat a short time later. He told me, “I had no idea what the fuck I was getting myself into. I thought it would be like a videogame or something.”

Someone who had seen me in the past sent Julio my direction because he was having thoughts of no longer wanting to live, and he was on a waiting list still months long at the local VA Hospital. He was concerned about not being able to pay, which I told him was of no concern since I work on a radical sliding fee scale. We made an appointment for the next week.

Upon his arrival, he told me some stories about things that happened while he was in combat. He said, “I’m a piece of shit. Look at what I’ve done. There’s no other way to say it. I’m a piece of shit. Everything that everyone said about growing up must be true. I’m just a Mexican piece of shit.” It was as if in this moment any remaining hope separated itself from his body.

Without giving it too much thought, I asked, “Do you think sometimes groups that are capable of behaving badly like the military can mandate that otherwise good people do bad things?” He stared back at me and declared, “What?” I repeated the question. After 30 seconds or so of silence, he replied, “I don’t know. I mean, no one has ever asked me a question like that before.” We decided that this was the kind of question he might be better served to live with for a while rather than just answer outright.

He came back to our next meeting with a sense of urgency in his speech as well as in how he was holding his body. “You remember that question you asked me last time? I couldn’t get it out of my head. Every time I started to think I was a piece of shit, I was like, nah, good person, bad group. It’s not like the whole military is bad, but it can go bad. Really bad.” I asked, “When you said to yourself, ‘good person, bad group’, what started to happen in your life?” He had an answer at the ready, “I started to feel like there was hope for me again. I thought, maybe I can live this life.”

Obviously, this conversation continued over a period of months and contained quite a number of twists and turns, but when I recently asked Julio what moment he thought was most important in our work, he relayed the story I just shared. For the purpose of this writing, I want to propose that we co-created a believed-in-hope that resided on the margins. The politics of hope at the center had been trying to squash Julio’s believed-in-hope ever since he was a boy. As a young adult, the system mandated that he behave in a way that betrayed his own ethics and values and then had the audacity to try and blame him for it. If dominant systems are too often the thieves of hope, perhaps conversations committed to justice-doing, however imperfect they may be, are one potential antidote.





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