

**The Impossible Will Take a Little While:
Perseverance and Hope in Challenging Times
By Paul Loeb**

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Excerpts from the book:

Introduction

A few years ago, I heard Archbishop Desmond Tutu speak at a Los Angeles benefit for a South African project. He'd been fighting prostate cancer, was tired that evening, and had taken a nap before his talk. But when Tutu addressed the audience he became animated, expressing amazement that God chose his native country, given its shameful history of racial oppression, to provide the world with an unforgettable lesson in reconciliation and hope. Afterward a few other people spoke, then a band from East L.A. took the stage and launched into an irresistibly rhythmic tune. People started dancing. Suddenly I noticed Tutu, boogying away in the middle of the crowd. I'd never seen a Nobel Peace Prize winner, still less one with a potentially fatal disease, move like that—with such joy and abandonment. Tutu, I realized, knows how to have a good time. Indeed, it dawned on me that his ability to recognize and embrace life's pleasures helps him face its cruelties and disappointments, be they personal or political.

Few of us will match Tutu's achievements, but we'd do well to learn from someone who spent years challenging apartheid's brutal system of human degradation, yet has remained light-hearted and free of bitterness. What allowed Tutu, Nelson Mandela, and untold numbers of unheralded South Africans to find the vision, strength, and courage to persist until apartheid finally crumbled? How did they manage to choose forgiveness over retribution while bringing to justice the administrators and executioners of that system? What similar strengths of spirit drove those who challenged America's entrenched racial segregation, or the dictatorships of Eastern Europe and Latin America? What enables ordinary citizens of today to continue working to heal their communities and strive for a more humane world, despite the perennial obstacles, the frequent setbacks?

We live in a difficult time, fraught with uncertainty and risk. From terrorist threats, foreign military ventures of questionable purpose, and mushrooming white collar crime, to skyrocketing health care costs, mounting national debt, and an economy that appears rigged for the benefit of the greedy and ruthless, the world can at times seem overwhelming, beyond our control. I write these words a few months after Europe's hottest summer on record, when a series of heat waves took an estimated 35,000 lives, more than ten times the toll of the attacks in New York City and Washington, DC on September 11, 2001. Respected experts like Worldwatch founder Lester Brown, drawing on an ever-growing body of sobering scientific research, attribute the deadly weather to global warming. How difficult it is, though, to address such looming realities as weather gone awry or a faltering economy when the day-to-day

demands of job and family require so much of our attention. Merely thinking about them is to flirt with despair.

And no one is immune, not even those whose occupations or interests directly involve helping others or bringing about constructive social change. In recent years, I've traveled throughout the country to deliver lectures. Virtually everywhere I've gone I've encountered people who question whether their actions really matter, whether it's worthwhile to continue making the effort. I've heard this from teachers struggling to help their students learn in inner-city classrooms, from nurses and doctors trying to deliver quality medical services while navigating bureaucratic HMO mazes, from Republican Chamber of Commerce members attempting to save small rural towns from going under. I've heard it from 18-year-old students and 80-year-old grandmothers. I've heard it particularly from those who marched and spoke out against the 2003 Iraq war—then were dismissed, in the words of a Minnesota student, “as if all of our efforts were worthless.”

But as understandable as such moments of doubt and apparent impotence may be, especially in a culture that too often rewards cynicism and mocks idealism, they aren't inevitable. If tackling critical common problems seems to be a fool's errand, it's only because we're looking at life through too narrow a lens. History shows that the proverbial rock can be rolled, if not to the top of the mountain, then at least to successive plateaus. And more importantly, simply pushing the rock in the right direction is cause for celebration. History also shows that even seemingly miraculous advances are in fact the result of many people taking small steps together over a long period of time. For every Tutu, there have been thousands of anonymous men and women who were equally principled, equally resolute. Having over the years drawn inspiration from some of their stories, as well as those of people whose names are more familiar, I decided to create this book, to remind readers that they belong to a community of like-minded souls, stretching across the globe and extending both backward and forward in time.

The writers assembled here have helped me maintain the belief that striving for a more humane world is worth the effort. Again and again, they've satisfied my hunger for hope. They've rescued me from despair. It's my wish that their example will do the same for others, encouraging everyone to take up the essential work of healing our communities, our nation, our planet—and to persist during a time when such involvement has never been needed more. Think of the following essays as a conversation in which some of the most eloquent, visionary, and provocative people of our age explore the historical, political, and spiritual frameworks that have underpinned their lives. Not everyone will agree with the specific beliefs they espouse or stands they take. But the conviction they exhibit possesses universal appeal. It's the same indomitable spirit expressed in the Billie Holiday lyric and World War II Army Corps of Engineers motto that inspired the book's title, “The difficult I'll do right now. The impossible will take a little while.”

Political and personal hope are intertwined, of course. What keeps us committed to improving our communities and our country is akin to what gives us the strength to endure the sometimes

devastating difficulties of our individual lives. So I've included pieces that straddle both worlds, like Diane Ackerman's moving account of volunteering at a suicide prevention hotline, where she faced the daunting task of persuading people that the answer to life's troubles isn't to retreat from life altogether. But my primary focus is on what moves us beyond mere personal survival, beyond carving out a comfortable private existence—to broader, more enduring visions that can help us tackle common problems and keep on doing so regardless of the frustrations we may encounter. We can't afford the sentimental view that mere self-improvement, no matter how noble in intention, is enough. Nor can we afford to succumb to fear.

This isn't to say that fear is unfounded. Any clear-eyed view of the world recognizes that grave threats exist. I've already mentioned some of the most troubling—terrorism, war, economic ruin, global warming. To make matters worse, those in power often take advantage of large-scale threats, including those that are exaggerated or entirely manufactured, exploiting fear and feelings of vulnerability for their own gain. Today fear so dominates American society that people hesitate to speak out against such exploitation, worried that they may be deemed unpatriotic or simply ignored, marginalized. And how could someone who's afraid to voice his beliefs be able to act on those beliefs, a far riskier endeavor? When fear dictates what we say and do, democracy itself is imperiled. The antidote to such paralysis is hope—defiant, resilient, persistent hope, no matter what the odds against us may be. As Jim Wallis, editor of the radical evangelical magazine *Sojourners*, writes, "Hope is believing in spite of the evidence, then watching the evidence change."

Orientation of the Heart

Another way of expressing what Wallis says is that hope is a way of looking at the world—more than that, a way of life. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the stories of those who, like Tutu and Mandela, persist under the most dangerous conditions, when simply to imagine aloud the possibility of change is deemed a crime or viewed as a type of madness. Consider former Czech president Vaclav Havel, whose country's experience, he argues, proves that a series of small, seemingly futile moral actions can bring down an empire. When the Czech rock band Plastic People of the Universe was first outlawed and arrested because the authorities said their Zappa-influenced music was "morbid" and had a "negative social impact," Havel organized a defense committee. That in turn evolved into the Charter 77 organization, which set the stage for Czechoslovakia's broader democracy movement. As Havel wrote, three years before the Communist dictatorship fell, "Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart."

How does a person come by such an orientation? The life of Rosa Parks offers a telling clue, provided we look beyond the conventional retellings of her experience, which actually obscure how the power of the human spirit prevails in bleak times. We think, because we've been told again and again, that one day Parks stepped onto a bus in Montgomery, Alabama and single-handedly and without apparent preparation inaugurated the Civil Rights movement by refusing

to sit in the segregated section. I remember Garrison Keillor, on Martin Luther King Day, saying, “Rosa Parks wasn’t an activist. She was just a woman with her groceries who was tired.”

Such well-meaning folksy accounts belie a much more complex reality: that Parks had by that time been a civil rights activist for twelve years, was the secretary of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and acted not alone but in concert with and on behalf of others. The summer before her arrest, she’d taken a ten-day workshop and met with an older generation of civil rights activists at the Tennessee labor and civil rights center, Highlander School, which is still going strong today. The first NAACP meeting that Parks attended addressed the issue of lynching, an all-American form of terrorism so accepted in respectable circles that gentlemen smoking cigars and ladies in their Sunday best allowed photos to be taken of themselves standing in front of black men being burned and hanged. (The pictures can be seen in all their horror at National Civil Rights Museum, in Memphis.) Out of this bleak legacy and, more importantly, years of struggle to overcome it, came the courage and determination of Parks, and people like her—the community of like-minded souls I mentioned earlier.

Nothing cripples the will like isolation. By the same token, nothing buoys the spirit and fosters hope like the knowledge that others faced equal or greater challenges in the past, and continued on to bequeath us a better world. Even in a seemingly losing cause, one person may unknowingly inspire another, and that person yet a third, who could go on to change the world, or at least a small corner of it. Rosa Parks’s husband Raymond convinced her to attend her first NAACP meeting, the initial step on a path that brought her to that fateful day on the bus in Montgomery. But who got Raymond Parks involved? And why did that person take the trouble to do so? What experiences shaped their outlook, forged their convictions? The links in any chain of influence are too numerous, too complex to trace. But being aware that such chains exist, that we can choose to join them, and that lasting change doesn’t occur in their absence, is one of the primary ways to sustain hope, especially when our actions seem too insignificant to amount to anything.

Community of Conviction

I often turn to the following story, a more personal but equally impressive version of the Parks episode, as a reminder of how powerful a community based on conviction can be, even though the members of that community may be unknown to each other, or be living in different places or historical times. In the early 1960s, a friend of mine named Lisa took two of her kids to a Washington, DC, vigil in front of the White House, protesting nuclear testing. The demonstration was small, a hundred women at most. Rain poured down. The women felt frustrated and powerless. A few years later, the movement against testing had grown dramatically, and Lisa attended a major march. Benjamin Spock, the famous baby doctor, spoke. He described how he’d come to take a stand, which because of his stature had already influenced thousands, and would reach far more when he challenged the Vietnam War. Spock talked briefly about the issues, then mentioned being in DC a few years before and seeing a

small group of women huddled, with their kids, in the rain. It was Lisa's group. "I thought that if those women were out there," he said, "their cause must be really important."

When the unforeseen benefits of our actions are taken into account, any action may prove more consequential than it seems at first. In 1969, Richard Nixon's envoy, Henry Kissinger, told the North Vietnamese that the president would escalate the Vietnam war massively, including using nuclear strikes, unless they capitulated and forced the National Liberation Front in the South to do the same. Nixon had military advisers prepare detailed plans, including mission folders with photographs of potential nuclear targets. But two weeks before the president's November 1 deadline, there was a nationwide day of protest, the Moratorium, when millions of Americans joined local demonstrations, vigils, church services, petition drives, and other forms of opposition. The next month, more than a half-million people marched in Washington, DC. An administration spokesperson announced that Nixon watched the Washington Redskins football game and the demonstrators weren't affecting his policies in the slightest—feeding the frustration of far too many in the peace movement and accelerating the move of a few to descend into violence. Yet privately, as we now know from Nixon's memoirs, he decided the movement had, in his words, so "polarized" American opinion that he couldn't carry out his threat. Moratorium participants had no idea that their efforts may have been helping to stop a nuclear attack.

Although we may never know, it's possible that America's recent peace movement similarly helped make further wars against countries like Iran and Syria less likely, even before our troops became mired in the shooting gallery of the Iraqi occupation. Whatever one thinks of the invasion of Iraq, and certainly decent people held positions both for and against it, several million ordinary Americans marched and spoke out to try and prevent it—the largest such protest in at least two decades, and for many, their first public stand, or their first in years. It wasn't easy to voice opposition, given that the Bush administration overtly linked dissent with being an "ally of terrorism." Yet people did, in every community in the country, joined by the biggest global peace demonstrations in history. This movement may have inspired the next Rosa Parks, Benjamin Spock, or Susan B. Anthony. It certainly marked the first steps for innumerable individuals who may be more emboldened in the future, possibly becoming the unsung heroes who ultimately make any change possible.

This Gorgeous World

But that's true only if the newly engaged don't become discouraged. And as I've suggested, many entertain significant doubts about the value of their recent participation in the public sphere. Whether they find new avenues of engagement or withdraw permanently to private life depends in part on the creativity and vision of America's peace, environmental, and social justice groups. It depends as well on whether these new participants can adopt the long view—developing the patience essential to continue even when their actions bear few or no immediate fruits. And it depends on whether they learn to savor both the journey of engagement itself and the everyday grace that nurtures us during the most difficult tasks. In "The Small Work in the Great Work," Reverend Victoria Safford advises us to "plant ourselves at

the gates of hope,” even in times or situations that would invite pessimism, because “with our lives we make our answers all the time, to this ravenous, beautiful, mutilated, gorgeous world.”

The natural environment may be more threatened today than in any other time in human history. Global warming, destruction of forests and other ecosystems, mass species extinction, pollution of aquifers, consumption of irreplaceable resources—the list is long and depressing. And that’s one reason why some people cannot imagine taking responsibility for anything beyond their own private lives. Yet for all the insults it has endured, that same natural world possesses a beauty and richness that can be a source of renewal. When I run, on Seattle’s many beaches or wherever I go during my travels, I start out weighed down by the ills of the world and all my personal obsessions. By a few miles in, the burden invariably lifts. I see the landscape with fresh eyes. I slow down, begin to take notice of little things in my surroundings, and soon enough it becomes clear again that humanity shares the earth with innumerable other creatures, and that the wild and not-so-wild places we inhabit together are sacred. Most important is the realization that we cannot exist apart from that non-human realm. The community of conviction is part of and dependent on the entire community of life. And to that larger and much older community we can always return to find hope.

In “The Sukkah of Shalom,” Rabbi Arthur Waskow uses the open-air Sukkoth shelter of leaves and branches as a metaphor for our post-September Eleventh predicament, arguing that we gain strength and compassion precisely by being linked in vulnerability with many others on this frail and threatened planet. I like to think that something like this realization of the preciousness of life is what motivated Desmond Tutu when he joined the other dancers at the Los Angeles fundraising event. As the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz has written, “There are nothing but gifts on this poor, poor earth.” Tutu, like other social and political activists who haven’t forgotten the importance of enjoyment, passionately embraces the gifts placed before him. If it’s a gift of music, he will dance. If a gift of food, he will eat. If the company of friends, he will converse, laugh, and share stories. Such are the small but necessary pleasures that enable him to look evil in the eye and be confident that the fight must be fought. For only someone who knows how good life can be is in a position to appreciate what’s at stake when life is degraded or destroyed.

Even if the struggle outlives us, even if it’s impossible to envision a time when it will end, conviction matters. Actions of conscience confirm the link between our fate and that of everyone and everything else on the planet, respecting and reinforcing the fundamental connections without which life itself is impossible. We will flourish or perish based on how well we understand and act in accordance with this interdependence—the interdependence that Martin Luther King evoked, explaining, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.” In “From Hope to Hopelessness,” Margaret Wheatley, author of *Turning to Each Other*, strips this notion to its essentials, arguing that only by renouncing the certainty that our actions will be effective can we continue on in hard times. So long as we are connected to our fellow human beings, Wheatley says, we can draw strength precisely from feeling “groundless, hopeless, insecure, patient, clear. And together.” I would

add that such fellow-feeling should be extended to the non-human world—for our sake as well as its.

Humility and Dignity

Perhaps the most important lesson the interdependence this gorgeous world teaches is humility. Among other things, it counsels restraint. It says that giving up on life and the living is a form of arrogance. In “Only Justice Can Stop a Curse,” Alice Walker examines the politics of bitterness, the temptation to conclude that we’re destined for extinction: “Let the earth marinate in poisons. Let the bombs cover the ground like rain. For nothing short of total destruction will ever teach [us] anything.” But then Walker remembers the acts of others that have given her cause to hope, and resolves that she will not be defeated by despair. What is this but a form of forgiveness? And everyone needs forgiveness—ourselves, for not taking on every cause and winning every battle, as well as others, our neighbors and co-workers, relatives and friends, and especially those who disagree with our beliefs or accept the lies and misdirections now so commonplace in our culture.

Nor should we forget that courage is contagious, that it overcomes the silence and fear that estrange people from one another. In Poland, during the early 1980s, leaders of the workers’ support movement KOR made a point of printing their names and phone numbers on the back of mimeographed sheets describing incidents of police harassment against then-unknown activists like Lech Walesa. It was as if, in the words of reporter Lawrence Weschler, they were “calling out to everyone else, ‘Come on out! Be open. What can they do to us if we all start taking responsibility for our true dreams?’”

As the Polish activists discovered, we gain something profound when we stand up for our beliefs, just as part of us dies when we know that something is wrong, yet do nothing. We could call this radical dignity. We don’t have to tackle every issue, but if we avoid all of them, if we remain silent in the face of cruelty, injustice, and oppression, we sacrifice part of our soul. In this sense, we keep on acting on the basis of conscience because doing so affirms our humanity—which forms the core of who we are and confirms what we hold in common with others.

If we do learn to keep going, as we must to create a better world, a question arises about the causes we’ll embrace. Do the voices I’ve included in this book speak to people representing all political perspectives, or only those who happen to mirror my sentiments? Certainly the individuals I’ve brought together share a passion for democracy and justice. That’s why I admire them. And most are critical of a runaway global market that would reduce us all to our monetary worth. But their specific politics can’t always be pigeon-holed: How do you categorize those who challenged Communist dictatorships in Czechoslovakia and Poland, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia? Their courage inspires me, yet many conservatives responded with equal hope to the overthrow of these repressive regimes. And many of the issues these authors take on, like Ackerman’s work with the suicide hotline, hardly fit into any political categories beyond simply trying to respond to our fellow human beings with compassion.

Even on specific political issues, the voices in this book sometimes differ. In a brief but powerful vignette, the late Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen writes of the hope and wisdom he gains while caring for a man who cannot walk or speak. He then asks us to speak for “unborn life, life on death row, the life of the severely handicapped, the life of the broken and the homeless.” I’m staunchly pro-choice and will remain so. Nouwen was not. We were raised in different traditions, lived through different times, developed divergent views of the world. Yet Nouwen’s essay gives me hope, which is why I included it.

Finally, responses to my previous books have exposed a troubling divide between secular and religious readers. Those rooted in more secular humanist ethics often recoil at religious language, even when used to explain actions of courage that they’d normally find admirable. Those of a stronger religious persuasion sometimes react in the opposite manner, mistrusting moral action that isn’t grounded in an overtly faith-based perspective. To me, when people act for justice, religious and secular perspectives conjoin, offering parallel ways of understanding our responsibility to our fellow human beings and our need to act on it. This book includes people from both sides of this divide, all who’ve worked strongly for justice. So whatever your perspective, I hope you’ll see their words as metaphors reaching for a common vision of human courage and connectedness.

My goal is that the conversation created by this book will model a process by which citizens can at times agree to disagree, even regarding highly consequential concerns, while joining in trying to heal our communities, our nation, and our planet. If you, as a reader, disagree with the views or actions of particular writers, that’s fine. You can still draw inspiration for the larger task of taking on the important issues of our time and continuing to do so despite the obstacles. Because in pursuit of that aim, we are all called to participate.