



The long read

Protest and persist: why giving up hope is not an option

The true impact of activism may not be felt for a generation. That alone is reason to fight, rather than surrender to despair

by [Rebecca Solnit](#)

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Last month, Daniel Ellsberg and Edward Snowden had a public conversation about democracy, transparency, whistleblowing and more. In the course of it, Snowden - who was of course Skyping in from Moscow - said that without Ellsberg's example he would not have done what he did to expose the extent to which the NSA was spying on millions of ordinary people. It was an extraordinary declaration. It meant that the consequences of Ellsberg's release of the top-secret Pentagon Papers in 1971 were not limited to the impact on a presidency and a war in the 1970s. The consequences were not limited to people alive at that moment. His act was to have an impact on people decades later - Snowden was born 12 years after Ellsberg risked his future for the sake of his principles. Actions often ripple far beyond their immediate objective, and remembering this is reason to live by principle and act in hope that what you do matters, even when results are unlikely to be immediate or obvious.

The most important effects are often the most indirect. I sometimes wonder when I'm at a mass march like the Women's March a month ago whether the reason it matters is because some unknown young person is going to find her purpose in life that will only be evident to the rest of us when she changes the world in 20 years, when she becomes a great liberator.

I began talking about hope in 2003, in the bleak days after the war in Iraq was launched. Fourteen years later, I use the term hope because it navigates a way forward between the false certainties of optimism and of pessimism, and the complacency or passivity that goes with both. Optimism assumes that all will go well without our effort; pessimism assumes it's all irredeemable; both let us stay home and do nothing. Hope for me has meant a sense that the future is unpredictable, and that we don't actually know what will happen, but know we may be able write it ourselves.

Hope is a belief that what we do might matter, an understanding that the future is not yet written. It's informed, astute open-mindedness about what can happen and what role we may play in it. Hope looks forward, but it draws its energies from the past, from knowing histories, including our victories, and their complexities and imperfections. It means not being the perfect that is the enemy of the good, not snatching defeat from the jaws of victory, not assuming you know what will happen when the future is unwritten, and part of what happens is up to us.

We are complex creatures. Hope and anguish can coexist within us and in our movements and analyses. There's a scene in the new movie about James Baldwin, *I Am Not Your Negro*, in which Robert Kennedy predicts, in 1968, that in 40 years there will be a black president. It's an astonishing prophecy since four decades later Barack Obama wins the presidential election, but Baldwin jeers at it because the way Kennedy has presented it does not acknowledge that even the most magnificent pie in the sky might comfort white people who don't like racism but doesn't wash away the pain and indignation of black people suffering that racism in the here and now. Patrisse Cullors, one of the founders of Black Lives Matter, early on described the movement's mission as "rooted in grief and rage but pointed towards vision and dreams". The vision of a better future doesn't have to deny the crimes and

sufferings of the present; it matters because of that horror.

I have been moved and thrilled and amazed by the strength, breadth, depth and generosity of the resistance to the Trump administration and its agenda. I did not anticipate anything so bold, so pervasive, something that would include state governments, many government employees from governors and mayors to workers in many federal departments, small towns in red states, new organizations like the 6,000 chapters of Indivisible reportedly formed since the election, new and fortified immigrant-rights groups, religious groups, one of the biggest demonstrations in American history with the Women's March on 21 January, and so much more.

I've also been worried about whether it will endure. Newcomers often think that results are either immediate or they're nonexistent. That if you don't succeed straight away, you failed. Such a framework makes many give up and go back home when the momentum is building and victories are within reach. This is a dangerous mistake I've seen over and over. What follows is the defense of a complex calculus of change, instead of the simple arithmetic of short-term cause and effect.

There's a bookstore I love in Manhattan, the Housing Works bookshop, which I've gone to for years for a bite to eat and a superb selection of used books. Last October my friend Gavin Browning, who works at Columbia University but volunteers with Housing Works, reminded me what the name means. Housing Works is a spinoff of Act Up, the Aids Coalition to Unleash Power, founded at the height of the Aids crisis, to push for access to experimental drugs, bring awareness to the direness of the epidemic, and not go gentle into that bad night of premature death.

What did Act Up do? The group of furious, fierce activists, many of them dangerously ill and dying, changed how we think about Aids. They pushed to speed up drug trials, deal with the many symptoms and complications of Aids together, pushed on policy, education, outreach, funding. They taught people with Aids and their allies in other countries how to fight the drug companies for affordable access to what they needed. And win.



Members of Act Up, the Aids Coalition to Unleash Power, at the Gay and Lesbian Pride March in New York City on 26 June 1988. Photograph: The New York Historical Society/Getty Images

Browning recently wrote: "At the start of the 1990s, New York City had less than 350 units of housing set aside for an estimated 13,000 homeless individuals living with HIV/Aids. In response, four members of the Act Up housing committee founded Housing Works in 1990."

They still quietly provide a broad array of services, including housing, to HIV-positive people 27 years later. All I saw was a bookstore; I missed a lot. Act Up's work is not over, in any sense.

For many groups, movements and uprisings, there are spinoffs, daughters, domino effects, chain reactions, new models and examples and templates and toolboxes that emerge from the experiments, and every round of activism is an experiment whose results can be applied to other situations. To be hopeful, we need not only to embrace uncertainty but to be willing to know that the consequences may be immeasurable, may still be unfolding, may be as indirect as poor people on other continents getting access to medicine because activists in the USA stood up and refused to accept things as they were. Think of hope as a banner woven from those gossamer threads, from a sense of the interconnectedness of all things, of the lasting effect of the best actions, not only the worst. Of an indivisible world in which everything matters.

An old woman said at the outset of Occupy Wall Street "we're fighting for a society in which everyone is important", the most beautifully concise summary of what a compassionately radical, deeply democratic movement might aim to do. Occupy Wall Street was mocked and described as chaotic and ineffectual in its first weeks, and then when it spread nationwide and beyond, as failing or failed, by pundits who had simple metrics of what success should look like. The original occupation in lower Manhattan was broken up in November 2011, but many of the encampments inspired by it lasted far longer.

Occupy launched a movement against student debt and opportunistic for-profit colleges; it shed light on the pain and brutality of the financial collapse and the American debt-peonage system. It called out economic inequality in a new way. California passed a homeowner's bill of rights to push back at predatory lenders; a housing defense movement arose in the wake of Occupy that, house by house, protected many vulnerable homeowners. Each Occupy had its own engagement with local government and its own projects; a year ago people involved with local Occupies told me the thriving offshoots still make a difference. Occupy persists, but you have to learn to recognize the myriad forms in which it does so, none of which look much like Occupy Wall Street as a crowd in a square in lower Manhattan.

Similarly, I think it's a mistake to regard the gathering of tribes and activists at Standing Rock, North Dakota, as something we can measure by whether or not it defeats a pipeline. You could go past that to note that merely delaying completion beyond 1 January cost the investors a fortune, and that the tremendous movement that has generated widespread divestment and a lot of scrutiny of hitherto invisible corporations and environmental destruction makes building pipelines look like a riskier, potentially less profitable business.

Standing Rock was vaster than these practical things. At its height it was almost certainly the biggest political gathering of Native North Americans ever seen, said to be the first time all seven bands of the Lakota had come together since they defeated Custer at Little Bighorn in 1876, one that made an often-invisible tribe visible around the world. What unfolded there seemed as though it might not undo one pipeline but write a radical new chapter to a history of more than 500 years of colonial brutality, centuries of loss, dehumanization and dispossession. Thousands of veterans came to defend the encampment and help prevent the pipeline. In one momentous ceremony, many of the former soldiers knelt down to apologize and ask forgiveness for the US army's long role in oppressing Native Americans. Like the Native American occupation of Alcatraz Island at the end of the 1960s, Standing Rock has been a catalyst for a sense of power, pride, destiny. It is an affirmation of solidarity and interconnection, an education for people who didn't know much about native rights and

wrongs, an affirmation for Native people who often remember history in passionate detail. It is a confirmation of the deep ties between the climate movement and indigenous rights that has played a huge role in stopping pipelines in and from Canada. It has inspired and informed young people who may have half a century or more of good work yet to do. It has been a beacon whose meaning stretches beyond that time and place.

To know history is to be able to see beyond the present, to remember the past gives you capacity to look forward as well, it's to see that everything changes and the most dramatic changes are often the most unforeseen. I want to go into one part of our history at greater length to explore these questions about consequences that go beyond simple cause and effect.



A 'water protector' at Standing Rock, where thousands gathered to protest the Dakota Access pipeline and its threat to the Missouri river. Photograph: Pacific Press/Rex/Shutterstock

The 1970s anti-nuclear movement was a potent force in its time, now seldom remembered, though its influence is still with us. In her important new book *Direct Action: Protest and the Reinvention of American Radicalism*, LA Kauffman reports that the first significant action against nuclear power, in 1976, was inspired by an extraordinary protest the previous year in West Germany, which had forced the government to abandon plans to build a nuclear reactor. A group that called itself the Clamshell Alliance arose to oppose building a nuclear power plant in New Hampshire. Despite creative tactics, great movement building, and extensive media coverage against the Seabrook nuclear power plant in New Hampshire, the activists did not stop the plant.

They did inspire a sister organization, the Abalone Alliance in central California, which used similar strategies to try to stop the Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant. The groups protested against two particular nuclear power plants; those two plants opened anyway.

You can call that a failure, but Kauffman notes that it inspired people around the country to organize their own anti-nuclear groups, a movement that brought about the cancellation of more than 100 planned nuclear projects over several years and raised public awareness and changed public opinion about nuclear power. Then she gets into the really exciting part, writing that the Clamshell Alliance's "most striking legacy was in consolidating and promoting what became the dominant model for large-scale direct-action organizing for the next 40 years. It was picked up by ... the Pledge of Resistance, a nationwide network of groups organized against US policy in Central America" in the 1980s.

"Hundreds more employed it that fall in a civil disobedience action to protest the supreme court's anti-gay *Bowers vs Hardwick* sodomy decision," Kauffman continues. "The Aids

activist group Act Up used a version of this model when it organized bold takeovers of the headquarters of the Food and Drug Administration in 1988 and the National Institutes of Health in 1990, to pressure both institution to take swifter action toward approving experimental Aids medication.” And on into the current millennium. But what were the strategies and organizing principles they catalyzed?

The short answer is non-violent direct action, externally, and consensus decision-making process, internally. The former has a history that reaches around the world, the latter that stretches back to the early history of European dissidents in North America. That is, non-violence is a strategy articulated by Mohandas Gandhi, first used by residents of Indian descent to protest against discrimination in South Africa on 11 September 1906. The young lawyer’s sense of possibility and power was expanded immediately afterward when he traveled to London to pursue his cause. Three days after he arrived, British women battling for the right to vote occupied the British parliament, and 11 were arrested, refused to pay their fines, and were sent to prison. They made a deep impression on Gandhi.

He wrote about them in a piece titled “Deeds Better than Words” quoting Jane Cobden, the sister of one of the arrestees, who said, “I shall never obey any law in the making of which I have had no hand; I will not accept the authority of the court executing those laws ...” Gandhi declared: “Today the whole country is laughing at them, and they have only a few people on their side. But undaunted, these women work on steadfast in their cause. They are bound to succeed and gain the franchise ...” And he saw that if they could win, so could the Indian citizens in British Africa fighting for their rights. In the same article (in 1906!) he prophesied: “When the time comes, India’s bonds will snap of themselves.” Ideas are contagious, emotions are contagious, hope is contagious, courage is contagious. When we embody those qualities, or their opposites, we convey them to others.

That is to say, British suffragists, who won limited access to the vote for women in 1918, full access in 1928, played a part in inspiring an Indian man who 20 years later led the liberation of the Asian subcontinent from British rule. He, in turn, inspired a black man in the American south to study his ideas and their application. After a 1959 pilgrimage to India to meet with Gandhi’s heirs, Martin Luther King wrote: “While the Montgomery boycott was going on, India’s Gandhi was the guiding light of our technique of non-violent social change. We spoke of him often.” Those techniques, further developed by the civil rights movement, were taken up around the world, including in the struggle against apartheid at one end of the African continent and to the Arab spring at the other.

Participation in the civil rights movement of the early 1960s shaped many lives. One of them is John Lewis, one of the first Freedom Riders, a young leader of the lunch counter sit-ins, a victim of a brutal beating that broke his skull on the Selma march. Lewis was one of the boldest in questioning Trump’s legitimacy and he led dozens of other Democratic members of Congress in boycotting the inauguration. When the attack on Muslim refugees and immigrants began a week after Trump’s inauguration, he showed up at the Atlanta airport.

That’s a lot to take in. But let me put it this way. When those women were arrested in parliament, they were fighting for the right of British women to vote. They succeeded in liberating themselves. But they also passed along tactics, spirit and defiance. You can trace a lineage backward to the anti-slavery movement that inspired the American women’s suffrage movement, forward right up to John Lewis standing up for refugees and Muslims in the Atlanta airport this year. We are carried along by the heroines and heroes who came before and opened the doors of possibility and imagination.

My partner likes to quote a line of Michel Foucault: “People know what they do; frequently they know why they do what they do; but what they don’t know is what what they do does.” You do what you can. What you’ve done may do more than you can imagine for generations to come. You plant a seed and a tree grows from it; will there be fruit, shade, habitat for birds, more seeds, a forest, wood to build a cradle or a house? You don’t know. A tree can live much longer than you. So will an idea, and sometimes the changes that result from accepting that new idea about what is true, right, just remake the world. You do what you can do; you do your best; what what you do does is not up to you.



Schoolchildren dress as Gandhi during celebrations to mark the 143rd anniversary of his birth. Photograph: Babu/Reuters

That’s a way to remember the legacy of the external practice of non-violent civil disobedience used by the anti-nuclear movement of the 1970s, as with the civil rights movement of the 1960s, which did so much to expand and refine the techniques.

As for the internal process: in *Direct Action*, Kauffman addresses the Clamshell Alliance’s influences, quoting a participant named Ynestra King who said: “Certain forms that had been learned from feminism were just naturally introduced into the situation and a certain ethos of respect, which was reinforced by the Quaker tradition.” Suki Rice and Elizabeth Boardman, early participants in the Clamshell Alliance, as Kauffman relates, were influenced by the Quakers, and they brought the Quaker practice of consensus decision-making to the new group: “The idea was to ensure that no one’s voice was silenced, that there was no division between leaders and followers.” The Quakers have been since the 17th century radical dissidents who opposed war, hierarchical structures and much else. An organizer named Joanne Sheehan said, “while non-violence training, doing actions in small groups, and agreeing to a set of non-violence guidelines were not new, it was new to blend them in combination with a commitment to consensus decision-making and a non-hierarchical structure.” They were making a way of operating and organizing that spread throughout the progressive activist world.

There are terrible stories about how diseases like Aids jump species and mutate. There are also ideas and tactics that jump communities and mutate, to our benefit. There is an evil term, collateral damage, for the people who die unintentionally: the civilians, non-participants, etc. Maybe what I am proposing here is an idea of collateral benefit.

What we call democracy is often a majority rule that leaves the minority, even 49.9% of the people - or more if it’s a three-way vote - out in the cold. Consensus leaves no one out. After Clamshell, it jumped into radical politics and reshaped them, making them more generously inclusive and egalitarian. And it’s been honed and refined and used by nearly every movement I’ve been a part of or witnessed, from the anti-nuclear actions at the Nevada test

site in the 1980s and 1990s to the organization of the shutdown of the World Trade Organization in late 1999, a victory against neoliberalism that changed the fate of the world, to Occupy Wall Street in 2011 and after.

So what did the Clamshell Alliance achieve? Everything but its putative goal. Tools to change the world, over and over. There are crimes against humanity, crimes against nature, and other forms of destruction that we need to stop as rapidly as possible, and the endeavors to do so are under way. They are informed by these earlier activists, equipped with the tools they developed. But the efforts against these things can have a longer legacy, if we learn to recognize collateral benefits and indirect effects.

If you are a member of civil society, if you demonstrate and call your representatives and donate to human rights campaigns, you will see politicians and judges and the powerful take or be given credit for the changes you effected, sometimes after resisting and opposing them. You will have to believe in your own power and impact anyway. You will have to keep in mind that many of our greatest victories are what doesn't happen: what isn't built or destroyed, deregulated or legitimized, passed into law or tolerated in the culture. Things disappear because of our efforts and we forget they were there, which is a way to forget we tried and won.

Even losing can be part of the process: as the bills to abolish slavery in the British empire failed over and over again, the ideas behind them spread, until 27 years after the first bill was introduced, a version finally passed. You will have to remember that the media usually likes to tell simple, direct stories in which if a court rules or an elective body passes a law, that action reflects the actors' own beneficence or insight or evolution. They will seldom go further to explore how that perspective was shaped by the nameless and unsung, by the people whose actions built up a new world or worldview the way that innumerable corals build a reef.

The only power adequate to stop the Trump administration is civil society, which is the great majority of us when we remember our power and come together. And even if we remember, even if we exert all the pressure we're capable of, even if the administration collapses immediately, or the president resigns or is impeached or melts into a puddle of corruption, our work will only have begun.



International Women's Day 2017. 'Actions often ripple far beyond their immediate objective, even when results are unlikely to be immediate or obvious.' Photograph: Brendan Smialowski/AFP /Getty Images

That job begins with opposing the Trump administration but will not end until we have made deep systemic changes and recommitted ourselves, not just as a revolution, because revolutions don't last, but as a civil society with values of equality, democracy, inclusion,

full participation, a radical *e pluribus unum* plus compassion. As has often been noted, the Republican revolution that allowed them to take over so many state houses and take power far beyond their numbers came partly from corporate cash, but partly from the willingness to do the slow, plodding, patient work of building and maintaining power from the ground up and being in it for the long run. And partly from telling stories that, though often deeply distorting the facts and forces at play, were compelling. This work is always, first and last, storytelling work, or what some of my friends call “the battle of the story”. Building, remembering, retelling, celebrating our own stories is part of our work.

I want to see this glorious resistance have a long game, one that includes re-enfranchising the many millions, perhaps tens of millions of people of color, poor people, and students disenfranchised by many means: the Crosscheck program, voter ID laws that proceed from the falsehood that voter fraud is a serious problem that affects election outcomes, the laws taking voting rights in most states from those convicted of felonies. I am encouraged to see many idealistic activists bent on reforming the Democratic party, and a new level of participation inside and outside electoral politics. Reports say that the offices of elected officials are swamped with calls and emails as never before.

This will only matter if it’s sustained. To sustain it, people have to believe that the myriad small, incremental actions matter. That they matter even when the consequences aren’t immediate or obvious. They must remember that often when you fail at your immediate objective - to block a nominee or a pipeline or to pass a bill - that even then you may have changed the whole framework in ways that make broader change inevitable. You may change the story or the rules, give tools, templates or encouragement to future activists, and make it possible for those around you to persist in their efforts.

To believe it matters - well, we can’t see the future. We have the past. Which gives us patterns, models, parallels, principles and resources, and stories of heroism, brilliance, persistence, and the deep joy to be found in doing the work that matters. With those in our pockets, we can seize the possibilities and begin to make hopes into actualities.

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