

Active hope: a practice for resilience in troubled times

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Summary

If we don't consider the sort of future we're heading into, we become vulnerable to the disasters current trends are taking us towards. This article explores how we can cultivate the resilience strength of future-mindedness and the resilience practice of 'Active Hope'. Exploring our hopes and fears is valued as a form of 'scenario planning', where we increase preparedness by exploring different ways the future may unfold. When anxiety about a potential disaster provokes positive changes, we can think of this as 'pre-traumatic growth'.

My interest in resilience grew out of a student research project 30 years ago. My journey since then has included work as a GP, nearly two decades as an addictions specialist, and nowadays a focus on writing, training and coaching. In these different roles, a central question I've been exploring is 'what helps us give our best response when facing bumpy times?' I see that as a key question for our times.

As a child, when I'd stumble or fall, my mum would say 'look where you're going'. Those words, said so many times, call attention to something that seems rather obvious and necessary. Yet as a culture and a society, how often do we really look where we're going?

How many school lessons or TV programmes, for example, look back in time rather than forward? If we don't consider the sort of future we're heading into, we risk attracting the disasters that current trends are so clearly driving us toward.

This article explores how we can cultivate resilience through future-mindedness by introducing the practice of 'active hope' and apply this to the challenges of protecting both personal and public health.

Facing uncertainty and cultivating foresight

Alan Greenspan, the former chief of the US Federal Reserve, saw our systemic short-sightedness as a central cause of the financial crisis of 2008. He described how, in financial decision-making, the lack of longer term consideration of costs was as 'underpricing risk' (BBC 2009). Yet when considering the future it is like looking

into the mist – we can't be sure what's there. That is why we need ways of thinking that can help us deal with this kind of uncertainty.

One approach involves sizing up risks in terms of their probability. But probability is not objective and research has shown, unsurprisingly, that the language used to describe a risk will powerfully influence our response to it (Misselbrook and Armstrong 2001). For instance, when looking at potential side-effects of medical treatment, current conventions regard a risk as 'high' if it has more than a 1% chance of happening, and 'low' if its likelihood is less than 0.1% (Calman 1996). Yet the International Panel on Climate Change (perhaps sensitive to political pressure to avoid appearing alarmist) has set the bar much higher: an event has to have more than a 90% probability before it is regarded as 'very likely', and, if it has less than a 5% chance, it is seen as 'extremely unlikely' (IPCC Working Group 2 2014).

Moving the focus away from probability, Royal Dutch Shell developed scenarios planning back in the 1960s as a way of cultivating foresight. Its goal was not to predict the future, but to increase preparedness by considering a range of scenarios for

how events might unfold (Wilkinson and Kupers 2013). As a result, Shell's directors were better prepared for the oil crisis of 1973 because they had already worked through similar scenarios. As a result of this success at Shell and in other organisations, scenario planning has now become widely used. It is also something we can do ourselves.

Hopes and fears as two different scenarios

One of the simplest forms of scenario planning is to consider our hopes and fears. Whatever situation we face, there will always be different ways it can go. Some of them we hope for, others we might dread.

Our hopes provide essential navigational information, a direction to head in that feeds our sense of purpose. Our fears and concerns alert us to danger, telling us what we might want to avoid or address.

In his book *An Astronauts Guide to Life on Earth*, Canadian spaceman Chris Hadfield (2013) describes how facing bad news scenarios formed a central part of his training. By contemplating the many possible wrong turns, he strengthened his capacity for responding to adversity and increased his understanding of how to make disasters less likely. Though such head-on confrontation of gloom is not something overly positive thinkers would advise, it seems that by considering potential pitfalls people's ability to reach goals gets stronger (Halvorson 2013). Bearing this in mind, view the following exercise as an invitation to explore the scenarios you hope for, and also those you don't.

Exercise – open sentences on hopes and fears

Read these beginnings of sentences, and see what words naturally follow. You can think this to yourself, or put it in writing. Try it with a partner, taking turns to speak and listen. It is worth spending a couple of minutes or more on each sentence. You can apply this process to any situation, looking at your hopes and fears, for example when considering your personal health and wellbeing, or the state of an organisation such as the NHS, or when reflecting on your hopes and fears for the world.

When I think about ... (decide the area you're looking at), what I'd love to happen here is...

When I look at what I hope won't happen here, my fears and concerns include...

Completing these sentences invites you to consider different possible outcomes and to sense how much you actually engage with them. In *passive* hope you identify what you hope for, but then look to others to bring that about. *Active hope*, however, is where we play an active role in making our preferred future more likely to happen.

Active hope training

When I've interviewed people about their hopes and fears for the future, an issue that often comes up is powerlessness. What's the point, some ask, of thinking about our hopes if it is beyond our power to make them happen?

If we don't believe we can make a difference, any action might seem futile. A creativity principle that helps here is 'first what, then how' – first identify what you'd like to happen, then begin the quest of looking for how to move in that direction. I think of this as 'the journey approach to change' (Johnstone 2010).

Giving attention to our fears for the future can serve as a wake-up call.

Often when you start something you might not know how to do it. But if you persevere, seeking out allies and learning new skills, you are more likely to find a way. So if you're not sure how to move towards your hopes, see this as the time to train yourself, to prepare by growing your capacities. I call this 'active hope training'.

In the planning model developed by Shell, each scenario developed as a story that illustrated possible consequences of particular conditions. The plotline was built around an 'if... then...' exploration of 'if this happened, then what might that look like? And what could it lead to?' We can do this with the scenarios based on our hopes and fears. If our deepest hopes for the future were to happen, then what would that look like? And if our worst fears came true, what would be going on?

Why look both ways? Well consider what might happen if we didn't do this sort of active consideration of the paired potential future scenarios? A common default mode is to assume the future will be much like the present, carrying on in a 'business as usual' kind of way. Angela Wilkinson and Roland Kupers, two former Shell staff writing in the *Harvard Business Review*, comment:

'The official view of the future – the business as usual outlook – both reflects an optimism bias and is based on a human tendency to see familiar patterns and be blind to the unexpected.' (Wilkinson and Kupers 2013)

In the addictions recovery world, there is a saying that 'if you carry on the way you're going, you'll end up where you're headed'. Giving attention to our fears for the future can serve as a wake-up call, activating our survival instinct and provoking necessary changes in our course. When anxiety about potential future traumas provokes positive changes, we can think of this as 'pre-traumatic growth'. But for this to happen, we need to look at how our choices and actions might steer us away from the scenarios we dread and towards those we deeply hope for.

Three stories of our time

Every scenario has its antecedents. Using our imagination, creativity and what we know of current trends, we can trace backwards from each imaginary future, creating a



plausible timeline of how this version of events might come to pass. Each scenario is a story that grows out of the present we live in now. That means the present moment contains the

seeds and sproutings of many different possible futures. Our power of influence comes from choosing which of these to cultivate, support and put ourselves behind.

In our book *Active Hope* (2012) my co-author Joanna Macy and I describe three different stories we see happening now. Each story can be thought of as a flow of events extending out of the present moment into the future. By looking at how we participate in these flows, we can consciously move from one story to another. You can apply these three stories at the level of an individual, or an organisation like the health service, or indeed, our whole society.

The first story we call *Business As Usual*. The main assumption here is that we can carry on our business the way we usually do. On an individual level, we each have our own version of this, our own status quo that we tend to maintain. In organisations like the health service, the appearance of 'business as usual' is often actively maintained even when reality is different from this, for example when whistleblowers are silenced. At a societal level, the 'business as usual' model aims for continual economic growth, without taking account of the way that bubbles burst. Business as usual is the default mode when we don't look where we're going in time. It leaves us unprepared for, and makes more likely, the bumps and crashes from problems not addressed.

If we take off any rose-tinted spectacles, we might see another story. We call this *The Great Unravelling*, as it focuses on how things are in decline or are falling apart. A drinking alcoholic might seem satisfied with their own version of 'business as usual', while others close to them recognise the unravelling. In organisations like the health

service, this story can be found wherever the system becomes dysfunctional, toxic to work in, or appears to be falling apart. And in our world situation, the tragedy of collapsing social, economic and ecological systems is becoming more and more apparent. This version of events can seem like a horror story that robs us of joy. Which is why the next story becomes ever more important.

Whatever situation we face, one thing we have choice over is the response we give. *The Great Turning* is a story of consciously heading towards our hopes; in this narrative, crisis can become a turning point. This plotline takes into account both the other stories, reflecting on what 'business as usual' is in the situation we're looking at, and then examining our fears or concerns about where this might be leading. If we recognise a downslope of unravelling, then what would a story of turning towards our hopes look like here?

Whatever situation we face, one thing we have choice over is the response we give.

Every day we'll have choice points where our decisions and actions serve as votes that make our preferred future more likely. Perhaps one of our most important choices is about which story we inhabit. This 'meta-choice' will shape all our smaller decisions. Active hope is a practice based on this decision. It involves a willingness to face things as they are, and to look at how they might be. But it is more than just looking. Every day we can also ask 'where does my hope guide me, and what can I do today that moves in that direction?'

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