

Our Hearts in the Age of Climate Change: Why to Hope and How

Erika Spanger, April 21, 2024

Thank you, Reverend Rebecca, for that [powerful reading](#) and for welcoming me here today, and to the Green Team for asking me to come and speak with you. It's my honor.

Happy Earth Day. I work for the Union of Concerned Scientists, a science based nonprofit working for a safer, healthier world. But I'm here today as myself—a mom, a gardener, a woods- and beach walker, a big fan of birds. And while I usually “rep” the science, I'm not really here to do that. Science is so critical. Without it, there is no good policy, no good plans, we're flying blind.

But here in 2024, on Earth Day or any day, it's important to speak directly to each other's hearts about what's happening and what it means to us.

Earth Day and I were both born in 1970 and back in that first year, 20 million people or an astonishing 10% percent of the American population participated in some kind of Earth Day event. And in many ways, the environmental movement was born.

Over time, many things have improved—so wonderful the way you can see a bald eagle over the Market Basket parking lot and be like “cool”—some things have worsened and *some* problems, like climate change, have emerged and taken center stage. And though our concern has grown, our ability or our willingness to get out and *do something* are not keeping up as the Earth's problems get bigger.

That makes a lot of sense: in the face of huge problems like climate change, we struggle to feel like our actions make a difference. And when we feel like we're beset by a huge problem that we can do little to stop, that very rationally creates fear and anxiety. And when climate- or “eco” anxiety is sustained over time, it can take a toll on our hope for the future. And *this* can feed inaction.

That's what I'm going to talk about. We face a crisis of climate anxiety and hopelessness, just when we have no time to lose and no one to spare. We need resilient hearts and minds resolved to see this challenge through.

That's why I chose the most audacious title for this sermon. Our Hearts in the Age of Climate Change: Why to Hope, and How. And *that's* why I've been lying awake ever since, sweating bullets...

I will say, I have struggled to live up to my own billing. To know how gentle to be... how honest...I won't get it right for everyone. But know I come in love.

Our Hopes on the Ropes

Why do I say we have a crisis of hopelessness? Because millions and millions of people say they struggle to hope for the future. Young people in particular. And climate change is a key reason. An important 2021 study found that, around the world, large majorities of young people have deep anxiety about their future *because of climate change*. They don't expect good things in the years ahead *because of climate change*. So many of them don't want to have children *because of climate change*.

I don't think those of us who are older sit with that enough. On our watch, a world has grow up around today's children and people *just coming of age* that is for so many of them breaking their hearts and crushing their spirits. I don't think we sit with that injustice. And it is an injustice.

And its not just them.

I know many of you have has asked themself some version of the question: "with climate change, what can I really do? Do I even matter?"

I know others have asked some version of the question: "with climate change, is there any hope?"

For others, I might not be speaking to you directly. But there's someone dear to you who is struggling with this.

And to be clear, the struggle to hope in 2024 isn't a deficit. This isn't mental illness, though it can certainly progress into that. This is a rational response to what we're seeing and experiencing.

There are a thousand different reasons why you might be having this really rational response, none of them good. This is the hard part of my talk. But we've got to do it. So please, I want us to take a moment and bear witness to some of them.

>> It could be that you watched 2023 shatter temperature records by a very wide margin, shocking scientists and crushing people under heat waves and other extremes.

>> It could be that you're watching 2024 continue that march, with each month clocking in as the hottest in history. The hottest June, the hottest January, 10 months in a row and counting...

>> It could be that you've read about the so-called "tipping points" we're inadvertently toying with: like the dieback of the Amazon forest or collapse of the Gulf Stream or the world's major ice sheets which would be, let's just say, consequential.

>> It could be that you know that you watched the floods in Pakistan, the wildfires in Australia, right now, today, you're watching many millions of people in Africa face hunger from climate-driven drought or that we're experiencing what scientists expect will be the worst global coral bleaching event in history.

>> It could be that you *know* we need deep emissions cuts by 2030, now 6 years away, in order to avoid the more devastating consequences of climate change, *but* global heat trapping pollution is still rising. Not rising much, but still rising when they need to be free-falling.

That's enough to challenge our hope, for sure.

>> Or it could be, and I promise this is the last one, but it's important, it could be that you know fossil fuel companies are presently making their strongest profits in recent history, and they're doing so:

- After decades of deception about the climate harm caused by their products,
- while bankrolling politicians who obstruct climate action,
- while greenwashing and telling us to mind our own carbon footprint, like this is on us,
- while running down the clock and degrading and diminishing the future for every young person alive and yet to be, for a flickering moment of profit...

It's enough to make a person angry...

I don't think we sit with *that* enough, either. The immorality and criminality of the fossil fuel industry and the interests that support it. It's madness... that today's children are inheriting a world that we could have been so much safer, healthier and more vibrant but corporate interests have driven it into such danger, on our watch and with our participation, willing or not.

I feel for us. In truth, we're not so well-built for a problem like climate change. It's so big, so long-term, so everything... Our minds struggle to hold it all, to see its true significance, and to see how *we* can change and respond to something at such a scale.

So, I think we can be forgiven for asking those questions. What can *I* really do? Is there hope?

Why hope?

Okay, that was the hard part.

Now I want to talk about *why to hope*. And there are so many reasons. You surely have your own. Here are just a few I chose to lift up.

We should hope because there's still time and every 10th of a degree matters. On the time part, you know that dream we've all had where it's the night before finals and we've been blowing off class for months and we spent our book money on beer and now we have a matter of hours to pass this test? That's us. The climb is steep. Nice job, kid.

But *when* we bring our carbon and other heat-trapping emissions to net zero, the atmosphere can stop warming relatively quickly – potentially within a decade. If we can do that before mid-century, we have a solid shot at keeping global temperature increases below 2 degrees C – the threshold beyond which dangerous and cascading climate impacts are expected. But in reality, there is no magic number and every 10th of a degree matters, every 10th of a degree is worth fighting for, and there will never be a point at which there's no point in trying.

We should hope because the natural world is incredibly powerful and, given half a chance, ecosystems change and rebound. We will not save everything, we will not simply stop the extinction crisis, and that will be to our lasting shame. But there is so much that can endure and flourish if we work harder—now—to change.

We should hope because things are changing. Wind and solar power are rapidly overtaking coal-fired plants in our electricity mix. EVs are everywhere. We are making massive, unprecedented federal investments in our clean energy and transportation futures. Gradual, positive change doesn't sell so we don't see it, but it's happening!

We should hope because even larger-scale change can come quickly if we create the conditions. And because the things that hold us back, the obstacles to that change, they're really just stories. Bill McKibben said recently that too many people in power are acting as if economic “reality” and political “reality” somehow mean more than... reality. But those two man-made realities depend entirely on the stories that underpin them. So let's stop repeating them and start telling better ones.

Our dependence on fossil fuels and the riskiness of clean energy is one such story. It was never true. It was just a story hawked by powerful, profit-seeking interests that too many of us repeated—or didn't challenge—for too long and it landed us here. But you can see that story losing its grip on us. It's time to close that book and put it in the dustbin of history. And sue them into the next millennium. We can talk about that at lunch...

We should hope because the idea that the future will inevitably be worse than the past, that's also just a story. We should stop telling that one. It *could* be *far worse*. But the past was no picnic for most people who lived it. And the future could be where we find peace, justice, equity, community, connection, thriving; where we transform in the ways we need to as individuals and communities and societies. Let's tell that story.

We should hope because we have scarcely begun to tap the power of the collective "we". In your congregation's community, you probably have a sense of the power of collective action. But across much of western culture, the prevailing mindset is one of action through individual agency and responsibility. "I have to solve climate change". No, you don't. You just have to put some skin in the game, on a team. We're in this together. Let's start acting, organizing, and fighting like it.

Lastly, we should hope because it's our job. It's our job to hope. When older people talk about what gives them hope it's often the brave activism of young people, which I get, but also, no. That's unfair. We need to flip that script.

Many of those young people feel betrayed by us. They learned about the climate crisis, they looked to us and saw our inaction, and they feel betrayed and abandoned. That's according to that 2021 study I mentioned. *Adults need to take action that gives younger people hope.* Like the Swiss "grannies" – 2000 Swiss women over 64 – who just won a landmark climate case in the EU's highest human rights court. [We can talk more about this over lunch]

It's not our job to decide what's unrealistic, what's too idealistic, what can't be done... It's our job to come with a sense of responsibility to try. And trying is hoping.

How to hope?

Okay, so how to hope? My short answer is, don't worry about it. Which I'll explain...

My longer answer is the last thing I'm going to share with you today. It's in the form of a poem from an anthology published last fall to accompany the National Climate Assessment.

This poem came about because I was heartbroken. And I was watching my climate colleagues – scientists, activists, policy experts – heartbroken and grieving and weary. And I realized there's no way to take this away, other than denial or giving up. So we have to understand it and hold it and alchemize it.

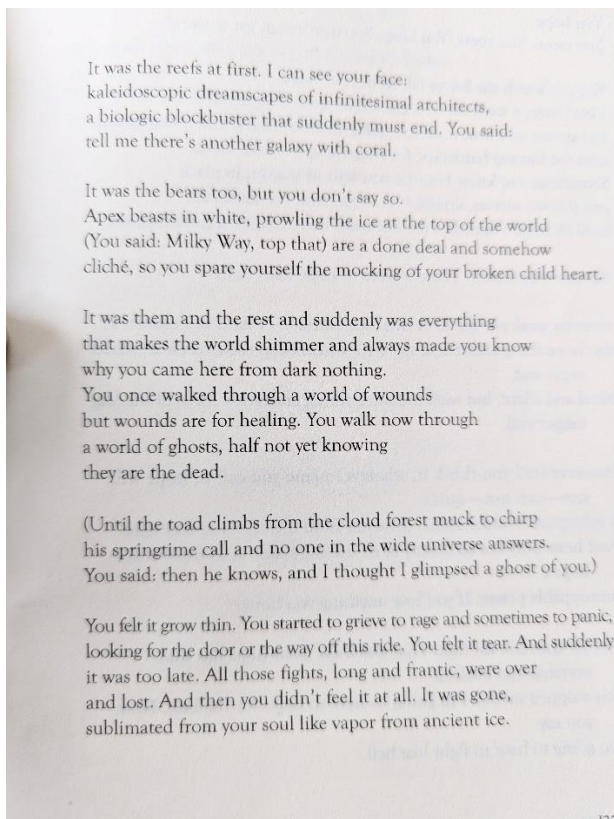
Here in 2024, your heart may be breaking. It may be broken. For nature, for our nation's toxic politics, for Gaza... We're all in some way grieving. And that's a price we pay for being human in this moment in our history. A moment that is taut and terrible and *possibly transformational*...

But not transformational yet...

It needs us... It needs you and your stitched up heart and your gritty, miraculous hope.

Thank you for listening.

Read: *On Hope*



In English we say "hope springs eternal."
In Russian it's "hope dies last." It's the same unbidden pulse.
In this world, if you love anything,
You hope.
You move. You press. You keep. You don't even get to decide.

You can watch the leaves fall from your hope:
a bird here, a town there; a glacier, its river, their people.
Sometimes you hear it on the radio, in thick traffic and you urgently
scan the fuming hardscape for something to make sense.
Sometimes you know because you wait in season, in place
and it never arrives, arrested en route. And the leaves fall
until all hope's branches are beautiful bones before a gathering sky.

But don't be fooled: There's more to hope than that.

However weak you see it, or dead you think it, or hard you mourn it,
this hope thing endures in the dark where deep roots sense scorched
earth and,
blind and silent, but with the unrelenting green-fuse force of life, dig
deeper still.

However frail you think it, whatever name you call it, hope will
not—can not—quit.
It relinquishes, shapeshifts, detaches from the object of its desire.
And hews only but so closely to its driving spark. And therein lies
hope's
unstoppable power: If you love anything you hope.

Not for this, not for that. That was then. Your hope has since
mutated and evolved.
You stopped saying: I'm going to have to hope for the best. Now,
you say:
I'm going to have to fight like hell.

And that's the bad news. You're going to have to fight like hell
without hope of "winning."
There's no winning anymore when so much is lost.
There's only what remains.

But look: It's still beautiful. I'll fight for that.

Whatever you fought for, whoever's in your locker,
the fight is now for what is left.
That is all. And that is everything.
And you, my weary friend, will never stop.