CHAPTER 15

On Giving Birth to Hope in Darkness

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In 1968, Hannah Arendt offered a collection of essays that focused on "men in dark times." That was the same year that Martin Luther King, Jr., was killed. King was, of course, an advocate of hope and light, especially the hopeful and creative power of nonviolence. It was King who wrote: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that."[1] King's nonviolent movement is a beacon or a sign, that there can be hope in the darkness. Hope played an important systematic role in King's nonviolent movement for social justice. King said in that same text, with reference to the Black American struggle for liberation and equality, "Our most fruitful course is to stand firm, move forward nonviolently, accept disappointments and cling to hope."[2] And: "The only healthy answer lies in one's honest recognition of disappointment even as he still clings to hope, one's acceptance of finite disappointment even while clinging to infinite hope."[3] The kind of hope that King appeals to here is religious and metaphysical. This is the hope behind King' famous claim that the "arc of the moral universe bends toward justice"—a phrase that appears, in a collection of his writings called *A Testament of Hope*. King explains this idea by appealing to the metaphor of light and dark. He writes:

> When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds of despair, and when our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a creative force in the universe, working to pull down the gigantic mountains of evil, a power that is able to make a way out of no way and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.[4]

Humanists and philosophers may have good reason to object to this kind of metaphysical hope. But it is possible to understand hope without appeal to a creative force in the universe. The important idea here is the active nature

1 Martin Luther King, Jr. *A Testament of Hope* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1986), 594.
2 King, *A Testament of Hope,* 584.
3 King, *A Testament of Hope*, 584.
4 Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Testament of Hope*, 252.

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of hope that we find in King's life and work. King's ideal is not merely a passive faith that clings desperately to metaphysical hope. Rather, King's hope is accompanied by firm resolve and systematic, nonviolent action. Perhaps King mis-spoke when he suggested that one must *cling* to hope. It might be better to say that hope is a beacon or a motor (as Bill Gay suggests in his contribution to the present volume).

The point is this: we don't merely *find* the light in the darkness. Rather, that light is *produced* by us. The light must be generated by the courageous and creative work of the human spirit. It is up to us to give birth to the light.

This theme can be found in different ways in Arendt's work—and also in the work of the great advocates of nonviolence such as Gandhi and King. Gandhi is famously quoted as saying "be the change you want to see in the world."[5] We might also say "give birth to the light you want to see." This is the point of hope, after all: to shine a light in the darkness. The light is kindled when we speak out, take action, and begin to move in the direction we want to go. And in giving birth to light in this way, the way forward is illuminated.

1 The Ubiquity of Darkness

This is not to say that the light of hope will be bright and unopposed. Indeed, the beacon of hope is often dim and the motor of hope risks running out of fuel. Such are the challenges of "dark times." But these challenges are common—and the cure is well known. Before turning to the cure, let's consider the ubiquity of darkness. Arendt introduced her volume by saying, dark times are "not only not new, they are no rarity in history."[6] As a Jew who emigrated from Germany during the Nazi time, Arendt was actively involved in trying to understand violence in light of ongoing war and social turmoil. The year she wrote those words, 1968, is remembered by some as one of the low points of recent history. That was the year, in the midst of the Vietnam War, when Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy were both assassinated. The streets erupted in political violence. But that year was also the year that the Civil Rights Act was passed,

5 Gandhi never quite put it this way exactly. The idea is a paraphrase of ideas implicit in Gandhi's work. See Christian Soschner, Gandhi Didn't Actually Ever Say, "Be the Change You Want to See in the World." Here's the Real Quote …, in: ILLUMINATION-Curated via Medium (4 April 2021), published at https://medium.com/illumination-curated/gandhi-didnt-actually-ever-say-be-the-change-you-want-to-see-in-the-world-d65b92cf5db.

6 Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968), ix.

as well as the year that Apollo 8 orbited the moon. History is like that: there are low points and high points—and often they intermingle.

And yet there are times when the darkness seems to have the upper hand. As we complete the present volume, *Peace and Hope in Dark Times*, it is appropriate to return to a theme that Barry Gan and others have addressed here, which is that discussions of "darkness" are often narrowly focused. Darkness is, in a sense, a matter of perspective—as is the question of what it is that we should be hoping for. Gan suggests that those of us who think that the Trump era and the Covid-19 pandemic are "dark times" may suffer from a narrow perspective that, as he puts it, "smells of privilege." Trump created challenges for the American constitutional system, to be sure. And he was not an admirable man. But Trump was no Hitler or Stalin or Pol Pot. And the system worked, preventing him from consolidating power. As I have argued elsewhere, Trump was only a would-be tyrant.[7] A similar problem holds with regard to the disruptions we have endured during Covid-19. The pandemic was a shock to the system. But it was not the Black Plague. And the economic dislocation of the pandemic was not nearly as brutal as the Great Depression. But we are biased toward the present: these crises affected our lives and they represent "darkness" in comparison to what we have experienced before and in relation to what we expect in terms of normality.

Gan's accusation of "privilege" cuts deep. Gan reminds us that for many around the globe, there has often been too little light. Indeed, the dream of the enlightenment has typically come at the expense of those who are "sitting in darkness," as Mark Twain put it in 1901. Twain's point was that the dream of spreading enlightenment (known as "the white man's burden") was often an excuse for outright imperialism undertaken in the name of "the Blessings of Civilization." Gan reminds us that the supposed purveyors of light have often actually been spreading darkness. As Gan writes, "dark times are omnipresent, and the U.S. has been a major player in contributing to dark times for many peoples throughout its violent history."

Indeed, such darkness was ubiquitous during past centuries. While there is some light to be found in the American founding, the U.S. Constitution was tainted from the start by slavery. This darkness was only eradicated after a brutal Civil War. Mark Twain's era was marked by this kind of darkness, as well as wars against the American Indians, the Spanish-American war, and other imperial misadventures. A hundred years ago, the world was rocked by the senseless violence of the First World War. This era included a terrible global

7 Andrew Fiala, *Tyranny From Plato to Trump* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2022).

flu pandemic and a genocide against the Armenian people. It gave way to further global crises, especially the Great Depression, the Second World War, the Holocaust, other genocides, and the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Gan is right to suggest that the present generation is privileged in comparison with the past.

2 Complicity and Posterity

In 1939, surely a low point of history, Bertold Brecht wrote a poem translated as "To Posterity" (*An die Nachgeboren*), which used the memorable phrase, "dark times."[8] Brecht begins the poem as follows:

> *Wirklich, ich lebe in finsteren Zeiten*

"Really, I live in dark times," he says. The German word "finster" resonates with more than just darkness. It also means, gloomy, sinister, and uncanny. In 1939, the times were ominous, threatening, and unenlightened. Brecht himself was on the run, escaping from Hitler's Germany, while he waited for a visa to relocate to the United States. On Brecht's telling, the sinister nature of the times is a product of both the pervasive sense of injustice that is at large in the world and the strange silence about injustice that lurks in the darkness. In Brecht's poem, there is also a sense of guilt and helplessness. Brecht had escaped the worst. But he knew that by escaping he left others behind. He begged that posterity would not judge his generation too harshly. These were times of weakness and injustice in which it was impossible to be kind.

But of course, we do judge Brecht's generation harshly. We also judge other past generations. These are iconoclastic times. In response to racial injustice, we have re-evaluated American icons, torn down statues, and renamed buildings. And so, of course, will our own generation be judged, just as we cannot help but judge the generation of 1901, 1914, 1939, and 1968. These exercises in creative remembering are productive. It is appropriate to learn from the past by shedding light on its darkness.

Of course, this is the easy part: past generations are no longer able to defend themselves against our critiques. From the vantage point of the present, it is easy to cast aspersions on darkness past. We wonder at the heartless brutality

8 Bertolt Brecht, "To Posterity" H.R. Hays translation at https://allpoetry.com/To-Posterity; German original here: https://www.lyrikline.org/de/gedichte/die-nachgeborenen-740.

and bloody hypocrisy of the slave masters, the Indian killers, and the imperialist powers. We wonder how those Germans, Austrians, and Vichy French could have willingly submitted to the genocidal militarism of National Socialism. We wonder about the cruelty and indifference of European accomplices to genocide. We wonder how the American and Allied bombers could have dropped fire bombs on German and Japanese cities, while also using atomic bombs against Hiroshima and Nagasaki. We also wonder about the generation of racists who opposed Rosa Parks and assassinated Martin Luther King, Jr. We wonder how our parents and grandparents so easily accepted a system of apartheid and white supremacy. We also wonder about the atrocities great and small of patriarchy, militarism, and plantation capitalism. And on and on it goes.

The "wonders" of history mentioned here are confined within a certain Euro-American frame of historical reference. But there are other sinister wonders at large in the history of the world. The Romans, the Huns, the Vikings, the Aztec, and the Inca were rapacious and cruel. And as civilization grew, the result has been devastating to the earth's biosphere. Megafauna have been hunted to extinction. Old-growth forests and coral reefs have been destroyed. The seas have been emptied of fish and filled with plastics and other garbage. The earth has been ravaged and the atmosphere clogged with heat-trapping gases. Again, we wonder how the past generations could have been so rapacious, so stupid, so ignorant, so … well, unenlightened.

But this crisis is also our own. History is still unfolding around us. Future generations will look back at us and wonder how Americans of this generation could have elected a tyrannical personality such as Donald Trump. They will wonder how we allowed racial injustice and economic inequality to fester and grow. They will be amazed at how we muddled through and mismanaged the Covid-19 pandemic. They will scratch their heads and ask why we permitted nuclear weapons to proliferate, why we accepted an economy based on fossil fuels, and why conspiracy theories and authoritarian ideologies festered and spread on our watch.

Perhaps our only response to the questions of the future is that "we are them." This is the same response that the past might give to us: "they are us, too." Human nature contains this darkness: this greed, this selfishness, this short-sightedness. The question of darkness will always be with us. The Christians called it sin. But we need not wax metaphysical to identify it. It is found in our near-sighted egoism, our indolent indifference, and our complacency in the face of evil.

Of course, once we recognize this, we can fix it. We do have some freedom, after all, despite the winds of history that buffet us. And here Brecht's poem is instructive. One reason to resist the darkness is so that posterity will not judge

us harshly. In his poem, Brecht offers a vision of wisdom, peace, happiness, and nonviolence. He writes:

> I would gladly be wise.
> The old books tell us what wisdom is:
> Avoid the strife of the world
> Live out your little time
> Fearing no one
> Using no violence
> Returning good for evil —
> Not fulfillment of desire but forgetfulness
> Passes for wisdom.
> I can do none of this:
> Indeed, I live in the dark ages!

The challenge Brecht poses here is that in dark times, the vision of wisdom and peace seems to evaporate. In the darkness, we are tempted to retreat to selfishness, complicity, fear, and violence. Brecht suggests that in his dark ages—in the darkness of the Nazi-time—there was no choice but to give in. As he says: "Alas, we who wished to lay the foundations of kindness could not ourselves be kind."

This may be the most hopeless result of living in darkness. The darkness seems to render us unable to do the right thing, unable to be kind, and unable to attain wisdom. But this is only true if we give in to the darkness. There is an alternative: to refuse to be unkind, to refuse to be complicit in wrongdoing, and to remain steadfastly committed to justice and to wisdom. This is what it means to shine a beacon of hope. This is what it means to give birth to hope.

3 On Giving Birth to Hope

Brecht's poem inspired the title of Arendt's book, *Men in Dark Times*. Her account of Brecht's wandering and struggles shows us just how dark the times were in the middle of the 20th Century. He bore witness to the despair of that time in the suicide of his friend Walter Benjamin. Brecht fled Germany and eventually landed in Hollywood, where he was caught up in the anti-communist mania of the House un-American activities committee. He returned to Germany, ending up in East Berlin, where he lived and eventually died uneasily in the shadow of Stalinist occupation. Brecht realized how difficult it was to live "in dark times." But on Arendt's telling the key to his survival

was compassion linked with stoic distance from suffering. This is paradoxical to be sure. But it seems right. To survive in dark times, we must find some way to retreat to the inner citadel without also losing our sense of compassion. Those without compassion retreat too far from the darkness, while those who are swept away by compassion can be ripped apart by the gloom.

This leaves us with a tenuous balancing act: between tender-mindedness and tough-mindedness (as William James might say). But from within this balancing act, it is possible to give birth to something new. This is what poets like Brecht do. It is also what activists like King do. They refuse to retreat from the moment, inspired by hope to put words on paper and feet on the ground. This process of creative engagement requires great courage when it is undertaken in the face of darkness, hate, and evil. As Brecht said in his poem "When Evil Comes Like Falling Rain," one of the worst problems of evil is the silence it creates. The poet writes:

> The first time it was reported that our friends were being butchered there was a cry of horror. Then a hundred were butchered. But when a thousand were butchered and there was no end to the butchery, a blanket of silence spread.
>
> When evil-doing comes like falling rain, nobody calls out 'stop!'
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> When crimes begin to pile up they become invisible. When sufferings become unendurable the cries are no longer heard. The cries, too, fall like rain in summer.[9]

Brecht's pessimism is palpable here. The butchers' gruesome pile mounts and nobody says anything. The blood and the crimes flood the world. And even the cries of the victims are washed away and evaporate, like summer rain.

And yet, there is the poet's voice and the outrage of the activist in the street. This is a different kind of rain—persistent and pleading. This protesting rain can be a powerful force against what King called "the gigantic mountain of evil." That mountain of evil is eroded one slow drop at a time.

With this invocation of evil let's return to Arendt and see whether there are grounds for hope in all of this darkness. Arendt is famous for giving voice to the phrase "the banality of evil." Evil can be blatant and explicit. The sadist, the racial supremacist, and the fascist are overtly wicked. They seek cruelty and domination for its own sake. This is the heart of the mountain of evil, the cruel

9 Huck Gutman, Bertolt Brecht – "When Evil-Doing Comes Like Falling Rain", in: Poetry Letters by Huck Gutman, published at https://www.huckgutman.com/blog-1/bertolt-brecht-when-evil-doing-comes-like-falling-rain.

granite at the core of hate and injustice. But there is another type of evil, that is not overtly cruel. This is the evil of indifferent complicity. This is the topsoil of complicity that gives a veneer of normality to evil.

Sometimes those who are complicit are ignorant. But often this ignorance is feigned and hypocritical. Arendt's example was Adolph Eichmann, whom she portrayed as a thoughtless bureaucrat, a mere functionary who happened to mastermind the mechanisms of Holocaust. Scholars of the Holocaust have debated whether Arendt's portrait of Eichmann is too lenient. But the phenomenon she was describing is familiar. This is the silence of the white majority that Martin Luther King, Jr. described as hiding "behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows." This is the problem of complicity in slavery and racism that runs throughout Twain's *Huck Finn*. This is the indifference and ignorance of those who fail to speak out and fail to take action in a world that involves cruelty, inequity, and injustice. This is the futile effort of avoidance and self-preservation that stops up its ears to the cries of the oppressed.

But this points us toward a solution—and a source of hope. We must give voice to suffering. We must open the floodgates and let the rain do its work. We must unstop our ears. And turn on the light. And we must take a step in the right direction. At the very least, we must make sure that we are not agents of darkness and concealment, who keep our lights off and thereby give cover to evil.

The model of this work of enlightenment and voice is ancient. Socrates spoke truth to power. So did Jesus. A more modern example is Thoreau, who refused to pay his taxes to a system that supported slavery and imperialistic wars—and wrote an essay that inspired Gandhi. He imagined that in his refusal he was being a "counter-friction" to the machine. King and his movement built upon this idea, with further inspiration from Gandhi and other liberationist movements of the 20th Century. This movement runs parallel with the work of Arendt's generation of anti-Nazi and anti-Totalitarian scholars and activists. We should include here the efforts of those who, like André Trocmé and Edouard Theis, were engaged in nonviolent subversion of the Nazi regime.

There are complicated questions here about whether and to what extent nonviolent resistance can work in the face of outrageous evil—and when and to what extent violence may be justified. But let's return to a point made by Gan in his essay, which is that violence is often found in the heart of the darkness. Violence causes fear, insecurity, and more violence. Gan suggests that it is with nonviolence that this dark cycle is broken.

This point was also made, of course, by Gandhi and King. King wrote (in a passage that refers to the darkness):

> Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that.[10]
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> King continued:
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> Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. The beauty of nonviolence is that in its own way and in its own time it seeks to break the chain reaction of evil.

These phrases have often been quoted and repeated—and so have sometimes themselves become banal. But let's pull these inspiring words apart in order to reveal the truth they contain. On the one hand, the imagery that King employs resonates with a kind of Christian metaphor that extends and morphs through the European enlightenment. It is Christ, after all, who is the light of the world. On one telling of the Christ story, the Christian dawn ushers in a new kingdom: a world where peacemakers are blessed, the mighty are brought low, and the meek inherit the earth. This idea of a new dawn or a new dispensation was familiar to King and to other Christian advocates of nonviolence. And for Christians, this is not merely a metaphor—it is also metaphysics.

But one need not be a Christian to understand the power of the metaphor of birth. Another useful source is Arendt. As Anna Taft has pointed out in the present volume, one of the solutions is for us to see the way that violence appears in what Taft calls (following Arendt) "fabrication." A significant problem for modern humanity is our tendency to view human life as a process of fabrication, with human beings as the raw materials of a vast mechanical process of production. This tendency to view human life in merely instrumental terms lies at the heart of much violence and darkness. It was at work in the trains that led to Auschwitz. It was present in the technological mindset that sought to maximize killing power with the creation of the atomic bomb. And it can be seen today in the way that human minds have become raw material for social media and pathways for the flow of "mind viruses" and fake news (see the Paula Smithka's essay in this volume, as well as Dakota Layton's). The solution to these problems must include active resistance to those paradigms of social and political life that focuses on manipulation, coercion, conformity, and violence.

One important part of that resistance is found in Arendt's idea of "natality"—the act or process of giving birth and creation. In *The Human Condition*,

10 Martin Luther King, Jr. *Where Do We Go From Here? Chaos or Community* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968/2010), 65.

Arendt offered an affirmative view of life that emphasized the capacity for birth, labor, and creative activity. Arendt explains in a pregnant passage (pun intended):

> Labor and work, as well as action, are also rooted in natality in so far as they have the task to provide and preserve the world for, to foresee and reckon with, the constant influx of newcomers who are born into the world as strangers. However, of the three, action has the closest connection with the human condition of natality; the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting. In this sense of initiative, an element of action, and therefore of natality, is inherent in all human activities. Moreover, since action is the political activity par excellence, natality, and not mortality, may be the central category of political, as distinguished from metaphysical, thought.[11]

Arendt does not connect natality directly to hope. Perhaps "hope" is too metaphysical for what she has in mind. Hope has often been connected with a kind of Leibnizian optimism that dreams of completion and fulfillment in the coming Kingdom of God. Rather, Arendt connects natality to labor and action. And in her brief discussions of hope, she approaches the concept phenomenologically. For Arendt, hope is a feature of human temporality that unfolds in tension with fear and remembrance. She says, for example:

> Man lives in this in-between, and what he calls the present is a life-long fight against the dead weight of the past, driving him forward with hope, and the fear of a future (whose only certainty is death), driving him backward toward "the quiet of the past" with nostalgia for and remembrance of the only reality he can be sure of.[12]
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> And:
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> Every hope carries within itself a fear, and every fear cures itself by turning to the corresponding hope. It is because of their shifting, unstable, and disquieting nature that classical antiquity counted both among the evil gifts of Pandora's box.[13]

11 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 9.

12 Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (London: Harcourt, 1978), Vol. 1 p. 205.

13 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Vol. 2 p. 35.

We might extend this phenomenology of hope a bit further, connecting it with ideas discussed above. Fear (along with hate, violence, and cruelty) are states of mind that prowl the darkness. Nostalgia (and related aspects of remembrance such as grief and regret) are static states that keep us wedded to the past. But hope is a kind of light and dynamism. It is an expectant and bright opening toward the future. It is not passive; it is active. It is not quiet; it is vocal. It is not afraid of the darkness. Rather, it offers courage and encouragement.

Although Arendt does not make this connection, it is easy to see that hope is connected to the concept of natality. Natality names a condition of action that is not merely fabrication. To create and to give birth are active verbs. And these actions lean toward the future with open expectation. The crucial point here is that for things to change, for the light to arrive, for the rain to wash away the mountain, we must take action in a bright mood of expectant anticipation. This is not a violent imposition on the world or on others: it is not coercive or manipulative. It is in action, labor, work, and natality that new things happen. This is how old patterns and cycles of violence are overcome. This is how justice and liberation arrive. As Arendt suggests, natality is what we experience when newcomers arrive. This includes visiting strangers (immigrants, new ideas, and new dreams). It also includes the future generation—those who will judge us.

And here we might conclude with another source of hope, which is found in the vitality of the human spirit. Human beings are prolific. Even in the darkness, we are creative. We love, produce, innovate, and reproduce. The very fact that there will be a future generation, gives us reason to hope—and a reason to do our part. It is sobering to imagine how the future will judge us. The future will condemn us if we contribute to the darkness: hate and cruelty do not fare well in the eyes of future history. But the future will also judge us harshly if we remain static and succumb to fear and regret, which are often excuses for inaction and complicity. Rather than this, a glance to the future can inspire us to get to work, to build and to create. There is no certainty with regard to the future. But we can be sure that if there is going to be a light at the end of the tunnel, it is up to us to give birth to it.

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