

The Pain Of Passion

[Hope is a concession to what you cannot control. When attachment fades, you are resigned. It is much easier to say why despair is bad than why hope is good. We despair when things are hopeless, but we remain attached to them. There is no cure. What they feel is grief or something like it. The pain of passion for a possibility that has died. But that doesn't mean there's merit in hope. Sometimes impossibility is a fact. My mother's Alzheimer's is not going to get better, only worse, and it would be foolish to hope otherwise, however much I wish it weren't. Even where hope is rational, what is the good of it? There was nothing to do but manage my anxiety and vehemently plead for the better result. Where is the value in that? Hope coexists with quiescence. If there's courage in hoping, it's the courage to face the fear of disappointment that hope creates. When things turn out badly, hope is more harrowing than despair. So Hesiod has a point. Hope can be deceptive, docile, daunting. Why celebrate its role in life? Hope is not like a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky, she wrote. Instead, hope should shove you out the door, because it will take everything you have to steer the future away from endless war, from the annihilation of the earth's treasures and the grinding down of the poor and marginal. Hope just means another world might be possible, not promised, not guaranteed. The call for action comes from somewhere else. This is where the myth of hope's value starts. But that doesn't make hope worthy in itself. Consider Prometheus, forging iron in the flames. He could not fashion plows or swords without fierce heat, but the temperature of the metal, the smoke and sparks, are means to an end, at best. Hope is the point at which we can be moved to act. But it is not the source of heat that brings us to that point or the force that moves us forward, the hammer blow with which we bend the world. And by itself, hope does nothing at all. Activists who valorize hope often recognize these facts. The mission of Black Lives Matter, Cullors wrote, is to provide hope and inspiration for collective action to build collective power to achieve collective transformation, rooted in grief and rage but pointed towards vision and dreams. The driving forces here are grief and rage, not hope. Fear, too, can be a motivating force, as it is for those who work on climate change. I don't want you to be hopeful, the activist Greta Thunberg told an audience at the World Economic Forum in Davos. I want you to panic. Hope is consistent with inaction. If you are trying to find a therapy for your illness, to adapt to disability, to cope with loneliness or escape from it, to succeed against the odds or to learn from failure, you are living in hope. Depending on your temperament, you may feel good about this or, like me, beset by fear. If hoping makes you anxious, you'll need courage. I have to fight the fear of hope that inhibits me from taking risks. And it's action, not hope, that matters. The reason I'm ambivalent is that hope is not one thing. As well as the attitude one takes toward a given outcome when one hopes for it, there's the trait of being hopeful, finding hope where hope ought to be found. Hope in this sense can be passive, as the etymology of passion attests. The theological virtue is different. Aquinas was inspired by Aristotle's theory of ethical virtue, on which a virtue is a mean between opposing vices. Each virtue oversees an action or emotion for which it finds an intermediate path. The brave experience fear at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way. Generosity is similar with giving and receiving. Though Aristotle did not recognize hope as a virtue of character, his theory seems to fit. One can be excessively hopeful, inflating the odds or refusing to](#)

give up when possibilities are so distant they should vanish. Or one can be too hopeless, minimizing chances or discounting risks that may be worth a shot. Virtue lies between these two extremes. Defying the angel of history who surveys wreckage upon wreckage, unable to act. Solnit conjures the Angel of Alternate History who tells us that our acts count, that we are making history all the time, because of what doesn't happen as well as what does. The Angel of History says, Terrible, but this angel says, Could be worse. Resistance is not futile. The virtue of hoping well is a matter of belief, of standing with or searching for the truth, attending to what's possible. And it's a matter of will, the courage to conceive alternatives, even when it's not clear what to do. The question, then, is not whether to hope but what we should hope for. What we need is acknowledgment and close reading of the lives we have. I can hope to ignore my pain or to make something of it, even if I don't hope for a cure. I can hope to see my mother again, to hold her hand and walk with her along the foreshore where the estuary gathers the tides and the great bridge sweeps across the river mouth, curving with the Earth. But I know she won't recover. There are limits to hope, and death is one. Some dream of immortality by uploading, copying the contents of their mind to a machine. Imagine you are uploaded but your brain is not erased, its data preserved through the copying process. And suppose that the machine is brought online. It is at best a mental duplicate of you, not you. But then the same is true if the machine is switched on when you die.