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ARTICLES

Radical Hope: Truth, Virtue, and Hope for What Is Left in Extinction Rebellion

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Abstract

This paper examines expressed hopelessness among environmental activists in Extinction Rebellion. While activists claim that they have lost all hope for a future without global warming and species extinction, through despair emerges a new hope for saving what can still be saved—a hope for what is left. This radical hope, emerging from despair, may make Extinction Rebellion even more effective. Drawing from personal interviews with 25 Extinction Rebellion activists in the United Kingdom and the published work of other Extinction Rebellion activists, this paper identifies signs of radical hope. While activists have cast off false hope and passive hope, a new hope for what is still possible remains. This hope is based on virtue ethics: doing what is right in the moment, rather than being attached to a desired outcome. This drives forward activism despite the results. Through their principle of regenerative culture, Extinction Rebellion activists learn to support each other and be prepared for a more turbulent and challenging future. Through a regenerative culture they can salvage and repair what is left and sustain radical hope.

Keywords Climate change · Biodiversity · Activism · Extinction Rebellion · Hope · Despair · Virtue ethics

Authentic hope requires clarity—seeing the troubles in this world—and imagination, seeing what might lie beyond these situations that are perhaps not inevitable and immutable.
Rebecca Solnit (2016, p. 20)

Time is running out, but it is never too late. There will always be something left to save.
Extinction Rebellion Activist, United Kingdom (2019)

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Introduction

Climate change is an issue of increasing public concern and over the last few decades a climate movement has emerged, including organizations like 350.org and The Climate Mobilization, demanding swift mitigation. These organizations helped to organize the 2014 Peoples Climate March in New York City as well as other activities and campaigns. However, in 2018, the climate movement became more vocal with new social movement organizations emerging. In 2018, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released a special report stating the critical importance of keeping average global temperature increases below 1.5 °C and adopting "rapid and far-reaching changes in all aspects of society" to do so (IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), 2018). This resulted in a surge in media attention and a rise in climate activism. The climate activist group Extinction Rebellion (XR) initiated a wave of protests and acts of civil disobedience in the United Kingdom (UK). These actions have been sustained over time and have spread internationally. The group claims that because governments have failed to take meaningful action on climate change and biodiversity loss, people should rebel until governments respond. XR has three demands: that governments (1) tell the truth about the realities of climate and biodiversity crises, (2) enact legally-binding policies to reduce carbon emissions to net zero by 2025 (while reducing total global resource use), and (3) create a democratic citizens' assembly to direct a wartime level effort to reduce carbon emission (Extinction Rebellion, 2019).

To pressure governments to meet their demands, XR UK's strategy involves civil disobedience and disrupting business as usual. Their largest actions have involved occupying major sites in London for up to two weeks during Fall and Spring "rebellions." In November 2018, over 6000 activists shut down five major bridges in London. In April 2019 activists occupied five major London sites, turning them into camps with a carnival atmosphere, which resulted in over 1100 arrests. In October 2019, XR activists again shut down major sites in London resulting in about 1800 arrests. In addition to London rebellions, XR local groups across the UK stage die-ins, protests, and other actions regularly. Most local groups hold weekly meetings to plan events and also to offer support for climate grief and anxiety.

The actions of XR have resulted in an increase in public attention towards the climate crisis (Shukman, 2019) and some responses from government, yet not responses that most XR activists deem as sufficient. The UK Parliament declared a "climate emergency" after the April 2019 rebellion, and some hoped this meant XR's first demand had been met. However, the declaration has not been followed with meaningful climate action. In January 2020, the UK government initiated a climate citizens assembly, yet the assembly's decisions are not binding. As government responses to the climate crisis remain insufficient, XR continues to organize and plan rebellions until their demands are fully met.

One XR slogan reads: "Hope Dies, Action Begins." Here, I explore if hope really is dead for XR activists or if it still exists in a different form. If action requires hope, then XR activists must have some form of hope. However, it is not

a hope for a world without global warming and species extinction, as it is too late for that world. The ideal outcome that was once desired by most climate activists is no longer possible. In addition, many proposed solutions to our ecological crisis are clearly insufficient. Given this dire reality, what motivates XR activists to continue, if not hope? I interviewed XR activists in the UK, read their essays, and watched their videos. My purpose was to understand personal motivations for participation as well as participants personal outlook for the future.

I frame this work in the literature of hope as it relates to climate activism. I draw from scholarly publications and also from activist writers who are highly influential in the environmental movement including Joanna Macy, Rebecca Solnit, Bill McKibben, and Derrick Jensen. Examining conceptions of hope and despair provide a framework to better understand the motivations of XR activists who maintain they are hopeless. Going into this research project, I did not have any questions specific to hope, but focused on what motivated XR activists to participate and what their outlook was for the future. In all interviews, whether or not they used the word "hope" specifically, respondents referred to feelings of loss, despair, a bleak future, or no hope for a future. Others had more positive outlooks and spoke of hope for a better or the best possible future. Most respondents (84%) used the word "hope" and the remainder of respondents used other words describing sentiments of hope or lack of hope. Many claimed they had lost all hope for the future. Yet, their actions and commitment to activism suggests that some form of hope exists. In addition, much of the XR literature also specifically refers to hope. In this article, I examine different forms of hope that motivates XR activists, including a "radical hope" emergent from despair. Why the focus of the study was on motivations and outlooks for the future, hope emerged the key theme. In this paper, I will interweave relevant literature on hope with the findings from my interviews and analysis of XR literature. The empirical examples of these notions of hope reveal a more nuanced picture about the motivations for XR (and likely other environmental) activists despite an increasingly bleak outlook for the future, as well as what forms of radical hope look like in practice.

Research Methods

Research to inform this paper included personal interviews XR activists in the UK, attending an XR weekly meeting, attending an XR "Rebel Rising" training event, reading book chapters and articles written by XR activists, and watching online videos of speeches from XR leaders and activists. All research was conducted over the summer of 2019.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person with 25 XR activists in the UK. Participants were identified in advanced through Facebook. Facebook XR pages allowed me to identify active members who had participated in XR rebellions. Interviews took place in London, Stroud, Cardiff, and Pembrokeshire (a region in Wales). London was chosen because the headquarters for XR are located in London and I was able to interview individuals working for XR full-time and in leadership roles. Stroud was selected because XR originated in the town, some of the founders and leaders

reside there, and there is a large and active XR group. Interviews were also conducted in Wales, in Cardiff and Pembrokeshire, because the XR groups had an active presence on Facebook and had participated in previous XR rebellions. Wales is also generally more progressive and "green" than England (Table 1).

Sampling depended on who was a part of the XR Facebook groups, who was active on the site, who viewed messages on Facebook, and who responded positively to my requests; therefore, it was not random. I initially sent a Facebook message explaining the study and requesting an interview to 72 individuals across the four locations. Some individuals did not respond and others who did respond were traveling or unavailable during my visit. I was able to interview 25 participants distributed fairly evenly across the four locations. Initial contact was through Facebook messages, but in many cases communication in email or phone texts followed to set up meetings with participants. While my sampling was not random, there was great diversity among participants. Participants ranged in age from early 20s to late 60s, 14 were women and 11 were men and all participates were white, despite efforts many respondents mentioned focused on trying to increase racial diversity in XR.

Interview questions focused on each participant's history of activism in XR, motivations for joining XR, balancing grief with action, experiences at rebellions, and expectation and visions of the future for XR. Interviews ranged from 40 min to 2 h. Detailed notes were taken during interviews and recordings were used for direct quotations. While attending the XR weekly meeting in Pembrokeshire and at the "Rebel Rising" training day in East London, I also took detailed notes but did not digitally record the proceedings. This research plan was approved by the Northern Arizona University Internal Review Board for human subjects research. Recordings and notes were transcribed and coded to identify dominant themes.

Additional data collection involved reading chapters written by XR activists in the book: *This is Not a Drill: An Extinction Rebellion Handbook* (Farrell, Green, Knights, & Skeaping, 2019). I examined the writing of XR activists in the book to identify relevant themes. I also watched YouTube videos of XR leaders giving XR talks: "Heading for extinction and what to do about it" (several different versions) and "Time to act now" (with Roger Hallam). Lastly, I watched a video of a strategy discussion between XR leaders Roger Hallam and Rupert Read titled "Oxford XR Discussion." While viewing, notes were taken on relevant themes. The discussion of results below primarily focuses on the 25 personal interviews. Quotes from interviews are numbered, for example (3) refers to respondent three. Other quotes will be distinguished with specific sources such as (Name Year: page) most referring to a chapter in the XR handbook, *This is Not a Drill*. Because hope emerged as such a dominant theme, I will now draw from the literature on hope to examine interviews and to understand how ideas of hope, despair, and radical hope emerge. This empirical application sheds light on how

Table 1 Interview participant characteristics and locations

Male	Female	>60	40–60	20–40	London	Stroud	Cardiff	Pembrokshire
11	14	3	7	15	6	5	7	7

activists facing no chance of their ideal outcome (fully stopping the climate and ecological crises), continue to stay motivated and how their visions of the future involve a hope from despair or a hope for what is left.

Results and Discussion: What Hope for Climate Activists?

Hope is not a simple concept. It is "complex and contested": some hope can motivate action, while other forms of hope can demotivate action through hope-fueled complacency (Lowe, 2019, p. 482). Hope exists in the realm of uncertainty. It describes the future, unknown events, and "yet unrealized possibilities" (Kretz, 2013, p. 932). As explained by Solnit (2016, p. xiv), uncertainty and instability are the basis of hope:

> Hope locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty there is room to act … Hope is an embrace of the unknown and the unknowable.

A sense of the probability or prospects of a desired outcome can range from unlikely to very likely. The only requirement for hope is a "worldview that proposes that development, betterment, and/or change is *possible*" (Courville & Piper, 2004, p. 58, emphasis added). In order to understand how hope motivates XR activists, I apply different ideas about hope identified in the scholarly and activist literature to interpret and discuss the empirical data.

Telling the Truth: False Hope and What Is Likely or Merely Possible

Most all interview respondents (84%) used the word hope when responding to interview questions about their motivations to participate in XR or their expectations and visions for the future. Many stated they had lost all hope in terms of it being possible to stop climate change and species extinction—both are already occurring at an increasing rate and will continue for the foreseeable future. There was widespread agreement that the best-case scenario, a world where warming and extinction are prevented, is no longer possible and many stated there was "no hope" for this world (Table 2).

Part of XR is to acknowledge how bad things really are. The primary recruitment talk "Heading for Extinction" explains the dire situation and increasing threats to the human race. Co-founder Roger Hallam has been criticized for so easily stating that millions of people are going to die if we don't change course. Among the XR activists interviewed, all agreed that we are currently in a dangerous situation that is getting worse. Many expressed grief and sadness over how much has already been lost and will be lost in the future, but believed we need to be honest (Table 3).

Table 2 Examples of quotes from interviews indicating a absence or loss of hope

Personally, I have no hope. We have failed miserably. It is already too late. (7)
Most people haven't gotten it. They don't see how bad it is. They still have hope. (17)
There is a real sense of hopelessness … It's too late. (19)

Hope requires an honest assessment of real-world conditions and the possibility for actions to successfully achieve one's desired outcome (Lowe, 2019). If there is a small possibility of achieving the desired outcome, anything greater than zero, then there are grounds for hope. Based on the sensed likelihood of success, there can be different "gradations in the strength of one's hope, in that one's sense of hope can be strong or weak," but for hope to be justified there must be at least some "probability of realizing the hoped for state of affairs" (Kretz, 2013, p. 932). These gradients or strengths of hope can shift over time along a spectrum. For many climate activists and concerned citizens, hope for effective mitigation has shifted from seeming likely to seeming *merely possible* (Gunderson, 2019).

Gunderson (2019) explains a gradation of possibility that is key to understanding gradients of hope. Drawing form Bloch (1986), Gunderson (2019, p. 8) describes "layers of the possible" and distinguishes between "real" and "mere" possibilities. A *real* possibility involves a clear way to bring about the realization of a desired outcome and in many cases the path is "already underway" (Hudson, 1982, p. 134, cited in Gunderson, 2019). In contrast, a *mere* possibility "only dimly illuminates a possible but perhaps unlikely future that is blocked by either a lack of potential (e.g., social organization, technology) or capacity (the right will or revolutionary consciousness)" (Gunderson, 2019, p. 3). Hope can still exist when outcomes are merely possible. As stated by Solnit (2016, p. 22), "[h]ope is not a door, but a sense that there might be a door at some point, some way out of the present moment even before that way is found or followed." Gunderson (2019) convincingly argues that paying attention to *mere* possibilities can help us identify social futures that at some point may become *real* possibilities when certain constraints are overcome or no longer present.

Given current and projected levels of global warming and the ongoing lack of meaningful political responses, as well as the reality that emissions today will continue to warm the planet for several decades, optimistic accounts of being able to stop any additional warming represents a false or fraudulent hope. The best-case scenario desired by environmentalists a decade ago is no longer possible; therefore, any hope for that scenario is false. Solnit (2016, p. 19) discusses Bloch's (1986) notion of "fraudulent hope" applying it to the example of President G.W. Bush claiming we would win the Iraq war and make the world safer place, convincing us that "another world is unnecessary, that everything is fine—now go back to sleep." False hope is deceptive, yet can be very comforting in troubling times.

In terms of climate change, it is this type of fraudulent hope that dominates popular and mainstream discussions about climate change solutions (Gunderson, 2019). For example, any belief in renewable energy or carbon storage as silver-bullet

Table 3 Examples of quotes from interviews indicating grief, loss, and despair

We are critiqued for being grief focused. But we need to focus how bad it really is. (1)
I have great guilt about bring a child into this world. What is their future going to be like? He could be dead in 20 years. I have to reconcile this. (14)
We need to accept our Western societies will end. We need to grieve and go forward. (17)

solutions lies far outside the realm of reality (see Gunderson, Stuart, Petersen, & Yun, 2018; Stuart, Gundederson, & Petersen, 2020). As stated by Thompson (2010, p. 57), "[w]ishing only for an alternative energy solution, instead of making preparations for cultural change" is analogous to "turning away from reality." Thompson (2010) further explains how the focus on an alternative energy solution distracts us and prevents us from other and better possible futures. It is an appealing narrative because it provides the false assurance that there will be a "technological solution to save us all the trouble of significant behavioral and conceptual change" (Thompson, 2010, p. 57). When recently asked about technological solutions, climate pundit and activist Bill McKibben quoted Greta Thunberg: "What are these absurd stories you've been telling yourselves? Because they're obviously not working" (Kolbert, 2019).

Given the definition of authentic hope requiring action, passive hope is another form of false or fraudulent hope. Macy and Johnstone (2012) explain that passive hope involves waiting for others to bring about a desired outcome. Passive hope has no agency. As Lueck (2007) describes, hoping it will not snow is both passive and false because there are no thoughts or actions that can have a possible effect. Passive hope can also demotivate action based on the assumption that others or something else will act or be the driver of the future. Stating "I hope the climate doesn't get worse" without action, or that "I hope the government adopts a climate policy" without action, are examples of passive and false hope. They promote "a false sense of security and optimism, thus placating some and leaving them less likely to take action" (Lowe, 2019, p. 482). Environmental activist Jensen (2006, p. 4) condemns passive hope and argues that only through releasing it can we actively work to address the climate crisis:

> When we stop hoping for external assistance, when we stop hoping that the awful situation we're in will somehow resolve itself, when we stop hoping the situation will somehow not get worse, then we are finally free—truly free—to honestly start working to resolve it. I would say that when hope dies, action begins.

Here we see the XR slogan, "hope dies, action begins," perhaps where it originated. Yet, this "death" of hope, as described by Jenson, is the death of passive and false hope. Only through truly seeing the dire state of the world and still actively working to create the best possible future, do we find a hope for what is left. As explained by Bill McKibben, "It's too late, obviously, to stop climate change. … It's not like it's going to be a utopia. But we may be able to avoid the worst dystopias" (Kolbert, 2019).

In line with honesty and eschewing false hope, respondents interviewed did not support technological or market-based climate solutions as quick-fixes to the climate crisis and many were critical of these approaches. As Bendell (2019, p. 75) explains in the XR handbook:

> I hear many voices fending off despair with hopeful stories about technology, political revolution or mass spiritual awakenings. But I cannot pin hopes on those things. We should be preparing for societal collapse.

An interview respondent also explained that they had lost faith in all other solutions, strategies, and approaches to environmental activism except for XR:

> I'm not a radical person. But I have tried everything else. Getting petitions signed, joining the green party, but there is no traction. Fossil fuels are still cheaper. There is nothing we can really do unless the government makes huge changes. We've tried everything else. XR is all there is left. (7)

XR activists do not believe in silver-bullet climate solutions and are critical of corporations and governments that have stalled action to address climate change. With protests and acts of civil disobedience specifically targeting fossil fuel companies, banks funding fossil fuel companies, embassies and government offices, media corporations, and political figures; XR is rejecting mainstream climate rhetoric, false hope, and "stories" of technological solutions. Many are also skeptical that there will be any far-reaching government climate agenda, as meaningful mitigation remains delayed and bold climate action seems a *mere* possibility.

Hope Without Optimism: Hope from Despair

Telling the truth about how dire the situation is in many cases is what motivated respondents to participate in XR. One respondent stated, "Only a tiny bit is changing, and more is getting worse" followed by: "It drives me to work with XR" (11). Many XR activists also described how allowing themselves to feel loss and grief motivated participation (Table 4).

Rather than denying loss, Cassegård and Thörn (2018) state that loss and grief need to be expressed by postapocyptic environmentalists. They state that "the acceptance of loss can be a wellspring of new forms of activism and new forms of struggles, including attempts to salvage what can still be saved" (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018, p. 14). In this way embracing loss and grief can be a source of new hope, hope from despair: "giving up hope may be a way to gain hope" (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018, p. 14). Activists expressed how through channeling these emotions, XR can become even stronger and more effective (Table 5).

These XR activists embrace loss and grief and from this and a new source of hope and motivation for action, a "wellspring" of activism, emerges (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018, p. 14).

Table 4 Examples from interviews and XR literature indicating motivation from despair

It is a misunderstanding that you have to be hopeful to act, that you have to have hope for action. If you know how bad it is, you realize you have nothing to lose. (1)
Yes, it is too late to prevent all the negative impacts of climate change. But this cannot destroy our capacity to love and our sense of justice. (Yamin, 2019, p. 27)
We need to accept our own feelings of grief and fear … In doing so we will build a movement that can handle the horrors we are facing. (Orbach, 2019, p. 68)

Table 5 Examples from interviews and XR literature about loss motivating action

Facing feelings is not a substitute for political action, nor is it a distraction from action … We need to mourn *and* organize. It should not be one or the other. (Orbach, 2019, p. 68)
When we are able to truly feel the losses among us, then we will be able to do what these times truly require of us. (Bradbrook, 2019, p. 186)
Letting go of a better future can allow us to drop false hopes and live in the present with more integrity. It might even make our activism more effective. (Bendell, 2019, p. 76)
People are repressing all of this emotion. Taking-action is like a geyser or emotional release. A chance to do something. (16)

Hope for What Is Still Possible, Hope for What Is Left

As explained by Kretz (2013, p. 936) telling the truth about the reality of the situation and feeling grief and loss does not mean that hope and action is lost, but that activists can adopt a new hope based on what is still possible:

> one can acknowledge serious, even dire circumstances, without feeling that it necessitates giving up all hope. Even for one convinced that it is too late, that humans have already done too much damage to reverse it quickly enough to afford a long and healthy future, we can be hopeful about stopping humans' contributions to that damage such that we lengthen the period of time both we, and the non-human world as we know it, are around.

While pessimistic (and realistic), this view also highlights that there is still much that can be saved and the value in adopting a sense of radical hope focusing on what is still possible. Several examples of these sentiments from XR interview respondents are listed in Table 6.

Within XR we see signs of the emergence hope from despair. The old hope for what was once desired as well as any false hope are lost, but something takes their place in the spaces remaining for what is still possible, what can be saved, and what can be recovered. In the XR handbook, Williams (2019) articulates the possibility that remains and a new hope for life:

- It is just possible that sustained pressure will bring about a modest change … and some serious adjustments *might* be made" … yet it might not work … we must face this possibility (probability?) squarely. (181–182)

Table 6 Examples of interview quotes illustrating motivation to act despite challenges

Even if there is only a one in a million chance, we might as well try. (14)
Time is running out, but it is never too late. There will always be something left to save. We have to keep pushing. (15)
I don't know if it will work or work quickly enough but we at least have to try. I can't just sit there as we walk to our death. (25)

- It might allow a new space for a new imagination to flower in the face of incipient tragedy, a new hope and dignity for human agents . . . these are the seeds that will offer life—not success, but life. (184)

Within the realm of uncertainty, possibilities for different futures exist that, as Wallace-Wells (2019) explains, may "contain more warming, and more suffering, or less warming and less suffering." The future is unformed, and what is still possible can be shaped to minimize the extent of tragedy. Therefore, action to fight for the best possible future is justified.

Hope is often contrasted with despair, defined widely as the lack of (or loss of) hope: a state of hopelessness. As stated by Lueck (2007, pp. 252–253) "if obstacles are seen as insurmountable or ignored, the agentic power of hope is dissolved and despair arises." Despair emerges when the desired outcome seems impossible and there is no perceived possibility of it becoming a reality (Kretz, 2013). Treanor (2010, p. 26) explains:

> despair is fatal to both environmental progress and individual flourishing, and is therefore a vice. It is fatal to environmental progress because while it is true that we may not be able to adequately respond to certain crises in time to avoid their negative effects, failing to try ensures failure and often exacerbates the situation. Despair is fatal to flourishing because it undermines our belief in the significance of our actions and our lives.

Kretz (2013) agrees that despair demotivates action, as having a vision of positive possibilities is required to motivate action. In these terms, despair is related to defeatism, the notion that there is no way to win so why bother trying, and fatalism: one's actions make no difference in a future that is already determined. All agency to change the situation is lost, as "there is no belief in any action making a difference" and the outcome becomes "a self-fulfilling prophecy" (Lueck, 2007, p. 251). When all possibility seems gone, inaction and despair take over.

Despair, defeatism, and fatalism are increasingly common among environmentalists. As explained by Milbrath (1995, p. 108), "the very idea of trying to move a society to a sustainable condition seems like such a huge undertaking that many conclude there is no point in trying." The challenge of getting global leaders to quickly and effectively tackle climate change is indeed massive and daunting. The result is the perception that any action is pointless and this fatalist attitude and related state of despair represents a serious threat to achieving a more desirable outcome (Kretz, 2013). As explained by Treanor (2010, p. 26), "[i]n the face of this complex and daunting constellation of crises it would be easy to despair, to throw in the towel, acknowledge the cause is hopeless, and get what enjoyment we can out of life for as long as we can get it."

In his *New Yorker* article, titled "What if We Stopped Pretending," Franze (2019) writes: "[a]ll-out war on climate change made sense only as long as it was winnable. Once you accept that we've lost it, other kinds of action take on greater meaning." He then argues we should devote more attention to adaptation and what we personally value. While in many ways Franzen is telling the truth about the dire climate reality, the idea that continuing to demand a large global response is futile represents

a fatalistic position. It is a position based on a false notion of global warming as an "all or nothing" situation. This perception is not only inaccurate, but demotivates action. In contrast, Wallace-Wells (2019) explains:

> [G]lobal warming is not binary. It is not a matter of "yes" or "no," not a question of "fucked" or "not." Instead, it is a problem that gets worse over time the longer we produce greenhouse gas, and can be made better if we choose to stop. Which means that no matter how hot it gets, no matter how fully climate change transforms the planet and the way we live on it, it will always be the case that the next decade could contain more warming, and more suffering, or less warming and less suffering. Just how much is up to us, and always will be.

In other words, there is still a possibility for a less bad future that is worth fighting for. This requires a new kind of hope that is not blind, but fully aware of reality and the *mere* possibility of paths that would effectively mitigate global warming. Like XR activists, it accepts the reality of a hotter and more catastrophic world, but actively works to save whatever can still be saved.

This is a pessimistic view, yet not defeatist or fatalistic. We are already experiencing global warming and a non-warming future is no longer possible. One could also fully accept the very low chances of the widely desired "World War II level mobilization" to prevent as much future warming as possible. Yet, this does not have to result in despair in terms of inaction. Authentic hope is based on telling the truth about actual possibilities (Lowe, 2019). One can be pessimistic, yet still actively working for a less bad future. Gunderson (2019, p. 6) states that he disagrees "with the assumption that pessimism is necessarily fatalistic …" but he does "agree with the argument that a pessimistic perspective ought to avoid the dusk of fatalism through a persistent search for alternatives." By being realistic about the possibilities, one can be pessimistic and even in a state of despair about the best-case scenario, but not falling into fatalism and inaction. Despair may even create a new form of hope, driving action to save what is left. This is a much more authentic form of hope than one based on false optimism. As Solnit (2016) argues, authentic hope requires clarity and truly seeing the troubles in the world. XR activists agreed: we must be honest and this honesty can help us to move through despair to a new sense of hope.

Radical Hope and Commitment: We Will Never Give Up

As defined and described by (Treanor, 2010), XR activists are politically virtuous: they are intellectually engaged and educated; they care about their community and want it to thrive; they are actively working to help the community flourish, and in all ways still possible. Williston (2015) discusses the importance of three specific virtues for climate activists: justice, truth, and hope. These involve justice for future generations and species, telling the truth about the reality of the situation and rejecting false optimism and technological fantasies, and an active hope for what is still possible. As summarized by Lowe (2019, pp. 481–482), Williston argues:

Table 7 Examples from interview quotes illustrating commitment despite outcome

I try not to be attached to an outcome and keep doing stuff, but it's a big ask. I am trying not to be attached to the outcome. (24)
I have to disassociate from the future. What matters is my actions now and doing the right thing now. (13)
But I can't put too much on the outcome. I have to be in the now. Knowing this is the only thing to do, even if it doesn't work. (18)
In XR we have to hold outcome lightly. Action is important but the future is beyond us. It's virtue ethics. (2)

Table 8 Quotes from interviews illustrating no plans to stop fighting

I am staying with XR until the government acts. I can't consciously doom the next generation. I have a daughter. I will do everything I can to stop it. (7)
There will always be something left to save. (15)
We need to keep working toward the life we want and need to live. We can't stop. (22)
This is a moment in history that will define our species. We must press on. (25)

> A major advantage to promoting a virtue ethics approach for dealing with climate change is that virtues are "agent-focused" and not as tied to consequences or outcomes … In other words, they enable moral agents to do what is right even when the results are not likely to be particularly effective or rewarding. Thus, they are more dependent on our character than on our perceived prospects for success.

XR activists interviewed embodied this approach. When asked about the future for XR and if XR would be successful, interview respondents stated that they try not to focus on future outcomes or if XR will be successful, they act because it is the right thing to do *now* (Table 7).

In addition, many respondents added that despite the outcomes they have no plans to ever stop fighting for a better future, demonstrating a virtue of commitment (Thompson, 2010) that sustains their activism. They explained that taking-action, rebelling against the government, and continuing to do so was the right thing to do, therefore despite any future challenges, set-backs, or other outcomes—they were determined to continue their activism (Table 8).

Many activists are participating in XR not because they think XR will succeed, but because they believe it is the right thing to do regardless of the outcome. They continue because it is morally unacceptable to give up. The XR activists interviewed expressed that as long as there is some possibility of saving something and creating a less bad future, the right thing to do is rebel. Even knowing the chances of their demands being met are low, they see no reason to give up.

Thompson (2010) and Cassegård and Thörn (2018) suggest that new forms of hope are emerging among environmental activists. These forms of hope arise because the best-case scenario is no longer possible and therefore hoping for a non-warming and rosy future is pure delusion. Feelings of despair are

appropriate, yet can there be hope *from* despair? Hope out of hopelessness? Here, we see examples of "radical hope" (Thompson, 2010) emerging from a "post-apocalyptic environmentalism" (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018). Contrasted with the *mere* possibility of radical and immediate climate mitigation, this hope is based on the *real* possibility of making something good out of what is left.

Thompson (2010, p. 48) explains that radical hope is "basically the hope for revival: for coming back to life in a form that is not yet intelligible." Even when despair is well justified and appropriate, as some degree of species extinction and human suffering are inevitable, radical hope remains "a form of courage at the end of goodness, underpinning action on the mere hope that someday the good will return in a presently unimaginable form" (Thompson, 2010, p. 49). Even when faced with well-justified despair, radical hope is a rejection of despair. Thompson (2010, p. 50) explains that radical hope also involves new ways of living:

> Radical hope is manifest in the *virtues of commitment* to a new form of living well, in the resolve to live well with less, along with the ingenuity, frugality, and restraint required to accomplish this. (emphasis added)

This lifestyle is a form of active hope for a future where all humans will learn to live within ecological limits. This approach is not focused on outcomes, but on a *commitment* to action: "a virtue ethics approach is strategic because it focuses on making us better people, regardless of the outcomes" (Lowe, 2019, p. 482). While there is a rich philosophical history and debate over virtue ethics (notably the work of MacIntyre (1984) and Swanton (2003)). What applies most here are interpretations that match with Thompson (2010) and Lowe's (2019) focus on commitment as a virtue, specifically commitment to activism, despite the unlikeliness of the best-possible or desired outcome. This also relates to MacIntyre's (1984) description of virtues situated in practice (and a commitment to identifying the most effective practices to induce social change), narrative quest (though identities of actors fighting for a noble cause-saving the Earth and achieving the good life through this quest, despite the odds of success), and lastly traditions of protest and civil disobedience that reinforce commitment in the face of many challenges. In other ways this commitment to activism can be considered a "good quality of character" (Swanton, 2003), focusing on the process as being a "good enough" action, a quality that results in maintained participation in activism. This virtue of commitment (despite the unknown outcome) is a characteristic that fuels radical hope—a hope for the good that is still possible, despite looming catastrophes. Overall, we see a radical hope that is a "revival of the good, when the goodness one understands is no longer possible" (Thompson, 2010, p. 50) or, as Kretz (2013, p. 933) summarizes, it is "a form of hope that can rise from the ashes of a demolished planet."

Cassegård and Thörn (2018) describe a form of activism that acknowledges that loss is already occurring and will continue to occur. Like with XR activists, the recognition and the mourning of loss, however, does not mean that actions will not be taken to save whatever can still be saved. Also like XR activists, Cassegård and Thörn (2018, p. 9), explain how acknowledging the extent of loss can motivate action to salvage what remains:

> The fact that a catastrophe appears irreparable or impossible to prevent may fuel political action … Out of the emotional working through of loss, new visions may emerge that can guide activism and provide blueprints for social change.

The authors also discuss a new form of hope, "hope from despair," that presents a "paradox" of hope: "the fact that hope is sometimes gained not by promoting explicitly hopeful messages, but by ostensibly denying hope" (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018, p. 11). They later explain that: "what at first sight appears to be a rejection of hope is the paradoxical quality of hope—the fact that giving up hope may be a way to gain hope" (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018, p. 14).

This paradoxical hope in many ways resembles radical hope, but instead of being against despair, it has emerged from despair. This emergent radical hope is authentic because it recognizes the truth, rejects false hope, and focuses on what is still possible to save or salvage. It is a hope based on pessimism, but is not inactive. Post-apocalyptic environmentalism is "radical" as the activists "lack trust in the established institutions governing the environment and in the capability of capitalism to reform itself into a green, just and 'sustainable' form" (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018, p. 3). As with the XR activists in this study, there is a shared identity formed over loss, hope from despair, anti-system sentiments, and a desire to change society for the better in any way still possible. This form of activism focuses on doing what is right rather than attaining the desired outcomes (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018). Therefore, these XR activists who are knowledgeable and honest with themselves embrace loss, grief, and even despair. From these emotions a radical hope can emerge motivating activists to save what is left.

Building Strength, Community, and a Regenerative Culture

In comparison to the *mere* possibility of governments meeting XR's three demands; creating community, strength, and resilience to enhance survival is a *real* possibility already being pursued through building a "regenerative culture." Regenerative culture is an XR principle that applies to taking care of oneself, taking care of others, and creating a resilient community prepared for an unstable and more difficult future. It encourages self-care and taking a break from XR activism when needed. It encourages support for those arrested during XR rebellions and helping others generally. It involves grief circles and gratitude circles to mourn and celebrate life. Regenerative culture also offers a pathway for the future. The future is likely going to be warmer and more catastrophic with impacts to food and water supplies and more disease and migration. Regenerative culture provides emotional support for XR activists, a shared vision for the future, and a model of resilient communities preparing for a turbulent future.

All XR activists interviewed, while critical of some XR strategies or practices, spoke positively about regenerative culture as something that has personally improved their lives. Many respondents described how they had experienced climate anxiety and grief and XR was a very useful outlet for those emotions to be released and shared with others (Table 9).

Other respondents shared how XR has given them an opportunity to act and that this action is critical for them to move beyond personal anxiety and depression:

- I have climate anxiety. It makes me go fast, and I can't relax. I am on high alert. But the XR gratitude circles and grief circles and being part of XR helps. If I am busy acting and doing something about it, it lightens the load. (5)
- I was depressed about climate change. Then I went to the uprising in November and thought, 'this is it.' I was overwhelmed and lost until XR. I am in active hope again. I am doing something about the situation. (24)

While only this one respondent (24) stated directly that they had new found hope because of XR, many indicated that they felt more positive because of XR and especially that they felt more at peace with a new collective vision of better future through regenerative culture.

Regenerative culture offers XR activists a supportive community with a shared vision for the future. The community shares what Braithwaite (2004, p. 146) calls collective hope: "a shared desire for a better society, articulated through a broad set of agreed-upon goals and principles." Lueck (2007) describes collective hope as being tightly coupled with cooperation and states that collective hope promotes and supports individual hope. Regenerative culture for XR activists builds community, supports cooperation and living simply within ecological limits, and offers a vision of a possible future where there is still something good to be desired.

- XR can divide people. But regenerative culture brings us back together. It focuses on how the community can thrive in the face of what is coming. (23)
- We can and now must redesign human societies based on love, justice and planetary boundaries so that no person or society is left to face devastating consequences and we learn to restore nature together. (Yamin, 2019, p. 27)

Interview respondents also shared how they fully expect to have to change their lives to adapt to more difficult conditions and that XR will be a source of strength and support through this transition. XR activists are growing more of their own food, preserving food, and learning to make their own clothes. Learning to live

Table 9 Interview quotes illustrating the personal benefits of participating in XR

The regenerative culture helps us cope with the emotional impact. (5)
We need spiritual tools to get through this. Without regenerative culture we won't make it. We need to keep sane. (17)
XR is an outlet for climate anxiety and grief. It feels good to be with people who share something so big—what we are facing. It feels good to not just talk about how bad things are but to do something. (18)
XR is my eco-therapy. I am educated, worried, and scared. (21)

differently now not only enables them to be more prepared for the future, but provides an example, a template, for others to learn to be adaptive in a changing world. As described by Thompson (2010, p. 50):

> We just don't have an alternative yet, a viable conception of the good life. But success here will both help mitigate environmental damage and position us to share what we learn with our successors, who will surely have to live with less.

XR activists are already trying to create a new model of the good life for now and in the future. This aspect of regenerative culture offers XR activists a hope for what is left and a hope for renewal and regeneration through learning to live better. As stated by Williams (2019, p. 182):

> There are ways of learning to live better, to make peace with the world. Learn them anyway: they will limit the disease and destruction; they may even be seeds for a future we can't imagine.

Some interview respondents were already focused on adaptation for future survival and training their children for life in a very different world:

> We have to prepare for a different future. We need to save water. We need to train our children to live without electricity, how to mend, how to get their own food, to be prepared. They are not far from a different life of catastrophe and need survival skills for riots, chaos, and disease. (17)

For XR activists, regenerative culture is about community, support, and renewal; but it is also about survival and radical hope. They can survive by learning how to take care of each other collectively and by being prepared for a less abundant and more turbulent future.

Conclusion: Hope Dies, New Hope Is Born

> Activism is not a trip to the corner store, it is a plunge into the unknown. (Solnit, 2016, p. 61)

Although many of the activists interviewed in this study claimed that they had lost *all* hope, this examination reveals that, while hope was lost in some respects, a new hope—radical hope—had emerged. The XR activists had clearly lost hope in terms of false and passive hope. They did not believe in technological silver-bullet solutions and they did not passively hope that someone or something else would save them from the ecological crisis. They had also lost hope that a warming world can be avoided, as that reality is no longer possible. In these ways, hope dies and despair takes over. As stated by Jensen (2006, p. 5):

> despair is an entirely appropriate response to a desperate situation. Many people probably also fear that if they allow themselves to perceive how desperate things are, they may be forced to do something about it.

Here, "hope dies" and "action begins." Through telling the truth about the reality of the crisis, experiencing the weight of loss and grief, and passing through despair, activists found new motivation and a commitment to act to create the best future still possible.

Focusing on notions of hope not only helps us to understand the motivation and commitments of XR activists, but can also be used to explore ongoing activism for other causes. From a place of hopelessness emerges a paradoxical hope, a hope from despair (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018). This hope is based on virtues of commitment and focused on doing what is right, despite the outcome. XR activists were generally pessimistic about the possibility of their three demands being met and bold climate mitigation strategies being quickly implemented. While government action on the climate crisis, to the extent demanded by XR, is unlikely and *merely* possible, XR has a secondary agenda that is focused on what is still a *real* possibility (Gunderson, 2019). This secondary agenda is creating a regenerative culture, a culture that can survive, salvage, and repair. In the face of extreme loss, radical hope emerges from the demise of previous hopes. Hope dies, and new hope is born: a hope focused on saving what can still be saved and building something good even when what is good cannot yet be known (Thompson, 2010). As explained by Solnit (2016, p. 61), this is "a different form of hope: that you possess the power to change the world to some degree or just that the world is going to change again, and uncertainty and instability therefore become grounds for hope."

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