How, at a time like this, can we possibly sustain hope?

We are almost three years into a pandemic that has resulted in millions of deaths globally. Here in the United States, law enforcement has sustained a reputation for aggressively pursuing, shooting, and killing Black and Brown bodies.

In 2020, we experienced a tense election cycle in which the outgoing president refused to accept the outcome. In his refusal, he also attempted to persuade lawmakers to do everything in their power to “find votes” and alter the outcome. As a result, we feared for the future of our democracy. On Jan 6, 2021, far-wing extremists attacked and invaded our capital during the counting of electoral votes—complete with firearms, makeshift weapons, tactical gear, and a guy with face paint and a fuzzy horned helmet.

Globally, there are ongoing armed conflicts, mounting challenges from climate change, and supply-chain issues impeding global imports and exports. On January 24, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin launched a violent invasion into Ukraine that has, thus far, resulted in thousands of civilian deaths and millions of refugees fleeing their homes. Experts fear that Putin’s agenda could be the catalyst that begins a larger armed world conflict.

In the United States, mass shootings and gun related deaths are accelerating. In May 2022, two particularly deadly attacks took place. The first was in Buffalo, New York, where the 18-year-old gunman racially targeted a small-town supermarket and murdered ten Black Americans. Ten days later another 18-year-old walked into an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas, and murdered 19 children and two educators.¹ This, all while we are witnessing a state-by-state pursuit to pass education policies to ban books and censor classroom conversations about topics like human rights, social justice, racism, and LGBTQIA+ issues.

And so, with all of this, I must ask: how, at a time like this, can we possibly NOT sustain hope?

At a time when the entire globe is collectively experiencing a number of exceptionally tumultuous events that ultimately put the very core of our values to the test, one might be skeptical of the value of a book about hope. The concept of hope can sound like white noise among the 24-hour news cycle that flashes negativity, propaganda, and infotainment on our screens. But, Sarah M. Stitzlein’s book, Learning How to Hope: Reviving Democracy Through Our Schools and Civil Society, written and published just before the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 election cycle, may have been a serendipitous foreshadowing of a philosophy educators did not yet know they needed.

“Pragmatic hope,” during this particularly chaotic time in our country, could be the means to revive and revitalize American democracy. And I believe Stitzlein is right to contend that educators are uniquely positioned to engage with students to do what it takes to sustain hope.

¹ For more information on gun violence in the United States, and up to date statistics, see the Gun Violence Archive at https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/.
Hope—Why, What, How?

During challenging times, we may find ourselves feeling hopeless.

Hopelessness might leave us wondering if there are reasons to have hope, what we should even hope for, and how to hope when we only feel despair. Stitzlein answers these questions by examining the present social and political context to address our current state of affairs. We come to learn “not only reasons for why we can hope and particular content of what we ought to hope for but also, more importantly, an enriched understanding of how we hope together.”

Stitzlein argues that hope should be valued as an endeavor that could result in a more equitable future to sustain our democracy. She claims that hope is waning and there is a critical need to “resuscitate hope within America by offering a notion of hope that is grounded in real struggles.” Her goal is to justify how we can sustain hope during difficult times and the role hope plays in our democracy.

Stitzlein calls on schools and civil society to action, to “nurture hope as a set of habits that disposes citizens toward possibility and motivates citizens to act to improve their lives and, often, those of others.” While her project is grounded in the current struggles of society, her aim is to develop habits of hope to revive our democracy. Building on the framework of American pragmatism, specifically using John Dewey’s work, Stitzlein guides the reader through a realistic approach to teaching and learning how to sustain hope.

Her approach to pragmatic hope considers “real conditions—recognizing their constraints, complexities, and possibilities.” Pragmatism substantiates that knowledge of the world, and our agency to act in the world, are symbiotic. According to Dewey, pragmatism is a method of knowing in which:

>Its essential feature is to maintain the continuity of knowing with an activity which purposely modifies the environment. It holds that knowledge in its strict sense of something possessed consists of our intellectual resources—of all the habits that render our action intelligent. Only that which has been organized into our disposition so as to enable us to adapt the environment to our needs and to adapt our aims and desires to the situation in which we live is really knowledge.

The reciprocal relationship of hope and pragmatism is built on the elements of inquiry, growth, truth, meliorism, and habits. These elements are key to sustaining hope. The challenge, however, is taking that first step to get past discouragement and hopelessness.

With respect to space and time, I have chosen to focus on the aspects of meliorism and habits as they are unique factors that are central to sustaining hope.

Meliorism and Habits

Meliorism is the belief that human action can effectively improve our conditions. Habits are the engine for realizing this belief.

However, it is not hard to understand why people are hesitant to believe that we can make the world a better place if they believe that meliorism means that there is a complete solution to unfair and oppressive conditions. Stitzlein addresses this concern by reminding the reader that hope for progress does not mean the struggle is over, nor does it mean the actions we take are

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3 Stitzlein, Learning How to Hope, 2-3.
4 Stitzlein, Learning How to Hope, 3.
5 Stitzlein, Learning How to Hope, 7.
7 Stitzlein, Learning How to Hope, 25-37.
meant to bring all struggles to an end. Rather, “hope provides us a direction and a rationale to guide our actions and is grounded in the belief that progress is possible.”

In Dewey’s terms, we should not seek solutions but, instead, seek ends-in-view, or, intermediate outcomes we desire based on the consequences of our experiences. Hope that accounts for ends-in-view requires us to become critically transitive about our world and our experiences. Stitzlein reminds us that “pragmatism emphasizes facing difficult conditions and responding with inquiry to understand them, ingenuity to experiment with improving them, and vision to craft a better future.”

Acting upon pragmatic hope does not mean we ignore our challenges and hardships, it means we define what we hope for in direct relationship to our everyday challenges and hardships.

Stitzlein makes the case that “hope, as a set of habits and their enactment, is most essentially a disposition toward possibility and change for the betterment of oneself and, typically, others.”

We develop habits of hope through practice, and practicing hope becomes more meaningful when we work towards common ends-in-view with our neighbors. Stitzlein observes that, “when cultivating pragmatist habits of hope is integrated across civil life and schooling, we can slowly make such an important transition and can sustain that effort through larger democratic habits.”

Our collective actions build a sense of trust. It shows that we care about our community and we want better circumstances for all people, not just ourselves:

Dewey recognized that action could be inhibited by stagnant and entrenched practices of individuals and culture in a democracy. Certainly, we have witnessed that problem in the cynicism and despair currently growing in America. As a result, Dewey turned to education, arguing that new and more flexible ways of life can be cultivated to fulfill the call to action for improving the world.

The foundation of American education is centered around the effort to develop citizens that will expand and preserve democracy. Still, citizens must act, and act often, to sustain our democracy. Stitzlein argues that sustaining hope and reviving democracy in America is an all-hands-on-deck approach. Within our school system, citizenship education is already taking place, which, according to Stitzlein, provides an existing platform to seamlessly integrate lessons on pragmatic hope.

**Finding Hope ImPossible**

Some might consider Stitzlein’s approach to hope impractical. Some might question how realistic it is to hope for progress when past experiences make it seem like there is no such thing as a “better” future.

But other thinkers would concur with Stitzlein. For example, Paulo Freire finds hope while entrenched within a struggle, not at the end of a struggle.

Further, Henry Giroux proclaims that hope “is a subversive force, an active presence in opening a space for imagining the impossible, evoking not only different stories but also different futures.”

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8 Stitzlein, *Learning How to Hope*, 34.
9 Critical transitivity, according to Freire, is the concept in which an individual has not only become conscious of societal problems but acts to transform society. Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021).
11 Stitzlein, *Learning How to Hope*, 42.
I posed a question at the beginning of this essay: How, at a time like this, can we possibly NOT sustain hope? It would be hard to deny that life in the early 2020’s has not been without its unique challenges. We might ask, between the pandemic, the intensification of climate change, political and cultural warfare, the economy, and the rise of fascism: How is hope possible? How is it possible to sustain hope at a time like (gestures wildly) THIS?

It is not easy, but I believe it is possible.

As the fall 2022 semester has begun, and there is life buzzing on my campus for the first time in two years, I feel there is potential to find hope. The students who have made it through the trials of the last two years could be the driving force behind the vision of sustaining hope.

I am in a position where I am a PhD student, but I also teach undergrads. I have experienced, as both a teacher and student, how unfamiliar it is to feel hopeful. As a student it was challenging to find hope to conduct research, complete assignments, and submit manuscripts amidst the constant despair. Regardless, I kept moving forward, and took steps towards my ends-in-view as a novice scholar. Each action I have taken, amidst the struggles, whether or not the outcome was “successful,” was an action taken because I really do still have hope (even if it is hard to find).

And as an educator, I know that my students are looking to me for guidance, and I can choose to guide with hope—or not. I teach two different undergraduate courses that address critical and societal issues in education. Week after week, I present issue after issue—problem after problem—to my students. And week after week we deliberate.

The purpose is to guide them through effective deliberation within a community of learners who are actively engaged in collaborative problem analysis with intelligent action as the ends-in-view. Stitzlein explains that deliberations about problems should be oriented around the question, “What should we do?” She emphasizes the need to engage as a community to hope together.

This type of collective action requires trust, and in the classroom, we build trust by “engaging in mutually supportive activities together, supporting the agency of others, and making ourselves vulnerable through recognition of our own need for support.” Through the use of deliberation, I encourage students to move the conversation forward through constructive responses to the issues and their classmates. The ends-in-view of this process is intentional. The student is tasked with making a judgement, not a conclusion, about the problem. Their judgements should be action oriented, meaning they are focused on the what should we do aspect of the issue.

It is not easy to spend each week discussing both the existing and looming problems that threaten our public schools. It often feels like there is no light at the end of the tunnel. Even though I wouldn’t say my students express unbridled hopefulness, one thing I rarely hear or witness is hopelessness; which tells me hope is there, even if dormant, ready to be nudged. But who is going to give that nudge?

Educators, who have direct and regular contact with their students, have the opportunity to cultivate a community of civic-minded learners engaged in pragmatic hope together. I recognize, however, there are restrictive barriers on educators’ agency, especially in the K-12 public school sector. Educators arguably experience constraints on resources and time. They are directed by the standards and evaluated by their students’ test scores. Their agency to abandon the standards is contingent upon the outcomes and consequences of student performance measures. (Perhaps these too are problems with which we could ask, “What should we do?”)

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16 Stitzlein, Learning How to Hope, 136.

17 Stitzlein, Learning How to Hope, 131.
With respect to existing challenges, educators are positioned to engage directly with students and inculcate habits of hope in their classrooms. The problems that students face in the world around them do not just go away or pause when the school day begins. James Baldwin believes that you cannot talk about schools without talking about communities—and that the problems we see in our communities will replicate within our schools. Stitzlein would agree that schools are a distinct space to intentionally contend with these problems. When teaching and learning is directed through meliorism and habits of hope, the problems become the guide—rather than battle. Students could practice positioning themselves as intelligent actors with some skin in the game. An emphasis on sustaining pragmatic hope in schools could help students become critically transitive participants in civil society who are focused on justice and social progress.

18 See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=piGSpnSqO5E.