

Servant-Leadership meeting June 20, 2025

In many circles hope has gotten a bad rap as having no connection to reality. In the June meeting of the Servant Leadership Group at UW-Madison, we will explore the often-hidden dimensions of hope, using an essay from Rebecca Solnit, author of “Hope in the Dark” and the essay, [“Hope is an embrace of the unknown.”](#) We have included excerpts below to aid discussion if you do not have time to read the full essay.

I. INTRODUCTIONS/ ICE BREAKER

What inspires hope in your life?

II. CENTERING

III. DISCUSSION

WHAT IS HOPE?

From Rebecca Solnit:

- It is important to say what hope is not: it is not the belief that everything was, is, or will be fine. ... It is also not a sunny, everything-is-getting-better narrative, though it may be a counter to the everything-is-getting-worse one. You could call it an account of complexities and uncertainties, with openings.
- ”Critical thinking without hope is cynicism, but hope without critical thinking is naivety,” the Bulgarian writer Maria Popova recently remarked. And Patrisse Cullors, one of the founders of Black Lives Matter, early on described the movement’s mission as to ‘Provide hope and inspiration for the collective action to build collective power to achieve collective transformation, rooted in grief and rage but pointed towards vision and dreams.’ It is a statement that acknowledges that grief and hope can coexist.”

1. How do you define hope? Is how you define hope a deterrent or a help to clear thinking and acting?

THE LANDSCAPE OF HOPE: WHERE DO WE FIND HOPE?

From Rebecca Solnit:

- “Hope locates itself in the premises that we don’t know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act. When you recognize uncertainty, you recognize that you may be able to influence the outcomes — you alone or you in concert with a few dozen or several million others. Hope is an embrace of the unknown and the unknowable, an alternative to the certainty of both optimists and pessimists. Optimists think it will all be fine without our involvement; pessimists adopt the opposite position; both excuse themselves from acting. (Hope) is the belief that what we do matters even though how and when it may matter, who and what it may impact, are not things we can know beforehand.”

· “My own inquiry into the grounds for hope has received two great reinforcements in recent years. One came from the recognition of how powerful are the altruistic, idealistic forces already at work in the world. ... The second reinforcement came out of my investigation of how human beings respond to major urban disasters, from the devastating earthquakes ... to the blitz in London and Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. ... In most disasters, the majority of people are calm, resourceful, altruistic and creative. ... What startled me about the response to disaster was ... the passionate joy that shone out from accounts by people who had barely survived. These people who had lost everything, who were living in rubble or ruins, had found agency, meaning, community, immediacy in their work together with other survivors. This century of testimony suggested how much we want lives of meaningful engagement, of membership in civil society. ... (P)eople return to those selves, those ways of self-organizing, as if by instinct when the situation demands it.”

2. Confronting uncertainty is never comfortable and usually not easy. How do you feel about the idea of embracing the unknown and the unknowable, whether in your family, your work or your community, as a starting point for going forward?

3. What altruistic forces do you see at work in the world?

4. How can the world tap into the ability to come together that is seen in responses to disasters?

HOW DO WE CULTIVATE HOPE TOGETHER?

From Rebecca Solnit:

· “Changing the story ... has often been foundational to real changes. Making an injury visible and public is usually the first step Long tolerated is seen to be intolerable, or what was overlooked becomes obvious. Which means that every conflict is in part a battle over the story we tell, or who tells and who is heard.

· “(T)hough hope is about the future, grounds for hope lie in the records and recollections of the past. We can tell of a past that was nothing but defeats, cruelties and injustices, or of a past that was some lovely golden age now irretrievably lost, or we can tell a more complicated and accurate story, one that has room for the best and worst, for atrocities and liberations, for grief and jubilation. A memory commensurate to the complexity of the past and the whole cast of participants, a memory that includes our power, produces that forward-directed energy called hope. ... A victory is a milestone on the road, evidence that sometimes we win and encouragement to keep going, not to stop. Or it should be.”

· “Amnesia leads to despair in many ways. The status quo would like you to believe it is immutable, inevitable and invulnerable, and lack of memory of a dynamically changing world reinforces this view. ... Things don’t always change for the better, but they change, and we can play a role in that change if we act.”

· “Every now and then, the possibilities explode. In these moments of rupture, people find themselves members of a ‘we’ that did not until then exist, at least not as an entity with agency and identity and potency; new possibilities suddenly emerge. ... Together we are very powerful, and we have a seldom-told, seldom-remembered history of victories and transformations that can give us confidence that, yes, we can change the world because we have many times before. You row forward looking back, and telling this history is part of helping people navigate toward the future.”

5. What are the stories you tell yourself? To others? What are the stories you want and need to remember to have hope for the future?

6. How might the practice of Servant-Leadership promote and sustain hope in organizations and more?