

**GUS SPETH** / NOVEMBER 16, 2023

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## The Space Beyond Despair and Hopium

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Thank you for this kind invitation. I hope this talk will be helpful, especially to folks like me who sometimes get discouraged. From such desperate moments I have tried to rescue the ground for hope— not hopium but legitimate hope.

Our world faces so many grave difficulties that a new word has been created for the situation – the polycrisis. America is not alone in the polycrisis, but I will focus on America because at least I know a bit there.

Well, regarding America, we can say with confidence that the country is in deep ... trouble.

Our economic system is tilted to production and profit and power, and not very much to people and place and planet.

Meanwhile, our politics are hobbled when our revered Constitution's checks and balances make their appearance repeatedly as clogs and barriers.

And if that were not enough, now, when a new sense of national purpose is imperative, when concerted action is most needed, the people themselves are cleaved, in trenches facing each other in mutual rejec-

tion, with massive efforts expended for small gains that are then often rolled back.

It is not easy to see where to turn! Books are full of good proposals –reformist proposals, radical proposals, proposals for the near-term and the long. I have written a few of these books myself. We know what could be done. We know what should be done.

But how? That is the question.

I want to probe a bit more on the nature of our problem. I think that will help. So, I have a visual for you. Think of our various policy communities each in our separate little boats, paddling through swirling waters. Some are flagged environmental integrity, others social and economic justice, still others community solidarity, or people’s democracy. Sometimes our boats go forward, then backwards, sometimes sideways. But, here’s the point, one cannot help but notice that the little boats tend strongly to move together, carried along by underlying currents more powerful than our efforts.

Progressives have a tendency to neglect these underlying currents that affect all our boats. But once we understand these forces, and we know what we are dealing with, the good news is that all progressives can join together in facing a shared situation.

The inconvenient news is that when we do look at the common, fundamental causes of the country’s problems, we find forces that are deeply burrowed in the American mainstream. The forces that war against progressive progress are often so widely and conventionally accepted as the American Way that challenging them can appear downright radical.

The search to pinpoint the currents holding back major progress must start with the American political and economic system, our political economy. Its prominent, driving features include ramping up GDP, growing corporate profits, focusing investments on high financial returns (rather than social and environmental returns), keeping labor markets slack, promoting runaway consumerism, sustaining great bastions of corporate political and economic power, and projecting overwhelming military strength abroad.

This complex – this powerful system – is reinforced by concerted efforts to demonize proposals to correct its many shortcomings and negative side-effects. These shortcomings include neglecting the half of America that is just getting by, while simultaneously increasing the incomes of the already well-to-do, which leads to appalling disparities in income and wealth. Just as appalling are the consequences of this system for the environment and the climate that sustains us and all life.

There are, of course, more sources of unwelcomed currents facing progressives. America's dominant cultural values remain decidedly materialistic, anthropocentric, and individualistic. Our reigning Constitutional interpretation is a flawed originalism. Our democracy is impaired and now at the point of major dysfunction. And there is an ever-active military-industrial complex working away.

So we cannot kid ourselves. Our national situation requires deep, transformative change. It cries out for revamping. The civil rights leader William Barber has said it bluntly: "Transformation is what we need." The shared background of these sentiments is that America's mounting problems stem not from episodic failures or neglects, but stem instead from core flaws in our system of political economy.

We are challenged, then, to imagine positive futures for the country, futures that involve deep transformation in our economic and political system. Many of us have been dreaming up such new systems of political economy. I have edited a book of them, *The New Systems Reader*.

But the terrible reality is that even modest, incremental progress is now a reach, requiring the greatest struggle.

So, given these realities, what is the way forward? How can we make the best out of a very bad situation? Well, this we can do.

First, we can search for modest openings for progress, seizing opportunities wherever and whenever they arise. We should especially look for possibilities of “non-reformist reforms,” those reforms that carry the seeds of deeper change. For example, one non-reformist reform would be adopting new national indicators of progress, beyond GDP (which, as you know, stands for Grossly Distorted Picture). If we could transcend our GDP fetish, we could then begin to escape the clutches of our growthmania.

Next, we can also be crisis ready, anticipating those moments when impossible becomes possible. System change will almost certainly be crisis-driven. We can be sure there are crises coming down the pike at us. We need to be ready. Political scientists have studied moments of punctuated equilibrium, when a stagnating balance of forces is overcome by a great perturbation – like multiplying crises that delegitimize the reigning order.

We can also back leaders with vision and skill, leaders in the mold of FDR and MLK. We know popular movements are crucial, and a bit more about that next. But we should not neglect the central role of leadership. And remember leadership happens at all levels.

Importantly, we can meld now-siloed progressive energies into an unprecedented fusion of forces and create an unprecedented people's movement. Today, unfortunately, progressive forces are still very much in their own boats.

We can sustain journalism and scholarship. We need them to keep truth alive and core values burnished.

We can embrace our preachers and prophets, those who elevate both new values and our battered spirits.

We can hold each other tightly. Today's young people are going to face a rough future, and they know it.

Beyond these paths for progress, there are some positive, encouraging signs and, even more, avenues for engagement. Let me briefly share 8 of them with you.

1. There is a rebirth of protest in America. Activism is increasing, including labor activism and activism among the young, the marginalized, and the victims. Bring on the direct action!
2. Doubts about the current order are surfacing, and calls for transformative change grow louder. I love the climate protest banner: "System change, not climate change." Bring on the new system!
3. Aversion to "socialist" ideas is fading, at least for young people. Economic democracy is in the air. Bring on worker and public ownership!
4. Recent affirmations of government action, like the Inflation Reduction Act, challenge the hold of market fundamentalism. The conventional wisdom that markets are good and government bad is on the way out. Bring on the people's government!

5. The rising menace of climate change is underscoring the imperative of a strong, effective government of, by, and for the people. Many now see the truth that addressing climate change will require big government. Bring on a ban on fossil development!
6. Paralysis at the federal level is countered at least partially by impressive initiatives by some states and localities. Indeed, the greatest things happening in America today are at the local level where the future is being brought into the present. If you don't believe me, ask the New Economy Coalition or the Solidarity Economy Movement. More globally, ask the Wellbeing Economy Alliance. So, bring on the decentralization out of DC!
7. The threat to democracy is recognized, and the fight for a democratic future is joined. The more reactionaries try to suppress the vote, the more citizens turn out to vote. Bring on the democratic renaissance!

And:

8. As the polycrisis deepens, more and more people are seeing the root of the problem in our misguided value system, and they are searching for new values and new lives to go with them. We now need especially, not more analysis, but a spiritual awakening to a new consciousness. So bring on the preachers and prophets, the poets and philosophers! Call them to strike the chords of our shared humanity, of our close kin to wild things!

So, I say all is not lost. It is not over yet.

In conclusion, let me stress that I believe the positive currents driving toward transformative change will likely strengthen in the future.

But the possibility progressives must face is that this strengthening will be too modest and too slow to head off a series of genuine catastrophes. This possibility of “too little, too late” underscores the imperative for progressives to leave behind their issue silos – their little boats – to come together, and to forge a mighty political force, both for immediate action and for deep, transformative change. We need a fusion of forces, a movement of movements. That would be new and could make all the difference.

I thank you for being here and for listening.