

Kids These Days: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Hope Again

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Sometimes, timing is everything. One Saturday afternoon, a little over a year ago, I received an email from a beloved colleague. He was inviting me to do what I am about to do right now: deliver the annual Josephine Gould Discourse at this gathering. To tell you the truth, if that email had arrived a few days earlier, I'm not sure what would have happened. I was ten years into retirement and no longer doing much active ministry. I was certainly not keeping up as thoroughly as I might with all the latest movements and issues in our association. Whatever I might have been passionate enough about to want to share it with you ten years ago, or fifteen or twenty, was feeling like old news. In truth, I was feeling just a bit past my sell-by date. So I might very well have been inclined to say "Thanks for asking me; I really appreciate the honor, but no thanks. I don't think I have a discourse in me." At best, I would probably have asked for a little time to think it over, to see if I could talk myself into it.

But as I said, sometimes timing is everything. The date was March 24, 2018, and at the moment when that email showed up in my inbox, I was sitting with my laptop, glued to the livestream of the March for Our Lives in Washington, D.C., watching the course of history change. One after another, the most amazing young people stood up and spoke to the world. Students from Margery Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, told us exactly what it was like when a gunman entered their school, just five weeks earlier, on February 14, and slaughtered seventeen people, students and teachers. Other young people from other cities spoke about their siblings, their friends, their relatives lost to gun violence. Some of the Parkland speakers still bore their own physical wounds from that day. All of them bore psychological and emotional wounds. But they were full of passionate conviction that this must never happen again. More than that—it was conviction that they, a bunch of mostly seventeen and eighteen year olds, could be and would be the change they desperately wanted to see.

And do you know what? I believed them. I believed them then, and I believe them still. If a dozen or two young people, deep in shock over the invasion of their school and deep in grief over the loss of fellow students and teachers, in just five weeks could pull off a major march on Washington; if they could speak with such passion and maturity and yes, wisdom, to a crowd of hundreds of thousands in Washington and millions more around the country and the world; if they could inspire hundreds of simultaneous sibling marches around the country and even abroad: if they could do all this, then I had to believe that they could do exactly what they said they would do. I had to believe that these kids could achieve what so many people have been trying and failing to do after every mass shooting since Columbine in 1992—change our nation's gun laws so that no child ever has to be afraid in school again.

I can't remember another time in my life when I felt so clearly that I was watching the course of history change, in real time, right before my eyes.

And so when I read that email from my colleague, I didn't even have to think about it. I knew that I would say yes, and I knew what my subject would be.

Now, I hadn't lost all sense of reality. I also knew that this night was more than a year away, and all kinds of things could happen in that time. Maybe the movement would fizzle out after the march, as the kids settled back into school. Maybe the trolls and the NRA and big money would win. Maybe when this day came, I would have nothing positive to talk about. I knew all that was possible, but I didn't believe it. What I believed was what I've seen them post on Twitter again and again since then: *the young people will win*. And for the first time in a long time, certainly for the first time since the start of the current administration in Washington, it felt safe to hope again. And I did.

Now before you decide that I've plunged off the deep end and am trying to drag you with me, let me clarify a couple of things.

First, no matter how passionate and dedicated the Parkland kids may be, we still live in perilous times. The morning after the 2016 election, I awoke to the thought, "Well, the great American experiment has had a good run. But it's over now." And pretty much every day since then, against my better judgment I take a peek at the news of the day, and it feels like the whole enterprise has moved one step closer to a black hole from which we will never be able to escape.

It's not just gun violence. The intolerance, the denial of science, the hatred, the corruption, the amorality, the ignorance, the spinelessness and just plain nastiness in the news are just about overwhelming. I don't know if you all feel the same way, but I'm guessing that many of you do. So I'm emphatically not saying everything is okay. I'm not saying we're out of trouble. I haven't completely lost touch with reality. All I'm saying is that it's starting not to feel totally crazy to hope again. And that, my friends, is no small thing. If you want my message to you tonight in one sentence, that's it: *It's starting not to feel totally crazy to hope again*. As Jennifer Hudson sang at the end of the March for our Lives, "the times, they are a-changing." And those amazing kids from Parkland are leading the way.

The second thing is that great changes in society, even revolutions, are often led by young people. The revolution that founded this nation was led by very young people, at least in part. Maybe because in the pictures, all the men wore those white wigs, we tend to think of the founders of our nation as a bunch of old men. And it's true that there were a few of them in their sixties or even above, though except for Benjamin Franklin, who was seventy in 1776, not the ones whose names most of us know best.

But get this: in 1776, when the Declaration of Independence was signed, James Monroe—who would later be President—was 18 years old. Andrew Jackson was only 9. Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, who would author the Federalist Papers a decade later, were only 21 and 25. Betsy Ross was 24. Even George Washington was only 44.

Closer to our time—some of us here are old enough to have lived through it—the Civil Rights movement of the 50s and 60s was led largely by the young. It was black college students who first sat in at lunch counters, and largely college students and other young adults risking their lives on the Freedom Rides. And that’s not even to mention the Children’s March in Birmingham, or the incredibly brave black teenagers and even pre-teens who needed armed guards to escort them into the white schools they were taking the first steps to desegregate. Martin Luther King, Jr., was only 26 when he led the Montgomery bus boycott.

Close on the heels of the civil rights movement, and indeed overlapping it, came the protests against the war in Vietnam, with young people—college students and young men of draft age—at the forefront. One of the catchphrases of the time was “Don’t trust anyone over thirty!” The marches, the protests, and the organizing of those young people eventually raised up public opinion against the war and were instrumental in bringing it to an end.

So when Parkland kid David Hogg ends his tweets, as he does again and again, “The young people will win,” he’s looking to the future, but he has a lot of history behind him.

So who are these young people of Parkland, anyway? And how is it that they have caught the imagination of so many people? And how on earth have they been so effective in raising the issues of gun control and school safety when so many, many other people have been able to make so little headway?

First of all, as they often remind us, these are the kids of school-shooting generation. At seventeen, eighteen, and now nineteen years old, they were all born not long after that first terrible school shooting in Columbine. Just as all of us grew up with regular fire drills in school, and those of us who are old enough grew up with air raid drills (as though hiding under our desks would actually protect us from a nuclear explosion), they have grown up with active shooter drills in their schools. From kindergarten, maybe even pre-K, onward, they have grown up with the knowledge that this could happen to them. One of them, Ryan Deitsch, said in an interview that he hopes someday kids will no longer have to have these regular reminders that they are never 100% safe in school. But at the same time, he said he was grateful for those drills, because knowing what to do certainly saved many lives on that Valentine’s Day. Because of this experience, kids this age— and younger— can speak to the issue with a perspective and an authority that the rest of us have only second-hand.

That said, let’s acknowledge that this particular group are a bunch of relatively affluent kids, mostly white and cis-gender. In some ways, this is a very good thing. Their privilege and their white skin almost certainly drew media attention that would likely never have come to an equally bloody shooting in an inner-city black school. But the important thing about that is that they are very much aware of their privilege. If you’ve seen them on TV interviews, you have probably seen that they are quite fluent in the language of privilege and oppression; words like “intersectionality” which some of us may still be struggling to get a handle on, flow easily from

their lips.

That's why speakers at the March for our Lives were not just the Parkland kids. Some of the most moving speakers were other young people from other cities, African-American kids whose experience with gun violence is not just active-shooter drills and the possibility of a shooter in their school, but every day on the streets where they live. These were kids who had lost siblings and cousins and friends, and who had reason to fear gun violence every day of their lives. When the Parkland kids brought a group from the Peace Warriors in Chicago to visit them in Florida, they were taken aback when one of them remarked on how safe they felt in Parkland, in these kids' homes and neighborhoods.

The Parkland organizers always intended that what they were doing was not just a one-off protest; it was the start of a movement. And one important goal, from the very beginning, was to make sure that their movement was not just about them. It also had to include the many, many anonymous young people across the country who were generally ignored by the media but who suffered as much or more from gun violence as a simple, ongoing fact of their lives.

In some ways, these were just ordinary young people who found themselves in an extraordinary situation. But it's also true that they brought some remarkable skills and talents and training to their efforts.

David Hogg, for example, was an experienced member of the debate team; he knew how to make an argument and deliver it persuasively. He was also director of the school's TV network, and he thought of himself as a TV journalist. He was interviewing fellow students and making video while his fellow students and the teachers were still huddled together behind desks and in closets. Determined from the start that the students must take charge of their own narrative, he was supplying video and commentary to the professional newspeople who didn't yet have access to the school.

Cameron Kasky and a number of others in the group were active in the school's drama program. They were comfortable speaking in public and knew how to do it effectively. Just as important, they knew how to convey emotion, which would be important in persuading people to their point of view.

Jaclyn Coryn—cheerleader, class president, straight-A student—turned out to have amazing organizing skills; she was the one who almost single-handedly organized the bus trip to Tallahassee, the state capital, to lobby the governor and legislators. She was also the main organizing force behind the Road to Change bus tour last summer: the manager, the scheduler, the briefer, the details person.

Most of these kids were already masters of social media, and the ones that weren't learned quickly. All of them were the products of a school that encouraged independent thinking and asking questions. In his memoir, David tells us,

We learned so much at Margery Stoneman Douglas. We studied Supreme Court decisions,

read Shakespeare, and explored the mysteries of black holes. We spent a huge amount of time on contemporary issues like poverty and environment. In our psychology classes, we talked about death and grief and mental illness. We spent a whole week studying school shootings. But it all seemed a little bit distant, a little bit like a dream. Either it happened before we were born, or it was happening somewhere else.

When it happened to us, we woke up. We knew we couldn't wait until we got out of college and settled into jobs. We had to make this world a better place now. It was literally a matter of life and death. (

And of course, there was Emma Gonzales. Her name became a household word just a couple of days after the shooting when she stood up at a rally in Fort Lauderdale, AP Government notes in hand, to let the world know that the Parkland kids were here to speak truth to power. Like the little boy in the old story, she spoke up loud and clear to let the world know that the emperor had no clothes on. To a long litany of all the reasons why politicians claim nothing can be done to reduce gun violence, to those who insisted that it was too soon to talk about gun reform when people were still grieving, to those who responded with thoughts and prayers and no action, to all of those and more, with tears running down her cheeks, Emma called B.S. And the chant of the crowd went viral: "We call B.S.!"

I think that was the moment when it became crystal clear that things had changed, that thoughts and prayers wouldn't cut it anymore, or ever again, that this was not going to be another three-day wonder before everybody settled down and got back to business as usual. To all of that, Emma and her colleagues called B.S.

Then they got to work. And they went about it in some remarkably savvy ways.

They realized early on that they needed to have a consistent message and speak with one voice about their goals. So they agreed on a ten-point plan that was aimed at respecting both people's right to own guns and their right to live. And these goals, they like to point out, are not radical; in fact, they're really just common sense!

The goal that they mention most often—probably because polls show that over 90% of Americans support it—is universal background checks for gun purchases. The only thing stopping it is politicians in thrall to the National Rifle Association, who consistently oppose it. They also want to restore funding for gun violence research and eliminate absurd restrictions on the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives, which is currently banned by law from keeping a searchable data base.

The March for Our Lives program emphatically doesn't call for banning all guns, but it does call for banning military-style assault weapons and high-capacity magazines, both of which have been used in almost all mass shootings.

They also want to see funding for intervention programs that have already proved successful at reducing violence, red flag laws to keep guns away from people who are at most risk for using

them for violent purposes, and laws blocking people with a history of domestic violence from owning guns.

(You can find details on these and their other points at MarchforOurLives.com .)

Besides these specific goals, they had one more overriding message, that all of these depend on: It was simple: VOTE! If your representatives will not support common-sense measures like these, then vote them out and elect people who will. If you're not old enough to vote yet, then get out and help register those who are. The change they wanted wouldn't happen overnight, or even this year, but the way to make it happen, however long it took, was through the ballot box.

They had learned in their history classes about popular uprisings of the past, perhaps especially the civil rights movement, and they grounded their movement in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, six principle of nonviolence. They reminded one another of them again and again. (I'll admit I had to look them up; you can, too.)

They particularly held up the third principle, which in their own words was something like, "the people on the other side are our opponents, but not our enemies." Keeping this in mind led them again and again into fruitful conversations with people who started out angry and antagonistic and ended up agreeing on at least some common ground.

And when things got tough, and they were tempted to be discouraged, they would remind each other, again and again, of the final principle, "the universe is on the side of justice."

Once they had an idea where they wanted to go, there was the challenge of getting the word out to as wide an audience as they could. It's the same challenge faced by every social movement, and the successful ones are usually the ones that have mastered the media of their time.

We know, for example, that the Civil Rights movement of the 50s and 60s made effective use of the media that were available to them—above all, television, which was still quite new as a force to shape public opinion. (My family got our first TV in about 1950.) There were stories in the newspapers, of course, but people could ignore those. It was much harder to ignore the images, on those little black-and-white television sets, of demonstrators and freedom riders being beaten bloody, of sheriffs with dogs turning fire hoses on small children, of young black children facing a barrage of hateful language as they made their way into their new white schools with armed guards to protect them. Images like these made people see the horrors of segregation in a new way. That, in turn built support for the new civil rights legislation.

In the same way, television news films brought the brutality of the Vietnam War into people's living rooms every evening and helped to turn the tide of public opinion against the war.

The Parkland kids made plenty of use of these now-traditional media, too, especially in the early days when the story was still fresh. Print journalism cranked out article after article—I have

over 100 articles saved on my computer, and that's just from the four or five papers and magazines I read at all regularly. They've published at least four books about their experience, in addition to the book *Parkland* by Dave Cullen. And the kids were all over TV for a while. Usually in twos and threes, sometimes more, they were on the news channels, on late-night shows, on talk shows, on 60 minutes. For a while, keeping up with the demand for interviews took just about everybody in the group who was willing to do it. You can still see a lot of that on YouTube.

But that kind of media attention wasn't going to last forever. Someone asked Matt Deitsch, a Parkland alum who was working with the team as their primary research person, what was their strategy for life after media? "Oh", said Matt, "you mean old media. We've already established our platform; we're on social media."

And indeed they were, and still are. One of the most important things about the Parkland activists has been that they are not only children of the school shooting generation, but they are also digital natives. Like many of their generation, they have lived a good chunk of their lives on social media. Twitter and Snapchat and Facebook and sites I've barely heard of were as familiar to most of them as the neighborhoods where they lived—maybe even more so. (Facebook, already old-fashioned, was really mostly only for the old folks; that's no longer where the young people, their prime audience, lived their digital lives.) They tweeted, they created memes designed to go viral, they shot lots of short youtube videos. They made sure they had their facts straight, and then sent them out with a combination of seriousness, humor, and satire, whatever was appropriate at the moment. They worked as a team, making sure they agreed before sending something out into the world, so their message stayed clear. They didn't have to be trained to do all this; they were essentially speaking their mother tongue.

I've described this so far as a youth movement, and it is absolutely is that. But there's a critical difference between this and at least some youth movements of the past. Where the cry of many activists in the 1960s was "Don't trust anybody over thirty," the March for Our Lives leaders knew that they needed the cooperation and help of adults, and they've welcomed it—though always on their own terms. From the bus trip to Tallahassee to the March for Our Lives through the Road to Change bus tour last summer, they needed adults for legal things like bus contracts and hotel reservations. Their financial support has come primarily from adults, because they're the ones with money. Adults were generous in sharing their experience with planning and carrying out mass demonstrations, from logistics to permits to financial arrangements. One adult in particular was very close to them—Manuel Oliver, soon known to the group as "Uncle Manny," was the father of Joaquin Oliver, or "Guac," one of the slain students.

But always, always, it was clear to everyone that the young people were in charge. The adults were there to support and help, not to take over, and the adults respected that. Nowhere was this as clear and dramatic as at the March for Our Lives itself, where the young leaders decided that the only speakers would be young people. The only adults on that stage were the celebrity

musicians who came to support the effort. Otherwise, the kids spoke for themselves, and for all the other children and youth at risk for gun violence in schools and on the streets and everywhere. Those young voices, one after another—wise, sad, shaky, passionate, thoughtful, and at the last moment, silent—were overwhelmingly powerful.

Oh, they knew what they were doing, these Parkland kids. I don't know how they knew so much, but they did, and they do.

It has not all been sweetness and light, of course. We have to remember that especially in the early days and weeks leading up to the March, the Parkland kids were not only planning and tweeting and being interviewed and trying to keep up with schoolwork: they were also still in shock from the attack on their school, attending funerals for their schoolmates, grieving the loss of fellow students and teachers. Sleeping and eating, apparently not so much. Moreover, as time went on, some of them suffered from PTSD, and others were just plain exhausted. That they could do everything they did is just plain amazing to me, but they supported each other and loved each other and kept on keeping on and somehow pulled it off.

And then there were the trolls. Still are, in fact. The downside of being on social media is that it could be used to attack them, and it was. Some of that came direct from the NRA; a lot came from gun owners afraid that the kids wanted to take away everyone's guns (they didn't); and a lot came from just plain nasty people, hiding behind the anonymity of the internet. Far from taking it easy on them because they were young, some people accused them of being too young to know what they were talking about—when in fact thanks to Matt and their own research, the kids generally knew more about the subject than any of their attackers. As David tweeted just recently, “If the right wing is so angry about what a 19 year old is saying, I must be doing something right.”

The kids weren't really surprised by this, of course; they knew how the internet works. Generally, they gave as good as they got, or better, and handled it all with impressive humor and maturity. They were accused early on, for example, of being crisis actors—people hired to pretend that the shooting had happened. They found that ridiculous. You've probably seen the tweet Sarah Chadwick posted when people started talking about crisis actors: “To clarify,” she tweeted, “David Hogg can't act to save his life. The fact that some people think he is being payed [sic] to is hilarious.” When the subject came up in an interview, Ryan Deitsch just shook his head in wonderment: “Some people think crisis actor is an actual job.” And in another interview, Cameron Kasky responded by saying, “I *am* an actor. I'm in “Spring Awakening — the school play— right now.”

There's no question that the Parkland kids captured the imagination and the hearts of many Americans, as they did mine. But now, a little over a year later, the question we need to ask is, have they accomplished anything? And I think the answer to that is a clear yes.

It's true that we still don't have sensible federal gun control policies; most of their ten points are still aspirational. But then they never expected to have the whole thing sorted out by now. And there has been some real progress, if not so much on the federal level, then in many states. The new Democratic majority in Congress did manage to pass a couple of bills, including one significantly expanding the requirement for background checks, even though there was never a chance their bills would be approved by the Senate and signed into law. But state legislatures passed more than 69 gun control measures in 2018, more than any other year since the Newtown, Connecticut, massacre in 2012, and more than three times the number passed in 2017. And unlike the year after the Newtown shooting, there was a decline rather than a rise in the number of bills expanding access to guns.

Now the Parkland kids were not necessarily responsible for all of this; much of it was at least in part the result of long, steady work by activist groups working out of the spotlight since Newtown. But at the same time, little of it might have happened without Parkland. As an article in the *New York Times* last December reported,

Seventeen students and staff members were killed in the Parkland attack, but it was certainly not the nation's first mass shooting. It is, however, the first one that appears to have been a legislative turning point — a “tectonic shift,” in the words of Allison Anderman, ... managing attorney at the Giffords Law Center.

“A lot of policies that we had been working on as a movement for years were pushed across the finish line because of Parkland,” Ms. Anderman said.

Similarly, if we look at voting patterns in the 2018 midterm elections, there's no way to be sure exactly how much the voter registration drives of the Road to Change affected turnout. But a recent study reported that 36 percent of citizens ages 18-29 reported voting in last year's midterm elections. That's 16 percentage points more than in 2014 (when turnout was 20 percent) and more than any midterm election since the 1980s. And the youth vote seems to have been decisive in swaying a number of elections across the country. Maybe the Parkland kids can't take all the credit for that, but then again, maybe they can. As Matt Deitsch tweeted shortly after the midterms, “A group of kids on a living room floor organized the largest protest in American history... a 63 day bus tour... over 200 chapters... registered hundreds of thousands of people... AND DEFEATED 27 (!!!) NRA BACKED CANDIDATES. I'm so proud of all of us. This is the beginning.”

Besides all that, there have been news reports in recent months that donations to the NRA are way down, and even that they may be in serious financial trouble. Apparently a few young people who are willing to stand up and say out loud that the emperor has no clothes have emboldened many others to stand up as well.

As I've said before, these young activists know they're in it for the long haul; it may take a discouragingly long time to accomplish all of their aims. But they know that their lives, and the lives of the next generation of children, and the next after that, are at stake. Emma Gonzales

summed it up this way: “The movement, she said, “is probably gonna be years, and at this point, I don’t know that I mind. Nothing that’s worth it is easy. We’re going against the largest gun lobby. We could very well die trying to do this. But we could very well die not trying to do this, too. So why not die for something rather than nothing?” She and the others are determined that the movement they are building will be strong and lasting enough to ensure, eventually, that no child will have to experience trauma like theirs.

So what does all this mean for the rest of us, whatever age we are? The first thing it means takes us right back to where I started: it means that in the midst of a world and a society that seem to be going to hell in a hand basket in more ways than we can count, these Parkland kids give us reason to hope again. As Bob Dylan sang fifty years ago and Jennifer Hudson sang at the end of the March for Our Lives, “the times they are a-changin’”. These kids believe that at the moment when they stood up and called BS on all the platitudes and defeatism and resistance to change they’ve lived with all their lives—at the moment when they decided that the massacre at their school was not an ending but a beginning—the very ground of history shifted. And in that belief, and in that shift, we too can find hope again.

Yet hope is not mindless optimism, not a guarantee, not a promise. Rather it’s a challenge, a challenge the Parkland kids, and thousands of other kids of their generation, have taken up and embraced. Now they challenge us to embrace it as well. If all we do is hope, it’s not any better than thoughts and prayers. If all we do is hope, we’re letting those kids down, big time. As Senator Cory Booker wrote, “Hope confronts. It does not ignore pain, agony, or injustice. It is not a saccharine optimism that refuses to see, face, or grapple with the wretchedness of reality. You can’t have active hope without despair, because hope is a response. Hope is the act of conviction that despair will never have the last word.”

And so the hope we may, however tentatively, let ourselves feel today is not just a warm, fuzzy feeling; it is a challenge to act. Like the phoenix rising from its own ashes, hope rises up out of despair and cynicism and carries us into action. It’s not just about gun violence. It’s also about a climate warming toward irreversible disaster, it’s about economic inequality, it’s about deep seated racism, religious extremism and intolerance, it’s about the distortion of democracy by the power of big money. It’s about all those issues tearing our society apart and threatening our very future and especially the futures of our children and grandchildren.

And in the end, that’s the message of the Parkland kids to all of us adults: We have to act. Just days after the Parkland massacre, David Hogg said to reporters, “We’re children. You guys are the adults. You need to take some action.” Greta Thunberg, the Swedish teenager inspired by the Parkland activists, who sparked the youth climate marches of recent months, said much the same thing to the wealthy plutocrats gathered at Davos, Switzerland: “You say, ‘We owe it to the young people to give them hope.’ But I don’t want your hope. I don’t want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act. I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if our house is on fire. Because it is.” She

says all she wants is for adults to act like adults, and act on the terrifying information that is all around us.

So that's the challenge to all of us adults, even those who, like me, may not be around long enough to see either the worst possibilities or the best come to fruition. The times are changing, and there's no more sitting back; we are all called to step up as the Parkland kids have stepped up.

And there's also a challenge to the youth and young adults here tonight and across our movement. I hope that, like Greta Thunberg, you will not only do your own part, but you'll also hold our feet to the fire. Don't let us forget for a moment that it is your lives, your futures at stake in what we do—or don't do—right now.

The old gospel song tells us that the darkest hour is just before dawn, and we are surely living through some very dark times. But the young people have felt the flow of history start to shift beneath their feet, and they are on the move. They are determined to be the change they want to see.

The challenge to the rest of us, old and young, is simply this: The old order is passing away, and something new is coming into being. Lend a hand or get out of the way, but above all don't let this moment go to waste. Or we may never get another chance.