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## Optimism versus Hope

I was intrigued and absorbed by David Orr's examination of optimism versus hope. He skillfully draws us into an enjoyable opportunity to argue about the shifting meanings of American English. Orr favors hope. "Hope is a verb with its sleeves rolled up." I suppose so. But *hope* is also a verb in night clothes, gazing longingly out the window for somebody to come over and rescue it. *Hopeful* lives near *wistful*. Personally, I like being optimistic. Optimism—which Orr describes as "the recognition that odds are in your favor"—also connotes a certain plucky chin-up-ness that defies those odds. "Optimism is an historical duty," Bernard Lown once said.

Really, it is just *potaytoe* versus *potahtoe*, another occasion for fun with our hypermutable vernacular. The really tough challenge Orr poses is a little deeper into his piece: how to talk to our nonspecialist fellow citizens. Orr was prompted to think about appropriate language after "being admonished recently to give a 'positive' talk." Who among the public-speaking readers of this journal has not been urged to avoid gloom? Who doesn't try to strike a balance between the dismal facts of global change and a desire to engage the audience? As Orr wisely observes, it is hard (and morally dubious) to elaborate on the "total destabilization of the planet" and then pitch 10 easy things to do at home. "Telling truth means the people must be summoned to a level of extraordinary greatness appropriate to an extraordinarily dangerous time," Orr writes. "They will have to see the connections between what they drive and the wars we fight, the stuff they

buy and crazy weather, the politicians they elect and the spread of poverty and violence." He concludes: "...Authentic hope can be found only in our capacity to discern the truth about our situation and ourselves and summon the fortitude to act accordingly. In time the truth will set us free from illusion, greed, and ill-will and self-imposed destruction."

I would be happy if the laws of this Republic were written by David Orr and people who see the world as he sees it. I admire their values and could depend on their characters. Their public policies would be generous and far-sighted.

But I am wary of "the truth" in general. And I do not believe that an appreciation of a particular set of facts about the relationships between consumer behavior and climate change ratifies the more astonishing assertion that burning oil and coal implies more "violence, inequity, and imperialism" than relying on human and animal muscle power. That is not what I read in human history. I would say that the Petroleum Age has just made the scale of everything bigger: more poverty but more wealth; more disease for some and greater longevity and less suffering for others; more brutality and more erudition; greater eruptions of violence and more regimes of peace and security. It is difficult—to say the least—to persuade the billion bourgeois grandchildren of landless peasants that their family history is embedded in the darker narrative of "the ecological and human violence that we have unleashed in the world." Sure, maybe so, but it has been enjoyable. And way more comfortable.

In a way, I am more simpleminded about our human dilemma. I believe that the ecological and social damage wrought by the emission of greenhouse gases will be contained and mitigated when the prices of carbon fuels are considerably more expensive—say four times more expensive—than they are today. Many argue that such a rise is already well under way, and that a fourfold increase in the price of a barrel of oil, adjusted for inflation, will be reached within two decades. I believe that projection grievously underestimates Russian oil reserves and Russian national ambitions, the ingenuity of petroleum geologists and engineers, and the stimulating effect of higher prices on exploration and development. I think humans will burn petroleum at high levels for many years to come and that the conservation of oil in country X will allow country Y to burn more, thanks to an already-integrated global market. And don't forget those centuries' worth of coal seams and tar sands.

I am for speaking truth to power. Moral suasion can work. I want David Orr on the hustings, ceaselessly. But nothing matters nearly so much as prices and costs. Those of us whose lives have profited from the Age of Petroleum can best serve our descendents and their planet by speeding the rate of carbon price increases through changes in fiscal public policy. Carbon tax, anyone?

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