

## **Coping with Climate Despair: Cultivating the Skills of Hope and Tranquil Resolve**

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**Abstract:** Sustainability educators are in a difficult spot. They must describe our unsustainable impacts on the environment and marginalized peoples, our growing understanding of how these impacts affect future generations and other species, and our failures to make the changes necessary to approach sustainability. At the same time they must avoid pushing students over an obscure tipping point where such information causes them to retreat into despair. For despair leads to inaction, which will only hasten the deterioration of planetary health. We propose two approaches to helping students avoid despair and strengthen their motivation for pursuing sustainable changes. One approach appeals to the motivational energy of hope and the other to the power of tranquil resolve described in Stoicism. We understand these approaches to be complementary. The skills of hope work well when we are pursuing long shot goals, while those of tranquil resolve aid when the achievement of our goals is beyond our own control. While the skills of hope are more aligned with our cultural norms and thus likely easier to teach, skills associated with a tranquil resolve can more powerfully (and lastingly) address the climate challenges we face. Pedagogical examples and strategies of these skills in action are offered throughout.

**Keywords:** Environment Education, Education for Sustainability; Climate Despair; Hope; Stoicism

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“What’s the point? It’s too late now! There’s no hope.” This despondent remark was made by one of the authors’ children in response to a request that he limit the length of his shower to conserve energy. Environmental educators often encounter such feelings when teaching about climate change and global warming – and for good reason. The technical summary of the United Nation’s recent International Panel on Climate Change Report (Arias et al., 2021) claims that a goal of reducing greenhouse gasses to near zero is no longer enough, we must seek “net negative” scenarios for CO<sub>2</sub> emission (where anthropogenic removal exceeds anthropogenic emissions) (p. 98). As leading climate scientists make clear, alarm about our current situation is widespread: “we declare, with more than 11,000 scientist signatories from around the world, clearly and unequivocally that planet Earth is facing a climate emergency” (Ripple et al. (2020) p. 8). A year later, Ripple et al. (2021) lamented that COVID-19 has revealed “even colossally decreased transportation and consumption are not nearly enough and that, instead, transformational system changes are required” (p. 897). As a result, they claim that climate change education should be included in core curricula globally, leading to “higher awareness of the climate emergency while empowering learners to take action” (p. 897). Herein lies the problem: educating widely about our emergency is likely to lead to more despair and despondency, which we cannot afford given the need to act aggressively (Andre, 2016; Ray, 2020).

Climate despair and eco-anxiety affect a broad swath of the population, including climate activists, researchers, educators, students, their parents and grandparents (Pihkala, 2020). In a survey of 10,000 16-25 year old participants across 10 countries, “59% were very or extremely worried and 84% were at least moderately worried” about climate change (Hickman et al., 2021, p. 863). Since it is youth who must face the worst of the coming climate changes, it is little surprise that 75% of those surveyed are frightened of the future. Worse, youth must manage this anxiety with limited societal power and a sense of “betrayal, and abandonment because of adult inaction towards climate change” (p. 864).

The epidemic of climate despair brings with it a host of troubling emotions such as “alarm, horror, outrage and fear” (Kelsey, 2016, p. 25), shame, hurt, grief, and depression (Hickman et al., 2021, p. 870). Climate despair is also associated with an increase in mental health pathologies. The mental health effects of climate change include sleep disturbance, depression, posttraumatic stress, and suicidal ideation (Cianconi et al., 2020, pp. 1-5). While these effects are tragic, their impact on the mitigation of climate change is devastating as they manifest in despondency, apathy, and a rejection of agency (Kelsey, 2016, p. 25). This reality of climate despair, then, places environmental and sustainability educators in a tough position. They must at once truthfully engage students with worrisome content in order to cultivate adequate concern, while avoiding an obscure tipping point where information registers as paralyzing despair (Kelsey, 2016, p. 27).

To meet these educational challenges, practical pedagogical strategies are needed. We compare two complementary approaches; one appeals to the motivational energy of hope and the other to the power of tranquil resolve described in Stoicism. Each approach has its own set of skillful habits that can assist in maintaining motivation to pursue climate solutions in the face of climate crises. The most common answer to the problem of despair is that we must be more hopeful. Orr (2004) argues that we need to learn to hope if we are to avoid the pessimism that

seems warranted by our environmental situation. Macy and Johnstone (2012) recommend “active hope” as a set of practices that can help us to productively navigate our daunting sustainability challenges. Williston (2015) argues that we are morally obligated to cultivate the virtue of hope regarding the rapid decarbonization of our economy, so that we will aggressively pursue such long shot goals. Kelsey (2016) charges teachers with the task of strengthening hope in the environmental education classroom to provide an antidote to the stultifying doom and gloom environmental narratives. While such recommendations focus on strengthening the feeling of hopefulness, we emphasize cultivating the *skills* of hoping well, which can be cultivated by environmental educators.

As the climate crisis worsens, however, and fears of its irreversibility loom, hope may increasingly become untenable. For one can reasonably hope to achieve a goal only when it is possible to do so. With the dwindling of hope, motivation to act sustainably is likely to falter. By contrast, a “tranquil resolve,” which roots its motivation in pursuit of what is right and just rather than securing certain outcomes, supports action even when its goal is impossible to achieve. Numerous traditions include references to this important motivational engine that we are calling “tranquil resolve,” including Buddhism, some forms of Christianity, and Stoicism. We will appeal to the ideas advanced by the late Roman school of Stoicism<sup>1</sup> (first century BCE – third century CE), especially Seneca, Epictetus, and Emperor Marcus Aurelius, to explicate and justify this approach to climate despair. These Stoics noticed that an effort to think and act virtuously, in a logically consistent manner, led to a state of “self-coherence” (Hadot, 1998, p. 75), which often yielded sustained peace of mind, a decrease in fear, and a sense of well-being (Farnsworth, 2018, pp. 222-223). As we will see, attaining this self-coherence required a candid honesty regarding reality (that much in life is out of one’s control), which informed the Stoics’ goals and expectations (Needleman & Piazza, 2008, p. xxii). By adjusting these expectations, Stoics accepted life’s inevitable losses, disappointments, and griefs (Lebell, 1995, p. x), while simultaneously preserving the ability to work hard to achieve goals, even where the results were outside their control. Beyond coping, however, this tranquil resolve brought a happy contentment, even joy, to the Stoic’s life, a joy that seemed fullest when one’s actions were in service to communal well-being (Irvine, 2009, p. 228).

Below we describe the skillful habits of hope and tranquil resolve that environmental educators can introduce to mitigate climate despair, and briefly outline pedagogical strategies for cultivating these sustainability-related skills. Although refining such skills takes years, sustainability educators can introduce practices that students can cultivate on their own to mitigate not just climate despair, but anxiety about other daunting challenges life will inevitably bring. We cover tranquil resolve in more detail, because it is less familiar than hope. We conclude the paper with an account of the relationship between these two approaches.

### **Cultivating Hope Skills**

Hope is often thought of as an emotion or a desire. For example, Martin (2013) explains hope as involving a desire that something happen and a belief that satisfying the desire is possible, but not certain. We often use “hope” to express a mere feeling or a wish that something occurs. For example, I may “hope” that you are having a nice summer or that your exams went

well. This view of hope involves no evident skill or action-orientation; it is a weak antidote to despair. But “hope” has multiple meanings in ordinary English. Other meanings of hope are much more closely connected to action, and they involve a set of skills that we can hone over time. These skills can be taught, and once a skillful habit of hope is acquired, one has the capacity to hold many forms of despair at bay.

Our approach to hope derives from C.R. Snyder’s work. Snyder, Rand and Cheavens (2009) explain hopeful thinking in terms of “the belief that one can find pathways to desired goals and become motivated to use those pathways” (257). The skills involved in hope so understood include creatively identifying multiple pathways for reaching important goals and assessing these both for their likelihood of success and our ability to motivationally engage them. They also include regulating our sense of agency by becoming more aware of our motivational triggers, so we can build motivation for goals. Regulating agency involves setting up feedback loops that help us to bolster flagging motivation when fatigue and despair threaten. Many of our students have not thought much about these skills and have had little opportunity to systematically develop them.

These skills are extremely valuable in life, and they apply far beyond the domain of the climate crisis. They dispose us to find new challenges stimulating and to redouble our efforts when reaching a goal becomes less probable. A sports team that often comes from behind to win a game seems to have such capacities, and its coach or team captain might have the skills to stimulate hope in team members. Snyder (1995) identifies a range of benefits of developing greater general capacity to hope:

The advantages of elevated hope are many. Higher as compared with lower hope people have a greater number of goals, have more difficult goals, have success at achieving their goals, perceive their goals as challenges, have greater happiness and less distress, have superior coping skills, recover better from physical injury, and report less burnout at work, to name but a few advantages. (357-358)

An educator might reasonably acknowledge that hope skills seem important<sup>2</sup>, but suggest they belong in a psychology or philosophy class, but Williston’s (2015) moral argument for cultivating hope indicates that they should at least be introduced in most climate change classrooms. As we teach about any sustainability challenge, we know that responses often involve either wishful thinking or despair. Wishful thinking that someone else will solve the problems reduces our motivation to work hard to address the challenge. But despair is likely to shift our focus toward adapting to our circumstances rather than changing them, which will make the challenges worse. Since we have a strong duty to do everything we can to avoid the disasters resulting from our unsustainable lifestyles, we should cultivate the skills of hoping well, which seems our best shot for motivating productive sustainability action under conditions where achieving our goal is a long shot.

If we are to teach the skills of hoping well, we must break them down into manageable chunks. We find it useful to cluster the skills into three categories: skills focused on self-regulation of our own agency, skills involved in fostering hope within a community, and skills involved in assessing the reasonable application of hope in a context. The main skills involved in

regulating our agency include focusing on goals and past successes rather than on constraints and past failures, and developing multiple creative pathways for achieving a goal. Students engaged in a course project often identify only one way their goals can be achieved. When that pathway is blocked (perhaps by an administrator or lack of support from other students), the students often give up on the project. Reminding them that many goals are achieved through indirect routes and helping them identify such routes, while expressing confidence in their creativity, provides an opportunity to discuss the dynamics of despair and to build hope skills.

Regulating agency also involves the social skills that assist one in accessing a community that helps to bolster one's agency. McGeer (2004) draws a strong connection between self-regulation of agency and becoming a part of a hopeful community, because the development of hope depends on the scaffolding provided by others. When we are young our caregivers provide the encouragement and skills to overcome frustrated desires and to persevere in pursuit of some difficult goal. But as we age, we need to replace parental scaffolding of hope with friendships that help us to surmount our challenges and deepen our agency. Knowing how and when to access such peer relationships to strengthen our hope is a crucial feedback loop for regulating agency. We have found that a classroom community can foster hope if peers are taught how to explore alternative pathways and support motivation without misrepresenting our odds of success.

Effectively communicating hope is central to building hopeful communities. This requires knowing the audience and having appropriate empathy, so that the speaker grasps what language, metaphors, and cautionary tales will strengthen motivation. It requires being able to communicate the depressing facts of a situation without diminishing hope. Being able to articulate the dynamics of hope and despair often helps to provide context for hope-building, especially when it uses familiar examples from typical life experiences or from history. Martin Luther King Jr. was a tremendous hope communicator. His famous "I Have a Dream" speech (King 1963) gives voice both to the long struggle of black people to achieve justice in the U.S. and to a renewed determination to make "all men are created equal" a reality. King did not sugarcoat the reality, but he motivated action by providing a compelling vision.

The third cluster of hope skills involves assessing the limits of reasonable hope in a context. Hope is rational only when it is possible for a goal to be achieved. A cancer patient may hope for a full cure, but if she learns that the cancer is clearly terminal, it seems irrational to pursue the goal anyway. It seems more reasonable to adapt the goals to the new information, and focus action on a goal that can be achieved – perhaps a good death. This is not to suggest there is a rational calculus for assessing hope. Those who have honed the skillful habits of hope are good at evaluating the constraints on achieving their goals, and weighing the importance of a goal compared with other goals. They have the capacity to survey their own motivational limitations and anticipate the potential of unforeseen roadblocks. These skills increase our chances of expending our efforts wisely in contexts where important goals are very difficult to achieve. The importance of mitigating climate change justifies expending a great deal of effort even if our odds of success seem minimal.

To teach such skills in a classroom, we must engage classes in discussions about the dynamics of hope, despair and wishful thinking in connection to sustainability. It helps to highlight the impact of our immediate satisfaction culture on our capacity to motivate long-term

action on challenging goals. We need to focus a greater portion of the curriculum on pathways to solving our problems rather than summaries of problem impacts. Sustainability classes often include group projects, and project-based education can be an excellent pedagogy for building hope skills, especially if it involves explicitly teaching some project management. When we scaffold projects so they include project proposals, milestones, timelines and so on, then we can help students to develop and evaluate pathways to a goal, and we can assist them in determining when roadblocks require new pathways or shifting goals. Group projects can explicitly involve practice and reflection on communicating hope and framing situations positively without misrepresenting facts. These basic life skills apply widely; it is worth the extra expenditure of time involved in having a class reflect on aspects of fostering hope under challenging conditions.<sup>3</sup>

While we have argued that building hope is important in the sustainability classroom, it should not be the only approach we use to address the problem of despair. Our brief discussion of hope assessment skills suggests two risks of relying solely on hope skills to combat despair. First, when hope is not warranted because a goal is out of reach, sometimes we still need to motivate action for the original goal. If a basketball team is so far behind that it cannot possibly win a game, it is still important for players to be motivated to play their best, but that cannot be motivated by hope of winning. There are no pathways to victory. Second, hope requires walking a knife edge between our recognition of the difficulty of achieving a goal and our belief in our capacity to surmount obstacles and find pathways to the goal. This balance is hard to sustain, and it is easy to slip into despair or self-deception.

Often it is hard to tell whether a goal is impossible to reach. In our current circumstances, this is certainly true of goals like limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees C and adopting sustainable behaviors in our communities. Of course, we can modify our goals accordingly (e.g., avoiding the *worst* consequences of climate change), but if modification occurs too often, our motivation tends to flag. When a goal is of great moral importance and is an expression of our character, it can be rational to work hard to achieve a goal we take to be impossible. Thus, it will be helpful to have another set of tools in our motivational toolbox. The skills of tranquil resolve augment hope skills and help us to avoid despair when achieving our goals seems impossible.

### **Cultivating A Tranquil Resolve towards Climate Action**

In his exegesis of Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, Hadot (1998) describes the Stoic as someone who: judges with "rectitude and veracity," accepts "serenely those events which do not depend on" them, and acts "justly in the service of other people" (p. 35). Judgment (employing right reason in our value assessments), desire (accepting life on its terms and remaining indifferent to things beyond our control), and action (acting justly and for the sake of humankind), then, are the three Stoic disciplines, so often repeated throughout Aurelius' *Meditations* (IV, 6; VIII, 7; IX, 7; IV, 33; see also Epictetus' *Enchiridion*, 1.1). The cultivation of these three (skillful) disciplines provides the tranquil resolve to face courageously the threat of climate change.

We describe these three sets of skills in a colloquial fashion before illustrating them with examples from Stoic sources. Stoicism was founded in Athens around 300 BCE by Zeno of

Citium.<sup>4</sup> We focus on the Late Roman Stoicism because of its emphasis on ethics and living with tranquil resolve. In emphasizing this period, we draw principally on three authors: Seneca, Epictetus, and Aurelius.<sup>5</sup>

We are aware that an appeal to antiquity risks alienating readers long-fatigued by references to past, privileged, male figures. To this understandable concern, we offer two comments. Although the language employed by the Stoics is exclusive, their vision was not. As Farnsworth (2018; see also Irvine, 2009, p. 50 on this point) states, “they were notable for welcoming women to the practice of their philosophy and favoring equality for them ... to a degree that was radical for their times” (p. xxv).<sup>6</sup> Likewise, while certainly privileged, the aforementioned Stoic practitioners endured many injustices and tragedies.<sup>7</sup> Despite such challenges, these Stoics remained engaged, not wavering in their commitment to the commons, between them serving as a senator, consul, playwright, head of school, and emperor (Irvine, 2009, p. 8).

Since Stoicism involves a framework largely at odds with dominant cultural norms, few have proposed it as an antidote to climate despair (e.g., Stickney & Skilbeck, 2020). However, as Pihkala (2020, p. 12) recognizes, the deleterious role of negative emotions, which Stoicism aims to avoid, is under-researched, and nearly all the expert (e.g., psychologists) advice on coping with climate despair is geared to living *with* anxiety. In Stoicism, we are suggesting an approach that mitigates anxiety, and negative emotion more broadly.

To be clear, the value of the Stoical skills examined here is independent of an ancient worldview. Put simply, the Stoic philosophers were purveyors of “psychological hygiene” (Farnsworth, 2018, p. xvi), “keen observers of humanity,” who noticed that negative emotions—like fear, anxiety, anger and grief—caused a majority of our suffering (Irvine, 2009, p. 226, 5). Their enterprise was to discover the source of these emotions and develop strategies to mitigate them—but how?

### **Desire: A Discipline of Consent**

A majority of our miseries are driven by desires for things beyond our present control: regrets regarding the past, aversions to the present, and anxieties toward the future. If we could limit our desire to what was within our control, we would become less vulnerable to life’s vicissitudes. While our desires may at first seem beyond our control, the Stoics thought otherwise. Hear Seneca (*Epistles*, 123.3, Trans. Farnsworth, 2018, p. 90): “no one can have whatever he wants. What he can do is not want what he doesn’t have, and cheerfully enjoy what comes his way.” Thus, if we wish to promote tranquility, we must make a study of life to determine what is reasonable to desire, what is within and without our control. Our control exists on a continuum with things under complete control (e.g., values and goals) at one extreme and things over which we have no control (e.g., others’ actions, the immediate weather) at the other. In between lies a murky middle of things over which we have some but not complete control (e.g., desires, health, wealth, impulses like grief). Irvine (2009) calls this division the “trichotomy of control” (p. 89), noting that Stoics focus their energy on what is within their control, detach from what is without their control, and curtail their desires towards things over

which they have some but not complete control. Adherence to this trichotomy yields a number of skills relevant to the mitigation of climate despair.

### ***The Skillful Habits of Setting Values and Internal Goals***

In this subsection, we focus on skills related to things under our control, namely our values and goals. Selecting values and setting (and attaining) goals provide meaning. Ojala's (2012, 2016) research into adolescents' coping with climate change has identified the cultivation of meaning to be a crucial skill. Establishing values and living up to them (both of which are within our control) lead to a sense of self-coherence, purpose, and fulfillment. A skillful habit in resisting climate despair, then, is clarifying our environmental and sustainability-related values and setting *appropriate* goals for their expression. We say appropriate because some goals are external to our control. Better, as the Stoics contended (Irvine, 2008, p. 95), to choose goals internal to (or within) our control. Using the example of climate change, an external goal would be to draw down carbon dioxide to less than 350 ppm by 2030. While laudable, this goal lies outside of one's direct control, and is unlikely to be met, resulting in disappointment, a loss in tranquility, and a likely lack of resolve. While acknowledging the need to attain 350 ppm, the Stoic focuses on internal goals: committing to meatless Mondays, wearing a sweater in the house, commuting by bike to school, joining an activist campaign, running for legislative office, etc. Here, challenging, but achievable, goals are set, which maximize sustainable action through positive feedback that encourages long-term efforts.

Pedagogically, in the tradition of Stoicism, our students have responded positively when asked to create their own set of values in the aphoristic style common to Aurelius' *Meditations* and Epictetus' *Enchiridion* (literally, a field-handbook). Hadot (1998, pp. 35-42) defends this aphoristic style, likening it to a spiritual exercise, where one contemplates their most important truths, stating them with utmost brevity and concision. This style allowed the Stoic to reduce complex values with many implications to their barest form. When reviewed later, the Stoic needed only to read the aphorism to be reminded of its larger implications. By frequently reviewing their lists of values, the Stoics found that over time "you become what you give your attention to" (Lebell, 1994, p. 51; see also *Meditations*, V 16). For instance, a student might write: "Lower carbon footprints are consistent with sustainable living." While only eight words, this aphorism could shape the student's daily decision-making around: food, heating/cooling a home, appropriate clothing, transportation, etc., and bring both guidance and meaning to diurnal rhythms.

### ***The Skillful Habits of Negative Visualization, Memento Mori, Fatalism Towards the Past and Future***

The second category, things over which we have no control, requires a rather brutal honesty, an acceptance of "life's terms." The truth is, we all experience disasters, disease, and eventually, death, but we often fail to prepare for these inevitable losses. How might we prepare for them, without becoming morose and melancholic? The Stoics suggested moderate amounts of negative visualization: the contemplation of bad things happening. Having already lost a number



of children, Marcus (Trans. 2003, *Meditations*, XI, 34) captures this practice in a chilling example: “As you kiss your son good night, ... whisper to yourself, ‘He may be dead in the morning.’” While easily overdone, negative visualization can lessen the sting of eventual losses, while also fostering gratitude for what one currently has. Pedagogically, implications for climate change are immediately obvious: such contemplation prepares us for the coming changes, rekindles gratitude for the earth, confronts our dependence on it, and is likely to fuel our future efforts to fight on its behalf.

We are loathe to admit our lack of control, because we struggle to accept our impermanence. However, a careful, candid recognition of our mortality brings results useful to mitigating climate despair: gratitude for the present moment, determination to steward what time we have left, and perspective in setting reasonable expectations. The Stoics called this practice *memento mori*, remembering one’s death. Marcus again (*Meditations*, IX, 28, Trans. Farnsworth, 2018, p. 44): “soon the earth will cover us all.” One of the authors has effectively used cemetery walks with students as a *memento mori* activity. Intensity can be scaled to the audience with a simple stroll and reflection questions at one end and the reading of tombstone epitaphs and death dates at the other. While long-standing practices of *memento mori* have fallen out of cultural favor, others have recently recognized the environmental importance of “death pedagogy” (see Affifi & Christie, 2019).

Less morbidly, the past and future lie outside our immediate control. Certainly, we must learn from past mistakes and prepare for the future, but there is little use in regretting and worrying. Like the Stoics (*Irvine*, 2009, pp. 104-105), we must remain fatalistic to the past and future. The implications for sustainable action are profound. By remaining fatalistic to past and future climate change events (which we cannot, in this moment, individually control), we remain undistracted and available to act in the present. “Each of us lives only now, this brief instant. The rest has been lived already, or is impossible to see” (Aurelius, Trans. 2003, *Meditations*, III, 10). To help students visualize their unhelpful regrets (past) and worries (future), and identify possible present action, one of the authors used the following activity to great effect. A length of rope was fashioned into three circles. Index cards were given to each student and each circle was labeled: past, present, and future respectively. Students wrote concerns on the cards and then placed them within the appropriate circle. Discussion followed and past and future cards were used as fire lighting material for the evening campfire. Present (action) cards were kept by the students for future reference.

### ***The Skillful Habit of Preferred Indifferences***

The third category, things over which we have some but not complete control (e.g., desires, impulses and aversions; see Irvine, 2009, p. 90), is the trickiest. As we outlined above, since desiring things outside our control sets us up for disappointment, the Stoics recommended we maintain a nuanced indifference towards them. Yet, in some cases (particularly cases in this third category, e.g., stopping climate change), it seems we must wish for (and act towards) things outside our control. In truth, the Stoics acknowledged that we have “preferred indifferences.” That is, we can still prefer some outcomes over others, while remaining detached from things beyond our control

(Farnsworth, 2018, p. 107). Said another way, the commitment to detach from things outside our control does not require a withdrawal, lack of care, or ambivalence towards them. For this indifference is not a cold, dispassionate disregard for issues of justice outside our immediate self-interest, but a candid reckoning that making our happiness dependent on life's luck and vicissitudes, so often outside our control, is a pathway to despair. By remaining gently detached and indifferent to (i.e., unconditional in our requirement of) things beyond our control, we delimit external circumstances' influence on our emotional state, thereby protecting our tranquil resolve, leaving us free to act in ways we consider just and right. For example, one could recognize that rising water levels are displacing vulnerable populations, acknowledge that this sad fact lies outside one's immediate control, and thereby protect oneself from a flood of paralyzingly negative emotions, but still remain compassionate and committed to do what one can to resolve this unfortunate loss.

Admittedly, preferred indifferences require a fuzzy balance, but the Stoics navigated this balance well. Here is the logic again: for the Stoic, moral responsibility is limited to that which is under one's control (Hadot, 1998, p 108). Since it was remaining self-coherent with regard to one's moral responsibilities that brought the Stoics peace of mind, to all else that did not depend on their liberty, virtue, and character, the Stoics applied a nuanced indifference. Seneca (*Epistles*, 124, 24) clarifies this nuance, claiming that one can prefer without requiring, thus allowing preferences without attachment. It is not emotion, but *negative* emotion that Stoics eschew. In a beautiful letter comforting his friend, Polybius, who had just lost his brother, Seneca (Trans., *To Polybius*, 18) demonstrates this middle path through emotion, recommending that the grieving Stoic aim to "maintain a mean which will copy neither indifference nor madness, and will keep us in the state that is the mark of an affectionate, and not an unbalanced, mind" (4-6) Succinctly: "unless reason puts an end to our tears, fortune will never do so" (Seneca, Trans. 1889, *To Polybius*, 12, 4.2).

The skillful habit pertinent here is to clearly identify one's wishes for climate change. Then, using the trichotomy of control, parse these desires into their respective categories. With those climate change-relevant desires within one's control, set values and internal goals to meet them. For those outside of one's control, acknowledge the preferred indifferences. Remain mindful and committed to them, but detached enough to keep the balance Seneca speaks of. For things over which we have some but not complete control, try to determine where agency ends and indifference must begin.

If we were to employ the above skills and consent to the trichotomy of control, our resultant state would be a tranquil resolve that prevents self-pity and the victimhood that often suppresses action. *Amor Fati*, a love of one's fate, is a phrase attributed to this Stoic state (Hadot, 1998, p. 144). Epictetus (*Enchiridion*, 8, Trans., Hadot, 1998, p. 143) explains: "do not seek for things to happen the way you want them to; rather, wish that what happens happen[s] the way it happens: then you will be happy." The freedom associated with this position allows the Stoic to maintain a joyful air, "to welcome with affection what is sent by fate" (Aurelius, Trans. 2003, *Meditations*, III, 16).

A powerful way to teach the promise of *Amor Fati* is through biography. By way of illustration, Admiral James Stockdale was a prisoner of war in Vietnam for nearly eight years. Beaten and tortured, Stockdale (1993) claims the Stoics, and Epictetus in particular, allowed him to not just accept his fate, but use it as the defining challenge of his life (see also the Stockdale Paradox in Collins, 2001, pp. 83-88).

Far from a resigned, apathetic withdrawal, the Stoic's *Amor Fati* becomes an "escape to reality, so to speak, not away from it" (Farnsworth, 2018, p. xxx). With clear values, a commitment to moral responsibility, and a cheerful temperament unburdened by negative emotion (all attributes key to sustained climate action), Stoics were renowned for their prodigious societal, and we will add environmental, contributions.

### **Action: A Discipline of Service**

Yvon Chouinard (2016, p. 178), co-founder of the Patagonia clothing company, struggles with climate despair, but has discovered relief in environmental *action*, the second Stoic discipline. However, finding the motivation to act, amidst the doom and gloom (Kelsey 2016), is for many insurmountable. This paralysis highlights the interdependence of the Stoic disciplines. For it is in having practiced the discipline of desire that we strengthen our agency. This agency is fueled, in part, by acknowledgment of what we cannot control, which frees us to act in a noble way and then to accept the results, come what may. That is, the agent, conscious of their values and goals, aware of the tranquility that comes with a life lived according to one's values, acts in good faith regardless of the outcome. Should the outcome, resulting from something outside their control, fall short of their intended wish, the agent consents, and moves on to the next most reasonable action. Beyond an ability to act, however, the relief Chouinard speaks of seems to depend on the motivation for the act itself.

The Stoics found that acts motivated by the desire to serve others led to greater tranquility than acts serving self-interest (Hadot, 1998, p. 186). Seneca (*Epistles*, 48, 2, Trans., Farnsworth, 2018, p. 219), again, puts it clearest: "nor can anyone live happily who has only himself in view, who turns everything to his own advantage; you ought to live for the other fellow, if you want to live for yourself." In sum, "love, kindness and compassion" are "underestimated themes in Stoicism" (Farnsworth, 2018, p. 216). More than niceties, however, Stoics associated these communal acts with justice: "on the occasion of every impulse to act, accomplish what is just" (Aurelius, *Meditations*, IV, 22, Trans., Hadot, 1998, p. 186).

This Stoical commitment to just action yields a number of skillful habits relevant to climate despair.

### ***The Skillful Habits of Finding Refuge in the Present Moment, Assessing Motivation Rather than Outcome, Having Heroes, and Letting Your Life Be Your Argument***

Seeking tranquility through a self-coherent life rooted in values and the pursuit of virtuous character, when coupled with the *Amor Fati* described above, leaves one with a near indefatigable motivation to act. Since thoughtful action, as Chouinard attests, brings its own relief, the Stoics spoke of a refuge in the present moment (see Seneca, *Epistles*, 101, 8-9 on this

point), which provided inexhaustible initiative to act for justice. Educators might challenge students to retreat into the refuge of the present moment. The motivation for such acts is key, however.

Many climate activists are consequentialist in their ethic – the value of their action comes through the consequences it secures. Alluded to above, part of a Stoics' invulnerability came from their practice of placing the moral value of an act entirely on the motivation that led to it. That is, Stoicism is nonconsequentialist in its ethic; a well-intentioned act, regardless of the outcome, attains its goal every time (cf. Marcus, *Meditations*, XI, 1, 1-2). While subtle, the value of this skillful habit can be seen in the opening vignette of this paper. Asking “What’s the point?” implies that the *only* value of an act is in its outcome. If the outcome isn’t large enough, or sure enough, why bother? Such thinking leads to inaction, and educators would do well to suggest this subtle change.

The inspirational examples of others provides yet another skillful habit for Stoic action. When energy flags, we might ask, “What would Alice Waters—or Bill McKibben, or Rebecca Solnit, or Naomi Kline—do in this situation?” The heroic acts of others stir courage, and renewed commitment often floods in. Environmental and sustainability educators – via websites, books, and films – can assist students in finding their heroes. Seneca (*Epistles*, 11, 8-9, Trans., Farnsworth, 2018, p. 225) explains the value of the technique: “we must single out some good man and have him always in view, so that we may live as if he were watching and do everything as if he saw it.”

We can also ask for whom we might play an inspirational role in our fight against climate change. For such responsibility is itself a source of moral motivation, thereby mitigating a tendency to despair. Stoicism, again, proves helpful here. Epictetus (see *Discourse*, II, 12, 4 ; II, 26, 7) challenged the Stoic to be a “good guide” for others. Critical to conversations about climate change, the Stoics (e.g. *Meditations*, VI, 27, 3) were careful to avoid anger when instructing others, remarkably viewing gentleness as the most powerful form of persuasion. It wins without combat, turning enemies to friends (Hadot, 1998, p. 227). Pedagogically, environmental and sustainability educators might ask students to identify those within their sphere of influence for whom they are a mentor, examine the integrity of their environmental example for them, and contemplate what educational role they might play in their mentee’s climate education.

Hidden within the disciplines of desire and action, lies the third Stoic discipline, that of judgment or assent. For contextually appropriate desires and actions do not immediately present themselves, but must be arrived at and assented to.

### **Judgment: A Discipline of Assent**

In a nearly constant inner dialogue, we interpret the value of everything we experience, and this interpretation colors both how we feel and act. We must therefore pay close attention to how we frame our experience. For frames that betray our trichotomy of control inevitably lead to despair, and stultify action. For the Stoics, life is judgment (e.g., see *Meditations*, VI, 3, 11; *Enchiridion*, 5). “It is not the thing itself that troubles you, but your own judgment about it. And this you have the power to eliminate now” (Aurelius, *Meditations*, VIII, 47, Trans. Farnsworth,

2018, p. 3). Suppose you are told that someone was speaking behind your back, then this is *only* what you have been told. You have *not* been told that you have experienced a loss, been victimized, or must retaliate (see *Meditations*, VIII, 49). We half-consciously add these value-judgments, whether by habit, convention, social prejudice, or through an unmonitored emotional/passionate response (Hadot, 1998, p. 105). It is the Stoic's task to determine whether a judgment or opinion is rational and consistent with the other two disciplines (desire and action). Ultimately, then, it is the discipline of assent that allows the Stoic to maintain a self-coherence with regard to their moral responsibilities, and experience the tranquil resolve that accompanies it (Hadot, 1998, p. 108). Within this third discipline of judgment (assent), the skillful habit of framing presents itself.

### ***Protecting the Inner Citadel: The Skillful Habit of Evaluating One's Framing***

The notion that we fare badly within a circumstance, we each add through our own judgment (Epictetus, *Discourses*, III, 8-5). Thus, we must constantly check the accuracy of how we evaluate (i.e., frame) our experiences by asking: What have I added (through my assessment) to what's happening here? In this way, our judgment (assent) acts like a wall, which Marcus (*Meditations*, VIII, 48) names an "inner citadel," protecting our thinking and feeling from inaccurate interpretations regarding the options truly available to us, thereby preserving our ability to act justly. While assent will inevitably curtail the goals we might reasonably pursue in climate action, we must remember that this Stoic position is not a cold resignation to the dystopia of climate change, but a means of protecting ourselves from the negative emotions that lead to the crippling despair of inaction. Herein lies Stoicism's power, for in a comprehensive review of the climate despair literature, Pihkala (2020, p. 15) identifies control of one's emotions and an ability to cognitively reframe as powerful coping skills.

Once we identify the interpretation we have added to a circumstance, we must ask if it is accurate (relative to the trichotomy of control and our wish to be self-coherent in our moral responsibilities) in notion and in scale. What correction, if any, is needed to bring this assessment into a more accurate light? A way to pedagogically "communicate" the power of this skillful habit is to liken it to "I-statements," where a speaker takes ownership for their own interpretation within a verbal interchange with another. With the I-statement expressed, the other speaker then has a chance to explain their perspective, and through this respectful back and forth, a conclusion closer to the truth is discovered. In the discipline of assent, however, the back and forth happens internally – at the "gate" of one's "inner citadel."

With all three disciplines now in view, we can witness their cyclic power. If we act in concert with reason, but either the execution or the effect of the action goes awry, then this errant result is checked against the disciplines of assent and consent and a new plan for action is hashed (cf. Aurelius, *Meditations*, VI, 50). Crucially, given the urgency of climate action, this constant cycle allows us to resist stalling when obstacles or disappointments are encountered.

Having articulated, and offered support for each of the three disciplines, at this point in our argument, we are able to state the Stoic project plainly: a Stoic is a person with a clear moral vision and a high commitment to integrity, who is resilient under difficult circumstances, and tirelessly acts for justice. With two differing approaches to climate despair – hope and the stoic's

tranquil resolve – now offered, one might reasonably ask, are they in tension? Which one is better? Am I drawn to one over another? These questions are addressed in our conclusion.

## **Conclusion**

Irvine (2009, p. 28) speaks of different personalities being drawn to different philosophies of life. We recognize that some readers may be more drawn to hope and others to tranquil resolve. We think of them as a continuum with some overlap in the middle – complementary not opposed approaches to coping with despair. Rather than choose one approach, we recommend the contextual use of both. The skills of hope work well when we are pursuing long shot goals, while those of tranquil resolve are more appropriate when we believe the achievement of goals are out of our control. Since determining when goals are within control is often controversial, it seems best to have both sets of skills in one’s toolbox, but to emphasize those tools that best fit one’s interpretative habits.

To help students understand these two skill sets, and where they are useful, we have found it helpful to have them read in advance relevant literature (much of what is cited here), and then to tease out in small group discussions their answers to the following prompts:

1. Where do you find yourselves using specific hope skills, and where in your experience are they most needed?
2. Where do you find yourselves using tranquil resolve skills and where are they most needed?
3. Under what conditions does each cluster of skills seem most appropriate?

The following tables (1 and 2) summarize the skills that the students consider in their discussion.

**Table 1**

*Summary of skillful habits associated with Hope*

<b>Skillful Habits of Hope</b>
Regulating your own agency: Focusing on goals and successes, identifying multiple pathways for achieving goals
Fostering hopeful communities: Finding groups that support hope skills, supporting others’ hopeful activity, communicating hope without sugar-coating the facts, drawing attention to the dynamics of hope and despair where we see them
Assessing when hope is applicable: Distinguishing hope from wishful thinking and self-deception, assessing constraints of goal achievement, adapting goals to circumstances that cannot be changed, evaluating our own motivational limitations

**Table 2**

*Summary of skillful habits associated with a Tranquil Resolve*

<b>Skillful Habits of Tranquil Resolve</b>	
<u>Stoic Discipline</u>	<u>Skills</u>
Desire (Consent)	Create a field handbook ( <i>Enchiridion</i> ) containing your sustainability values and choose goals within your control, reviewing them weekly
	Periodically contemplate bad things happening (negative visualization) both to prepare yourself for loss and renew your sense of gratitude
	Confront life's terms, regain perspective, and bolster motivation, by moderately reflecting on your eventual death ( <i>memento mori</i> )
	Try to sort your environmental concerns into what is within and without your control (trichotomy of control); recognize that many of the things you prefer may be outside your control, and therefore ought to be held lightly (preferred indifferents); focus your attention where you do have control
	Don't spend your energy wishing things were otherwise; instead, put this effort into bringing about just changes within your control ( <i>Amor Fati</i> )
Action (Service)	Since action is its own comfort, take refuge in the present moment by attending to the service opportunities you find there
	Resist the impulse to view success only in results (utilitarianism); renew your motivation by taking joy in the well-intentioned act
	Contemplate your environmental heroes and draw motivation from their service; be mindful of those that look to your example, and use this responsibility as a motivation to act justly
Judgment (Assent)	Listen to your inner dialogue; be sure to accurately frame your experiences in light of the Stoic disciplines of desire and action (inner citadel)

Pedagogically, we believe the skills of hope fit better with the dominant interpretive habits of our culture. Thus, the educator may have an easier time introducing the skills of hope than those of tranquil resolve. Yet the skills of tranquil resolve have the potential to address more powerfully the climate challenges (both internal and external) we face since its motivation does not require that we achieve our goals.

Despite the potential for Stoic *joy*, however, we recognize that “the unassailable wintry kingdom of Marcus Aurelius” (in Hays, 2003, pp. xlix-l, quoting William Alexander Percy) will not be for everyone! The tranquil resolve skills mentioned here are a challenge to apply and are “best viewed as an ideal” (Farnsworth 2018, p. xxxii). The relevant question, then, is not whether tranquil resolve is ultimately attainable, but whether one is helped by trying? Educators must urge students to be patient with themselves when practicing such skills and to focus on improvement over time.

Educationally addressing the above skills requires sustainability educators to move beyond external scientific and policy-level treatments of environmental issues and include inquiry that explores internal aspects of human development, such as psychological hygiene and moral formation. That is, if students are to digest productively the scientific information we give them, they will need introspective tools to do so. Educators will benefit from working on the skills themselves, determining what practices work for them, and then telling their own stories in the course of discussions about the dynamics of despair, hope and tranquil resolve. We have

found that a one to two-week unit on coping with eco-anxiety and despair in a semester course increases the students' confidence that their actions matter and helps them keep despair at bay.

Inevitably, cultivating these skillful habits must begin with individuals deciding that they will be well-served by the results, but, ultimately, we need to scale up their cultivation, so that we create social norms within communities that reinforce their development. Formal and informal education provides the most promising avenue for this scaling up (Throop, 2016). Outdoor and environmental educators in particular are well-positioned to aid in this regard (Stonehouse, 2022).

Much more work needs to be done on the details of pedagogies that effectively counter despair. Like many others, we are convinced that philosophical change (e.g., ontologically, ethically, aesthetically), both individually and societally, is needed to address the problems of the anthropocene (e.g., Paulsen et al., 2022). We anticipate working with educators to apply the aforementioned skillful habits within their classrooms, and through action research refine curricular delivery – all in hopes of mitigating climate despair and securing a tranquil resolve towards climate action.

#### **Notes:**

1. The social and economic instability of our times, has led numerous scholars to revisit the promise of Stoicism, including a few, who have proposed a Stoic approach to climate change (see Gindin, 2020; Goodman, 2020; and Holiday, n.d.).
2. In our experience, numerous faculty do insist that helping students acquire life skills like hope or tranquil resolve seems too personal, insufficiently “academic,” or outside their areas of expertise. In response we note that such skills are fundamental to the enterprise of learning how to accelerate the sustainability transition, which is one central goal of much sustainability education. Such interdisciplinary work is required of sustainability professionals.
3. For more discussion of how to cultivate hope in educational programs, see Ray (2020), and articles in the special issue on Hope and Agency of the *Journal of Sustainability Education*, November 2015.
4. Space and purpose preclude a differentiation of Stoicism's four central periods (see Irvine, 2007 and Lebell, 1995 for introductions) and prevent further exploration into the evolution of its three-part philosophy (logic: valid forms of inference, discourse, and rhetoric; physics: cosmology, ontology, and theology; and ethics: the good life; see Inwood, 2018 for an overview).
5. Seneca's corpus is voluminous, encompassing a variety of genres. Although Epictetus' direct writings do not survive, we have four *Discourses* and a summary of his teachings called the *Enchiridion* (literally, the field handbook or manual), all composed by his student, Arian. Finally, although never intended for publication, antiquity has serendipitously preserved



Emperor Aurelius' *Meditations*, a collection of aphoristic truths Marcus wrote for himself. In fact, all three writers wrote in this aphoristic style.

6. Like Farnsworth (2018, p. xxv), in an effort to represent the quotations accurately, we have not expunged their sometimes sexist language, but lament the exclusion while taking some consultation in the spirit of inclusivity present in so many of the Stoic's ideas.
7. Seneca brooked multiple banishments and was forced to commit suicide under Nero (Irvine, 2009, p. 47); Epictetus was born a slave, permanently crippled by his violent master, and similarly banished (Stockdale, 1993, p. 6); and Emperor Aurelius ruled during the Antonine plague, lost eight children, and suffered a coup (Hadot, 1998, p. 3).

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