



The Confessions of a Recovering Cynic

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I am a recovering cynic. Perhaps I will always be one, but I am making progress—one day at a time. As a sign of progress, I am now able to mindfully observe the continual wrestling match between my cynical self and my hopeful self.

For instance, my cynical self looks at our federal government and thinks, “That’s a lost cause.” There is good reason to think this. The influence of money on elections and politics is [well-documented](#). President Trump has certainly made good on [his promise to fossil fuel executives](#) when he said he would scrap environmental protections and policies in exchange for their raising a billion dollars to get him elected.

So, what does my hopeful self think of all this? I take my lead here from Jamil Zaki, a Stanford psychologist who authored the book *Hope for Cynics: The Surprising Science of Human Goodness*. Zaki argues for replacing cynicism with “hopeful skepticism.” For him, this kind of skepticism affirms approaching matters with a robust curiosity, gathering evidence, and analyzing it scientifically. Zaki believes that cynicism is actually based on a lack of evidence.

He [contends](#), “The cynical voice inside each of us claims that we already know everything about people.” The problem with this is that “humanity is far more beautiful and complex than a cynic imagines” and “the future far more mysterious” than a cynic knows.

A hopeful skeptic might affirm that

Congress has indeed been corrupted by unlimited political spending as well as dangerous ideologies. At the same time, the hopeful skeptic can also acknowledge that possibilities still exist because of other evidence before us. Members of Congress are known for changing course. (If we don't like that change of course, we call it "flipflopping." If we do like the change of course, we call it "seeing the light.")

Years ago, I remember attending [a speech by Jim Wallis](#) in which he humorously captured the fluid and fluctuating nature of political positions in Congress. He recalled how he once told an audience of visiting protestors in Washington, DC, how to identify members of Congress in public. He said they are the ones "who walk around town with their fingers held high in the air, having just licked them and put them up to see which way the wind is blowing."

Wallis went on to note that many get disillusioned and give up altogether when they discover that replacing "one wet-fingered politician with another" does not lead to change. Wallis then drew upon the evidence of past movements for justice to suggest that a reason for hope still existed. He declared, "The great practitioners of real social change, like Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mahatma Gandhi, understood something very important. They knew that you don't change a society by merely replacing one wet-fingered politician with another. You change a society by changing the wind." For Wallis, this is how he understood the role and calling of "people of faith and conscience": they are to be the "wind changers."

On days when my hopeful self out wrestles my cynical self, I can feel the stirrings of a breeze and begin to believe that a better future is indeed possible.

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