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‘To hope is to gamble. It’s to bet on the future, on your desires, on the possibility that an open heart and uncertainty is better than gloom and safety’, wrote Californian author Rebecca Solnit (2016, 4), some six weeks after the US led invasion of Iraq, in an essay called ‘Hope in the Dark’.

Writing this editorial on 11 March 2021 is not only almost exactly 18 years after Solnit’s expression of both sadness and hope about the state of the world in 2003 but is also precisely one year since the World Health Organisation declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic (WHO 2020).

The world of 2021 is truly a very different place from that of 2003, when some of the largest mass gatherings and demonstrations the world has ever seen gave way to a bloody and drawn-out conflict in the Middle East that is still not resolved.

But Solnit’s words ‘to hope is to give yourself to the future, and that commitment to the future makes the present inhabitable’, ring very much true in the current moment. Moreover, they set a specific challenge to those of us engaged in working with, and making sense of, the past in the present. How can archaeology contribute to such a commitment to the future and hope for a better world? This commitment has become particularly difficult over the past twelve months, as community archaeology and especially field work, like so many aspects of most our lives, has been severely disrupted. Community archaeology by its very definition relies on people – communities – coming together in their explorations of (past) worlds and this was one of the things that has not been (and in many places still is not) possible since the outbreak of the pandemic.

But while there is no doubt that the coming months will continue to be extremely difficult for millions of people globally, there are at last some grounds for hope, with vaccination programmes beginning to make inroads and new leadership in the US is offering the prospects of a more conciliatory approach to global politics, opening the door for transnational cooperation to get on top of the current crisis.

All the papers in the current issue of JCAH relate primarily to a pre-COVID world, with three out of the four charting developments over a number of years. But they can also give us hope that the drive for the projects they discuss has not gone away, and that such community projects and initiatives will rise again as soon as circumstances allow. The papers bring together a geographically and methodologically diverse set of case studies, located in Pakistan, Israel, Australia and the UK. Two of them (Smith et al.; Storchan) relate to archaeological field schools, but with very different outlooks. Storchan’s paper discusses a project for teenagers on an excavation of a Byzantine church in Israel while Smith, Jackson and Ralph’s paper reviews the longest running archaeological field school in Australia, which centres on learning about Aboriginal culture from Aboriginal people.

Though also practically grounded, the other two contributions bring in a wider focus on conceptual issues, with Hussain’s paper investigating the relationship between local communities, the heritage imagination and infrastructural development in Pakistan, and Bowden examining the role of academic involvement in a longstanding community archaeology project in the UK.

Despite their very different foci, all these papers do what community archaeology does so well, and arguably better than any other branch of archaeology: they highlight various levels of social

inequality both in the present and the past. At the most benign level, these are the differences between academics and committed community volunteers, who by and large also tend to be relatively financially secure and highly educated. But at the other end of the spectrum, there are the more substantial inequalities that exist between the Bedouin labourers and Israeli teenagers (discussed by Storchan) or those between members of Aboriginal communities and 'white' Australians (discussed by Smith et al.).

Coming back to the current world, such inequalities have also become painfully apparent in the degree to which different communities have been impacted by the pandemic and how the eagerly awaited vaccinations are being distributed.

While archaeology and heritage cannot rid the world of its ills and are certainly not capable of defeating the COVID pandemic. The contributions to this issue point to the possibility of hope for a more collaborative, understanding, and harmonious future, where people from very different backgrounds realise that paying attention to each other's perspectives can benefit us all.

Perhaps it is fitting to end this editorial the way we started it, with the words of Rebecca Solnit. 'Hope just means another world might be possible, not promised, not guaranteed. Hope calls for action; action is impossible without hope'. (Solnit 2016, 4).

References

Solnit, R. (2016). *Hope in the Dark: untold histories, wild possibilities*. Edinburgh, Canongate books.

WHO (2020). *Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 - 11 March 2020*. Accessible on: <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020>