

Leslie Knope and the Importance of Hope

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Michael Schur must be living his best life right now. If that name doesn't ring a bell, Cousin Mose might. And if that doesn't work, then I would guess you have at least heard of one of the following series: *The Office*, *The Good Place*, *Brooklyn 99*, or *Parks and Recreation*. Michael Schur created and/or wrote all of those titles. Not only is it unusual to have one TV show take off, but it's significantly more rare that four shows are renewed over five times and amass a cult-like following. While Schur's wit deserves plenty of credit for the success of these shows, I believe there is something else keeping them relevant. Each show features a similar, primary theme: hope.

Almost daily, a new headline appears: "SCHOOL CHILDREN SHOT DEAD;" "THE PANDEMIC RAGES;" "6 JUSTICES STRIP PERSONAL AUTONOMY FOR SPORT." It's no wonder that when we reach for the remote, we pick shows that feel familiar but different. Jim and Pam's relationship tells a story about resilient love. Captain Holt's leadership paints a picture of more progressive law enforcement. Eleanor Shellstrop's transformation makes humanity seem salvageable. However, Leslie Knope is the crown jewel in Schur's hope-portfolio. The lead character in *Parks and Recreation*, Leslie is a civil servant with no greater passion than making the world a better place, starting with the smallest parks in her hometown of Pawnee, Indiana. Schur's superpower is crafting characters that live authentically with hope.

How often have you heard: "My vote doesn't matter" or "we're all screwed" or "the world is dying anyway?" Have you heard something similar this month? This week? Today? Maybe you're the one who said those words - do you actually believe them?

Nothing matters. Nothing seems to change. So, why bother - right?

I would be a hypocrite if I told anyone to stop feeling that way. It is brutally painful to live in a culture where capitalism is more fiercely defended than the right to clean water, access to education, or physical safety. To speak candidly, I busted my ass for the 2020 presidential election. I helped former highschool classmates track their ballots and researched county judge profiles. I called my 78 year old Catholic grandparents in Texas to explain the prevalence of racism. I wrote postcards for Amy McGrath in Kentucky and laughed through the verbal abuse of phone banking in Maine. My Instagram became a hub for voter registration support. But I, too, watch the news. I clench my fists at the mention of the filibuster. I have had genuine feelings of wanting to sink Joe Manchin's houseboat. I listened as my office floor descended into quiet sobs when the Dobbs decision arrived. In the last month, I have thought "maybe voting really doesn't matter." But then I go home and rewatch Leslie Knope fighting for her community.

Cynicism is easy. Hope takes work. In his 1977 farewell remarks, former Attorney General Edward Levi said,

“We have lived in a time of change and corrosive skepticism and cynicism concerning the administration of justice. Nothing can more weaken the quality of life or more imperil the realization of the goals we all hold dear than our failure to make clear by words and deed that our law is not an instrument of partisan purpose, and it is not to be used in ways which are careless of the higher values which are within all of us. We have shown that the administration of justice can be fair, can be effective, can be non-partisan. These are goals which can never be won for all time. They must always be won anew.”

In essence, Levi reminds us that democracy and justice are never guaranteed. They must always be protected. And in order to protect those values, we as citizens need to find a way to keep going after each blow. We need hope.

If we lose hope, we seal the fate of millions of animals that cannot understand why their homes are suddenly melting or in flames. If we lose hope, we gag ourselves on behalf of those who want nothing more than to prove that our voices do not matter. If we lose hope, we suffocate the promise of a more fair and just world. If we lose hope, we tell our children that their dreams are wasted.

So when the challenges feel insurmountable and the fight seems already lost, I suggest you listen to Leslie Knope’s City Council acceptance speech:

“With hard work and positivity, a group of people can make a difference...I want to focus on your hopes, and not your fears. I want to solve problems instead of creating friction...so let’s embark on a new journey together. Let’s break out a map. Not the old, out-of-date one that shows where we’ve been, but a crisp new one that shows where we might go. Let’s embark on a new journey together. And see where it takes us.”

If we are to preserve our democracy, our rights, our world, then we must first preserve our hope.

References

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