

Optimism – Naiveness or Necessity?

Rise & Shine, May 10th

Lamentations 3:21-23

But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

Questions:

1. What most challenges your sense of hope?
 2. When has optimism served you well? When has pessimism? What would you consider your default?
 3. What is the fundamental difference between hope and despair, and how would you summarize the Christian message of hope to someone in despair?
 4. How do you avoid making the message of hope sound like mere optimism or sugar-coating?
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In the News

Optimism Is a Faulty Human Setting During a Pandemic -- But Gospel Hope Abides

In mid-March, while Covid-19 raged in Italy, some Italians posted videos of themselves giving advice they regretted ignoring earlier as the disease was breaking out in their country. Some Americans, including some elected officials, are now in a similar position, wishing they could have a do-over, in which they take the threat more seriously and make greater and earlier preparations -- perhaps even starting lockdowns sooner.

For a number of reasons, including an underfunded public-health system and a general lack of knowledge about the coronavirus' behavior, the pandemic, says health reporter Olga Khazan in an April 23 article in *The Atlantic*, "caught the United States unprepared and turned into one of the biggest disasters in recent memory." But one reason easily overlooked "is the human brain's basic tendency toward optimism, even when the facts suggest we should be worried," Khazan said.

Since at least 2012, infectious disease experts and intelligence officials have been warning of a pandemic to come that could "destroy Americans' way of life," Khazan said. But what in hindsight seems like buoyant over-optimism,

many in the United States considered such warnings as overblown. As recently as March 2, after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention warned of outbreaks of Covid-19 in this country, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio urged New Yorkers to "get out on the town." And three days later, Surgeon General Jerome Adams told Fox News that the risk of coronavirus "is low to the average American."

Khazan, who has been writing about science and health for some time, now acknowledges that in retrospect, even she was too optimistic about how the virus would impact this country. When on March 2, Helen Chu, an epidemiologist at the University of Washington, told her that schools might soon shut their doors and sporting events might be canceled, Khazan thought, *I doubt it will come to that*. Yet within days, schools were closed, and the NBA had suspended its season.

After talking to experts on the psychology of risk perception, Khazan explained why optimism seems to be a default setting for humans: "That kind of naive optimism in the face of encroaching disaster is a pitfall of owning a human brain. ... People have trouble appraising exponentially growing problems, seeing exactly how they themselves might be affected, and understanding the best way to help when disaster arrives. Our brains aren't designed to anticipate threats such as pandemics."

While not everyone is an optimist, many of us are, and this is not a new finding. In a study published in the October 2011 issue of *Nature Neuroscience*, researchers at the Wellcome Trust Centre for Neuroimaging at University College London present evidence that people who are naturally optimistic learn only from information that reinforces that rosy outlook.

That study suggests that many of us are hardwired for optimism. The researchers designed a test to examine how people underestimate the possibility of future negative events. They had participants lie in a functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) scanner and review a list of 80 negative life events, including being cheated on by a spouse, getting Alzheimer's disease, losing one's job, having one's car stolen and other unpleasant scenarios. While researchers monitored the brain activity, the participants were first asked to rate how likely they were to experience these events. Next, the subjects were told their statistical probability for experiencing such

negative events and asked to estimate again their own likelihood of experiencing them.

The scientists discovered that the participants were considerably more inclined to lower their estimates when they learned they were statistically less likely to experience these troubles, but when their probability was worse than they had estimated, the participants stuck with their original estimate or changed it only slightly. In other words, the study suggests that we pick and choose the information to which we listen.

The scans showed increased activity in the frontal lobes of the brain when the information given was better than expected. But when the information was worse than expected, there was less efficient activity in the frontal lobes. "Our findings suggest that this human propensity toward optimism is facilitated by the brain's failure to code errors in estimation when those call for pessimistic updates," the study authors wrote. Some reporters shorthanded this finding to describe optimism as a "brain defect."

Brain defect or not, optimism seems necessary for personal progress. We have to be able to imagine better realities. "Without optimism," wrote Tali Sharot, one of the researchers, "our ancestors might never have ventured far from their tribes and we might all be cave dwellers, still huddled together and dreaming of light and heat."

In fact, a yet newer study -- from last August -- supports the idea that optimism is likely built into our DNA for the survival of humankind. So by itself, optimism can be a good thing. Both the 2019 study and the one from 2011 suggest that while there are individual exceptions, as a human race, we are tilted toward optimism because, on balance, positive expectations increase our odds for survival.

Except perhaps when optimism causes us not to take prudent precautions, skip health checkups, not apply sunscreen, put too much confidence in investment prospectuses, and take other risks we later regret. There are definitely situations, including the current worldwide health crisis, where we'd be a lot better off if we'd approached them expecting -- and preparing for -- the worst.

Optimism is sometimes viewed as a synonym for hope, which is a word with strong religious dimensions. But the reality that optimism is a sometimes

faulty human baseline gives a reason to distinguish it from hope. Optimism is sometimes just naiveness. Hope, by contrast, is rooted in God's love for us, which is quite a difference. Biblically speaking, hope, along with faith and love, make up the "big three" of Christianity.

"And now faith, hope, and love abide," is how the apostle Paul put it in 1 Corinthians 13. He meant that when we look for the qualities that are distilled from the experience of our believing life together, these three things are the solid footing on which we stand -- even if seen now only darkly as through a distorting glass (v. 12).

Christianity itself presents us with a view of life as seen from the end. While we can't see that ourselves, we trust that God can, and thus we base our hope on that eternal perspective. That view points us to the fully come kingdom of God and says to us, "This is how you will understand it when it is all over." This end-view is of supreme importance to a life of faith because without it, we have nothing to look forward to beyond whatever we ourselves can make of this life. Theologian Emil Brunner said, "the fate of humanity is dependent on its supply of hope."

Psalm 71:14

But I will hope continually, and will praise you yet more and more.

1 Thessalonians 4:13

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

Prayer for Quiet Confidence (BCP p. 832)

O God of peace, *who has* taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and confidence shall be our strength: By the might of *your* Spirit lift us, we pray *you*, to *your* presence, where we may be still and know that *you aet* God; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*