“Is Our Glass Half Full…Or What?”

Rev. Dr. Jim Culver
Sermon at UUSP on Sunday, December 13, 2009

To the reader: This sermon was only part of a service of worship with many components working together, all of which were designed to be experienced in a community context. In our "free pulpit" tradition, its concepts are intended not as truths to receive, but as spurs to your own thought and faith.

CALL TO WORSHIP
(In loving memory of my former colleague & mentor, Rev. Dr. Duncan Littlefair)

This is a day for us to live.

Let’s celebrate it and make a difference in the world.

Let’s be grateful for the incredible gift of life,

And let us be especially grateful for the love which brings us together

Giving dignity, meaning, worth and joy to all of our days.

READINGS:

Our readings this morning speak to optimism, that view that there is more good in life than bad, that attitude of positive expectations. Of our 6 readings this morning, the first 5 are printed in our programs.

From Henry David Thoreau: “Go confidently in the direction of your dreams! Live the life you’ve imagined.”

From Helen Keller: “No pessimist ever discovered the secrets of the stars, or sailed to an uncharted land, or opened a new heaven to the horizon of the spirit.”

From Eleanor Roosevelt: “The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.”

From John Milton: “The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of
From William James: “The greatest revolution of our generation is the discovery that human beings, by changing the inner attitudes of their minds, can change the outer aspects of their lives.”

Our sixth and final reading, ok… it’s a joke, speaks not only to the polarity that is relationship between optimism and pessimism, but also to the humor that lies in choosing to have a pessimistic outlook toward life.

A family had twin boys whose only similarity to each other was their looks. If one felt it was too hot, the other thought it was too cold. If one said the TV was too loud, the other claimed the volume needed to be turned up. Opposite in every way, one was an eternal optimist, the other a doom and gloom pessimist. On the twins' birthday, their father tried an experiment… he filled the pessimist's room with every imaginable toy and game. The optimist's room he filled with horse manure. That night the father passed by the pessimist's room and found him sitting amid his new gifts crying bitterly.

"Why are you crying?" the father asked. "Because my friends will be jealous, I'll have to read all these instructions before I can do anything with this stuff, I'll constantly need batteries, and my toys will eventually get broken." answered the pessimist twin. Passing the optimist twin's room, the father found him dancing for joy in the pile of manure.

"What are you so happy about?" the Father asked. To which his optimist twin replied, "There's got to be a pony in here somewhere!"

SERMON

Is our glass half full… or what? Is optimism something we’re born with or is it a one of our many choices in life? Is there any substance to that book The Secret? This
morning, let’s briefly explore these questions together, which requires an examination of human nature, psychology, science, a sense of humor, and two important publications, one from 1759, and the other from 1902.

For our guests here today, please allow me a moment to provide them with a framework in which to listen to this sermon on a subject that doesn’t sound all that religious. Here at UUSP, we accept - we celebrate - that what we “know” is always partial and incomplete; and it will always be. We know that the core teachings of all faiths hold much more in common than their violent verbal and physical disagreements would indicate. This is why we Unitarian Universalists hold no creed of faith with which we all must agree. We know that whatever creed we might come up with would inevitably be inadequate. We understand that we are not weak and childlike, incapable of rising up to meet the many challenges life brings. We have inherent dignity and worth, qualities that naturally inspire us to speak the truth in love and to assist the cause of justice. It helps us nurture and develop the potential that life has given us. Not to give us the answers to life’s questions, but to give us a loving community in which to follow our own conscience, help us come into the integrity of our own answers. Not to protect us from the realities of suffering, but to move us to engage problems and do our best to make a difference in the world. Unitarian Universalism is a faith in the abundance of human potential to create unique lives of wisdom derived from trusting our own deepest experiences. So, let’s do the work of today and ask, is our glass half full…or what?

An optimist sees the glass as half full. A pessimist sees the glass as half empty. And a pragmatist sees the glass as twice as big as it needs to be. So, what is optimism? It is simply the belief there’s more good in life than bad. It is reacting to life in a positive
manner. It is an attitude of positive expectations. There are certain psychological characteristics surrounding pessimism and optimism. Whenever something goes wrong, pessimists believe the problem will continue indefinitely, affect all areas of their life, and is their fault. Optimists, however, believe that problems are temporary setbacks with limited impact and due to external causes. In a word, optimists choose to cope, pessimists choose to mope.

Although I’m an optimist, as a lifelong joke teller I must reluctantly admit that pessimism is a better source for humor than optimism, because a pessimist can poke fun at the optimist, but the optimist can’t be negative about the pessimist. For example…did you hear the one about the optimist who accidentally fell off the Empire State Building? When he passed the fourth floor he said to himself, “Well, so far, so good!” Or how about this pessimistic saying; When everything's coming your way, you're in the wrong lane.

This is why some of my favorite comedians do pessimist “schtick.” The best is Woody Allen, who suggests that the world is divided into good people and bad people. The good ones may sleep better, but the bad ones seem to enjoy the waking hours much more. Or how about this Woodyism; you can live to be a hundred, if you give up all the things that make you want to live to be a hundred.

It’s a challenge to even to come up with an optimist joke. Two optimists walk into a bar. One optimist says “what a nice bar.” The other optimist says, “Yeah, I think we’ll have a very nice time here.” This is not funny. Optimist jokes are not all that funny. And yet, we're all born optimists. It is our nature to be optimistic. But too many of us, when we reach five or six years old, have been subjected to so much negativity from our parents, family and friends that we begin to believe the world may be gloomy after all. As
we grow into adults, the negativity continues. "It's a rat race out there. No point in working hard and making big bucks when the government is going to take it all in taxes. What's the point of getting married when 50% of marriages end in divorce? Why protest this war when another one will immediately replace it?"

The case for pessimism is very convincing. Around two hundred years ago the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer argued for pessimism by pointing out how weak human reason is when pitted against human will. Human desires are much stronger forces than human rational thought. So in real life, whenever a choice comes down to what we want, as opposed to what our reason tells us what we would benefit from, the want is bound to win most, if not all, of the time. Pessimism is easier to choose than optimism. If it’s a choice between the broccoli that’s good for you or the chocolate that you want, who’s going to choose the broccoli? The logic of Schopenhauer’s argument is difficult to counter, for deep down we know that so many of the choices we make are based more solidly on what is wanted or desired than on what is needed.

What makes this argument historically one sided is that the philosopher on the side of optimism offers a much weaker argument than that of Schopenhauer. The philosopher of optimism was Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, a 17th century German. His argument was that God could make the world any way God wanted, and since God chose to make it this way, rather than some other way, it is this way for a divine reason. This must then be the “best of all possible worlds,” because if a better way to make the world were possible, then, God would have designed it that way. Earthquakes and diseases, Leibniz argued, have a divine purpose, and all things work together for good. We just don’t always know God’s plan.
The French philosopher Voltaire famously mocked Leibniz’s argument that “this is the best of all possible worlds” in his 1759 comedy Candide, which 200 some years later Leonard Bernstein used to compose my favorite operetta by the same name. The argument is easily mocked, and it’s no wonder the book is a comedy, pessimism is a better source of humor than optimism. Especially when the optimist is the butt of the joke. Voltaire was the Woody Allen of his time.

So, if pessimism can be so easily justified, and optimism so easily mocked, why choose to be optimistic? The quick start answer to that question is that optimism works. Leibniz set back the case for optimism a few hundred years with his inane 18th century arguments, yet if we set his ramblings aside for a moment, we now have as resources to consider thousands of scientific studies to confirm that people who are optimistic are happier in life than those who are pessimistic. Those who have reached their goals in life overwhelmingly tend to be those who have a positive outlook. Those who approach life with a positive attitude are more fun to be with, tend to have more friends, enjoy happier relationships, and, here’s the biggie, they live longer. Modern studies have confirmed these benefits, but these principles have been known for centuries and indeed, known intuitively throughout the ages.

Pessimists may make the best comedians, but historically the people who have made a difference in the world are overwhelmingly optimists. In addition to those readings we heard earlier, here are a few more:

From Abraham Lincoln: “Most people are about as happy as they make up their minds to be.”

From Frank Lloyd Wright: “The thing always happens that you really believe in,
and the belief in a thing makes it happen.

So on a very practical level, at least, the argument for optimism is simple: it works. But there’s another reason for looking at life positively. There is a religious aspect to all this. Being optimistic enhances your own unique spiritual journey. Here at UUSP we have a vision of liberal religion that views every person as unique, with unique gifts that define their ministry to the world. Our religious community exists not to defend doctrine or save souls, but to proclaim this vision to the wider world and help those who join to discover, nourish, and share those gifts, optimistically looking forward to a more just and loving world.

* In his classic 1902 book, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, philosopher and psychologist William James writes that we can experience those moments of being at one with the universe when looking at a fire, or the waves, or listening to music, or simply being quiet. “Believe that life is worth living”, he writes, “and your belief will help create that fact.” In more pragmatic terms, believing in something will inspire you to put forth more effort to accomplish that thing in which you believe.

Henry David Thoreau agreed that a positive orientation toward the world around us can help us get through life. Thoreau wrote this about it: “I believe there is a subtle magnetism in Nature which, if we consistently yield to it, will direct us aright.” Buddhists would term this acceptance. So, in 1902, a century before the “New Age” publication of “The Secret,” William James wrote “There are cases where a fact cannot come at all unless a preliminary faith exists in its coming. Although some scientific absolutists insist that faith running ahead of scientific evidence is the ‘lowest kind of immorality,’ it seems clear that more often than not, faith in a fact can help create that fact.”
“Faith in a fact can help create that fact.” That’s the deeper understanding of our earlier readings by people who have had faith in themselves and faith in their passions.

So, who is being realistic, an optimist or a pessimist? The answer is both are realistic and correct, because both optimistic and pessimistic attitudes become at the end self-fulfilling prophecies. For example, Cynthia Sinclair from Resurrection House spoke from this pulpit 2 weeks ago about a young homeless woman who wanted to become a pharmacist. You can just imagine what her friends thought about her goal, but she is an optimist. Because she thought she had a chance, she kept trying. And because she kept trying, her chances kept increasing. True, she ran into obstacles, but she's an optimist, so hurdles are seen not as objects of fear or frustration, but as puzzles in need of a solution. Because of her positive attitude, she doesn't give up. And do you know what happens to people who don't give up? They reach their goal!

Faith in a fact can help create that fact. That is how an optimistic outlook can help shape a positive and meaningful life. But there is still another religious factor in looking at life through a positive lens like optimism.

One of the central themes of Unitarian Universalism was and still is the dignity of human nature. As we talked about on Thanksgiving Sunday, the doctrine of original sin has been accepted in the fundamentalist Puritan culture since the 1620 landing of the Mayflower. That doctrine proposes that each of us is born a sinner, with even newborn babies being servants of the devil. Hundreds of years ago, those who would come to be called Unitarian or Universalist objected strongly to this doctrine. People are not born evil, they argued, but with the natural capacity for both good and evil. While the Puritan culture believed the human soul to be naturally oriented toward evil, the Unitarians found the strong capacity for good to be an innate part of each person. And while the doctrine
of original sin allowed that a person’s soul could be saved only through the intervention of a theistic, supernatural father figure holding a naughty and nice list, by the late 1800s, Unitarians were speaking of a doctrine they called “salvation by character.” It suggests that the end of the religious quest is not correct belief. The true test of religion is not to be found in creeds. Rather, the religious task is the nurture of that natural capacity in all of us for good. Not everyone has a well-cultivated character, but everyone, by virtue of their humanity, has inherent worth and dignity.

So, in addition to the idea that looking at the world through optimistic eyes actually works, it also affirms the religious task of making life a meaningful quest, directing us towards embracing a positive view of humanity that recognizes each persons inherent worth and dignity as well as the innate capacity for choosing good.

So, what if you’re a pessimist, or not as optimistic as you would like to be? What could you choose to do? First, I suggest that optimism is indeed a choice, and one of the greatest powers in the universe is our individual power of choice. Secondly, I invite you to become aware of negative self-talk, those negative scripts that are programmed in our minds, constantly playing. Scripted self-talk such as, "I’m too old, I’m too young; I’m too fat, I’m too skinny; I wasn’t born with that ability.” Whenever you catch yourself with a negative thought, step back and merely observe that you had that thought. That thought is only your programming, only your ego. Just observe it and acknowledge it for what it is; a preprogrammed response that you can choose to change just as you change the programmed response on your voicemail. Thirdly, remember that to be pessimistic, you have to ignore all the good things in life. Just as our kids experienced during Time For All Ages, we humans often focus so intently on the challenging aspects of
existence that we ignore all of the joy and beauty and good around us. We drill down too far and lose the big picture. One of my favorite stories to help remind me to keep in focus the bigger picture is the tale of the two ditch diggers in front of a new cathedral. The construction foreman for a new cathedral walked around the site one day and noticed two workers standing in a hole. To the first, he shouted “hey, what are you doing down there?” To which the first ditch digger replied with a sneer while throwing down his shovel, “what does it look like? I’m digging a ditch.” The foreman walked over to the second ditch digger and shouted down “hey, what are you doing down there?” To which the second ditch digger replied with a huge, proud smile while continuing to shovel, “I’m helping to build a cathedral!”

Let me share one other favorite story, one I often use when counseling people especially people escaping depression brought on by that mind numbing programming written into the mind by parents in early childhood. This story is about a man who lived most of his early life hearing “You can’t do that, because of how you were born.” This person was born premature, and spent his first 4 weeks of life in an incubator at the hospital. The doctors counseled his parents that the child would be both physically and mentally handicapped. During his early childhood, his Father emotionally and physically abused him, while his Mother was not especially affectionate. There was no joy or humor in the home. At school the boy never played at recess with his classmates. Spending his time instead with a speech therapist until the 6th grade. He never ate lunch with his friends during elementary school either as he worked with a behavioral therapist everyday. His father died when he was 11, and the boy went to work after school starting in the 6th grade assist his poor family. Yet the boy was an optimist with beautiful goals.
And today he is now blessed with a wonderful wife, 3 great kids, 3 great step kids, and an amazing job where the people he works with encourage him to tell jokes every Sunday morning. Optimism works.

Let’s use as an ice breaker during coffee in Gilmour Hall to your right a question or two that both long time members and first time guests can equally dialogue on. What pessimistic sayings did your parents and family program into you throughout your life? Which of those sayings are still programmed into you? Which ones would you like to reprogram in an effort to become more optimistic?

* So, is our glass half full…or what? It’s a choice. For me, my glass is half full…half full of coffee in the morning and half full of a good red wine in the evening. I drink from those half full glasses in the same spirit and for the same reasons we do all that we do in life…to bring Dignity, Meaning, Worth and Joy to all our days. Waves of love.