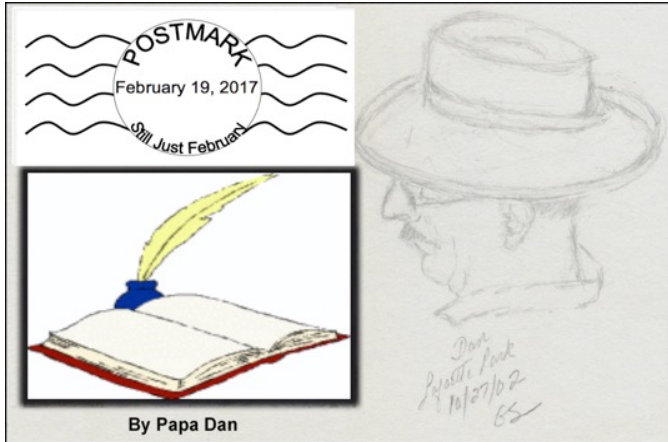


And Yet, Optimists Speak

By Dan Sapone



In case you thought optimism was dead, the average pencil is seven inches long with just a half-inch eraser."

— Robert Brault

Spoiler alert --> Yes, it turns out that I am an optimist. Honest. Really. Maybe you are, too?

These days, such a label often elicits an insulting response, such as "How can you be an optimist? Aren't you paying attention? Everything is going to hell in a handbasket. Just open the newspaper any day of the week." Or "Anyone with experience knows better than to expect the future to be better than today." Or "Right, an optimist, but I bet you look both ways before you cross the street, don't you?"

My father was an optimist and I acquired that attribute from him. In fact, believe it or not, when he was an insurance agent back in the 1950s, he was actually the president of a club of other businessmen in town, called "The Optimists Club." They had an "[Optimist's Creed](#)," which they recited at meetings. (Yes, they actually had meetings.) He was an optimist in earnest. As a successful businessman who had not completed the eighth grade and was the son of an illiterate immigrant, it was actually part of his experience to expect positive surprises.

The Optimist Creed was in a frame on the wall in my Dad's office — it looked like this → → Why do I remember this? Back in the late 1950s, my Dad kept his office open until noon on Saturdays; and sometimes he took me to the office with him. I'd sit in the back of the office and jam up the adding machine. (I think I was supposed to be watching him in action and developing an appreciation for the insurance business. His plan was to hang a sign outside that would say "And Son" and I would one day take over the business.) But, my actual accomplishment was to jam up the adding machine. But I digress ... why did I bring this up? Oh yes ...



A friend of his, Jerry Bassett, also a member of the Optimist Club, had a call-in talk show on the local radio station ([KKIS in Pittsburg, CA](#)). On those Saturday mornings, the show was playing on the radio in the office. One day, Jerry wasn't getting enough callers; so, he called my Dad during a commercial and told him "I'm dying here, Al. Can you call me up with something interesting to talk about? Whuhduhyuhsay?" So, my Dad took the framed "Optimist Creed" off the wall and called him back.

I was stunned. There was my Dad, sitting at his desk, telling Jerry Bassett about the Optimist Club and why it meant so much to him. He actually read the Optimist Creed over the phone and I sat there and listened to my Dad on the radio — with the confusing five-second delay — talking about what it meant to him to be an optimist. Apparently, others called in and wanted to talk about it; so, I guess it sorta saved the show for Mr. Bassett.

For me, a ten-year-old sitting in my Dad's office on a few Saturday mornings, while I didn't acquire an interest in the insurance business, I did develop an appreciation for the idea of being an optimist — just by watching, listening, and observing how people responded to him.

I learned over time from my Dad and from my own observation, that being an optimist meant a number of different things to him and to others. As I read the news and listen to what people say about it all, I grant you that it requires some effort to be optimistic these days (I'm sure I don't have to tell you that); but it seems that many of us have different views of what that might mean. So, let's explore some of the different meanings people attribute to optimism — borrowing some words from a few others — and then, let's try to figure out what it might mean to us to be an optimist today.

Let's ask around. It seems there are different kinds of optimists.

The Delusional Optimist

This is a guy who falls out of the top floor of a ten-story building. As he passes the floors on his way down (the ninth, then the eighth, the seventh, etc), he says to people on those floors as he flies by on his way down: *"I'm doin' OK so far."*

This is the optimism that gets the most disdain from "realists" who are paying attention to the news (maybe you and me). This delusional optimist doesn't get a lot of respect. He's just wrong. In reaction to this rosy view of a harsh world, some pessimists call themselves realists and seek comfort by lowering their expectations:

The 'Optimism' of Lowered Expectations

"A pessimist? That's a person who has been intimately acquainted with an optimist."
— Elbert Hubbard

Some of us go to great lengths to avoid being called a fool. A pessimist makes clear that the world can be a bad place for real people; and asserts that a fool is someone who thinks it can be otherwise. Others, like Winnie-the-Pooh's friend Eeyore, try to solve the problem by keeping their expectations low:

"It's snowing still," said Eeyore gloomily. "So it is." "And freezing." "Is it?" "Yes," said Eeyore. "However," he said, brightening up a little, "we haven't had an earthquake lately."
— A.A. Milne



The Patient Optimist: Two versions

“Everything will be okay in the end. If it is not okay; it is not the end.”

— John Lennon (I bet you thought somebody else said that first, didn't you?)

This is the classic belief that, at some time in the future, something better will happen if you just wait for it.

Lin-Manuel Miranda portrays Aaron Burr as a different kind of patient optimist in *“Hamilton, the Musical.”* Burr and Alexander Hamilton are both orphans who have an opportunity to impact history. Burr waits cautiously for the chance to fulfill his destiny in a very tough world and resents Hamilton's more confident approach. He sings to the audience, *“Wait For It”* ([click to hear the entire song](#)):

***Life doesn't discriminate between the sinners and the saints,
it takes and it takes and it takes
We rise and we keep living anyway, we rise and we fall and we break
We fall and we make our mistakes.
and if there's a reason I'm still alive when so many have died,
then I'm willin' to -
Wait for it ...
Wait for it ...***

In the same show, Hamilton — expecting much more than waiting, says to Burr ...

“If you don't stand for something, Burr, what will you fall for?”

— Lin-Manuel Miranda

Hamilton doesn't respect those who are reluctant to risk making a commitment to something greater than themselves — a criticism he leveled at Aaron Burr, early in their fatal “rivalry.” Burr, wary of commitment, was held back by a feeling that ‘making a difference’ might be futile — or dangerous. In our own time, this very year, some of us fear that the prospects for a positive future are so bleak that there is no point in trying and the challenges we face are too big for us to make a difference. But there are optimists among us who remind us that it is too early to give up and we are pretty useless if we do:

The Resigned Optimist (aka the “No Other Choice” optimist)

“For myself I am an optimist. It does not seem to be much use to be anything else.” — Winston S. Churchill

And then, some among us feel that we all have some responsibilities to those who will come after us:

The Burdened Optimist (aka “The Future has its eyes on you”)

“There is some good in this world, and it's worth fighting for.”

— J.R.R. Tolkien

“The future belongs to those who give the next generation reason for hope.”

— Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

And then, some take that responsibility deeper, especially during difficult times (like war):

“Lest I keep my complacent ways, I must remember somewhere out there a person died for me today. As long as there must be war, I ask and I must answer ‘was I worth dying for?’ ” — Eleanor Roosevelt

Ouch. Eleanor insists that we need to be worthy of the sacrifices others made for us. That brings us back to the need for a plan to make something better and the need to follow through with that plan. Optimism, of this variety, requires action since positive change doesn’t happen by itself. So, in order to avoid being called a fool, a person would have to make something better. You can’t just wait for it. So, this optimist must be bold and forceful, like this guy:

The Determined Optimist (aka “Just try and stop me”)

“My optimism wears heavy boots and is loud.” — Henry Rollins

The determined optimist has to make a show of it and get some attention. But then, that begs the question: ‘What are you actually going to DO to justify all of that stomping around? What are you going to accomplish?’ What is worth the risk of being disappointed or being called a fool? From time to time, this brand of optimism can be sufficient, but not always. Some simply take a practical approach and compare optimism to a fruitless alternative:

The Confident Optimist (aka “Look, we know how to do this”)

“Pessimists are usually right and optimists are usually wrong but all the great changes have been accomplished by optimists.” — Thomas L. Friedman

So, the need to accomplish something rears its (ugly / beautiful) head:

“One thing we know beyond all doubt: Nothing has ever been achieved by the person who says, “It can’t be done.” — Eleanor Roosevelt, You Learn by Living

“BE the change you wish to see in the world.” — Mahatma Ghandi

Like Eleanor and Mahatma, some notable optimists in our own time insist that despair is not helpful and we need to take responsibility to encourage others. You know this guy:

“The only thing that’s the end of the world is the end of the world.”

“Yes, we can.” — Barack Obama

Not all of us are going to run for office, speak to an audience of millions, and change the world. For many of us it may have to be enough to serve as a good example to encourage others — our children, their children, people we meet — to BE the change that is required. Maybe all it takes is a few words of encouragement to younger minds — maybe words like “Yes, we can.” It turns out that some outcomes are possible even if we haven’t seen them before.

The “Who’s Going To Stop Me” Optimist (aka “What do you mean it can’t be done?”)

“Sometimes you have to pass through the fire swamp to get where you need to go.”

“But, we’ll never survive.”

“Nonsense. You’re just saying that because no one ever has.”

— William Goldman, The Princess Bride

Is it often difficult to distinguish the “Delusional Optimist” (you remember, the guy falling out of the building) from the “Who’s Going to Stop Me” optimist, but the difference matters. Many optimists are occasionally intimidated by the enormity of great challenges — finding that important things seem to require great effort, by a great many people. But some wise people suggest the opposite approach: taking small steps in the company of just a few people:



The “Incremental” Optimist

“The secret of getting ahead is getting started. The secret of getting started is breaking your complex overwhelming tasks into small manageable tasks, and starting on the first one.” — Mark Twain

“A year from now you will wish you had started today.” -Karen Lamb

“A small group of thoughtful people could change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” – Margaret Mead

“Thou hast seen nothing yet.” — Don Quixote de la Mancha (Cervantes)

The “Maybe this time” Optimist

One thing seems essential — that we do not settle into the extremes of “always” and “never” — that we find an optimism based on the idea that, sometimes, good outcomes are possible. Sometimes. This poem by Sheenagh Pugh reminds me that, whichever variety of optimist I decide to be, on a particular day, there is reason to believe in positive outcomes. They don’t happen by themselves, they do require our efforts, but they happen ... sometimes.

And that may be enough. I may be this kind of optimist ...

Sometimes

By Sheenagh Pugh

Sometimes things don’t go, after all,
from bad to worse. Some years, muscadell
faces down frost; green thrives; the crops don’t fail;
sometimes a man aims high, and all goes well.

A people sometimes will step back from war;
elect an honest man; decide they care
enough that they can’t leave some stranger poor.
Some men become what they were born for.

Sometimes our best efforts do not go
amiss; sometimes we do as we meant to.
The sun will sometimes melt a field of sorrow
that seemed hard frozen: may it happen for you.

Sorting Out the Voices

So, what have I learned from all of these voices? My Dad taught me about “sometimes” as his Dad taught him. The other side of “sometimes” is that sometimes we need to stomp around and be “The Determined Optimist,” and march in the street with other determined optimists. Sometimes the best we can be is “The Resigned Optimist” and simply try not to give up. Sometimes we are forced to be “The Patient Optimist and “Wait for It.” Sometimes we can see a middle path and serve as a “Confident Optimist” and contribute to incremental change by contributing to organizations that can accomplish important changes with lots of small donations (examples: organizations like the ACLU, Planned Parenthood, PBS, The Yosemite Conservancy, Meals On Wheels, your local library ... you probably have your own list.) Those among us with more imagination and determination may find ways to “Be the change we seek.” Perhaps our task, if we can’t BE one of them, is to support those who do.

