

“Look on the Bright Side”

a sermon by Dan Lillie
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Back in January, Bill Gates, creator of Microsoft, and now a major philanthropist and humanitarian, got to serve as the first guest editor on an issue of TIME Magazine. The theme of Gates’ issue was “reasons to be optimistic about the future.” In the issue, he wrote an opening essay, which I think articulates two important points:

First, that we have a bias towards negativity.

And second, that because of this “negativity bias”, we often have more reason to be optimistic than we might at first realize.

Listen to this excerpt:

“Reading the news today does not exactly leave you feeling optimistic... Even for those of us lucky enough not to be directly affected, it may feel like the world is falling apart...

But... On the whole, the world is getting better...

I’m not trying to downplay the work that remains. Being an optimist doesn’t mean you ignore tragedy and injustice. It means you’re inspired to look for people making progress on those fronts, and to help spread that progress.

So why does it feel like the world is in decline? I think it is partly the nature of news coverage. Bad news arrives as drama, while good news is incremental—and not usually deemed newsworthy. A video of a building on fire generates lots of views, but not many people would click on the headline ‘Fewer buildings burned down this year.’

There’s also a growing gap between the bad things that still happen and our tolerance of those things. Over the centuries, violence has declined dramatically, as has our willingness to accept it. But because the improvements don’t keep pace with our expectations, it can seem like things are getting worse.

To some extent, it is good that bad news gets attention. If you want to improve the world, you need something to be mad about. But it has to be

balanced by upsides. When you see good things happening, you can channel your energy into driving even more progress.

... the world is improving. I hope you'll be inspired to make it even better."¹

So, as Gates points out, we have a bias towards negativity, and plenty to be worried about around us. But we also have reasons to be optimistic. And Gates points this out through a secular lens, but as religious people, as spiritual people, as Unitarian Universalists, we also have plenty of reasons to be optimistic.

Don't get me wrong, I'm following what's happening in our country. I'm bothered by the daily news. I see the atrocities.

I recently visited the Arizona desert, near our border with Mexico, and experienced first-hand the conditions that our broken immigration system forces thousands of migrants to endure. I plan to share more about this experience in the near future. But for now:

I understand the bias towards negativity, and I know how easy it is to get caught up in one injustice after the next. I also know, that our faith tradition gives me reasons to be hopeful. In fact, this isn't unique to Unitarian Universalism. Many people find support, grounding, and a sense of comfort and belonging in their faith tradition.

But for me, there is something special about Unitarian Universalism, because the reason we have for our hope and our optimism is inherent to our faith tradition.

Both our Unitarianism and our Universalism are heretical traditions. We come from a line of thinkers who like to challenge conventional wisdom, and accepted ways of thinking. And I wonder if we cannot be heretics when it comes to our optimism? If we as humans have a bias towards the negative, can we UUs be heretically optimistic?

I believe we can; and not just because it is heretical, but because optimism is inherent in our faith tradition. In fact, I would say Unitarianism and Universalism are built on optimism.

Ours is not the first generation to face hardships, challenges and atrocities. And through the years, both Unitarians and Universalists have been religious people that have recognized the goodness in humanity.

¹ Gates, Bill. "Some Good News, for Once." <https://www.gatesnotes.com/About-Bill-Gates/Some-Good-News-For-Once>

Going all the way back to John Murray, the founder of Universalism in America, we have this quote from the 1770's, which he would preach frequently to his congregants, saying:

“You possess only a small light. But uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of [all people]. Give them not hell, but hope and courage.”²

His message of universal salvation, of the saving of all human souls, was one in which he found hope and optimism that carried him through the difficulties of his own life, and which resonated with his many followers.

More than a century later, in 1915, Universalist minister Clarence Russell Skinner wrote *The Social Implications of Universalism*. Like Murray, Skinner's optimism was grounded in his Universalism. He writes, “The most distinctive contribution which Universalism has made to the development of theology and religion is the idea of the universal salvation of all souls and its concomitant of the final triumph of good over evil.”

I'll note that Skinner's is not a naïve optimism that ignores the evils in the world, but rather, is born out of them. He continues:

“This triumphant hope in the ultimate salvation of humanity did not arise out of blindness to the hard facts of reality. It does not find its motive in the ostrich method of hiding the head in the sand. It comes as the result of seeing the sin and misery of life in their proper relationships. It sees through facts to the great beyond-facts. It interprets the present in the light of potentialities.”

Many modern Unitarian Universalists, myself included, claim that ours is a life-saving faith tradition, and we can trace our claim back to this theology, articulated here by Skinner, and by Murray before him.

Our optimism, which today is expressed in our belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, is rooted in this concept of universal salvation; Not that some of us get heaven while others get hell, but that all are worthy of God's love.

Now, Universalism has grown beyond having a firm belief in an afterlife, although we don't deny the possibility. Our Universalism now means that whatever awaits any one of us on the other side of death awaits us all.

I'll note that, in doing away with an affirmative belief in the afterlife, we shifted not just our interpretation of the *Universal* part of *Universal Salvation*, but the

² Smith, Bonnie Hurd. “John Murray Biography.” *Judith Sargent Murray Society*: http://www.jsmsociety.com/John_Murray.html

Salvation part as well. Without an afterlife, any salvation, or saving, has to happen here, in this world. We are called to work towards Salvation in *this life*; and this is the grounding of our justice work. However, I digress.

Getting back to optimism, we see that it is deeply rooted in our Unitarian side as well. In a rebuke of Calvinism and Trinitarian theology, Unitarian James Freeman Clarke articulated his “Five Points of the New Theology” in 1886, which are (and please forgive the male-centric language of his time):

- the fatherhood of God
- the brotherhood of man
- the leadership of Jesus
- salvation by character
- the progress of humankind onward and upward forever.³

Now, these were created in direct opposition to The Five Points of Calvinism, which hold a very opposite belief in the depravity of humanity nature.

Clarke’s points, however, are full of faith in human potential, believing that salvation is achieved through character, and that humankind’s progress has an eternally positive trajectory.

Decades later, another Unitarian minister, James Luther Adams, found himself struggling mightily with optimism. Faced with the horrible realities of World War II, Adams had a very difficult time buying into a theology of optimism concerning the human condition, when he saw all around him the awful things that people were doing to people. He was wrestling with the problem of evil in a very real way: that war and genocide are not just possibilities, but realities of the human condition. We are not just capable: we have actually committed these atrocities.

All of Adams’ wrestling led him to sharpen his theology, and to deepen his understanding of the role of religion in society. He believed that Religious Liberalism had a very distinct role to play, and that religious liberals had some foundational truths that they, *that we*, can build upon: he called these truths the Five Smooth Stones of Religious Liberalism. And while all five are important, I want to focus on the last one. Adams writes:

“[Religious] liberalism holds that the resources (divine and human) that are available for the achievement of meaningful change justify an attitude of ultimate optimism. This view does not necessarily involve immediate

³ Robinson, David. “The Unitarians and the Universalists.” Greenwood Press, 1985, p 76-77.

optimism. In our century we have seen the rebarbarization of [humanity], we have witnessed a widespread dissolution of values, and we have viewed the appearance of great collective demonries. Progress is now seen not to take place through inheritance; each generation must anew win insight into relevance to moral and spiritual values. A realistic appraisal of our behavior, personal and institutional, and a life of continuing humility, and renewal are demanded, for there are ever-present forces in us working for perversion and destruction.”⁴

As Unitarian Universalists, how do we reconcile this with our belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person? How do we reconcile this with a theology of original blessing, rather than original sin? If we believe people to be inherently good, then how are we capable of doing such evil?

Our goodness is certainly not a given. The agency we possess as humans, our free will, means that we have the ability to choose evil. To choose hate. And sometimes, we do.

But once again, I’m letting my bias towards negativity take over.

As it turns out, that very same human agency and human free will that allows us to sometimes choose evil and hate, also allows us to choose better: to choose love and hope.

Here is the good news that I take from Adams: that we have the resources, human and divine, to justify an attitude of ultimate optimism. Not immediate optimism, necessarily, but ultimate optimism. That, like Bill Gates said, the negative comes as drama, but the positive comes as steady, incremental change.

But I wonder, which comes first, the positive change or the optimism?

Do we have to have optimism before we start making our world better, or do we have to improve the world before we can feel optimistic?

The short answer is: we should feel optimistic before the world improves, because we know it’s possible. Before we take the first step, before we lay the first brick, we know we can- because we have the resources, and the determination.

⁴ Adams, James Luther. *On Being Human Religiously*. Ed M. Stackhouse, Beacon Press, 1976, p 19.

And here's one more reason to be optimistic: we have *already taken* the first step; and we have already laid the first brick. The work has already begun, and it is up to us to continue doing it.

We have reason to be optimistic. We have reason to be hopeful. But our hope is not that someone or something will swoop in and save us. Our hope is not that we will be saved by some divine intervention.

Our hope lies in ourselves- in our own agency, sovereignty, and power.

Our hope comes from knowing that we can save ourselves- and that we must. We have the resources, human and divine, to work for a better world, but it will not happen on its own- we still have to make it happen through the work of our hands and our hearts. And we have reason to be optimistic, because we have what we need to do the work.

The garden will not plant itself, but we have the plot of land, the soil, the seeds, and the tools. We must choose to be gardeners.

The stew will not cook itself, but we have the vegetables, the spices, the cauldron and the ladle. We must choose to be cooks.

The house will not construct itself, but we have the lumber, the nails, the saw and the hammer. We must choose to be builders.

Olam chesed yibaneh: we will build this world from love. We have what we need; we have the tools, the resources, divine and human:

we have covenant, a way of being with one another that prioritizes relationships over creeds and contracts.

We have inherent worth and dignity, and a recognition of it in others- in *all others*.

We have an understanding that, beneath all that divides us, there is a unity that makes us one. That to be human is to be anointed as a sacred manifestation of the divine.

We have curiosity, and the ability to be awestruck by the enormity and mystery of the universe.

And we know that the moral arc of the universe bends toward justice.

We have what we need to build this world from love. But it will not build itself. We must *decide* to build it. And then we *must* build it. Olam chesed yibaneh: We will build this world from love.

May we make it so.