

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Why I Choose Optimism

by Dr. Mike Armour

Leadership is as much about attitudes as it is actions. People who are fundamentally optimistic about life differ markedly in their leadership style from those who are pessimists.

Optimists are more likely to expect the best of people, pessimists to expect something less. As a result, optimism and pessimism yield differing approaches to problem solving, policy-making, managing conflict, and evaluating performance.

Long time readers of this newsletter know that my feet are firmly planted in the optimists' camp. I don't fret a lot. I don't waste time with worry. I have a bedrock conviction that things will turn out well in the long run.

But this is more than blind belief. It's based on what I observe in the world around me. Especially if I step back and take longer-range views.

Admittedly, much of my optimism stems from a spiritual faith, which I treasure. But even if I remove faith from the picture, I would still find compelling reasons to be optimistic.

A Bias Toward Life

To begin with, I see a cosmic bias toward life. That may sound a bit strange, given the heartless universe in which we live. Space is vast, ferocious, and altogether inhospitable. It's a place where galaxies are born violently, only to be ripped apart by forces too powerful to fathom. So far as we know, life exists only on this tiny speck of turf called Earth. Thus, one could argue that the universe is prejudiced *against* life, not for it.

But I disagree. For life to exist at all in such an alien place, a powerful bias toward life must somehow be at work. How powerful? Powerful enough to shrug off the determined hostility of an infinite universe. To me that is a staggering reality!! Against all odds, surrounded by the stellar violence of exploding galaxies, life nonetheless exists.

So I begin with the assumption that a bias toward life is woven through the universe. That makes for optimism. And since we are products of that bias, I'm not surprised to discover that man's inner world – our psyche, if you would – is equally biased toward life.

This bias shows its face in our universal sense of right and wrong. Not that we all agree on the specifics of right and wrong. We clearly do not. Hence our passionate debates in law, politics, ethics, and theology.

But the very passion of our debate is itself compelling evidence that we are all united around a deeper truth, namely that right and wrong do in fact exist. Indeed, when people have no sense of right or wrong, we hang a most unflattering label on them. We call them sociopaths.

Once we affirm the reality of right and wrong, we then need a mechanism for separating the two, one from the other. However we tackle that task, whatever our approach, our method eventually reduces to a single principle. For something to be "right" in our judgment, we must see it as conducive to quality of life, either directly or indirectly, either near-term or long-term, either personally, socially, or culturally.

Conversely, what we lump together as "wrong" are things deemed detrimental to life. If we view something as violating the well-being of life, we never consider it the right thing to do. So we are back to the bias toward life again.

Anticipating the Future

Because this bias is so inexorable within us – as inexorable as our sense of right and wrong – I'm optimistic about the ultimate course of human events. I believe, for instance, that the march toward political and personal freedom cannot be undone. It may suffer momentary setbacks, but never final defeat. Which adds to my optimism. Totalitarianism is not the wave of the future. Freedom is. Why? Because freedom works hand in glove with the bias toward quality of life, while totalitarianism and absolutism strive to thwart it.

In effect, that's the lesson we learn from the century just concluded. Near its mid-point, as America entered the Second World War, democracy seemed in wholesale retreat. Fewer than ten national democracies remained anywhere on the planet. Most of them, interestingly enough, were elements of the former British Empire. Totalitarianism in the form of Stalinism, fascism, and nazism seemed destined to prevail.

In less than a single lifetime, however, the world did an about-face. By 1991 Stalinism, fascism, and nazism were all relics of the past. Democracy was sweeping the globe. Totalitarianism simply could not suppress the human longing for freedom.

Which is why I'm optimistic that democracy will ultimately triumph across the Middle East, despite fanatic efforts of would-be absolutists. And freedom will likewise raise a victory flag ultimately in China and even in North Korea. I may not see it in my lifetime. But I'm fully persuaded it will occur. And it's this greater trend in history – not the month to month or year to year reversals, when evil may seem in ascendancy – that buoys my confidence.

Relentless Resilience

In addition, this deep-seated bias toward life has endowed both nature and humanity with what I call "indomitable resilience." When we lived in Oregon, our living room window framed a panoramic view of Mount St. Helens. In the months after its eruption, no one could believe the horrific and massive destruction stretching for miles along its blast zone. Life seemed obliterated. Only a wasteland remained.

Yet, in short order the wasteland began to recede. Life quickly reappeared and soon was thriving. Nature absorbed the violence it had unleashed upon itself, tapped into its "indomitable resilience," and bounced back.

The same thing happens in human history. In 1349, over no more than a few months, the infamous Black Plague killed one-third of Europe. Entire villages disappeared, never to rise again. Standing in the devastation of that event, the future looked dire and bleak.

Within 50 years, however, the Renaissance was sweeping Europe, the greatest flowering of culture and advancement we've ever known. Cities sprouted up everywhere, teeming with people, their numbers growing rapidly, as the industrial age prepared to take stage.

No Hand-Wringing For Me

The human spirit is truly resilient, almost beyond belief. For that reason, I don't join the hand-wringing when pundits map out doomsday scenarios. Not that I want to ignore or dismiss impending danger. I'm fully in favor of averting disaster. But even if we fail, even if the unthinkable occurs, I'm optimistic that the human spirit has the resilience to regather, carry on, and even flourish. History, indeed, bears me out.

Sadly, we pay too little attention to history these days. Schools no longer teach it in depth. Instead our educational system grounds its curriculum in the present moment, in what is contemporary and current. The contemporary and current are supposedly relevant in a way that history is not.

Marginalizing history, however, costs us a sense of the long term. A sense of historical perspective. And absent that perspective, it's easy to focus on the short-run, where there is always enough bad news to seemingly justify pessimism.

But pessimism is short-sighted. A longer-range perspectives argues for optimism. It is there, in the long-term view, that the bias toward life, freedom and resilience is most evident. And there, too, optimism finds fertile soil in which to grow.

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