

THE PRESUMPTION OF OPTIMISM

"Hell's bells and all is well." Tom Stoppard

A couple of years ago, I was glossing Philip Larkin's "The Wedding Wind," a poem about a country bride trying to understand her buoyant emotions the morning after she'd married. I explained to my class of Clemson juniors that a storm had dropped several inches of rain on the couple's farm during the "honeymoon" forcing the husband to go and shut the barn doors pried open by the wind. Early the following morning, he leaves again to survey the storm damage while she undertakes a problem over her breakfast coffee in what Jeremy Bentham might call "felicific calculus." Imagining the looming duties of a farmer's wife like beads on the frayed strings of an abacus, she wonders how long the euphoria that runs through her every capillary will continue to pulse?

After an awkward silence, I volunteered to answer that question for the class, "Not forever, of course, but judging from the few details provided, the prognosis for a successful marriage is good. The couple apparently enjoys 'the basic six': good health, a common religion, freedom, a measure of financial security, congenial work, and reciprocated love. Surely at some point he's going to suffer some prostate trouble; one year at least a drought will wipe out the corn crop, and the seven-year itch may strain their trust, but the odds are strong that this couple will succeed," I predicted. Paraphrasing Wayne Booth, I said, "Rather than doubt what you cannot prove, assent to what is probable." That's been my thinking if not my syntax for as long as I can remember. If jurors are told to presume the defendant is innocent, I think the rest of us have a similar obligation to assume the best until we know otherwise. I call this duty the presumption of optimism.

A student, however, troubled by the storm thought that Larkin was implying an unstable start for the newly weds. I said the law of science is that whatever rises must fall, but the law of faith holds that whatever falls must rise. "Something is usually lost in the transition," I added, "but something is usually gained as well. Ask any divorcee five years after the papers are signed if things haven't worked out for the best, and most will tell you they have. The great majority of us, I suspect, deserve a trophy inscribed, 'Better than anyone expected.'" "Whatever made you so optimistic, Dr E?" said the student as the bell rang. There was a paper due the next class and an examination after that, so I never got back to the question. I figure it's about time to answer even at the risk of getting my spiritual boxers in a metaphysical knot.

First, I'd say that I have been lucky. I have a plastic diptych on my desk at home showing my father in full combat uniform and me on the left standing by his duffel bag in August of 1944, the day he left home for the war in Europe. I wasn't quite three, but I knew something significant was up, and my shy smile partly obscured by one hand reveals that. On the right is a photograph of my father heaving me skyward the day he returned from combat in September of 1945. I'm just a blur rising toward heaven, but surely my face wears a smile as broad as my father's. Little did I know that there were boys and girls in Europe and Asia, including my future wife, wearing a very different expression that day, but I was smiling as if Zeus was tossing me into the arms of Aeolus. History has been kind to me, for I surely would have had a very different life if Andreas Eisenmenger had not moved his family to America in 1751 or if Gen. Eisenhower had not been successful on D-Day.

But my optimism was not entirely handed to me on a platinum platter. Early on

my parents insisted that I “make the desert bloom.” Consequently whether I was earning a merit badge in Boy Scouts, diagramming homework sentences, raking leaves, delivering newspapers, painting the family home, or moving fourteen times before finishing high school, I learned Candide’s famous lesson for myself. After searching the world over for happiness and finding a bog of misery, Candide finally decides to stop his wandering, gather his loved ones around him, and cultivate his garden. Voltaire stops there, but extrapolating from my own wanderings and sweaty cultivations, I’d say that one day he awoke and quietly realized the gnawing in his stomach was gone. Contentment, good health, and a full larder make up much of the sweat equity Candide’s labors earned for him, and the interest such productive work yields is compounded daily. A few of my students have argued that Candide tumbled into a rut at the novel’s end; I’d say he made a congenial structure. At least he had some vine-ripened tomatoes to show for his efforts, and gardening was his choice, not Pangloss’s.

Freedom and physical activity, then, are vital to happiness; no one has ever found it for long in a beer can, a pill, or lying on the couch watching television. One does something, and if the activity is such that it fully engages the mind, happiness is a secondary result the way that flat-panel TV screens and automatic insulin pumps were byproducts of man’s going to the moon. Space travel involves considerable risks, yet astronauts seem very willing to assume them. I suspect they know something most earth-bound folk will never know, namely that risk is one ingredient that can make an ordinary meal into a *cordon bleu* masterwork. I’ll never forget hiking north of Tucson one spring morning with my wife and my eighty-year-old father. We were returning from Finger Peak, and I was leading the descent when I rounded a bend and saw a rattlesnake coiled in my path. It clearly had felt or heard me coming, but I was deaf to his rattle. Had I taken the step my momentum was urging me toward, I would have come down squarely on its spine. For once, my ego, id, and superego agreed: taking the next step as planned was ill advised. So I raised my leading leg, pushed off with my trailing leg, and with a surge of adrenaline worthy of the Roadrunner, leapt over this creature whose tail was all aquiver. Dad seeing my leap and hearing my yelp cleverly deduced what was around the bend. Coming to a quick stop, he picked up a large stone and threw it between the snake and me. Realizing that this was a shot fired across its bow, the serpent slithered off the trail into a grove of yuccas. Though the threat was gone, I found myself leaping in place as if the earth had become a trampoline and my knees belonged to my chest. Like a man possessed, I leapt skyward repeatedly laughing as I rose and fell. When I finally settled down, my wife threw a pebble at the back of my legs and yelled, “Snake!” Once more, I launched myself toward some invisible sky haven while she and Dad shared a laugh. I can’t remember a happier time in my life in which sex played no role. Our children’s weddings, the births of our three grandchildren, graduating from college—not one of these milestones holds a candle to hurdling that snake and laughing our way down the hill.

Risk or no risk, I learned as a child that happiness is subject to term limits. December 26 was always that dark day when Christmas lost its luster and the realization sank in that I had a year to wait for the next potlatch. But even if the bluebird of happiness is a lame duck, as a comedian once claimed, there are always the cardinals, juncos, and meadowlarks to watch for. “Black as it darkles, a star will sparkle,” Mother used to tell me, and I’d go to work on the balsa model I’d found under the tree making “the desert” bloom.

It wasn't the new pogo stick I'd wished for, but it was enough to take my mind off my "poverty" and lift me from the quicksand of self-pity.

Indeed self-pity is an emotion I avoid in others as well, for it dampens my spirit wherever I find it. One reason I have volunteered to teach at-risk students each summer for the last twenty years is the virtual absence of bathos and entitlement among them. With Clemson honors students, I often want to say, "Excuse me, but I can't hear you for the whining." The students in Clemson's "catch-up-in-a-hurry program," however, have been selected because, while their SATs are marginal, they have shown a willingness to work hard and not make excuses. Furthermore, what I have learned from these students, who have every right to blame an education system that has excused them from ever writing an essay, is that the smaller the achievement, the greater the potential. Of course that's Pollyanna speaking, but that's my philosophical approach to these kids, and it appears to work, for their graduation rate is higher than the school average.

One of the things I love about teaching is the way that it teaches the teacher to give more and expect less, not of one's students, of course, but of those with the money. I try not to dwell on the inequities of the system for fear that I'll implode in a cynical black hole from which only a few pathetic x-rays escape. With a hundred students to shepherd each semester, there's little time for wallowing. But then "nothing's hard if you love it," as Albert Einstein observed, even sub-atomic physics. My German mother-in-law once was the sort who if you discovered a flat tire in her presence would say, "But it's only flat on one side." Once her two warring sons agreed to come to see her on her birthday, but before long, they were quarreling again right before her eyes. "You son of a lizard," said one. "You son of an insect," replied the other. She turned to me and said, "It's good to see the boys talking again."

My mother-in-law, who is part of perhaps the last European generation to assume that happiness is survival, never had the luxury of what the Hollywood actor James Cagney called his contractual happiness clause: "If Jimmy isn't happy, Jimmy isn't working." Very few of the globe's six billion inhabitants enjoy such privilege including this tenured professor. Indeed, I once was privy to a coffee-lounge meeting in which our chairman threatened, "I can replace each of you tomorrow with a Harvard Ph. D." Because jobs were scarce in the seventies, not one of us ever called his bluff though one quipped, "But how are you going to live with them?" I've always wished that I'd said, "Wouldn't it be a lot easier to replace you, sir, with an Oxford Ph. D.?"

I've never laid off anyone in my life, but if I had to, I hope I'd tackle the worst case first. I'm not always true to this "worst first" principle, but experience has taught me that if I grade my papers by Friday, the weekend will be a lot more pleasant. I try to remind myself that each year has fifty-two of these calendar sanctuaries and that preserving the sanctity of my time off is vital to not only my well being but the family's. Tackling the worst first usually means having the necessary tools in place when it's time to use them. I'm much more likely to change a flat on my bike, for example, if I know where my tire irons and patch kit are. Many do not share my preemptive need for order; indeed, I know people who will fix a lawnmower and drop their wrenches in the grass. Two weeks later, they'll mow around the tools now lying in ankle-high grass, rusting inexorably back to earth. Personally, I can't imagine that they're happy taking their frustrations out on their tools—can a sadist ever find true happiness if his victim feels nothing?

One reason I'm careful with my tools is that our family never had so much that we took the replacement of lost or broken items for granted. Consequently, I have some tools that are close to a century old, including planes, chisels, and punches I inherited from my father-in-law and grandfather. I take great pleasure wiping them with an oily rag occasionally or sharpening their blades. I inherited these tools in superb condition, and I intend to pass them on in the same condition.

At the age of sixty-four, I have just about every tool and gizmo I've ever wanted. I was surprised recently reading a United Nations' report that all a person in the Third World needs of a material nature is an AM radio, a bicycle, and some kitchen utensils. The U.N. assumes, of course, a water-tight house with electricity and enough income to feed, clothe, and afford medical care. So, let me see if I have this right: a radio, a bike, and a stewpot are all that it takes to make people in the Congo or Amazon Basin happy? Just wait until they reach Johannesburg or Rio. It is interesting, though no surprise, that the very poor (those without a roof or a radio, I suppose) report that they are "very unhappy." Yet the very rich are not, they say, "very happy." Indeed, they claim to be about as happy as middle-class folks say they are.

The wisdom of the blues has long been "mo' money, mo' problems." For a long time I believed that because like most blues singers I could not see myself becoming rich, so I joined the chorus critical of prodigal wealth. "If you can't have it, scorn it," was our refrain. Then the Clemson Alumni Association asked me to guide a group of twenty-five Clemson graduates and their spouses to Europe. They gave me a thousand dollars in "pocket money" to spend as I saw fit on these folks in the belief that money fertilizes the money tree. One grand hardly qualifies as obscene, but it was the most money this frugal soul has ever squandered. Whether that tree has borne fruit as a result of my fertilizing, I don't know. What my spending meant in immediate terms to me, however, was unqualified pleasure. After a meal, I'd order another round of wine for everybody, or I'd pick up the tab for lunch, or pay for a trip down the Grand Canal. I felt like Croesus throwing money to his admiring subjects. Giving money away especially someone else's is delightful, and if my mutuals ever make me a Gatesian-size fortune, I'll do like Bill Gates and give most of it away. For despite the blues, "No money, bigger problems." And few things make one feel better than solving someone else's problem with a little seed money. "It's just money after all," says Bill Gates, and, "You can't take it with you," says every pharaoh including Tut we've ever exhumed.

Why archeology hasn't made realists of more people, I don't know. I'm sure it has a lot to do with religion being hammered into our bones from birth or before in the case of fundamentalist mothers who play hymns for their children in the womb. With sedulous scouring, however, about all the religion that's left in me is a belief in the Creator, the divine mathematician and architect of the universe. I find it oddly comforting, for example, that the Fibonacci sequence governs the order of things from pineapples to spiral nebulas. God may play dice with the universe, but He has a fool-proof system for betting.

I also believe that "the Kingdom of heaven lies within," as Jesus stated, so I think of myself as spiritual but without the dogma. Wallace Stevens felt the need for some "imperishable bliss," but for me bliss is suspect. Has anyone ever wanted a roller coaster ride or an orgasm to last forever? Many pagans have it right: they don't fret much about death and wring their hands over sin for fear they'll overlook the joys of life at hand. My

Aunt Clarice, I now realize, was something of a Druid. A lapsed Baptist, she told me once after Billy, her only son, died in a diving accident that “church” for her meant taking a Sunday morning walk along the beautiful stream that carved the granite margins of her farm. When one of her Baptist “friends” implied that Billy might have passport problems at heaven’s gate because he was not “born of the blood,” Clarice stopped attending her friend’s church and began her peripatetic devotionals. She told me, “After every judgment I hear pronounced, I pause and say, ‘and yet....’ This little phrase has saved me an awful lot of rash miscalculations. It’s amazing how little is written in stone including the Ten Commandments—what is it, ‘Thou shalt not kill,’ or ‘Thou shalt not murder?’”

As a celebrator of life, she said, “Everyone brings something to the party—some bring their own bottle, some their own Bible.” Working as an elementary school teacher in rural South Georgia, she volunteered to teach the first black children to attend a white school in Harris County. Many of her Baptist neighbors and colleagues reviled her for that choice, but her faith in herself and her decision never wavered. Like William James, she felt life was worth living, and her belief in that worth made her own life worthwhile.

My beliefs are admittedly unorthodox perhaps because unlike many believers especially fundamentalists, I place considerable faith in science. Scientists tell me that the atoms comprising my body are 13.7 billion years old. They were born in the Big Bang along with everything else and should enjoy millions more years of usefulness. They remind me of the brass bells of Europe. Cast originally as bells, they were melted into cannons. When the war ended, they were recast as bells, and so the cycle has continued for centuries in some cases. The atoms in my body, I’m confident, have many roles to play before the electrons stop orbiting their nuclei, and the quarks are finally understood.

Science, however, is helpless against the cynic. Perhaps it has always been this way, but an alarming number of aging Americans disparage any music that isn’t Benny Goodman’s or writing that isn’t by Hemingway. A curmudgeonly art historian told me a few months ago, “I’ve read a hundred new books since retiring, and every one was cheap and pornographic.” When I suggested some books I thought he might enjoy and that perhaps he needed to stop and smell the roses, he said, “What, and inhale an aphid?” Academics with one foot in the grave like this fellow unhappily assume that the majority of present-day students, administrators, and politicians are stupid, lazy, or crooked. I used to try to disabuse them of their suspicions, but I’ve finally realized the truth of Lincoln’s famous observation, “People are about as happy as they make up their minds to be.” When I spot one of these misanthropes in the grocery or pharmacy, I make a beeline for the checkout because they usually succeed in bringing me down, not vice versa.

The fact of the matter is most cynics are mistaken. The amateur social scientist and professional journalist Steven Brill did us all a valuable service when he pretended to be a well-heeled foreigner lost in New York City. He and his wife hailed twelve cabs in the course of his research for *New York* magazine to see how they would fare in what many take to be the shark’s maw of Western civilization. Plump as Brill’s minnow was, only two sharks took the bait and overcharged the couple. One cabby even walked them to a point where they could see their destination and told them they didn’t need a cab for such a short trip. Had I been presented with a hypothetical scenario based on Brill’s experiment, I would have guessed one in four or five would take advantage of them, so 17% is an excellent report card for the human race since 83% of our fellows can be trusted.

Is America “a vast conspiracy to make us happy,” as John Updike once wrote? Hardly. Nor is socialistic Scandinavia where the “conspiracy” is even wider since their blond bureaucrats try even harder than Uncle Sam’s blue-eyed boys. Our Constitution only guarantees Americans the “pursuit of happiness,” an opportunity, nothing more. Attainment, the Founding Fathers understood, is ultimately the responsibility of the individual. For myself, I hope to die as happy as a clam in the henhouse, but it’s up to me to devise some means of getting in there. I can’t expect the winds and tides to drop me where I want to be.

THE HELPLESSNESS OF FATHERS

As Homer tells it in the *Iliad*,
 Sarpedon was the half-breed son of Zeus
 and Laodamia his human mother.
 His demigod status made him reckless,
 and he challenged Patroclus, Achilles’
 strong friend, to combat on the plains of Troy.

Sarpedon’s spear sailed harmlessly over
 his foe’s shoulder, but the brazen weapon
 of spear-famed Patroclus was well thrown.

Freezing the action for a moment,
 Zeus turned to his wife Hera, and asked
 if he should snatch his son from harm’s way.
 Not sharing the same emotional stake
 in the lad as her faithless husband, she said,
 “The boy is fated; do not help him.”
 Zeus sadly agreed that he was no match
 for destiny and unfroze the action.

Over his son’s dying body, the father
 shed tears of blood as Sarpedon cried,
 “Father, why have you forsaken me?”
 Hearing this, Zeus chose Olympian silence.
 “Take this cup of suffering from me.”
 When there was still no response, the son said,
 “It’s done; in your hands I place my spirit.”

As dark clouds formed, Zeus spoke to Apollo,
 begged him to retrieve the mangled body,
 wash, anoint, and dress the mortal remains,
 and place them in the hands of Sleep and Death.