The Road to the Good Life III: Optimism about the Future

"I am fundamentally an optimist. Whether that comes from nature or nurture, I cannot say. Part of being optimistic is keeping one’s head pointed toward the sun, one’s feet moving forward. There were many dark moments when my faith in humanity was sorely tested, but I would not and could not give myself up to despair. That way lay defeat and death.” Nelson Mandela

In previous issues of Illuminations, we’ve discussed how to feel better about our past and how to improve our experience of the present. For our final installment of this series, we will focus on improving how we think about the future.

Trust, faith, confidence, hope and optimism: these are all positive feelings about the future. Research indicates that optimism and hope cause better resistance to depression when bad events occur, better physical health, and better performance at work (Seligman, 2002). Yet at various times, it can be challenging to remain hopeful and optimistic. Perhaps someone you care for is ill, or you’ve been laid off from your job. Globally, these are difficult times: the recent election has left some individuals feeling as if the country is divided, the ongoing war in Iraq and the specter of terrorism contribute to a sense of fear and uncertainty for many in the United States and elsewhere. It is easier to be an optimist when things are going well. Yet, if we take a snapshot from history, we get a different idea about progress than when we look from a longer time frame. In 1939, the Great Depression had been ongoing for 10 years and Germany was invading Poland to start World War II. By 1949 the Allies had won World War II and the economies of the United States and much of Europe were starting to boom.

Hope is a way of looking at the world. As Paul Loeb points out in, “The Impossible Will Take a Little While,” we can draw strength from those who, like Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela, embody a resilient, persistent hope, acting no matter what the odds, in order to be true to their deepest moral values and to open up new possibilities. A primary way to sustain hope, especially when our actions seem too insignificant to amount to anything, is to recognize that we are links on a chain of influence. Even in a seemingly losing cause, one person may unknowingly inspire another and that person yet a third. As Loeb states, “The unforeseen benefits of our actions mean that any effort may prove more consequential than it seems at first.”

To take this a little closer to home, imagine two graduating seniors.

   Senior 1: “It’s a really hard job market and there is nothing out there,” she says. “It was easier for people in the past. They could get good paying jobs that they could stay at for their lifetime, they could buy a house and even have one parent staying at home with a child – in a time when the world was simpler.”

   Senior 2: “I know that getting a good job in my field is tough,” she states. “Some of my friends think it was so much easier before – but they forget there have been other recessions, other wars, and other problems that our parents have faced. When I think of all the advances that have been made in my field, I’m excited about the future and want to be a part of that world.”
Senior I isn’t motivated to look for a job and doesn’t anticipate finding anything. The other senior is actively job hunting, having hope and concomitant energy to face life’s challenges. Both are entering the same field in the same job market: which senior do you believe is most likely to find a job?

Numerous research studies have been conducted on optimism and pessimism. If you think about bad things in terms of “always” and “never,” you have a pessimistic style. People who give up easily believe the causes of the bad events that happen to them are permanent — the bad events will persist and are always going to be there to affect their lives. People who make universal explanations for their failures often give up on everything, even when failure is striking just one area of their lives. Moreover, pessimists see temporary reasons for good events and may give up even when they succeed, believing their success was a fluke. “If it’s good,” pessimists say, “it’s temporary, specific, and I had nothing to do with it.”

People who resist helplessness believe the causes of bad events are temporary. If you think of bad events in terms of qualifiers such as “sometimes” and “lately,” you have an optimistic style. Furthermore, optimists believe good events have permanent causes, such as traits and abilities, which helps them to work even harder. According to Seligman (2002), “Finding permanent and universal causes of good events along with temporary and specific causes for misfortune is the art of hope; finding permanent and universal causes for misfortune and temporary and specific causes of good events is the practice of despair.”

How can we create more optimism about our future? A well-documented method consists of recognizing and disputing pessimistic thoughts. The key is to treat pessimistic thoughts as if they were said by someone else — a rival whose mission in life is to make you miserable (Seligman, 2002). Stand back and distance yourself from your pessimistic explanations, at least long enough to verify their accuracy. Here are four methods that Seligman has identified:

- **Evidence.** Adopt the role of a detective and ask, “What is the evidence for this belief?”

- **Alternatives.** Most events have many causes. If you did poorly on a test, all of the following might have contributed: how hard the test was, how much you studied, how smart you are, how fair the professor is, how the other students did, how tired you are, and what else is going on in your life at the time. Pessimists have a way of latching onto the worst of all these causes — the permanent and pervasive one — i.e. “I’m stupid, don’t have what it takes, and am never going to succeed.” Ask yourself, is there any less destructive way to look at this?

- **Implications.** The facts won’t always be on your side and the negative belief you hold about yourself may be true. In the situation, use the technique of decatastrophizing. Even if the belief is true, say to yourself, what are the implications? How likely is the worst-case scenario? Does this mean no one will ever hire you?

- **Usefulness.** Is the belief destructive? What good will it do to dwell on the belief? Even if the belief is true now, is the situation changeable? Detail the ways you can change the situation in the future.

How you feel about your life at any moment is changeable, and an accurate appraisal of your life is important in making decisions about your future.
Momentary feelings of sadness or happiness can strongly cloud your judgment of the overall quality of your life. A recent rejection will drag overall satisfaction way down; a raise may momentarily elevate it. In order to get an overall perspective, try taking a January retrospective of how satisfied you are with your life. List domains of your life that you value, such as family, relationships, friends, school/career, religion, health, play, etc. You can use a 1-10 rating scale as well as write a few sentences about these areas. You may want to include looking at year-to-year changes and do this on an annual basis. It will help you be clearer about what is important to you as well as when and how you need to act in order to live in a more satisfying and meaningful way -- embodied with hope for the future.
