

From Newsweek

This Is Your Brain on Optimism

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New research reveals the biological roots of positive thinking. How a rosy outlook can affect your health.

We humans tend to be an optimistic bunch. In fact, it's long been established by psychologists that most people tend to be irrationally positive. The optimism bias, as it's called, accounts for the fact that we expect to live longer and be more successful than the average and we tend to underestimate the likelihood of getting a serious disease or a divorce. This tendency is adaptive—many researchers have claimed that a positive outlook motivates us to plan for our future and may even have an effect on our long-term physical health.

Optimism may be so necessary to our survival that it's hardwired in our brains. A new study published in the journal *Nature* further confirms the idea that having a rosy outlook is a personality trait with deep, neurological roots. Researchers found that the brains of optimistic people actually light up differently on a scan than those who tend to be more pessimistic when they think about future events.

The disparity between positive and pessimistic minds is especially prominent in areas of the brain that have been linked to depression. "The same areas that malfunction in depression are very active when people think about positive events," says Tali Sharot, a post-doctorate fellow at University College London, who conducted the research at New York University.

In the study, Sharot had subjects think about emotional events, both positive and negative, like winning an award or ending a romantic relationship. They did this for past events and those that could plausibly occur in the future, while their brains were being scanned in a fMRI. Afterwards, subjects filled out a questionnaire that measured their level of optimism. What Sharot found was that when participants thought about positive future events, two regions of the brain became much more active than when they thought about negative events.

One of those areas (the rostral anterior cingulate) was linked to optimism with such consistency that it surprised Sharot. "You can see it in all the subjects, indicating that it's probably very fundamental to human nature," she says. "[Optimism] is mediated in some very strong way in the brain." And other research has linked abnormal activity in that same brain region with [inherited depression](#), suggesting that the tendency toward optimism and depression is regulated by the same region of the brain.

While we can't say for certain why some people respond more positively to life's events, it's increasingly clear that your mental outlook can have a big effect on your physical health. Optimism motivates individuals to take control of their lives, while depression has been found to have the opposite effect. It is often linked to a sense of hopelessness. "The problem with depression is that people are so pessimistic that they don't engage in actions that could make their lives better," says Elizabeth Phelps, one of the study authors and psychology professor at NYU.

For example, those who hold fatalistic beliefs about cancer, have shown to be at greater risk of the [disease](#) because they not take preventative measures like eating vegetables or quitting smoking. On the opposite end, a body of research has linked optimism to better health. A landmark study of 999 elderly men and women found that optimism significantly lowered the risk of death from cardiovascular disease.

The exact nature of the relationship between optimism and good health is still unclear. Martin Seligman, who studies optimism and positive thinking at the University of Pennsylvania says that it might be that, optimists, as opposed to pessimists, are more likely to take care of their health because they believe in the potential positive outcomes. Or, it could be that optimistic people are more likeable and build better social networks, which have been associated with longevity. Another possibility is that optimistic people may have had less trauma or difficulty in their lives (a high number of negative events in a lifetime correlates with bad health). "All of these are plausible," says Seligman.

So does this mean that self-help books that aim to boost your optimism, like "The Secret" or "The Power of Positive Thinking" will make you healthier? Not necessarily. But researchers like Seligman do believe that promoting positive thinking is a promising avenue of medical research. And whether or not you agree with his hopeful outlook may tell you something about your own brain.

**Perhaps imagination is only intelligence having fun.
George Scialabra**

Five Smooth Stones: An Attitude of Ultimate Optimism

Five Smooth Stones: An Attitude of Ultimate Optimism
Rev. Fred L Hammond
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Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Tuscaloosa

Over the last several months we have examined Unitarian Universalist Theologian James Luther Adams Five Smooth Stones of Liberal Religion. We looked at the first four stones; *Revelation is Continuous*—the idea that new understandings of the mystery of life are always unfolding; *Mutual Consent*—the idea that relations between people ought to be free of coercion and rest instead on the mutual, free consent of each person; *A Just and Loving Community*—the notion that we have a moral obligation to create a world where all people are honored and respected and *No immaculate conception of virtue and the necessity of social incarnation*—the idea that nothing is good in and by itself but only in its actions in relation to the other. Today we look at Adams' final smooth stone of liberal religion, *An Attitude of Ultimate Optimism*.

This has been a difficult few months on the national level with what appears as legislated racism in Arizona, the protracted wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the financial collapse of our banking institutions, and the unprecedented uncontrolled oil geyser in the Gulf of Mexico. Then on the local level we have been dealing with the tragic deaths of friends. And we haven't even mentioned the personal trials and tribulations that many of us are going through. With all of these events circling around us like vultures it is difficult to see the truth in James Luther Adams proclamation that we as people of a liberal faith should resolve to have ultimate optimism.

But this is not just ultimate optimism because optimism feels better than the alternative. No, the reason for ultimate optimism is because “the resources... [both] divine and human, are available for the achievement of meaningful change justify” this attitude.

We cannot rest on the laurels of the work that generations did before us in areas of justice, whether that justice be racial, economic, or ecological. No, James Luther Adams argues that “each generation must anew win insight into the ambiguous nature of human existence and must give new relevance to moral and spiritual values.”

And so the gains that the civil rights movement won in the mid-20th century must be redefined and won again in the 21st century because the arc of history is always bending towards a greater more inclusive justice. As our eyes were opened at the injustices of segregation, our eyes need to become open to the injustices of white privilege because white privilege would seek to segregate again. The various legislations passed in Arizona are one way white privilege is rearing its ugly head. Whose history do we tell when we teach history in our schools[1]? What criteria do we use to determine that a person is qualified to teach English[2]? What shade of paint do we use to depict our children in school murals[3]?

Under the guise of immigration enforcement, white privilege is attempting to re-assert its standard for living in America. The nation requires an immigration policy that is not solely to benefit the whims of white corporate America. Such has been our history with Mexican immigrants through out the 20th century. We welcomed them, documented and undocumented, when their labor kept our farms and factories producing during two world wars and deported

them when those wars ended or when the economy took a downturn. It is this issue that will define our nation again just as the civil rights movement defined our nation in the mid-20th century. Will we define ourselves on the side of justice?

The civil rights movement of the 1960's was an achievement of justice for that generation but we must not assume that the achievements of that era are a *fait accompli* for all times. Rev. Peter Morales, President of our denomination, wrote this week, *"We are in a struggle for the future direction of American society. How we treat immigrants, especially those from Mexico and Central America, is today's equivalent of the Civil Rights Movement. This is a struggle for America's soul. The real issue for us is how we are going to live in an America in which Anglo-Americans ("whites" or "Americans of European descent") are in the minority. That day will soon be with us. "White" Americans are already the minority in a number of states. The prospects frighten many people. ... The question is whether we can embrace the changes that are coming, whether we can thrive in this new America.*[\[4\]](#)"

In terms of James Luther Adams' fifth smooth stone, the question is 'are we going to tap into the resources both divine and human to create an America that continues to hold its revolutionary ideal of achieving liberty and justice for all when Anglo America is no longer the majority?' If Arizona is the canary of this new America and other states introduce replica bills against a targeted population, then the answer will sadly be no.

But the theology that our Unitarian and Universalist heritage derives from believed that history has a destination it is winging towards where justice and grace prevail. History has a meaning that reveals something of the evolutionary direction of humanity. For our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors it culminated in the creation of heaven on earth, a place where all people lived in harmony with the divine. A place where there was no longer any sorrow or pain from injustice. We sing of this place in our hymn:

"Come build a land where sisters and brothers, anointed by God may then create peace: where justice shall roll down like waters, and peace like an ever flowing stream.[\[5\]](#)"

But history has also revealed the darker side of humanity. Adams states, "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." We do not have to go too far back in our history to see what perverse and destructive forces they are.

Our recent financial crisis was the result of intoxicating greed. Without the appropriate oversights, the banks allowed their intoxicated greed to demand for more wealth at the expense of the clients who sought them for loans to live the American dream. Knowing and hedging the bet that these clients could not afford the loans they sought; the result was an economy that loomed close to the edge of world wide depression and families fortunes and homes decimated.

Yet even with this propensity to reveal the darker nature of humanity through greed and through war, our prophetic faith writes Adams, calls forth to have a 'dynamic hope' that "at the depths of human nature and at the boundaries of what we are, there are potential resources that can prevent a retreat to nihilism."

The resources both divine and human are available to achieve meaningful change. Divine here for Adams might refer to some supernatural resource but it also points to something other than supernatural but wholly inspirational. The divine could be that new idea that breaks through the toil and struggle of rehashing the same ol' same ol' and beckons for a new point of view. It could be that connecting thought that brings about a new way of being or a new way of operating.

But ultimately what choices we make will open up the resources that are available to us, both divine and human. We have a choice in the events that are occurring in the nation today. We can say it does not impact my daily life and therefore ignore it and then wonder how it came to bite us later.

The crisis in the gulf might illustrate this better. We live several hours away from the gulf and therefore are not facing the toxic oil fumes that are causing health problems for asthmatics and others with breathing difficulties. We are not faced with our 134 year old family business ending because there are no oysters to harvest.

So one choice is to ignore it as Scarlet O'Hara says in *Gone with the Wind*, "I will think about this tomorrow... after all, tomorrow is another day." Ignore it and continue our mantra of 'drill baby drill.' Or downplay its significance as BP has done by stating that there is plenty of shrimp found elsewhere[6] or the amount of oil dumping into the gulf is minimal[7] or blocking journalists from seeing firsthand the vast wildlife succumbed to oil washing up on the beaches[8] or denying government confirmed underwater oil plumes six miles long[9]. So ignoring or denial is a choice we could make.

Or we could despair the loss of an ecosystem that impacts the world in so many multiple ways. The prospect of dead zones in the gulf where no life can grow is certainly a despairing prospect. A recent video found on Youtube of divers in the gulf to look at what is happening under the water noted that the water is eerily void of fish until reaching a depth of 30 feet[10]. However, this sort of despair shuts down the natural creative forces of life that is inherent in all of creation including humanity.

Or we can choose to do something about this spill. Organize to have legislation mandate stricter regulations on off shore drilling. Organize to encourage alternate forms of clean energy such as solar and wind to become standard over fossil fuels. Educate others of our participation in this interconnected web of life. We can begin to educate ourselves and others on how our personal consumption and craving of oil based products has contributed to this event in the gulf. The resources for making this choice are already available for us to achieve this. All we need to do is to organize and tap into the populous will to have this achieved.

Here are three different choices all based on the same data with different conclusions made on that data. Liberal religion invites us to not deny or despair but rather to look beyond the present to what possibilities can arise and then to act accordingly.

Howard Zinn in his essay, *The Optimism of Uncertainty*[11], writes about the vast surprises that have occurred through out history. He writes, "There is a tendency to think that what we see in

the present moment will continue. We forget how often we have been astonished by the sudden crumbling of institutions, by extraordinary changes in people's thoughts, by unexpected eruptions of rebellion against tyrannies, by the quick collapse of systems of power that seemed invincible."

Justice when it occurs may appear to have happened over night but it usually is the result of a cumulative effect of many different events over time. A state law ending housing discrimination against gays. An executive order granting hospital visitation rights and respecting patient care directives for same sex partners. A law addressing bullying in schools. The right for a lesbian mom to have custody of her children in a divorce. Another law passed barring employment discrimination against gays and lesbians. The ability for a transgender person to receive gender re-assignment surgery in this country. The allowing for transgenders to state their self-identified gender on a US passport.

These on their own do not seem like huge victories. But taken together they begin to add up to represent equal treatment under the law. They begin to sound like justice.

Howard Zinn ended his essay with this: "if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.[\[12\]](#)"

Rev. Barbara Wells ten Hove wrote, "Despite all that we do wrong, all the wrong that is done to us and the suffering we cause and endure, love is always, always there. Our job as Universalists is to preach that love wherever we go and not to scare people about the end. Just hold each other in love and work to bring more love to the world.[\[13\]](#)" May it be so.

"If you wish to experience peace, provide peace for another." -Dalai Lama