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# THE NO NEGATIVITY EVENT

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## LIVING WITH OPTIMISM

An ad in the *Metro* newspaper recently caught my eye. Among the usual upbeat ads for clothing, restaurants, and movies was the picture of a depressed-looking man, his head tilted, with one hand over his down-turned eyes. Underneath this image was the large letter caption, “The No Negativity Event,” followed by a description:

*At this Event, we will fight against the negative forces influencing your life! We have helped people in over 90 countries.*

Right here in the *Metro*, which boasts that it is “the largest daily newspaper in the world,” was this unexpected ad about fighting negativity. This, I thought, is the sign of a good direction toward personal growth. Instead of enticing us to buy more clothing or to see another movie, this ad encourages positive personal growth. This is certainly a much-needed service. Who wants negativity? We all desire

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good things in our lives, such as health, financial success, meaningful friendships, and committed love. Conversely, we all seek to avoid such negative things as illness, poverty, loneliness, and rejection. This seminar seemed to offer a way to help.

I began to think more about negativity, and wondered: What is negativity exactly? Where does it come from, and how does it enter our lives? One dictionary defines negativity as:

*Lacking positive or constructive features; gloomy, skeptical, pessimistic.*

Negativity, then, can be linked to pessimism. Next, I looked up pessimism and found this illuminating definition:

*Pessimism, from the Latin pessimus (worst), denotes a belief that the experienced world is the worst possible. It describes a general belief that things are bad, and tend to become worse; or that looks to the eventual triumph of evil over good; it contrasts with optimism, the contrary belief in the goodness and betterment of things generally.*

Negativity, then, contrasts directly with optimism.

By coincidence (or perhaps by intent), the ad for fighting negativity was printed during the first week of spring, a season of rebirth, renewal, and regrowth, when the cold and stagnation of winter recedes to reveal a new cycle of life. Spring is a season for optimism. It was a quick journey from the

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unexpected ad for “The No Negativity Event,” to the struggle between the opposing viewpoints of optimism versus pessimism. Spiritual traditions clearly stress the need for optimism in our lives and encourage us to discard negativity, and spring is celebrated by most of the world’s major religions as a time to develop optimism through the anticipation or commemoration of goodness. Here is a sampling:

- Easter, the Christian Holy Day that celebrates rebirth, redemption, and the possibility of eternal life, occurs in the early spring.
- For Jews, spring is the time for Passover, which recollects the miraculous redemption from slavery to freedom and the promise of a new life filled with limitless potential.
- Muslims celebrate Mawlid al Nabi, the commemoration of the birth and death of Muhammad, the receiver of the Quran.
- Some Buddhists celebrate New Year at this time as well by noting the endless cycle of life, death, and renewal.
- The spring equinox is the New Year for Zoroastrianism, whose adherents believe that good will eventually prevail over evil.
- This is also the most important time for Sikhs, who, in spring, celebrate the birth of their faith.

All these wisdom traditions encourage us to live optimistically and to fight pessimism. Why, then, do

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we experience so much negativity? Why do so many of us see the negative side of things instead of the positive? There is a saying, which pretends to contain wisdom, that I have often heard quoted about these viewpoints:

*A pessimist is what an optimist calls a realist.*

This is a pithy and clever quote, to be sure, but is actually a disturbing declaration of a belief in existential negativity, proposing that pessimism is somehow more realistic than optimism. I don't know who wrote it, but this cynical aphorism quickly sums up a familiar attitude—that there is something inherently wrong in the world; that the natural direction of events is essentially toward the worst; perhaps, even, that people are essentially bad, and that given the chance, others will naturally take advantage of you. This saying then relegates the viewpoint of optimism to a delusional, naive state.

Maybe we have come to believe that this quote is true. Maybe the events of our lives and our understanding of history have driven us to this conclusion. But as the *Metro* ad implies, who wants to live in negativity? Perhaps this is why a “No Negativity Event” is needed—to teach us how to counter this

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inclination toward pessimism and negativity and how to cultivate optimism.

Let's take a deeper look at optimism. First, is it realistic to be optimistic? Clearly, there is a tremendous amount of pain, suffering, and cruelty in the world. Half the world's population lives in crushing poverty, and unspeakable atrocities occur with all too much regularity. It is staggering to realize that less than one percent of what the world spends every year on weapons could educate every child in the world. Yet, I believe, we live in the best of all times and that things are getting even better. We are living in a time of freedom, potential, prosperity, and spiritual awakening. Ask yourself if there was a time in history in which you'd rather live, and then I challenge you to research the hard reality of existence in that time. You will eagerly return to this time in gratitude and relief. From a statistical data analysis, we can see the positive trends here in the United States:

- Diseases that had previously killed and maimed millions, such as polio, malaria, tuberculosis, and small pox, have been cured. Today, on the average, people live longer and healthier than ever in history. The tragedy, of course, is that this medical prosperity has not been shared with much of the world.
- Women, racial and religious minorities, and others who were systematically discriminated,

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oppressed, enslaved, and killed, are now protected and increasingly integrated.

- Through vast improvements in technology, information that was once hidden, unavailable, or limited to the elite few, is now readily available to anyone with computer access. Some may see this, somehow, as a problem, but it is hard to argue that access to information is anything but a good thing.
- Social confines of class, sex, race, and religion that once limited one's opportunities have been disintegrating, and we are collectively moving toward a future where individuals can pursue their own dreams based on their content.
- The U.S. government reports the lowest percentage of drug use, especially among young people, since such statistics began to be collected in 1979.
- In the U.S., firearm-related crime has plummeted since 1993, and violent crime is at a two-decade low. Most cities are safer than they have been in decades (we see this clearly here in New York).
- Teenage pregnancies are the lowest reported since 1991, with a marked decline in all demographics, and more young people, with greater diversity, are entering college than ever before.

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Science is also pointing to the value of optimism. A long-term study of Harvard University graduates found that those who were categorized as pessimists at age 25 had significantly poorer health or were more likely to have died when they were reassessed 20 to 35 years later. Studies of cancer patients have found that those with optimistic outlooks dramatically outlived their pessimistic counterparts and that the leading indicator for remission is the patient's positive attitude.

Other studies have found that optimists are generally healthier, happier, and more successful than those who carry negative attitudes. At the forefront of science, quantum physics (as far as I can understand it, which admittedly is not very much) seems to have discovered that one's attitude can actually change the very nature of reality. Electrons, the building blocks of matter, appear to fluctuate between wave potential and fixed matter as they register and react to the attitude of the observer. Quantum physics has discovered that our attitude literally affects reality!

This idea, that we should strive to live and act in optimism, and that positive attitude creates positive outcomes, is an ancient one, shared by the world's religions. From Paul, in a letter to the Corinthians, comes the famous words:

*Whoever sows sparingly will reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will reap generously.*

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The Buddha told his followers:

*Do not think lightly of good that not the least consequence will come of it. A whole waterpot will fill up from dripping drops of water, so the wise fill themselves with good, just a drop at a time.*

From The Book of Deuteronomy:

*I have placed before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life!*

And an extraordinarily similar statement from a Taoist scripture:

*Curses and blessings do not come through gates, but people themselves invite their arrival.*

These religious teachings encourage us to live in optimism—to see the good and to act with positive intent. This is not to say that we should ignore the inevitable challenges in our lives or turn our back on pain and suffering, bury our heads, close our eyes and ears, and pretend that everything is okay. There is clearly much that is wrong in the world, and one would have to be delusional to believe that there are no dangers, no diseases, and no people who are bent on harming others. What all these traditions teach, though, is that we can, at any moment, make the choice to see the world and the people in it as inherently good and to contribute in a positive way. This positive contribution will then increase the good in the world, leading to more optimism. As religion, science, and psychology realize, when we approach

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a situation with optimism, expecting the best of others and ourselves, we are much more likely to receive just such a result. By doing so, we improve our attitude, health, and success and actively contribute to humanity's collective growth and our movement toward a glorious future, which is our children's rightful inheritance.

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