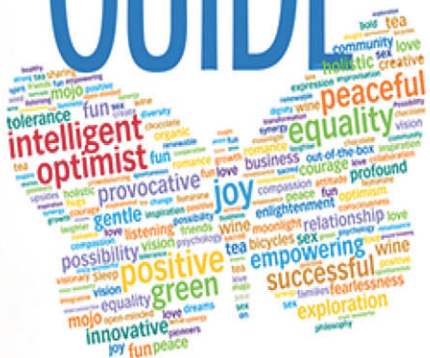


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THE INTELLIGENT OPTIMIST'S GUIDE TO LIFE



How to Find
Health and
Success in a
World That's
a Better Place
Than You Think

Jurriaan Kamp

Cofounder of *The Intelligent Optimist*

More Praise for *The Intelligent Optimist's Guide to Life*

“Every person in the world wants the same thing—to lead a happy, healthy, and fulfilling life. Yet most of us feel that ultimate goal is determined by external factors. In this fact-based, simple, and pragmatic book, Jurriaan Kamp shifts all the power into our own hands by illustrating that our view of the world around us is a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

—**Bert Jacobs, cofounder and Chief Executive Optimist, The Life is good Company**

“Optimism is both the precondition and the precursor for individuals and organizations in making meaningful change, and Jurriaan Kamp does a wonderful job of reminding us just how powerful it can be.”

—**Walter Robb, Co-CEO, Whole Foods Market**

“More and more research confirms that optimism is a critical ingredient of longevity and a healthy lifestyle. Jurriaan Kamp’s book shows how you can improve your health through optimism.”

—**Andrew Weil, MD**

“This book is like a good companion: it cheers you up.”

—**Ben Knapen, former State Secretary for Foreign Affairs, The Netherlands**

“An inspired and inspiring guide to living with optimism in a world that is increasingly jaded and pessimistic—uplifting, rousing, and challenging us to dream the world into being in a positive and creative manner.”

—**Alberto Villoldo, bestselling author of *Shaman, Healer*, Sage**

“Optimism is a mindset, a lens through which to look at the world around us. It takes this mindset to be able to adapt to the changes that technology and climate change will bring our way. More importantly, this mindset also will give us the resolve to not just let change happen; we are the masters of our destiny and can shape a better world for all.”

—**Peter Bakker, President, World Business Council for Sustainable Development**

“Thoughtfulness and inspiration are two ingredients that are mixed into a perspective that helps us look at the world as an optimist. There are many ways to journey through life, but the goal surely must be to live well. A good read and one you will want to pass on!”

—**Arkadi Kuhlmann, founder and CEO, ZenBanx**

“The world is full of opportunities for anyone wishing to see them. Media blur that vision and feed pessimism and depression. Optimism is in short supply. That should change and this book points the way.”

—**John Mackey, founder and Co-CEO, Whole Foods Market**

“Pessimists, beware! This little book has the power to turn your mind around and, with it, your life! Rarely has the case for optimism been made with such precision and persuasion. The author has a genius for seeing deeply into the nature of our time and gives examples of how the world that seemingly isn’t working actually is—and in a most elegant manner. To read this work is to cease giving credence to the whiny naysayers and instead to join the band of angels who carry a passion for the possible, advance the solutions, and engage in the creation of an emergent positive, practical, and successful world. Above all, it is fair to say that those readers who embrace the optimists’ way will even stop boring God.”

—**Jean Houston, PhD, author of *The Wizard of Us***

“There’s no problem in this world without a potential solution. What’s too often lacking is the strategy to find these new solutions. That strategy is optimism—the desire to find the solution wherever it might be. It’s the vital force for innovation in business and society. This is your handbook to create and contribute your solutions. Read and implement it!”

—**Rinaldo Brutoco, entrepreneur and Founding President, World Business Academy**

“This is a thought-provoking, challenging, and inspirational book. Jurriaan Kamp’s unique way of looking at how we filter, use, and approach news and information is well worth considering. He is on a mission to help us all realign our thinking. Do yourself a favor and take the time to read and absorb *The Intelligent Optimist’s Guide to Life*.”

—**Robert J. Rosenthal, Executive Director, The Center for Investigative Reporting**

“Jurriaan is just the kind of visionary we need today: well-informed, pragmatic, and indefatigably optimistic. His lively book should wake up readers who are using their pessimism as an excuse for inactivity.”

—**Bryan Welch, Publisher and Editorial Director, Ogden Publications, and General Manager, Capper’s Insurance Service, Inc.**

THE INTELLIGENT
OPTIMIST'S
GUIDE TO LIFE

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THE INTELLIGENT OPTIMIST'S GUIDE TO LIFE

**How to Find
Health and Success
in a World That's
a Better Place
Than You Think**

Jurriaan Kamp



BK[®]

Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.
San Francisco
a BK Life book

The Intelligent Optimist's Guide to Life

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To Hélène, the love of my life and the better optimist

No pessimist ever discovered the secret of the stars, or sailed an uncharted land or opened a new doorway for the human spirit.

—*Helen Keller*

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CONTENTS

A Note from the Author	ix
[Introduction] Stories, News, and the Challenge of Optimism	1
[1] The Best Way to Live	11
[2] A Key to Health, Happiness, and Success	23
[3] How to Become an (Even Better) Optimist	33
[4] The World Is a Better Place Than You Think	45
[5] Welcome to the Age of Optimism	61
Checklist for Optimists	79
Life Orientation Test Scoring	81
Notes	83
Resources	87
Acknowledgments	89
Index	91
About the Author	95
About <i>The Intelligent Optimist</i>	97

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

One of the privileges of being a reporter is that it is your job to always look for new stories and thus you always meet new people.

Through all these meetings over many years I have learned that a lot of people choose vocations that they themselves can learn the most from.

Many psychotherapists have a great need to heal their own psyches.

Mediators tend to create conflicts in their personal lives.

High-energy motivational speakers who talk about the power of positive thinking appear to ignore the negative in their own lives.

Business gurus who teach that egos are so often road-blocks in business have big egos themselves.

People who teach meditation and mindfulness tend to need to quiet their own minds.

It is like healing your own wounds becomes the most important and inspiring contribution you can make to the world around you.

Then there are also the people who are natural teachers. They don't need to write books or tell their stories to big audiences. They just *are*. And through their beings they teach and inspire. Talking or writing about something is different from *being* that same thing. From being flows natural inspiration. No need for books or talks.

So where does that leave me as the maker of a magazine and a book on optimism?

Am I a pessimist who himself needs more optimism?

Someone once asked me, "How could you construct doors without locks and windows without shades if you don't know the power of the negative?"

So, yes, I was born an optimist—like you, for that matter. But—probably like you too—I have encountered disappointments early in life that weakened my natural ability to remain optimistic. At some point I made it my mission to overcome my disappointments and the pessimism that came from it.

Many people never need to read a book on optimism because they already are optimists. That is to say their optimism is stronger than their pessimism. It is important to recognize that in our dualistic world all of us are both optimists and pessimists. The fact is that our lives are more fulfilling as optimists than as pessimists. Science is very clear about that, as you will read in this book.

I know from my own experience that pessimists can become optimists, and that the journey from pessimism to optimism is a very rewarding one. At the same time many optimists can strengthen their optimism. Perhaps, because I do know the pessimistic parts in me as well as the optimistic parts I can be a good guide for you on the road to more optimism.

I look forward to sharing what I've learned with you, as well as many stories that have inspired me. I wrote this book to motivate and energize you and to inspire you to live your life to the fullest.

That's optimism. And this is your guide.

[introduction]

STORIES, NEWS, AND THE CHALLENGE OF OPTIMISM

Media distort reality and breed pessimism. We need
optimism for more health, happiness, and success.

We need freedom *from* the press to get there.

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE STORY

We create our reality through our stories.

Every change begins with a story.

Societies rise and fall by the stories they tell.

Our lives are made by the stories we hear and the ones we tell ourselves.

That's why media—as our professional storytellers—play such an important role.

That's why it matters that media focus almost exclusively on whatever goes wrong.

Media feed pessimism and depression.

Media stand in the way of solutions that could help improve lives and our world at large.

And that's why a book on optimism has to start with a story about the news.

MORE BOMBS, MORE MONEY

I spent the first ten years of my career as a reporter at the leading newspaper in my country, the Netherlands. I worked in the newsroom in Rotterdam before becoming a correspondent in Delhi, India, and ultimately leading the economics desk. In chasing news, I came to a deep understanding of something we all know: Media are much more interested in what goes wrong than in what goes right. If it bleeds, it leads. In India, on a freelance contract, more bombs meant more monthly revenue for me.

I used to think the negative, pessimistic focus of the media was grounded in the choices of the writers and editors. I thought that if the writers changed the way they saw the world, we would have more balanced newspapers and broadcasts.

As much as I still support that perspective, I now know things are much more complicated. It's not just that many of my former colleagues were pessimists, always suspicious, and preferred dressing in black.

The press is under siege.

It all comes from a big misunderstanding. Somehow, somewhere, in the decades since World War II, we have started confusing telling stories—informing the public—with selling watches, cars, soda, and toothbrushes.

Nowadays, publishers are supposed to target certain well-defined interest groups. In fact, each new media initiative starts by defining its audience. As much sense as that seems to make in today's money-driven world, it's unethical. Media's contribution should come from their stories, their content—not their capacity to serve a certain audience and to attract money from advertisers. There is, I'm afraid, more policy behind the ads or commercials than behind the stories. With small exceptions here and there, there's no free press anymore. But standing in the way of this crucial constitutional right is not a dictator—it's the market economy. It's capitalism.

"History has shown that competition and free markets deliver real value . . . something we should encourage," Rupert Murdoch said when he acquired the *Wall Street Journal* in 2007. This may be true in many industries. Better cars drive on India's roads today than they did twenty-five years ago, when the Indian economy was basically closed. But the same model has not led to better journalism. It won't lead to better symphony orchestras either. We have to save certain parts of our society from the thinking of the Rupert Murdochs.

THE EROSION OF DEMOCRACY

Watergate is a heroic example of the importance of the free press. But do you remember how long it took for media to start questioning America's invasion of Iraq? Numbed by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, it took some two years before important critical questions about weapons of mass destruction and more were raised in the media. The American people were deceived—much like at the time of Watergate—because the media were not leading the quest for the truth.

And do you remember that Disney refused to distribute Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* because, as Disney executives said, "It's not in the interest of any major corporation to be dragged into a highly charged partisan political battle."

Would that be language Katherine Graham, the publisher of the *Washington Post* in the Watergate era, would ever have used?

The problem is that Disney is in the wrong position to begin with. Disney is an entertainment company. Such a company has nothing to do with serving the freedom of the press. But Disney has become one of a handful of big corporations that own most of the media in the United States. These corporations increasingly sell "infotainment"—a word that reveals why Kim Kardashian and Paris Hilton frequent the pages and websites of serious media.

In the meantime, the fourth pillar of democracy is staggering.

I'VE MADE BOOKCASES, BUT I'M NOT A CARPENTER

The press doesn't matter anymore, some will argue. We have Twitter. News spreads instantly through social media. These days, we are all journalists.

The evolution of social media certainly brings a lot of good. Whereas the average front page is 90 percent frauds, floods, fires, murders, and diseases, research shows that what people share on social media is more positive than negative. The more positive an article, the more likely it's going to be shared, explains Jonah Berger, social psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania, in his book *Why Things Catch On*. And in an interview with the *New York Times* he said, "The 'If it bleeds' rule works for mass media that just want you to tune in. They want your eyeballs and don't care how you're feeling. But when you share a story with your friends and peers, you care a lot more how they react. You don't want them to think of you as a Debbie Downer."¹

So friends care about each other, and tweeting and sharing tend to be more positive. But tweeting is no journalism. Journalists are trained for years to write good news stories that cover all relevant angles. Good journalism is a trade. It should present and explain the news. It should investigate and discover. Media should always be on a quest for the truth. Social media should complement that, not replace it.

Let me put it like this: I've made bookcases for our home. Recently, we hired a carpenter to do the same. I could easily see the difference between his work and mine. I'm definitely not a carpenter.

OBJECTIVITY AND TOOTHBRUSHES

Leading media pride themselves on objectivity and fairness. They follow a strict policy of fair reporting that includes the facts and perspectives of all the interested parties. But I'd like to put this objectivity to the test. If you ask the people you meet today how their day is going, most people will say that in their lives more is going right than wrong. Yes, all of us suffer from

pain and loss from time to time. But it's fair to say that in most lives most of the time more goes right than wrong. Ultimately, our world is quite a happy place (more about that later).

Now imagine a visitor from outer space who just reads the papers and watches television news to get an idea about this newfound world. Without meeting with real people, that visitor will think this is a place of despair and failure. Media are not objective. Far from it. Media distort and misrepresent our reality.

While I was reporting in Afghanistan in the late 1980s, I saw with my own eyes that journalists were "adjusting" stories to meet the expectations of their newsrooms. If the *mujahideen* resistance fighters were quiet that day, they were made to be dangerous. They had to be to make sure newsstand sales didn't plummet. It was never official policy, but the pressure to "perform" was always in the air. Evelyn Waugh wrote a satirical novel about this: *Scoop*. I only wish reality was not so close to his satire.

Media use a tool dictators have used with great success for centuries. They spread fear and pessimism because it sells. Editorial choices are determined by business interests and by stock prices. Newspapers have become like toothbrushes. Stories have become commercials.

GREAT INNOVATION . . .

ONE PROBLEM

I remember when the paper came in the morning. In the evening, we watched the news. In between: no news. That changed during the first Gulf War in 1991, when CNN jumped on the scene with twenty-four-hour broadcasting. Great innovation . . . one problem: There was not enough news—or so it seemed, because the same stories kept being repeated again and again, hour after hour.

In the past, the onslaught of negativity was restricted to twice a day. Now it has become a twenty-four-hour bombardment that continues in elevators, at gas stations, and in bars where people meet to relax.

It matters which stories we tell each other. If media continually shout that the world is falling apart, we will register that and it will influence our perspectives. It's much harder to see a beautiful world when you get reports only about problems and disasters.

Between 1990—one year before the twenty-four-hour news invention—and 2010, the world population grew 40 percent—mostly in developing countries. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the number of people suffering from depression rose 300 percent—mostly in rich countries—making it one of the biggest challenges to health and well-being. I'm not a social scientist, but I see a remarkable correlation between the rise of depression and pessimism and the twenty-four-hour negative news invasion over the same twenty-year period.

HOW DO YOU FEED YOUR MIND?

In recent decades, many of us have discovered that what we eat makes a big difference to our health. We have changed our diets. We take better care of our bodies.

But most people still don't pay much attention to how they feed their minds. And the impact of what we put in our eyes and ears is as deep as what we put in our mouths. "News is to the mind what sugar is to the body. News is easy to digest," wrote Rolf Dobelli in the *Guardian*.²

To be healthy, we need to avoid sugar. It's the same with the news. Like bad eating habits, continuous exposure to bad news makes you sick.

What makes it worse is that the news is often irrelevant to you. *Black Swan* author Nassim Taleb gives a good example. When a big bridge collapses, the “news” interest will be on the person in the last truck that made it over. That may be sensational but it’s not relevant to you. What is relevant is the story about the fragility of the bridge. Was it a structural problem? Could that happen in a similar bridge you go over one day?

News is often about things you cannot influence. What can you do about the next bomb blast in Afghanistan? Or even about the next tortured and twisted soul who opens fire on an innocent school crowd? Nothing. But these sad stories do make you feel powerless and helpless. That’s how the news feeds pessimism and depression.

It’s a fair guess that you read some twenty-four news stories every day, or at least their headlines. That comes to some 10,000 news stories per year. Do you remember a story you read in the past year that has helped you make a better decision about your life? Most news is not helpful to you. It interrupts your thinking. It stands in the way of creativity and the emergence of new ideas. As Rolf Dobelli wrote in the *Guardian*, “If you want to come up with old solutions, read news. If you are looking for new solutions, don’t.”³

So often what is presented as *news* is really *olds*. It is not about innovation, breakthroughs, solutions, or new insights. In short, it’s not optimistic. It’s about sad repetitions of unfortunate events that don’t support and enrich your life. That’s very pessimistic.

FREEDOM FROM THE PRESS

We are always calling on developing countries to allow for freedom *of* the press. But the Western world faces something as important: We need freedom *from* the press. Freedom from

a press that focuses on negative news to the exclusion of the good. Freedom from a press run by advertisers rather than by journalists. Freedom from a press in which the bottom line is more important than the common good. And—most important—freedom from a press that feeds depression and pessimism and stands in the way of progress.

TWO FREE WEEKS AND MORE HAPPINESS

If you are like most people, you spend an hour a day watching or reading the news.

Research has shown that after watching the news for fifteen minutes, most people need fifteen minutes of relaxation exercises to get rid of the resulting anxiety and mood disturbances. (Don't think you aren't one of them. The research shows that the news affects *everyone*.)⁴

I don't know anyone who does that. But more important, why would you consume the anxiety-provoking news in the first place? That's a very poor investment of your time.

Imagine what you could do with your time if you stopped reading and watching the news. One hour a day equals fifteen full days a year that you could invest in activities that give meaning to your life.

"Another press is possible." That slogan was on our T-shirts when we launched the English-language edition of our magazine at the World Social Forum in Porte Alegre, Brazil, in early 2003. It is a T-shirt I often wear. We want to live in a different world. A healthier, greener, happier, and more just world. For that world to become reality, we need more optimism and different stories. The press should find these stories. But, ultimately, these stories begin with you and me. When you embrace optimism and take the time to discover your story, your life will become richer and happier and the world will be a better place.

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[chapter 1]

THE BEST WAY TO LIVE

Pessimism and optimism are strategies. We create pessimism as a response to what happens to us.

But we can also respond with optimism to the events in our life. And that's much more rewarding.

BAD WEATHER AND UNFOUNDED OPTIMISM

In high school, my week revolved around the field hockey game on Saturday. Back then, we still played on real grass. Hence, as the week progressed, a striking parallel arose between my mood and darkening skies. Too much rain would force the game to be canceled, which routinely happened in the fall and winter. My grumbling started well in advance. If it were raining cats and dogs on a Friday afternoon, my dear mother would try to cheer me up by looking out the window and pointing at a random piece of sky. "Look," she'd exclaim, "it's already clearing up over there!"

That unfounded optimism always infuriated me.

Yet she had a point. After the rain there will always be sunshine. Yes, bad things happen. But it is our choice to accept the rain and look beyond it to the coming sunshine. We create pessimism by our focus on the bad. At the same time we create optimism by focusing on the good. And, as we shall see, optimism is a much more rewarding strategy.

Optimism doesn't mean denying reality. According to the dictionary, the everyday meaning of *optimism* is "hopefulness and confidence about the future or the success of something." But the root of the word comes from Latin (*optimum*) and the more precise definition of optimism is "the doctrine that this world is the best of all possible worlds."

Optimism is a fundamental attitude. It's not an opinion about reality; it's a starting point for dealing with reality. At every moment, you can decide that you're in the best situation to handle a given challenge. *That* is optimism. Optimism is searching for the *yes* in every situation and finding it. Or as someone once aptly described that attitude: "If there's no solution, then there's no problem."

PESSIMISM: A GIGANTIC ROADBLOCK

“This pessimism is lying across modern civilization like some enormous fallen tree and somehow we’ve got to get a bulldozer and shift it out of the way,” said the English writer and “the first philosopher of optimism in European history” Colin Wilson.¹

According to Wilson, the roots of the pessimism epidemic go back to the Romantics of the early nineteenth century whose message was that humans could only briefly experience “exquisite happiness,” but it was not meant to be forever and life was supposed to be miserable. “Most people still don’t understand what has happened in Western culture over the past two centuries. How the long defeatist curve that originated in the early 19th century continues to cloud our way of thinking,” said Wilson.

Human beings have a unique capacity to find new answers through the expansion of their consciousness. That’s why optimism, the art of finding solutions, is a more logical way of life than the, in intellectual circles, still dominant—pessimistic—worldview that was “invented” by a few poets 200 years ago.

Life will inevitably deal us some bad hands from time to time. Life is not simple. That it should be is a contemporary misconception fed by modern consumerism, which offers a quick solution for every inconvenience. An increasing stream of gurus have extrapolated from that material prosperity to claim that life can be, should be, an effortless affair.

All those messages seem to have made us less of a match for life. Our ancestors trekked across the steppes and savannas. They knew they were continually in danger. They didn’t know life could be anything *but* challenging. Our reality consists

of hospitals, insurance policies, and benefit payments when things go wrong. The welfare state has strongly influenced our expectations, but it still doesn't preclude bad things from happening.

In 1978, psychiatrist M. Scott Peck wrote *The Road Less Traveled*. The book begins like this: "Life is difficult. This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult—once we truly understand and accept it—then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters."

Every religion and philosophy of life teaches that the meaning of life lies in our responses to the challenges we encounter. Our life lessons are the essence of our existence. That's why the way we face those lessons is so important. "Pain is inevitable, suffering is optional," Buddhists say. Optimism turns out to be the most promising and fulfilling strategy, because the optimist accepts reality and then *does* something about it.

RESILIENCE IS MORE USEFUL THAN SUSTAINABILITY

In more and more environmental dialogues the word *resilience* begins to replace the word *sustainability*. Sustainability means keeping things intact. It means avoiding causing damage. It's about preventing change. Sustainability is a static concept.

Resilience, though, is dynamic. "The capacity to recover quickly from difficulties," says one definition. Resilience is part of ongoing change. The world today is not the same as the world of 5,000 years ago. Nor will the world of the future much resemble our current reality. That's why sustainability is not a helpful concept in a world of continual and rapid change.

The same applies to our daily lives. They will never be sustainable in the static sense. We can only frustrate ourselves by

not accepting the changes we cannot escape. That frustration is at the root of much pessimism. The optimist is resilient. She evolves with circumstances and times.

Bad days will come. But the point is, they will go as well. So the challenge is to go as untouched as possible through the bad days. That's where resilience comes in. But *untouched* does not mean "disconnected." Resilience means remaining part of the circumstances and adapting, taking the fact in, learning the lesson—understanding and accepting—and moving on.

The focus of the optimist is on the potential change. She embraces *yes* and fights against *no*. The optimist makes the conscious choice to endure in times of hardship. It is illuminating that the Chinese use the same character for *endurance* as for *patience*: the patience required to wait for the moment when you can once again act effectively. That wise patience is also evident in theologian Reinhold Niebuhr's famous prayer: "Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

Optimism, persistence, and resilience go hand in hand. You can't find answers or solutions if you aren't prepared to keep searching and digging. At the same time, you can't find them if you don't first accept the truth at the deepest level. That's often a painful process. Optimism isn't always fun and happy.

You don't want to sustain your life as it is; you want it to be resilient and adaptable to the ever-ongoing change around you.

THERE IS NO BAD WEATHER, ONLY INAPPROPRIATE CLOTHING

Boston Philharmonic conductor Benjamin Zander and his former wife psychotherapist Rosamund Stone Zander wrote a

bestselling book: *The Art of Possibility*. It is an art that every optimist has to master. Zander precisely distinguishes living in possibility from aiming for the possible, or hoping, or positive thinking:

"The possible is what you can achieve. Politics is the art of the possible. Possibility is not hope either. Hope comes from not being able to deal with the present. It is not positive thinking. I hate that. You can always tell that positive thinkers don't want to deal with the negative. It is not possibilities, plural. That's about our options, our choices. Possibility, however, is a domain. In every experience there is possibility. It is available to us every moment of the day. It is about one choice: To be in the present, and . . ."²

. . . and in that moment the future can unfold and the answer can come.

Zander's penchant for possibility started early. He speaks passionately about his father, who inspired his children with a Scandinavian proverb: "There is no such thing as bad weather, only inappropriate clothing."

"Possibility is a place of imagination and response. Human beings have a capacity to accept and react. To say: Great! What's next?," says Zander.

We suffer a lot of unnecessary pain because we don't say, "Great! What's next?" We don't respond, and we judge too early. Zhou Enlai, the Chinese leader, was asked in the early 1970s about the impact of the French Revolution. "Too early to tell," Zhou Enlai is supposed to have answered.

Zhou likely misunderstood his interpreter. However, the anecdote points to an important message. If we are really smart when something happens to us, we won't immediately judge and say it's good or bad. So often a painful loss opens the door to a new and deeply meaningful experience that could not have happened without the preceding loss. The circle of

life requires a rigorous discipline to stay in the state of mind of possibility and resilience. It is indeed too early to tell.

SCHOOLS BREED PESSIMISTS

In studies on happiness, the French consistently rack up the lowest scores in the Western world. The material quality of their lives is comparable to that of people in neighboring countries. Measured over long time periods, French economic growth is consistent with European averages. Yet the French are more pessimistic. Far more than other Europeans, they expect their lives to get worse, and they are the top consumers of antidepressants. Why is that?

Writing in the *Financial Times*, Claudia Senik, a professor of economics at the Sorbonne in Paris, indicated a possible source of French pessimism: the educational system. The French system assumes all students will achieve the same top outcome. In reality, of course, they cannot all enjoy the finest educations at the best universities. As a result, the system undermines the self-confidence of French teenagers, according to Senik. High school students feel powerless.

Powerlessness is the root of pessimism. We are all born optimists. Who has ever met a pessimistic four-year-old? A child who fell on the playground and, after having her tears dried and the scratch on her knee bandaged, decided never to run again? Those children don't exist. Children get up, try again, and keep laughing, even through their tears. Every child has the instinctive intelligence to keep trying. Young children don't feel powerless.

A lot of optimism gets lost in high school, and not just in France. Expectations increase. Exams and grades multiply. This creates a hierarchy within which the student is judged. No one used to count who had the bloodiest knees; suddenly, failing grades are tallied. The system strongly implies that

people with higher grades lead better, more successful lives. That is an illusion of control. Those with poor scores have less control; they are more powerless; and they become more pessimistic. Education is supposed to be about opening children's hearts and minds to new experiences. However, grades stand in the way. The educational system is a devastating experience for many children. It is a factory that produces pessimists.

WE NEED VICTORIES— VICTORIES FOR ALL

Like pessimism, optimism can be created. And we do so through our victories. There's plenty of research that shows that we need victories in our lives. Success is good for us. Success gives us energy. Defeat takes energy away. But if we judge too early, we may misjudge an event as a defeat. Later on it may turn out to be a victory. Many athletes say that they had to endure difficult losses to build the strength to become great champions. At the same time we sometimes need to keep losing to make us see that we need to radically change a direction in our life—that our victory lies somewhere else.

After breaking his legs three times within two years, one of Germany's most promising young skiers was forced to quit his favorite sport. Because he did, he went to medical school and became a doctor who discovered a new, innovative healing therapy. His "failure" at skiing bred his success as a doctor. Looking back, he's grateful that he missed the medals but found the mission that fulfills his life. With his broken legs he felt a loser. Now, looking back, he feels a victor.

Optimism is not a zero-sum game. Optimism just produces *life*, ever more life. The optimist is not the winner in the traditional sense. The optimist is not the one who defeats the pessimist. Optimism has nothing to do with the culture of competition that so deeply undermines modern society. There's a big difference between competing at the expense of

another and overcoming challenges that make you a wiser, more loving, more compassionate, and more whole human being. The battle is with yourself, not with the other. The optimist is the winner in that personal battle. And her hard-fought victory of resilience, her gain of wisdom and understanding is a victory for all.

In the game of life, all of us can be victors. No one is destined to only lose in life. And we need much more of such victories in our interconnected world where failure in one country—or even of one company—can bring down the entire global system. We have entered a world where we can flourish only if we all win. That united winning requires the discipline of optimism. The more of us who commit to their personal victories, the more of us will benefit. Optimism is a strategy that enhances life and serves us all.

RESPONSE-ABILITY

The word responsibility can be neatly parsed: *response-ability*, the ability to provide a response. That ability forms the core of the optimistic lifestyle. Back to the stumbling preschooler: We don't fail when we fall; we fail when we don't get back up. Getting back up, one way or another, is always an option. That's response-ability.

The most striking example of this vision is the book *Man's Search for Meaning* by Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl. Frankl wrote the book in the days after he was freed from a concentration camp in 1945. The original German title reveals more about the book's message. *Trotzdem Ja zum Leben sagen* means "yes to life despite everything." When Frankl was sent to the concentration camp, he decided to put his psychiatric training to the ultimate test: How does the human mind work in extremely challenging, dehumanizing circumstances? He observed what kept some people going and what pulled the rug out from under others and wrote, "Everything can

be taken from a man but one thing, the last of the human freedoms: to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

The optimist knows he is not in control of all that happens in his life, but that he does determine his response to it. The pessimist feels like a victim; the optimist searches for solutions.

And there is always a solution, or at least the beginning of one. After actor Michael J. Fox developed Parkinson's disease, he related in a television interview how he finally came to terms with it: "The answer had nothing to do with protection and everything to do with perspective. The only choice not available to me was whether or not I had Parkinson's. Everything else was up to me. I could concentrate on what I'd lost, or I could keep living and discover how the holes would fill themselves back up."

WHY IS THE BEGINNING OF HOW

Optimism and decisiveness also go hand in hand. Optimists act. That's why entrepreneurs are optimists. "Optimism is an essential condition for doing something difficult," says Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon.com. By acting, by doing something, you enter into relationship with the reality around you. That makes *the* reality *your* reality. And that gives meaning to your life. That kind of meaning is missing in many lives today.

Long ago, you were born on a farm and you were needed to help in the fields and in the stables. You knew what your life would look like and what you would do. That clarity provided something to hold onto. Today, everyone can be everything, but that is the flip side of everything is nothing. Many lives strand in that abyss. As the philosopher Friedrich

Nietzsche said, “He who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*.”

Advertisements sell the good life after sixty-five when you can live off your savings—if properly invested with the advertising company, of course. But what is often overlooked is that neither “getting paid to sit at home” nor going on frequent vacations provides you with a fulfilling sense of purpose. You’re better off doing something than having “free time.”

In 2006, San Francisco commemorated the major earthquake of 1906. The *San Francisco Chronicle* ran a story about a 106-year-old man who had lived through the earthquake as a boy. He described that experience, but he also talked about his current life. Every day, he got up at six in the morning to go to work, stocking the shelves at the grocery store a few blocks from his house. He still enjoyed his job. He belonged somewhere. He had a purpose.

THERE’S ALWAYS A WAY

Optimists naturally embrace two elements more readily than pessimists. Optimists are grateful, and they have a sense of humor. They take themselves less seriously. “Laughter is the currency of hope,” Frankl said. Norman Cousins, American political journalist, author, and professor of medical humanities, overcame a painful disease by watching Marx Brothers films. “Laughter interrupts the panic cycle of an illness,” he wrote in his autobiography, *Anatomy of an Illness*. There is a correlation between laughter and the levels of certain hormones in the body that regulate our perception of pain. Who hasn’t experienced laughter as a welcome balm in the middle of grief and misery? It’s as if the painful reality fades for a time, and space opens up for a new and broader perspective.

There will always be problems. That won’t ever change. What you can change is the way you approach those prob-

lems: with gratitude for the chance to learn a new lesson, gratitude for the opportunity to find a path that may provide new fulfillment, and thanks for everything that is working and for everything that makes your life good. That gratitude is the converse of the pessimist's disappointment.

The Brazilians have a saying that might explain why they always place near the top in the list of most optimistic countries. *Da um jeitinho*: There's always a way. It's true. And because that way exists, my mother was right after all: Dark skies are always clearing up. That's why optimism offers us the best way to live.

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