THOUGHTS ON HOPE

Delivered by Elder Dardis McNamee
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We all think we know what hope is: Empowered by love, it's a belief in possibilities of the future, that experiences of value still lie ahead. It's closely related to optimism, the hope-filled tendency to see the good in a situation. But these come in different forms.

One of my favorite examples is one involving filmmaker Steven Spielberg. It was 1988 and Spielberg was already at work on the film, *Always,* for which he was planning to use Irving Berlin's song of that name. Written in 1925, the song was undoubtedly long since in the public domain, but as a courtesy, he decided he would call up the elderly Berlin, approaching his 100th birthday, to let him know.

The phone rings and Berlin answers. "Hello?!" he growls.

"Uh, hello. This is Steven Spielberg.!

"Who?!"

"Steven Spielberg. I make movies."

"Yeah? What d'ya want?"

"Mr. Berlin, I wanted to let you know that I would be using your song *Always* in my next movie."

"No. No way." Berlin growled. "I got plans faw dat song!"

This is American optimism.

Today, in spite of the enormous challenges we face – climate change, a pandemic, violence and a divided citizenry – Americans remain largely optimistic, I think. In spite of recent polls that show a sharp drop in American's faith in the direction the country is taking, I don't think the underlying beliefs will change so quickly. It's deeply rooted in our national character: Most of us believe things – at whatever level – can change for the better and that we can, and should, play a role in making this happen.

(There are also a lot of *shoulds* in the American character…)

But the extent to which this is unusual – by that I mean very different from other cultures – I didn't fully realize until I lived abroad.

In much of Europe, and certainly in Austria where I live, people see American optimism as laughably naïve – while they consider themselves realists who see the world as it is and plan accordingly.

The Austrians, and particularly the Viennese, prefer a kind of “tragic optimism” – that no matter how bad things get, there is always a bright side. This is best expressed in the dark, ironic humor of *Wiener Schmäh*, where situations may be hopeless, but never serious. Even in tragedy and loss. A typical Schmäh goes as follows:

"At his wife’s graveside, a husband stood next to a family friend, who was completely broken up and crying bitterly. The husband laid his arm consolingly across her shoulders and said: 'Don't take it so hard. I'll definitely marry again!' "

It’s a kind of teasing born of a melancholy view of life that, like Schubert’s quintessentially Viennese music, invites smiling through tears, that uses irony to ease the pain of suffering and loss. Tensions are dissolved with humor, and the crisis passes.

Successful politicians are masters at this: When Austria’s great chancellor Bruno Kreisky, a social democrat, was attacked for having so many aristocrats in the Foreign Ministry, he acted mystified: “Why not?” he shrugged. “They speak foreign languages, they have good manners, …and they don’t steal the silver.”

By contrast, Europeans often find Americans alarmingly direct, and our idea that we can intervene to “straighten things out” arrogant and intrusive. We should please mind our own business. Anyway, they know “perfectly well” (in their view) that their lives are shaped by powerful forces beyond their control – which are the job of politicians and government to address.

Americans see this as a copout. In our view, our fate is in our own hands, and if things don’t work out, it’s our fault and we need to do something about it. As my grandfather Cooley so charmingly put it, “Anyone who isn’t rich in America is either lazy or stupid.”

But in his defense, my grandfather was hardly alone: According to a 2004 study by Harvard economists Alberto Alesina and Edward Glaeser, *Fighting Poverty in the US and Europe,* the vast majority of Americans – over 60% – believe that the poor are poor because they are lazy, whereas an equal percentage of Europeans believe the poor are trapped for reasons beyond their control. In countries where people believe poverty is the result of bad luck, voters are overwhelmingly (82%) in favor of redistributing the wealth. For those who believe poverty is curable with hard work, the figure drops by half – to 40%.

Our assumptions about upward mobility – "that the US is actually an egalitarian society because the poor will be rich tomorrow" – also turn out to be wrong. While 70% of Americans believe that the poor could escape poverty if they worked hard enough; only about 40% of Europeans believe that. “Yet in reality,” Alesina and Glaeser wrote, “the American poor are, if anything, more trapped than the poor in Europe,” a gap that has only widened since the study was published.

The origins of hope
Thus it seems all the more remarkable that Americans are so optimistic, when the realities of American lives, particularly at the moment, might leave plentiful grounds for a sense of defeat. But there it is, a never-say-die optimism, and it is surely something to be proud of.

(And if you'll grant me an aside, this tradition may be part of what makes the response to current social trends so complicated – where impulses for badly needed reform seem to have devolved into a "cancel culture" of blaming. When critics go after the activists as un-American, you can begin to see where they're coming from.)

The reasons for this optimism are undoubtedly complex, combining a history of our early struggles for religious freedom and experiments in social utopianism, a pioneer's penchant for self-invention and our undisguised admiration for the fortunes of the self-made.

But more fundamentally, I think it's about our belief that we have a choice: that we can decide how we are going to think about, how we *feel* about what's happening in our lives.

So it is perhaps surprising that, long before I had any idea I would live there, this very American idea was introduced to me by a Viennese. In college, struggling to make sense of my rollercoaster emotions, someone handed me a copy of Viktor Frankl's a remarkable 139-page masterpiece *Man's Search for Meaning*, which some of you may know.

Drafted in nine days in 1945, the book is a memoir of his months of brutal denigration in Auschwitz and Dachau and his discovery that, even in those horrific circumstances, he still had a choice. "I had lost everything that could be taken from a prisoner," he wrote, except ''the last of the human freedoms: to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.''

Every day in the camps, prisoners were inevitably faced with moral choices, about whether to submit internally to those in power who sought to rob them of their remaining humanity. It was the way a prisoner resolved those choices, Frankl wrote, that made the difference.

"A man who could not see the end of his 'provisional existence' was not able to aim at an ultimate goal in life," he wrote. "He ceased living for the future." Others insisted on going on, despite the grotesque and heartless challenges, the utter hopelessness of it all.

The distinguishing factor, Frankl wrote, was someone's ability to find meaning.

Many years later, after moving to Vienna, I found the book again, this time in German. The German title, *Trotzdem Ja zum Leben sagen*, "in spite of everything, say yes to life," has a different emphasis. The whole telling, too, felt different, although it may well have been as much that I was by then a different reader – decades older and in Vienna, where the legacies of World War II are still a living presence. The message felt even more powerful than when I read it at 20.

That optimism, that hope, is a choice.

Frankl, in fact, called his theory “tragic optimism,” and I gradually came to see this as something he understood from the Viennese culture he had grown up in. And I also see it as antidote we need today: That with all of life’s hardships, with all the pain, guilt or death, it is possible to remain optimistic. “*In spite of everything, say yes to life*.”

“Man i*s* capable of changing the world for the better if possible,” wrote Frankl, “and changing himself for the better if necessary.” The power to change ourselves is always ours.