

Is There Room for Realistic Optimism in a World of Divisiveness?

Part II

Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

In [last month's article](#) I cited interviews conducted with United States citizens prior to the presidential election. The people interviewed, some planning to vote for Kamala Harris and others for Donald Trump, voiced a similar concern: if their candidate lost, our country would rapidly deteriorate and not be a place where they wished to live. I noted that while some U.S. citizens also held similar feelings prior to the 2016 and 2020 elections, the intensification of divisiveness, anxiety, and anger during the past eight years had fueled an ever-increasing desperate perspective about the election's outcome.

I do not know if those who voted for Harris hastened their plans to leave the country or are waiting to see what happens when Trump assumes the presidency next month. I know that some are concerned about his choices for cabinet and advisory roles. This concern was heightened when a lawyer for Robert F. Kennedy Jr., Trump's choice for Health Secretary, asked the F.D.A. to revoke approval of the polio vaccine, a vaccine that has basically eradicated polio worldwide. When asked, Kennedy replied that he was "all for" the vaccine.

I decided to write last month's article at the suggestion of several people who asked what they might do for themselves and their children to cope more effectively with the distress and loss of hope they experienced because of the election results. However, I voiced my concern that in offering hope during such a challenging time I not be seen as minimizing or denying the anxiety and dismay that many felt. Comments such as: "Don't worry, things will get better" or "There is nothing to worry about" represented hollow reassurances that would not reassure anyone. I emphasized the importance of adopting an outlook of "realistic optimism" that did not minimize the angst people were experiencing but invited us to seek solutions rather than become trapped by what mental health professionals refer to as a "victim mentality."

My November column focused on what parents and other adults might do to lessen anxiety in children. This article examines the steps adults might initiate to nurture realistic optimism and resilience in themselves, especially if the election results did not favor their candidates.

I believe there are constructive ways to adopt a more hopeful mindset and cope more effectively with anxiety and sadness. Several were highlighted in two articles posted immediately following the election in one of my favorite online publications, *Greater Good Magazine: Science-Based Insights for Meaningful Living*. The first was titled “[Where Do We Go From Here?](#)” and the second “[What’s Giving Us Hope Right Now?](#)”

Contributors to the first article were asked to consider, “What is one step we can take toward a more inclusive, cohesive, and compassionate society?” The second asked researchers, nonprofit leaders, and other experts, “What keeps them optimistic about a better future for American society?” I found their insights to be thoughtful, thought-provoking, and relevant across the political spectrum. And, very importantly, they are rooted in an outlook of realistic optimism rather than false hope. I have selected several to share in this column.

“Where Do We Go from Here?”

The following were answers to the question, “Where Do We Go from Here?”

Dr. Eboo Patel, founder and president of Interfaith America, wrote that whoever won the election, “We’re not looking at the death spiral of democracy, in part because so many people in America will keep doing meaningful things that add up to a strong democracy. They’ll keep showing up at the food bank. They’ll keep coaching Little League. They’ll keep mentoring kids. In each of those small acts, I think, is the work of democracy. That’s the work of civilization. That’s the work of grace. In the weeks and months after the election, there will be time for strategizing and sociologizing. But I think in the immediate aftermath, I would recommend that our first reflection be a spiritual reflection: What am I doing that is meaningful to me and to others—no matter how small or mundane—that I want to continue doing?”

Dr. Mylien Duong is a clinical psychologist and senior director of research and innovation at the [Constructive Dialogue Institute](#), (CDI) described as “a nonprofit devoted to equipping the next generation of Americans with the mindsets and skillsets to bridge divides.” In her work with CDI, Dr. Duong observed, “I’ve engaged across political divides myself: I’ve talked with people who disagree with me about the role of race in America; the purpose of diversity, equity, and inclusion programs; legal rights and restrictions for trans youth; and the morality of early-term abortion. I’ve had these conversations with complete strangers from the opposing political party.”

Duong continued, “Gradually, over the course of these conversations, something began to shift for me. The sense of ‘the other’ dissipated and was replaced by real people with real lives. For the first time in my life, I understood why ‘the other side’ thought and voted the way they did. I learned that, no, these individuals were not driven by hate or misinformation. I found that, for the most part, people wanted what was best for their families.

“By nature, elections are divisive. Some Americans will feel exuberant or relieved; others will be angry and dejected. Rather than relying on the media narrative of what the ‘other party’ is really like, perhaps ask yourself: How many Republicans and Democrats do I really know? And if it turns out, as it did for me, that you have almost no meaningful contact with people of an opposing party, there are [incredible organizations](#) that can help you bridge that gap.”

“What’s Giving Us Hope Now?”

The following were answers to the question, “What’s Giving Us Hope Right Now?”

Dr. Tania Israel, professor of counseling psychology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, wrote, “What gives me hope? You do!” She explained, “I spent the months leading up to the election engaging with Americans across the political spectrum. I listened to them from the stage, in bars, on the phone, and at their front doors. I heard from people who are happily married across political parties, who are reaching out to repair relationships strained by differing views, who appreciate their neighbors despite contrasting yard signs. What I glean from these conversations is that Americans are more thoughtful, complex, and caring than we imagine them to be.”

Israel noted that while her anecdotal stories may not convince some people, there is a body of research that supports what she found in her interviews. The research she cited indicates that Americans have more in common than we may realize, including:

“[Two-thirds of Americans](#) do not fall into either end of the political spectrum. This ‘exhausted majority’ is tired of division, recognizes complexity of issues, and supports compromise.

“Our negative feelings about people on ‘the other side’ are fueled by misperceptions. [We overestimate the distance between our views](#), the demographic differences between party members, the willingness of people in the other party to circumvent democratic norms, their support for political violence, and the dislike and dehumanization they feel toward us.”

Israel observed that there are certainly “people who are misinformed, aggressive, and corrupt. But most of us are not.” She posited that most Americans share core values, including service, patriotism, and bipartisanship, adding that many organizations in America are engaged in bringing people with [different political views together](#).

Paralleling the observations of Israel and Duong are the beliefs held by Monica Guzman, a senior fellow at Braver Angels. Guzman cited research that we’re not as divided as we may assume on most issues. “Our political climate is rife with misperceptions and exaggerations that, as soon as you get a little closer, you realize are just not real. We have enormous capacity as humans to understand each other, if we allow ourselves to break out of the cycle where we judge each other more and engage with each other less.” Guzman also reported studies that show disagreement doesn’t have to be “horrible and painful,” that it can actually be “fun.”

Common Themes

I found several common themes housed in the insights of the contributors to the two articles described above, a couple of which I addressed in last month’s column. I recognize that some people may feel the suggestions of these contributors are unrealistic, that the “other side” is not willing to change, that there is little they themselves can do to change the situation. Some may find it is easier to limit interactions with those who have different viewpoints, especially if the behavior of these “others” is characterized by constant hostility and lack of empathy. In contrast, there may be more room for cooperation and understanding than originally predicted. The common themes include:

Strengthen Personal Control. While we may not have control over who won the election, what we have more control over than we realize is our attitude and response to this and similar events. As noted earlier, many groups are engaged in uniting people of different backgrounds and political views. One might consider joining such a group or taking action in their community to bridge differences and get to know other people. Also, as a number of studies have shown, we must be open to questioning misperceptions. If reinforced often enough, these misperceptions, although false, become truths, and they assume even greater strength.

Engage in Meaningful Acts. As I noted earlier, Dr. Patel highlighted the impact that even small acts such as volunteering at a food bank or coaching children can have on fortifying a democracy. I view these small acts that involve contributing to the well-being of others as

“contributory activities” that strengthen ties with one or two people or, possibly an entire community.

Replace Thoughts and Emotions of Resignation and Hopelessness with Realistic Optimism and Hope. I am aware that changing mindsets dominated by resignation and hopelessness to mindsets filled with realistic optimism can feel like a Herculean task. However, consider the alternative if we don’t engage in this task and continue on a path of greater divisiveness permeated with a lack of empathy and kindness.

Just as we possess misperceptions about “the other,” studies have shown that we are not very skilled at predicting the future. Perhaps in four or five months, I will question if my realistic optimism about current events was in fact “realistic.” However, what I do know is if we do nothing constructive to address our anxiety, anger, or sadness, we are inviting a self-fulfilling prophecy that will produce the very events we do not wish to see. I would encourage each of us to ask, “What small steps can I take to address the issues that divide and weaken us and that serve as obstacles to achieving the basic needs we have for a sense of belonging and connectedness?”

A Thought about Hope

On several occasions I have quoted Chan Hellman, founding director of the Hope Research Center at the University of Oklahoma. I wish to do so again:

Being hopeful doesn’t mean engaging in wishful thinking or blind optimism. Rather, it’s the belief or the expectation that the future can be better, and that more importantly, we have the capacity to pursue that future. The opposite of hope, therefore, is not pessimism, but rather apathy, with its loss of motivation. And while wishing is passive, hope is about taking action.

My warm wishes for a happy, healthy, and peaceful holiday season and New Year filled with possibility and hope.

<https://www.drrobertbrooks.com/>