

# The Power of Optimism

By Daniel W. Trathen, D. Min. Ph. D.

As we are in the last week of this year we are faced with looking back at the reality of 2009 and ahead to the hope for 2010. Local and national news programs air television specials on the "best of 2009," or the "top 10 news stories of 2009." We receive holiday cards wishing us a "joyous, healthy, and prosperous New Year." Such was the word picture for the Romans when they selected the word January for the first month of their calendar year. The word January was chosen in honor of the Roman god Janus who was identified with doors, gates, and new beginnings. He was represented on their coins as a man with two opposite faces; one looking back and the other forward. Many of us spend time doing the same. We play, "coulda, shoulda, woulda" games and second guess our past decisions and behaviors. We are stuck in the past; frozen in time. Others of us think more positively and give ourselves the benefit of the doubt. We are more optimistic about the future. What do optimistic people look, sound, and act like? How do they think and behave? Optimistic people are positive. They might perceive a cup as "half-full", not "half-empty". They're contagious and creative thinkers, seeing possibilities in every situation. Optimists are made, not born. William James, a famous psychologist of the early 20th century wrote, "The greatest discovery of my generation is that human beings can alter their lives by altering their attitudes of mind." He went on to say that, "the essence of genius is knowing what to overlook."

"The optimist thinks this is the best of all possible worlds. The pessimist is afraid it is so," quipped novelist James Branch Cabell. What is an optimist? How do they think and behave? Optimistic people are individuals who are positive and encouraging. Optimists act rather than react. They are more intentional and willing to overlook some issues. Optimists do not get as distracted by situations and personal feelings, and can keep focused on their goal. They are visionaries who can visualize how a person or event can positively develop and seek to implement details toward that end. They are leaders who have confidence in themselves, their leadership style, and their vision. While pessimists are infectious, optimists are contagious because they are hopeful. Webster's defines optimism as "an inclination to put the most favorable construction upon actions and events or to anticipate the best possible outcome." The power of optimism is the process of positive anticipation.

Synonyms of optimism are hope, buoyancy and thankfulness. Orison Marden once wrote, "There is no medicine like hope, no incentive so great, and no tonics so powerful as exceptions of something better tomorrow." Proverbial wisdom states, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but desire fulfilled is a tree of life."

Whereas pessimists tend to sink in never-ending circumstances, optimists float on the top like buoys--buoys that mark the channels and dangerous shoals and reefs. We need to be careful to follow the lighthouse of optimism.

The power of optimism leads to a thankful perspective. Optimists are thankful for what they have and they bring light into darkened places. As Robert Louis Stevenson wrote, "The person who has stopped being thankful has fallen asleep in life." In his best selling book, *The Power of Optimism*, Alan Loy McGinnis spells out 12 characteristics of tough-minded optimists who choose to see life through the power of positive anticipation:

1. Optimists are seldom surprised by trouble.
2. Optimists look for partial solutions.
3. Optimists believe they have control over their future.
4. Optimists allow for regular renewal.
5. Optimists interrupt their negative trains of thought.
6. Optimists heighten their powers of appreciation.
7. Optimists use their imaginations to rehearse success.
8. Optimists are cheerful even when they can't be happy.
9. Optimists believe they have an almost unlimited capacity for stretching.
10. Optimists build lots of love into their lives.
11. Optimists like to swap good news.
12. Optimists accept what cannot be changed.

As we stand in the doorway crossing from one year to the next, rather than making resolutions that we might never keep, why not do some simple evaluation of ourselves and make a conscious decision to be more of an optimist in 2010. What do you want your life to be like on December 31, 2010? What do you want your relationships to be like? What do you want your job to be like? What needs to change to insure positive results? We don't have to be like the Roman god, *Janus*; we can choose to be more single-minded.

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