



**NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALIST CHURCH**

**Do You Want the Good News . . .
or the Bad News?**

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It's good to see all of you today. I was starting to get worried that everyone had gone up to de Benneville Pines and there would be no one here.

It is such a pleasure to be part of Lissa's "Summer Worship Team" and be speaking to you today. Don't you love these summer services with people from the congregation getting up and talking about such meaningful things that are on their minds? It's a little like Greg's mystery box...you never know what you're going to get, but it's likely to be something wonderful. It's been a highlight of my summer ever since Jim started the "Preacher in You" program five years ago in 2011. And this summer has been fabulous, hasn't it?

But sadly in the world beyond our "Neighborhood" the summer of 2016 has been...not so fabulous. Outside of the Olympics, it has been a summer memorable for its violence, its tragedy, and just bad news. We have been shocked. We have been saddened. We have been mystified.

In America we have witnessed fear, anger, and divisiveness. We have heard doom and gloom about where we are going and who we have become as a nation. Apparently that is supposed to translate into votes for some of our more cynical politicians. Listening to the screaming tantrums of Rudy Giuliani and others, I began to feel like they were trying to form a lynch mob. How did that happen? Do we still do that in this country? So many questions. So few answers.

But in spite of all that, for most of us, I suspect, somehow...there is hope. Somehow we can still see tomorrow as a better day. You see most of us, believe it or not, are optimists. No really, scientists tell us this is true. This may sound improbable. It certainly does to me. I have never thought of myself as an optimist. Sarcasm, cynicism – a questioning mind that never takes things at face value – that has always been me.

But watching the political scene lately, I have learned just how foolishly negative the world out there can be, and it's a little scary. So I decided to talk about optimism today. Why not? Explore a road generally less travelled by me, and perhaps discover something I should have learned long ago.

I found this book by Tali Sharot, a neuroscientist and faculty member of the Department of Cognitive, Perceptual and Brain Sciences at University College, London. It's called *The Optimism Bias*. In her book she contends that The Optimism Bias is something we all share; that our brains are pre-programmed to overestimate positive outcomes and underestimate negative ones, and that it may, in fact, be crucial to our very existence.

Still don't believe it? Well, maybe I can help you. Let's take marriage, for example. This is an important survival strategy for most societies. Now we all know that in this country the

divorce rate is somewhere between 40 - 50%. Yet there was a recent survey polling newlyweds and it asked them what they thought their chances of getting divorced were. 0% of them believed that that was possible. Interestingly, divorce lawyers, who you would think might know better, were also polled, and also hugely underestimated their own likelihood of getting divorced. Given the divorce statistics of 40% - 50% you would expect divorce lawyers to be doing a booming business in pre-nups. But no, statistically speaking, only about 5% of married couples have pre-nups. But *remarriage* is booming! A Pew survey in 2013 revealed that fully 40% of marriages in that year had at least one partner with a previous marriage. As Dr. Samuel Johnson accurately proclaimed some 250 years ago, "Remarriage is the triumph of hope over experience."

So you see Mother Nature didn't instill in us "family values" in order to keep marriage a strong force in human society and to propagate the species. No, Nature prefers to keep things simple, and stays out of politics. She gave us... "optimism."

Here's something else. In another recent survey 3 out of 4 people were found to be optimistic about the future of their families, while only 1 in 4 were optimistic about the future of "the family" in general. Apparently we are optimistic about ourselves, but about other people in other places, not so much. As we zoom out and expand our view, something changes in our sense of optimism.

Here, let's try an experiment in our "Neighborhood" Laboratory. I'm going to name a few basic human skill sets, and I would like you to rate yourself as honestly as you can and raise your hand if you feel a category I name could apply to you. Okay, here we go:

Getting Along With Others – Who here believes they are in the bottom 25% in this category?
Who here believes they are in the TOP 25%? (Yes, most of us)

How about Driving Ability? Who here believes they are in the bottom 25% in this category?
Who here believes they are in the TOP 25%? Getting the idea?

Here are some others (you needn't raise your hands): How Interesting Are You? (Top 25%... bottom 50%?); How Honest Are You?; and, I guess I have to ask, How Modest Are You? So now (many congratulations), we have all managed to prove a statistical impossibility. We can't ALL be in the Top 25–50% in ALL of these categories. Someone *has* to be on the bottom.

Or perhaps, what we have just proven is that we are all just a teensy bit optimistic. Is that a good thing? Some people would say NO. They say the secret to happiness in life is to have low expectations – much less chance of disappointment, and if you are wrong, you can look forward to that unexpected thrill when you are pleasantly surprised. It's a good theory, but it's wrong.

Whether you succeed or you fail, people with high expectations always feel better. It's what I call "the Donald Trump" effect. "If I succeed it's because I'm a genius. If I fail it's because the

system is rigged and unfair, but now I have learned something about how to game the system. Next time I will win." On the other hand, when you have low expectations it's the "Eeyore" effect. "If I fail, it's because I'm *never* any good at this. And if I succeed, well, I guess I just got lucky. Next time, no doubt, reality will catch up with me."

So optimists expect more in the future, and that anticipation makes us happier. Yes, anticipation – the promise of good things to come. That is at the heart of every true optimist. Ever wonder what people's favorite day of the week is? Guess what? It's NOT Saturday. No, the name of the restaurant is TGIF, "Thank God It's Friday." Friday is that magical day with all the anticipation of good things in store for the coming weekend. On Sunday all you have to look forward to is going back to work. And Saturday? Well, too often it's not quite as good as we might have hoped. But if we attack the day with all the enthusiasm of Friday, sometimes things can turn out even better.

And so the optimism bias can not only make us feel better about things, it can actually change our objective reality. That's why the power of positive thinking is so related to success. It's also been proven to lead to better health. It's not for nothing that most doctors believe in the power of placebos. Guess what? They work! An excellent example of the triumph of belief over distress. If we look forward to a brighter future, stress and anxiety are reduced. Suddenly we have better relations with family and friends. In this way our positive attitude can often start to become a self fulfilling prophecy.

"Data pointing to the upside of optimism is plentiful." says Tali Sharot. "Optimists live longer, are healthier and happier, make better financial plans and are more successful." Or as Winston Churchill once said, "The pessimist will see difficulty in every opportunity... while the optimist will see opportunity in every difficulty." Were it not for optimism perhaps our caveman ancestors would never have been able to overcome their fear of fire to discover the millions of ways that they could actually make use of it.

So here's a question I keep asking myself, if "the optimism bias" is all around us, bred into our species by Mother Nature as necessary for positive growth and even survival... **why do we seem to be so fixated on bad news?** Now, we circle back to the "troublesome summer" that I talked about in my opening.

Paris, Nice, Orlando, Baton Rouge, Dallas, Munich, and now Milwaukee, the list goes on. As of this writing, there have been 125 police shootings captured on video so far this year. Black Lives Matter has sounded the alarm, and in July, speakers at the Republican Convention and members of law enforcement were blaming them for Dallas and Baton Rouge and who knows what else? So, what is their message here? Are we not supposed to care?

There are negative news stories of murder and mayhem and natural disasters coming at us from all directions. "If it bleeds it leads" says the prevailing wisdom in journalism, and it has been this way since long before the advent of the 24 hour news cycle in the early 1980s. Today bad news far outweighs good news by as much as seventeen negative news reports for every

one “good news” report. “It’s what the readers want to read.” says the print media. “It’s why people tune in” say the newscasters. But is it really? Yeah, it may be so.

We, the millions of consumers who read and tune into the news; we the happy, optimistic, audience, have shown repeatedly to scientists and sociologists who attempt to study this issue, that we seem to “prioritize bad news over good news.” I’ll spare you the multitude of studies and surveys that sample both readers and viewers in an effort to prove that the general public seems to prefer bad news to good news, but it’s not good news. However, there is a big distinction to be made here. And it is an important one. We do not “prefer” bad news. We “prioritize” bad news. And this is where things get interesting.

Let’s go back to “mother nature” for a moment, and what we know about our own psychological evolution. Our brains evolved in a hunter/gatherer environment where anything unusual or dangerous that was known to have occurred had to be communicated immediately ...it was a matter of survival. News travelled fast about saber tooth tiger attacks and hostile tribes on the move, and headed in our direction. News of fire, flood, and other natural disasters spread surprisingly quickly over remarkable distances. “Nothing travels faster than the speed of light,” said Douglas Adams author of *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Universe*, “with the possible exception of bad news, which obeys its own special laws.”

We emerged from the jungles as a dominant species, because we had highly developed “jungle brains.” Ever cautious, ever watchful. In times of vulnerability we kept a hair trigger on our panic button, and were ready to do battle at any moment. But that was long, long ago. We are no longer hunter/gatherers. We have evolved way beyond that into what we like to call “a democracy.” We may not have a problem with saber tooth tigers these days. But hostile tribes are out there in remarkable profusion. And they say they are coming to get us.

If you are a person of color or perhaps gender non-compliant, you may easily fall prey to other kinds of hostiles within our own community. There are “lone wolves” everywhere. And sadly some of them, as difficult as it seems to be for our society to admit, may be wearing a badge. Suffice it to say, our “jungle brains” are still on high alert. And so, I think, we all pay very close attention to the sounds of the drums – the nightly news – CNN, MSNBC, dare I say, Fox News? And some of us still *read* our news.

An article in *Psychology Today* says, “News appeals to our mind’s quest for survival-relevant information, but it doesn’t necessarily meet that need. It squanders our attention on generalized threat signals that we can’t really act on.” Far distant from our current location, and of no immediate threat at all. Our new methods of electronic news make distance disappear. We see that negative and unusual things happen all the time in the world, and we seem to fantasize that they are right next-door. But distance is important here.

In his book *Innumeracy: Mathematical Illiteracy and Its Consequences*, mathematician, John Allen Paulos explains it this way:

If all the news you were receiving was about the small town you live in...say, 500 to 5000 people, then the possibility of something unusual or violent happening would be low. Unusual and violent things don't happen to individual people very often. But in a large city of millions of people, dramatic and negative things do occur all the time. *Now*, most people watch national and worldwide media where news reports are coming in from everywhere . . . and we have expanded geometrically the bad news.

Remember what I said before about optimism? We tend to be more optimistic about ourselves, but as we pull back and widen our view, something seems to change. Namely, as you expand your view, you begin to multiply the number of negative stories coming in. "As soon as you get out of your zone," says Mary McNaughton-Cassill, a professor at the University of Texas, "the only information you receive is from the news, but our news has become global, and by definition, covers mainly the negative and extreme things." Suddenly, you don't feel quite as good as you did a minute ago.

Perhaps, it's important to state at this juncture what a steady diet of bad news *won't do*. It won't give you PTSD, or anxiety, or depression if you weren't pre-disposed to these conditions. However, it would be hard to argue that unstable and paranoid people have *not* been motivated to act irrationally by what they see on the news. Some of this summer's actors may fall into that category.

So what do we do about this? I believe we need to take even another step back. We need to alter our frame of reference. And then we need to look again, with different eyes, and readjust the sensitivity of our panic buttons. Because what we most need to understand in order to gauge the degree of threat we may be facing is context. "We need to stop consuming the news like a hungry teen-ager wolfing down pop tarts," says our professor from the University of Texas, "rather seek out a bit of context and a bit of understanding as to what the true significance of a story may be to us, why certain pieces of information are affecting us in certain ways. Learn why we get anxious and worried about things that probably aren't going to happen to us, or even affect us. Learn what our triggers are."

There is a huge difference between being informed and becoming obsessive. *Pondering* over unpleasant events is a dangerous line to cross that can lead to pessimism, anxiety and stress. But it is easy to do so in an age when there is so much scary information zipping around. Perhaps people can be forgiven these days for taking a "hell in a hand basket" attitude toward what is going on in the world. But we already know from social psychology 101, that the more threatened people feel, the more likely they will be to support repressive right-wing politics and the dangerous demagogues who promote them. History, even recent history is full of examples of societies making bad choices because of pessimistic public hysteria. And from our own history, we know we are not immune to this phenomenon.

Maybe *we* don't know what our triggers are. But there are ruthless politicians out there who do. They know only too well how to stimulate our "jungle brains." "Just get them to push the

panic button", they say, "and they will pull our lever in the voting booth." There are a whole lot of people out there who are counting on it. But being of sound mind and a contrary nature, I am looking for a way to disconnect my panic button. And learn to recognize bad news for what it really is – a shadow in a remarkable, often beautiful, landscape full of both light and shade. Without observing both the darkness and light, how can we see anything clearly?

Winston Churchill, who faced perhaps the worst of these "jungle brain politicians" in a global conflict liked to say, "For myself I am an optimist – it does not seem to be much use being anything else."

To that I say "Amen" and I'll let Stephen Grimm and Charlie Chaplin have the last words:

Smile though your heart is aching
Smile even though it's breaking.
When there are clouds in the sky, you'll get by

If you smile through your pain and sorrow
Smile and may be tomorrow
You'll see the sun come shine through...for you

Light up your face with gladness,
Hide every trace of sadness,
Although a tear may be ever so near

That's the time you must keep on trying
Smile, what's the use of crying.
You'll see that life is still worthwhile,
If you just smile.