

PESSIMISM AND OPTIMISM

AMBASSADOR JONATHAN MOORE

Dennis Goodman '52 asked the first question of the panelists who had just finished speaking on "Answering John Dickey's Call: In the Service of the Nation", an event held at Dartmouth on February 7, 2007 celebrating the 25th anniversary of the John S. Dickey Center for International Understanding:

"Observing Washington and the world today after all that experience, are you optimistic or pessimistic?"

Ron Spiers '48, formerly a career ambassador at the State Department and under secretary general at the United Nations, replied: "I'm hopeful. Neither pessimistic nor optimistic." Later he amended this to: "I guess I'm more on the optimistic side than on the pessimistic side."

Bill Frenzel '50, once U.S. Congressman from the Minnesota Sixth District and Chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, answered: "To have engaged in politics means you're a cock-eyed optimist. I'm always optimistic; especially when things aren't going so well, that's the best time to be optimistic."

A member of the class of '54 and having served at State, Defense and the U.N., I said: "I'm going to give an evasive answer. I don't like either pessimistic or optimistic because they involve the requirement of making a prediction. I don't have any predictions."

Bob Barry '56, citing his training in economics and his experience as ambassador in Indonesia and Bulgaria, and lamenting the cost of lost opportunities, concluded: "I have to be an out-and-out pessimist. . . I think it's going to take a long time to pull ourselves out of the hole we're in and the first step is to stop digging."

Stimulated by my colleagues' comments and dissatisfied with my own, the question kept re-occurring, and I felt I should give it some further thought -- if not to understand better then at least to get it out of

Ambassador Jonathan Moore, Dartmouth Class of 1954, wrote this essay in response to a panel held while he was a visiting fellow at the Dickey Center during the Winter and Spring 2007 terms. Ambassador Moore has held a variety of posts at the United Nations and in the federal government, and currently is an associate at the Joan Shorenstein Center for the Press, Politics and Public Policy at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard.

my mind.

Without intending to be straitjacketed by formal constructs or to ignore either creative or current usage, I checked Webster's and found a definition of pessimism as follows: "An inclination to put the least favorable construction on actions and happenings, to emphasize adverse aspects, conditions and possibilities, or to anticipate the worst possible outcome." For optimism, it is the exact opposite; substitute "most favorable", "minimize" and "best possible" in the relevant slots.

I remember from a time I worked with refugees the combination of dejection and inspiration I got from being with them, and the urgency of sustaining hope while not denying reality. I resisted giving up doubt; certainty bothered me. The last thing I wanted was to be cynical in my skepticism.

I recalled Gandhi's pragmatic optimism; maybe that was closer to it. I laughed at P.G. Woodhouse's dialogue between optimist Pat ("the race is always to the swift") and pessimist Mike ("education is a draining out, not a putting in"), and at the author's wonderful character Gussie Fink-Nettle, a devoted optimist who spoke of an acquaintance, "He's as foul a pessimist as ever bit a tiger. . . and why do I despise him? Because. . . his attitude is defeatist."

Wary of pessimism because of getting caught in the gloom and of optimism because of denying the truth, I favored a Jeremiah over a Pollyanna.

Of course, quite a lot has been written on this subject, and I'm only barely acquainted with it. Reinhold Niebuhr delineated "pessimistic optimism". He wrote that "Perplexity remains, but there is no perplexity in despair." Niebuhr warned against an optimism not related "to some ultimate source of meaning", and also that

The more men think the more they are tempted to pessimism because their thought surveys the worlds beyond their little cosmos, and analyses the chaos, death, destruction and misery which seem to deny their faith in the harmony and meaning of their existence in it.

John Paul Lederach, in his book *The Moral Imagination*, writes about "constructive pessimism" and examines the relationship between "transcendence and grounded realism." He believes that "The pessimism of which we speak arises from hard-won experience as a guide that tests the quality of the engagement. . . What it seeks to engage is a deep understanding of human affairs. . ."

We may not be dealing with a useful formulation; something may be lost in the oppositeness inherent in the question. Exclusivity of either one seems foolish. Pessimism discourages action because it won't do any good; optimism discourages action because it isn't needed. Taken separately, each option tends to encourage lethargy and to discourage

energy. Adherents of each are let off the hook; accountability is absent in both cases.

John Dickey was Dartmouth's last internationalist President. He was unable to think of the College's purpose or personality as separate from the world at large. He believed Dartmouth's mission was inextricably connected to what happened internationally. He kept reminding us of this, perhaps thinking that an extra effort was required to point us beyond our privileged life in such a nurturing, beautiful and isolated community. And he combined rueful recognition of the dangers in the world with a spirited confidence about our ability to confront them.

Along with its exciting opportunities, our new world is afflicted by intense, complex, intimate interactions unanticipated a half century ago and not fully comprehended now, all of its citizens threatened with converging forces which move with speed and power across nations, continents, oceans and under no one's control. "Globalization" in all of its definitions and dimensions is exploding as humans and their globe collide: in climate change and environmental degradation, hypersensitive economic interdependence, expanding ethnic conflict, terrorism and nuclear proliferation, pandemics and the widening inequity between the rich and the poor. Despite such phenomena and their tendency to reinforce each other, we have not yet grasped what we must do to avoid being overwhelmed by them. Our global institutions cannot be left dwarfed or our human imagination stunned. We have not collectively resolved -- across the globe -- that the interests of one depend as never before on the interests of every one.

What all this means is that we need to be pessimistic enough to recognize these unprecedented realities for what they are, not deny or hide them; becoming sufficiently aroused to embrace the commitments necessary to mobilize the great reservoir of optimistic energy with which we might prevail. This comes close to being pessimistic in thought and optimistic in action,

Guided by such contemplation, and my own experience, I think that pessimism and optimism are not separate alternatives, but closely connected and even interdependent. The question inviting a one-or-the-other answer is a trap. The answer is: Both. The two go together. Pessimism should be the footing for optimism, and optimism can enlighten pessimism. Optimism ought to be earned through pessimism; if the pessimism is by-passed, the optimism is illusory. Perhaps we can use pessimism to give impetus to hope and to nudge optimism from rhetoric to result.