

## ULTIMATE OPTIMISM

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Several weeks after 9/11, my then-eight-year-old daughter Zoë crawled into bed with my wife Holly Atkinson early one morning after I had gotten up to make coffee and feed our dog Bonnie. Zoë snuggled in and glanced at the New York Times Holly was reading.

A few moments later, Zoë asked, “If they drop a nuclear bomb on us, will it destroy all of New York City?”

“Yes,” Holly replied.

A short pause, then another question: “Will it destroy Roosevelt Island?” (That’s where Zoë’s mother lived at the time.)

“Yes,” Holly answered again.

“Will the bomb destroy New Jersey too?” (That’s where Zoë was born.)

“Yes, at least much of it,” Holly replied for a third time.

Zoë thought for a moment, then sighed and said, “Oh well, I guess we might as well stay here.”

This is not the sort of conversation we are used to having with eight-year-olds at 7 AM on a weekday morning. Nor was Zoë the only New Yorker whose waking hours after 9/11 were spent pondering bombs, germs, and other terrorist acts. Which means that Osama bin Laden had achieved at least part of the goal of terrorism, which is to terrify.

The word terrorism comes from the Latin verb *terrere*, which means “to cause to tremble.” It came into common usage in the so-called Reign of Terror during the French Revolution. In his book *Terror in the Mind of God*, Mark Juergensmayer explains that “the public response to the violence — the trembling that terrorism effects — is part of the meaning of the term.”

“The definition of a terrorist act,” he says, “is provided by us, the witnesses — the ones terrified — and not by the party committing the act. It is we — or more often our public agents, the news media — who affix the labels on acts of violence that make them terrorism. These are public acts of destruction, committed without a clear military objective, that arouse a widespread sense of fear.”

The terrorist attack by Hamas on the state of Israel and its citizens two weeks ago appears to have had several goals, but it’s not clear that any of them were primarily military goals. Rather, Hamas had political aims in mind — to upset the status quo of the ongoing blockade of Gaza and the continuing expansion of settlements in the West Bank, to disrupt the normalization of relations between Israel and Arab states which heretofore has mostly ignored the Palestinians, and perhaps most importantly, to

provoke Israel into exacting revenge in a way that sullies its reputation with the West and its Arab neighbors. It's too early to say whether Hamas will succeed in achieving these aims, but thus far Israel's response seems to be in line with Hamas's expectations.

On this point, I strongly encourage you to listen to an interview with [Thomas Friedman on Israel's "Morally Impossible Situation"](#) published as a podcast on Friday in the New York Times. Among other things, he insists that peace will not come to the Middle East unless Israel stops building illegal settlements in the West Bank.

Whatever may come next, it's clear that the attack two weeks ago was a terrorist attack. In its aftermath, there has been a lot of trembling — both from outrage at what has happened and from fear of what might happen next.

In President Joe Biden's speech in Tel Aviv on Wednesday, he addressed these emotional consequences of terrorism directly. He warned against giving into what he called the primal feeling of shock, pain, and all-consuming rage. He said, "While you feel that rage, don't be consumed by it. After 9/11, we were enraged in the United States. And while we sought justice and got justice, we also made mistakes."

Biden's remarks echoed comments made a week earlier by the Yale historian Timothy Snyder in his Substack column. The best-selling author of *On Tyranny* and many other books, Snyder says, "Terror can be a weapon of the weak, designed to get the strong to use their strength against themselves. Terrorists know what they are going to do and have an idea what will follow. They mean to create an emotional situation where self-destructive action seems like the urgent and only choice."

Snyder continues, "9/11 was a successful terrorist attack because we made it so. Regardless of whether its planners and perpetrators lived to see this, it achieved its main goal: to weaken the United States. Without 9/11, the United States presumably would not have invaded Iraq, a decision which led to the death of tens of thousands of people, helped fund the rise of China, weakened international law, and undid American credibility. 9/11 was a contributing cause to American decisions that caused far more death than 9/11 itself did. But the point here is that 9/11 facilitated American decisions that hurt America far more than 9/11 itself did."

He adds, "My point is that it is always worth asking, in such situations, whether you are following the terrorist's script. If what you want to do is what your enemy wants you to do, someone is mistaken. It might be your enemy. But it also might be you."

Here's the question: how do we not make this mistake? How do we face down the fear without being overwhelmed by it or driven by it?

The contemporary American poet Maggie Smith addresses this quandary in her poem titled "Good Bones." She begins:

Life is short, though I keep this from my children.  
Life is short, and I've shortened mine  
in a thousand delicious, ill-advised ways,  
a thousand deliciously ill-advised ways

I'll keep from my children. The world is at least fifty percent terrible, and that's a conservative estimate, though I keep this from my children. For every bird there is a stone thrown at a bird. For every loved child, a child broken, bagged, sunk in a lake. Life is short and the world is at least half terrible, and for every kind stranger, there is one who would break you, though I keep this from my children.

Maggie Smith begins where we should all begin — by recognizing that life is short and there are terrible people in the world who do terrible things. In so doing, however, Smith may have overstated the percentage of the world that's terrible.

Writing in the current issue of Atlantic magazine, the Harvard social scientist Arthur C Brooks describes what has been called the “Dark Triad” personality. He says, “The term was coined by the psychologists Delroy Paulhus and Kevin Williams in 2002 for people with three salient personality characteristics: narcissism, Machiavellianism, and a level of psychopathy. These people confuse and measurable hurt you, because they act in a way that doesn't seem to make sense.” They are “social predators who charm, manipulate, and ruthlessly plow their way through life, leaving a broad trail of broken hearts, shattered expectations, and empty wallets.”

Brooks points out that these psychological characteristics act as dials, not switches. Everyone exhibits at least some degree of self-centered, manipulative, and antisocial behavior. But when these traits become dominant in a personality, the person can be labeled a Dark Triad personality.

Brooks goes on to point out that psychologist Scott Barry Kaufman has concluded, based on his research, that such people constitute about seven percent of the population — or about 1 person out of every 14. In extreme cases, a Dark Triad person can display a fourth trait to make what is called a Dark Tetrad. This added trait is sadism, or the enjoyment of others' suffering.

Perhaps Maggie Smith was right after all. People on the extreme end of the Dark Tetrad continuum, even if they are few, can indeed make the world half terrible. Why? Because the most narcissistic, Machiavellian, and sociopathic men in the world often end up in leadership positions. Human civilization has not yet evolved a way to deal preemptively with the horrific destruction caused by Dark Tetrad leaders.

The good news is that Kaufman and his colleagues have also described a counterpoint to Dark Triad personalities, which they call the Light Triad. “The characteristics of a Light Triad,” they say, “include faith in humanity (trusting in people's fundamental goodness), humanism (believing in the dignity and worth of each person), and a Kantian adherence to the idea of universal moral law,” which means refusing to treat others as objects or instruments. Compared with the seven percent of

the population that qualify as Dark Triad personalities, Kaufman estimates that fully 50 percent of the population qualify as Light Triads.

On the interpersonal level, a good way to assess whether an individual fits into one category or the other, Kaufman says, is to ask how you feel around them. Do they bring out the worst in you or the best in you? Do they inspire you to become a better person? The process of bringing out the best in others is known as moral elevation. Being around morally excellent people helps us feel uplifted and optimistic.

In Biden's Tel Aviv speech, he urged moral elevation in the face of terrorism. He said, "What sets us apart from the terrorists is that we believe in the fundamental dignity of every human life — Israeli, Palestinian, Arab, Jew, Muslim, Christian — everyone. You can't give up what makes you who you are. If you give that up, then the terrorists win. And we can never let them win."

Biden continued, "Nations of conscience like the United States and Israel are not measured solely by the example of their power. We're measured by the power of our example. That's why, as hard as it is, we must keep pursuing peace. We must keep pursuing a path so that Israel and the Palestinian people can both live safely, in security, in dignity, and in peace."

Maggie Smith ends her poem in much the same way — by focusing not on what's terrible in the world, but by emphasizing the role we can play in making the world a better place. Speaking of her children, from whom she is trying to hide the horrors of the world, she says:

I am trying  
to sell them the world. Any decent realtor,  
walking you through a real hellhole, chirps on  
about good bones: This place could be beautiful,  
right? You could make this place beautiful.

In the final line of the poem, Smith emphasizes our agency in creating beauty, which requires the presence of truth, justice, and peace. You could make this place beautiful, she says — you.

No matter how terrible the world becomes, we need to keep our focus on how we can create such beauty. Fortunately, most people in the world are well suited to the task. We trust the fundamental goodness of other people (until proven otherwise), we believe in the dignity and worth of each person, and we refuse to use or abuse other people simply as a means of getting what we want. Simply put, we are optimists. We believe we can together make this place — this world of ours — more beautiful, more truthful, more peaceful, and more just.

When I find myself overwhelmed by the ugliness of the world, I find myself turning time and again to Voltaire's novel *Candide*, published in 1758. It recounts the misfortunes of young Candide and his optimistic tutor Pangloss. Given everything

necessary for a happy and successful life, Candide suffers the opposite: every conceivable misfortune, tragedy, and form of abuse. In part, Candide is an ironic attack on the optimism espoused by Leibniz, who famously insisted that this is the best of all possible worlds. Maybe not, Voltaire says. Bad things do happen.

Voltaire's primary focus in Candide is the alliance between religious fanaticism and political power, which almost always leads to rampant torture and cruelty. At the very end, Voltaire suggests how one can, as he put it in his most famous phrase, crush the horror. He says, simply, "We need to work our fields," or as it is often translated, "make our gardens grow."

In Voltaire's terms, saving the world from the peril of the present is like growing a crop. We need to work our fields. We don't need to work other people's fields, or fields in different or better locations, but our fields. We don't need to ponder our fields, or exclaim how weedy they are, or bemoan how poor the soil is, or compare them to the best possible fields or the worst. We need to work our fields. The root meaning of the word optimism is "ops," which means power. Optimism comes from the power we have to do the work that is ours to do.

In an essay titled "Guiding Principles of a Free Faith," early 20<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams insists that "the resources (divine and human) that are available for the achievement of meaningful change justify an attitude of ultimate optimism." I agree. Adams then adds, "Anyone who does not enter into that struggle by first affirming love and beauty misses the mark and thwarts creation as well as self-creation."

For us, there is no better time to celebrate what's beautiful about life, as well as to confront what's terrible. There will never be a better time to expand the scope of our compassion and extend the range of our mission. There will never be a better time to do the work that is now ours to do.