

gratitude ATTITUDE

ACHIEVE AUTHENTIC HAPPINESS WITH HOPE AND OPTIMISM.

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When you look at the cover of this magazine, what do you see?

Is it a glass that is half full or a glass that is half empty? Your answer says a lot about who you are and how you approach life. It might even explain life's approach toward you.





“Two people can experience the same event but the differences in interpretation can be staggering,”

says **Michael E. Rutter, PhD**, an associate professor of counseling and human services, and a licensed psychologist whose areas of interest include positive psychology and learned optimism.

If you see the glass as half empty, you’re likely to be a negative thinker – a pessimist. Pessimistic people expect the worst possible outcomes and as a result, they often prove themselves right.

Conversely, if you see the glass as half full, then you’re likely to be a positive thinker – an optimist. Optimists recognize the realities of difficult situations but are confident they will be able to accomplish the things that are important to them. “They have the natural ability to reframe challenges as opportunities,” explains Rutter. “Optimistic people have a sense of agency. They take credit for the good things that happen to them and externalize reasons for negative events.” As a result, optimists are more successful in their relationships, in school, at work and at sports. They are resilient, and demonstrate effective personal and social skills. They are happier, healthier people, both physically and mentally.

In many ways, optimists are akin to people of hope. They reject negative outlooks. They enjoy an enhanced sense of well-being and are self-motivated. Optimism and hope both reside in the left prefrontal cortex of the brain, where the abilities to differentiate thoughts and emotional responses occurs.

The two words are often used interchangeably in today’s culture but there are distinct differences between them, specifically when the secular view of optimism is compared with the Christian view of hope.

Perhaps the late Rev. Henri J.M. Nouwen, one of the most important spiritual thinkers of the 20th century, explained it best. The Dutch Catholic priest described the Christian notions of hope and optimism as “radically different attitudes”: Optimists arrange reality in a way that enables them to think things will get better. Pessimists arrange the same reality in a way that they believe things will get worse. Hope, however, is not based on chances that things will get better or worse. Hope is built upon the promise that no matter what happens, God is with us at all times, in all places, and that His plan is always at work.

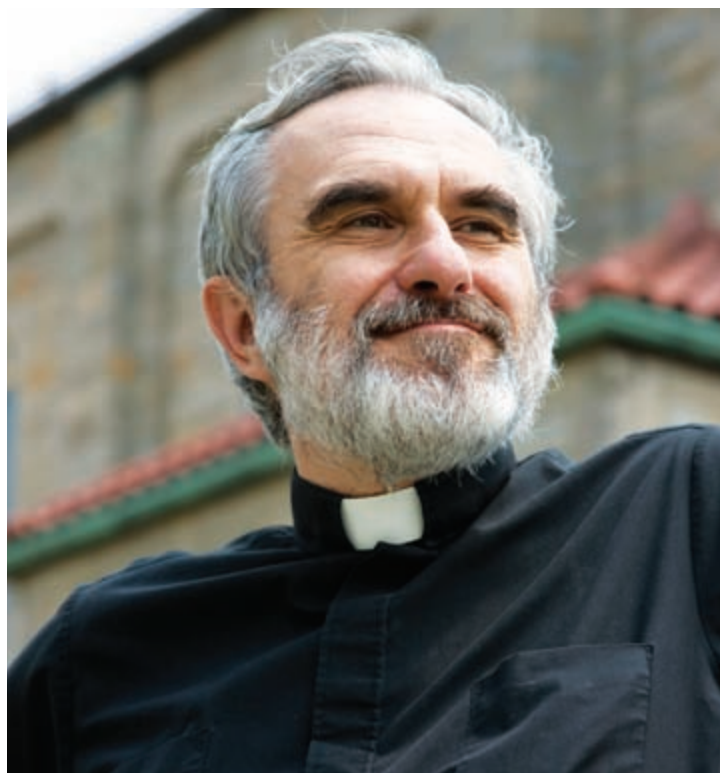
“There is an enduring reality with hope, which promises that something larger – that God – is up there waiting for us,” explains **Rev. Michael F. Tunney, S.J.**, rector of the Jesuit community at Canisius and professor of fine arts.

Mahatma Gandhi, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela and Mother Teresa are examples of modern-day leaders of hope. "No matter what they experienced in their lives, no matter how they were denied or how they suffered, they all witnessed something larger than themselves," adds Father Tunney.

They also persevered in spite of the overwhelming realities of the grief, sorrow and challenges before them. They demonstrated that hope begins with an honest acceptance of what is real, as did Nouwen, who acknowledged his own "brokenness and pain" in his writings.

Nouwen struggled with self-rejection and suffered from periods of depression which, he confessed, were weaknesses that tested his faith. But like many Christians, even when Nouwen's emotional and spiritual strengths left him vulnerable, he was buoyed by hope. In other words, hope will continue to function when optimism may fail.

"Hope is not about the fulfillment of desires," Nouwen explains. "It is not about belief in the impossible. Instead, hope enables people to sustain life's defeats and disappointments in the faith of Jesus Christ."



Rev. John P. Bucki, S.J., director of campus ministry

The writings of the late Rev. Karl Rahner, S.J., support Nouwen's views. The influential Roman Catholic theologian, whose philosophies influenced the Second Vatican Council, wrote that while Christians recognize that they will experience struggles, pain and suffering throughout their lives, they go forward with faith in the higher power of God. **Rev. John P. Bucki, S.J.**, director of campus ministry, explains that it is much like what Jesus Christ experienced. "For Christians, it's their own cross, crucifixion and resurrection."



Spe Salvi (Saved in Hope)
To read Pope Benedict's second encyclical in its entirety, visit www.vatican.va and click on "Latest Updates."

THERE'S ALWAYS HOPE

As one of the three theological virtues hope, along with faith and charity, is a God-given grace. "We all desire hope and certainly we can all attain it," says Father Tunney.

Pope Benedict XVI explains how in his second encyclical *Spe Salvi* (Saved In Hope). He says that all men and women should practice hope, not only to obtain eternal life in Heaven but to obtain eternal life here on Earth. One way to practice hope is through prayer.

"When you pray, you slow down, you reflect and you become more aware of what is going on in your life," says Father Bucki. "In the process, you acknowledge a problem or struggle and then something miraculous happens. You let go and allow God's spirit to take over. Your hope is nurtured through prayer."

Similarly, the Pope explains that hope is often realized through suffering. Christians must honestly face despair, reflect upon it and ultimately find meaning in it through Christ. "If Jesus couldn't avoid despair, no one who claims to be His follower can avoid it," says Father Tunney. The loss of a loved one or the deterioration of health are among the most common human experiences that cause a person to question his faith in God. "These are the experiences that make us painfully cry out in anger toward God. We will get through the suffering though. We will have our resurrection. We will experience His joy but only by going through the cross."

Finally, Pope Benedict encourages Christians to experience hope by affecting change toward a more humane world. "We do this by striving to make our life on Earth a heavenly life, a life of productivity, justice, peace and goodness, a positive world order that prospers."

Peter Tassini '10, a religious studies major, experienced hope this winter when he traveled with Canisius' Campus Ministry to Chennai, along the southeastern coast of India. The group lived and worked at Loyola Higher Secondary School. Founded by the Jesuits, the school educates approximately 800 of the region's most poor, oppressed, dalit (untouchable) children. The experience was radically different than anything Tassini had previously encountered.

"These children have so little yet they are willing to share so much of themselves, their space, even their food," says Tassini, who plans to return to the region, possibly as soon as next January. "For me, it was really a lesson in hope. I never felt as though the situation was so bad that we weren't making a difference. Yes, it can get discouraging but when God is on your side, you can't be stopped."

In the same way our spirits are amenable to hope, our brains are wired for optimism. According to a 2007 study by scientists at New York University, people generally envision that good things will happen to them in the future. People presume they will live longer, healthier lives than the average person. They overestimate their prospects for professional success and they underestimate the likelihood that they will have failed marriages.



Peter Tassini '10 poses with Chennai children during a campus ministry trip to India



Rev. Michael F. Tunney, S.J., rector of the Jesuit community and professor of fine arts

ATTITUDE ADJUSTMENT

Learned optimism is one technique that can help affect change. Learned optimism is a cognitive-behavioral therapy that trains people to be aware of automatic thinking, stop negative thoughts and reformulate explanations for things that happen to them. It's an idea developed by Seligman, a self-proclaimed pessimist. He says, "When adversity strikes, how we think and what we believe determine how we feel and what we do."

Athletes and sales people are great practitioners of learned optimism. "People in these professions can't focus on the door that's been shut on them," notes Rutter. "So they tell themselves, 'I know I'm good. I know I have the skills. I know I can succeed.'"

Elementary, middle and high school counselors use concepts such as learned optimism "as a universal tool to prevent emotional problems in young children and teens, and to promote healthy mental development," says **David L. Farrugia, EdD**, chair of counseling and human services. The benefits of positive psychology in school counseling are the focus of a paper co-authored by Farrugia and Rutter. Entitled "A New Synergy: School Counseling and Positive Psychology," the article

So what does all of this mean?

Simply put, it means that we all have, within us, the ability to change. And why not change; the benefits of a healthy outlook go beyond happiness. "There is interesting research that suggests optimism can inoculate us and reduce our risk for a variety of physical problems and psychological disorders," notes Rutter.

In fact, pessimists are eight times more likely to get depressed, according to renowned psychologist and author Martin E.P. Seligman, PhD. Moreover, people with defeatist attitudes typically have weaker immune systems. They are more susceptible to colds and flu, have more major health problems after age 50, and have shorter lives.

appears in *The Journal for the Professional Counselor* and maintains that optimistic adolescents not only perform better in school, they also suffer from fewer cases of depression, anger, drug abuse and interpersonal problems.

Learned optimism can even lift the moods of the happiest people.

"Happiness is not simply the absence of negative feelings. The happiest of people experience feelings of sadness and anger," explains Rutter. "But even they can increase their happiness and quality of life when they learn and practice the techniques to enhance optimism."

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“In the process, you acknowledge a problem or struggle and then something miraculous happens.
You let go and allow God’s spirit to take over.
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- Rev. John P. Bucki, S.J.



To do so doesn't necessarily require the assistance of a counselor or psychologist. Rutter suggests that when people jump to negative conclusions that they "stop, and ask if there is another way to look at the circumstances. What evidence is there to support the pessimistic reaction?"

"When we regularly monitor and adapt our internal dialog, we train ourselves to interpret perceived negativity more positively," adds Farrugia.

A second action step toward learned optimism is to become engaged in life. While pessimists often prefer solitude, detachment from others can lead to more pessimism. To break the cycle of gloom, Farrugia suggests that people make conscious choices to connect with other people, places and things that bring engagement and pleasure. When pessimists are fully involved in something, it distracts from their self-fulfilling prophecies.

It also distracts them from what is truly good in their lives. Rutter explains that a third exercise to increase happiness and enhance quality of life is a gratitude journal, in which people write down, each day, something for which they are grateful. "People want to make sense of things in their lives and find real meaning. When they consciously focus on the positive, they feel better."

People can also recalibrate their dials with an exercise used in counseling situations. Rutter's clients are asked to think about

three times in their lives when things didn't work out as they wanted. They are then asked to reflect on their thoughts and feelings at the time. Next, Rutter asks them to think about the positive experiences that resulted from the negative ones. "When people apply this exercise in a very personal way, they really start to see and believe that when one door closes another opens."

Whether you get through that door by walking the secular road of optimism or the Christian route of hope, the outcomes are the same. They both point to happiness.

"Hope and optimism both get at a goodness, a rightness, a desire that is inherent in the human person, whether he or she is a person of faith or just good human virtue," says Father Tunney.

So have faith in God. Count your blessings. Accentuate the positive. When you do, your glass will always be full. ■

David L. Farrugia, EdD, chair of counseling and human services (left) with Michael E. Rutter, PhD, associate professor of counseling and human services



Optimist or Pessimist: **WHICH ARE YOU?**

Find out how full your glass is by taking the optimism test by Martin Seligman. Go to: www.canisius.edu/magazine and click on the "Optimism" link.