



# Living in an age of optimism

GLENN ASHTON

WE live in tough times, often adrift in despondency. Given the scale of the challenges we confront — climate change, overpopulation, inequality and economic uncertainty compounded by the modern plagues of debt and overwork — it is a daily miracle we are able to extract ourselves from our beds.

In spite of these realities, I note a growing tendency towards increased optimism, manifesting at many levels — global, national and local. Perhaps my sense of a more empathetic Zeitgeist only manifests in the circles I move in, perhaps it is imaginary. But the signals are pretty widespread.

People tend more to optimism than despair. Our survival depends on the dominance of optimism over depressed hopelessness. Imagine primitive man simply giving up, overwhelmed by the risks of wild animals, disease and apparently arbitrary events. Humanity would not have survived without a positive attitude. Optimism serves an important role as a talisman, an internal petition to manifest the intentions of the better side of our nature.

However, optimism does not automatically, magically banish negativity from our personal or collective psyches. Instead, it enriches and fortifies our uncertain existence. The modern world is a challenging, dangerous and opaque

place, especially so in South Africa with massive inequality, underlain by fragile social contracts, witnessed in the recent resurgence of xenophobia and continued racial intolerance.

Wilkinson and Pickett's 2009 book *The Spirit Level* explains how increased equality in turn improves the welfare of all sectors of society, from the rich to the poor. It reveals in detail how inequality impacts on our mental and physical health, on the security, education, welfare and opportunity of everyone, even the wealthy.

A fully realised life enables people to assume responsibility for their lot and fortifies our survival against the vicissitudes of life.

It is interesting to see how electronic fora reveal the loudest, most disconnected complaints emanate from the well-heeled, reinforcing the adage that wealth does not equate to happiness. Perhaps it is just that when one is down, everything else looks like up.

The past two decades have delivered the fruits of the fall of the Berlin wall, détente between east and west, Perestroika, the rise of China as counterweight to the United States and the Mandela legacy. These events individually and cumulatively provide significant reasons for hope.

The domination of capitalism over the bogeyman of centralised communism has failed to deliver Francis Fukuyama's end of history.

Instead, the Achilles heel of the present economic reality is the accumulation of wealth by a shrinking elite, who shamelessly exploit people, institutions and our ecological foundations, further worsening inequality, undermining the social contract.

For instance, Chinese wealth has boomed, but not without huge increases in pollution, greenhouse gas emissions and Dickensian work conditions. This, too, provides a poor model for global development. But it is interesting how increased inequality and stress on global ecosystems have opened up new horizons of possibility. For instance, a profound, global citizen activist movement has emerged. Academics have immersed themselves in real politics — as in Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece. These shifts have spilled beyond traditional avenues like trade unions, into a vast range of cross-cutting groups which make cogent linkages between issues like climate change and social inequity.

Globally, the middle class is increasingly squeezed by the corporate-political nexus. The new plutocracy has imposed the double whammy of austerity-depleted services and tax hikes to pay off the governmental 2008 bailout of the global financial system. Consequently, middle classes have begun to identify more closely with the poor than with the rich, their historically aspirational class. As the say-

ing goes, most are only a pay cheque away from homelessness.

In order to assert positive relevance, movements like Occupy have enabled globalised civil activism. Shifting beyond simple volunteerism, local levels food hubs and welfare networks are growing, complementing individual purpose and providing succour. The point is that people would not enter into these social movements if they did not enhance our self-belief. The cynical counterpoint is that the alternative is too awful to contemplate.

Electronic media has played a powerful role in spreading these beneficial shifts against authoritarianism. The legitimacy of oppressive regimes are questioned by an emerging discourse of hope, from the Bolivarian renaissance in the Americas, to challenges to middle-eastern oligopolies and shifts away from traditional leadership patterns from Africa to East Asia. Conversely, it would be irresponsible and naïve to approach these challenges blinkered by over-optimism. Besides electronic surveillance, exposed by heroes like Julian Assange, Bradley Manning and Edward Snowden, opposition to the global status quo is not risk-free, from both reputational as well as real-time threats against those who provide meaningful counter-narratives and strategies.

The triumvirate of corporations, trade blocs and the captured political elite epitom-

ise the new feudalism. Yet today's workers are better informed than ever. Our young people are unafraid to ask why we do not live in a better, cleaner, more equal world and why we do not work harder to achieve it.

The psychologist Mary Pipher wrote in her book *The Green Boat* about how these environmental and social challenges serve to unite us. She shows how practically grappling with serious threats to our collective welfare builds unlikely alliances and lead to far more cohesive and more resilient social structures than the conventions of suburbanised social isolation. Social cohesion also serves to undermine the tropes and soundbites of hopeless futility transmitted by the mainstream corporate media. "Resistance is futile" is increasingly displaced by "Yes, we can".

Perhaps one way is to aspire to the principles of Burning Man, built on inclusion, a cashless economy and radical social engagement. These principles are also pursued through cashless community exchange systems, inner city co-operatives, soup meetings that provide start-up funding for innovative programmes, removing community values from being subordinate to conventional financial constraints.

The more ecologically and socially engaged we become, the more networked we are, the more we regain our connectedness, the more

we discover the true purpose of our lives. This leads inevitably towards greater optimism. Through engagement we create a self-perpetuating virtuous cycle that enhances self-actualisation, self-realisation and self-belief.

Similar patterns can be found in communities that have managed to overcome xenophobia in South Africa. Masiphumile in southern Cape Town, where xenophobic madness welled up in 2008, has now embraced and accepted its international community, forging a stronger, better resourced community.

These local movements often feed into larger global movements, such as those which deal with environmental risks, like 350.org, Greenpeace or Sea Shepherd, or those building new inclusive political and economic models like Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece.

But in order to succeed we first need to grasp optimism as a point of departure. To do otherwise is to diminish our potential to manifest the boundless possibilities on this incredible planet, filled with amazing people. On the other hand, resignation to cynicism and social distrust automatically closes down the potential space created by positive optimism, resigning us to a dull, repetitive, depressing reality. Surely life is meant to be far sweeter and more fulfilling than that?

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# Love casts out FEAR

Overcoming the psychological devastation of addiction

**THE NARC REPORT**  
with Jarrod Cronje



I WAS planning on discussing cocaine addiction with you today. But before I unravel the cunning of the most notorious narcotic of all time, which also so happens to have been my drug of choice, I feel led to take this discussion another way, just for today. So please forgive me as I digress.

A few nights back, I received a late call from an ex-resident's dad. I immediately knew something was wrong. John (not his real name) had relapsed and his dad wanted to bring him back to Harmony. His voice was uneasy and I could almost taste his fear through the cellular network. I don't use the word "fear" loosely here because in that moment of realisation that your child has fallen again, resides probably one of the most terrifying and anxious experiences a parent can ever feel.

When they arrived here, John stepped out of the car, walked towards me and opened his arms. We embraced in silence. Me in understanding. Him in surrender. Then I looked up and walked towards Dad whose bottom lip was quivering. I extended an open hand for him to shake, as the protocol had been in the past. He didn't even look at my outstretched arm. Instead, he stepped toward me and wrapped his arms around me. We embraced in silence. Me in understanding. Him in surrender. Their journey from fear to love had begun again.

This particular journey is what I want to talk about today. It is a summation of what needs to happen from a spiritual and emotional point of view for any type of recovery to begin and then develop into a long-term, sustainable success. The therapeutic details of what happens inbetween are obviously much more psychologically complex and unique to the individual but I'm not talking about that today. Instead, as we explore the issue of fear and love briefly, let us take the focus away from addiction, thus making you aware of a much bigger picture. Addiction aside, this is an approach and an attitude that I believe you can use as a foundational tool against any challenging disease, condition, vice or affliction you may be facing.

Allow me to pose a question to you: if you had to draw a line out in front of you, where would you position yourself on the scale between living in fear on the left and living in love on the right? Do you lean more to the left, thus paralysed by fears that hold your potential



*Every time we feel the discomfort of growth and progress, we become more free and we move closer to love. Fear contracts, closes down and draws in. Love expands, opens up and sends out. Fear runs, hides and hoards. Love stays, reveals and shares.*

back? Or are you poised comfortably in the middle and not really experiencing either state, thus living a life of mediocrity? Or are you leaning towards the right, and therefore fuelled by love and experiencing life to its fullest potential? Have you ever even considered this question? Are you able to quantify a value or rate yourself along this scale? Maybe you are so used to living in fear that it has become comfortable. They call this the "dirty nappy syndrome", which basically says that we have become so accustomed to living in the fear and dirt that we don't even notice it anymore. We end up adjusting our lifestyle around the dirt without

**The above article contains vital information on drug and alcohol abuse. It takes courage to confront these issues so I encourage you to take the time to read through this series carefully. What questions do you have? What problems are you facing? Are you a concerned parent? Are you a school in need of a drug prevention strategy? Do you need help? Break the denial and make contact with me.**

actually changing the nappy. Stepping outside of our comfort zone becomes too challenging. However, the longer we go through life without stretching our abilities, the further entrenched our fear of change becomes. Many of us say that we fear the unknown. But if you think about it, it is the unknown that makes us free. If we knew everything what would there be to learn and experience?

Character cannot be built without experiencing discomfort or pain and each time we face our fears or do something that scares us, we take back the power that fear stole from us. Every time we feel the discomfort of growth and progress, we become more free and we move closer to love. Fear contracts, closes down and draws in. Love expands, opens up and sends out. Fear runs, hides and hoards. Love stays, reveals and shares. Fear creates diffidence. Love creates confidence.

The reason some people are able to respond positively in the face of adversity is because the leaning of their attitude is towards love. In the realm of love, anything is possible. Which way are you leaning?

My hope for you is that you take time to think about the things that scare you most and hold you back from being the person you dreamt of. Make a list. May you start to become aware of your fears and may you have the courage to face them.

There are no coincidences and I believe everything happens for a reason. Yes, sometimes it is difficult to understand how, in this seemingly fearful and mad world, there is a grand design to our existence. In your "snapshot" of life within the big picture, what are you choosing, fear or love? I know where I stand. Do you?

I found this poem many years ago and I'd like to share it with you. The author is unknown. "Now is the time to know, that all you do is sacred."

Now is the time to understand that all your ideas of right and wrong were just a child's training wheels to be laid aside when you finally live with veracity and love.

Now is the time for the world to know that every thought and action is sacred.

This is the time to compute the impossibility that there is anything but grace.

Now is the time to know that everything is sacred."

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