

Remaining Hopeful and Optimistic During Troubled Times

Part I

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On October 3 of this year, my friend and colleague Sam Goldstein and I sent out and posted a jointly [written article on our respective websites](#). We outlined what we considered to be 10 realistic reasons for being optimistic in a world filled with very divisive local and global issues, including but not limited to social and economic inequality, xenophobia, mass shootings that seem to be taking place on a daily basis, climate change, and geopolitical tensions. We used the word “realistic” to capture our belief that all 10 factors were achievable and not rooted in an unrealistic, Pollyanna outlook fueled by a positivity bias.

I was pleased to receive a number of complimentary remarks in response to the article. Several readers wrote that with all of the negativity and mistrust in the world they welcomed our focus on factors that provided a sense of hope rather than despair for the future. At an in-person talk I gave, a man told me how much he appreciated the article, explaining, “Most newspapers or TV news shows are dominated by accounts of what’s wrong with the world. It’s easy to forget what’s good about the world and what each of us can do to make it better. Thanks for reminding us.”

A War Begins

Four days later on October 7, a position of optimism would be severely tested once again with the brutal slaughter by Hamas of men, women, and young children in Israel, most of whom were living on a kibbutz. It was estimated that at least 1,400 people were murdered. Accounts of babies and young children being shot, of parents being killed in the presence of their children, of children being burned alive in their so-called safe room, of women being raped and dismembered, and of many people being taken as hostages, consumed the news. During an interview, a captured Hamas fighter described in detail the killings, including the massacre of children. He noted that his parents were unaware that he was a member of Hamas, adding, “If my father sees me, he will shoot me. He will kill me because I did those actions.”

As expected, Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu immediately declared, “We are at war” and Israel responded with intense military force, vowing to eradicate Hamas just as

Hamas since its inception had vowed to eradicate Israel and the Jewish people. Given how quickly news spreads around the world, especially via social media platforms, what was occurring in Gaza and Israel aroused strong emotions and prompted actions across the globe. In the United States, many of these actions occurred on college campuses, revealing a level of antisemitism and islamophobia that had existed for many years but was now in more prominent view.

Actions at Harvard and Other Universities

As one example of the impact of the Israeli-Hamas war in the United States, the Palestine Solidarity Committee (PSC) at Harvard College, just hours after the Hamas attack, published a statement on social media that was co-signed by more than 30 other student groups. The statement read, “Today’s events did not occur in a vacuum. For the past two decades millions of Palestinians in Gaza have been forced to live in an open-air prison. The apartheid regime is the only one to blame.” A prominent rallying cry was “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.” Depending on one’s interpretation, some understand this quote as advocating the destruction of Israel, while others proclaimed that it focused on freedom and statehood for Palestine.

Boston Globe columnist Yvonne Abraham wrote, “Whatever the students’ intentions, much of the public, and certainly a large share of Harvard alumni, viewed the statement as a justification of Hamas’ attack. The reaction was swift and furious. Congressmen condemned the statement, scores of alumni wrote to Harvard with complaints, and former Harvard president Larry Summers went public with his disapprobation. ‘In nearly 50 years of Harvard affiliation, I have never been as disillusioned as I am today.’”

Harvard President Claudine Gay, similar to many college heads, issued a joint statement with other Harvard leaders that while attempting to steer a middle course prompted further anger. As Abraham reported, the statement did not label the attack as terrorism and did not distance Harvard from the student groups that suggested Israel “is the only one to blame.” Jewish students at Harvard reported being frightened when hearing the approval voiced by some of their classmates of the Hamas attack.

Given strong complaints about her initial statement, Gay and other Harvard leaders issued a follow-up announcement that condemned the “terrorist atrocities” and added that “no student group—not even 30 student groups—speak for Harvard University.” Even with the

release of this second statement, a number of donors cut ties with Harvard and several prominent business leaders vowed that they would not hire any of the students who signed the PSC document. Former New Jersey Governor and presidential candidate Chris Christie, known for his blunt comments, called for the University of Pennsylvania President Liz Magill's firing, accusing her of failing to combat antisemitism on campus in the midst of tensions related to the Israeli-Hamas war. He stated, "This is not about freedom of speech. This is about rank and competence." Christie also recommended that the presidents of Harvard and Cornell be fired.

While Christie stated that "this is not about freedom of speech," certainly others perceive it to be. Certain groups have been banned at several different campuses for what is seen as language that is antisemitic and incites violence. Michigan House of Representative Rashida Tlaib was censured by colleagues from both parties for her remarks about Israel, which she asserted were not antisemitic. In mid-November she posted on X (formerly known as Twitter) that she "stood in solidarity with Rabbis from across the country and Jewish peace advocates calling for an immediate ceasefire and an end to the violence. Their commitment to recognizing our shared humanity inspires me."

During last week's Thanksgiving holiday, three 20-year-old men of Palestinian descent attending American colleges were shot without provocation while walking in Burlington, Vermont. Two of the students are American citizens and the other a legal resident. Reportedly, one of the students is facing a long recovery because of a spinal injury. The shooter has been apprehended and law enforcement strongly believes it was a "hate crime."

A Question I Was Asked

I could spend many more pages summarizing the ongoing events in the Israeli-Hamas War and its ramifications throughout the world. However, what I would like to discuss now is a question I was asked at one of my presentations about the October article that Sam and I co-authored. It pertained to being optimistic when war breaks out: "Can you be overly hopeful or optimistic so that if adversity strikes you won't be as prepared to cope with it since your focus has been only on the positive side of things?"

Interestingly, I addressed a similar question in an article I wrote in [October, 2020](#) that examined The Stockdale Paradox. For those not familiar with The Stockdale Paradox, it became well known when described by Jim Collins in his book *Good to Great*. Admiral James Stockdale was a Prisoner of War in Vietnam for more than seven years and endured repeated torture. In

preparing to interview Stockdale, Collins read his memoir and wondered, “If it feels depressing to me, how on earth did he survive when he was actually there and did not know the end of the story?”

As I wrote in my 2020 column, Collins asked Stockdale this question and the latter answered, “I never lost faith in the end of the story. I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into a defining event of my life, which, in retrospect, I would not trade.” Interestingly, Stockdale added that the prisoners who had the greatest struggles and often didn’t make it out of the camps were “the optimists,” observing, “They were the ones who said, ‘We’re going to be out by Christmas.’ And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they’d say, ‘We’re going to be out by Easter.’ And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart.”

However, in my article I advised that qualifiers be placed before the word “optimist,” namely, “realistic” and “unrealistic.” For example, Heidi Grant, a social psychologist at Columbia University, in an article titled “[Be an Optimist without Being a Fool](#)” that was posted on hbr.org wrote, “Realistic optimists believe they will succeed, but also believe they have to *make success happen*—through things like effort, careful planning, persistence, and choosing the right strategies. They recognize the need for giving serious thought to how they will deal with obstacles. This preparation only increases their confidence in their own ability to get things done.” Grant highlighted the importance of “an honest assessment of the challenges that await you,” citing research to show the poor outcome experienced by “unrealistic optimists” who believed that “*success will happen to them.*”

Stockdale captured the distinction between realistic and unrealistic optimists when he proposed: “You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.”

I believe that realistic optimism plays an especially important role in our lives when we are confronted with adversity such as Stockdale faced as a POW. This belief was reinforced when I read an article by Angela Haupt in a recent issue of *Time* magazine. I was drawn to the article by its title: “5 Ways to Cultivate Hope When You Don’t Have Any.” The first paragraph read, “There’s a sense, once a whisper, that’s growing louder every day. Glaciers are melting,

children are being slaughtered, hatred runs rampant. Sometimes it feels like the world's approaching a nadir. Or like you are."

Haupt continued, "The antidote to any despair might be hope, experts say. It's one of the most powerful—and essential—human mindsets, and possible to achieve even when it feels out of reach."

The concepts of hope and optimism are often used interchangeably, but some define them differently. One definition of optimism involves the "general sense that things will work out in the future. Hope is what you can do to make those things happen." Haupt quotes Chan Hellman, founding director of the Hope Research Center at the University of Oklahoma, about his definition of hope. "Hope is a way of thinking. We know it can be taught; we know it can be nurtured. It's not something you either have or don't have."

Hellman's elaboration of this definition parallels the distinction I made earlier between realistic and unrealistic optimism. He states, "Being hopeful doesn't mean engaging in wishful thinking or blind optimism. Rather, it's the belief or the expectation that the future can be better, and that more importantly, we have the capacity to pursue that future. The opposite of hope, therefore, is not pessimism, but rather apathy, with its loss of motivation. And while wishing is passive, hope is about taking action."

I have often been asked what is the mindset and accompanying behaviors of a resilient child or adult. Since I view hope and optimism as components of what Sam and I call a "resilient mindset," I agree with Hellman's description of hope as a way of thinking (a mindset) and his position that hope can be taught and nurtured. In next month's article I will share what I consider to be some realistic steps we can take to become more hopeful and optimistic, especially during very troubled times.

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