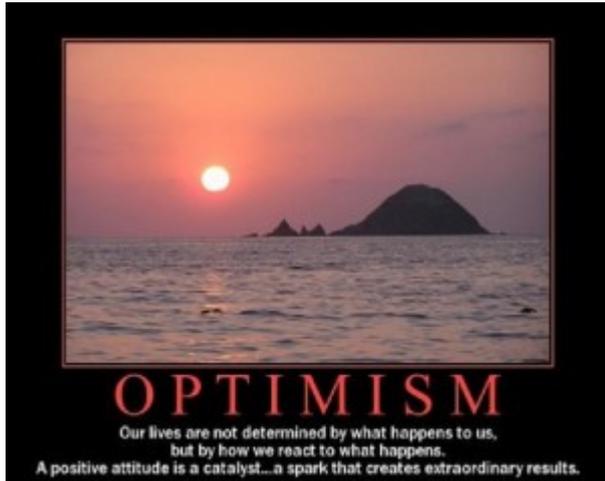


# The high cost of optimism



Day 3 of "Downer week" on the JMD blog.

Dad was able to go through the kidney biopsy today, so we look forward to finally getting to the bottom of this in the next 48 hours.

In the meantime, read on...

I'm a big fan in the power of positive thinking. I think it tends to surprise people, since so many mistake me for a pessimist. That's mostly my sarcastic nature (I hesitate to call it "wit"). Really, I am an optimist.

That characteristic is never more needed than when someone you care for is hurting. The case at hand may be a serious illness, but the same holds for a divorce, firing or even your favorite sports team losing. Optimism is the universal salve.

It's important to recognize that true optimism does not ignore realism. Do that and you are talking about either blind faith or Pollyanna vision. No, optimism in its most effective form accepts the possibility of bad things but intentionally focuses on the good.

The easiest example of this, on a strictly internal level, is when you are sick. The more you focus on feeling sick, the

more sick you feel. Depending on the level of the illness (cold, feeling down, etc.), you may need no more than a distraction to renew your positive feelings. The body operates much better when you're upbeat, so the better you feel, the better you feel. For me, that usually means picking out one of my favorite comedies and remembering to laugh.

When I'm using my optimism for others, it's harder to see the results, which can sometimes make the effort more draining. I've got a tangible example of that, as well.

My Mom was always the Queen of Optimism. She never got knocked down such that she didn't think to just take a step higher. She was generous in lavishing her optimism on me throughout my life.

When Mom was going through the early stages of her cancer, I had the benefit of a considerate boss who allowed me to take time off in the middle of the day to take her to doctors and treatment.

Mom was reluctant to take chemotherapy. She didn't like the side effects described, especially with little potential benefit offered up by the doctor (Mom's cancer was too far advanced for the treatments to "save" her). Still, she opted to give it a try.

Without going into all the details, she was made ready at a treatment center and then we were escorted into a room filled with other people also receiving treatment. There was no noise in the room, save for the occasional hum of various machines. No one was talking. No one looked like they wanted to talk. In fact, no one looked like they wanted to be there. It was harrowing.

Mom sat down in a chair and they hooked her up to her "stuff". I sat next to her and chatted with her. Well, not so much "with" her as "at" her. Mom seemed to fall under the same spell as the rest of the people in the room. I won't say

it was a sense of hopelessness, because that could have just been me projecting, but the look on Mom's face was one I wish I could forget.

We shouldn't have been there that long, but for some reason, Mom's "stuff" just wasn't going in that quickly. We ended up staying in that room for about an hour and a half. I never stopped talking to Mom the entire time; I was so afraid she would turn into one of those other people with the sightless eyes.

Finally, Mom was finished and we left. Mom looked worse than when we arrived and I spent my remaining strength fighting to prevent any sign of that from showing on my face or in my voice. After dropping Mom off, I drove home and collapsed on my bed.

I've had days when I've been exhausted before. Working over 27 hours straight during Christmas season at a toy store; playing tennis in the morning, golf in the afternoon and bowling at night of the same day; doing a marathon driving run from Florida to another state. Nothing compared to the total emptiness I felt that afternoon.

Beyond the hoarse voice, beyond the headache from being tired, beyond even the pain of all that dammed up emotion; projecting a light, upbeat and positive outlook in such an oppressive atmosphere for so long had just destroyed me. But I knew, if I was needed, I would do it again.

And the reason for that was because my Mom had run out of her optimism. She needed mine more than I did and I was not going to let her down. The way I saw it, it was her optimism anyway, I just learned it from her.

And I practice it all the time. I am fortunate that many people consider me a good person to talk to when they have a problem. Mostly, I just listen. But occasionally, if I hear something that bothers me, I encourage them to look again at

their problem from a positive view. It doesn't always solve the problem, but it often makes the person more able to solve it.

None of the above was to paint me as a hero or a saint. I just prefer to look at every situation in life with a optimistic view and if I need to do it for others when they are finding it difficult, well, then let me pitch in for them.

Sure it occasionally proves to be a costly effort, but, thanks to Mom, I have riches to share.