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Half-empty outlook

When the focus is on the downsides, the results may turn out wrong too..

Ironically, as children we are born optimists.



T.T. Srinath

Self-help books abound with the wisdom of those who have suffered and risen like the phoenix. These books rarely talk about ordinary, normal people like me who do not necessarily suffer setbacks but are pessimistic and often see problems instead of possibilities.

We tend to focus on the downsides so much that we engineer failure or the wrong result. In recent times I have discovered that this misplaced focus arises because I do not see life as a 'mystery to be lived'. In not doing so, I see everything as a 'problem to be solved'.

When I shift to looking at life as a mystery, I wake up every morning with the spirit of anticipation. 'Hope', life's greatest gift to me, occupies my mind and I face the day with wonderment.

When I look to the ensuing day with wonderment, I free myself from self-imposed limitations. I wear positively tinted glasses and see the world as colourful.

A king wanted to beautify his kingdom and also make the roads soft. He was advised by his ministers to paint his kingdom green so that it would appear fresh, and carpet all the roads so that the feet would not feel pain. One day, as he was walking down the newly carpeted roads a young boy asked the king what he was trying to do. When the king explained his action, the child simply said, “Dear King, wear green glasses and soft slippers. Everything will appear fresh and the roads will feel soft.”

The wisdom of the child is what we all need.

Pain is inevitable, suffering is by choice. Thus, I can claim to suffer or look at pain as an opportunity to work around. Norman Cousins, the famous author, says ‘learn to laugh’.

Watching a comedy film, laughing at a joke can distract us from feeling pain. The mind briefly shifts focus. Thus, cultivating the habit of distracting the mind from what isn't happening and moving it away from impossibilities helps to free ourselves.

Imagine yourself stuck in a traffic jam. There are two ways to cope: one is curse, which raises your blood pressure, and the other is to listen to music and daydream. The latter will relax the body and calm the mind.

A technique I often practise when stuck in traffic is to take a few deep breaths, countdown from 25 and as I reach 1, I say to myself: ‘The deeper I go the more I am relaxed’. I immediately feel at peace and experience calmness.

Pessimism is often a learned state, coming as it does from constant setbacks. Ironically, as children we are born optimists. Take a child of two or three, put her on a cycle. She will fall but keep going back to the cycle until she learns to balance. She does this resolutely for she knows she can.

Yet, as this child goes through life, she experiences pain and slowly but surely loses the spirit of ‘I can’ and then, like many people do, she will spend money on a personality development course to regain her optimism.

All it requires is for you and me to focus on what we have and rejoice in it rather than focus on what we don't have.

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