

Passage 1. *Kevin Kelly considers the value of optimism in our lives.*

- 1 Poet Khalil Gibran once wrote that “your living is determined not so much by what life brings to you as by the attitude you bring to life; not so much by what happens to you as by the way your mind looks at what happens.” The attitude to which he refers to here is what we know as optimism. Philosophically, optimism is linked to the notion that the world is fundamentally good, that it has purpose and meaning and that, therefore, one can reasonably expect fulfillment. There is a sense that one can control one’s environment and destiny. So, there are important reasons why we should be optimistic. 5
- 2 Optimism yields happier and emotionally stronger people. Optimism equips people with a greater ability to deal with hardship and stress in their lives. The psychological temperament of an optimist is not a sunny disposition or a delusion that everything is ideal. Rather, optimists believe that bad things are produced by temporary causes that can be overcome, while pessimists believe bad things always happen, and if anything good happens, it is temporary. It is a swap of the default - from the universe is conspiring against you, to the universe is conspiring for you. Optimism can be learnt, especially by children. Everyone is born with a different bias, but a child’s assumption can be shifted towards a more optimistic view by parenting, training, and education. In this regard, optimism is a skill that anyone can get better at. Likewise, at the societal level, optimism is a skill that bestows resilience and adaptability. 10 15
- 3 Certainly, overly positive assumptions can lead to disastrous miscalculations. They make us less likely to get health checkups, apply sunscreen, and more likely to bet the farm on a bad investment. But the bias towards optimism keeps us moving forward. Without optimism, our ancestors might never have ventured far from their tribes, and we might all still be cave dwellers, huddled together and dreaming of light and heat. The primary ingredient for progress is optimism. The unwavering belief that something can be better is what drives mankind forward. To make progress, we need to be able to imagine possibilities – better ones – and we need to believe that we can achieve them. Optimism thus underpins innovation. It challenges us to doubt the status quo and ask probing questions for the world to change. Widely considered to be a visionary, Steve Jobs wanted to revolutionise the workplace by making computers more affordable and easier to use. He envisioned a future where technology creates opportunities to amplify a human’s ability and improve our lives, and consistently pushed back against what was conventional at that time. Such faith in the possibility of a better future is what motivates mankind to pursue his goals. 20 25 30
- 4 Often, the media’s excessive focus on bad news creates stories about our world that distorts reality, divides us and counterproductively limits our ability to respond effectively to the challenges we face. For too long, the press has been telling negative stories about human nature and what is happening in our world. The broad narrative that arises is that things are bad and getting worse; that we live in an acutely dangerous world characterised by self-interest, competition and scarcity. However, recent decades have in fact brought much progress globally and by many measures. There is much to be optimistic about as we are wealthier, healthier, and safer. Global life expectancy has more than doubled in the past century. Two centuries ago, 8 in 10 people still lived in extreme poverty, today it is fewer than 1 in 10. War, disease and natural disasters now claim fewer lives than at any point in our history. These recent developments have shown that the ‘doom and gloom’ news narrative no longer serves society. Rather, a more inspiring lens on the world is needed to better reflect the positive trends. Where the media puts its attention and how it frames the information it presents is a precious choice. It wields a powerful influence over our individual and collective mind states, and it guides our shared story. There is thus an urgent need, and opportunity, for a better story about ourselves, our world, and what is possible. 35 40 45



- 5 Optimism is a slow march towards incremental betterment. The reason we can and should still be optimistic is that our estimates of future woes do not take into account our ability to solve them. The ultimate reason we should (and can) be optimistic is not because our problems are smaller than we thought, but because our capacity to solve them is larger than we thought. 50

Passage 2. *Alain de Bruyne discusses why pessimism is the key to a good society.*

- 1 It might be normal to imagine that good societies are those where the majority hold optimistic views about themselves and their collective futures. After all, what is the use of brooding over the innumerable ways things could go wrong? Nonetheless, in an increasingly VUCA¹ world where the realities of economic downturns, disease outbreaks, environmental issues, conflict and humanitarian crises dominate our newsfeeds, it seems more sensible that in preparation, one should assume the worst in order to hope for the best. Thus, pessimism is instead the key for the maintenance of good societies. 5
- 2 At the core of pessimism is the idea that everyone, however outwardly normal, is flawed: short-term, vengeful and prone to recklessness. Even tennis icon Serena Williams, known as a role model not only for her sporting success but also her push for gender and racial equality, caused controversy during the 2018 US Open Women's Final when she had an emotional outburst and a heated exchange against an umpire over accusations of cheating. A brutal acceptance of this facilitates a range of measures that make for exceptionally wise, calm and reasonable societies. 10
- 3 Because pessimists know how flawed individuals can be, in an ideally pessimistic society, boring and extremely steady politicians are valued over eloquent but reactive ones. With Donald Trump now the archetype of populist politics that could seriously derail progress, people are sobering up to the reality that the world needs well-advised leaders with acumen and composure instead of those who give in to the whims and fancies of the people. Pessimistic societies prefer measured, slow-moving governments which are rational and deliberative, rather than those that react haphazardly to the fluctuations of public opinion which are prone to hysteria and overreaction. 15 20
- 4 In addition, understanding that mankind is flawed by nature and therefore prone to self-destructive tendencies, pessimists (who value order and self-control) willingly accept a paternalistic government as the price for limiting those tendencies. Governments are expected to render an average life as attractive as possible. Public housing, state schools, public hospitals and transportation will be superb, because governments know we tend to make impaired decisions. We are hence dependent on them to make sound decisions to provide for a reasonable standard of living and quality of life. 25
- 5 In pessimistic societies, citizens assume that the raw human mind needs a huge amount of structured, targeted help to cope with life's challenges and prepare for an increasingly volatile and disrupted global economy. Therefore, education systems are elaborate, broad, ambitious, and well-resourced. The curriculum is not merely focussed on technical skills though; there is a lot of help around emotional issues too, as it is acknowledged that students are highly stressed and tightly wound in the pursuit of academic excellence to secure a well-paying job for a 'bright future'. 30 35
- 6 Pessimism will be the norm in the days ahead. In an era where the relative peace and prosperity the world has enjoyed for decades is constantly shattered by doomsday predictions, we are forced to realise that while humankind has made great strides, we must still live with an ethic of stewardship and caution for our continued survival. The profound consequence will be a society where there will be a lot to be cheerful about – though, of course, the pessimistic citizenry would never dare to put it like that. 40

¹ Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous



