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Pessimism Is the Last Taboo



By Marty Kaplan

It gets worse.

If you pay attention to the news, the prospects for the future look grim. The new normal of high unemployment and stagnant wages will likely not turn out to be just a phase. The next generations may indeed do worse than the ones before them. Thanks to the Supreme Court, big money will keep tightening its stranglehold on elections and lawmaking. Financial reform and consumer protection will never survive the onslaught of lobbyists. Reckless bankers will go on making out like bandits, and the public will always be forced to rescue them. The Internet, along with cable and wireless, will be controlled by fewer and more-powerful companies. The world will keep staggering from one economic crisis to another. We will not have the leadership and citizenship we need to kick our dependence on oil. We will not even keep up with the Kardashians.

Add your own items to the list. Whatever global threats scare you — climate change, the Middle East, loose nukes, pandemics — and whatever domestic issues haunt you — failing schools, crumbling infrastructure, rising poverty, obesity — the odds are that the honesty, discipline, resources and burden-sharing required for a happy ending will not, like Elijah, show up at our door.

Sure, there's some good news around, and there are advances ahead. Gay marriage is legal in New York, and perhaps one day the resistance to it will seem as unfathomable as the opposition to women's suffrage. Technology is growing exponentially, and today's iGizmos will doubtlessly seem like steam engines tomorrow. We will some day actually be gone from Afghanistan. Justices Scalia and Thomas will eventually retire. French fries or salami will turn out to be good for us, at least for a while. Some Wall Street slimeballs will be nailed, some good guys will win elections and some little girl will be rescued from a well.

But it would pretty much take a miracle for our intractable problems to become tractable. Without one, political polarization is not about to give way to kumbaya. Cultural coarsening is not going to reverse course. The middle class will not be resurgent; the gap between rich and poor will not start closing; the plutocrats calling the shots will not cede their power. No warning on its way to us — no new BP, no next shooting, no future default — will bring us to our

senses about the environment, assault weapons or derivatives for any longer than it takes for the next Casey Anthony or Anthony Weiner comes along.

Politicians, of course, can never say something like this. They're selling progress, greatness, can-do. The only place for pessimism in the public sphere is as a handy foil. "There are those who say that we can't solve our problems, that our best days are behind us, that China is the future. But I say..." It's a surefire applause line. But it's also a straw man. There aren't "those who say" that. Americans hate pessimism. We get discouraged, our hope flags, but predicting defeat is inconceivable. The comeback kids, the triumphant underdogs, the resilient fighters rising to the challenge: that's who we see in the mirror.

We place fatalism beyond the pale. To give up on the possibility of change, to doubt that we're up to the task, is socially aberrant. You may fear that we are doomed to be a nation of big babies: we claim to want leaders who'll face tough choices, but we punish them for actually making them. You may despair that the rationality required to face up to reality will never overcome the fundamentalism, know-nothingism and magic thinking that have a hammerlock on our national psyche. You may believe that big money and big media have become so powerful that our sclerotic democratic institutions are inherently incapable of checking them.

But you can't admit any of that. In public, we never let such darkness prevail. Instead, we work to improve things. We organize, rally, blog, join movements, work phone banks, ring doorbells, write checks, sign petitions.

We are not a tragic nation. If a leader disappoints us, or breaks our hearts, we say it's just a setback, not a sign that the system itself manufactures impotence and capitulation. If a problem festers, we cling to the belief that money, know-how and perhaps some sobering wake-up call are all we need to solve it; we don't dare entertain the notion that there's something in human nature that's causing and protracting it. If social conflict splits us, we diagnose a communication problem, a semantic setback on the road to common ground, a gap that can be bridged by consensus on facts and deliberation on goals; it's just too painful to think that tribal values impervious to rationality and insusceptible to compromise are the ineluctable driver of our divisions.

I wish I could declare my confidence in our ability to solve our problems without sounding like some candidate who just wants my vote. But ironic optimism won't do. I'm desperate for evidence that we're prepared to pay for the services we demand, or to subordinate our desires in order to meet our obligations to one another, or to reform our governance so that special interest money, filibusters and the other Washington diseases didn't sicken the system. I just wish it didn't take drinking the can-do Kool Aid to see the glass as half full.

This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you'd like.

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