

Essential Positivity

Combating Negative News Fatigue

BY JOSHUA A.H. HARRIS

These past weeks of impeachment, trial, acquittal, and aftermath can be seen as dark days by any measure, by people on both sides of the aisle. Every screen in my house relentlessly blares heat-scorched news, divisive political grandstanding, and talking points from contemptuous commentators—each arguing over the others for their ten minutes of fame, for their all-important Twitter moment. It's like my brain has been soaking in a vat of acidic digital negativity. Today's "news" provides little clarity, much repetition, and certainly no modicum of hope; rather, it amplifies the real-world carnival mirror of our country, our world, in 2020—where opportunism seems to have slain truth, and brute *realpolitik*, incessant hypocrisy, and unadulterated negativity rule the day. For honest, caring, and generally optimistic humans, the psychological toll can be extensive.

What can we do to adjust to this new surge of negativity? I've been trying to conceive of a thoughtful reaction for a while now. My process is far from complete, but I am beginning to see progress and the outlines of a workable strategy.

First, I diagnosed myself. After some research, I am hovering around the term "negative news fatigue," or NNF—and yes, it's a thing. The obvious fix: Stop or limit consumption of the news. The obvious flaw in this obvious fix: These are historic times (they truly are) and we, as citizens of the longest standing and most revered democracy, are obliged to understand what is happening to our nation. Plus, many of us simply cannot resist the constantly evolving plots and subplots, the high stakes, and the ever-shifting intrigue recounted in the nightly/hourly news. Suffice it to say, I tried a news diet and failed miserably.

Instead, I decided to try addressing my NNF with a basic happiness technique—I began to

count my many blessings, just as my parents taught me long ago. (I recognize that many people are suffering greatly right now; but nearly everyone has blessings in their lives too.) To formalize my thinking, I sat down each morning and wrote a free-form list of all the things for which I am thankful.

After a few days, I felt a bit more optimistic. I realized I had all too often allowed dark, media-tainted anxieties about national events to sneak into my brain and take over my emotions. Counting my blessings undercut those negative feelings by forcing me to seek out, categorize, and more fully investigate the many positive elements in my immediate personal surroundings—like family, friends, and food. As my practice developed, I gave it a name, "essential positivity," because at a fundamental level, aren't there often many reasons to feel fortunate/optimistic/positive? We just have to locate and embrace them.

At a certain point, my lists began to focus on deeper and more enduring blessings, those often taken for granted because they are baked into our daily experience. I looked outside at the glimmering clouds, the squirrels racing through trees, the ever-shifting sunlight, and consciously took account of the resilience of nature and the persistence of beauty. How can the pull of media negativity possibly compete with warm sunshine on your face? Essential positivity asks you not to ignore the problems of the day, but to focus also on the underlying structure of good that perseveres.

With this new lens, I returned to politics. One morning, I wrote "the US Constitution" down on my list. Before essential positivity, I'd been obsessing on the destructive, sky-is-falling themes that the media relentlessly hammers into our heads. That morning, though,

I stopped and really considered the state of our federal government. From a fundamental long-term perspective, we will likely discover that our democracy is currently functioning quite admirably under this unprecedented stress test. Politicians in the ruling party have not disbanded the courts they do not favor, nor stolen vast sums of money from the nation's coffers, nor disappeared dissidents, as happens in many parts of the world. Will there be lasting damage to our political system from this era of extremism and unrelenting partisanship? Perhaps, but I think it is unlikely. A weaker country with a weaker constitution would have collapsed by this point. America does not seem broken, not by any means. Of course, we must address the very real problems in our democracy, but we must also celebrate the enduring strength of our nation.

The steady rudder of essential positivity has helped me feel better in this time of real—yet also media-inflated—crisis. But beyond a salve for the soul, a more optimistic perspective, taken by the collective, could do much more than quell national anxieties. If we citizens of this great nation can begin to employ a more positive outlook toward our nation and each other—and resist the pervasive cynicism of the day—we will find it much easier to address problems, progress into a new era of national and international strength, and reclaim our heritage as the *United States of America*. 🐾

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