

An Honest Pessimist Is as Good as an Honest Optimist

Statement #1: "Things will never get better."

Statement #2: "Things look pretty bleak right now."

On the surface, both of these statements seem negative or pessimistic. Neither one is going to bring a smile to your face, but if you look closely you'll find two important differences.

1. The first statement is a declaration about the way things *are* and the second statement is about the way things *appear*: In this case, the first statement leaves you with a definition of reality that you're forced to accept. The second statement, on the other hand, leaves open the possibility that there may be more to reality than what you can currently see. This allows room for new perspectives and counter-intuitive insights to slip through.
2. The first statement has a relationship to time that's permanent. It describes how things are going to be forever. It implicitly denies the possibility that tomorrow might bring a little ease. The second statement locates the negative situation in a temporal state. It allows room for the knowledge and hope that can come with the passage of time.

What we have here are two negative statements, but two different attitudes. One is an attitude of permanence and the other is an attitude of possibility.

It's easy to dismiss all talk of negative things as "being pessimistic", but even the optimist has to acknowledge negative truths in order to express his or her dedication to making the world a better place. After all, why seek to make the world better unless you believe there are ways in which it falls short? Why seek to make people better unless you believe there are ways in which they're not living up to their potential? Our positive pursuits are nothing less than an implicit concession of the fact that our world, in its current state, is not good enough to be left alone.

True optimism isn't about refusing to acknowledge "negative" truths. It's about choosing to acknowledge "negative" truths in a way that's honest enough to admit these more fundamental truths:

- 1) There's always more to reality than we can see,
- 2) The fact that there's more to reality than what we can see is not a fact that magically disappears when what we can see happens to look very bad,
- 3) There is a future,
- 4) As a species, we are very bad at predicting the future, and
- 5) Our ability to predict the future doesn't magically improve just because we're in the mood to make negative predictions.

When it comes to “being negative”, there are two extremes to avoid:

- 1) Being the kind of person who refuses to acknowledge negative truths because you’re afraid it will turn you into a negative person.
- 2) Being the kind of person who assumes you’re being honest just because you’re “telling it like it is.”

If you’re refusing to acknowledge where people are hurting, you compromise your ability to help.

If you’re using “I’m telling it like it is” as a trump card, you risk forgetting that “telling it like it is” isn’t the same thing as “telling everything there is to know about what is.”

If you’re an optimist, the key is to be honest about the truths you don’t like.

If you’re a pessimist, the key is to be honest about the truths you don’t know.

And what that really means is that we all have the same responsibility: to be honest in whatever way we need to work at being honest.