

# Beyond Positive Thinking: Reflections on Balance at Midlife

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**T**his season is a time for reflection: What can we be grateful for at Thanksgiving? What meaning do the religious holidays have beyond exchanging gifts? What deficiencies must we admit in making New Year's resolutions?

As we approach 2001, I recall when that year had a futuristic ring to it. But the future is now, and for many of us Boomers who have reached the mid-century mark, the reflective mode is deepened. Our space odyssey has turned the corner, heading now toward its ultimate destination. My own personal journey has taken some hard landings and detours through uncharted galaxies.

My early life in the 1950s lacked experience with life trauma - no alcoholic parent, few deaths in the family, nothing beyond the usual childhood illnesses. If the Dodgers leaving Brooklyn was my major early loss, then it was easy for me to be swept along with the rising expectations of the postwar boom.

As a young man, I certainly never pictured my fourth son being born with Down Syndrome, my vigorous father, who played tennis in his late 70s, succumbing to Parkinson's disease, or my gentle and kind mother losing her Self to the ravages of Alzheimer's.

Coming to terms with those losses was difficult, even for a psychologist who has counseled scores of people in coping with trauma and loss. I drew upon the same concepts that my clients showed me can successfully transform crises into personal growth. I learned what I had taught, but I learned it in my bones and with my heart. I learned it in the depths of suffering and had to drink deeply of my own medicine.

## Dealing With Adversity

What is my prescription for coping with loss? The answer is simple but not easy: Take one dose of balance and one dose of flexibility. Realize that life is balance, struggle to accept this ultimate truth, and adapt to the unexpected turns of events. A balanced life is not one without suffering, but one where the positives outweigh the negatives.

My own research has demonstrated the ancient wisdom that life is a balance. Many other studies have shown that people have an "inner computer" which balances positive and negative thoughts and feelings with considerable precision. People who maintain optimal balances are psychologically healthy, while those who deviate from this balance suffer from depression, anxiety or impaired self-esteem. The healthy mind maintains about four positive thoughts for every negative one.

We can't avoid some negativity in our minds. Anyone who thinks too positively about himself or herself is being unrealistic. Consider that even gold, as precious as it is, would be



■ Robert M. Schwartz with son.

too soft and impractical for most uses, were it not mixed with baser metals that give it strength. Similarly, life will inevitably bring losses, "necessary losses," but these can add resilience and new perspective.

## Great Expectations

Boomers have been raised in an era of inflationary expectations. Martin Seligman, who has studied optimism, accounts for the increase in clinical depression in the last 30 years by pointing to high, and sometimes unrealistic, expectations in the postwar years. As a result, boomers have experienced disappointment on a grand scale. I quip with my clients who struggle with guilt about not meeting their lofty aspirations that my goal is to give my own kids a college education and one year of psychotherapy. After that, they are on their own.

Must we then settle for less? Less than perfection, yes! But nothing less than an optimal balance. If you are disappointed too often, you are expecting too much; if you are gloomy and pessimistic, your thinking is too negative. I was once in a meeting with a rabbi who took the phone to talk with a fund-raiser, who apologized for obtaining a pledge of only \$1,000 for an important project when she thought she might receive \$10,000. I couldn't help but overhear the conversation, and observed that he must be disappointed if \$10,000 were expected. To my surprise, the rabbi replied, "Who expected \$10,000? I expect nothing. Compared to nothing, \$1,000 is a great bonus."

I realized that, although the rabbi expected nothing, he had infinite hope. Expectations are specific and rigid demands for life to correspond with our wishes and plans. Inherent in expectations are disappointments. Hope is a more general sense that things will turn out well.

Every parent hopes for healthy children, and every adult child hopes for the smooth aging and death of

and embrace life's challenges lies in your hands. If you hold yourself rigid, however, you run the risk of being overwhelmed.

Through my youngest son, this small hero who had to practice as an infant to keep his head erect, I have learned that I could not expect him to talk. But I could hope, and after ten years, he does talk. Not only that, beyond even my own wildest hopes, he beams the most radiant and appreciative smile when I place my hand on his head to give him his blessing at our weekly Sabbath meal. He is the one who stretches his arms out wide to pull my wife together with a smile when the negative part of the balance strains our mood. He has been my teacher in this exercise.

I expect little, but am full of hope.

Life is a balance. Given a life relatively sheltered from serious illnesses, I made the error of expecting that I would have four healthy children and that my parents would move easily through late life. I knew from my research that the balance of life requires a mix of one part negative for every four positives. But I needed my own life experience with suffering to deepen my understanding of what my clients have known in their bones and with their hearts: That balance in life means "some laughter, some tears," and that suffering can be the catalyst for new beginnings and personal growth. On balance, life is good.

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their parents, but we cannot expect them. Whether we believe in fate or God's will, we must flexibly and graciously align our hopes with what life brings. A living tree will bend and adapt itself to nature's pressures, whereas a dead tree is brittle, and under repeated stress will eventually break. The same rule applies to our minds. The decision to actively live



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