

# May we sustain our optimism and gratitude



**Highland Views**  
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Guest columnist

In his acceptance speech for an honorary Oscar, actor Michael J. Fox showed his characteristic humor and humility. Challenged to manage the quirks of his Parkinson's, Fox paused several times to tell his shaking hand, uncontrollably knocking on the podium: "Stop it!" In a more serious moment he presented something like a personal motto: "My optimism is fueled by my gratitude; with gratitude, optimism is sustainable." I think that's worth running over in our heads from time to time.

Do you consider yourself generally optimistic? How about grateful? When I was a person of faith, I would often thank God for good things that came my way. I was raised to say "Please" and "Thank you," which served to remind me to be courteous to both God and others. As for optimism, that was often harder to sustain. In youthful days, my positive outlook for the future was getting to heaven as fast as possible. As an adult, I learned to take life as a mix of good and bad while trying to keep an

"attitude of gratitude" and "hope for the best." I was not always successful at holding that belief. When events in life shook me to the core, I might have said many one-word prayers — "Please!" — but not so many "Thank You's." Eventually I came to the precarious stance that life was up to me, that personal choice and wise decisions were my responsibility, with a boost of optimism from others now and then.

A simple, and very natural, illustration: Carol and I were taking an autumn wood-walk and the trail we chose crossed a stream. It wasn't wide or deep, though some rocks looked slippery or unstable. We took a moment to pause and consider the risk: losing balance, getting wet, twisting an ankle. Did we really want to proceed up this trail? Was it worth the risk? All this happened in a few moments, but it felt natural, and smart, to think for a second what the consequences were going forward, or backward. The choice was ours. We lightly stepped across, stone by stone, and made it across without incident. The path took us along a meandering route through laurel with only the gentle sound of the nearby stream. Pushing through our hesitancy, we were gifted by nature, in the beauty of the late afternoon sun streaming through leafless trees.

When we're shaking because of fear or confusion about our path forward, or even our beliefs, do we have the strength, the courage, to say: "Stop it!" What inability do we live with, in mind or body? Everyone has some limitation. Do we feel unable to help ourselves, let alone another person? Does our body limit some things we would like to do but simply can't? Life is shaky; sometimes our bodies are telling us things that distract us, or teach us, to call attention to something we are overlooking — our own needs or the needs of others.

With his motto — profound words of wisdom — Michael J. Fox hands us a principle to live by through the shakiest periods of our lives. His disease is no laughing matter, yet his contagious sense of humor lightens the heaviness, and perhaps brightens the darkest times. We can admire that, and emulate that outlook ourselves.

We can never go "back to the future," but we can choose the present moment to breathe when we feel breathless, to steady ourselves when we get shaky, and live with the imbalance—even the embarrassment—in times when we lose our balance or fall.

Optimism comes from a Latin word for "best thing." It's related to the word optimum. According to Wikipedia, optimism "is seen as a trait that fosters resilience in the face of stress." We may not always know what the "best thing" to do, say or believe is for us, but a resilient feeling of gratefulness for what we have, for life itself, can usually reveal something better if not best. There is a abiding sense of hopefulness that can give us positive expectations and present fresh ideas for the unknown way ahead.

On his website, Michael J. Fox writes: "To me, hope is informed optimism." This reflects the reason he received the humanitarian award. To practice "informed" optimism takes a commitment to reality, being real. In his book, "No Time Like the Future," Michael strikes the balance. After a bad fall, he remembers so many people telling him he has one job: Don't Fall. This time it "feels personal. Make lemons into lemonade? Screw it — I'm out of the lemonade business." May we be a little more grateful, sustained by humor and a more positive outlook, as we seek the natural beauty and optimal gifts of life.

*Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His books and blogs are presented on "Friendly Freethinker" ([www.chighland.com](http://www.chighland.com)).*