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Message from the Dean

Jeffrey S. Lehman
University of Michigan Law School

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Each year I use my messages in *Law Quadrangle Notes* to examine a quality that helps to define an outstanding attorney. I have discussed how great lawyers pursue intellectual growth and renewal, maintain integrity, teach others about the law, serve as community citizens, bolster our profession's image, and exhibit patience. In the coming year, I would like to explore the quality of optimism.

As a philosophical concept, optimism has had a rough go. It originated in the early eighteenth century theological writings of Gottfried Leibniz, who contended that our world is an "optimum" in the mathematical sense. Leibniz asserted that there had been a divine decision to create "the best of all possible worlds," and that evil and suffering are necessary elements of a universal order.

Relatively few people read Leibniz today, thanks largely to Voltaire. A few years after an earthquake devastated Lisbon in 1755, Voltaire began to depict optimism, at least as it had been popularized by Alexander Pope, as a form of complacent speculation, irrelevant to the real-world problem of how we might alleviate suffering and evil. In *Candide*, Voltaire satirized Pope with the memorable character of the tutor, Dr. Pangloss, who prattled on insipidly about how everything must be for the best. "He could prove to admiration that there is no effect without a cause; and, that in this best of all possible worlds, the Baron's castle was the most magnificent of all castles, and My Lady the best of all possible baronesses."

Over a century later, in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the character Lord Henry expressed his contempt for optimism as follows: "The reason we all like to think so well of others is that we are all afraid for ourselves. The basis of optimism is sheer terror."

Nowadays popular portrayals of lawyers suggest that we are all Lord Henry. The attorneys who capture the greatest media attention often exude disdain for high-minded ideals of truth and justice. Their actions appear to be the product of a profound alienation, leavened only by a manipulative and cynical self-interest.

Yet my own experience of our profession is otherwise. The best lawyers I have known can properly be described as optimistic at their core. Why is that? In what sense can one say that an optimistic spirit has infused the people who most effectively serve their clients and have the greatest impact on the world around them?

One may begin by recognizing a breed of optimism that stops short of being Panglossian. Active rather than complacent, pragmatic rather than foolish, this optimism can motivate competent lawyering.

During the coming year, I look forward to exploring that breed of optimism in this column and elsewhere in my work as dean. For if I am right that such a quality characterizes the most effective practitioners of our craft, then we should be asking what role our law school can appropriately play in nurturing that quality in the lawyers of the twenty-first century.



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