

The Downside of Positive Thinking

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The Power of Positive Thinking, written in 1952 by a Dutch Reform minister, Norman Vincent Peale, greatly appealed to the imagination of Americans in that the book virtually promised that we would receive anything we pursued if we just maintained a positive attitude. The book's premise essentially embodied Thomas Jefferson's immortal phrasing from the Declaration of Independence that life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness were inalienable rights. All we had to do on our end is remain positive.

Jefferson was not exactly original in his litany of all that to which we were supposed entitled as Americans. He borrowed the idea from John Locke, the English philosopher who maintained that God granted us the right to live a healthy life while free to amass and maintain property. Locke's phrasing included: "Life, health, liberty, and prosperity."

Jefferson improvised the "happiness" part of his Declaration, which apparently resonated with everyone in the Second Continental Congress since it remained intact after several drafts. The pursuit of happiness remains to this day the heart of the American spirit and viewed as our absolute God-given right.

Positive thinking became a tool. As Americans we had the right to happiness, and the only one who kept us from it was ourselves. Our own negativity interferes with our own success. For Norman Vincent Peale, positive thinking would enable us to overcome financial, marital, and business problems. Positive thinking was a way of healing the person so that he or she can not only pursue happiness but also claim it.

Peale's approach was to stamp the mind indelibly with mental images of our own success while canceling out any and all negative thoughts concerning our personal limitations. Fifty-three years later, a fellow named T. Harv Eker wrote the best seller, *Secrets of the Millionaire Mind*, where he makes the obvious connection between happiness and wealth. Eker is more prescriptive than Peale, offering instructions like these:

Place your hand on your heart and say: I admire rich people. I bless rich people. I love rich people. And I'm going to be one of those rich people.

Envisioning yourself as successful, essentially re-programming your mind, has evolved into a successful device by many mega-church preachers. Based on the same old concept as John Locke's profession that God wants us to enjoy health, property, and prosperity, and Jefferson's pursuit of happiness as a God-given inalienable right nobody can take away, the message of today is that God wants you to be rich. You can enjoy God's abundant life by purging negative thinking from your mind. Joel Osteen, successfully preaching God's intent on making us rich and happy,

says: "You will produce what you're continually seeing in your mind." If you have a positive attitude, the Lord will provide for you, as He did for Osteen: Getting out of a speeding ticket; finding a parking place; getting a good table in a crowded restaurant. You just need to be positive. These rewards of positive thinking may induce me to sign on because, lord knows, I'm impatient at a crowded restaurant.

Let's take a closer look at Barbara Ehrenreich's book: *Bright-Sided*.

She begins her book with a chapter on the world she confronted after her diagnosis of breast cancer. I was very moved by her words because it reminded me of one of the more challenging times in my ministry following the 1986 publication of surgeon Bernie Siegel's *Love, Medicine, and Miracles*. His thesis was that a vigorous immune system can overcome cancer, and emotional health toward greater self-acceptance helps keep immune systems strong. The underlying message which made my ministry so terribly difficult in that time period stated quite simply that our own inability to govern our emotions with a more positive attitude leads to our own demise with cancer. In other words, we bring cancer on ourselves by allowing immune systems to acquiesce to stress, tension, and negativity in our lives.

I had to deal with enormous guilt among cancer patients who believed they brought on their cancer themselves, and also a suspicion among family members that this could have been avoided altogether if only he or she had better control over his or her emotional life.

My assistant minister at the time, an older man who at age 4 starred on Broadway with Helen Hayes, developed an interest in the ministry in later years and graduated Harvard Divinity School at age 67, became my assistant minister for a \$1 a year contract. He developed prostate cancer and devoted his life to listening to Bernie Siegel on tape, convinced that he could overcome his cancer with good and positive thinking. Whenever I asked Ted how he was feeling, he always answered: Tip-Top; tip-top. He began answering his phone at the office and at home with: This is Ted Jones, how can I help?" (I'd say, "Ted, take it easy. Just want to remind you to bring wine to the board meeting." "Happy to help out," he'd say, never lowering the upbeat attitude for a second.)

Shortly after I arrived in Salt Lake I got a call from his wife that Ted died. We both wept. Nobody ever made a more gallant effort to heal by making a positive effort.

Barbara Ehrenreich experienced a sense of drowning in all the positive thinking and cheeriness of support groups and dealing with medical professionals. Breast cancer had become now a "rite of passage," not an injustice to rail against. Cancer became an "opportunity" to become a better and more caring person, with continuous upbeat messages like: "I can't stop the birds of sorrow from circling my head, but I can stop them from building a nest in my hair." Or, "when life hands out lemons, squeeze out a smile." Ehrenreich writes: "Positive thinking seems to be mandatory in the breast cancer world, to the point that unhappiness requires a kind of

apology...even the word "victim" is proscribed, leaving no single noun to describe a woman with breast cancer... It could be argued that positive thinking can't hurt, that it might even be a blessing to the sorely afflicted. Who would begrudge the optimism of a dying patient? Or of a bald and nauseated chemotherapy patient who imagines that the cancer experience will end up giving her a more fulfilling life? Unable to actually cure the disease, psychologists looked for ways to increase such positive feelings about cancer, which they term "benefit finding." If you can't count on recovering, you should at least come to see your cancer as a positive experience. It's a path, a model, and a paradigm of how you can interact to help yourself. By doing so, you evolve to a much higher level of humanity."

Ehrenreich's observations first hit me as shocking, but her lament is really about positive thinking distorting reality. I am sure that most of us, I certainly, have been raised in a family that insisted on "mind over matter." After all, nobody likes a whiner, and I was made to feel shameful every time I felt the least bit sorry for myself. My father worked two fulltime jobs and never complained. Whenever I felt sick my mother demanded that I need only think of other more pleasant things and I'd soon get over whatever ailed me.

Where did all this positive thinking originate? It was not with Thomas Jefferson although he did do his share in linking happiness to a right we deserve in God's universe. It came about long before M. Scott Peck and his advice to constantly raise our sights, or Stephen Covey who wants us to admit that what we have isn't enough. Jeffrey Gitomer advises us to purge all negative people from our associations, which incidentally, is exactly what Lehman Brothers did to the one executive who warned that they were headed for disaster. They fired him.

The benefits of positive thinking were developed long before the 2006 publication, *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne, which had many subsequent DVD's to prove its point. In one, a woman admires a necklace in a store window and is next shown wearing it around her neck, simply through her conscious effort to "attract" it. The message, visualize what you want and it will be attracted to you...or believe and receive...or name it and claim it...applies to getting a perfect partner, a necklace, and good eyesight so you don't have to wear glasses. Life coaches and motivational speakers have taken *The Secret* to the next level or is it a return to Norman Vincent Peale: "One's external condition, such as failure and unemployment, are projections of one's inner sense of well-being."

Where did this all originate? The key name to remember is Phineas Quimby, a self-educated, watchmaker and inventor from Portland Maine, who filled his journals in the mid 19th century with what he called, "the science of life and happiness." It was meant as a rebuke to the Calvinism that scared the hell out of kids growing up and still kept adults terrified about the destiny of their souls. What is not widely known is that the fear and trembling of growing up in a Calvinist family or environment produced certain maladies (obviously!!!!). George Beecher, brother of Harriet

Beecher Stowe, tormented himself over his spiritual status until he shattered his nervous system and committed suicide in 1843.

Phineas Quimby grew up in a Calvinist home and knew of the melancholy, depression, and the ailments of a constricted life that Calvinism produced. One day a woman whose first husband had died, and the second husband abandoned her, leaving her nearly destitute in middle age visited him. The daughter of a fire and brimstone preaching Calvinist father, she was now faint and feeble, and had to be carried up the stairs to the consulting room of Phineas Quimby. Her name was Mary Baker Eddy.

After meeting with Quimby, Mary Baker Eddy pronounced herself cured, and when Quimby died three years later, she claimed his teachings as her own. She gained considerable wealth by founding her own religion, Christian Science. The power of positive thinking was launched, from Quimby's New Thought philosophy to the ultimate mind over matter that claims there is no material world, only thought, mind, spirit, Goodness, and love awaiting us in abundant supply. Mary Baker Eddy exemplified positive thinking: there are no such things as illness or want.

And let's not forget, it worked...at least on the simple maladies...just as my mother said it would. Mind over matter. However, it did not work and had disastrous results when followers of Christian Science refused antibiotics or to undergo surgery.

The era in which we live today has simply taken the formula of positive thinking and moved it to arenas beyond health such as wealth and success. Not only was illness viewed as a personal failure, but unemployment and low living standards spilled over into this thinking...this magical thing that everything can turn according to our frame of mind. In our current recession, being laid off work was framed as an "opportunity to be embraced," much like breast cancer was viewed as a "gift." By being a positive person, as expressed through motivational speakers, self-help books, and religion, being positive was like God answering prayer, a kind of cure that will bring great rewards of happiness. Wealth is one of the principle goals of positive thinking. Think like a winner, not a loser. Positive thinking can "attract" money.

The American people prefer magical thinking to doom and gloom. Why do you think environmentalists are having such a hard time convincing us of global warming? Nobody likes a whiner. Positive thinking is the American way, which allows Sarah Palin to say that the very idea of global warming is sac- religious. God wants us to be happy. It is our inalienable right. God is not going to blow it for us. It's the American ideology: Through wars and economic downturns, think positively and you will realize your desires just as God answers prayer.

The downside of positive thinking as far as I can discern is a matter of myth making. For example, despite an analysis of over 100 studies of self-reported happiness

worldwide, America ranks ranked 23rd, surpassed by the Dutch, the Danes, Malaysians, and even the dour folks from Finland.

Despite our children scoring lower on basic subjects like math and geography among all industrial nations, and despite us having the widest disparity between rich and poor among all nations on earth, and the highest percentage of our population incarcerated than anywhere else on earth, and low results on health care when compared to other western nations, positive thinking leads to embarrassing hubris. We proclaim that America is the best country in the world in education and medical care and if we believe it long enough, it will be true.

The link between positive thinking and entitlement needs to be better understood. A good attitude is indeed healthy, but by manipulating thoughts for material gain and for conquering cancer and other fatal diseases leaves us vulnerable. The number of motivational speakers brought in to high-level corporations during the recessions where executives were encouraged to envision wealth and good outcomes is a huge embarrassment. A little reality check would have gone a long way in preventing the total collapse of our economic system.

To think something is to make it happen has been at the root of the whole movement from Mary Baker Eddy to Norman Vincent Peale to Rhonda Byrne. A young man from our junior choir asked David recently why they always had to sing such "happy" songs." He caught David up short and he will probably be recruited for the choir's next performance of a requiem.

But it was a good question, a profound one to be sure. In our society today it's an either -or. You look at the bright side or you go over the dark edge. What's obviously missing is critical thinking, and let's not mistake doom and gloom for a bit of vigilance. And finally, by viewing unemployment, illness, or poverty as a personal failure, the result of poor imaginations and lack of emotional control will only exacerbate the personal situation with unrealistic guilt.

Let's not get hung up on the pursuit of happiness or at least understand it better. Plenty of affluent people are not happy. So what is happiness, really? And if you really believe that God wants us to be happy by wearing a diamond necklace, attainable through positive thoughts to attract it, then this God is really just a projection of our greed.

I have always encouraged my own kids to think positively, and you probably have too. But add to that a little prudence, a little suspicion about God answering prayers of desire, and perhaps life will be a little more real and even tolerable. So be it.