

The Power of Positive Thinking: For Better and for Worse
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Reading One

Each [of us] is building their own world. We both build from within and we attract from without. Thought is the force with which we build, for thoughts are forces. Like builds like and like attracts like. In the degree that thought is spiritualized does it become more subtle and powerful in its workings. This spiritualizing is within the power of all. Everything is first worked out in the unseen before it is manifested in the seen, in the spiritual before it is manifested in the material.

Ralph Waldo Trine

Reading Two

I have no romantic attachment to suffering as a source of insight or virtue. I would like to see more smiles, more laughter, more hugs, more joy. Once our basic material needs are met — in my utopia, anyway — life becomes a perpetual celebration in which everyone has a talent to contribute. But we cannot levitate ourselves into that blessed condition by wishing it. We need to brace ourselves for a struggle against terrifying obstacles, both of our own making and imposed by the natural world. *And the first step is to recover from the mass delusion that is positive thinking.*

Barbara Ehrenreich

Tolerance, forgiveness. Curiosity. And a positive outlook.

Good things; things we believe in and want to maximize, eh?

But: Tolerance of child abuse, even when justified on religious grounds . . . well, there is that.

Forgiveness, though— must always be good. Yet Joyce Henricks gave a sermon here questioning the imperative to forgive. Encouraging/pressuring victims to forgive . . . Can't we imagine horrible circumstances where that would be much *worse* than useless?

What about curiosity? Eleanor Roosevelt and Einstein say it is *the very greatest thing*. But: our lives are limited and there is no limit to things to be curious about. How many hours can I play words with friends before my brain turns to slush? How many grains of sand are on Lake Michigan beaches? And what is the latest on Beyoncé? Oh, and what were we talking about here anyway? Maybe curiosity is not *always* good.

Like curiosity, forgiveness, and tolerance, when we consider the power of positive thinking we do well to recall our fourth principle. Which is? (pause) *Seeking the truth* requires that we be skeptical of unqualified claims—in our culture and faith traditions—about the importance of cheerfulness, optimism, and a positive mindset.

Positive thinking, like other power, can be helpful or harmful depending on the circumstances. It is a medicine that can help, but misused can spiritually, or actually, kill. *Life is complicated*. We have to be judicious about what to be curious about, what to tolerate, so we ought also to be temperate in our enthusiasm for positivity.

Let's first look at how this started—and then weigh the pros and cons.

One deep root of positive thinking is in Arminianism, an early Protestant theology that rejected key aspects Calvinism, including the notion of predestination. Churches in this line, such as the Methodists, say that *we all have the power* to open ourselves to the divine, or not. We will see how important this idea is: *we have the power*.

Another ancient root of positive thinking is magic, where “like attracts like.” If everything in the world is vibrantly interactive, if the world is a vast living organism, then perhaps we can read our fate in the stars, our palms, the flight of birds. OR, perhaps and even more enticingly, *we can change our life situation* with the energy of thoughts, prayers, and ritual practices focused directly on that which we would wish to appear.

In America, Phineas Quimby (1802–66), a hypnotist and healer, taught that illness originated in the mind as erroneous beliefs and that a mind open to God's wisdom could overcome any illness. Mary Baker Eddy, founder of Christian Science, got her start as Quimby's patient. Picking up influences from Emerson, Swedenborg, Asian religions, and spiritism (think *séance*), these ideas snowballed. “New Thought” emerged as an umbrella term for many similar late 19th century groups, among which we find the Unity Church—with which UU is still frequently confused. Most of these early New Thought groups were led by charismatic women who also figured in the suffrage movement. So there was a fair amount of taking it to the streets, not just keeping it in the parlor.

Phineas Quimby never published anything, but by the early 20th century New Thought was book-based: there was Atkinson's *Thought Vibration or the Laws of Attraction*, McClelland's *Prosperity through Thought Force* (“You are what you think, not what you think you are”), and the highly influential *In Tune with the Infinite* by Ralph Waldo Trine. Trine was a good friend of Henry Ford; New Thought was becoming more establishment. Disparate groups organized as the New Thought Alliance; their teachings have flourished in the New Age, with vast cultural impact. Key shared beliefs are:

- True human selfhood is divine.
- Divinely attuned thought is a positive force for good.
- *All* disease is mental in origin.
- And therefore: right thinking has a healing effect.

In 1952 Methodist minister Norman Vincent Peale published *The Power of Positive Thinking*, selling 5 million copies in 15 languages. Peale was a close friend of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan; Bill Clinton and Donald Trump have also praised his work. Peale says we should inculcate ourselves with *permanent*,

constructive and optimistic attitudes via intentional thoughts such as affirmations and positive visualizations.

The best known of Peale's affirmations: "*Everyday, in every way, I am getting better and better.*"

Peale claims that such self-training leads to greater quality of life. He persuades via anecdotes, testimonials, and some dubious case histories, rather unlike Trine, Quimby and so forth—who give mainly metaphysical claims in support of their positivity instruction. Still, like them, Reverend Peale believes that his techniques of autosuggestion (self-hypnosis) work because they engage, on our behalf, divine power.

In the 1970s, Dr. Wayne Dyer scored a bestseller with *Your Erroneous Zones*. His early work was influenced by existentialist psychology, but he soon found his audience in the New Thought crowd. Dr. Deepak Chopra and countless others kept the ball moving, selectively weaving bits of science and spirit to promote self-help.

In 2006, exactly one hundred years after Atkinson's *Thought Vibration or the Laws of Attraction*, Australian Rhonda Byrne put out a film revealing **the** Great Mystery of the universe. Vaulted to popularity by Oprah Winfrey, Byrne's book *The Secret* sold more over 20 million copies, surpassing the bestsellers of Mark Twain and Jane Austen. The secret law of attraction, a.k.a. the power of positive thinking, unleashes hidden, untapped power within. And just as Mary Baker Eddy and Phineas Quimby very sincerely saw *their* spirituality as science, Rhonda Byrne (like Deepak Chopra) invokes *quantum physics* to explain compelling stories of healing and also: wealth acquisition. Byrne herself, for example, acquired over 300 million dollars via *The Secret* and its sequels.

So: this stuff sells. It sells **BIG**. And it sells *over and over*, repackaged and rediscovered as the lost secret of cosmic wisdom. Inquiring minds want to know: *Why the heck is that?*

I think there are basically two reasons: (1) to some extent, it sells because it works; and (2) although it does *not* work as promised, it gives many people what desperately want, perhaps really need; something that in some ways truly helps them—that is: a sense of control.

So, the first reason it sells is that—to an extent we rationalists might prefer not to acknowledge—it works. Positive thinking works the way magic works, or the power of prayer. These messages of hidden, inner potential can give a quick boost to our confidence and self-esteem. Like a jump-start in February, or like a B-

12 shot, they don't heal any deep problems, but they can get us started. They allow us, for a while at least, to feel that the locus of control is not out in the random, hostile world. In this one way, they are an antidote to a Calvinist heritage—wherein we are both depraved and helpless. Instead we learn: I have the power of the divine *RIGHT HERE* within me. “I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul.”

There is abundant research evidence that self-confidence and internal locus of control are strongly correlated with good outcomes in many spheres of life. It is not hard to understand: people who feel helpless and worthless are unlikely to succeed. Hence: I am woman, hear me roar. Black Power. Black is beautiful. Or as Jesse Jackson has had huge crowds chanting: I AM somebody. And Black Lives Matter.

Also, positive thinking works because it trains us to direct our intentions in specific, clear ways and to do so repeatedly, thereby *creating mental habits of aspiration*. Research shows that one of the most effective strategies to help people change is to get them to set specific goals.

Stumbling around in Wonderland, Alice was asked: Where do you want to go? I don't know, she said. In that case, it does not matter *which* way you go. I heard the same thing lesson learning to serve in tennis. “Where were you aiming that one?” asked the instructor. If you have no target, then you can't get closer: you can't improve.

French surrealist Andre Bretón said, “The imagined is what tends to become real.” If we imagine a goal, then even if we don't right now know how to reach it, our focus primes us to recognize an opportunity, a potential pathway we might otherwise overlook.

Finally, there is scientific evidence that the mind can induce healing in ways grounded in physical complexities we don't understand. I refer not to faith healing, but to the placebo effect. Potential new drugs are not tested against nothing—they must be tested against a placebo, an inert substance administered under the guise of treatment. How come? Because everyone knows, but does not yet know exactly why, placebos *work*. Routinely, and often in objectively measurable ways. Brain imaging has shown that placebos affect heart rate, blood pressure, and chemical activity in the brain. They work on pain, depression, anxiety, fatigue, and some symptoms of Parkinson's disease.

When we consider how New Thought, or positive thinking, strengthens self-confidence, trains us to aspire with goal-setting behavior, and is likely to be bolstered by a placebo effect, then we see its upside. We get a notion about where all the glowing testimonials might be coming from. I think some are concocted to profit the author. But it is reasonable to think that many people have *really* benefited, albeit in non-mystical ways.

So then . . . what could be the dark side of looking on the bright side, keeping a good thought and remembering that we are better and better every day?

Well . . . let's start right there. It seems unlikely that I am in every way getting better and better. How can this kind of reality denial be helpful, or adaptive, over time? A critical review of *The Power of Positive* thinking states, "Peale refuses to allow his followers to hear, speak or see any evil murderous rage, suicidal despair, cruelty, lust, greed, mass poverty, or illiteracy---- he would dismiss these as trivial mental processes which will evaporate if thoughts are simply turned into more cheerful channels." How are we going to address real problems in the world, and in our personal lives, if we refuse to look at them due their being, well, kind of a bummer.

Here is a demonstrated practical problem with positive thinking: When people resolutely commit to positivity, they fixate on certain goals, minimizing the perils. Peale insists our positive mindset should be *permanent*. William James said that New Thought leaders have "an intuitive belief in the all-saving power of healthy-minded attitudes, . . . and a *correlative contempt for doubt, fear, worry, and all nervously precautionary states of mind*." But such faith may impede flexibility, changing goals in light of new information, and lead to disaster rather than against-the-odds triumph. In 1996 eight climbers on Mt. Everest died thinking positively, which is to say unrealistically, in the face of a terrible storm that they knew was coming. They discounted "negative thinking" and defeatism and became martyrs for the movement. Undoubtedly, the annals of Christian Science—and Wall Street—could give us countless similar stories. And what about W's catastrophic decision to invade Iraq? That was some gung ho positive stuff, nattering naysayers be damned.

Many philosophers have pointed out that dogged optimism invites bitter and repeated disappointment—in fact, absolutely assures it in the long run. Mental stability, equilibrium, would seem to depend on a more flexible and balanced approach to life, not a *fabricated* optimism. Some research psychologists say that optimism definitely *is* healthy-- *but only when it is learned through real achievement*.

Finally, the one of the worst problems with the positivity movement (some call it an *industry*) is its implicit (and more rarely *explicit*) victim-blaming. To maintain the sense that we have so much control, we inescapably imply that when bad things happen to people it is caused by those people's negative thinking. Elaine Pagels reported that when a congenital disease afflicted her child, she reflexively felt guilty even while knowing it made no sense. In horrible circumstances, the alternative to guilt is to admit helplessness; and most would rather be guilty than to admit the truth we cannot bear: that in fact, *we are often helpless*, as in the face of a tsunami.

And, if we would rather blame our precious selves than painfully acknowledge our helplessness, than we would most *certainly* rather blame some random sick person or rape victim for their situation rather than admit that we cannot assure our family's security against the same.

Causality in New Thought/positive thinking runs just *one way*: from the mind to the world. Trine says: everything is first worked out in the unseen, in our minds or spirits, before manifesting in the world. This mentalism, an inverted image of scientific materialism, denies realities we know too well: that the physical conditions of poverty and oppression shape people's brains and psyches. Are better attitudes more important than nutrition or lead-levels in poor kids bodies? Are good attitudes going to fix lead poisoning? Or—and this is the crux of the matter--perhaps people get lead poisoning in the first place because of their bad mindsets? This is how positive thinking—just like Calvinism—ends up hand-in-hand with capitalism. It justifies the richness of the rich and the poorness of the poor as natural consequences of their respective spiritual choices.

In 2010, Barbara Ehrenreich, after a breast cancer diagnosis, published *Bright Sided*, a harsh critique of dogmatically peppy and positive breast cancer survivor culture. She reports being chided for her anger and distress; she was made to feel that her rage foretold a bad medical outcome. Yet: until the bacillus that causes

tuberculosis was identified, ‘tubercular personality’ was blamed. During my lifetime it was wrongly thought to believe that ulcers are caused by repressed anger. So when we hear that certain mental attitudes typify the cancer patient or heart patient, or the poor person, we do well to be cautious. Many researchers, as human beings, will be strongly motivated to believe that crippling problems derive from the mental habits of the victims. For if only this were true, then (1) not having that sort of mindset makes us safe and (2) changing our mindset will give us control. Just as the hypnotist-healer Phineas Quimby said.

In conclusion, there is no cure-all anywhere or anywhen. Telling people to be mindful does not magically solve all their problems. Telling people to be more loving does not solve all problems; if it did, we would have no problems, for that message has pumped constantly from every pulpit. Curiosity, tolerance and forgiveness—like mindfulness and love, these are good medicines—medicines that are sometimes useless or worse. They are good medicines to which some might be allergic. A quack gives *everyone* the same snake oil, which probably does have a little something to put pep in the step. But a real doctor does differential diagnosis. Telling people to keep their chin up and keep a good attitude is the best medicine for some on certain days, but poison for others, or at other moments.

Utopia is nowhere—there is no perfect way to organize society so as to assure justice. And there is no perfect medicine, no panacea. We could say that there is no secret at all; there are no magic words. But we might rather say that there are many secrets; that *any* word could be magic if said at just the right time, in just the right way, to the right person. The problem is that we rarely know for sure what to say or do, what will *help* or ring true, what to prescribe—either for ourselves or for others.

So it helps not to grasp desperately at the salesperson’s quick-fix promise. She is of course saying what we want to hear. Instead, recognize, know in our bones, *that we don’t know*, that there is no simple answer. The world is complicated.

But that’s no reason to give up. Remember: amazing people gave their blood, their lives, to make what is good here now in this room. It does not come from nowhere. So let’s look around, eyes wide open,

and do the best we can to work with what we see. What we can figure out. Let's see what works best for us, this day, and what works best for those who need our help.

A few of the sources

Byrne. *The Secret*

Ehrenreich. *Bright Sided*

Henley. "Invictus"

James. *Varieties of Religious Experience*

Moyers. Video interview with Elaine Pagels asking her about the personal basis for her book *Adam,*

Even and the Serpent

Peale. *The Power of Positive Thinking*

Trine. *In Tune with the Infinite*