

IS THERE POWER IN POSITIVE THINKING?

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PARENTAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES

Susan Sklaroff-Van Hook, *The Sun*, March 2003

My son, Alex, was born with club feet, a small chin, and no suck or swallow reflex... He is now nine years old, uses a wheelchair to get around, and is deaf. He has a congenital myopathy, which leaves him with pervasive muscle weakness, and he has scoliosis...

Alex needs assistance to eat, to get dressed, to brush his teeth, and to get into a chair, onto the toilet and into bed. These things are a part of who Alex is. They can never be denied. But there is more.

Alex is fluent in sign language, and although he lags behind in reading, he has a deep and abiding love of books, pouring over them again and again, refusing to give up. He is a Nintendo junkie, which I sometimes feel guilty about, but since I found out that one can earn a degree in video-game design, I feel a little better.

Alex is gentle with our dogs and cats and looks at them with deep understanding. He does not eat meat, because he doesn't want to kill animals. When he grows up, he wants to be a video-game designer, a veterinarian and a teacher of sign language.

He argues with me about his bedtime, about homework and about physical therapy. After a really big argument, we both apologize, and he puts his arms around my neck and plants a wet one on my cheek. He is a clown and a teaser and sometimes laughs so hard that he can't stop. He's gotten in trouble with the principal for popping wheelies and refusing to come in from recess on a beautiful Autumn day.

He proudly displays his leg and chest braces to his classmates and explains that his bones are not broken; it's his muscles that are weak... He yells at people who don't get out of his way in museums and the grocery store. He has never shown a hint of bitterness or jealousy toward more able-bodied children, and he once told me that God signs to him.

When I ask Alex if he felt sad about not walking, he said, "Walking is fine, but I like my wheelchair."

My son has a long and difficult road ahead of him, but he takes each new day as it comes. Instead of fighting his

nature, he embraces it and is completely comfortable in his own skin. How much more perfect can you get?

From William James, "The Will To Believe" (1896)

A social organism, of any sort whatsoever, large or small, is what it is because each member proceeds to his own duty with a trust that the other members will simultaneously do theirs... A government, an army, a commercial system, a ship, a college, an athletic team, all exist on this condition, without which not only is nothing achieved, but nothing is ever attempted.

A whole train of passengers - individually brave enough -- will be looted by just a few highwaymen, simply because the latter can count on one another, while each passenger fears that if he makes a movement of resistance, he will be shot before anyone else backs him up. If we believed that the whole car-full would rise at once with us, we should each severally rise, and train-robbing would never even be attempted.

There are, then, cases where a fact cannot come at all unless a preliminary faith exists in its coming. Although our scientific absolutists insist that faith running ahead of scientific evidence is the "lowest kind of immorality" into which a thinking being can fall, it seems clear that more often than not, faith in a fact can help create that fact.

REFLECTIONS

When I was a freshman in high school way back in 1965 I really wanted to play football. Not because I was all that enamored of the sport, but mostly because it was a high status activity that offered golden opportunities for social advancement. If you were male and wanted to "make it" in high school, it really helped if you were willing to spend Autumn afternoons wearing shoulder pads and banging into people.

My football career, however, lasted less than one full season. I was not very quick on my feet, which disqualified me from the more glamorous skill positions; I wasn't physically aggressive enough to be a linebacker and I was too small to play on the line. And so, after having been run over and out maneuvered in a few dozen scrimmages, I accepted nature's verdict: physically and temperamentally I was not cut out to play football.

But was that really the case? Perhaps my failure had less to do with physiology than with psychology, most notably the absence of a "can-do" attitude. A whole raft of inspirational movies like **The Longest Yard** and **the Bad News Bears** demonstrate what mediocre talent can do when properly motivated. Success, they all say, is mostly a matter of believing in one's self, of cultivating a healthy, positive attitude. Believe and you will succeed, even when the odds are decidedly against you.

The notion that thoughts are powerful, and that positive thinking insures personal achievement, is taken as a given by many in our contemporary culture. In fact, the idea has a long lineage and can be traced back to at least the mid-nineteenth century.

That is when stories, both factual and fictional, of plucky, optimistic "self-made men" achieved tremendous popularity. **Horatio Alger**, son of a Unitarian minister who studied for the Unitarian ministry himself before embarking on a literary career wrote many best sellers using this formula.

And there was **Mary Baker Eddy**, founder of the Christian Science movement, who proclaimed that health, healing and happiness could all be achieved through focused thought and fervent prayer. Powerful metaphysical energies are available to the person whose thoughts are positive and properly pious. But **Mrs. Eddy** was only one among a crowd of so-called "mind-cure" specialists who preached some variation of the "mind over matter" theme. Key to realizing our heart's desire is the tone and tenor of our thinking.

This message was also conveyed to children through stories like "**The Little Engine That Could**," composed by an anonymous writer in the 1890's. Enduringly popular, that story has been repeated and revised numerous times, made into a movie and has helped shape the outlook of millions of Americans. Even **Robert Solomon**, a world-renowned teacher and philosopher at the University of Texas, admitted to having been decisively influenced by that parable

"'I think I can, I think I can...' -- that refrain has carried me through a good deal of my more difficult phases of life," **Solomon** wrote in 2002.

However, perhaps the best-known promoter of this principle in the last century was the popular protestant preacher, **Norman Vincent Peale**. He published **The Power of Positive Thinking** in 1952 and it quickly became a huge best seller. **Peale** admonished his readers to "always picture

success, no matter how badly things seemed to be going at the moment." Repeat the mantra "If God be for us, who can be against us" at least ten times a day, and watch your fortunes improve.

Finally, there is **The Secret** - a newly-minted version of this old, well-circulated coin. Simply put, **The Secret** touts a "law of attraction" by which positive outcomes are inexorably drawn to positive thoughts. This theory has been warmly endorsed by **Oprah Winfrey** among others and has created a buzz world-wide. "Books like "The Secret" **Peter Birkenhead** writes,

...propose that good things come to those who believe, whether it is a belief in a diet, a God or a Habit of Successful People... They all trust that their devotion will be rewarded with money, boyfriends, job promotions, with hockey championships and apartments. And most of all they believe - they really, really believe in themselves.

There are indeed many who embrace this creed and will passionately attest to its validity. **Ray Kroc**, the man who re-invented the fast-food industry and made McDonald's the planet's most recognizable restaurant, was a believer. As a young man **Kroc** sold any number of products, including coffee beans, sheet music, Florida real estate and square ice-cream scoops. He struggled as a salesman but, he said,

I always knew that success was just around the corner. If you believe in it, if you believe in it hard, it's impossible to fail.

Then there is the witness of a senior editor for a prestigious daily newspaper, recorded in **Norman Vincent Peale's The Power of Positive Thinking**. "How did you get to this place?" **Peale** asked the editor.

"I wanted to be here," the editor replied.

"Is that all there is to it?" **Peale** asked. "You wanted to be editor of a distinguished newspaper and so there you are."

"Well, that may not be all of it, but that was a large part of the process..." the editor responded.

He then produced a well-worn card from his wallet and said, "I repeat this quotation every day of my life. It has become my dominating thought."

A man who is self-reliant, positive, optimistic and undertakes his work with the assurance of success magnetizes his condition. He draws to himself the creative powers of the universe.

This is, of course, basically the same "not-so-secret" message that has been magnified and marketed by those who brought us **The Secret**.

Management guru **Tom Peters** also subscribes to positive thinking. "The most successful managers," **Peters** says, "are unwilling to tolerate the negative stuff." These high-functioning individuals tend to be extremely confident, and do not harbor the mental reservations and emotional insecurities that the average person contends with.

The medical community has its own tales to tell. The **Placebo Effect** is a well-documented phenomenon, and it is apparent that a patient's beliefs and attitudes are often a major factor in their recovery. Furthermore, as reported in Friday's local paper, just being surrounded by positive, hopeful people can also be remedial. This could make a huge difference for a young man with multiple disabilities like **Alex**, whose amazing courage and confidence need to be reinforced by parents, siblings and classmates who believe in him.

Positive thinking, then, has collective as well as individual implications. There are indications that by creating a culture of optimism and self-assurance - by "hitching its wagon to a star," as **Emerson** put it - a family or a community can write a new chapter in its history.

It has taken a long time for this congregation to achieve that level of confidence - to believe it could successfully complete a project as ambitious as the one on which we embarked last year. Eight years ago, when a plan for expansion was first proposed, our consultants told us to forget about it. Through interviews with our members and an assessment of our giving patterns they concluded that the commitment just wasn't there. A few years later we studied the issue again, and a second consultant reported that the congregation was still lukewarm and somewhat dubious. But a third report, two years ago, showed a shift; people were beginning to come around. The new report indicated that we ought to be able to raise in the neighborhood of \$4.5 million for restoration and expansion.

Still, even that would not be enough to construct an addition that would reflect our values and measure up to our social, environmental and aesthetic ideals. But that dream building is now taking shape because we've been able to raise from you, the members of this community, 30% more money than the most liberal estimate of two years ago.

So yes...If I didn't before, I now do believe in the power of collective positive thinking! I attribute our success to a shift in the outlook of our FUS culture. This community expects great things of itself and it clearly understands what an expanded, state-of-the-art facility can mean to us and to the community at large. Our courage and our confidence have enabled us, as **William James** put it, to pull together to create a stunning new fact.

Nevertheless, we are not there yet. This has been a complex undertaking and we have had to deal with a number of unexpected developments. It is ever so important, therefore, that we continue to pull together, believing in one another and in the importance of our mission.

But having said all that, I feel obliged to add a couple of qualifications. Although positive thinking may be highly advantageous, it is hardly sufficient. I do not subscribe to the "law of attraction" whereby good thoughts routinely produce positive outcomes. I could have focused on football and repeated positive affirmations 'till the cows came home" but still, I would never have become a gridiron star. The truth is, without careful discernment we are merely indulging in wishful thinking.

Remember that successful newspaper editor cited by **Norman Vincent Peale**? He also said that before committing one's heart and soul to an enterprise, we need to know it is right for us, that it is a sound objective.

My own athletic career is a case in point. Having forsaken football, I took up wrestling, which didn't require a lot of speed and had the advantage of matching me against boys my own size. I got pretty good at wrestling. I also tried cross-country and discovered that while I was no sprinter, I was blessed with exceptional stamina. By focusing on distance running, I eventually collected a cabinet full of awards and an exercise pattern that continues to pay rich dividends.

Discernment means analyzing your gifts, learning where your potential lies, setting your sights reasonably high and figuring out how to make the most of what you have.

Making the most of one's abilities requires discipline and a good deal of hard work. The "**Little Engine That Could**" didn't think her way up that steep grade. Every

piston was pumping and every bolt and rivet was straining as she inched along those tracks. The congregation of First Unitarian Society did not raise six million dollars by praying for it to appear. A whole lot of people thought very carefully and worked very hard to produce that number. Repeating affirmations, forming and holding a clear picture of what we want in our heads -- none of that will bring us any closer to our goals if we aren't willing to put shoulder to the wheel.

There is nothing magical about positive thinking. It merely provides us with the focus and firm commitment we need to make a major investment in an important project. "It is not so much that thinking makes things happen," **Robert Solomon** writes.

It is rather that by adopting a stance that dispels the most debilitating doubts and discouragement, success at made more likely.

What this means is that the focused, active energy of optimism is more potent than the diffuse, mostly passive energy of pessimism.

At this point one question remains to be asked: Is positive thinking always appropriate? Probably not. Skepticism and doubt often serve as a critical reality check because optimists and promoters of positive thinking have a tendency, research shows, to discount obstacles and minimize real problems. Submit a grand idea to a room full of optimists and you have a sure-fire recipe for half-baked decisions.

Finally, there is always the issue of context. Not every situation calls for positive thinking, and not every condition responds well to it. **Barbara Ehrenreich** urges caution when she writes:

There is some evidence that the ubiquitous moral injunction to think positively may place an additional burden on the already sick or otherwise aggrieved. Not only are you failing to get better, but you're failing to feel good about not getting better...

Optimists, proponents of positive thinking, need to remember that there is a time for encouragement and also a time for compassion and commiseration. Friends, neighbors, relatives co-workers, children - all of us are buffeted at times by events over which we have very little control -- losses and disappointments that leave us at our wits end

and emotionally drained. Sometimes what a person really needs is a dollop of sympathy rather than yet another strong dose of positivity. The latter may make us successful, but the former is what keeps us human.