

NOTEBOOK

Pathologies of Hope By Barbara Ehrenreich

I hate hope. It was hammered into me constantly a few years ago when I was being treated for breast cancer: Think positively! Don't lose hope! Wear your pink ribbon with pride! A couple of years later, I was alarmed to discover that the facility where I received my follow-up care was called the Hope Center. Hope? What about a cure? At antiwar and labor rallies over the years, I have dutifully joined Jesse Jackson in chanting "Keep hope alive!"—all the while crossing my fingers and thinking, "Fuck hope. Keep us alive."

There. It's out. Let pestilence rain down on me, for a whole chorus of voices rise up to insist that hope, optimism, and a "positive attitude" are the keys to health and longevity. The more academically respectable among them—the new Ph.D.-level "positive psychologists"—like to cite a study of nuns in which the ones professing a generally positive outlook in their twenties went rather tardily to their maker while the glummer ones dropped off like flies a decade earlier. The average author of motivational materials—books, CDs, and audiotapes—needs no studies to buttress the warning that negative thoughts "can be harmful to your health and might even shorten your life span."

Not only is health at stake; so is your credibility as a citizen, employee, or social entity of any kind. "Ninety-nine out of every 100 people report that they want to be around more positive

people," claims the self-help book *How Full Is Your Bucket?* Many champions of positivity urge one to ostracize negative people—complainers and "victims"—because they are "committed to lose."

It's everywhere, this Cult of Positivity, at least in America, the birthplace of Mary Baker Eddy, Norman Vincent Peale, and est, where 30,000 beaming "life coaches" ply their trade and a pessimist is no more likely to be elected president than an atheist. George W. Bush provides a sterling role model. Asked on his most recent birthday about the potential nuclear threats of Iran and North Korea, as well as the U.S.-instigated civil war in Iraq, he replied, "I'm optimistic that all problems will be resolved."

Google offers more than a million entries on "positive thinking" covering almost any kind of challenge you might encounter. Dieting? Robert Ferguson, the "Master Weight-Loss Coach," tells us, "With a positive attitude you can *do*, *have* and *be* everything you want in life!" Bereaved? You can put the fun back in funeral by replacing it with a "celebration" of the deceased's life. Need money? Attract it to your wallet with positive mental affirmations, such as:

I love having money. . . . I am open to receive money. I give generously to myself and others. I am generous. I feel great about all the money I spend. Note: Be SPECIFIC about amounts of money [you require].

Cancer? See it positively, as a "growth opportunity," and hopefully not just for the tumor. A representative of the American Cancer Society rebuffed a researcher in the mid-Nineties

by saying that the organization didn't "want to be associated with a book on death. We want to emphasize the positive aspects of cancer only." Laid off? Forget the economy and concentrate on reconfiguring your attitude, as explained in the 2004 bestseller *We Got Fired! . . . And It's the Best Thing That Ever Happened to Us*.

One measure of the cult's success is the growth of the "self-improvement" industry, most of which promotes techniques for upgrading your attitude and visualizing success through affirmations that open you to the abundance of the world—like this one, for example, from a current financial self-help book:

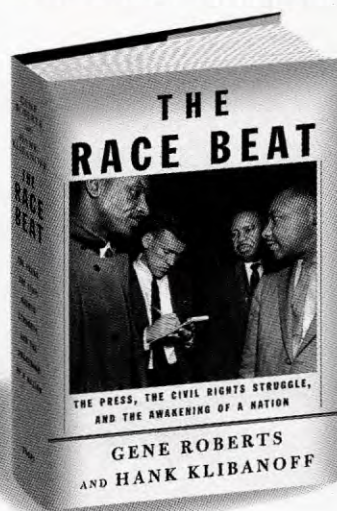
Place your hand on your heart and say . . . "I admire rich people!" "I bless rich people!" "I love rich people!" "And I'm going to be one of those rich people too!"

In 2000, the self-improvement industry—including books, CDs, seminars, and coaches—took in \$3.35 billion. In 2005, it grossed \$5.62 billion, with the coaching market alone growing by almost 500 percent.

Until recently, the marketing of optimism was left largely to familiar snake-oil purveyors like motivational speakers, prosperity-oriented preachers, and self-anointed coaches. Then, in 2000, the new academic discipline of positive psychology emerged, complete with annual conferences, a *Journal of Happiness Studies*, and a World Database of Happiness. There are now more than a hundred courses on positive psychology available on college campuses, and in the spring of 2006, one of them was the most popular

Barbara Ehrenreich is a Contributing Editor of Harper's Magazine. Her new book, Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy, is due out in July.

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course at Harvard. Its professor, Dr. Tal D. Ben-Shahar, takes an indulgent stance toward his disreputable confederates. "For many years," he says, "the people who were writing about happiness were the self-help gurus. It had a bad rap.... What I'm trying to do in my class is to regain respectability for the concept of self-help."

Much of the behavioral advice offered by the gurus, both credentialed and otherwise, is innocuous. "Smile," advises one success-oriented, positive-thinking website, "greet coworkers." Surely the world would be a better, happier place if we all held doors for one another and stopped to coax smiles from babies—if only through the well-known social psychological mechanism of "mood contagion." Nor can I quibble with the common assignment in positive-psych courses to write "gratitude letters" or keep a "gratitude journal." As the mother of two Ivy League graduates, I'm for having all students write weekly odes to their tuition-payers.

The problem, for anyone with a lingering loyalty to secular rationalism, is that the prescriptions don't stop at behavior. Like our culture's ambient Protestantism, the Cult of Positivity demands not only acts but faith. It's not enough to manifest positivity through a visibly positive attitude; you must establish it as one of the very structures of your mind, whether or not it is justified by the actual circumstances. Some gurus attempt to dodge the potential conflict with reality by attributing to positive thoughts the power to control the outer world through a "Law of Attraction," as yet unknown to physicists, whereby thoughts somehow produce their material counterparts in the outer world. The 2005 book *Secrets of the Millionaire Mind*, for example, explains that the universe "is akin to a big mail-order department.... You 'order' what you get by sending energetic messages out to the universe based on your predominant beliefs."

The academic side of the cult, which rests its claims to respectability on science, is of course barred from endorsing wacko mind-over-matter notions. Instead, we learn there that irrational-

ity, at least in the form of "positive illusions," works like a vitamin, even at the admitted "cost perhaps of less realism." Scientists should presumably avoid such magical thinking, but it is recommended to everyone else: Go ahead, pump yourself up, imagine that all the obstacles you face are projections of some lingering negativity, whatever gets you through the day.

Why should an intelligent species need to rely on illusions? According to positive psychology's founder, University of Pennsylvania psychologist Martin Seligman, it is our negative, pessimistic, thoughts that are maladaptive and happily, as it turns out, vestigial:

Because our brain evolved during a time of ice, flood and famine, we have a catastrophic brain. The way the brain works is looking for what's wrong. The problem is, that worked in the Pleistocene era. It favoured you, but it doesn't work in the modern world.

In this view, which was restated uncritically in a February 2006 *New Yorker* review of two books on happiness, our Paleolithic ancestors were well served by the suspicion that a saber-toothed cat crouched behind every bush. Today we would do better to visualize pots of gold.

There are exceptions, the positive psychologists concede, even in the modern world, and at first glance they seem a little exotic: airplane pilots, for example, need to anticipate worst outcomes rather than happy landings. Recently, Seligman further limited the purview of positive psychology to nations that "are wealthy and not in civil turmoil and not at war," perhaps not realizing that he had thus excluded the majority of the world's people. But even leaving the poor and war-ravaged aside: if a pilot needs a healthy dose of negative thinking, what about the driver of a car? Should I assume, positively, that no one is going to cut in front of me or, more negatively, be prepared to brake?

Child-raising is another quotidian activity that eludes the positive psychologists. Religion and marriage are both recommended as positivity-boosters, and they do seem to increase self-reported happiness, but children, according to Harvard psychologist

Daniel Gilbert, can be "an extreme source of negative affect." Kids are, in other words, bummers, and it's easy to see why. You might want to be "positive" by advertising a trip to the pediatrician as an opportunity to play with the cool toys in the waiting room rather than an occasion for a painful shot, but no parent dare risk assuming that the sudden quiet from the toddlers' room means they are studying with Baby Einstein. Visualize fratricidal stranglings and electric outlets stabbed with forks: that's how we reproduce our genomes.

If health and well-being in general are at stake, the positive psychologists would argue, why not indulge in some positive illusions even at the cost of "realism"? There's no question but that extreme, locked-in negativity in the form of depression is a risk factor for physical illness, but the evidence for the health-enhancing effects of positivity is surprisingly muddled. A frequently cited 1988 article arguing that positive illusions, such as unwarrantedly high self-estimations, promote mental health has been disputed. Nor are positive-thinking people necessarily happier than pessimists or realists, since anyone who self-reports positivity is equally likely to self-report happiness. As for "success": in workplaces that enjoin a positive attitude, one would do well to conform, but the halls of fame are lined with the busts of major depressives, including Max Weber, William James, John Donne, and Samuel Johnson.

It takes a positive spin to see a consistently positive effect of positivity on physical health. A 2002 *New York Times* article headlined "Power of Positive Thinking Extends, It Seems, to Aging" cited two studies linking optimism to longevity—and four studies tracing longevity to such other traits as "conscientiousness," calmness, pessimism, and even cantankerousness. A 2002 study not cited in the *Times* article found mildly depressed women living longer than nondepressed or more severely depressed women, and even two positive psychologists reported that people displaying negative affect "complain about their health but show no hard evidence of poorer health or increased mortality." As for those oft-cited nuns: Nuns are popular

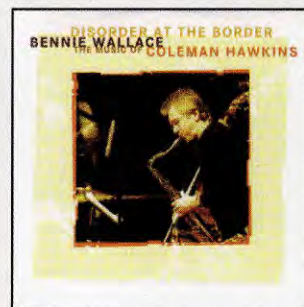
with researchers because of their controlled, homogeneous lifestyle. But that lifestyle is not for everyone, and Freud might think of reasons why those who were not initially enthusiastic about their vocation would go on to live lives of quiet and self-destructive desperation.

In fact, 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. Similarly for the long-term unemployed, who, as I found while researching my book *Bait and Switch*, are informed by career coaches and self-help books that their principal battle is against their own negative, resentful, loser-like feelings. This is victim-blaming at its cruelest, and may help account for the passivity of Americans in the face of repeated economic insult.

But what is truly sinister about the positivity cult is that it seems to reduce our tolerance of other people's suffering. Far from being a "culture of complaint" that upholds "victims," ours has become "less and less tolerant of people having a bad day or a bad year," according to Barbara Held, professor of psychology at Bowdoin College and a leading critic of positive psychology. If no one will listen to my problems, I won't listen to theirs: "no whining," as the popular bumper stickers and wall plaques warn. Thus the cult acquires a viral-like reproductive energy, creating an empathy deficit that pushes ever more people into a harsh insistence on positivity in others.

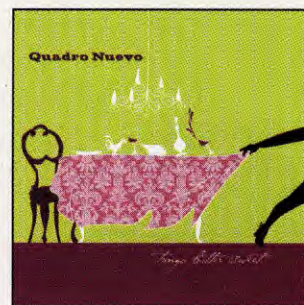
I got through my bout of cancer in a state of constant rage, directed chiefly against the kitschy positivity of American breast-cancer culture. I remain, although not absolutely, certifiably, cancer-free down to the last cell, at least hope-free. Do not mistake this condition for hopelessness, in the beaten or passive sense, or confuse it with unhappiness. The trick, as my teen hero Camus wrote, is to draw strength from the "refusal to hope, and the unyielding evidence of a life without consolation." To be hope-free is to acknowledge the lion in the tall grass, the tumor in the CAT scan, and to plan one's moves accordingly. ■

Music of Distinction



Bennie Wallace Disorder At The Border

Disorder At The Border, the result of Bennie Wallace's enduring love of Coleman Hawkins, features one of the finest ensembles Wallace has ever assembled: alto saxophonists Brad Leali and Jesse Davis; baritone saxophonist Adam Schroeder; trombonist Ray Anderson; trumpeter Terrell Stafford; pianist Donald Vega; bassist Danton Boller; and drummer Alvin Queen. The album's repertoire consists entirely of compositions by or associated with Coleman Hawkins (1904-1969). Wallace adds, "His music is so important to all saxophonists, yet I feel he's been unbelievably overlooked in recent years."



Quadro Nuevo Tango Bitter Sweet

After three acclaimed recordings released in North America, Justin Time continues its association with Munich-based musicians Quadro Nuevo for a fourth, with the arrival of their stunning new opus, *Tango Bitter Sweet*. Whether visiting the rich repertoire of Italian street songs (*Canzone della Strada*), or exploring the cultural and geographical roots of coffee (*Mocca Flor*), Quadro Nuevo, appealingly armed with acoustic guitar, bass, accordion and saxophone, are never less than enchanting. "Dynamic, rich in detail... highly recommended"

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