

“Getting By or Getting Back Up”
a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
at First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis
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A reading from the Black Panther Party for Self Defense co-founder Huey P. Newton:

I have often pondered the similarity between prison experience and the slave experience of Black people. Both systems involve exploitation: the slave received no compensation for the wealth he produced, and the prisoner is expected to produce marketable goods for what amounts to no compensation. Slavery and prison life share a complete lack of freedom of movement. The power of those in authority is total, and they expect deference from those under their domination. Just as in the days of slavery, constant surveillance and observation are part of the prison experience, and if inmates develop meaningful and revolutionary friendships among themselves, these ties are broken by institutional transfers, just as the slavemaster broke up families.

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Many white inmates are not outright racists when they get to prison, but the staff soon turns them in that direction. While the guards do not want racial hostility to erupt into violence between inmates, they do want hostility high enough to prevent any unity. This is something like the strategy used by southern politicians to pit poor whites against poor blacks.

...

The whites are not only duped and used by the prison staff, but come to love their oppressors. Their dehumanization is so thorough that they admire and identify with those who deprive them of their humanity.

INTRO

Declaring yourself a “stable genius,” as President Trump did the other day, is laughable, but there is a very American history behind such inanity. It’s called “positive thinking.”

The classic of positive thinking is Norman Vincent Peale’s book *The Power of Positive Thinking*. Published in 1952, it has now sold something over five million copies. The book’s most famous quote has become part of American culture: “Change your thoughts and you change your world.”

Norman Vincent Peale was a minister at Marble Collegiate Church in Manhattan. Donald Trump’s parents were members of the church, and Donald attended. During a CNN interview, Trump said, “The great Norman Vincent Peale was my minister for years.” In a *Washington Post* interview Trump said of Rev. Peale, “He thought I was his greatest student of all time.”

Norman Vincent Peale called Trump, “one of America’s top positive thinkers and doers.”

So there is that.

When Peale’s book came out, it was immediately and soundly thrashed by both psychologists and Christian theologians. A. Powell Davies, pastor of All Souls’ Unitarian Church in Washington D.C., said of the book,

It has sort of a drug effect on people to be told they need not worry. They keep coming back for more. It keeps their minds on a superficial level and encourages emotional dependency. It is an escape from reality. People under stress do one of two things; seek shelter or respond to harsh reality by a deeper recognition of what they are up against. The people who flock to the ‘peace of mind’ preachers are seeking shelter. They don’t want to face reality. (Wiki, “Norman Vincent Peale”)

When Adlai Stevenson, who was Unitarian, was asked about Peale, he responded, “I find Paul appealing and Peale appalling.”

Rev. Peale was very open about the connection between positive thinking and conservative politics. After all, tests have shown that there is a clear connection between reporting what we call "happiness" and contentment with how things are, the *status quo*. So, the rich can *afford* to be happy. The poor . . . not so much.

I think we can reliably say that optimism is a healthy attitude, but positive thinking is, as Rev. Davies said, "escape from reality" among those who already have a cushy reality.

Unlike Adlai Stevenson, I don't find St. Paul's philosophy appealing, but Peale and his disciples are still appalling.

ONE

Last week, Rev. Jim considered the distinction between resilience and endurance. As I've been thinking this week about the kind of privilege it takes to believe in the power of positive thinking and the kind of thinking it takes to declare yourself a "stable genius," I thought back to my grandfather who lived his entire life as a sharecropper. I remember him saying to me when I was a little kid, "The only thing poor folks get out of life is what me manage to eat."

That's not all that positive, is it?

But you see, the bankers can send the county sheriff out to take away your hope. So hope is a dangerous thing to have. The county sheriff can't take away your cynicism. You buy yourself a firearm so you feel some power if that sheriff comes out to the farm. You probably won't use it, but you *could*, so you feel some power.

Then you hear liberals talking about how powerful the National Rifle Association is and how the NRA buys off politicians, and that just reinforces what you already believe about the corruption of the government that always screws you. So you join the NRA. And you wait.

That's endurance, not resilience. That's the voice I've fought all my life.

When you're born into privilege, it's not difficult for your thoughts to be positive and your actions legal. When you're born poor, cynicism and violence come to you much more naturally.

So, we know what happens when a privileged person relies on positive thinking: They can indeed be president one day.

But what about the oppressed? What about the poor?

Thinking about this I remembered reading the words we heard this morning from Huey P. Newton, who was the co-founder of the Black Panther Party back in 1966.

Donald Trump is four years younger than Newton *would have been* had Newton not been murdered during a drug deal.

TWO

Newton's father was a sharecropper and part-time Baptist preacher. Newton grew up in Monroe, Louisiana (one of the places I lived as a kid.) It's for some reason pronounced MON-roe, not Mun-Roe.

Huey Newton was named after the populist governor of Louisiana, Huey P. Long, who Huey's father admired, as did my grandparents. Long brought the poor of all races together to form a progressive political machine. "Every man a king!" Long used to shout. (I'll have to talk more about him sometime.)

Now, at the end of his life Dr. Martin Luther King was promoting what was called the Poor People's Campaign. The Poor People's Campaign of the 1960s was designed to include *all* oppressed people, black, white, Latinx, Asian, Native . . . everybody. Then King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee.

Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale had that inclusive vision when they started the Black Panther Party for Self Defense. Yes, the the Black Panther Party for Self Defense was for African Americans exclusively, but Newton and Seale also helped to form the Young Lords and *Macheteos*, who were Puerto Rican, as well as the Young Patriots and Rising Up Angry, both organizations for poor whites.

The Black Panther Party for Self Defense wore *black* berets, but there were also brown berets and white berets, just as there were later pink berets, after the Gay Liberation Front began supporting the Black Panthers financially.

Newton and Seale invented what in anti-racist, anti-oppression training nowadays we call caucusing. That is, different oppressed groups talking among themselves before they talk with other groups.

Now, most Americans don't know the story I have just related. You can walk as long as you like in the Chicago neighborhood of Lincoln Park today and never see a plaque mentioning the Lincoln Park Poor People's Coalition. If you mention the Rainbow Coalition to even history buffs, they will say that's a group founded by the Rev. Jessie Jackson, who was with Martin Luther King the day he was assassinated.

But the *original* Rainbow Coalition was made up of the groups I mentioned that were encouraged by Seale and Newton. And Newton explains what he was doing in the reading from this morning about prisons:

The whites are not only duped and used by the prison staff, but come to love their oppressors. Their dehumanization is so thorough that they admire and identify with those who deprive them of their humanity.

Nowadays we call that "Stockholm Syndrome."

Endurance, not resilience.

In your order of service this morning is a quote from the social activist Barbara Ehrenreich. "There is a vast difference between positive thinking and existential courage." Endurance necessarily has more existential courage in it than does positive thinking. But endurance is only about getting by. "Existential courage" is a whole lot more.

THREE

The quote in your order of service comes from a book titled *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America*.

Ehrenreich wrote the book after her experience with breast cancer taught her a very difficult lesson, quote: "The failure to think positively can weigh on a cancer patient like a second disease."

Ehrenreich wrote,

Breast cancer, I can now report, did not make me prettier or stronger, more feminine or spiritual. What it gave me, if you want to call this a "gift," was a very personal, agonizing encounter with an ideological force in American culture that

I had not been aware of before—one that encourages us to deny reality, submit cheerfully to misfortune, and blame only ourselves for our fate.

“Deny reality, submit cheerfully to misfortune, and blame only ourselves for our fate.” Now, in my experience, the poor don’t tend to do that: my sharecropper grandfather thought he was looking at reality head on; he was deeply bitter about his misfortune, and he blamed the government for his fate. Endurance versus mainstream American positive thinking.

But let’s look more closely at Ehrenreich’s “existential courage.” What I’m going to call “resilience.”

Because Humanism looks at things from exactly the opposite angle: Humanists face reality even if we wish reality weren’t like it is; we object strongly to what we see as wrong; and we understand that everything is interconnected. Humanists know that cancer has a cause, and that cause isn’t negative thinking. Often cancer can be cured, but not by positive thinking or blaming yourself.

Last week Rev. Jim mentioned a study of children that demonstrates that resilient children have what psychologists call an “internal locus of control”—they believe that they, and not their circumstances, affect their achievements. Bottom line: the resilient see themselves as the orchestrators of their own fates.

Sounds a lot like that old Victorian-era Stoic poem by William Ernest Henly “Invictus.” It was a favorite of Nelson Mandela:

I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.

Here’s the unfortunate fact that positive thinking can’t get around: some problems don’t have solutions. Thinking otherwise is delusion.

Yet, some people don’t sit around and think we’re victims. The difference between just getting by and getting back up and going on is looking at problems squarely for what they are and then seeking solutions that are reality-based.

That’s what bothers many of us about Trump’s policies: it’s not only that they benefit only a tiny fraction of the population, but also that they aren’t reality-based.

One of the hallmarks of Humanism and other non-theist philosophies and religions is their insistence that human life can be improved by cognitive means—by using our thoughts, our knowledge, and our perceptions. In these traditions, wisdom comes not from the gods but from a very human combination of acquired facts and controlled intuitions. Mind. Thought.

For example, the Serenity Prayer is a concise example of improving life through cognitive means: “the wisdom to know the difference” between what we can and cannot change.

The Serenity Prayer encapsulates a key concept in Stoicism called the Axiom of Futility. Simply stated, the Axiom of Futility says: If you can't do it, don't do it. The Axiom of Futility is why you cannot think positively and become a stable genius when you're neither stable nor a genius.

Not doing what you can't do avoids all manner of disappointment. It can give us existential courage.

Clearly, the trick to using the Axiom of Futility is that “wisdom to know the difference” thing. You might decide it's futile to try to fix your financial situation; or your relationship; or your drinking problem; or that little lump you think you feel. Those decisions are not wise: just because you don't *want* to do something, or just because it's hard, doesn't make it futile. It just makes it hard.

The Stoic philosopher Epictetus, puts it this way:

Some things we *can* do, some things we can't . . .

Take power over what you have power over . . .

. . . learn what illusion looks like. Learn to say, “That is an illusion.” Learn to ask: “What is in my power?” If it's not in your power, forget about doing it.

Doctor George Bonanno, a psychologist, is taking the ideas of ancient Stoicism into the study of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Fancying up the words of Epictetus, Bonanno claims that an event is a “PTE: potentially traumatic event.”

An event is “potentially traumatic” because we decide, consciously or unconsciously, whether or not the event is traumatic. And by thinking about it, we can change our own stories.

The difference between positive thinking and Stoicism is this: positive thinking claims to change reality but . . . doesn't; Stoicism changes the way you view reality.

CONCLUSION

Allow me to conclude with that Stoic poem “Invictus.”

Out of the night that covers me,
 Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
 For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
 I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
 My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
 Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
 Finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
 How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
 I am the captain of my soul.

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