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REVIEW OF THE WEEK

Always look on the bright side of life?

A breast cancer patient hits out in her new book against the US's forced culture of positive thinking. **Polly Toynbee** reviews



Smile or Die: How Positive Thinking Fooled America and the World

Barbara Ehrenreich

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Rating: *******

The relentless American habit of optimism stirs our love-hate relationship with the United States. The mindless “have a nice day” corporate smile on the face of an underpaid burger flipper is hideous to behold. But that can-do cast of mind also seems to power up the great engine of US inventiveness.

Barbara Ehrenreich, one of the sharpest US reporters and thinkers, has turned her laser analysis on the creed of positive thinking. Behind the smile she finds a national delusion that has become a cult of immense political significance. To outsiders the American dream is a puzzle. How does the US delude itself that it is the classless land of opportunity when any league table or graph you choose to consult—I suggest *The Spirit Level* by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett for examples (see *Observations, BMJ* 2009;338:b1293)—shows the US as not only the most unequal but the least socially mobile of all Western nations?

Ehrenreich has the answer: the power of positive thinking. Hyped up by motivational cheerleading in churches and business conferences, people are told that they can overcome every obstacle if only they try hard enough. Optimism is the opium of the people, she says, keeping them in their place, and they have only themselves to blame for believing the American dream despite the evidence of their own eyes.

Ehrenreich first turned her attention to this phenomenon when she contracted breast cancer and encountered a tidal wave of injunctions to be “positive.” Smile or die was the message, and they meant it literally. She found herself swamped by the “pink ribbon” culture, a sea of pinkness

where horror and dread are muffled by teddies for awareness called Hope or Daisy. The websites are awash with positive embrace of the disease: “I really am a much more sensitive person now”; “This has been the hardest year of my life but the most rewarding. I got rid of baggage.” A book called *The Gift of Cancer: A Call to Awakening* carries the message that “cancer is your passport to the life you were truly meant to lead . . . Cancer will lead you to God.”

The positive message goes far beyond simple comfort and cheer. It says that if you succumb you are yourself to blame. The oncology nurses who treat her are imbued with these myths—harmless stories that her hair will grow back softer and fuller after chemotherapy come with messages that opportunities for self improvement abound. When she expresses complaints about the debilitating effect of the treatments, the cult-like believers admonish her: “You have a bad attitude towards all of this, and it’s not going to help you in the least.”

Most sinister is the volume of bad science claiming that medical studies “demonstrate the link between a positive attitude and an improved immune system.” She documents the history of this notion, which continues unabated despite frequent and rigorous puncturing. The *Psychological Bulletin* carried a systematic review finding

that psychotherapy and support groups might improve people’s mood but did nothing to overcome cancer. The imaginative combat between the immune system and cancer is itself largely mythical, let alone able to be influenced by positive thoughts. “Failure to think positively can weigh on a cancer patient like a second disease,” Ehrenreich warns. The only “gift” she perceives from her cancer episode was her 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.”

Recovered (despite negative and angry thoughts), she seeks out the roots of all this empty optimism. Christian Science was an early promoter, along with evangelical churches, from Norman Vincent Peale (author of *The Power of Positive Thinking*) to the pentecostals, offering magical thinking whereby believers will get rich, get well, pass exams, and be promoted purely by the power of thought. She charts how this phenomenon infected the world of business, where motivational trainers pumped up the self belief of chief executives. It led directly, she says, to the state of mind of the likes of Dick Fuld of Lehmann Brothers, whose runaway self belief let all in the company imagine that red numbers on the page could be blown away by positive thinking. Those who warned of danger were fired as too “negative.” The alarming truth about the world of finance is that it was half true: if others would only keep believing too, the bubble would keep inflating. “Positive thinking destroyed the economy,” Ehrenreich writes.

The science of happiness comes under her forensic scalpel too as she takes apart the many self help guides and works on “the power of optimism” by Martin Seligman, former president of the American Psychological Association. He too purveys this myth: “Happy people” have “feistier immune systems than less happy people.” The invasion of unscientific positivism into the field of psychology is alarming.

So what’s wrong with looking on the bright side? By the end of this intelligent and well researched book, mindless optimism emerges as America’s dark force, keeping people in their place, blaming them for their fate, and preventing them from seeking collective political solutions by misdescribing all social ills as personal problems. As a management tool, motivational instructors use it to grind down employees and make them smile while underfoot. As a tool for leadership, it causes gross arrogance and miscalculation. The real world has to be faced, in medicine, business, and in politics.

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