

Expecting the Positive in a Negative World
Countryside Church, January 8, 2017
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This is sort of a personal sermon today. I'm going to talk about a strategy I have long used to help me deal with my life. I hope you will find it interesting and suggestive.

It's about what we clergy-types called "Practical Theology." That is, taking theological principles and applying them to solve practical problems. I'm going to explain why I think it's important to find ways to stay positive in a negative world.

Napoleon Hill

"To every disadvantage, there is a corresponding advantage." That is a quotation by W. Clement Stone, and is his version of a saying by Napoleon Hill, a positive thinking guru of the 1930s and 40s. What Hill said was "Every adversity, every failure, every heartache carries with it the seed of an equal or greater benefit."

While I don't think that is always true, there have been times when I've found it a comfort as I tried to figure out how to move on from some reversal or problem.

One of the prize books in my personal library is a leather bound edition of The Laws of Success by Napoleon Hill. It was a personal gift from W. Clement Stone, the founder of the Combined Insurance Company of America. Mr. Stone was one of the wealthiest people in American when he was alive, building an empire and rising out of poverty by putting into practice the "laws of success" taught by Napoleon Hill.

Mr. Stone was a patron of People's Liberal Church, an independent Unitarian church on Chicago's North Side, and I met him through the minister of that church, Dr. Preston Bradley. Dr. Bradley taught me how to preach, even though when I knew him he was more than 90 years old.

Napoleon Hill is credited with being the founder of the whole "Positive Thinking" movement and was influential on the teaching of the Rev. Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, the clergyperson our new President-Elect most admires.

Basically, what Positive Thinking (in its more rational form) says is “what you can realistically imagine you can probably achieve,” and that you will get much farther by putting a positive spin on everything than otherwise.

It’s possible to go too far with that, in the way that some of the people who talk about “The Law of Attraction” do in the book The Secret and its sequels, but I’ve actually got some respect for the whole positive thinking thing.

The Biochemistry if it All

Of the 60 or so chemicals that your brain uses to regulate its functioning, about 45 are involved in the experience of fear. In fact, worrying about bad things happening is very much the default setting of human consciousness.

It’s not hard to understand why. Fear makes a creature cautious. Cautious creatures tend to survive by avoiding larger creatures who want to eat them.

Cautious creatures who survive then pass on the “fearful” gene combinations to their offspring. At this point in evolution, fear is the easiest emotion for anyone to experience. It’s something that makes mental health professionals happy and their bank accounts full.

This morning I want to talk about how to expect positive things in a world that sees to be negative and fearful.

My take-away point is that unless we intentionally do something to overcome the biologically pre-determined tendency to expect the negative, we don’t actually perceive the world correctly. For biochemical reasons, our minds put a negative spin on observations. Positive Thinking was for Peale, Hill, Stone and Bradley, an intentional mental discipline to correct for that.

It makes some kind of sense. In fact, I doubt I would be alive today if it were not for my tendency to live my life as if I expected the best. I have a cardio-vascular condition that was expected to end my life years ago. I keep myself going with a combination of good medical care, a healthy lifestyle and by practicing good mental hygiene. I have trained myself to quickly process and release negative emotions.

Most chronic medical conditions have a psychological state that is common among the people who live with that condition.

For example, research has show than people living with cancer tend (you can always find exceptions) to be the care taking members of their families who put everyone else first and themselves last. Their self-care and self-soothing skills tend to be rocky.

People with cardiac issues like myself (and the American Heart Association has done excellent research about this) tend to be people who struggle with anger. Therefore, my efforts to release anger and replace it with optimism is important in my own survival.

As I like to say, “I live my life with a positive expectancy, a mental state that goes all the way with pessimism but manages to arrive at a point beyond it.” I put a positive spin on pretty much all I say and do (much the the annoyance of my wife and friends).

This method has stood me well over the years. Not only am I still alive, I believe that a decision to be optimistic, even in the face of negative data, is a wise decision.

When the human community harnessed fire and invented clothing, our bodies stopped evolving. They no longer had to change to match the environment because we developed technologies that could shield us from the environment.

Unfortunately, the result is that the human nervous system evolved to deal with the stress of a Neolithic society. But while our bodies stopped changing, our social and technological evolution continued. We are now ill suited to living in the world we find ourselves in, which is why stress-related and lifestyle-related illnesses are the modern plague.

The harmful effects of stress on the human body and mind are well known. I’ve spoken about some of them from this pulpit. When you are frightened your body produces a chemistry set of hormones that evolved to help you meet the terrors and issues of a bygone time. They do not help you now. Instead, they impair your immune system, encourage cardio-vascular disease and even cause changes down to the level of the telomeres on the chromosomes in every cell of your body.

So I try to remain positive no matter how scary things seem to be. In that way I shield my body from the consequences of excessive stress. Even if bad things do actually happen, at least I have not made my situation worse by damaging my body through the process of anticipation. I'm still ahead of the game.

A Negative World

It can be a negative world. As Ric Masten put it in the reading I shared earlier—none of us are going to get out of this alive. We all get older, and there comes a point where the goal (and I love how Ric Master puts it) isn't so much winning, as "looking good while losing." And we have to cope with that.

Some of you may have noticed that we had a national election recently. Much of the political community that considers itself "progressive" was blindsided with the unexpected win by a person that no one considered "politically-correct."

Winston Churchill once said that "the best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter." While I don't really believe that, I get the irony, and recited that quotation to my parish minister wife on election night.

The shock in some areas of society was so great that in a story by science reporter Maddie Stone about the New Year's Day approach of comet 45b which appeared recently, she titled the story, "Sorry, this Nearby Comet will not Strike the Earth and End our Collective Nightmare." Better luck next time.

Talk about living in a scary and negative world! "Sorry, this nearby comet will not strike the Earth." Sorry?

To be honest, how some people have responded has been bewildering to me. Humorist Garrison Keillor recently characterized the response from the political left as being like people who are "lost in a forest and who keep bumping into trees."

As my ministry specializes in medical hypnotism, especially with cancer patients, I'm probably doing a bit better than most because of my years helping people deal with any of a number of life-changing medical diagnoses.

When you get such a diagnosis there is a period when your physicians are gathering information about you. It isn't until all the blanks are filled in that

anyone really knows what to expect. In cancer care this is called “staging.” It’s the period between the diagnosis and the determination about how far along the disease has progressed.

This time where you are waiting to discover your situation is a time of very high anxiety. I always caution people not to get your emotions too far out ahead of the data. There are 1001 bad things that might happen, and most of them are NOT going to. If you exhaust yourself worrying about what might happen you only make your own situation worse and drive everyone around you crazy.

When something actually happens, that is the time to make a thoughtful response. It is never a good idea to react in fear to all the things that might happen. Because most of them won’t.

Therefore, I counsel people to self-soothe and wait to see. I tell my politically active friends to try to stay as chill as possible for the time being. Give the benefit of the doubt, hope that people will stand up when the time and comes...whatever you need to do to keep yourself from a negative expectation. Who knows? This might actually go better than you think.

I tell my medical clients to stay calm. When we’ve got all the information we’ll be able to make a good response. Until then, you are just hurting yourself worrying about what might happen.

For myself, I am confident in my ability to make an appropriate and effective response to any bad thing that happens, and I am determined not to injure myself by descending into fear prematurely.

In saying this I am not minimizing the emotional trauma that goes along with fear. While I’ve had a lifetime to get used to my own medical condition, I’ve had to companion my wife through her many operations and recently her cancer (she’s doing fine). I see what happens to people who get overwhelmed every day among my clientele.

However, as Gandalf said to Frodo in The Fellowship of the Ring when Frodo said... “I wish it need not have happened in my time,...”So do I," said Gandalf, "and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.”

We need to make the best of the situations we find ourselves in, it's in our self-interest to do so.

Chunking

As for why the world seems to have gone mad? I think I understand why, and what we can individually do about it.

The human mind has a limited capacity to handle specific information. The limitation is created by the way nerve cells work together to form short-term memory. To greatly simplify this, neuroscience estimates that our short term processing can handle only seven (plus or minus two) items of information at a time. Unless we make a concentrated study of something and move processing from short into long-term memory, we start forgetting what we learned about seven items ago.

Our nervous system loves simplicity. When a lot of complex information is presented to us we automatically seek to find ways to simplify it. It's just what we do.

For example, take the complex system of moving parts that is your automobile. Except for those who have made a study of such things, we don't have much of an idea about how all those gears, pistons, shafts and pins work together.

So our nervous system gets to work. It takes one chunk of that stuff and associates it together in our minds because that stuff makes the "horsepower" (whatever that is), and we call that chunk the "engine." We take another chunk that transforms the horsepower into spinning wheels and we call that the "transmission." Most of us have no idea about how either of these work, and I personally have no idea about how one chunk is connected to another. But thinking in this way makes things seem more simple. Therefore my mind goes along with it even though I don't understand what is inside of those "chunks."

Hypnotists call this simplification process, "chunking" and we all do it. The more detail we have to confront the more powerfully our nervous system tries to associate those details into "chunks" so we don't get overwhelmed.

But when we do this we lose an understanding of how things actually work. We have only a symbolic understanding and that makes it easy for us to misunderstand what is really going on.

We live in a society with a 24 hour news cycle. Information is increasing exponentially. We are in a constant state of near overwhelm.

To keep us sane our nervous system is constantly creating chunks of ideas and information to give us an illusion of understanding. It's an illusion, as we don't really understand what is in those chunks, and have no idea if someone is actually just selling us a bill of goods. That makes us vulnerable.

If you are a politician, or an advertising executive, and you want to manipulate people all you have to do is provide a simple explanation that gathers worrisome information into an easy-to-understand chunk, and you will be believed by most.

The scientific fact is that dirt is good for us, and antibacterial products are promoting the evolution of resistant bacteria. Worse, we're creating generations of hyper-allergic children because we are harming their immune systems by protecting them from exposure to dirt and allergens. But we chunk all this together into the idea that "Clean is Good" and personal care products fly off the shelves.

The interlocking geopolitical situation is immensely complex, and it may be that no one entirely understands it. Then, someone comes along and says the problems can all be chunked together into clear issues of "immigration," "race" or "energy" and because that is simple, we tend to buy it.

Then charismatic leaders arise who offer the ultimate simplification by saying "I can fix this. Just leave to me." And the brain wants to do exactly that, as it prevents the feeling of overwhelm and takes problems off the mental table. We just chunk all the social problems we're worried about into a chunk that says "My guy will fix that. I don't have to give that any thought after all."

So we see Modi in India, Duterte in the Philippines, Putin in Russia, Jinping in China, Le Pen in France, Jong-un in North Korea...the list goes on and on. Each promising to make the world seem simpler by giving a simple way of thinking about a complicated world. "Leave it to me," they say. "I can fix what is wrong" and for biological reasons the mind's reflex is to agree.

I believe this is why we are seeing the rise of the meme of the “strong man” everywhere around the world today. I suspect it’s actually caused by the tendency of the human nervous system to seek simplified solutions whenever things get too complex. That is what the human mind does when information becomes overwhelming.

Coping Skills

Sounds scary, doesn’t it? It scares me. Which is why I keep that leather-bound copy of The Laws of Success on my office bookshelf and periodically take it down for a refresher read.

As I mentioned earlier, when we are worried or frightened, our bodies produce a chemistry set of stress hormones. While these hormones are in our bloodstream we are cortically inhibited—our brain is not working at its best. Called the “Fight or Flight” response, instead of thinking critically and figuring things out, we prepare to run away or do combat. That was fine in a Neolithic campsite, not so helpful now.

The more worried you are, the less effectively your mind works. To manage that worry your nervous system goes to work and chunks things together trying to find some simple way of thinking about what is happening.

The more you simplify in this way, the more inaccurate your understanding becomes, and the more likely you are to settle for a simplified explanation that is actually a bill of goods created by someone who wants to deceive.

So I always try to put a positive spin on things. It helps me lower worry, reduce chunking, and improve how I processes information. I make better decisions and protect my physical health. It’s gotten me through some tough times.

In Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s 19th century poem, The Masque of Pandora, Prometheus says, “Whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad.” What he meant by that is when someone is getting ready to sabotage themselves, usually this begins with them getting angry. The stress hormones flow, the mind ceases to work properly. Mistakes are made and bad things happen.

I would tweak this a bit. I'd put it "If you want to take advantage of someone, start by getting them worried." The stress hormones flow, logic fails, and many people will believe anything you tell them if it lowers their stress.

But those who find a way to look for the positive in a negative world they will be resilient. You will not find them as easy to fool. That's what I hope for myself and it is what I hope for you.

And that's my sermon.