

Positively Downbeat

Sometimes happiness isn't everything.

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Published Sep 25, 2009

From the magazine issue dated Oct 5, 2009

Is this endless pursuit of happiness just making us all miserable? We've said our affirmations, drunk coffee out of cheesy mugs with nonsensical motivational quotes ("CLIMB AS HIGH AS YOU CAN DREAM!!"), and bought millions of tomes on getting rich quick while thinking positive thoughts. According to *Psychology Today*, last year 4,000 books were published on happiness, up from 50 in 2000. From Norman Vincent Peale in 1952 (*The Power of Positive Thinking*) to Rhonda Byrne in 2007 (*The Secret*), Oprah's America has panted, chanted, and visualized while trying to be really, really cheerful: "I am beautiful, wealthy, and successful."

Even when we're really not. Most of us have been getting poorer for some time—and that was before the recession hit. That's the funny thing about the obsession with smiley-faced happiness: the more overtly we have studied and pursued it, the less happy we have become. And the more confusing it gets.

According to a study from the General Social Survey by economists Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers of Wharton, despite three decades of economic growth in America, men and women are no happier. This fact has been lost in the hubbub over the finding that while women were happier than men in 1972, they are not now. Conservative commentators rapidly blamed the women's movement, inferring that perhaps, as Rush Limbaugh has said, feminism really was just a misguided way to "allow unattractive women into the mainstream." This is astounding logic—why not take the vote away for a few years and see if we perk up?



The broader point remains—while Europeans are growing happier, especially Italians, Americans are not. This is fascinating because it is in this country that a relentless focus on "positive thinking," from prosperity theology to corporate coaching, has emerged over the past few decades—and it is this country that is now more gloomy.

In her new book, *Bright-Sided: How Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America*, Barbara Ehrenreich calls positive thinking a "mass delusion." She argues that an unrelenting drive to train our brains to overlook problems and blame ourselves for failures has blinded us to inequality, incompetence, and stupidity.

The philosophy of positive thinking, she argues, developed both as a reaction to the negativity of Calvinism and a salve for the sick and anxious, but has, over time, been turned into a kind of blind optimism. At the heart of positive thinking is a belief that you can will anything you like into happening: recovering from cancer, getting a promotion, becoming a millionaire. Often, the worse things are, the more vehemently people are encouraged to be sunny. The more companies downsized and restructured in the '80s and '90s, the more popular affirmation-chanting, team-building consultants became. And all the while, as the country's wealth shot up, the gap between rich and poor ballooned.

Ehrenreich argues that positive thought has at times made us deaf to the pleas of those who warn of potential dangers—the Iraqi resistance, Hurricane Katrina, 9/11, and the Wall Street implosion. Urging positivity is not just beside the point when our circumstances are rotten, it's also dangerously distracting.

This is why Ehrenreich dedicates her book to "complainers everywhere," inciting them to "turn up the volume." But surely there's a middle way between clueless cheerleaders and grumpy prophets. The Dalai Lama shows you can strive to be content and remain angry about injustice.

What we do need to be cautious of is leaping on the nascent science of positive psychology before we are certain that we are asking the right questions. The most recent findings, for example, are that wealth makes you happy but children do not.

So ... more money and fewer kids. Can this really be the weight of our accumulated wisdom? Do we all want daisies-in-the-meadow happiness, or a less chirpy, quieter contentment? Or do we want to suck greedily on life's marrow, like Jack Kerouac, to "burn, burn, burn, like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars"? The most inspiring people are those least obsessed with their own happiness, especially those who stride confidently across the globe to create, evoke change, or wrest from life what they will. Eleanor Roosevelt believed happiness "is not a goal, it's a byproduct." I think she might be right.

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