The esu sitive

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by Norman Vincent Peale



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Does Positive Thinking Always Work?

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Now, I realize this is a rather bold statement. And someone may object: "Is that so. I had lots of problems. I read about positive thinking and I still have problems." Someone else may say, "Well, I had a business that was in the doldrums, and I tried positive thinking, and my business is still in the doldrums. Positive thinking didn't change the facts. Failure exists. If you deny that, you're just being an ostrich, burying your head in the sand."

So often, people don't really understand the nature of positive thinking. A positive thinker does not refuse to recognize the negative, he refuses to dwell on it. Positive thinking is a form of thought that habitually looks for the best results from the worse conditions. It is possible to look for something to build on; it is possible to expect the best for yourself even though things look bad. And the remarkable fact is that when you seek good, you are likely to find it.

This seeking-the-positive is a deliberate process, and a matter of choice. Not long ago, I received word that a friend of mine had been fired. In talking with Bill, I learned the circumstances. There had had been a policy change, and he was no longer needed. To make matters worse, nine months earlier Bill had received a handsome offer from a competing firm. He had talked the matter over with his boss, and his boss had persuaded him to stay on, saying: "We need you here, Bill. And frankly, things look pretty good for you."

Well, of course, Bill reacted rather bitterly to all of this. He went around feeling unwanted, insecure, rejected. His ego had been hurt. He became morose and resentful, and in a state of mind like that, he was in no condition to look for another job.

This is exactly the kind of situation where positive thinking can do its best. One day, Bill dug out an old copy of *The Power of Positive Thinking*, and read it through. What possible good was there in his condition, he wondered? He didn't know. But he could see plenty of negative factors, and realized that these negative emotions were dragging him down. If he was going to put positive thinking to work, the first thing to do was to get rid of the negative feelings.

Here, at least, was a place he could begin. So he practiced the principle of thought replacement. That is, he deliberately filled his mind with positive affirmations and crowded out the negative thoughts. He began a systematic program of prayer and told the Lord: "I believe You have a plan for my life, so there must be some purpose in my getting fired. Instead of railing against my fate, I humbly ask You to show me the purpose in what has happened." Once he began to believe there had been a reason and some meaning behind what had happened to him, it was easier to rid himself of resentment against his former employers. And once that happened he was "employable" again.

One day, shortly after he had reached this point in his thinking, Bill met an old friend. They got to talking, and the friend asked how things were.

"Oh, I've just been fired," Bill said, casually.

The friend was surprised. "Well, you're certainly honest enough about it," he said. "What happened?"

Bill told him, and he finished by saying: ". . . and I know the Lord has a job for me somewhere else."

"The Lord! Aren't you worried?"

"Not at all. Something better will turn up. In my philosophy, when one door shuts, another will open if you just have faith and put it in God's hands."

A few days later, Bill received a telephone call from his friend, saying that there was a long-unfilled opening in his company, and asking him if he wanted the job—salary-wise it wasn't as good as

his last position, but it had potential. Bill took it. There was no doubt about the fact that in his new job, he was in a better position to be of service to people. He realized this shortly and soon discovered that his new activity was one he had always wanted. He became stimulated and excited about his work in a way that he had almost forgotten at his previous place of employment. He would grow. This, he felt sure, was part of the plan that God had in mind.

Now the important thing to analyze here is why positive thinking worked. It's not that some magic entered the picture and created a job. There was a definite scientific principle at work. When Bill had his mind filled with resentments and angers and hatreds, he was destroying his own value as an employee. He was making it impossible for himself to do his best at the business of job-seeking. On the day Bill met his friend, if he had been bitter and full of sly defenses, do you think his friend would have considered him a good person to recommend for the new job? There is no mysticism at work here. This way of thinking and of acting is, above all, down-to-earth common sense.

Positive thinking is looking at events with the knowledge that there will be both good and bad in life, but that it is better to emphasize the good. And as you do that, good seems to increase.

The other day I went out the door of my office and hailed a cab. As soon as I got in the taxi, I could tell that my driver was a happy man. He was whistling. First, he whistled a tune from "My Fair Lady," and then he launched himself into a version of "Stars and Stripes Forever." After a while I said to him, "You seem to be in a happy mood."

"Why shouldn't I be?" he said. "I've just learned something. I've learned that there's no percentage in getting excited, or down in the dumps, because things average out."

And he went on to explain what he meant. Early that morning he had taken his cab out, hoping to take advantage of the morning rush hour. It was a bitterly cold day. The driver said it was "... the kind of temperature where, if you touch metal, your hand will stick to it." And as luck would have it, no sooner had he started his day than he had a flat tire. He was angry. Muttering, he got out his jack and lug wrench and tried to take off the tire. It was so cold he could only

work for a few minutes at a time. And while he was struggling, a truck stopped. The driver jumped out and, much to the taxi-driver's surprise, began to help him. When the tire was back in place, the trucker gruffly waved off the cabby's thanks, got in his truck and drove off.

"Well, this put me in a good mood," the cabby said to me. "Already things were averaging out. First, I was angry with the flat, then I felt good because of that trucker's help and right away things started going good. Even the money has averaged out. I've never had a busier morning, one fare after another in and out of the cab. Things average out, Mister. Don't get excited when a situation gets rocky; things average out."

Here was a positive thinker, all right. He said he was never again going to let life's mishaps annoy him. He was just going to live by the theory that things average out. That is real positive thinking, and it will work, too, because things always come around to a brighter view when you wait them out and work them out optimistically. The law of averages is always on the positive thinker's side. A positive thinker chooses to keep his mind fixed on the bright future that is always just around the corner, and in this way he helps make the dark moments more cheerful, productive, and creative. That attitude gets you around the "corner" quicker, too.

It is a fact of life that all of us will come face-to-face with plenty of frustration, difficulty, and trouble. But there isn't one of us who needs to be defeated by these obstacles. If you face life with the sincere faith that through the aid of the Almighty you can overcome your troubles, then you will keep defeat at arm's length.

And this applies to all the circumstances that life can bring. One evening in San Francisco, I had the pleasure of dining in the home of a charming lady named Elena Zelayeta. I have never attended a dinner party presided over by an individual of happier personality or more irresistible gaiety. Elena is Mexican, and the dinner she served that evening was a 17-course Mexican dinner (small courses)—the most delicious repast I could hope to experience. She cooked it herself— and she is totally blind.

Elena Zelayeta once ran a restaurant in San Francisco. It was a beautiful place, full of color and life. Then her eyesight began to fail. Soon she was blind, living in darkness. One day, the telephone rang and she groped her way to answer it and received the shocking news that her husband had just been killed in an accident.

Blindness—and now her husband suddenly dead. She sat by the telephone, utterly crushed, wondering what she was going to do. She was dejected for weeks, living in helplessness. But in this most complete darkness, emotionally and physically, she perceived finally, by the help of her strong faith, that there was something positive to which she could attach herself. She did not choose to dwell on the negative, she sought the positive, and she found it in a most remarkable way. As she struggled in shock and sorrow, suddenly she felt "as if a great, strong hand gripped her and lifted her up."

Putting sincere faith and strong positive thinking against her sad conditions, she determined that she would conquer her grief, loneliness, and handicap. So complete was her ultimate victory that presently she picked up her life again as a career woman. How well Elena Zelayeta succeeded is shown by the fact that in recent years she has lectured on cooking up and down the West Coast, sometimes to as many as a thousand women at a time. She has written three successful cookbooks and a book of inspiration. She operates a frozen food business with her two sons and goes to the office every day.

She had to cook by a sense of feel and taste and smell. But these, she says with a smile, are what cooking is all about anyway. This inspiring woman is one of the most marvelous examples of positive thinking I ever ran across. Naturally, I sought for her secret of conquering adversity. While we were having dinner at her home, Mrs. Zelayeta made this powerful statement, which is the guiding principle of her life. It is the formula through which she found victory. "Always act," she said, "as if it were impossible to fail and God will see you through."

Always act as if it were impossible to fail!

Elena Zelayeta is the type of person William James, the philosopher-psychologist, would call "tough minded." The world, according to this great thinker, is made up of two kinds of people—the "tough-minded" and "tender-minded." The tender-minded are the ones who wilt under obstacles and difficulties. They are cut to the

quick by criticism and lose heart. They are the ones who whine and fail. But tough-minded individuals are not like that. They are people from all walks of life, the manual workers and the merchants, the mothers and the fathers, the teachers, the old people, and the young people too, who have a strong cement of toughness built into them by Almighty God. By toughness is meant the inner power to stand up to a difficulty; to have what it takes to take it.

In the little town of Carmel, N.Y., where we publish *Guideposts* magazine, there lived a boy named Jim Mackey. Jim was fourteen years old; a lovable boy and real man, one of the truly tough-minded people of this world. He was a natural-born athlete, one of the very best. But early in his high-school career, he began to limp. It soon developed that he had cancer. An operation was required, and Jim's leg was amputated. As soon as he was out of the hospital, he went around to the high school on his crutches, talking cheerfully about how he was going to have a wooden leg soon. "Then I'll be able to hold up my socks with a thumb tack," he said. "None of you guys can do that!"

As soon as the football season started, Jim went to the coach and asked if he could be one of the team managers. For weeks he appeared regularly for practice, carrying the coach's set of plays and infusing the team with his contagious, fiery courage. Then one afternoon he missed a practice. The coach was worried. He checked, and learned that Jim was in the hospital having another examination. Later, he learned that the examination had revealed lung cancer. "Jim will be dead," said the doctor, "within six weeks."

Jim's parents decided not to tell the boy about his death sentence; they wanted him to live as normal a life as he could for the last few weeks. So, Jim was soon back at practice again with his big smile and his offering of enthusiasm and courage. With his inspiration the team raced through the season undefeated, and to celebrate they decided to throw a banquet. Jim was to receive a victory football autographed by each member of the team. The banquet, however, was not the success it should have been. Jim was not there. He was too weak to attend.

A few weeks later, however, Jim was back again, this time at a basketball game. He was pale, very pale, but aside from that he was

the same old Jim, smiling, laughing, making jokes. When, after the game, he went to the coach's office the entire football team was there. The coach scolded him gently for missing the banquet. "I'm on a diet, Coach," said Jim with a grin that covered his pain. Then one of the team members presented him with the victor's football. "We won it because of you, Jim," he said. Jim said a quiet thanks with tears in his eyes. The coach and Jim and the other boys talked about plans for the next season, and then it was time to go. Jim turned, and at the door he said, looking at the coach with a steady, level gaze:

"Good-bye, Coach."

"Don't you mean, 'so long,' Jim?" the coach asked.

Jim's eyes lighted up and his steady gaze turned into a smile. "Don't worry, Coach," he said. "I'm all set." And with that he was gone.

Two days later, he was dead.

Jim had known all along about his death sentence. But he could take it, for you see he was a tough-minded positive thinker. He made of this sad and tragic fact a creative experience. But, someone might say, he died; his positive thinking didn't get him very much. This is not true. Jim knew how to reach out for faith and how to create something warm and uplifting from the worst possible situation. He wasn't burying his head in the sand; he knew full well what was in store for him, and yet he chose not to be defeated! Jim was never defeated. He took his life, short as it was, and used it to instill courage, faith, and laughter permanently into the lives and minds of the people who knew him. Could you, in any possible way, say that a person who succeeded in doing that with his life had been a failure?

That's what positive thinking is; it is tough-mindedness. It is refusing to be defeated. It is making the most of what you have to deal with in life. I have always been a reader of the works of the apostle of tough-mindedness: Thomas Carlyle. Recently I went up to Ecclefechan, the little Scotch village where he was born, to see if I might find there something of the strength of mind and character he possessed. Carlyle was the son of a stonemason. He started off to Edinburgh for his education with a shilling in his pocket and he walked into immortality.

Carlyle grew up in the little town of Ecclefechan, halfway between the Scottish border and the town of Dumfries. He loved Ecclefechan and Dumfrieshire. He might have been buried in Westminster Abbey, but he preferred Ecclefechan. Queen Victoria once asked Carlyle what he considered the most beautiful road in Britain, and he answered, "The road from Ecclefechan to Dumfries." And then she asked him what he considered the second most beautiful road, and he answered, "Why, it's the road back to Ecclefechan."

I visited Carlyle's grave in the cemetery of his beloved Ecclefechan and sat at his graveside reading some of his words. Carlyle's message came to me anew, the essence of which is never give up; never give in; stand up to it; fight it through. God will aid you. According to Carlyle's understanding, life asks of each of us, "Will you be a hero, or will you be a coward?" It is just that direct and forthright. Where did Carlyle get such ideas? Of course, from the most rugged Book ever put together. "Be strong and of good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed; for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest" (Joshua 1:9).

Will you be a hero, or will you be a coward? Will you be toughminded or tender-minded? The positive thinker will not be a coward. He believes in himself, in life, in humanity and in God. He knows his own capacity and his own ability. He is undaunted and invincible. He will draw the best from whatever comes.

The formula he uses is one by which he is changed from weakness to strength. Some time ago, Chase Manhattan Bank started excavation for a new skyscraper. Most of Manhattan Island is composed of solid bed-rock. This is the reason we can have structures that pierce the sky. But early excavations revealed that this site was not solid rock, as had been supposed, but contained a large pocket of quicksand! And of course it would be very difficult indeed to build a skyscraper on such a base.

So the bank people called in experts to suggest ways for meeting this situation constructively. One expert suggested pilings; another said to seal it off with caissons; but the cost would be prohibitive. Geologists were consulted: How long would it take to turn quick-sand into sandstone? About a million years, the geologists answered. Well, the bank didn't feel they could wait that long. They then called

in some soil solidification people, and this is where their search ended. These experts knew how to handle the quicksand problem. They sank pipes down into the quicksand and pumped into it a solution of sodium silicate and calcium chloride. In a few days the quicksand solidified into sandstone hard enough to permit the erection of a sixty-floor skyscraper building.

Does this seem miraculous? No, because it was done according to a sound, scientific principle; a proven, scientific formula. But I have seen "miracles" that make this achievement fade into insignificance. I have seen weak, defeated personalities who have had infused into them a special mental-spiritual formula called positive thinking, and I have seen them become as solid as rock. They have become strong people, well able to bear the weight of life most successfully.

This kind of transformation is available to all of us. It is in this sense that positive thinking always works. Positive thinking is able to transform us from cowards to heroes, from tender-minded to tough-minded individuals, from weak, negative, vacillating people to men of positive strength.

Although the life-changing power of positive thinking is available to all, some people experience difficulty in making it work. This is because of some strange psychological barrier that stands between them and the full use of positive thinking. One that keeps cropping up, is simply that they do not *want* it to work. They do not want to succeed. Actually, they are afraid to succeed. It's easier to wallow in self-pity. So, we create our own failure, and when a suggestion (such as positive thinking) comes along that will help overcome that failure, we subconsciously see to it that the suggestion doesn't work, and we believe the principle, rather than ourselves, is at fault. But when we understand such unhealthy mental reactions, then positive thinking begins to work. Recently, I received this letter from a reader who lives in Petaluna, Calif.:

For the first time in my life, I can see where I have created my own bad luck by my thought pattern. Since reading your book about positive thinking and trying to clear my mind, I find little resentments popping up I thought I'd forgotten years ago. What silly little

things to carry with me all these years.

Certainly, if you have helped me rub out these little termites, I owe you a great deal for showing me the way. I, too, have a pattern of failure and defeat. I never expected the best and I never got it, either. From here on out, I'm going to go after the things I want with confidence.

I feel God gave me a good chance and I just didn't have sense enough to use it. My faith will certainly deepen as I remove these mental blocks that I have so industriously set up. Believe me, I built them strong!

This woman states that, for the first time, she sees that she has been creating her own bad luck by her thoughts. We have to stop creating our own failure. We have to stop being afraid that success will come our way.

I have a good friend who is outstanding in the field of industrial medicine. He is the medical director of one of the nation's giant companies. He has come up from the worst kind of failure to the finest kind of success. Like the quicksand, he was made into rock, but by a spiritual formula of great strength. I received a letter from him that had this paragraph in it:

I struggle constantly with success. For me, it has an insidious sweetness far more difficult to handle than the bitterness of failure, and much more uncertain as a stepping stone to spiritual progress.

I will call this man Dr. Tom, because he has such a spectacular story hidden in his past that I cannot name him fully. His was a dramatic struggle with success. He did not want it. It frightened him so thoroughly that he came close to killing himself rather than face it. In 1938, Dr. Tom was on the staff of a state mental hospital. Exactly ten years later, he was released from this same hospital as a patient!

Dr. Tom started out in life with all the advantages. In fact, he had so many advantages that they got him in trouble. He had social position, a fine education, wealth, health and good looks. A nurse sat beside him in private school until he was nine years old; his father

gave him an open checkbook when he was in high school. If Tom wanted anything, he just wrote a check; it was as simple as that. But along with this ease went trouble. People were always watching him, expecting great things from him because he came of such an outstanding family and "wonderful" environment. Nothing that Tom did seemed to live up to people's expectations. He never got any satisfaction out of success; in fact; success always seemed to get people annoyed with him: "Of course he's successful," they'd snap. "He ought to be!"

So Tom's subconscious mind did the thing that so many of our minds do. It said, "All right. If I can't get satisfaction from success, I'll get it from failure." And he proceeded to fail magnificently. When he was in college he started drinking. At medical school, his drinking became excessive. Drug addiction compounded his troubles. He married, set up a practice and had a child; the degeneration continued. In about ten years, he reached the place where "just one" drink would start him off on a wild, blind drinking orgy that would last for days, even weeks. After one of his long disappearances, Dr. Tom came home to find that commitment papers had been made out against him. He was put in the violent ward of the state hospital, the same hospital where he had served as a doctor only a few years earlier.

"For forty-five days," Tom says, "I was out of my mind with D.T.'s. I was in solitary confinement, eating out of a tin plate like an animal. Then I began to come out of it and for another eighty-six days I lay in a comatose state, halfway between life and death. Surely this was as low as a man could sink. And then, suddenly—my heart still pounds when I think of it—I heard words spoken very slowly, and very distinctly. 'As far as the east is from the west, so far have I removed your transgressions from you' (Psalm 103:12). Nothing has been the same for me since."

What had happened? Tom didn't know. He only knew that he had changed. He became calm. He was released from solitary confinement and allowed the comparative freedom of the ward. There he met two men who befriended him, and introduced him to Alcoholics Anonymous. In time, under the sponsorship of his AA friends, he was paroled from the hospital.

It was at this point that I met Tom at a religious conference where I was speaking. Scarcely have I ever known a man so thirsty for the water of life, so hungry for the bread of life. He wanted God, and God wanted him, and they found each other.

Dr. Tom did not go back to his practice right away. He felt he wasn't ready for that. He wanted to get a job on his own, one that had no relation to his childhood education. The only work he could find was a manual labor job in the city dump. Think of that! A highly skilled, wealthy young man working as a laborer in the city dump and in the very southern community of his birth. But it was what Tom wanted. He wanted to see if he could be accepted for himself, and not for his family or his money.

One day while he was working, several of the "city fathers" came down to the dump for an inspection. Dr. Tom recognized some of his former schoolmates. He was suddenly filled with shame that they might recognize him, and he turned his back, bent down, and pretended to be working with something on the ground. A black fellow-worker saw him do this, and at the same time saw the neatly dressed city fathers. He must have sized up the situation quickly because, without saying a word, he turned and did Dr. Tom's work for him until the visitors left. To my mind that is one of the greatest, kindliest acts of understanding and brotherhood that I have ever heard about. Dr. Tom and his friend never spoke about it, but it created a bond between them that was to have a wonderful effect on the young doctor. He took from it the strength that he needed.

"That man's name was Frank," Dr. Tom told me. "Frank will never know what he did for me. He accepted me. He taught me that I could be accepted for myself. First I had the acceptance of God, there in the hospital's solitary ward. Then I had the acceptance of man. It was what I needed in order to start again."

Today, Dr. Tom is again practicing medicine successfully. He has a kind of enthusiasm about him, and a basic solidarity that comes from the new tough-mindedness that he has found. He was transformed from a "coward" to a "hero," to use Carlyle's terms. Of course, not many of us have such dramatic experiences with our fear of success, but it is nonetheless true that we often *don't want* positive thinking to work. We subconsciously see to it that our fail-

ure patterns remain intact.

But this is not the only block that can keep positive thinking from being effective. Sometimes, there are strong negative elements in our lives that we refuse to clean out. We make feeble efforts to put positive forces to work, but they get stymied behind negative forces.

One night, after I finished speaking at a dinner meeting in a hotel ballroom, a man came up to me with the challenge: "I've been reading your stuff," he said, "I've tried it and it won't work."

"Why won't it work?" I asked him.

"That's what I'd like to know," he blustered.

Having a little time before taking a late flight, I invited him to my hotel room for a talk. "I didn't mean to be impolite," he said as we sat down to chat. "But I'm trying to find out what's wrong. I seem to have lost my grip. I'm nervous and tense. I have a wonderful wife and family, a good business, a nice home, and I go to church. You'd think I'd be happy. But" The recital went on and on. One trouble after another. And positive thinking, he said, did him no good at all.

After some discussion, it occurred to me to throw out this question: "Are you doing anything wrong?"

"Nothing much," he muttered.

"What?" I asked.

"There's no point in going into that. I'm not doing anything that is in any way connected with my troubles. I'm only doing what everyone does."

"What does everyone else do?" I asked.

"Well," he said, "there is a little affair with a woman in Milwaukee."

"How little?" I asked.

He hesitated, "Well, maybe not so little."

"Maybe we had better face it. The plain truth is that you know you are doing something wrong, something you are ashamed of, something that could very well be the reason positive thinking isn't working for you."

"But how?" he demanded, on the defensive.

"Because guilt has a way of closing off your personality," I con-