

Barbara Ehrenreich's new book "Brightsided" should prove of great interest to psychoanalysts and psychoanalytically informed consultants everywhere. Perhaps a recent review in the NY Times will give it the publicity it so richly deserves but I fear that it will be swallowed up and dismissed by the very "positive thinking" culture she decries.

In her book, Ms. Ehrenreich documents the far reach consequences of the positive thinking movement, recognizing how deeply it has infected nearly all aspects of our national conversation and contemporary culture.

She makes a very compelling argument that it was a reflection of this naive positivity that contributed to Bush's ignoring of pre 9/11 warning signs, the hegemony of breast cancer pink optimism and associated promise that right thinking will rid one of illness, the corporate world's embracing of motivational guru's and performance coaches, the academic fashion for positive psychology and "happiness" studies, the self-help movement that promises riches and happiness through grandiose wishing, the evangelical promise of salvation by ridding oneself of negativity, and the colossal denial of risk by Wall Street and main street alike. She sees all these elements tied together by the thread of false self smiles and "optimistic bias" that is uniquely American.

Unfortunately, she may have missed a few: the denial of serious mental illness and consequences of de-institutionalization, the denial of the dangers of arming our citizens with high powered assault weapons-and allowing them at presidential protests, ignoring the effects of climate change, and the prominence of politically correct thinking(which her perhaps left leaning bias let her ignore) could all be included in her list.

In discussing all of these issue Ms Ehrenreich thankfully does not pull any punches. She begins by discussing her very personal most painful experience with the positive thinking of the breast cancer world quoting *The Gift of Cancer: A Call to Awakening*: "Cancer is your ticket to your real life. Cancer is the passport to the life you were truly meant to live". She details how the "sugar-coating of cancer" takes a devastating toll by promising that positive thoughts will determine the course of the illness, and the inability to remain positive is therefore a personal failing. Her having a PhD in biology and having completed a thesis on macrophages adds to her credibility in debunking the excesses of positive thinking and it's relation to cure.

Likewise whether she participates in corporate retreats-she cites a Business Week article which details corporate "captains of industry" lying blindfold on towels in an incense filled, candle -lit room listening to how they must "retrieve from their inner depths their "power animals who would guide their companies to 21st century success"; whether she visits the Osteen church, whether she attempts a serious interview with former head of the American Psychological Association Martin Seligman, or whether she tries her hand at understanding new-age self-help get rich quick by "the law of attraction"(think and you shall receive) books-, she forthrightly attacks hucksterism, opportunism, and the astounding lack of scientific credulity where she sees it. Equally impressive is that although she notes that positive psychology and positive coaching attempt to distance themselves from pop-psychology-she does not let them get away so

easily with this as she details how much these groups have in common and how much the “tactics” of the later are used by the former. Finally ,her analysis of how the positive thinking movement has contributed to risk avoidance in financial markets is an argument not to be missed.

Of perhaps most interest to psychoanalysts and psychoanalytically oriented consultants-after appreciating what we are up against-is Ehrenreich’s tracing of the origins of “positive thinking” in America as a reaction to melancholy -inducing Calvinism. In doing so she describes the ubiquitous(at least in women) illness called “neurasthenia” present in 18th and 19th century America, an illness that sounds remarkably similar to the neurasthenia and hysteria that analysts are familiar with in Freud’s work. Although she does not discuss this in the book, it is interesting to compare American and European responses. In Europe, psychoanalysis was discovered; in the U.S. the New Thought movement embraced and popularized by Mary Baker Eddy in the form of Christian Science, formed the roots of positive psychology, a movement that would lead to influential texts such as “Think and Grow Rich” by Napoleon Hill, “The Power of Positive Thinking” by Norman Vincent Peale, more recently The Secret(I understand the movie is just out) and the mega best-seller management book “Who Moved My Cheese”.

A final note: it is interesting to consider the problems that Obama is currently having in the context of “Brightsided”. In his book “Leadership Without Easy Answers” Ron Heifetz argues for a theory of leadership based on approaching problems, in a non-authoritarian way, as adaptive challenges, taking into account the values of all sides. It is a leadership style I believe that Obama is attempting to emulate. Perhaps he is being brightsided by the demand for easy answers.

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