

The Power of Positive Thinking

1952

“Faith is the one power against which fear cannot stand. Day by day, as you fill your mind with faith, there will ultimately be no room left for fear. This is the one great fact that no one should forget. Master faith and you will automatically master fear.”

“There was a time when I acquiesced in the silly idea that there is no relationship between faith and prosperity; that when one talked about religion he should never relate it to achievement, that it dealt only with ethics and morals and social values. But now I realize that such a viewpoint limits the power of God and the development of the individual. Religion teaches that there is a tremendous power in the universe and that this power can dwell in personality. It is a power that can blast out all defeat and lift a person above all difficult situations.”

In a nutshell

You can achieve anything if you have faith.

In a similar vein

Florence Scovell Shinn, *The Game of Life and How to Play It* (p258)

CHAPTER 40

Norman Vincent Peale

If it were not for Peale's wife's persistence, this book—which is one of the all-time bestselling self-help titles and made him a founder of the human potential movement—might never have been published. He was in his 50s when he wrote it and had received nothing but a stack of rejection slips. Dejected, he threw the manuscript into the wastebasket and forbade his wife to remove it. She took him literally, next day presenting the manuscript, inside the wastebasket, to what became the successful publisher.

The book has sold around 20 million copies in 42 languages. Along with *How to Win Friends and Influence People* it was one of the original twentieth-century self-help classics.

The perception

If likened to a television character, Peale's book might be Ned Flanders from *The Simpsons*, the Christian dad always ready with a cheery word for his neighbor Homer Simpson. Through Homer we see the world as it “really” is, through Ned Flanders the world as the do-gooders perceive it. The book has become linked with a Pollyanna-ish attitude to the world that sees no evil and hears no evil, and believes that a happy smile can melt all obstacles. “Every day, in every way, I am getting better and better” is Emile Coué's famous positive thinking mantra, which to most ears is superficial and even idiotic.

In *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey criticizes positive thinking by saying that before we can justifiably take on a positive frame of mind, we first have to accept that things are not OK, and then take responsibility. Otherwise we are fudging reality.

The reality

However, when we open up Peale's book, we read:

NORMAN VINCENT PEALE

“The book is written with deep concern for the pain, difficulty and struggle of human existence.”

He went on to say:

“It teaches positive thinking, not as a means to fame, riches or power, but as the practical application of faith to overcome defeat and accomplish worthwhile creative values in life.”

These are not the ideas of someone with an unrealistic take on life. Peale saw plenty of human misery in his daily life as a minister in New York City, but he was not content to provide a weekly sermon; he wanted measurable change in the life of the people he met. Over many years, he created a “simple yet scientific system of practical techniques for successful living that works,” tested and refined among thousands of people within and outside his ministry. And like Carnegie with *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Peale ran the ideas as an adult course long before they were distilled into book form.

The source of positive thinking

For Peale there was no greater source of personal power or guidance than the Bible. Biblical quotes are the mainstay of the book (supplemented by the likes of Emerson, William James, and Marcus Aurelius) and perhaps because it is based on this timeless wisdom, Peale’s classic has amazing power. When statements such as the following are highlighted for us, it is difficult to argue with Peale’s conviction:

“If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31)
“If thou can believe, all things are possible to him that believeth.”
(Mark 9:23)
“According to your faith, be it unto you.” (Matthew 9:29)

Peale’s theme was that we don’t have to depend on ourselves; there are incredible sources of power open to us if we only believe in their existence. We make life hard, but an appreciation of the universe’s ability to make good and to provide would lead us to see life as flowing and abundant. Life seems difficult because we only believe in ourselves. He expressed the great secret of self-help that, in order to gain personal

power and peace, we have to be willing to go beyond the merely personal to something greater than ourselves.

The book proceeds by cases and stories, some of them incredibly touching. Filled with the struggle of humanity, its aim is to show that defeat is not permanent. Some of the chapters, with examples of their content, are described below.

“How to have constant energy”

Peale revealed the secret source of energy of every great person he had known: attunement with the infinite. The knowledge that what one is doing is supported outside oneself and is serving a divine end provides a constantly renewable source of energy. Working only by oneself and for oneself leads to burnout.

“Try prayer power”

Prayer is different to what you may have thought. It is a space to say whatever is on your mind, in whatever language you choose. Instead of asking for things, give thanks in advance for what you desire, leave it in God’s hands, and visualize the good outcome. The Peale formula is “Prayerize, Picturize, Actualize.” Be surprised at its effectiveness.

“Expect the best and get it”

Fearful creatures that we are, we tend to expect the worst. But an expectation of the best has a way of organizing forces in your favor. You are less likely to keep anything in reserve. The subconscious, which regulates many of our actions, merely reflects your beliefs. Alter the belief about an outcome and your actions will seem to be shaped in order to achieve it. Peale’s phrase is: “Doubt closes the power flow. Faith opens it.”

“New thoughts can remake you”

Use only positive and hopeful language for a 24-hour period. Then go back to being “realistic” the next day. Repeat this over a week and you find that what you considered realistic a week ago now seems pessimistic. In golfing terms, discover that “the rough is only mental.”

Your new understanding of what is realistic moves up to a higher, permanently positive level.

Final comments

To really appreciate *The Power of Positive Thinking* you have to understand its background. Peale came from plain Mid-Western stock, and he believed he was writing, in his words, “for the plain people of this world.” Most readers will find it quaint or amusing because the language conjures up simple church-going folk in the 1950s. It might be old-fashioned, but only a cynic would find it redundant—the book’s principles are easily moved from its original time and place and applied to your life, as you would expect of a classic. It is refreshing because there are no gimmicky techniques; expect to find only a bag of well-worn tools for chiseling away cynicism and hopelessness.

Although the book contains things like a “prayer for salesmen,” it is something more than a hotchpotch of Christian and capitalist morals. Consistent with most of the self-help classics, it says that the highest morality is fulfillment of potential; to “give up” is to deny yourself all the spiritual and material rewards that are rightfully yours.

If you are feeling down, there is an unassailable logic to Peale’s book that can forcefully restore life again and again, clearing all doubt from the mind.

Norman Vincent Peale

Peale was born in Bowersville, Ohio, in 1898. Following college (Ohio Wesleyan University) and work on newspapers (Detroit Journal), he studied theology at Boston University. After ordination he quickly became a popular preacher who could swell congregation numbers tenfold. During his time at University Methodist Church in Syracuse, New York, he met and married Ruth Stafford, his life-long partner and collaborator.

At 34, Peale moved to Marble Collegiate Church in New York City, where he stayed through the Depression and the Second World War until the early 1980s. His sermons became so well known that they attracted tourists. In the 1930s he also began a radio broadcast, "The Art of Living," that was to be heard weekly for 54 years, and established a clinic of Christian psychotherapy with psychiatrist Smiley Blanton. In 1945 he established the inspirational magazine Guideposts, which is still popular. Politically he was conservative: He traveled to Vietnam at President Nixon's request and was given the Presidential Medal of Freedom by Ronald Reagan.

*Peale was a prolific speaker; he was still addressing around 100 groups a year in his 90s. He died on Christmas Eve, 1993, aged 95, but the Peale Center in New York State carries on his work. Peale's life has been chronicled in Carol V. R. George's *God's Salesman: Normal Vincent Peale and the Power of Positive Thinking*.*