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On Trying Too Hard to Be Happy

> Try to pose for yourself this task: not to think of a polar bear, and you will see that the cursed thing will come to mind every minute.
>
> – Fyodor Dostoevsky,
> *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*

The man who claims that he is about to tell me the secret of human happiness is eighty-three years old, with an alarming orange tan that does nothing to enhance his credibility. It is just after eight o'clock on a December morning, in a darkened basketball stadium on the outskirts of San Antonio in Texas, and – according to the orange man – I am about to learn 'the one thing that will change your life forever'. I'm sceptical, but not as much as I might normally be, because I am only one of more than fifteen thousand people at Get Motivated!, America's 'most popular business motivational seminar', and the enthusiasm of my fellow audience members is starting to become infectious.

'So you wanna know?', asks the octogenarian, who is Dr Robert H. Schuller, veteran self-help guru, author of more than thirty-five books on the power of positive thinking, and, in his other job, the founding pastor of the largest church in the United States

constructed entirely out of glass. The crowd roars its assent. Easily embarrassed British people like me do not, generally speaking, roar our assent at motivational seminars in Texan basketball stadiums, but the atmosphere partially overpowers my reticence. I roar quietly.

'Here it is, then,' Dr Schuller declares, stiffly pacing the stage, which is decorated with two enormous banners reading 'MOTIVATE!' and 'SUCCEED!', seventeen American flags, and a large number of potted plants. 'Here's the thing that will change your life forever.' Then he barks a single syllable – '*Cut!*' – and leaves a dramatic pause before completing his sentence: '. . . the word "impossible" out of your life! Cut it out! Cut it out forever!'

The audience combusts. I can't help feeling underwhelmed, but then I probably shouldn't have expected anything different from Get Motivated!, an event at which the sheer power of positivity counts for everything. 'You are the master of your destiny!' Schuller goes on. 'Think big, and dream bigger! Resurrect your abandoned hope! . . . Positive thinking works in *every area of life*!'

The logic of Schuller's philosophy, which is the doctrine of positive thinking at its most distilled, isn't exactly complex: decide to think happy and successful thoughts – banish the spectres of sadness and failure – and happiness and success will follow. It could be argued that not every speaker listed in the glossy brochure for today's seminar provides uncontroversial evidence in support of this outlook: the keynote speech is to be delivered, in a few hours' time, by George W. Bush, a president far from universally viewed as successful. But if you voiced this objection to Dr Schuller, he would probably dismiss it as 'negativity thinking'. To criticise the power of positivity is to demonstrate that you haven't really grasped it at all. If you had, you would stop grumbling about such things, and indeed about anything else.

The organisers of Get Motivated! describe it as a motivational seminar, but that phrase – with its suggestion of minor-league life coaches giving speeches in dingy hotel ballrooms – hardly captures the scale and grandiosity of the thing. Staged roughly once a month, in cities across north America, it sits at the summit of the global industry of positive thinking, and boasts an impressive roster of celebrity speakers: Mikhail Gorbachev and Rudy Giuliani are among the regulars, as are General Colin Powell and, somewhat incongruously, William Shatner. Should it ever occur to you that a formerly prominent figure in world politics (or William Shatner) has been keeping an inexplicably low profile in recent months, there's a good chance you'll find him or her at Get Motivated!, preaching the gospel of optimism.

As befits such celebrity, there's nothing dingy about the staging, either, which features banks of swooping spotlights, sound systems pumping out rock anthems, and expensive pyrotechnics; each speaker is welcomed to the stage amid showers of sparks and puffs of smoke. These special effects help propel the audience to ever higher altitudes of excitement, though it also doesn't hurt that for many of them, a trip to Get Motivated! means an extra day off work: many employers classify it as job training. Even the United States military, where 'training' usually means something more rigorous, endorses this view; in San Antonio, scores of the stadium's seats are occupied by uniformed soldiers from the local Army base.

Technically, I am here undercover. Tamara Lowe, the self-described 'world's number one female motivational speaker', who along with her husband runs the company behind Get Motivated!, has been accused of denying access to reporters, a tribe notoriously prone to negativity thinking. Lowe denies the charge, but out of caution, I've been describing myself as a 'self-employed

businessman' – a tactic, I'm realising too late, that only makes me sound shifty. I needn't have bothered with subterfuge anyway, it turns out, since I'm much too far away from the stage for the security staff to be able to see me scribbling in my notebook. My seat is described on my ticket as 'premier seating', but this turns out to be another case of positivity run amok: at Get Motivated!, there is only 'premier seating', 'executive seating', and 'VIP seating'. In reality, mine is up in the nosebleed section; it is a hard plastic perch, painful on the buttocks. But I am grateful for it, because by chance it means that I'm seated next to a man who, as far as I can make out, is one of the few cynics in the arena – an amiable, large-limbed park ranger named Jim, who sporadically leaps to his feet to shout 'I'm *so* motivated!' in tones laden with sarcasm. He explains that he was required to attend by his employer, the United States National Park Service, though when I ask why that organisation might wish its rangers to use paid work time in this fashion, he cheerily concedes that he has 'no fucking clue'.

Dr Schuller's sermon, meanwhile, is gathering pace. 'When I was a child, it was impossible for a man ever to walk on the moon, impossible to cut out a human heart and put it in another man's chest . . . the word "impossible" has proven to be a very stupid word!' He does not spend much time marshalling further evidence for his assertion that failure is optional: it's clear that Schuller, the author of *Move Ahead with Possibility Thinking* and *Tough Times Never Last, But Tough People Do!*, vastly prefers inspiration to argument. But in any case, he is really only a warm-up man for the day's main speakers, and within fifteen minutes he is striding away, to adulation and fireworks, fists clenched victoriously up at the audience, the picture of positive-thinking success.

It is only months later, back at my home in New York, reading the headlines over morning coffee, that I learn the news that the

largest church in the United States constructed entirely from glass has filed for bankruptcy, a word Dr Schuller had apparently neglected to eliminate from his vocabulary.

For a civilisation so fixated on achieving happiness, we seem remarkably incompetent at the task. One of the best-known general findings of the 'science of happiness' has been the discovery that the countless advantages of modern life have done so little to lift our collective mood. The awkward truth seems to be that increased economic growth does not necessarily make for happier societies, just as increased personal income, above a certain basic level, doesn't make for happier people. Nor does better education, at least according to some studies. Nor does an increased choice of consumer products. Nor do bigger and fancier homes, which instead seem mainly to provide the privilege of more space in which to feel gloomy.

Perhaps you don't need telling that self-help books, the modern-day apotheosis of the quest for happiness, are among the things that fail to make us happy. But, for the record, research strongly suggests that they rarely much help. This is why, among themselves, some self-help publishers refer to the 'eighteen-month rule', which states that the person most likely to purchase any given self-help book is someone who, within the previous eighteen months, purchased a self-help book – one that evidently didn't solve all their problems. When you look at the self-help shelves with a coldly impartial eye, this isn't especially surprising. That we yearn for neat, book-sized solutions to the problem of being human is understandable, but strip away the packaging, and you'll find that the messages of such works are frequently banal. *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* essentially tells you to decide

what matters most to you in life, and then do it; *How to Win Friends and Influence People* advises its readers to be pleasant rather than obnoxious, and to use people's first names a lot. One of the most successful management manuals of the last few years, *Fish!*, which is intended to help foster happiness and productivity in the workplace, suggests handing out small toy fish to your hardest-working employees.

As we'll see, when the messages get more specific than that, self-help gurus tend to make claims that simply aren't supported by more reputable research. The evidence suggests, for example, that venting your anger doesn't get rid of it, while visualising your goals doesn't seem to make you more likely to achieve them. And whatever you make of the country-by-country surveys of national happiness that are now published with some regularity, it's striking that the 'happiest' countries are never those where self-help books sell the most, nor indeed where professional psychotherapists are most widely consulted. The existence of a thriving 'happiness industry' clearly isn't sufficient to engender national happiness, and it's not unreasonable to suspect that it might make matters worse.

Yet the ineffectiveness of modern strategies for happiness is really just a small part of the problem. There are good reasons to believe that the whole notion of 'seeking happiness' is flawed to begin with. For one thing, who says happiness is a valid goal in the first place? Religions have never placed much explicit emphasis on it, at least as far as this world is concerned; philosophers have certainly not been unanimous in endorsing it, either. And any evolutionary psychologist will tell you that evolution has little interest in your being happy, beyond trying to make sure that you're not so listless or miserable that you lose the will to reproduce.

Even assuming happiness to be a worthy target, though, a worse

pitfall awaits, which is that aiming for it seems to reduce your chances of ever attaining it. 'Ask yourself whether you are happy,' observed the philosopher John Stuart Mill, 'and you cease to be so.' At best, it would appear, happiness can only be glimpsed out of the corner of an eye, not stared at directly. (We tend to remember having been happy in the past much more frequently than we are conscious of being happy in the present.) Making matters worse still, what happiness actually *is* feels impossible to define in words; even supposing you could do so, you'd presumably end up with as many different definitions as there are people on the planet. All of which means it's tempting to conclude that 'how can we be happy?' is simply the wrong question – that we might as well resign ourselves to never finding the answer, and get on with something more productive instead.

But could there be a third possibility, besides the futile effort to pursue solutions that never seem to work, on the one hand, and just giving up, on the other? After several years reporting on the field of psychology as a journalist, it finally dawned on me that there might be. I began to realise that something united all those psychologists and philosophers – and even the occasional self-help guru – whose ideas seemed actually to hold water. The startling conclusion at which they had all arrived, in different ways, was this: that the effort to try to feel happy is often precisely the thing that makes us miserable. And that it is our constant efforts to eliminate the negative – insecurity, uncertainty, failure, or sadness – that is what causes us to feel so insecure, anxious, uncertain, or unhappy. They didn't see this conclusion as depressing, though. Instead, they argued that it pointed to an alternative approach, a 'negative path' to happiness, that entailed taking a radically different stance towards those things that most of us spend our lives trying hard to avoid. It involved learning to enjoy uncertainty, embracing insecurity,

stopping trying to think positively, becoming familiar with failure, even learning to value death. In short, all these people seemed to agree that in order to be truly happy, we might actually need to be willing to experience more negative emotions – or, at the very least, to learn to stop running quite so hard from them. Which is a bewildering thought, and one that calls into question not just our methods for achieving happiness, but also our assumptions about what 'happiness' really means.

These days, this notion certainly gets less press than the admonition to remain positive at all times. But it is a viewpoint with a surprisingly long and respectable history. You'll find it in the works of the Stoic philosophers of ancient Greece and Rome, who emphasised the benefits of always contemplating how badly things might go. It lies deep near the core of Buddhism, which counsels that true security lies in the unrestrained embrace of insecurity – in the recognition that we never really stand on solid ground, and never can. It underpins the medieval tradition of *memento mori*, which celebrated the life-giving benefits of never forgetting about death. And it is what connects New Age writers, such as the best-selling spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle, with more mainstream recent work in cognitive psychology on the self-defeating nature of positive thinking. This same 'negative' approach to happiness also helps explain why so many people find mindfulness meditation so beneficial; why a new generation of business thinkers are advising companies to drop their obsession with goalsetting and embrace uncertainty instead; and why, in recent years, some psychologists have reached the conclusion that pessimism may often be as healthy and productive as optimism.

At the bottom of all this lies the principle that the countercultural philosopher of the 1950s and '60s, Alan Watts, echoing Aldous Huxley, labelled 'the law of reversed effort', or the 'backwards law':

the notion that in all sorts of contexts, from our personal lives to politics, all this *trying to make everything right* is a big part of what's wrong. Or, to quote Watts, that 'when you try to stay on the surface of the water, you sink; but when you try to sink, you float' and that 'insecurity is the result of trying to be secure'. In many cases, wrote Huxley, 'the harder we try with the conscious will to do something, the less we shall succeed'.

The negative path to happiness is not an argument for bloody-minded contrarianism at all costs: you won't do yourself any favours by walking into the path of oncoming buses, say, rather than trying to avoid them. Nor should it be taken as implying that there's necessarily anything wrong with optimism. A more useful way to think of it is as a much-needed counterweight to a culture fixated on the notion that optimism and positivity are the only possible paths to happiness. Of course, many of us are already healthily sceptical when it comes to positive thinking. But it is worth noting that even most people who disdain the 'cult of optimism', as the philosopher Peter Vernezze calls it, end up subtly endorsing it. They assume that since they cannot or will not subscribe to its ideology, their only alternative is to resign themselves to gloom, or a sort of ironic curmudgeonhood, instead. The 'negative path' is about rejecting this dichotomy, and seeking instead the happiness that arises *through* negativity, rather than trying to drown negativity out with relentless good cheer. If a fixation on positivity is the disease, this approach is the antidote.

This 'negative path', it should be emphasised, isn't one single, comprehensive, neatly packaged philosophy; the antidote is not a panacea. Part of the problem with positive thinking, and many related approaches to happiness, is exactly this desire to reduce big questions to one-size-fits-all self-help tricks or ten-point plans. By contrast, the negative path offers no such single

solution. Some of its proponents stress embracing negative feelings and thoughts, while others might better be described as advocating indifference towards them. Some focus on radically unconventional techniques for pursuing happiness, while others point towards a different definition of happiness, or to abandoning the pursuit of it altogether. The word 'negative' often has a double meaning here, too. It can refer to unpleasant experiences and emotions; but some philosophies of happiness are best described as 'negative' because they involve developing skills of 'not doing' – of learning not to chase positive feelings so aggressively. There are many paradoxes here, and they only get deeper the more you probe. For example, is a feeling or a situation truly 'negative' if it leads ultimately to happiness? If 'being positive' doesn't make you happy, is it right to call it 'being positive' at all? If you redefine happiness to accommodate negativity, is it still happiness? And so on. None of these questions can be tidily resolved. This is partly because the proponents of the negative path share only a general way of seeing life, rather than a single strict set of beliefs. But it is also because one crucial foundation of their approach is precisely that happiness involves paradoxes; that there is no way to tie up all the loose ends, however desperately we might want to.

This book is the record of a journey through the world of the 'backwards law', and of the people, living and dead, who have followed the negative path to happiness. My travels took me to the remote woodlands of Massachusetts, where I spent a week on a silent meditation retreat; to Mexico, where death is not shunned but celebrated; and to the desperately impoverished slums outside Nairobi, where insecurity is the unignorable reality of everyday life. I met modern-day Stoics, specialists in the art of failure, professional pessimists, and other advocates of the power of negative thinking, many of

whom proved surprisingly jolly. But I began in San Antonio because I wanted to experience the cult of optimism at its most extreme. If it was true, as I had come to believe, that Dr Robert Schuller's flavour of positive thinking was really only an exaggerated version of the one-sided beliefs we all tend to hold about happiness, then it made sense, first of all, to witness the problem at its purest.

Which is how I came to find myself rising reluctantly to my feet, up in a dark extremity of that basketball stadium, because Get Motivated!'s excitable mistress of ceremonies had announced a 'dance competition', in which everyone present was obliged to participate. Giant beach balls appeared as if from nowhere, bumping across the heads of the crowd, who jiggled awkwardly as Wham! blared from the sound system. The first prize of a free trip to Disney World, we were informed, awaited not the best dancer but the *most motivated* one, though the distinction made little difference to me: I found the whole thing too excruciating to do more than sway very slightly. The prize was eventually awarded to a soldier. This was a decision that I suspected had been taken to pander to local patriotic pride, rather than strictly in recognition of highly motivated dancing.

After the competition, during a break in proceedings prior to George Bush's arrival, I left the main stadium to buy an overpriced hot dog, and found myself in conversation with a fellow attendee, an elegantly dressed retired schoolteacher from San Antonio who introduced herself as Helen. Money was tight, she explained when I asked why she was attending. She had reluctantly concluded that she needed to come out of retirement and get back to work, and she'd been hoping that Get Motivated! might motivate her.

'The thing is, though,' she said, as we chatted about the speakers we'd seen, 'it's kinda hard to think these good thoughts all the time like they tell you, isn't it?' For a moment, she looked stricken.

Then she recovered, wagging a teacherly finger as if to tell herself off. 'But you're not supposed to think like that!'

One of the foremost investigators of the problems with positive thinking is a professor of psychology named Daniel Wegner, who runs the Mental Control Laboratory at Harvard University. This is not, whatever its name might suggest, a CIA-funded establishment dedicated to the science of brainwashing. Wegner's intellectual territory is what has come to be known as 'ironic process theory', which explores the ways in which our efforts to suppress certain thoughts or behaviours result, ironically, in their becoming more prevalent. I got off to a bad start with Professor Wegner when I accidentally typed his surname, in a newspaper column, as 'Wenger'. He sent me a crabby email ('Get the name right!'), and didn't seem likely to be receptive to the argument that my slip-up was an interesting example of exactly the kinds of errors he studied. The rest of our communications proved a little strained.

The problems to which Wegner has dedicated much of his career all have their origins in a simple and intensely irritating parlour game, which dates back at least to the days of Fyodor Dostoevsky, who reputedly used it to torment his brother. It takes the form of a challenge: can you – the victim is asked – succeed in *not* thinking about a white bear for one whole minute? You can guess the answer, of course, but it's nonetheless instructive to make the attempt. Why not try it now? Look at your watch, or find a clock with a second hand, and aim for a mere ten seconds of entirely non-white-bear-related thoughts, starting . . . now.

My commiserations on your failure.

Wegner's earliest investigations of ironic process theory

involved little more than issuing this challenge to American university students, then asking them to speak their inner monologues aloud while they made the attempt. This is a rather crude way of accessing someone's thought processes, but an excerpt from one typical transcript nonetheless vividly demonstrates the futility of the struggle:

> Of course, now the only thing I'm going to think about is a white bear . . . Don't think about a white bear. Ummm, what was I thinking about before? See, I think about flowers a lot . . . Okay, so my fingernails are really bad . . . Every time I really want, like . . . ummm . . . to talk, think, to not think about the white bear, then it makes me think about the white bear more . . .

At this juncture, you might be beginning to wonder why it is that some social psychologists seem to be allowed to spend other people's money proving the obvious. Of *course* the white bear challenge is virtually impossible to win. But Wegner was just getting started. The more he explored the field, the more he came to suspect that the internal mechanism responsible for sabotaging our efforts at suppressing white bear thoughts might govern an entire territory of mental activity and outward behaviour. The white bear challenge, after all, seems like a metaphor for much of what goes wrong in life: all too often, the outcome we're seeking to avoid is exactly the one to which we seem magnetically lured. Wegner labelled this effect 'the precisely counterintuitive error', which, he explained in one paper, 'is when we manage to do the worst possible thing, the blunder so outrageous that we think about it in advance and resolve not to let that happen. We see a rut coming up in the road ahead, and proceed to steer our bike

right into it. We make a mental note not to mention a sore point in conversation, and then cringe in horror as we blurt out exactly that thing. We carefully cradle the glass across the room, all the while thinking "don't spill", and then juggle it onto the carpet under the gaze of our host.'

Far from representing an occasional divergence from our otherwise flawless self-control, the capacity for ironic error seems to lurk deep in the soul, close to the core of our characters. Edgar Allan Poe, in his short story of the same name, calls it 'the imp of the perverse': that nameless but distinct urge one sometimes experiences, when walking along a precipitous cliff edge, or climbing to the observation deck of a tall building, to throw oneself off – not from any suicidal motivation, but precisely because it would be so calamitous to do so. The imp of the perverse plagues social interactions, too, as anyone who has ever laughed in recognition at an episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* will know all too well.

What is going on here, Wegner argues, is a malfunctioning of the uniquely human capacity for metacognition, or thinking about thinking. 'Metacognition', Wegner explains, 'occurs when thought takes itself as an object.' Mainly, it's an extremely useful skill: it is what enables us to recognise when we are being unreasonable, or sliding into depression, or being afflicted by anxiety, and then to do something about it. But when we use metacognitive thoughts directly to try to control our other, everyday, 'object-level' thoughts – by suppressing images of white bears, say, or replacing gloomy thoughts with happy ones – we run into trouble. 'Metathoughts are instructions we give ourselves about our object-level thinking,' as Wegner puts it, 'and sometimes we just can't follow our own instructions.'

When you try not to think of a white bear, you may experience

some success in forcing alternative thoughts into your mind. At the same time, though, a metacognitive monitoring process will crank into action, to scan your mind for evidence of whether you are succeeding or failing at the task. And this is where things get perilous, because if you try too hard – or, Wegner's studies suggest, if you are tired, stressed, depressed, attempting to multi-task, or otherwise suffering from 'mental load' – metacognition will frequently go wrong. The monitoring process will start to occupy more than its fair share of limelight on the cognitive stage. It will jump to the forefront of consciousness – and suddenly, all you will be able to think about is white bears, and how badly you're doing at not thinking about them.

Could it be that ironic process theory also sheds light on what is wrong with our efforts to achieve happiness, and on the way that our efforts to feel positive seem so frequently to bring about the opposite result? In the years since his earliest white bear experiments, Wegner's research, and that of others, has turned up more and more evidence to support that notion. One example: when experimental subjects are told of an unhappy event, but then instructed to try *not* to feel sad about it, they end up feeling worse than people who are informed of the event, but given no instructions about how to feel. In another study, when patients who were suffering from panic disorders listened to relaxation tapes, their hearts beat faster than patients who listened to audiobooks with no explicitly 'relaxing' content. Bereaved people who make the most effort to avoid feeling grief, research suggests, take the longest to recover from their loss. Our efforts at mental suppression fail in the sexual arena, too: people instructed not to think about sex exhibit greater arousal, as measured by the electrical conductivity of their skin, than those not instructed to suppress such thoughts.

Seen from this perspective, swathes of the self-help industry's

favourite techniques for achieving happiness and success – from positive thinking to visualising your goals to 'getting motivated' – stand revealed to be suffering from one enormous flaw. A person who has resolved to 'think positive' must constantly scan his or her mind for negative thoughts – there's no other way that the mind could ever gauge its success at the operation – yet that scanning will draw attention to the presence of negative thoughts. (Worse, if the negative thoughts start to predominate, a vicious spiral may kick in, since the failure to think positively may become the trigger for a new stream of self-berating thoughts, about not thinking positively enough.) Suppose you decide to follow Dr Schuller's suggestion and try to eliminate the word 'impossible' from your vocabulary, or more generally try to focus exclusively on successful outcomes, and stop thinking about things not working out. As we'll see, there are all sorts of problems with this approach. But the most basic one is that you may well fail, as a result of the very act of monitoring your success.

This problem of self-sabotage through self-monitoring is not the only hazard of positive thinking. An additional twist was revealed in 2009, when a psychologist based in Canada named Joanne Wood set out to test the effectiveness of 'affirmations', those peppy self-congratulatory phrases designed to lift the user's mood through repetition. Affirmations have their origins in the work of the nineteenth-century French pharmacist Émile Coué, a forerunner of the contemporary positive thinkers, who coined the one that remains the most famous: 'Every day, in every way, I am getting better and better.'

Most affirmations sound pretty cheesy, and one might suspect that they would have little effect. Surely, though, they're harmless? Wood wasn't so sure about that. Her reasoning, though compatible with Wegner's, drew on a different psychological tradition

known as 'self-comparison theory'. Much as we like to hear positive messages about ourselves, this theory suggests, we crave even more strongly the sense of being a coherent, consistent self in the first place. Messages that conflict with that existing sense of self, therefore, are unsettling, and so we often reject them – even if they happen to be positive, and even if the source of the message is ourselves. Wood's hunch was that people who seek out affirmations would be, by definition, those with low self-esteem – but that, for that very same reason, they would end up reacting against the messages in the affirmations, because they conflicted with their self-images. Messages such as 'Every day, in every way, I am getting better and better' would clash with their poor opinion of themselves, and thus be rejected, so as not to threaten the coherence of their sense of self. The result might even be a worsening of their low self-esteem, as people struggled to reassert their existing self-images against the incoming messages.

Which is exactly what happened in Wood's research. In one set of experiments, people were divided into subgroups of those with low and high self-esteem, then asked to undertake a journal-writing exercise; every time a bell rang, they were to repeat to themselves the phrase 'I am a lovable person.' According to a variety of ingenious mood measures, those who began the process with low self-esteem became appreciably less happy as a result of telling themselves that they were lovable. They didn't feel particularly lovable to begin with – and trying to convince themselves otherwise merely solidified their negativity. 'Positive thinking' had made them feel worse.

The arrival of George Bush on stage in San Antonio was heralded by the sudden appearance of his Secret Service detail. These were

men who would probably have stood out anywhere, in their dark suits and earpieces, but who stood out twice as prominently at Get Motivated! thanks to their rigid frowns. The job of protecting former presidents from potential assassins, it appeared, wasn't one that rewarded looking on the bright side and assuming that nothing could go wrong.

Bush himself, by contrast, bounded on stage grinning. 'You know, retirement ain't so bad, especially when you get to retire to Texas!' he began, before launching into a speech he had evidently delivered several times before. First, he told a folksy anecdote about spending his post-presidency cleaning up after his dog ('I was picking up that which I had been dodging for eight years!'). Then, for a strange moment or two, it seemed as if the main topic of his speech would be how he once had to choose a rug for the Oval Office ('I thought to myself, the presidency is going to be a decision-making experience!'). But his real subject, it soon emerged, was optimism. 'I don't believe you can lead a family, or a school, or a city, or a state, or a country, unless you're optimistic that the future is going to be better,' he said. 'And I want you to know that, even in the darkest days of my presidency, I was optimistic that the future was going to be better than the past for our citizens and the world.'

You need not hold any specific political opinion about the forty-third president of the United States to see how his words illustrate a fundamental strangeness of the 'cult of optimism'. Bush was not ignoring the numerous controversies of his administration – the strategy one might have imagined he would adopt at a motivational seminar, before a sympathetic audience, and facing no risk of hostile questions. Instead, he had chosen to redefine them as evidence in support of his optimistic attitude. The way Bush saw it, the happy and successful periods of his

presidency proved the benefits of an optimistic outlook, of course – but so did the unhappy and unsuccessful ones. When things are going badly, after all, you need optimism all the more. Or to put it another way: once you have resolved to embrace the ideology of positive thinking, you will find a way to interpret virtually any eventuality as a justification for thinking positively. You need never spend time considering how your actions might go wrong.

Could this curiously unfalsifiable ideology of positivity at all costs – positivity regardless of the results – be actively dangerous? Opponents of the Bush administration's foreign policies might have reason to think so. This is also one part of the case made by the social critic Barbara Ehrenreich, in her 2010 book *Smile or Die: How Positive Thinking Fooled America and the World*. One underappreciated cause of the global financial crisis of the late 2000s, she argues, was an American business culture in which even thinking about the possibility of failure – let alone speaking up about it at meetings – had come to be considered an embarrassing *faux pas*. Bankers, their narcissism stoked by a culture that awarded grand ambition above all, lost the capacity to distinguish between their ego-fuelled dreams and concrete results. Meanwhile, homebuyers assumed that whatever they wanted could be theirs if they wanted it badly enough (how many of them had read books such as *The Secret*, which makes exactly that claim?) and accordingly sought mortgages they were unable to repay. Irrational optimism suffused the financial sector, and the professional purveyors of optimism – the speakers and self-help gurus and seminar organisers – were only too happy to encourage it. 'To the extent that positive thinking had become a business in itself,' writes Ehrenreich, 'business was its principal client, eagerly consuming the good news that all things are possible through an effort of mind. This was a useful message for employees, who by the turn of the twenty-first

century were being required to work longer hours for fewer benefits and diminishing job security. But it was also a liberating ideology for top-level executives. What was the point in agonising over balance sheets and tedious analyses of risks – and why bother worrying about dizzying levels of debt and exposure to potential defaults – when all good things come to those who are optimistic enough to expect them?'

Ehrenreich traces the origins of this philosophy to nineteenth-century America, and specifically to the quasi-religious movement known as New Thought. New Thought arose in rebellion against the dominant, gloomy message of American Calvinism, which was that relentless hard work was the duty of every Christian – with the additional sting that, thanks to the doctrine of predestination, you might in any case already be marked to spend eternity in Hell. New Thought, by contrast, proposed that one could achieve happiness and worldly success through the power of the mind. This mind-power could even cure physical ailments, according to the newly minted religion of Christian Science, which grew directly from the same roots. Yet, as Ehrenreich makes clear, New Thought imposed its own kind of harsh judgmentalism, replacing Calvinism's obligatory hard work with obligatory positive thinking. Negative thoughts were fiercely denounced – a message that echoed 'the old religion's condemnation of sin' and added 'an insistence on the constant interior labour of self-examination'. Quoting the sociologist Micki McGee, she shows how, under this new orthodoxy of optimism, 'continuous and never-ending work on the self [was] offered not only as a road to success, but also to a kind of secular salvation'.

George Bush, then, was standing in a venerable tradition when he proclaimed the importance of optimism in all circumstances. But his speech at Get Motivated! was over almost as soon as it had

started. A dash of religion, a singularly unilluminating anecdote about the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, some words of praise for the military, and he was waving goodbye – 'Thank you, Texas, it's good to be home!' – as his bodyguards closed in around him. Beneath the din of cheering, I heard Jim, the park ranger in the next seat, emit a sigh of relief. 'OK, I'm motivated now,' he muttered, to nobody in particular. 'Is it time for some beer?'

'There are lots of ways of being miserable,' says a character in a short story by Edith Wharton, 'but there's only one way of being comfortable, and that is to stop running around after happiness.' This observation pungently expresses the problem with the 'cult of optimism' – the ironic, self-defeating struggle that sabotages positivity when we try too hard. But it also hints at the possibility of a more hopeful alternative, an approach to happiness that might take a radically different form. The first step is to learn how to stop chasing positivity so intently. But many of the proponents of the 'negative path' to happiness take things further still, arguing – paradoxically, but persuasively – that deliberately plunging more deeply into what we think of as negative may be a precondition of true happiness.

Perhaps the most vivid metaphor for this whole strange philosophy is a small children's toy known as the 'Chinese finger trap', though the evidence suggests it is probably not Chinese in origin at all. In his office at the University of Nevada, the psychologist Steven Hayes, an outspoken critic of counterproductive positive thinking, keeps a box of them on his desk; he uses them to illustrate his arguments. The 'trap' is a tube, made of thin strips of woven bamboo, with the opening at each end being roughly the size of a human finger. The unwitting victim is asked to insert

his index fingers into the tube, then finds himself trapped: in reaction to his efforts to pull his fingers out again, the openings at each end of the tube constrict, gripping his fingers ever more tightly. The harder he pulls, the more decisively he is trapped. It is only by relaxing his efforts at escape, and by pushing his fingers further in, that he can widen the ends of the tube, whereupon it falls away, and he is free.

In the case of the Chinese finger trap, Hayes observes, 'doing the presumably sensible thing is counterproductive'.

Following the negative path to happiness is about doing the other thing – the presumably illogical thing – instead.