



continuous conversion

The perils of a positive attitude

by Sara Tusek

I am by nature what's known as a positive person. It seems that God has gifted me with an attitude in which the sun is always shining (somewhere), the grass is always green (or about to get green) and people are always (at heart) kind. This attitude, I've noticed, seems to grate on many people's nerves.

Negative Attitudes

For reasons that probably appear obvious to most people, it's more common in social settings to be negative—to bemoan what's wrong than to celebrate what's right.

Many years ago I knew a man who was a professional motivational speaker. His standard talk included one exercise that consisted of showing you a blank sheet of paper. He then drew a tiny dot on the paper, and asked you what you saw. When you said you saw a dot, he told you that you were a typical negative thinker—that what you are seeing is a vast ocean of white paper with a tiny dot. So why pick out the dot as “what you saw”?



One way to stay positive.

This exercise made perfect sense to me. If the paper is 99.9% white, why focus on the dot? By extension, if a situation is 99.9% satisfactory, why are people so eager to point out the diminutive part

that's not satisfactory? Isn't it more pleasant to focus on what's good?

Human Nature

You may hear that it's human nature to see “what's wrong,” no matter how insignificant, rather than see “what's right.” Moreover, it's lamentably human to see what's wrong with another person (no matter how negligible the fault) and be blind to what's wrong in ourselves (no matter how noticeable the fault).

In fact, Jesus addressed this proclivity in a parable about a beam and a mote. The beam was a large, long piece of wood, and the mote was a tiny speck of wood. In Jesus' scenario, a person with a huge beam in his/her eye was complaining about the mote in the eye of a neighbor. Jesus suggested that the complainer remove his own beam before worrying about the neighbor's mote.

So evidently it's human nature to notice very small things and ignore very large things. If so, then it's not hard to understand why people latch onto infinitesimal imperfections in daily life and examine them minutely, while blithely ignoring the enormous areas of life that are perfectly fine.

Frequent Flyer

One place to test this hypothesis is an airport. On any given day, the majority of planes land and take off more-or-less on time. Most luggage lands at the same airport as its owner. Most passengers have an endurable, if not luxurious, flying experience.

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As is well-known, flying is statistically far safer than driving, and (despite much-publicized disasters and near-disasters) most flights are about as exciting as sitting in your living room.

Yet the press and its readership are vigilant for the exception—the ridiculously-delayed flight, the change of aircraft at the last minute, the airless and foodless wait on the runway for an ever-postponed takeoff. These incidents are like the dot on the paper—they are not the 99.9%, the norm.

I am always grateful and awed, in a way, when my flight is smooth. With so many ways it could have gone wrong, isn't it fantastic that all went well? But I have found that when I express my gratitude, people either think I am being sarcastic or that I am not bright enough to notice all the flaws in the flight.

I can't figure you out!

When I was in high school, I had a friend who knew me pretty well. Senior year, he wrote a message in my yearbook to the effect that he couldn't figure me out—sometimes I appeared very intelligent, and sometimes not intelligent at all! He wasn't being rude—he really was baffled by my behavior. My schoolwork reflected a sharp mind that was quick to see flaws in an argument, but my social life reflected a person who was often a few beats behind everyone else in noticing that someone was insulting me or taking advantage of me. The explanation was logical, to me—I expected that my friends would be kind to me, so when they weren't, I just didn't notice it.

I was like Mr. Magoo—the “little old man” cartoon character with his squinty eyes and genial nature. Magoo was so near-sighted he couldn't see anything till he was right on top of it. He routinely walked through closing doors, off of cliffs, and into lion's dens, always smiling and humming to himself. Yet he never suffered any harm, as miraculously the door

slammed shut just after he walked through, a plank appeared at the edge of the cliff, and the lion had just eaten a big meal and was sound asleep. Like Magoo, I am often protected in spite of (or perhaps by) my simple-minded approach to life. I'm not looking for problems.

Protected by the Holy Spirit

There's an old joke that the Lord looks out for children, fools and Irishmen. Sometimes I have had the distinct impression that I am being protected from harm by the work of the Holy Spirit. This is no excuse for me to be careless, as Christians are to be “wise as serpents and harmless as doves” (Matthew 10:16), implying that stupidity is not a Christian virtue. But it's reassuring that I can relax my guard and enjoy life without becoming unduly vulnerable. This protection is, no doubt, part of “the joy of the Lord” that's given to every Christian.

Don't go to the dark side

I cling to my positive outlook, as I also have within me the obverse, or flip, side of being positive—an unrelievedly hopeless and despairing side. Occasionally a mood strikes me in which all seems doomed, dreary and desolate. Swiss psychologist Karl Jung would call this my “shadow self,” the part of my personality that I want to deny, the repository for all my darker imaginings. A pastor would probably call it “sin.”

Whatever it is, I don't like it. When I feel this bleak negativity coming over me, I pray very fervently that it will keep on going. I cherish my positive attitude, for when it's threatened, I experience the world as a hostile, vacant place, devoid of all love and tenderness. I can't imagine what I would do if I didn't have my positive attitude to give me strength. I pity anyone who has to live in complete negativity for even a moment. So even if my attempts to remain positive continue get on the nerves of everyone I meet, I'll keep on trying, because the perils of being positive are far less than the perils of being negative.

