

uncertain existence which they are only minimally in control of. This is the challenge that when met will lead to a fulfilling life.

Although he talks about the value of manual work, hands are a metaphor for personal agency, the way the present-at-hand transforms into the ready-to-hand, engagement with problem solving and the ability to take a task through from beginning to end. To know from experience the qualitative difference between the beginning, the middle and the end. And to be able to persevere and succeed by one's own ability. Although psychotherapists do not work with their hands as such, what we do is equivalent in that we quickly discover how inadequate technical advice is. We work on our account. We are thrown back on our abilities with the existential choice being whether to accept the responsibility or not. If we do, we carry on, if we do not perhaps we should get a job that relies more on technique.

In order to find out the accuracy of Crawford's thesis, readers of this journal could do worse than to ask themselves what it is exactly that they find meaningful about their jobs.

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Smile or Die: How Positive Thinking Fooled America and the World

Barbara Ehrenreich. (2009). London: Granta.

Smile or Die is a fierce, ferociously funny and learned exposé of the ideology of positive thinking, a.k.a. 'The Happiness Industry', written by one of America's most trenchant social commentators. The author of nearly twenty books, many of which expose the dark side of the American dream (*Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class*; *Bait and Switch: The Futile Pursuit of the Corporate Dream*; *Nickel and Dimed: Undercover in Low Wage USA*), investigating journalist Barbara Ehrenreich has examined the nefarious role of life coaches, motivational speakers, fundamentalist Christian 'pastorpreneurs', self-help books, etc., when the economy 'tanked', industries were mothballed or 'globalised' (relocated to Third World countries) and workers – particularly white collar professionals – had to learn to hustle and promote 'Brand You'.

Ehrenreich had first hand experience of the tyranny of positive thinking: when she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She was, rightly, terrified, angry and confused – over treatments, the real possibility of her own

mortality – and what did she find?: a tidal wave of sticky pink sentiment (ribbons and teddy-bears with inspirational messages), and fatuous advice (*'Don't cry over anything that can't cry over you'*). Cancer was *'sugar-coated'*; and the appropriate attitude was upbeat, even beatific. Support groups/websites of former patients (survivors) even insisted that cancer was a *'wake-up call'* and the disease a gift: *'Cancer is your passport to the life you were truly meant to live ... [it] will lead you to God ... Cancer is your connection to the divine.'* A rationalist and trained molecular biologist, Ehrenreich could easily dismiss such drivel; however, it proved more difficult to reject more invidious messages dressed up in dodgy science: that positive thinking strengthens the immune system and thus helps ensure recovery (a theory which has been debunked). The patient is responsible for her own survival - if she works on herself, monitors her moods for negativity and mobilises her psychic energy for war at the cellular level. In other words: smile or die.

The more Ehrenreich delved into the websites, *'the greater my sense of isolation grew. No one ... seemed to share my outrage over the disease ... what causes it and why it is so common, especially in industrialised societies.'* Fortunately for her and us, she got mad and wrote this book. *'I didn't mind dying,'* she says tartly, *'but the idea I should do so while clutching a teddy bear – well no amount of philosophising had prepared me for that.'*

But the purveyors of militant positivity – particularly Rhoda Byrne's best seller, *The Secret* - have another, more devastating message for the patient: negativity *'attracts'* cancer (and redundancy; mortgage foreclosure and every other bad thing), and when terrible things happen, it's your fault. A psychiatrist attached to a New York cancer clinic confirms the viciousness of the message, noting: *'I've read all about this – if you get cancer, you must have wanted it.'* As Ehrenreich notes, the failure to think positively can weigh on a cancer patient like a second disease; and she records the poignant story of one woman who wrote to new age spiritualist Deepak Chopra that *'Even though I [...] have come a long way in unburdening myself of toxic feelings, have forgiven everyone, changed my lifestyle to include meditation ... the cancer keeps coming back ... I am positive I am going to beat it, yet it does get harder with each diagnosis to keep a positive attitude.'* Chopra's advice: work harder.

What does the above anecdote, and Ehrenreich's broader thesis (that the lunacy of positive thinking is responsible for worldwide financial meltdown; climate change; environmental degradation) have to do with therapy in general and existential therapy in particular? Quite a lot, I would argue. I believe it would behove us existentialists to put down Heidegger for a moment and read books like *Smile or Die*. Magical thinking is not confined to crass north America; it is an ancient, universal response to fearful events. Frightened, desperate people, unsurprisingly, may clutch at

any straw – including therapy. During my training in London a friend with final stage breast cancer asked me to recommend a therapist so she could expunge the negative thoughts that were killing her. Years later, another dear friend dying of breast cancer asked me for names of therapists. I recommended an existential therapist. When I asked her how her therapy was going, she said: *'I can't decide if he's brilliant or a wanker!'* (I took that as a compliment.) The point, however, is that even traditional psychotherapy confers no survival advantages for cancer patients. Says one researcher, it can offer emotional support and social benefits; however, patients should not undergo therapy *'solely on the expectation they are extending their lives.'* And it will probably be our job as therapists to convey this hard truth.

Ehrenrich's book makes other assertions relevant to our profession: [1] that positive psychology is making inroads into serious academic psychology and medicine, with dubious claims based on flimsy data (see her chapter on the science of happiness); and [2] in selecting CBT as its therapy of choice, the NHS has embraced a methodology that has its origins in what she calls 'the dark roots of American optimism'. First articulated in the 1860s, positive thinking was a reaction to Calvinism's gloomy obsession with sin (the living must constantly examine their souls for abomination). It was a punitive theology that posited that only an elect could enter heaven (predestination), and that one's health and wealth were a result of hard work and a sign of God's favouritism. One of the first organised movements of positive thinking was Christian Science, which posited that the universe was fundamentally benevolent and illness/poverty were illusions that would vanish if one's mental/spiritual energies were focused. In the 1930s this was more crassly expressed in books like *Think and Get Rich*; and the 1950s tome *The Power of Positive Thinking*.

Today, as Ehrenreich discovered, positive thinking hucksters such as Byrne have preserved Calvinism's more toxic features. It is harshly judgemental and insists on the constant interior labour of self-examination; one's inner life is subjected to relentless monitoring for negative thoughts. If you are negative, you deserve what you get. The flip side of positivity is the insistence of personal responsibility. (Laid off? You didn't work hard enough/have the right attitude.) Of course there is never a hint of the possibility of collective action or protest. Why? It's impractical and expensive ... it would be anti-American and communistic. On the other hand, if you ask the universe for what you want ... you will get it. However, as Ehrenreich scathingly remarks, these requests are so ... modest. In *The Secret* no one asks the universe for world peace, or a cure for AIDS. No, it's always for a new car, a bigger house, a £300 handbag, an exotic holiday. Furthermore, we are instructed not to waste time on world events (and be bombarded with negativity). This retreat from the real

drama and tragedy of human events, Ehrenreich believes, '*is suggestive of a deep helplessness at the core of positive thinking.*'

In a worldwide recession/depression, positive thinking has become a multi-billion dollar industry – and the corporate world its main client. In the US, so-called life coaches are cynically used by corporations and big business to soften the blow of lay-off (its an opportunity for a new beginning); and simultaneously as a whip to keep the remaining workforce grateful and happy to accept speedup, slashed wages and benefits (you don't know how lucky you are). In the US there are real penalties for 'negativity'. People have been fired for supposedly manifesting it. Motivational speakers cannot change reality; it supposedly helps people *think* differently about their dire circumstances.

And what of the NHS and CBT? Is it doing the same thing? What might its (unwitting) role be when the NHS is overwhelmed with distressed citizens who have lost their livelihoods, benefits, housing and hope? Ehrenreich calls optimism a '*cognitive stance ... a conscious expectation which presumably any one can develop through practice, requiring a deliberate self-deception, including a constant effort to repress unpleasant thoughts*' (negativity). Like Calvinism and its 21st century positive thinking incarnation, CBT is big on 'work': work for the client (homework) and work for the practitioner (pedagogical instruction to change clients' wrong thought patterns, grids, checklists, box-ticking). The more serious (moral) question, in my opinion, is whether therapy is becoming an adjunct, a subtle enforcer of the dictates of the so-called 'free market' and its governments.

Ehrenreich believes that the alternative to phoney positive thinking is not despair. In fact, both positive and negative thinking are delusional; and "*to see things 'as they really are,' or as uncoloured as possible by our own feelings and fantasies, [is] to understand that the world is full of both danger and opportunity - the chance of great happiness as well as the certainty of death.*"

Or put another way: there is a vast difference between positive thinking and existential courage.

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The following publications have been received for possible review. People who wish to be included in the list of book reviewers for Existential Analysis for these or other publications are requested to e-mail the Book Reviews Editor Martin Adams at adamsmc@regents.ac.uk.

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