

THE TRIAL OF POSITIVE THINKING
A One Act Play by
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Pacific Unitarian Church
August 18, 2019

Cast: Judge, Prosecutor, Defense

Judge:

I would like to begin today's trial with the Prosecuting Attorney's Opening Statement.

Prosecutor: (wandering around like a pompous lawyer.)

Because I get to play the bad cop—the grump if you will—I would right up front like to establish my credentials as a positive thinker. I may be skeptical of unsubstantiated claims, but I am also a dreamy, drippy, sloppy, hopeful thinker who is pretty happy, avoids conflict, and has been lucky enough to live with an innate trust, that things will turn out. Okay?

Ladies and Gentlemen of this court, I lean to optimistic. Not convinced? I have had cancer and barely remember it, never worry about it. Because it left a scar on my arm that looks like the bite of a large fish, I tell the kids at beaches and pools that "When I was about your age I was bitten by a small shark, (pointing) just about over there." Weird thing is, I have lied enough about it, long enough I have come to half believe it.

Judge: (interrupting)

Counsel, are you going to spend the Court's time telling fish tales?

Prosecutor:

No Your Honor, I am not. My point is to show that I know the power of the mind to bend truth to its liking.

So, the question before us today is, does positive thinking work, and at first blush yes, it certainly does. The question we face, good people is how much? And what is the cost of not tempering our expectations regarding its potency?

Does *The Secret*, (holding up the book) which I am submitting into evidence as the symbol today, explain much of the magical thinking going on? *The Secret*, and I could have picked many other mass-produced publications from New Age thinkers, suggests that the Universe contains, among other fanciful things, a hidden law that suggests our thoughts and will literally have the near-magical power to attract that which is thought of. I am here to challenge that much of this is wishful thinking that borders on false advertising.

The answer dear Jury, is the latter. And, I might add, a quietly dangerous idea that needs a little critical thinking.

(Pointing at Defense) Moonbeam over here, with the hippy long hair.

Judge:

Caution Counsel!

Prosecutor:

Sorry Judge It is just that he is going to try to soft-sell us the lie that our minds literally bend reality, affect matter! And he will in part be right. Our minds have a great deal of impact in controlling our

behavior. Certainly, no one would challenge that thinking calm thoughts can lower your blood pressure. I would wish to add that it can likely in many cases do much more.

However, despite the obvious impact on how we think and feel affects us, and our behavior, that potency all begins and ends between our ears.

See, for all the good vibes his philosophy spreads, hidden in his snake-oil pitch is the belief that bad things don't happen to good thinkers. And that is simply bad thinking, worse theology, and a dangerous idea we have already if we have the eyes to see it, is fake news.

As we proceed today, expect Ozzy's long-lost brother over here to likely drop anecdotal evidence of how positive thoughts manifested in good outcomes that only the un-enlightened would call luck. Don't let it woo you. (sits down)

Judge: (angrily pounding the gavel)

I think we have heard just enough for now. Defense, you have the floor.

Defense:

This is how it always goes, doesn't it? The Grinch over here,

Judge: Counsel!

Defense:

Sorry, Judge, the people who would wish to squelch the real power of good intentions and of good people having their own agency want to paint positive thinkers as unrealistic; or now, (scoffing as if absurd) worse as dangerous. I didn't see that accusation coming. It makes sense though actually, because fear and doubt are what keeps them from being able to see the truth.

It makes sense if one demands we live inside the boxes that have usually defined us. However, even if most people like Eeyore over here, (pointing to Prosecutor) don't yet have the ears to hear it, or the eyes to see it, the news is breaking, and here is a summary.

The mind and the body are interconnected and interdependent is what we across history and religions had suspected, and experienced, but couldn't confirm.

As science has expanded, I said as science has expanded, we have learned that thought and matter are connected. More connected than we even have words to say.

We have all heard that atoms can appear and disappear before our eyes, and moreover, that those atoms in ways that remain inexplicable appear to be affected by those that watch them. (Pointing angrily at me), ever heard of Quantum Physics, Ebenezer, there are truths we can't see or measure.

Judge: (interrupts in a scolding tone)

Defense!

Defense:

See, those who wish to refute the news that is breaking to catch up to that old wisdom, are actually ignoring what we are learning. Ask yourself, in a universe that is at its lowest levels

appears to be made up of strings, rhythm, quarks, and, in a sky with as many stars as grains of sand on a beach, can we really say that our thoughts don't affect reality?

Good people, the truth is, we are quite simply in our infancy as a species, and it is going to take some time for us, particularly those like the Prosecutor, who are committed to evaluating spiritual truths by tests that spiritual truths can't pass. People like the Prosecutor, committed to only old tests, have failed to realize we are no longer living in a Newtonian Universe that for so long we thought defined us, and defined those tests.

Good people of the jury, we know now, with countless examples from science like the truth of dark matter or mirror neurons, that not everything real is easily measured. Likewise, we know from our personal experiences with intuition and deja-vu that the world is more nuanced and interconnected than anyone can fully claim to explain.

Mr. Prosecutor, just cause you can't accurately measure love, doesn't mean it isn't real or has no power. Right. Much of the wisdom contained in the secret is the same. For what it is worth, I can't explain it either. There is more humility in these new sciences than Scrooge would ever be willing to admit.

Judge: (cautioning)
Defense!

Defense:

Sorry, Judge. We know that just because you can't measure it, does not mean that it isn't real or didn't happen. A good example of that is the discovery of a new galaxy. The discovery of a new galaxy is not seen, it is inferred, based on a long history of reliable, arguably circumstantial facts. So too is the power of positive thinking a real force, beyond its obvious ability to, while deeply and slowly breathing, lower our blood pressure.

Good people, as this trial proceeds, remember to continually ask yourself who the burden of proof lies on. Remember, who picked this fight? The prosecution is charged with the task of proving beyond a reasonable doubt that positive thinking does not have any power beyond its influence the actions of person whose head thinks them.

Remember that it lies on the likes of naysayers like Barbara Ehrenreich (holding up her book) and him (pointing at the Prosecutor)) who have picked this fight. We are not looking for a fight. We are looking to bring light and hope into the world.

Judge:
Prosecutor. Do you have a response?

Prosecutor:

I do.

Okay, so I and those who require a little evidence are naysayers. "Eeyores" or as one can only translate what he meant by calling me Eeyore, dumb, worried, skeptical jackass-like, as apparently I am. Nice. That's positive. For what it is worth, this is exactly what I expected from the psycho-religious carries that the positive thinking movement, at its core, is.

Let's move away from indulging this magical, new age understanding of quantum physics for simple a real-life story. What a family friend of mine about my age, married to a nice woman, was up to about ten years ago. They were an active couple, had two kids, now about ten and fifteen. All was well in their little family until she began to feel stiff, to drop things, to develop a few disconcerting twitches. When these vague troubles persisted, they began to pursue what it was. She went to her doctor, and then more doctors.

It was first suggested that perhaps she had an odd allergy, then Lyme disease was suggested and tested for. Eventually, multiple sclerosis was considered, even cancer was discussed. No test made it clear.

For the record, I knew them. She was no more or less optimistic than anybody else. If anything, more. Like anyone would, they began to worry and pray.

It turns out she had ALS—Lou Gehrig's disease. ALS has proven to be 100 percent fatal. Which, Mr. Prosecutor, must mean that so far, no one has been able to think positively enough about getting or not getting, or wishing their way through, Lou Gehrig's disease;

Apparently, nobody's prayers have been good enough. Should they have tried harder? Maybe they were not optimistic enough to begin with.

I'm thinking it is pretty positive that similar stories could be told about polio, tuberculosis, and scarlet fever, until of course those diseases became far more manageable or eradicated via hard, scientific discoveries.

You know what, when we are done here today, why doesn't the good counselor over here go talk to my friend who now has to do every milestone in his kids lives alone, and go teach him how to turn his frown upside down.

Judge:

Enough, Mr. Prosecutor, enough. Defense, the floor is yours.

Defense:

You know, I am just not going to get trapped in that anger. And I don't suggest any of you do either (pointing at Prosecutor). You can stay there if you like, but I am not going to get into whose prayers are heard and whose are not. Or why that might happen. You want to know why? Because I know what that anger can do to you.

And, I know this too. The Universe is an abundant place, full of positive creative energy that needs magnets to attract it. I also know that humans manifest into their lives the things, energy, and experiences they think about. So rather than focus on complaining about death, put yourself in a state that acknowledges the blessing has already been given, the healing has already taken place.

Your point, Debbie Downer is well taken, and I cannot explain all the tragedies that take place. I wish I could. Maybe someday we will.

I will close by uttering the words said by Henry Ford in the early part of the last century- "Whether you think you can or can't, either way you are right." And, you know what, if there is not all the world's truth in Ford's quote, there is at least a lot of truth in it. In fact, I think perhaps the most valuable truth humans can learn.

Maybe, dear members and witnesses of the jury and Court, it is as simple as the difference between whether you want to focus on what you don't have, what we can't know, and and can't do, or be grateful and celebrate what you do have.

I'll return Prosecution's timely challenging question with one of my own. If our thoughts, emotions, and dispositions were not as powerful as I claim them to be, why would so many people feel miraculously cured? Why would the religious history of the World be littered with faith healers?

Let's flip the argument over. Why would this idea persist on into the modern world if it did not hold up? We don't believe that a jaguar god lives behind that palm tree anymore. Hardly anybody argues that rain dances actually work, that Zeus is the source of the lightning that light up the sky, or that human sacrifice pleases the heavens. See, this is not that old-time religion. If anything, those old-time religions were trying to talk about the challenging truths proposed and struggled towards today.

If thought had no profound effect on matter, it would like the list of bad ideas above have fallen, as they say into the dustbin of history, not emerging stronger and re-interpreted today.

(Looking back over at the Prosecutor) Everyone has the capacity to change their relationship with their thoughts, and someday Steve I hope you do too.

Judge:

Mr. Prosecutor. Do you have a response?

Prosecutor:

Yes. Yes, I do.

At the heart of Counsel's argument is a quiet and implicit "Why not? What's the harm? What's the cost?" And mostly, that's right. Mostly there is no cost to envisioning what you want and focusing on the positive. Surely that attitude pulls us forward more than pessimism. And, truth is, sometimes you get a break on a traffic light just when you are late. Sometimes an old friend calls just when you were thinking of them. Sometimes the tumor just goes away. It does happen.

But once you start to account for how our minds work, what we notice and remember, once you begin to caution against wishful thinking, and pull away the magical thinking, one begins to see that these events, and miracle cures like them, are not really occurring any more reliably conjured up than random chance can account for.

See, I wish, like Defense is advocating, that a Pollyanna perspective bent reality in the way he believes it does.

What follows is a story of how Pollyanna thinking did change the world.

In preparing for this debate, I discovered that this book *The Secret* was published in 2006, and out of curiosity, I began to look at what happened around that time. I didn't expect anything to come from this. Mostly, I was just curiously procrastinating, but bear with me.

If in 2006, millions of people read this book or saw the movie. Data shows over 30 million copies of the book were sold, most of them in the US. Given the repeating clarity of the message in both the book and film, the optimism and uncritical message that regardless of your present circumstances, you should focus on what you want, more than on where you are.

If at no time in human history have more people read more affirmation driven positive messages, sat in cars in front of more positive bumper-stickers, made dream collages, and or listened to Podcasts from follow your bliss speakers, isn't it ironic that two years after *The Secret* was released we experienced a massive recession that by all accounts was driven by overly optimistic buyers and sellers of mortgages?

Huh! Good people of thought and conscience, if more and more people were dreaming of a better life, with the prompt and aid of this particular book, or movie, wouldn't we expect the exact opposite would have happened. How could a nation of faithful, abundant minded people fail so incontrovertibly?

Let me help. Easily.

Under what other kind of ethos swimming about could more people, economic leaders and simple working people who wanted to be homeowners, or multiple homeowners have been talked into not looking at the facts.

Look I don't blame *The Secret* for the Mortgage Crisis. I am sure its effects were minimal.

Nevertheless, I think, Mr. Sunshine over here should be proud. See, the message worked. Just like more and more people were willing to look past the facts of how their income was going to cover the mortgage, and right alongside them more and more financial leaders were apparently living above the mundane task of looking carefully enough at the balance sheet or that those now buying houses, or second houses to see that they were terrible risks.

"What's the cost?" everyone thought. Housing never goes down. Until reality caught up

More recently another group of people thought that hiring a lying failed businessman to run our country would return our country to its formerly unchallenged unique super-power status, and indirectly likely improve their own personal self-esteem.

Congrats, you win, and because you cultivated your crafty verbal snake oil like denial, we have all lost.

Judge:

Well, I did not expect that argument. Defense. The floor is yours.

Defense: (holding up the Bible)

Matthew 7:7-8 says, "Ask and it shall be given to you; seek and you shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you. For everyone that asks, receives; and all that seek, find. And to all that knock, it shall be opened.

It's interesting to note that the passage says that in order to find, we must seek. It doesn't say, "meander along aimlessly" and you shall fall into good luck and favor, does it. Nope! The Bible chooses to say, "Ask and it shall be given to you." It doesn't say, "kick back, relax, and everything will be handed to you."

You need to be an active participant in the co-creation process. Focusing on what you want brings life *within your control*. And that is key, *not on what you don't want*.

(Don't worry, I'm not going to get all Christian on you...I just think this passage says a lot. These are action verbs. You have to do something to get something—action follows thought. What you think about, positively or negatively, you attract in an invisible way—even the Bible talked about it two thousand years ago.)

Judge:

Prosecution, the floor is yours.

Prosecutor:

See it all makes sense. You just said it, and now (cynically) I get it. Because attitude is so much, and it is, it really is crucial, you encourage the belief there were not really a reality out there to check, or contradict all the spin you sell. You do this because what you sell has nothing to do with what is true. Only what works motivationally.

I don't think that you are even aware, or maybe you have forgotten that magic and scripture are not really in line with science. See, blurring quantum physics together with scripture and suggesting that they affirm one another feels good. You have accurately written the gospel we in the modern world wished were true. The only trouble is, it is not.

Interestingly, the wish that the ancient wisdoms had remarkably turned out to be in alignment with the edge of physics, and in being so validates all our supernatural wishes, does make the world feel more whole, and your ideas feel less radical. However, sadly, reality is a buzz kill to that dream. Science has never suggested that with enough mental focus, one can leap the constraints of space time and biology.

I do wish you were right. Kudos to you for trying that tact. It is motivating, but poetic platitudes about the power of intention do not bend the constraints of space, time, and matter. Positive thinking does not answer the question of how it works, because it doesn't. Even though it seems to. Positive thinking kinda works even—though it doesn't—because the hope and good feelings cultivated by the belief that all things are possible in an odd way replace the ability to soberly realize that they don't, aren't, didn't.

It is a little bit of a shell game you're playing. Look, this is science, look, this is the wisdom of the ancients, look how good you feel thinking the world works like that.

Books like *The Secret* or this similar one, *The Field*, or better, sell, because the positive thinking movement is on to the rich and important and deep truth that most people don't really want the truth, as much as they want to believe what feels good is the truth.

This is not exactly noticed because in crafting your paradigm, you replace truth with the feeling that people are on the cutting edge of new truth, and wise to be at the point of that arrow. All this muddies the capacity of your audience to evaluate clearly, or even want to.

Listening to the Prosecutor's talk, really more a sermon than an argument, I got excited. Did you? Did you sit up a little straighter in your seat? I ask because, "I did! I did because it felt so good, I could all but stand up and give a respectful "halleluiah."

God bless you, your message is more healing than mine, even if it isn't true.

Judge:

Defense? (waving him to the floor)

Defense:

To listen to the Prosecution's arguments, you would think we think we can make cars defy gravity with a flick of our nose, or begin to walk through a stone wall because we wish it. I'm sorry, but that is a straw man, isn't it. We have all felt the importance of our will power, or the lack of it, as we face a challenge.

Positive thinking may be analogous to learning to drive. Knowing how to operate the vehicle will guarantee that you can get into the driver's seat, rather than just being a passenger. It will help you get to where you want to go, though it won't guarantee a perfect driving record. Positive thinking is a vehicle—a tool to moving forward in a direction of your choice, but knowing how to drive doesn't guarantee that you won't get into fender benders (or sink into dirt in an off-road situation). With *driving*, you need to know how to operate the car, the rules of the road, and have enough coordination to safely and effectively operate your vehicle. That is a given.

Despite the way we are painted by the prosecution, positive thinkers aren't "wishful thinkers," they're realists, living in and of this world. In general, those who seek the wisdom of the mind also have a sense of personal responsibility and accountability for their actions and their circumstances. We are not dreamers. We are people who are seeking ways to transform our own instincts for doubt and despair to something more positive. I think the Jury has seen clearly who the more aggressive agent in this debate, and whose thinking is really more motivated by deep drives that they don't care to explain.

Judge: (Referring to the congregation/ the jury)

As each of you works towards your own position on this, I would like to attempt to summarize what we have heard.

In the spirit of the Defense's arguments, anyone who has watched Stephen Hawkins wheel about and with the aid of technology utter the most sophisticated things, or heard about the kid in Utah who cut off his arm that had been trapped by a boulder to survive, will likely feel their heart swell, and with it their mind expand to push the boundaries of all that attitude can do.

And yet as the Prosecutor reminds us, there is a real world and that place has real rules. Skepticism asks us to ask if the reason so many Native Americans died in the near immediate centuries after the arrival of Europeans was because they were weak in their vision of what they wanted their lives to be like, or instead that as the record shows, the millions who died after

Europeans came were killed by the silent killer viruses from "the old world." Likewise, was the holocaust a result of the Jews losing their internal compass as God's people? Not likely.

If positive thinking really mattered, you could will yourself not to die, your husband not to leave, your tooth not to ache. Sure, sages can remarkably walk over hot coals, I believe love and fierceness can be correlated with higher cancer survival rates, I believe that a great athlete can assert her will over others on a court. Mind over matter, yes, sorta, kinda, within reason.

But can someone find me someone who has willed themselves to live beyond 150 years. Someone who under scientific testing can resist gravity for any length of time. There are some things that are very hard to think around.

And yet, said another way—what and how we think really does have a magical control over us. The Defense is right, the power of thought is amazing. Over the last century, we have seen an overall erosion of the difference between a distinct observer and the observed,

Thinking positively is great, but, if, and sadly when, positive thinking is used to replace diligence, hard work, serious sober self-reflection, and simple common sense, it is destructive.

So, the Defense probably avoids accepting is that that are real downsides? Counsel certainly failed to detail where illusion separates into delusion? But neither did the Prosecutor. Might we be trapped in an action response or even a petition response cycle that is functioning on a different timeline. In God's or the universes' time?

That is not this Court's place to say.

Let's switch the travel metaphor to the sea. If our attitude is comparable to what we think is our sail, what it does not do is change is the sea. And let's not forget that.

Perhaps the goal is to think about how these obstacles can have a positive impact. They might make the road longer and the journey more arduous, but they do offer us new insight, some learning opportunities that we would otherwise not have had, and thus, we leave it to you, the Jury, to decide.

The End and Amen