

## **The Power of a Positive Attitude**

**Denis Waitley is a sports psychologist who has spent a lifetime trying to understand the difference between winners and losers. Talent and ability clearly play a role, but often, says Waitley, the difference comes down to attitude. In a talk to a San Diego community group several years ago, Waitley said this:**

**“The winner glories in the good; the whiner majors in the mediocre. ...Winners think constantly in terms of “I can” and “I will.” Losers concentrate...on...what they should have done...would have done...what they can’t do. When the mind’s self-talk is positive, performance is more likely to be successful. Most of our negative doubts and fears are imaginary or beyond our control.”**

**Someone I think we would all consider a winner is the late great golfer Arnold Palmer. A plaque on the wall in his office read:**

**If you think you are beaten, you are.  
If you think you dare not, you don’t.  
If you’d like to win but think you can’t,  
It’s almost certain you won’t.  
Life’s battles don’t always go**

**To the stronger or the faster man,  
But sooner or later, the man who wins  
Is the man who thinks he can.**

**Henry Ford put it like this: “Whether you think you can  
or you think you can’t, you’re right.”**

**There is a body of evidence that grows almost daily: we  
are what we think. What we think will determine how we  
live. Your life today is the result of your thinking  
yesterday. Your life tomorrow will be determined by  
what you think today.**

**We are what we think. Sour dispositions create not only  
sick souls but also sick bodies. Feelings of  
worthlessness, resentment and self-pity diminish us as  
persons. Self-centeredness, self-protectiveness and  
self-indulgence shrivel the soul, creating dysfunctions  
within us, distorting perception, blurring perspective,  
and preventing the healing we need.**

**The opposite is also true. Those who fill their minds  
with positive thoughts, who concentrate on the noble  
virtues that make life meaningful, set the stage for  
healing and health. We are what we think.**

**Two thousand years before psychologists were teaching this truth, St. Paul discovered its power. In our lesson from Philippians, Paul says: “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”**

**St. Paul made a choice about the things on which he would set his mind. Surely it was not an easy choice. Here was a man determined to evangelize the Greek and Roman world. After enjoying a period of great success, he was arrested and began an imprisonment that ended with his execution in Rome. Deprived of his liberty and confronted with the possibility of his death, Paul could have engaged in self-pity and fallen into severe depression. He chose instead to write letters to the churches he had founded, letters full of life and hope. Quite simply, Paul refused to let his ugly circumstances control his thought processes. He chose instead to focus on matters of truth and honor and justice and beauty and love.**

**He also urged the members of the church at Philippi to do the same. They lived in a culture permeated by injustice and impurity and brutality and increasing**

**antagonism toward Christianity. How easy it would have been to become preoccupied with the dark side of life. “Don’t do that,” Paul urged them. “Find whatever you can that is true and honorable and just and pure and lovely and gracious and think about those things.”**

**These words remind you that whatever your circumstances, there is always something good to be found in your life. A positive attitude, like a negative attitude, is something we are free to choose or not choose. The matter is entirely up to us.**

**In 1984 Greg Andersen’s doctor informed him that he had metastatic lung cancer. At most, they believed he would live a month or two. Andersen refused to accept the doctor’s diagnosis. He began searching out and interviewing people who had outlived their doctor’s predictions. Eventually, Andersen compiled what he learned into a book, 50 Essential Things to Do When the Doctor says it’s Cancer. His most compelling finding was that the people who had lived the longest had decided they had a purpose for their life, a reason to go on living. One woman had decided that she must help raise her grandchildren. A man had committed himself to help starting a local chapter of Habitat for Humanity. Most of the people who had beaten the cancer odds had**

**done so because they had both a positive attitude and a purpose in life to which they became devoted. (1)**

**This is a finding that is confirmed time and time again. A positive attitude coupled with a purpose in life will make you far healthier and happier and take you further than you can possibly imagine.**

**Many of us may know the name Stephen Hawking. He is a Cambridge University astrophysicist and perhaps the most intelligent man on earth. He has advanced the general theory of relativity farther than any person since Albert Einstein.**

**Hawking is afflicted with ALS Syndrome (Lou Gehrig's disease). It will eventually take his life. He has been confined to a wheelchair for years, where he can do little more than sit and think. He has lost even the ability to speak, and now he communicates with a computer that is operated from the tiniest movement of his fingertips. Yet this dependent of all humans has escaped invalid status.**

**Hawking said that before he became ill, he had very little interest in life. He called it a "pointless existence" resulting from sheer boredom. He drank too much and**

**did very little work. Then he learned he had ALS Syndrome and was not expected to live more than two years. The ultimate effect of that diagnosis, beyond the initial shock, was extremely positive. He claimed to have been happier after he was afflicted than before. How can that be understood? Hawking provided the answer.**

**“When one’s expectations are reduced to zero,” he said, “one really appreciates everything that one does have.” Stated another way, contentment in life is determined in part by what a person anticipates from it. To a man like Stephen Hawking who thought he would soon die quickly, everything takes on meaning: a sunrise or a walk in a park or the laughter of children. Suddenly each small pleasure becomes precious. Instead of being negative about his life, Stephen Hawking chose to be positive – and it was only then that he realized his life was worth living.**

**“Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious... if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”**

**In my sermon files I found this statement: “A vision**

**without a task is a dream; a task without a vision is drudgery; a vision and a task together is the hope of the world.” Think of that. The union of vision and task is a good organizing principle for your life, for this parish, and even for the world.**

**Let me try to illustrate this. There is a story about a man who loses the keys to his car while walking down a dark city street. Instead of retracing his steps, he confines his futile search to one small area beneath one lamppost. Asked why, he replies, “Because that’s the only place I can see.”**

**Too often our vision is too narrow, too restricting, not because we can’t see but because we don’t want to see beyond our own self-confined limits. But for those who have eyes to see, the world is full of possibilities.**

**Take, for instance, John Grisham’s novel Street Lawyer. Michael was on the fast track toward partnership in his law firm. Partnership would assure him a healthy income. Yet he gave it all up when he had a spiritual encounter with a homeless man. Michael left his firm to become a “street lawyer” to help the poor and indigent. At different times, Michael’s father, his brother, and the law firm partners met with him to tell**

**him that he was crazy. They did not understand why he would give up the promise of millions. But Michael saw something they did not – the value of offering legal assistance to poor and indigent people, even at the expense of his own career.**

**I choose to believe that there are a lot of Michaels in the world, people who are committed to the future of the planet, to the future of humanity, and to the future of the church. I choose to believe that God is working right now to bring about a new world where peace and justice will replace terrorism, discord and violence. I choose to believe that reason and reconciliation will someday replace rancor and meanness in our public discourse. I choose to believe that the Episcopal Church can still be attractive to people who seek a way of living and believing that embraces both the mind and the heart; that includes both heritage of our past and hope for our future, a church with deep roots in tradition but wings that soar into tomorrow. I choose to believe that the best days of the church are yet ahead, and that God reigns in every circumstance, even when times are tough and the way uncertain.**

**“A vision without a task is a dream; a task without vision is drudgery; a vision and a task together is the**



**hope of the world.” Where vision and task come together, hope is strengthened, energy is generated and new life comes into being.**

**Vision, quite simply, is necessary for personal life and family life and professional life just as it is for church life and global life.**

**“Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious... if anything is worthy of praise, think on these things.”**

**Many of us would like nothing better than to be able to do that, but we can't. Why? Because we are not sure in our heart of hearts whether the world in which we live is headed for death or for life. The world is convulsed by wars and rumors of war, by conflict of every kind, and even conflict in our own hearts. The mass shooting in Las Vegas, the ongoing reality of terrorism, the global warming of our planet, and the threat of nuclear Armageddon can sap the hope right out of us. The world can seem a very dark and unfriendly place right now.**

**If you are a pessimist, if you believe in your heart of hearts that everything is spiraling downward, coming**

**apart and moving toward death, and that your star is dimming with every passing day, then you will begin to think and feel and behave that way. What you believe will determine what you think and feel and live out.**

**If, on the other hand, what you believe in your heart of hearts is that the star is going to outlast the darkness that tries to absorb it, and that God's divine purpose will not be thwarted by the forces of chaos and destruction, then you will discover that in the most unpromising situations there is that star which keeps catching your attention and just won't stop twinkling.**

**I am not anxious about the future. Neither should you be. After all, Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life. Human dignity remains the bedrock principle for any civilized society. And all-inclusive love is still the best hope for the world. The reason St. Paul was not anxious was because he believed that at the heart of the universe was a loving God, who is nearer to us than we are to ourselves, and that in Jesus Christ this God had come among us to save us, redeem us and bring us home to heaven. If you believe that, you will find that in every circumstance you can be gripped by what is true and honorable and just and pure and lovely and gracious.**

**Dr. Gary Nicolosi**

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**Text – Philippians 4:4-9**

**Proper 23, A**

**1. Greg Andersen, Living Life on Purpose (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1997) 8-9**