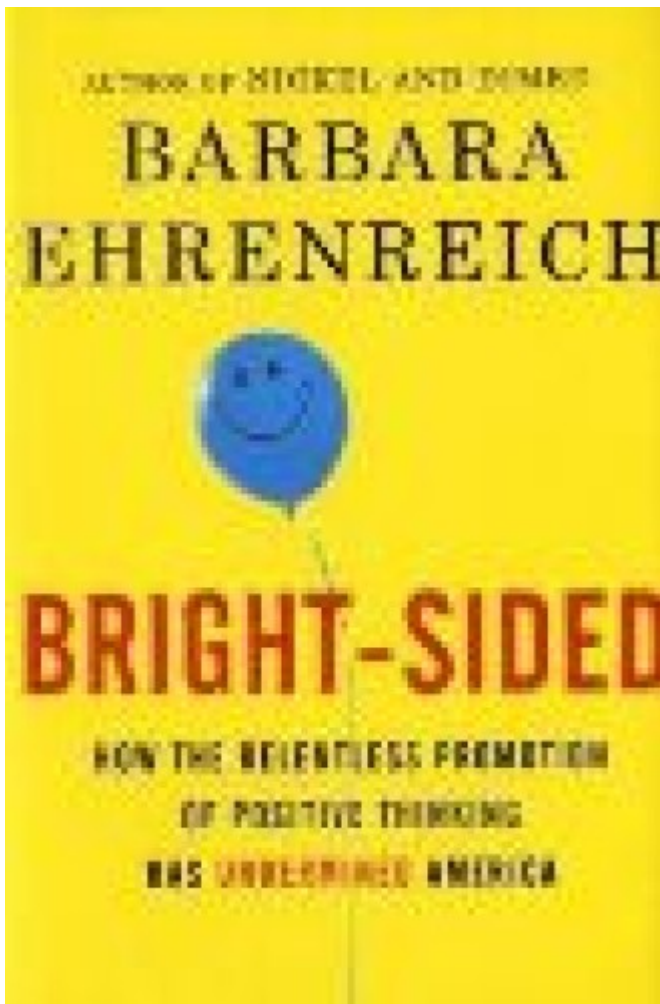


Sappy days

By [Martin B. Copenhaver](#) in the [March 9, 2010](#) issue

In Review



Bright-sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America

Barbara Ehrenreich
Metropolitan

Reading Barbara Ehrenreich is a bit like listening to a friend of mine whose mind is never more incisive, his wit never more crackling, than when he is on something of a rant. For such people, it seems, anger creates both heat and light. And so one wants to say to them, to borrow Alice Roosevelt Longworth's famous line, "If you don't have something nice to say, come sit by me."

In her most acclaimed book, *Nickel and Dimed* (2001), Ehrenreich worked as an undercover investigative journalist to examine the trials and travails of the working poor, particularly in the wake of welfare reform. In the follow-up volume, *Bait and Switch* (2005), she attempted to do something similar in regard to the beleaguered middle class. These books and others display Ehrenreich's characteristic blend of keen journalistic eye, personal experience, sarcasm and righteous (some would say self-righteous) indignation. If you hold convictions similar to hers, reading these books can give you something like the satisfaction of holding the coat of a ferocious fighter who is going after a target you would like to pummel yourself, but could not do so nearly as effectively.

In a more recent book, *Dancing in the Streets* (2007), Ehrenreich took up a most uncharacteristic topic: the history of communal expressions of joy. But even as she celebrates rituals of ecstatic revelry—such as bacchanalias, carnivals and rock concerts—her heart never seems quite in it. She does build a case for communal expressions of joy being increasingly repressed by the governing classes. Nevertheless, Ehrenreich seems unable to find enough to be angry about regarding the topic of joy to bring out her gifts as an author.

Now she is back to form with her new book, and this time it's personal. She didn't need to go undercover to start her research for *Bright-sided* because it originated with her own experience with breast cancer. The diagnosis was horrible and the treatment grueling, but what really bothered Ehrenreich was the way breast cancer patients are expected to endure enormous doses of saccharine. For instance, Ehrenreich learned that when you have breast cancer people try to sell countless items intended to cheer you up, such as popular lines of "breast cancer teddy bears" that can be dressed in various cute outfits. She reports that she had always been quite philosophical about death: "I didn't mind dying, but the idea that I should do so while clutching a teddy and with a sweet smile on my face—well, no amount of philosophy had prepared me for that." She concludes that such cuddly consolations reflect the attitude that "femininity is by its nature incompatible with full adulthood,"

adding, “certainly men diagnosed with prostate cancer do not receive gifts of Matchbox toys.”

Ehrenreich contends that this insistent cheeriness is not imposed merely by a commercial culture out for a profit or by friends and family members who don’t know a better way to respond. Those who have breast cancer often impose a severe regimen of positive thinking on each other. In articles, books and Web sites written by those with the disease, the words *victim* and *patient* are avoided almost entirely, replaced with the preferred honorific, *survivor*. And, she points out, there is no noun to describe those who succumb to the disease. If they are referred to at all, it is only obliquely as “those who have lost their battle.”

Perhaps what infuriates Ehrenreich the most is the way those who have suffered breast cancer talk about how much they have learned or otherwise gained by having the disease, sometimes going so far as to characterize cancer as a gift. When she wrote for a blog for those with breast cancer, “complaining about the debilitating effects of chemotherapy, recalcitrant insurance companies, environmental carcinogens, and, most daringly, ‘sappy pink ribbons,’” her post was met with rebukes from other victims of the disease.

Ehrenreich is probably right to conclude that the vehemence of the response she received arises from the conviction that a positive attitude is essential to recovery. After making the case that this conviction is not supported by medical studies, she goes on to assert that the promotion of positive thinking does considerable damage:

Rather than providing emotional sustenance, the sugar-coating of cancer can exact a dreadful cost. First, it requires the denial of understandable feelings of anger and fear, all of which must be buried under a cosmetic layer of cheer. This is a great convenience for health workers and even friends of the afflicted, who might prefer fake cheer to complaining, but it is not easy on the afflicted.

Nevertheless, the expectation persists that breast cancer patients must remain positive at all costs and that failure to do so can be lethal, a conviction summarized in the startling title of the chapter in which Ehrenreich recounts her experience with cancer: “Smile or Die.” She concludes, “clearly this failure to think positively can weigh on a cancer patient like a second disease.”

After refusing to don a smiley-face mask when she had cancer, Ehrenreich began to see smiley faces everywhere and to notice similarly unfortunate consequences of positive thinking in other circumstances. At motivational sessions, laid-off white-collar workers are told to see their unemployment as an “opportunity” and that the biggest factor in finding a job is to remain “positive.” The implication is that if some people remain unemployed, it is their own fault.

Ehrenreich scores some good points along the way, but in building her case, she overreaches at times. She sees that smiley face lurking in as many places as Joseph McCarthy saw communists and reacts with similar alarm. She contends that the “near universal optimism of the experts,” along with the “wildly upbeat outlook of many ordinary Americans,” is largely responsible for recent economic woes, as if greed and lack of regulatory oversight were secondary factors. She blames the “optimistic bias” of George W. Bush and others for greatly contributing to the September 11 attacks because “there was simply no ability or inclination to imagine the worst.” She goes on to assert that a “similar reckless optimism” led to the invasion of Iraq and observes that some mercilessly authoritarian regimes demand “constant optimism and cheer from their subjects.” I suppose, if given a chance, she would try to make the case that the decline of network television, the Chicago Cubs’ century-long World Series drought, and the increase (or decrease, take your pick) in the price of gold are all attributable to positive thinking.

Though there are points at which Ehrenreich takes aim at decidedly broad targets, in doing so she sometimes shows remarkable restraint. For instance, she could have had a delicious time taking apart Rhonda Byrne’s best-selling book, *The Secret*, which explains that if you visualize what you want, it will be “attracted” to you and you will receive it. Instead, for the most part Ehrenreich writes about *The Secret* in a “just the facts, ma’am” manner, presumably because the book is beyond parody. (When I first encountered *The Secret*, I had to ask a friend if it was intended as a parody of self-help books or if Byrne wrote it with a serious intent.)

At other times, however, Ehrenreich doesn’t even try to restrain herself, such as when she is describing evangelist Joel Osteen’s writing style: “Osteen’s books are easy to read, too easy—like wallowing in marshmallows.”

Ehrenreich is most effective when she writes journalistically with an eye for the telling detail, such as in this description of Joel Osteen and his wife, Victoria: “In one way, the two of them seem perfectly matched, or at least symmetrical: his mouth is

locked into the inverted triangle of his trademark smile, while her heavy dark brows stamp her face with angry tension, even when the mouth is smiling.”

Pastors who serve in quite different settings from the Osteens’ and who interpret the gospel differently than they do may take some delight in seeing them skewered so skillfully. But pastors might not want Ehrenreich to train her eye on their own churches. Increasingly, I encounter churches that have done away with corporate prayers of confession in worship because they are “too negative.” Funerals are now often approached as “celebrations of life,” where death is spoken of only in euphemisms. I have heard far too many sermons recently that substitute a glib positive message for the gospel.

Ehrenreich insists that the alternative to positive thinking is not despair; it is realism. Although she does not make this a theological argument, I think she would appreciate the distinction between positive thinking and the gospel. Positive thinking can be a lulling mixture of illusion and denial. By contrast, the gospel is based on hard realities, like sin and death, but can remain ultimately hopeful because it is also based on the reality of a God who triumphs over both. It seems to me, then, that any attempt to dismantle the shallow optimism that Ehrenreich critiques relentlessly—and, at times, effectively—is in service to the gospel.