



Living the Resurrection

Helping congregations thrive

Channeling Emotions Toward Constructive Outcomes: Theory and Practice

Bishop Tutu Danced

Neuropsychologist Bessel van der Kolk tells a story from the time he spent in South Africa during the collapse of apartheid. Those who fought against that racist system knew they would soon come to power, and many wanted their oppressors to die for their sins. Bishop Desmond Tutu had a different vision of the future. He went from town to town asking for and listening to stories of the horrors people had suffered. He heard their pain, grief, and anger. Whenever the emotions in the room became overwhelming Bishop Tutu began to sing a song of faith. Once others joined in, he would begin to sway with the music. Soon the people were singing and swaying together. With their unity and focus restored, Tutu called for another story. He repeated this process, encouraging people to share their feelings and then channeling them into a sense of unity and calm resolve. Out of Tutu's efforts, his vision for a Truth and Reconciliation process was born.ⁱ There was no bloodbath in the change of power.

Reality Check

South Africa in Apartheid is not our context, but this truth remains; the energy of emotions can be used in more than one way. Affective Neuroscience and Appreciative Inquiry share a common theory. In neuroscience, it sounds like this: *Our perception of reality is something we actively construct.*ⁱⁱ In Appreciative Inquiry it sounds like this: *We construct our reality, our world, through language.*ⁱⁱⁱ Both theories reveal the same truth: reality is not objective, we build it for ourselves. We do this as individuals and as people groups. The good news is that since we constructed it -- we can deconstruct it and then construct it in a new direction. To do this we need to understand our emotional

landscape, name our feelings, and then choose to channel them toward a constructive outcome.

Our Emotional Landscape

The dominant social culture in America is obsessed with positive thinking. Things are always either GREAT or going to get better. Barbara Ehrenreich almost exhausts this topic in her book, *Bright-sided; How Positive Thinking is Undermining America*.^{iv} Corporate America rewards upbeat positive folks and holds downbeat folks back. There is a popular theory that the universe functions under the “law of attraction” which dictates that positive thoughts cause positive things to happen, while negative thoughts bring about negative outcomes. Many motivational speakers and self-help/personal growth books offer advice on how to purge negative thoughts, so they don’t become self-fulfilling prophecies.

In contrast, human biology maintains that our brains respond more quickly to threats than to rewards. We were designed to watch out for Woolly Mammoths, Sabretooth Tigers, and anything else that might hurt us. Neuropsychologist Rick Hanson says that our brains are velcro for negative experiences and teflon for positive ones.^v It’s part of our survival instinct. Since positive experiences rarely have lethal consequences – there’s no need to remember much about them. Negative experiences get locked in.

The combination of these two realities left me wondering how we developed such a bright-sided social culture when biologically our brains’ natural bias is toward negativity. Is our positive outlook a reaction to our natural negativity? With that conundrum in mind, I asked several groups of church leaders to share what positive thinking sounds like when it is a reaction to a negative experience. Most of what they relayed sounded like this:

- “It will be alright – this COVID scare is overrated – folks need to calm down.”
- “Faith over fear.”
- “No one I know has died – it’s just the flu – we need to get back to normal.”
- “We are allowed to gather -- how come everyone isn’t back? Why are they still afraid?”

What these church leaders shared isn't just positive thinking. There's something else in the mix and it sounds a lot like one of our favorite defense mechanisms: denial. We know things are bad and we see threats everywhere, but we also consider that the situation might not be as bad as our brain is telling us. After all, we haven't seen a Wooley Mammoth or a Sabretooth Tiger – EVER. Smaller tigers, some that turned out to be paper, but not actual large tigers. We don't want to live in fear, so we let denial defend us against our negative bias and calm ourselves with comforting, positive thoughts. Perhaps the emotional math looks something like this: Negativity bias + Denial defense mechanism = Positive Thinking. We see this kind of math in our congregations' thinking about church decline. Very often congregations defend their smaller size as enhancing their ability to love one another, without understanding that they are not loving their neighbors.

Not that denial isn't an essential coping mechanism! If we didn't use it all the horrible things that continually go on in our lives and around the world would paralyze us. But maybe we are overdoing it. Since defense mechanisms aren't conscious choices, but intuitive reactions to experience, we need to consciously choose to listen and accept some bad news, rather than deny it. One way to start this process is to pay attention to what we are feeling. We can't change our sense of reality if we minimize our feelings and deny its negative implications.

The meditation below is a good place to start. It isn't the "empty your mind and focus on your breathing" type of mediation. It's a way to learn from difficult emotions and find the hope buried underneath.

Practice: Meditation

This meditation is based on one in "The Book of Joy" by Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, p. 315-319. I've kept the topics and some of the directions, but the questions are mostly mine.

"Fear, Anger, and Sadness – an Analytic Meditation"

- Sit comfortably.
- Close your eyes—or leave them open but soften your gaze -- focus inward.
- Inhale for a count of four and then exhale to a count of six. Do this two or three times.
- Let your mind recall an experience that troubled you in some way.
 - Watch your thoughts and feelings arise. Let them float through your mind like clouds.

- Settle on one thought/feeling that you want to work with today.
 - Ask yourself,
 - What story am I telling myself about this situation?
 - Is my story true?
 - How do I know that? What part is true? What might not be?
 - Is my story helpful?
- Find the question set that is most appropriate for the emotion/situation you are thinking about.
 - “For fear/anxiety”
 - What were you afraid might happen? Would you and your loved ones survive?
 - How have you gotten through similar situations in the past?
 - What could this feeling/situation teach you?
 - “For Anger/frustration”
 - What were you hoping would happen?
 - What happened instead? Why did that happen?
 - How can you move toward what you’d hoped for, in this new situation?
 - “For Sadness”
 - What did you value that no longer exists?
 - How did you feel when the thing you valued was present?
 - Where can you experience that feeling (or something close) in your life today?
- Bring yourself out of the meditation by offering what you have learned to God. Ask for guidance, and support so that your choices can “reflect your hope, not your fears.” (Nelson Mandela).

ⁱ van der Kolk, *Tutu, Mandela and PTSD*.

ⁱⁱ Mlodinow, *Emotional: How Feelings Shape Our Thinking*, 99.

ⁱⁱⁱ Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change*, 45.

^{iv} Ehrenreich, *Bright-Sided: How Positive Thinking Is Undermining America*.

^v Hanson and Mendius, *Buddha’s Brain: The Practical Neuroscience of Happiness, Love & Wisdom*.