

Accentuate the Positive

by Bill Herbst

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Unlike a fair amount of Americans, I have some savings. Not a lot — I'm not a billionaire, not even a millionaire. I am, however, a thousandaire, for the time being at least. About a quarter of my savings is in gold and silver bullion, which I bought 13 years ago, mainly as a hedge against possible financial collapse of the dollar. Yes, I know that hasn't happened, and I've never felt any particular confidence that my decision was well-founded. Had I been looking for a return on my "investment," I'd have done much better over the past decade to have put that money into an index fund. But I wasn't looking to increase my modest wealth, just protect it. I haven't traded any of my gold and silver to try to increase my holdings. Instead, I just keep my small stash of precious metals stored in allocated vaults in Zurich and London.

Part of my morning ritual each weekday is to go online and check the market prices of gold and silver. That may be silly, since I never buy or sell any regardless of price movement, but I like to track the prices anyway. The site I use for this, like most investment-oriented financial sites online, is filled with daily articles on money, markets, investing, and economics, which are written and read mostly by people who lean decidedly to the right — not necessarily Republicans, since some of them don't like Donald Trump, but certainly economic and fiscal conservatives, contrarians, or Libertarians.

On occasion, I read some of these articles, or parts of them, and comments left by readers, who are typically investors. With a frequency that I find disturbing if predictable, they espouse a hatred for the left. This is usually not simply an unstated or implied subtext, but instead a sentiment written overtly and stated boldly. These people hate the left with a passion that borders on religious fervor.

Anything that has even a hint of social redistribution of wealth downwards is anathema to them. They're all for "individual freedom," and screw anyone who believes in economic equality. Their attitude toward those of us who don't like the social darwinism of late-stage predatory capitalism isn't nuanced or thoughtful. It's a knee-jerk, broad-brush tarring with the epithets of "socialist," "communist," or "Marxist." Every time I read one of these slurs, I feel like I've been transported back to Cold War America of the 1950s — you know, *"Capitalism is good; Socialism and Communism are evil."*

Do these people not realize that America doesn't have a "free-market" system? Have they overlooked the fact that we have long embraced a kind of economic

socialism, but that it's primarily for the wealthy? Do they think we don't have a planned economy, where some corporations and even entire industries are subsidized one way or another by the government? Apparently not. At the very least, they don't seem to understand that (or care). No, they seem to believe in private ownership of everything, with no public commons. They're against all regulations and taxes, approve of externalizing every possible cost of doing business onto the public, and think that "trickle down" is God's chosen plan.

This brings me to my personal reaction (which may be just as crude, but is every bit as passionate). Those people may hate the left, but I loathe the right with every fiber of my being.

This is just one particularly personal example of the polarized animus and profound disaffection of Us-versus-Them now on display in America at every level: cultural, racial, economic, political, and even spiritual. Astrology tells me that the past decade's long Uranus-Pluto square and this new decade's current (although briefer) alignment of Jupiter, Saturn, and Pluto in late Capricorn make this unavoidable, and that's what I see all around me in real life as well. Many well-meaning people are suffering fatigue from this polarization and long to sit around the campfire with all of us singing *Kumbaya* together, but it's just not possible at this point. Not now, and not for another couple of years, at the very least. Maybe not even then.

So, what's the pathway through this conflict? Is there a road that leads to greater reunification? Some people believe that positive thinking is the antidote to fear and hate, and that persistent negativity worsens the divide. This includes many New Agers who insist on the metaphysical presumption (i.e., Laws of Manifestation) that positive attitudes create positive results, while negative attitudes lead inevitably to negative results. As a result, they insist on the remedy of positive thoughts.

These folks might as well be singing the 1944 hit pop song and title of this commentary, "*Accentuate the Positive*," (often written phonetically, as "*Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive*"), penned by Tin Pan Alley stalwarts Johnny Mercer and Harold Arlen — Mercer wrote the lyrics, while Arlen composed the music. The song was recorded initially by Mercer himself, but later by many other notable singers as well, including Bing Crosby and Ella Fitzgerald. Even today, it's still beloved as an iconic pop song from 1940s America. Below are a couple of stanzas from the lyrics:

*You've got to accentuate the positive
Eliminate the negative
Latch on to the affirmative
Don't mess with Mister In-Between*

*You've got to spread joy up to the maximum
Bring gloom down to the minimum
Have faith or pandemonium
Liable to walk upon the scene*

My thoughts about the song's sermon-like message are not straightforward. Remembering and appreciating the positive strikes me in general as a pretty good idea, especially when we're crazed with fear. What worries me is taking that message too literally and too far, to the point of denying the shadow.

First off, the whole notion of spiritual materialism bothers me (think Prosperity Consciousness as one example among many). Second, I'm extremely dubious about the possibility of humans successfully controlling the outcomes of damn near anything that occurs in our lives. We play the hands we're dealt as well as we can and roll with the punches. Third — and this is where the rubber meets the road for the theme of this commentary — the very idea that *positive = good* while *negative = bad* is way too simplistic for my tastes. That's the kind of message that's attractive to spiritual novices, most of whom — like the sorcerer's apprentice — aren't even close to ready for prime time. Too many of these devotees of the exclusively positive act like people standing directly in the path of a tornado saying, "*Isn't it a lovely day?*" No, it's not. There's a friggin' tornado bearing down on us. Not only do such people disregard their fear — the warning memo from cosmic central — they refuse to even acknowledge it.

In other words, I regard the message of the song as worth considering in principle. Taken to the extreme as a dogmatic universal law, I think it's bunk — not merely ineffective, but downright wrong-headed. A fool's paradise.

Look, I try to walk the path of universal love and compassion. I fall short often, but I give it my best shot, and in the long run I'm committed to it. And yes, I prefer to feel motivated by being *for* something rather than *against* something else. It feels better. But that's not the nature of the times we're living through. This is an age of sobering conflict within humanity, literally a fight for our lives, and knowing which side we're on (and which we're not) comes with the territory. Taking a stand both for and against is part of that. As the song says, "*Don't mess with Mister In-Between.*"

So, when I consider the song's main lyric, "*Accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative,*" my interpretation is to win the battle for what's right. Eliminating the negative means changing what's wrong. That may not be how most people interpret that song, but I think it's an assessment that fits these times, and the only one that makes sense to me.

The opposite of love isn't hate. It's indifference — not caring.

Whenever possible, and as often as I can, I try to discover what I hate and have rejected in myself (and quite probably projected onto others, whether accurate or not), and then invite it back home. That's easier said than done, though. In terms of this commentary, it's obvious as hell that I hate my own selfishness and hedonism, since I react so strongly to seeing them on display in the world. The human tendency toward self-centeredness is natural, and I still don't fully

understand how it gets perverted into selfishness. Hedonism is easier for me to get, but I still struggle with it.

The risk of too much projected hate lies, I think, in inadvertently strengthening in others the very thing you're trying to get rid of in yourself. Even after victory in a battle or a war, the danger of projected hate is that we probably haven't won nearly as much as we thought. The question becomes how to fight without hate, and I don't have an easy answer for that. We've been in that dilemma before, and it looks like we're there again.

Far and away, however, the hardest part of this inner work for me is revealing not what I hate in myself, but what I've denied, repressed, or hidden within myself. And that is a slow, sporadic, and ongoing process of discovery.