

Positive Spin

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At the beginning of this year I made a [New Year aspiration](#) to practice with "Positive Spin."

The basic premise of this practice is recognizing that there is a fundamental difference between *the facts* in any given situation and *the story* we tell ourselves about these facts. Typically, we tell ourselves very negative stories about the facts, and these stories can end up being a source of suffering. Practicing Positive Spin entails asking myself when facing a negative situation: "Given the facts I have, what's the most empowering story I could tell?"

Credit where credit is due: I was inspired to take on this practice after reading an [article by Tony Schwartz](#) where he shared about "Realistic Optimism" and how it had helped him be resilient in difficult times.

When the New Year began I was eager for an opportunity to practice, and soon enough, one came along:

That winter I was living at [Blue Cliff](#) and in my role as Wake Up Coordinator I decided to initiate a t-shirt fundraiser for the [Wake Up](#) community. The idea was simple: create t-shirts with the "Wake Up" logo on them and sell them by advertising on Facebook. After a little research I selected an online t-shirt supplier and was ready to begin. I wasn't exactly sure who I needed to receive approval from to launch the campaign (monastery's aren't necessarily designed for

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quick decision-making), so I circulated the information to a couple people who I thought would want to know. There was one last person who I thought might want to be informed before it went public, but he lived in a different location and I didn't want to wait for an email response from him, which may take weeks. Although I had some hesitancy, I decided to go ahead and launched the campaign on Facebook one Sunday afternoon. Right before going to bed I saw an email arrive from this very person who I didn't check with.

My heart sank and my mind immediately went to a negative place. I hadn't read any part of the email yet but I automatically conjured up images of him being very upset that I didn't check with him. He is someone I respect greatly and I had a crystal clear image of him shaking his head in disappointment. Maybe he would ask that I shut down the campaign? But I can't shut it down; it just started! I could see myself already creating a rebuttal in my mind.

Then I remembered Positive Spin. Hmmmm, what's a positive story I could tell myself, given the fact that I received an email from this person? Well, what if the email went something like this: *Dear Brandon, Wow. Thank you so much for initiating this project! I looked it over and it's really well done.* I laughed to myself and kept going... *You are really inspiring me to look at beneficial ways to support this community! Can you teach me how to do this in the future?* My body eased up, my mind relaxed. I took a few deep breaths and opened the email. It was a short note asking if I had considered other suppliers for the t-shirt. I answered, and that was that.

While this practice of Positive Spin helped relieve difficulty in that situation, I still harbored some reserve: was I just fooling myself by creating some made-up story...was this just my ego's way of trying to escape feeling an emotion?

After some deep looking, I resolved that this was no cheap trick. I uncovered a strong habit energy of mine of fearing people's opinions of me and creating intensely critical stories on very limited data.

What I was doing with Positive Spin was actually training my nervous system to recognize that the unknown doesn't have to be scary. When I look back at these stories, it pretty much never turns out exactly as I think. So why not imagine it working out in ways that are completely unknown to me?

I decided to experiment with pushing the envelope, and a few weeks later, another fantastic opportunity presented itself:

I was cooking breakfast one morning at Blue Cliff when an elder Vietnamese monk shouted at me from across the table. I had just put down cranberries, and he exclaimed with vigor: "Brandon! Get the raisins!"

I immediately froze and assumed the worst. *I made a mistake. I should have brought out the raisins; he probably thinks I'm incompetent. As an elder monk he is in a position of authority and if I proved incompetent enough times it wouldn't be long before he would probably be asking for me to be off the cooking rotation. If I was kicked off the rotation that wouldn't bode well for*

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when I'll be asking to extend my stay at the monastery...what if they say no and I have to leave? My fear then turned to anger and I got defensive that he was barking at me over raisins, which he could have easily gotten himself.

Then I remembered Positive Spin. What if...raisins were this monk's most precious resource, the one food that gave him energy and lifted his spirits when everything around him was crumbling? What if he pulled an all-nighter last night working on an important monastery crisis and arrived to the breakfast line totally exhausted with only enough energy to lift a single raisin? Not seeing any there he must have panicked and looked around in desperation, and upon seeing me he was filled with great relief. He had been observing me these last few months and had an unshakable confidence in my dependability in times of crisis. With his last gasp of speakable breath he uttered out a plea for raisins, knowing I would answer the call!

Ridiculous? Without a doubt. But after creating a ridiculously positive story I realized that it was just about as absurd as the negative story that kicked in automatically, and this one made me a feel a lot better!

The facts were the facts: this human had said three words to me in a tone and volume substantially different from his normal pattern of speech. Who was I to assume his intention? I went to get the raisins, I put them on the table, he smiled at me, and that was that.

After realizing how ridiculous my negative stories were, I resolved to match kind with kind, that whenever I was aware that a negative story was taking hold I would stick to the facts and combat it with the kindest most wonderful story imaginable.

Since then I've practiced with this on the subway when someone is talking loudly in a foreign language while I'm trying to meditate, I've practiced with this when I have difficulty sleeping at night, and I've practiced with this when I'm waiting for an email response from a colleague at work.

A complementary way to think about this is to ask in a given situation: "*What's more likely?*" If you have a meeting scheduled with someone and they don't show up, is it more likely that they don't care about you or is it more likely that something important came up for them? Of course if someone repeatedly misses meetings you can address it, but again, one must be careful. Perhaps something traumatic happened in their personal life and they're doing the best they can to keep up with the pace of their working life, but they're really struggling.

After practicing with this for the rest of the year, I had two major insights:

1. The key to this entire thing is the **ability to be aware of one's thoughts** and the weaving of these thoughts into stories. Once you bring a negative story to light it is not difficult to see its absurdity and conjure some creativity to transform it into a positive one. But how often are we caught in a story without being aware of it

This is where meditation can be of immense [benefit](#). Practicing mindfulness allows one to see just how ridiculous, automatic and *subtle* the thoughts are that enter in and proliferate and

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weave themselves into stories. We realize we are thinking, we smile, we let it go. We realize we are thinking, we smile, we let it go. Over and over and over and over and over again. Without such a practice, it is far too easy to live our entire lives as victims of our own unexamined habitual thinking patterns.

What Positive Spin fundamentally comes down to is **a story of Fear vs. a story of Love**. A story of [This Moment is Not Enough](#) vs. This Moment is Perfectly what it is.

Things happen (almost everyday) which are upsetting, which have us feeling bad. This is a given. But how do we respond? When something "bad" happens, we *truly* do not know what the benefit will be. Why not tell yourself something inspiring, and see what happens?