

The Prosperity Gospel

Sunday, May 18, 2014

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READING:

The poem "[Shoulders](#)," by Naomi Shihab Nye.

A man crosses the street in rain,
stepping gently, looking two times north and south,
because his son is asleep on his shoulder.

No car must splash him.
No car drive too near to his shadow.

This man carries the world's most sensitive cargo
but he's not marked.

Nowhere does his jacket say FRAGILE,
HANDLE WITH CARE.

[Dad's] ear fills up with breathing.
He hears the hum of a boy's dream
deep inside him.

We're not going to be able
to live in this world
if we're not willing to do what he's doing
with one another.

The road will only be wide.
The rain will never stop falling.

SERMON

"I never win anything!" they exclaim. I hear this from people at a raffle or a grand prize drawing, when their names are announced as the winners. "I never win anything." I've said it myself, not recalling those times when I *did* have the right number.

On the other hand, some folks make a bold claim: I AM a Winner. All it takes is having a can't-lose attitude, "a winner's consciousness," or the secret for success. The most enterprising of the Winners have packaged their secrets into bestselling books, DVD sets, workshops and lecture series.

They strike it rich. They are part of an enormous movement, the Prosperity Gospel movement.

You can find the Prosperity Gospel's guidance in Bible-speak and in non-religious but mystical sounding expressions. I'll explain both. First is the kind you can find in the packaging of Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity, like the book *Pray and Grow Rich*. My favorite example is a book entitled, *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life*. The author, Bruce Wilkinson, credits his own success and promises yours based on a few lines from the Hebrew Scriptures, or the Old Testament. Buried amid the history of Israel, in the genealogies of who begat whom, starting all the way back with Adam, this scripture says,

Jabez was honored more than his brothers; and his mother named him Jabez, saying, "Because I bore him in pain." Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, "Oh that you would bless me indeed, and enlarge my territory, and that your hand might be with me, and that you would keep me from hurt and harm!" And God granted what he asked.

Wilkinson writes that he and his wife have been reciting the words of Jabez day after day for years. They and thousands more have been blessed through this prayer. The point is this: God wants us to be successful! God certainly wants *Wilkinson* to be successful. His book was a best seller--in hardcover, paperback, audio recordings, and a leather-bound edition.

Then came its targeted marketing: In *The Prayer of Jabez for Teens*, for example, where Wilkinson introduces youth to "a God who wants to give you more than you've ever thought to ask for." There's *The Prayer of Jabez for Kids* and *The Prayer of Jabez for Women*, authored by his wife, Darlene. Not Jabez's wife, but Wilkinson's wife. You can buy a Jabez Bible cover, a *Prayer of Jabez* calendar, and the *Prayer of Jabez* Journal.

According to him, God has a checkbook of blessings for each one of us, and is just waiting for us to cash them. Surely Mr. Wilkinson is praying all the way to the bank.

I see two problems with the Prosperity Gospel industry: one is how it imagines the divine

mystery, and the other is how it portrays human life, success, and failure. The books portray God as a cheering coach and the ultimate sales manager. God is the kind of dad who will always lend you the keys to the car, if you ask him.

Though such books have done well in the Christian marketplace, their harshest critics have also been Christians. Some say the Prosperity Gospel is “Christianity without Christ.” One church held a study group on the *The Prayer of Jabez*. They had a time of testimony, inspired by the testimonies in the book. However, the pastor said people were talking only about “how God was giving them money here, [and] increased success there.” The tone of discussion was self-centered, self-congratulatory, and embarrassing to the pastor, so he called it off.¹ One Christian reader said that such books act as if God is “a genie in a brass lamp.”² Another said they treat the divine mystery not like a mystery at all, but like a holy ATM, automated teller machine.

Wilkinson says that God granted Jabez his prayers because he was a godly man. But the Bible portrays lots of godly people who do not prosper. Despite their faithfulness, they suffer loss, deadly diseases, and exile. Historian of religion Martin Marty says that, yes, there are some Bible stories of people “who prospered,” but not that many. While some parts of the Bible do speak a “loving God,” one who provides for people, the Prosperity Gospel fails to account for the troubling aspects of God in the Bible, and ignores “all of the dark sides” of life.³

In the New Testament, the disciples ask Jesus how to pray. He prescribes a different kind of prayer, one of humility: “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name. *Thy* kingdom come, *thy* will be done.... Give us this day our daily bread.” Not riches, not success. Nothing more, nothing less than one’s daily bread.

Running alongside the Prosperity Gospel is its non-Christian counterpart, the prosperity consciousness movement. It has its own corner of the publishing industry. One popular title is *Think and Grow Rich*. Books like *The Secret* claim to reveal ancient wisdom newly discovered. The book

The Law of Attraction shows the hidden laws that attract success, longevity, or prosperity into your life—even romance. Their message, their promise, is that you can envision the future you want, and bring it into being.

The origins of this movement go back to the late 1800s and early 1900s. Various versions of what is named the New Thought movement combined aspects of religion, psychology, and the American spirit of individualism. It’s an application of mystical idealism for practical benefits. Institutional versions of the New Thought movement have included Christian Science, Religious Science, the Theosophical Society, Swedenborgian Churches, and Unity Churches. My grandmother brought up her kids, including my mother, in Christian Science, which is notable for its founding by a woman. “Mind over matter,” was the motto I heard from older cousins when I was a kid. Mind over matter.

When I moved to a new city in a new state for my first job at the age of 24, I visited three churches regularly, before settling on the Unitarian Universalist one as my home. One of the others was a Unity church, part of the New Thought movement. It had a woman minister, a powerful preacher with a deep heart.

Every Sunday, when it was time for the offering, she would tell us to hold our gift of money in our hand and give our attention to it. Before the baskets came around, she would lead us in saying this affirmation: “Divine Love, through me, blesses and multiplies all that I have, all that I give, and all that I receive.”

I still remember it! It’s not a bad thing to direct our attention to the resources in our lives, even to money. Ignoring money doesn’t make us virtuous or saintly. Perhaps it could help our spirits if we were to take a little time to pay attention to what we receive, what we have and what we give away.

If I were to recite that affirmation now, I might change it to read like this:

May the spirit of gratitude bless and multiply all that we have, all that we give, and all that we receive.

For me, this is the good part of the Prosperity Consciousness movement. It reminds us to take seriously the material aspects of our lives, to focus on our needs and goals, and our abilities. The affirmations of positive thinking can get us to begin making steps forward, and make choices with our eyes wide open.

Yet all the affirmations in the world won't fix an economy—they won't change unfair tax policies, enforce regulations of the finance industry, or keep employers from cheating low-wage workers on their paychecks. A positive affirmation might help one long-term unemployed worker snag a new job, but it can't help the other 500 who applied for the same position. Prosperity thinking can't restore that worker's wage to the level she made before her job was outsourced or sent overseas.

Years ago, critic Donald Meyer said that New Thought movements reflect an American "penchant for ignoring the brute realities" of our economic system.⁴ This is my second point about the dangers of the Prosperity Gospel movement. While preaching unity with divine wisdom, it can distract us from our unity with others, and from our solidarity with one another. It shields from criticism the forces that favor only a few of us. At this time, for example, the top one percent of people in this country have more wealth now than the other 90 percent combined.

Can you *think yourself* rich? Strong motivation is important, but in the last 30 years, fewer people have even been able to WORK themselves rich. Columbia University economist Joseph Stiglitz says: "Equality of opportunity ... has always been a cherished American ideal." Yet, he says, the data show that our growing inequality is paired with a lack of opportunity to get ahead. Stiglitz notes that among the industrialized countries, the United States "has become the ... country not only with the highest level of inequality, but one of those with the least equality of opportunity."⁵

The dirty down side of the Prosperity Gospel is that if you direct your passions to positive thinking and you still can't keep your head above water, then it must be your fault. If you follow the

formulas, pray the prayers, and always keep a smile on your face—and you find yourself only deeper in the hole, with medical bills, student loan payments, credit card debt, and a downsized job—perhaps you're not praying sincerely or thinking positively enough. Bad fortune is your fault; good luck is a sign of your goodness.

The Reverend Lillian Daniel, a Congregational pastor, says when we see pain and suffering in this world, "I think ... rather than feeling lucky, God wants us to get angry and [to] want to do something about it. The civil rights movement didn't happen because people felt lucky. The hungry don't get fed, the homeless don't get sheltered, and the world doesn't change because people who are doing okay feel lucky. We need more," she says.

In the poem "Shoulders," Naomi Shihab Nye likens our common fate to that of a child and parent crossing a wide road in a storm, together. The storms of life will come. We dare not cross the roadway alone, without care and support. From time to time, she says, we have to be willing to carry each other.

The spiritual perspective of unity with others leads to an awareness of suffering and unfairness. It gives us an urge to do what we can to change things, even when all we can do is to bear witness, be present in the pain of another, or protest an unjust situation.

It's not a matter of charity, but of connection. Whether we receive help or give it, speak out for fair laws or join hands in community, we realize our dependence is mutual and inter-related. So much of our individual success rests on the shoulders of so many others, those whose faces we know, those whose names we remember, and those whom we'll never know.

Those involved in the Civil Rights Movement worked in hope for a shared prosperity, for success to be available to everyone, through freedom and equality of opportunity. This summer marks the 50th anniversary of the Mississippi Freedom Summer. Black and white activists worked together to register African Americans to vote and to organize a Freedom School to do civil

rights training. They did this risky work not for themselves alone, but out of a passion for a better country for every person. In June of 1964, Mississippi Klansmen attacked a rural black church and burned it. They did this to lure civil rights workers out for an investigation. One black man and two white men got in a car and headed that way. They were James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, all in their early 20s. On the 21st of June, they disappeared. Their bodies were found 44 days later. Among those indicted for the killings were police officers and the county sheriff.

Robert Reich is a professor of public policy at UC Berkeley and a critic of the growing income and wealth gaps of our system and the erosion of democracy. One of his books is called: *Beyond Outrage: What has gone wrong with our economy and our democracy, and how to fix it*. In addition, he's featured in a documentary film from last year, "Inequality for All." Personally he's very successful, prosperous even. Yet he keeps working for social change.

The movie tends to glorify Reich as a celebrity activist, and it has fun with his height, 4 feet, 11 inches. But the movie also tells why he feels such passion for building a fair society. [In another interview] speaking of his childhood, Reich says: "Because I was always short for my age, I relied on a couple of bigger boys to be my protectors from the bullies. And one of my protectors, named Michael Schwerner, about 6, 7

years older than I, in the summer of '64, was brutally murdered by the real bullies, in Mississippi, including the Sheriff of Neshoba County. When one of my protectors from my little bullies was killed by the real bullies, I think something just kind of shifted in my brain. I thought, 'I've gotta do something. I mean, I have to make sure, that in whatever way I can, that people have some degree of protection — that the vulnerable people, of which there are many, don't suffer the economic bullies.'"

Reich carries on the work, because he carries the memory of someone who helped him bear the unfair storms of life. He is not alone, but carried on the shoulders of another.

Hope, ambition, and a passion for personal goals are natural human traits. When life is challenging, ambition and hope can keep us going.

But knowing that we are not alone can keep us going too. Shared ambitions and shared hopes give strength. When times are hard, having a bigger picture can save us from compounding our hardship with shame, or looking with easy judgment on the plight of others. When life is unfair, the support of others can restore a sense of dignity and worth in us.

May we be grateful always for the strength of the shoulders which have carried us along. So may we live.

Amen.

¹ in customer reviews of the book on www.amazon.com

² Ibid.

³ Quoted in "The Prosperity Gospel and the Financial Crisis," by Martin E. Marty, in Sightings, an online journal, December 7, 2009. Found at divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/prosperity-gospel-and-financial-crisis---martin-e-marty

⁴ Quoted in "Foreword," by Robert C. Fuller, in *The History of New Thought: From Mind Cure to Positive Thinking and the Prosperity Gospel*, by John S. Haller, Jr. West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation Press. Found at www.amazon.com/History-New-Thought-Prosperity-Swedenborg/dp/0877853487/ref=sr_1_9?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1400266733&sr=1-9&keywords=prosperity+gospel-reader_B00BA9STIK

⁵ "It's Now the Canadian Dream," by Nicholas Kristof, *New York Times*, May 14, 2014. Found at www.nytimes.com/2014/05/15/opinion/kristof-its-now-the-canadian-dream.html?_r=0