

Laurie Penny | Life-Hacks of the Poor and Aimless

Late capitalism is like your love life: it looks a lot less bleak through an Instagram filter. The slow collapse of the social contract is the backdrop for a modern mania for clean eating, healthy living, personal productivity, and “radical self-love”—the insistence that, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, we can achieve a meaningful existence by maintaining a positive outlook, following our bliss, and doing a few hamstring stretches as the planet burns. The more frightening the economic outlook and the more floodwaters rise, the more the public conversation is turning toward individual fulfillment as if in a desperate attempt to make us feel like we still have some control over our lives.

Coca-Cola encourages us to “choose happiness.” Politicians take time out from building careers in the debris of democracy to remind us of the importance of regular exercise. Lifestyle bloggers insist to hundreds of thousands of followers that freedom looks like a white woman practicing yoga alone on a beach. One such image (on the @selflovemantras Instagram) informs us that “the deeper the self love, the richer you are.” That’s a charming sentiment, but landlords are not currently collecting rent in self-love.

Can all this positive thinking be actively harmful? Carl Cederström and André Spicer, authors of *The Wellness Syndrome*, certainly think so, arguing that obsessive ritualization of self-care comes at the expense of collective engagement, collapsing every social problem into a personal quest for the good life. “Wellness,” they declare, “has become an ideology.”

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There is an obvious political dimension to the claim that wellbeing, with the right attitude, can be produced spontaneously. Months after being elected leader of the most right-wing government in recent British history, yogurt-featured erstwhile PR man David Cameron launched an ill-fated “happiness agenda.” The scheme may have been better received if the former prime minister were not simultaneously engaged in decimating health care, welfare, and higher education—the very social structures that make life manageable for ordinary British people. As part of Cameron’s changes to the welfare system, unemployment was rebranded as a psychological disorder. According to a [study](#) in the *Medical Humanities* journal, in the teeth of the longest and deepest recession in living memory, the jobless were encouraged to treat their “psychological resistance” to work by way of obligatory courses that encouraged them to adopt a jollier attitude toward their own immiseration. They were harangued with motivational text messages telling them to “smile at life” and that “success is the only option.”

This mode of coercion has been adopted by employers, too, as Cederström and Spicer note. Zero-hour-contract laborers in an Amazon warehouse, “although they are in a precarious situation . . . are required to hide these feelings and project a confident, upbeat, employable self.” All of which begs the question: Who exactly are we being well for?

The wellbeing ideology is a symptom of a broader political disease. The rigors of both work and worklessness, the colonization of every public space by private money, the precarity of daily living, and the growing impossibility of building any sort of community maroon each of us in our lonely struggle to

survive. We are supposed to believe that we can only work to improve our lives on that same individual level. [Chris Maisano concludes that](#) while “the appeal of individualistic and therapeutic approaches to the problems of our time is not difficult to apprehend . . . it is only through the creation of solidarities that rebuild confidence in our collective capacity to change the world that their grip can be broken.”

The isolating ideology of wellness works against this sort of social change in two important ways. First, it persuades all us that if we are sick, sad, and exhausted, the problem isn't one of economics. There is no structural imbalance, according to this view—there is only individual maladaptation, requiring an individual response. The lexicon of abuse and gas-lighting is appropriate here: if you are miserable or angry because your life is a constant struggle against privation or prejudice, the problem is always and only with you. Society is not mad, or messed up: you are.

Secondly, it prevents us from even considering a broader, more collective reaction to the crises of work, poverty, and injustice. That's the logic exposed by personal productivity gurus like Mark Fritz, who tells us, in *The Truth About Getting Things Done*, that:

The biggest barrier to achieving the success you have defined for your life is never anyone else or the circumstances you encounter. Your biggest barrier is almost always *you*. . . . Dr Maxwell Maltz, author of *Psycho-Cybernetics* [ETA: sounds legit to me!], put it best when he said, “Within you right now is the power to do things you never dreamed possible. This power becomes available to you as soon as you can change your beliefs.

This, of course, is a cyclopean lie—but it's a seductive one nonetheless. It would be nice to believe that all it takes to change your life is to repeat some affirmations and buy a planner, just as it was once comforting for many of us

to trust that the hardships of this plane of existence would be rewarded by an eternity of bliss in heaven. There is a reason that the rituals of wellbeing and self-care are followed with the precision of a cult (do this and you will be saved; do this and you will be safe): It is a practice of faith. It's worth remembering that Marx's description of religion as the opiate of the masses is often misinterpreted—opium, at the time when Marx was writing, was not just known as an addictive drug, but as a painkiller, a solace when the work of survival became unbearable.

With the language of self-care and wellbeing almost entirely colonized by the political right, it is not surprising that progressives, liberals, and left-wing groups have begun to fetishize a species of abject hopelessness. Positive thinking has become deeply unfashionable. The American punk kids I know describe it, disparagingly, as “posi.” The British ones, of course, describe it as “American.” Whatever you call it, it feels a lot like giving in.

In a scintillating essay at *Open Democracy*, activist [Chloe King writes](#) that

changing your attitude is not going to change or help to dismantle structural injustice and a failed and unsustainable economic model which serves only the elite rich of this world, and exploits the rest of us, particularly the working class and those living in poverty. As far as I am concerned positive thinking will fucking ruin your life. “Just think positive” is a precursor to “it gets better,” and the hard reality is it is only going to get much, much worse for our most vulnerable.

There is truth here. What is also true, however, is that the young people I know who are, in general, the very worst at taking basic care of themselves as individuals—the people whose problem is not that they don't drink enough asparagus water, but that they don't drink enough of anything that isn't day-old wine from a foil bag—are those who went through the student and Occupy

uprisings of 2010–2012 and experienced, briefly, what it meant to live a different sort of life. What it meant to be part of a community with common goals of which mutual aid and support were not the least. What it meant to experience that sudden, brief respite from individual striving and build a prefigurative society together. The lonely work of taking basic care of yourself as you wait for the world to change is a poor substitute. When you're washed up and burned out from putting your body on the line to fight the state, it's especially galling to be told to share a smile and eat more whole grains.

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When modernity teaches us to loathe ourselves and then sells us quick fixes for despair, we can be forgiven for balking at the cash register. Anxious millennials now seem to have a choice between desperate narcissism and crushing misery. Which is better? The question is not rhetorical. On the one hand, Instagram happiness gurus make me want to drown myself in a kale smoothie. On the other, I'm sick and tired of seeing the most brilliant people I know, the fighters and artists and mad radical thinkers whose lives' work might actually improve the world, treat themselves and each other in ludicrously awful ways with the excuse, implicit or explicit, that any other approach to life is counterrevolutionary.

Some of the left critique of self-care as a neoliberal conspiracy has to do with dismissing the work that women and queer people do to survive. "I have heard feminism be dismissed as a form of self-indulgence," writes Professor Sara Ahmed of Goldsmiths, University of London. So have I. I've heard men on the left write off anti-sexist, anti-racist politics as hopelessly

individualistic, whilst also refusing to do the basic work of self-care and mutual care that keeps hope alive and health possible, because that work is women's work, undignified in comparison to watching your life fall apart while you wait for the revolution or for some girl to pick up the pieces, whichever comes first.

The left has a special talent for counterproductive, theory-enabled wallowing. "Neoliberalism sweeps up too much when all forms of self-care become symptoms of neoliberalism," writes Ahmed. "When feminist, queer, and anti-racist work that involves sharing our feelings, our hurt and grief, recognizing that power gets right to the bone, is called neoliberalism, we have to hear what is not being heard. . . . A world against you can be experienced as your body turning against you. You might be worn down, worn out, by what you are required to take in."

It is at this point that I confess to you that I've been doing yoga for two years and it's changed my life to an extent that I almost resent. I have trained myself, through dedicated practice on and off the mat, to find enough inner strength not to burst out laughing when the instructor ends the class by declaring "let the light in me honor the light in you." The instructor is a very nice person who smiles all the time like a drunk kindergarten teacher and could probably kill me with her abs alone, so I have refrained from informing her that the light in me is sometimes a government building on fire.

Downward-facing dog is not a radical position. Nonetheless, that particular asana is among a few small concessions I make to self-care while I wait for the end of patriarchy and the destruction of the money system. Overpriced charcoal health drinks aren't good for liberating anything except your wallet and your colon in short succession, but walks in the park are free, so I occasionally go out in the sunshine and try to soak up a bit of Vitamin D without worrying about skin cancer, melting ice-caps, and millions of people

drowning in Bangladesh. I no longer subsist entirely on chicken nuggets, cigarettes, and spite. I sometimes take a day off, because it became apparent that the revolution was not being driven any faster by my being sick and sad all the time. Late Capitalism is as good an excuse of any for not getting out of bed, but huddling under the covers worrying about Donald Trump is a very inefficient way of sticking it to the man.

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The problem with self-love as we currently understand it is in our view of love itself, defined, too simply and too often, as an extraordinary feeling that we respond to with hearts and flowers and fantasy, ritual consumption and affectless passion. Modernity would have us mooning after ourselves like heartsick, slightly creepy teenagers, taking selfies and telling ourselves how special and perfect we are. This is not real self-love, no more than a catcaller loves the woman whose backside he's loudly admiring in the street.

The harder, duller work of self-care is about the everyday, impossible effort of getting up and getting through your life in a world that would prefer you cowed and compliant. A world whose abusive logic wants you to see no structural problems, but only problems with yourself, or with those more marginalized and vulnerable than you are. Real love, the kind that soothes and lasts, is not a feeling, but a verb, an action. It's about what you do for another person over the course of days and weeks and years, the work put in to care and cathexis. That's the kind of love we're terribly bad at giving ourselves, especially on the left.

The broader left could learn a great deal from the queer community, which has long taken the attitude that caring for oneself and one's friends in a world of prejudice is not an optional part of the struggle—in many ways, it is the struggle. Writer and trans icon Kate Bornstein's rule number one is "Do whatever it takes to make your life more worth living. Just don't be mean." It's more than likely that one of the reasons that the trans and queer communities continue to make such gains in culture, despite a violent backlash, is the broad recognition that self-care, mutual aid, and gentle support can be tools of resistance, too. After the Orlando massacre, LGBTQ people across the world started posting selfies under the hashtag #queerselflove. In the midst of the horror, the public mourning, and the fear, queer people of all ages and backgrounds across the world engaged in some light-hearted celebration of ourselves, of one another.

The ideology of wellbeing may be exploitative, and the tendency of the left to fetishize despair is understandable, but it is not acceptable—and if we waste energy hating ourselves, nothing's ever going to change. If hope is too hard to manage, the least we can do is take basic care of ourselves. On my greyest days, I remind myself of the words of the poet and activist Audre Lorde, who knew a thing or two about survival in an inhuman world, and wrote that self care "is not self-indulgence—it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare."