

POSITIVE PRINCIPLE

Nobody has Nothing

“Donnez moi cent francs!” is a common phrase heard on the streets of Kinshasa. What is really being said is, “I have no money. Pity me.” I hear a similar response when I meet with impoverished communities to discuss their challenges, “N'y a pas les moyens.” In other words, “We have no means. Pity us.”

This phrase reflects a learned response. Children, whether poor or rich, are eager to put their ideas into action. Once the idea-light bulb goes on, they scramble for materials and invite friends to join them. Because it is done with their own creative effort, they take pride in what they accomplish, no matter how simple it may be. Kids begin with a hopeful mindset, “I can do this somehow.”

In impoverished neighbourhoods, this childlike innate drive fades quickly. In its place, a subtle message seeps into the community. “You aren’t good enough. You can’t do it. Why bother even starting?” This creates a barrier between having an idea and thinking it is good enough to act on. If a person believes that being poor also means a lack of ability and intelligence, then their whole world will be viewed through the same negative lens. This is called the ‘lens of poverty.’

The negative voice that ricochets through an impoverished community reinforces feelings of failure and low social standing, shaping a worldview marred by these feelings. They are led to accept their shortcomings and seek handouts. The true challenge is helping people confront and expose the lies in their inner dialogue.

I met ‘John’ on a Yamaha 125 motorbike, which he used to guide me to a remote village clinic. On our way back, the motorbike broke down, forcing us to push it through sandy grasslands for hours. Being stuck in the middle of nowhere, with our shared goal of getting home, led to some interesting conversations.

John had a college degree in agriculture, and his passion was to build a network of farmers he could assist by providing technical advice and advocating for them. I asked him why he hadn’t started yet, and he told me he did not have the means. I admired his passion and, as a friend, encouraged him to begin despite the barriers. Several months later, when I visited, he was eager to share what he had

started. Through simply walking and talking with local farmers, he had created a network of twenty farmers he visited regularly.

I had a similar experience with Congolese colleagues, ‘Dave’ and ‘Ben’, whom I got to know while they were in medical school. About a year after graduating, Dave invited me to visit one of the poorest neighbourhoods in Kinshasa, where he and Ben had established a clinic. I asked why he hadn’t mentioned the clinic to me earlier, especially because we saw each other regularly. He replied, “I didn’t want to tell you because I wanted to prove to myself I could do this.”

Over the years, John, Dave and Ben have worked positively to influence their communities. They recognize the negative inner dialogue that spreads lies and actively move against it with a ‘can-do’ spirit. This mindset is the starting point for the most fundamental element of development in an impoverished community: the Positive Principle.

The Positive Principle begins by asking: Who am I? Every human has worth that transcends their economic status or skill set. By investing time to simply listen to John, I communicated respect for his dreams. I valued Dave through our casual visits, allowing us to get to know each other as friends. The common element in both stories is the space we created for each other to share our passions and hopes for the future. This environment was built on mutual respect, as we recognized each other’s intrinsic value.

In early creation myths, such as those of the Sumerians around 4500 BCE, humanity was believed to have been created as slaves and, therefore, expendable. In contrast, Genesis introduces a subtle twist by asserting that all humans have intrinsic value. A unique element of this narrative is the idea that humans were created as reflections of God and, as such, possess great worth. The Positive Principle leans into the Genesis narrative, insisting, “You’re not a slave! You’re a reflection of God, the creator of the universe!”

The Judeo-Christian narrative culminates in Jesus, whose sacrifice, according to early church writers, signifies the ultimate demonstration of human value. From God’s perspective, humans—along with their dreams and passions—hold innate worth. This understanding forms the basis of the Positive Principle: you did not earn your value; you had intrinsic worth the day you were born.

The Positive Principle then asks: What is my purpose? Some argue that our intelligence distinguishes us from animals, but it is our quest for purpose that truly sets us apart. The Positive Principle acknowledges that humans are innately curious. We reflect the grand creator through our desire to discover and our dreams to create.

The Positive Principle echoes the Genesis story, asserting that there is indeed a purpose to your existence: “Your purpose is to reflect God!” This is not about religious ritual; it is simply about acting upon our desires and dreams. The world around us is our temple. If we are reflections of God, then our desire to discover and create is our purpose. By doing so, we reflect God in community, revealing the falsehoods of insignificance and restoring true community.

Finally, the Positive Principle asserts that if you truly have value and if your purpose is to reflect God, then you possess the tools and resources needed for restoration, no matter how simple they may seem. You might see your cup as half-empty, but the hope in the Judeo-Christian story is that it is actually half-full. Begin by looking at your own hands.

On one of the outer columns of the Temple of Apollo in Delphi, the inscription read, “Know Thyself.” In other words, if you are seeking restorative change in your family or community, start by looking inward. Who are you? What is your purpose? What do you have in your hand? This encapsulates the Positive Principle well. It isn’t about your problems or barriers; it’s about recognizing the value of who you are, what you already have, and what you are currently doing. It is that little something in your hand that carries the seed of community transformation.

Summary statement:

Respecting the intrinsic value of every person, a community recognizes the riches it possesses and can put to use for a unified purpose, realizing tangible change.

Discussion

1. Reflect on the concept of inner dialogue. How have your experiences shaped your inner dialogue? What barriers does your inner dialogue create for you? What are the positive influences from your background affecting your inner dialogue?
2. At times, the inner dialogue is a confusing chorus of voices. Distinguishing between falsehoods and truth is no small feat. The challenge lies in finding a starting point—the one thing you can rely on, even if it takes a step of faith. What do you use as a starting point to ground yourself?

3. Reflect on the concept of image bearer. Apply the questions from the Biblical narrative to yourself and your community. In what ways do you reflect God within your community? How is God reflected in your community?
4. If you possess intrinsic value, it follows that your passions and visions should be explored. What are you passionate about? What do you enjoy? What visions do you have for your community? Create a short-term list for this year and a long-term list for five years from now.
5. Make a list of what's in your hand. What assets do you bring to your community? What assets does your community already possess?