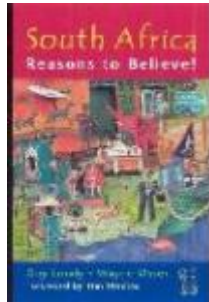


South Africa:

Reasons to Believe!

By Guy Lundy and Wayne Visser (Aardvark Press, 2003)



~ 9 MAKING MAGIC HAPPEN ~

In the eyes of the beholder

Magic happens when we change our perception. There is magic all around us, if we just have the eyes to see it. When something disappears, like apartheid, that's magic; when something changes, like a racist person's attitude, that's magic; when someone pulls a rabbit out of a hat, like Mark Shuttleworth's Afronaut expedition, that's magic; and when someone makes a difference in another's life, like caring for an AIDS orphan, that's magic. We believe that what makes magic happen is a healthy sprinkling of positive attitude. This is not the same as going into denial.

For us, there are two basic ingredients to being positive. The first is to recognise that our pessimistic views are skewed by unbalanced media reporting. We have to remember that our mental state is determined by what we focus on. It's not that the media is lying; it's just that they are painting a picture of the world and South Africa that is highly selective. They are like manic-depressive artists patching together a collage, using bits and pieces of real events, most of which happen to be dark or disturbing. So, we need to start exposing ourselves to more of the positive news stories, in order to get a more balanced perspective of what is going on around us.

The second ingredient to being positive is to recognise that our attitude influences the world around us, for better or worse. The neutral scientist in the white coat is a myth – he/she does not exist. The observer and the observed are not separate; they are always inextricably linked. Everything we think, or believe, or value, changes the world around us. It even affects our physical health. Attitudes are like lenses that colour what we see. But they are also like yeast in bread – they have a very real, visible effect on the outcome of whatever we are trying to make work, whether it is a family, a business, or even a nation.

This is not just a philosophical point. We believe that optimism comes from actively engaging with life's challenges. We know that living in South Africa is no pleasure boat cruise for anyone – neither the rich executive living in paranoid fear of being hijacked, nor the street vendor struggling to get food on the table each day. Living in South Africa is a challenge. But that fact in itself creates a set of amazing opportunities, as internationally renowned psychiatrist Victor Frankl testifies.

Frankl endured unspeakable horror in the Nazi death camps, yet emerged with a deep understanding of human behaviour, which he translated into a technique called logotherapy. At its core is the belief that humans' primary motivational force is their search for meaning. He summarises this philosophy in his remarkable autobiographical book, *Man's Search for Meaning*. Meaning, he says, can be found anywhere, but is most often associated with overcoming hardships or pursuing a dream. In other words, meaning is created when we respond to challenges or engage with a vision of a better future.

Frankl's ideas may help to explain the existential crisis being experienced by many people caught up in the rat-race of Western culture. Ironically, once you no longer have to worry about material comforts, you begin to wonder whether your life is really worthwhile – are you making a difference in the world? Well, there is certainly no shortage of challenges in South Africa, and the vision of South Africa as an example for the world to learn from is a compelling dream to hold onto. Could it be that it is easier to live a meaning-filled life in South Africa than anywhere else in the world?

Closely tied to magic and dreams is the notion of myths, which should not be confused with the contemporary use of the word to mean untruths. Joseph Campbell, perhaps the greatest scholar ever on mythology, suggests that "it has always been the prime function of mythology and rite to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward, in counteraction to those other constant human fantasies that tend to tie it back." Like Frankl, Campbell's theories rest on psychiatrist Carl Jung's notion of archetypes, or patterns of collective consciousness, which are stories that we as humans constantly tap into and identify with. There are numerous myths that South Africans can use to create our positive future – the triumph of good over evil, the poor boy's rise from rags to riches, or the genius heretic that revolutionises the world.

The science of optimism

Pessimism is a self-fulfilling prophecy, as is being positive. Martin Seligman, author of *Learned Optimism*, talks about how people's response to the world is determined largely by the way they explain things to themselves. Optimists always see a positive spin-off for themselves, no matter what the situation is, while pessimists have a self-explanatory style that casts a shadow over everything. As Lipkin and Lascaris put it in *Fire & Water*, "Truly effective people do not allow what is going on around them to dictate their inner state. ... They carry their own weather within because they know that everything that happens to them has value."

Optimism is an acquired skill. It is not about denial, or bluffing yourself. It is about being more effective in life. Typically, those who are actively involved in doing something about the problems around them are more optimistic. This is ironic, since they probably know more than most how bad things really are. In South Africa, this is often the case with people doing work in communities for churches, NGOs and other organisations. The difference is that they also know how much constructive work is being done to tackle the issues. They are aware of all the small success stories that never make the news headlines. They have personal evidence that keeping a positive attitude and engaging in constructive action, especially in the direst circumstances, helps to turn situations around.

Those that have learned to turn every circumstance into a potential opportunity – to grow personally, to make a difference – have become our most successful and inspiring leaders, in every field. This is not a secret. There are whole libraries of books dedicated to the theme of becoming more effective by realising the power of our perceptions and attitudes, combined with constructive action, from Norman Vincent Peale's classic, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, to numerous others: *Pray and Grow Rich* (Richard Gaylord Briley), *The Dynamic Laws of Prosperity* (Catherine Ponder), *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective*

People (Stephen Covey), *Awaken the Giant Within* (Antony Robbins), and *The Magic of Thinking Big* (David Schwartz), to mention but a few.

If that all sounds a bit too academic though, just think of sport. How often haven't we shouted at our sports heroes on the television to keep their chins up? Athletes, perhaps more than most, know the importance of positive attitude. They hire sports psychologists to coach them on how to visualise the outcome they desire, how to practice their ideal performances mentally, how to rebound from set-backs, to stay focused on the goal and never give up, no matter how impossible the task may seem at the time.

In addition to visualisation, others propose the use of positive affirmations – statements of intent or achievement that are repeated frequently, perhaps by chanting them or writing them down daily. And in case you think that sounds a bit too much like New Age mumbo jumbo, there are some pretty successful people who claim it works, like Scott Adams, creator of the international run-away hit cartoon, *Dilbert*. What are your positive affirmations for the country and for your role in it? Why not trying writing down a few right now – it won't cost you anything, or harm anyone, and it may just help to change things for the better.

Lipkin and Lascaris apply all this thinking on the science of optimism to South Africa's recent history and suggest three key actions: (1) See things the way they are – take stock of both the positive and negative attributes of your specific situation in this country. (2) See things the way they can be – don't forecast, backcast. Work back from the future. Look beyond the moment to what can be. And (3) make things the way they can be – Take action. Realise that you have the power to make a difference, because if not you, then who?

The lesson of the starfish

Have you heard the story of the starfish? An old man walking along a beach that was strewn with beached starfish came across a woman who was gently throwing them back into the sea. He asked her why she was doing this, since the beach was enormous and she could not possibly return all of them to the sea before they died. "You cannot possibly make a difference," he said. But as she gently threw another starfish into the water she replied, "It made a difference for that one."

This parable, adapted from the story "The Star Thrower" by Loren Eiseley, was the catalyst for a group of South Africans living in London who felt that something must be done to help the thousands of children that are being orphaned or affected by the AIDS pandemic that is sweeping our country. Starting as no more than an idea by a group of young friends who believed that they could make a difference by way of small events like hosting dinners to raise money for organisations directly involved in caring for and helping the children, the charity has grown beyond their wildest expectations.

Today the Starfish Charity is a registered charity in England and Wales, with offices and operations in South Africa and supporters all over the world, having raised hundreds of thousands of rands from thousands of individuals. One of those individuals is Mark Fish, the South African footballer playing professionally in England, who donated 10,000 pounds to the charity and challenged other South African sportspeople based overseas to better that amount. All donations made to the charity are channelled directly to the supported beneficiaries, while operating costs are funded separately by core sponsors. The Starfish Charity is an inspiring example of how doing something, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, can make a difference, and even create a ripple effect of unexpected positive consequences. To find out more, visit <http://www.starfishcharity.org>.

Another example of a project that is trying to make a big difference by way of small actions is that of Phisa. The acronym stands for 'Peace here in South Africa', but it is also a Xhosa word which means 'to give freely and expect nothing in return'. A group of people of any culture, income level, or political affiliation meets once a month to discuss how they can make a small, positive difference to life in South Africa. Once they have introduced themselves and shared their hopes and dreams for the country, they decide as a group on one area of concern to be addressed that month, for example unemployment. Then they decide on one concrete action that each member of the group must undertake to try to make a difference to this particular problem, for example hiring someone to do something around your house. And finally, they go out into the world and carry out that agreed action, for example creating a job by getting someone to cut the grass. A very small action to address a very big problem, but the idea is simply that small actions can set off a chain of progressively bigger reactions, rather like the story of the butterfly flapping its wings in China and eventually causing a tornado in America. The project is open to anyone who wishes to make a positive difference in South Africa. To find out more you can send an email to si.ekin@intekom.co.za.

Other ways to make magic happen

Apart from getting involved in an organisation like the Starfish charity or Phisa, there are many things that you as an individual can do to make South Africa a positive place. Here is a simple list of things to think about and do:

Buy local

Proudly South African exists to encourage people here and overseas to buy quality South African products that are made by companies who care about their employees and the environment. The Proudly South African logo is the easiest way to recognise companies that meet these criteria. Supporting this initiative by buying products displaying the Proudly South African logo can only do the local economy good by creating local demand for local goods that use local labour. Look out for the logo and buy local before you buy a comparative imported item.

Sell South Africa

Until now we have allowed foreigners to make up their own minds about South Africa, and they have had to rely on their media for information. Their media has relied on our own, very negative, media to set the tone, and as a result the overarching issues under the spotlight have been those of crime, HIV/AIDS or Zimbabwe. It is up to us ordinary South Africans to change these perceptions. Whether you are a tourist or businessperson travelling overseas or the owner of a B&B or even someone sitting at a bar, sell South Africa to foreigners at every opportunity you get. Why? Because by encouraging foreigners to come here or to come back here, you are encouraging them to spend their money here and you are thereby helping to make a better country for all of us.

And if you come across other South Africans running your country down, don't just sit by. Challenge them and work on undoing the untold damage that they are causing to the country's image and thus to themselves and their families and friends. Point out that there are many good things about the country, and if you need any more positive stories to quote in addition to the ones we have already given you here, visit the South African portal website, <http://www.southafrica.info>. In fact, make it your homepage.

Embrace your Africanness

Recognise that you are African and enjoy it. Take note of the things that make Africa unique, especially those quirky little things like cows grazing on the grass next to the six

lane N2 highway, and enjoy them for how different and special they are. Forget about comparing us to Europe and the USA. Rather look at South Africa and Africa in light of the opportunities that they present. Remember the essence of our South African brand: 'Alive with possibility'.

Get to know your fellow South Africans

All of us need to work together if we are going to reach that brighter future. Always keep in mind the spirit of ubuntu, the African principle that a person is only a person through other people. Unfortunately apartheid split our people apart and kept us apart for so long that now we don't really know very much about each other. Overcome these false divisions between our cultures by talking to each other openly and finding out more about each other. Go out on a limb and invite people around for dinner; you'll be amazed how much more you have in common than you think. It is only by knowing each other that we can learn respect and tolerance, which are vital if we are to go forward into the future hand in hand.

Travel locally

We have talked about South Africa as the world in one country. Yet there are so many of us that have not visited even a fraction of our own country or the countries around us. If you are looking to go travelling, rather spend your rands locally or in our surrounding countries, where they will still go a long way and where there is so much adventure to be had so close to home. If you want culture, go to Johannesburg or Cape Town and experience some of our own theatre, music and art galleries. If you want to go skiing, visit the Maluti ski resort. And if it's tropical fish you want, go diving in Sodwana Bay. Get out there and enjoy it. Learn to love the land in which we live.

Smile and acknowledge

It is truly amazing how much a smile will do to build a nation. For so long South Africans were pitted against each other, and we still so often display elements of mistrust, bitterness, stifled anger, arrogance and general unpleasantness towards each other. Smiles go so far in cutting through all of that. Try forcing yourself to smile from the first moment you interact with someone, a security guard at the gate of an office block for example, whether you actually feel like it or not. The positive reaction that you get from a person when you smile at them and they don't expect it is so uplifting that it will make you want to smile again. Then take it one step further and actively acknowledge that person by thanking them for the job that they are doing, helping to build their self esteem in the process. Practise this smiling and acknowledging always – if someone thrusts plastic coat hangers in your face at a traffic light, don't react angrily, smile and say that you really don't need any right now but if you do in the future then you will come back. By acknowledging each other in a positive manner we take steps towards making this a better country.

Support positive initiatives

If you have enough money to buy this book, then you have enough money to buy the Big Issue magazine (which incidentally is a very good read and costs the same as one drink in the pub). There are plenty of positive initiatives like the Big Issue that require your support to help those less fortunate than yourself, and a great number of them have been terribly let down by the national lottery which has not yet delivered the cash support that it was expected to deliver. Look out for Homeless News and others, which create employment and go some way towards making a better life for your fellow South Africans, and give them your support.

Towards a can-do, will-do South Africa

The following quote by John Kotter during the 1996 BMW Innovative Thinking Conference in Cape Town captures our message on optimism poetically: "Youth is not a time of life; it is a state of mind; it is not a matter of rosy cheeks, red lips and supple knees; it is a matter of the will, a quality of the imagination, a vigour of the emotions; it is the freshness of the deep springs of life. Youth means the temperamental predominance of courage over timidity, of the appetite for adventure over the love of ease. This often exists in a man of 60 more than in a boy of 20. Nobody grows old merely by deserting our ideals. We grow old by deserting our ideals. Years may wrinkle the skin, but to give up enthusiasm wrinkles the soul. Worry, fear, self-distrust turns the spirit back into dust. Whether 60 or 16, there is in every human being's heart the lure of wonder, the unfailing childlike attitude of what's next, and the joy of the game of living. In the centre of your heart and my heart, there is a radio station; so long as it receives messages of beauty, hope, cheer, courage and power from people and from the infinite, so long are you young. When the aerials are down, and your spirit is covered with snows of cynicism and the ice of pessimism, then you are grown old, even at 20; but as long as your aerials are up, to catch waves of optimism, there is hope you may die young at 80."

Undoubtedly, this book is intended as a 'pep-me-up', but its message goes deeper than injecting a temporary burst of optimism. We are calling for a new way of being in South Africa, a change in the way that we see the world and this country's place in it, a belief in the future of our country. We are promoting positivity and pride, not in a superficial way that pumps up the emotions, but in a way that connects with an underlying belief that we have reason to be positive and proud. We can live the South African dream. We can make it super-cool to be South African. We can make our contribution to a renaissance, not just of this continent, but of the world. So, why not start now. Before you put this book down and go on to your busy life, think of just one thing you can do that will make South Africa a better place. Write it down and make an emotional commitment to do it. Do it now! ...

... Congratulations (if you have done it), you have just become a can-do, will-do, positive South African. You have just become one of the many reasons we believe in this country, its people and its future. You have already made a difference. One of many more to come.