

The healing, the loving, and the exceptions

A popular book flying off the bookshelves lately and appearing in everyone's Instagram posts is *Milk and Honey* by Rupi Kaur, which is a collection of poems on hurting, acceptance, and recovery. Other authors such as Nayyirah Waheed have written similar poetry collections, such as *Salt*, that deal with the same self-compassionate message. Due to the increasing number of book sales and the large amount of people quoting their work, it's important to note what power positive writing has and why their poetry may not be for everyone.

The idea of thinking positive to combat the negativity is one that has been floating around for a while. From simple "it's I can, not I can't!" to "stay positive," this method has been recommended in various occasions to combat negativity. The issue, of course, is that someone can't simply "stay positive" or "today choose happiness." In theory, yes, choosing happiness and staying positive are excellent ways to combat mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety, but the solution is more complex than mere commands.

That is why books like *Milk and Honey* and *Salt* are necessary. The complexity that is recovery isn't obtained with just a few simple words and a sudden mind change. It is a long journey with relapse and suffering and hard work. The words included in their poetry help boost the mentality of gentle recovery; the idea that you should stay positive and make progress but acknowledge that you won't always will--and that's okay. The gentle treatment of setbacks and the practice of self-care allow the individual to recover in a way that isn't too demanding or unrealistic.

Rupi Kaur writes: "it is a part of the / human experience to feel pain / do not be afraid / open yourself to it." While "it's okay to not be okay" aids in not being self-critical during recovery, it can do more harm than good if an individual does not digest it correctly. At times, it can have the opposite effect if assumed someone can stay in his or her depressed state, not looking for a way out. This in turn feeds their mental illness, making them believe that there is no need to reach out for help. This, of course, is not at all what the phrase means, but is instead a confirmation that during the road to recovery an individual should not be self-critical of himself or herself. They should acknowledge the progress they've made, no matter how small, and be gentle with their shortcomings in an attempt to move forward despite of them.

Another mentality that this type of poetry encourages is the fact that you should not depend on someone else's love, but rather your own. Again, this has good and bad undertones. A primary trait associated with mental illness is the concern for other people's judgments or the constant need for the love and acceptance of another person. Here's where positive thinking comes in as Waheed addresses: "if someone / does not want me / it is not the end of the world. / but / if i do not want me. / the world is nothing but endings." While this is overall supposed to convey the idea of self-love being the most important, some individuals could possibly feel worse from the fact that they may not currently be at that level and therefore have "nothing but endings."

The self-love doctrine that is portrayed in their poems is particularly appealing due to the fact that the authors are minorities. Both women, Rupi Kaur was born to Indian parents while Nayyirah Waheed is of African descent. Their

backgrounds allow both writers to urge readers towards self-love in regards to both race and ethnicity as well as gender itself, promoting the acceptances of various identities. Waheed's poem displays the importance of appreciating your race as she writes: "black women breathe flowers, too. / just because / we are taught to grown them in the lining of our / quite (our grandmothers secret). / does not mean / we do not swelter with wild tenderness. / we soft swim. / we petal. / we scent limbs. / love. / we just have been too long a garden for sharp / and deadly teeth. / so we / have / grown / ourselves / into / greenhouses." Kaur does something similar in regards to femininity: "the next time he / points out the / hair on your legs is / growing back remind / that boy your body / is not his home / he is a guest / warn him to / never outstep / his welcome / again."

The problem is that it doesn't end there. Rupi Kaur and Nayyirah Waheed at times express negative sentiments towards men and the white race. This is due to the fact that Rupi Kaur mentions her rape while Nayyirah Waheed sprinkles her writing with criticisms of white supremacy. While it is understood the amount of oppression, hurt, and anger that resides in minorities and victims are the cause for these words, it should still be noted that these are not ideal books for every one. Mental illness doesn't know race, gender, ethnicity, moral background, economic level; it simply attacks as it pleases. But, this still doesn't erase the fact that it's harder for some to receive the same mental care as their counterparts. At times this can be a problem, especially when there are mental issues present in individuals, regardless of their privilege, that need attention; a simple example being cases where men are not allowed to express their emotions or even admit to having a mental illness.

Regardless of whether you relate to Kaur or Waheed, it's important to note the significance of surrounding yourself in positive affirmations as often as possible. If someone sticks to the same pair of words over their lifetime, the effect has the possibility of dwindling. Or if an individual sticks to a small collection of positivity, the limit of options result in not being able to fit a situation where other phrases would have helped. While it's not mandatory to practice positivity and self-love every day, a constant exposure to them can make a difference.

Poetry by Rupi Kaur and Nayyirah Waheed aren't the only forms of positivity. There are plenty of other authors and books that provide the same experience; the importance is in finding them. Even if you only purchased *Milk and Honey* after seeing it everywhere (which, again, is perfectly okay!), don't allow that to be your only source. Look into other poetry, anything that will help you, even if it's not an entire collection and just one poem. If the melodic words written in poetry aren't appealing, look into stories, prose, and novels themselves. If written word doesn't suit you, listen to slam poetry. And of course if that's still not appealing, listen to motivational speeches. The point being, it is not sensible to debunk the method of positive thinking without even trying, especially since there are various mediums of positivity. But if "thinking positive" isn't a match, at least remember that it's okay to not always be okay, and it's okay if it takes days or months or years to feel better. In Nayyirah Waheed's words, "it is being honest / about / my pain / that makes me invincible."