

# Life, Liberty *and the* Pursuit *of* Happiness

( A Cautionary Tale)



ACTON FOUNDATION  
for Entrepreneurial Excellence

# Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness: A Cautionary Tale

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“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Declaration of Independence

The unalienable right to the “pursuit of Happiness”<sup>\*</sup> is burned into the DNA of every American. Many believe it was instrumental in creating the wealthiest and most powerful nation on the planet; others blame it for the materialistic excesses of a people who have lost their way.

How should this “pursuit of Happiness” influence your personal journey? Should it inspire you to work your way to the top, making whatever sacrifices are necessary to achieve your fortune? Or does it suggest that you should slow down and savor every pleasure, drinking deeply from the well of life? These are the questions of our age for any talented and thoughtful person.

Except that they present a false choice. A choice almost certain to lead you on a fool’s errand that will waste much of your life, talents and treasure.

Somewhere deep down you already know this. You remember meeting that rare person who seems driven by a deeper mission, who moves calmly and faithfully as if guided by an inner compass and fueled by passion. If only you could find such a mission.

Why does such a calling elude you? Why does winning the “rat race” seem so alluring? What is it that makes happiness always seem to be just beyond your grasp? Welcome to the human race.

It turns out that there are answers to these questions, answers supported by the latest developments in behavioral economics, experimental psychology and neuropsychology. Not that the answers are new; they are identical to the teachings of wisdom literature throughout the ages. It’s just that our impulses and appetites keep distracting us from the truth.

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This note is designed to help you rise above your instincts and urges you to begin a search for the life you were meant to live. Once you have abandoned a foolish quest for the ephemeral rewards of happiness, wealth and power, you can begin to look for your true calling on this earth—a Hero’s Journey. To do this, you must first learn to lose yourself. Unbundling this paradox will require you to accomplish three tasks.

<sup>\*</sup>Adam Smith originally coined the phrase as “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Property.”

## TASK ONE: UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HAPPINESS, SATISFACTION AND FULFILLMENT

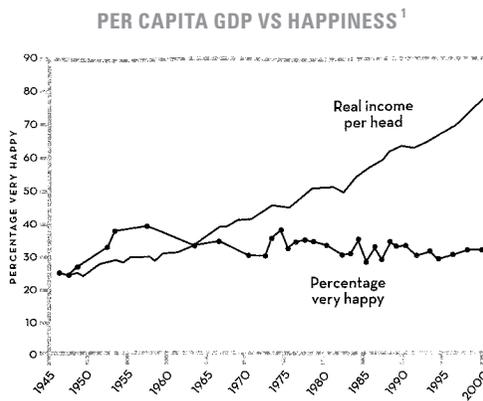
Before you begin the search for a Hero's Journey, it is important to understand why so many people are lured by a false search for happiness, power or wealth.

The latest scientific research delivers some lessons about happiness you may find surprising:

- 1 The old saying that “money will not buy you happiness” turns out to be supported by all of our latest scientific research. You likely are as happy today as you ever will be. More money, power or sex will have little, if any, effect on your long-term happiness, satisfaction or fulfillment.
- 2 Despite all of your daily worries, you likely will end your life quite satisfied, though not necessarily fulfilled.
- 3 The greatest threat to you leading a fulfilling life is a misguided pursuit of happiness that blinds you to the possibility of a more meaningful Hero's Journey.

### MONEY WILL NOT BUY YOU HAPPINESS

Behavioral psychology studies conclusively show that chasing the materialist American dream is not making the United States a happier nation. In other words, once a country has a reasonable standard of living, more wealth does not lead to happier citizens.\* Once your basic needs are satisfied, chasing more money, power, fame, beauty or sex will not lead to a happier life.



America is a far richer nation than decades ago, but not happier. Real per capita income in the United States more than doubled between the 1960s and 2000s, yet the percentage of Americans who call themselves “very happy” remained around 30%.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, increases in per capita income in other industrialized countries have failed to increase the average level of happiness.

Personal income levels also have little impact on the average person's happiness. When Americans in the top income quartile are asked whether they are “very happy” or “quite happy,” 96% reply “yes.” But 86% of those in the bottom quartile also report that they are “very happy” or “quite happy.”

\*Numerous studies show that lottery winners report lower levels of happiness than non-lottery winners.

## HAPPINESS ACCORDING TO INCOME POSITION IN THE UNITED STATES<sup>3</sup>

(percentage of each group of respondents)

	TOP QUARTER	BOTTOM QUARTER
VERY HAPPY	45	33
QUITE HAPPY	51	53
NOT TOO HAPPY	4	14
	100	100

### THE SECRET TO HAPPINESS: YOU ARE ALREADY QUITE HAPPY

So what is the secret to happiness? The secret is that most of us are already quite happy. When behavioral psychologists survey people around the globe, they find most people report high levels of happiness, with an average happiness score of 7.71 on a scale of 1 to 10.<sup>4</sup>

Even more surprising, carefully controlled studies of twins show that 50-80% of our average individual happiness is inherited.<sup>5</sup> So not only are we reasonably happy, but we seem to have a genetically determined “happiness thermostat” that is largely set at birth. Despite sometimes desperate attempts to chase happiness, most of us will spend all our lives oscillating around our pre-set level of happiness.

While our average level of happiness is mostly determined by heredity, there are a few decisions that can increase or decrease your average level of happiness:

- **Live in a free country that minimizes life-threatening poverty.** You will not be happy if someone in the government controls your life. There is a marked difference between people who live in countries controlled by authoritarian regimes and those who live in freedom. While the effects of material wealth are limited, extreme poverty does breed unhappiness.<sup>6</sup> More money does not result in more happiness once you are barely comfortable, but poverty that threatens life itself leads to long-lasting unhappiness.<sup>7</sup>
- **The workplace you choose matters.** People who have less control in their jobs are less happy. Pointless work will make you unhappy, as will a lack of variety or stress caused by your boss.<sup>8</sup>
- **Where you live matters too.** Climate doesn't matter. People in Southern California are no happier than those in the deserts of Arizona or the hills of Tennessee. Surprisingly, what does matter is how far you have to drive to work. While the joy of a larger house and yard in the suburbs will diminish, the unhappiness that comes from a long-term commute will stay with you and grow worse. You also will be unable to adjust to loud and uncontrollable noises near your home, like those from an airport or a highway.
- **Some events that bring unhappiness will be out of your control.** You will adjust slowly, if ever, to a long-term debilitating illness, caring for a loved one with Alzheimer's or the death of a spouse or child in a car wreck.<sup>9</sup>

## FROM HAPPINESS TO SATISFACTION

Not only are you likely to be happy and remain happy, but you also are likely to be satisfied with your life, particularly as you grow older.

Long-term studies that track satisfaction show that your level of education, race, gender and the climate of where you live will have little effect on your sense of life satisfaction. If you are not overweight, don't drink excessively, don't smoke, escape early debilitating illnesses and surround yourself with loving people, you will be reasonably satisfied. Furthermore, your sense of satisfaction will increase with age.<sup>10</sup>

Specifically:

- Genetics and outside events may have a large impact on momentary happiness, but for satisfaction, it's relationships that matter. "It's the good people who happen to us at any age" that make a far bigger difference in satisfaction;
- Deep loving relationships, with a capacity for gratitude, forgiveness and sharing are far more important than accomplishments;
- A good marriage has far more impact on lifelong satisfaction than good health; and,
- Continuing to seek challenges and having friends of all ages is much more important than income.<sup>11</sup>

You likely will go through a series of life stages:

- **From Identity**, understanding who you are, to
- **Intimacy**, learning to live with others in a deep relationship, to
- **Career Consolidation**, learning to use your talents in the world, to
- **Generativity**, learning to unselfishly give to the next generation, to
- **Meaning**, understanding ageless wisdom and virtue, to
- **Integrity**, having a spiritual sense of how you are connected to the transcendent.<sup>12</sup>

## HOW THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS WILL KEEP YOU FROM FINDING FULFILLMENT

What is it about our nature that distracts us from a noble quest to find meaning and significance and converts it to a meaningless, addictive and ultimately hollow grab for money, power and pleasure?

Three mistakes consistently distract and mislead us:

- We pursue sensual pleasures and material success for the wrong reasons.
- We misjudge how near-term events will affect our long-term happiness.
- We all too often allow our addictive natures and lack of perspective to transform healthy self-interest into a corrosive self-centeredness.

## PURSUING SENSUAL PLEASURE AND MATERIAL SUCCESS FOR THE WRONG REASONS

Sensual pleasures—good food, drink and sex—can bring great joy to life. But these are treats that must be sampled sparingly, because enjoyment drops off sharply if the experiences are repeated too frequently. The first taste of an ice cream cone can bring intense pleasure; the last spoonful from a gallon of ice cream may leave you feeling disgusted.

In the same way, you will enjoy pursuing goals, like a higher income, a promotion

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or a new house. Inevitably though, once you obtain something, you rapidly will become accustomed to the new reality, and it will cease to provide much pleasure.\* As Shakespeare noted: “Things won are done; joy’s soul lies in the doing.”<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, it is our nature to chase sensual treats and challenges long after they cease to provide joy—looking to recapture the early highs. Once pleasure becomes an end in itself, rather than a byproduct of a life

well lived, unbridled hedonism transforms sensual cravings into empty habits, and finally, leads to destructive addictions.

We seem to confuse **enjoyment**, a transitory experience, with the deeper and more complex experience of **satisfaction**. Satisfaction requires looking past ephemeral joy to trends in our levels of happiness. Measuring satisfaction requires weighing and balancing the good with the bad in life and getting some sense of your general level of contentment.

Unfortunately, even satisfaction proves unfulfilling when it becomes your primary goal. It is your nature to compare yourself to others, and you are more satisfied when you measure up well. This too is ephemeral. Once you reach the top of one pecking order, you almost immediately raise your sights. Once you have the nicest house in the neighborhood, you begin looking for one in a more upscale community.

**Fulfillment** turns out to be quite different than either pleasure or satisfaction. It involves having the perspective, usually in later years, of having done well with the opportunities you have been given. That’s why beginning with the end in mind, and talking with those you respect who are nearer to the end of their journey, is so important.

#### **A TWISTED SENSE OF PERSPECTIVE: MISJUDGING THE PRESENT’S IMPACT ON THE FUTURE**

Our tendency to pursue pleasure instead of satisfaction and fulfillment is exacerbated by the poor job we as humans do in predicting how current events will affect our future happiness.

First, we do a poor job predicting how recent events will make us feel in the future. The human brain is not sensitive to our absolute level of happiness, but is sensitive to short-term change and comparison to others.<sup>14</sup> As a result, we greatly overestimate how the gain or loss of material goods or social standing will affect us.

Within weeks, even major lottery winners are no happier than they were before winning.

Studies show that the effects of even major life changes will fade within three months.<sup>15</sup> The impact of lucky breaks and major accomplishments has surprisingly little power to affect happiness.<sup>16</sup> We far overestimate the effect acquiring more money or power will have on our long-term happiness. Within weeks, even major lottery winners are no happier than they were before winning.

\* Luckily, this applies to most setbacks and tragedies as well. For example, quadriplegics or those with a terminal illness are not, as a group, appreciably less happy, satisfied or fulfilled than the average person.

We also overestimate the negative effects that setbacks and failures will have on our long-term happiness. People have shown they cope well with many challenges, including the loss of limbs or life-threatening illnesses. For example, even individuals who have become paraplegics as a result of a spinal cord accident will have more positive than negative emotions within only eight weeks of the accident. In time, 84% of people with extreme quadriplegia believe their lives are average or above average.<sup>17\*</sup>

**Second, we are optimists about our own lot in life but pessimistic about the world in general, despite past experiences that suggest the reverse will be true.** Surveys by behavioral psychologists show that we routinely predict that as individuals we will be happier in the future. We also routinely predict the world around us will be a more dangerous and unhealthy place.

... later in life we are far more likely to regret risks not taken than mistakes made.

When behavioral psychologists survey the same groups five years into the future, they find the reverse turns out to be true. Individuals have not increased their personal level of happiness but have remained near their natural genetic set point, while the world around them has vastly improved by every objective standard.

**Third, our wish to avoid pain focuses us on dangers, annoyances and slights of our day-to-day lives.** This risk averseness may have been healthy for our distant ancestors, when misinterpreting the sound in the bush meant that you may be eaten by a saber-toothed tiger. Today it makes us far too risk averse, so later in life we are far more likely to regret risks not taken than mistakes made.<sup>18</sup>

**Fourth, we change our yardsticks of success depending on the circumstances.** In good times, we compare ourselves to those who are doing even better, so we are less grateful for good fortune. In bad times, we look for those who are doing worse to excuse our failures.<sup>19</sup> When faced with information that contradicts our preconceived notions, we simply ignore it and search until we find confirming evidence for our original positions.

Quite simply, we long for fulfillment while engaged in a futile pursuit of happiness.

**Quite simply, we long for fulfillment while engaged in a futile pursuit of happiness.** We are lured into a rat race, believing that money or sensual pleasures will pave a path to satisfaction and fulfillment. Ironically, we already are happy, are likely to be equally happy in the future and are even likely to be quite satisfied with life in our later years. It's just that our human nature leads us to be so wrapped up in a self-centered quest for an unattainable "heaven on earth" that we miss the chance for a Hero's Journey that would lead to a more meaningful life. We remain locked in a downward spiral that leaves us more self-absorbed, less joyful, less satisfied and ultimately, we die less fulfilled.

\*The only three setbacks that people seem unable to adjust to are: (1) long commutes; (2) caring for a loved one with Alzheimer's; or (3) loud noises over which they have no control.

## SLIDING FROM SELF-INTEREST TO SELF-CENTEREDNESS TO SELF-DELUSION

All of our natural appetites and instincts feed the most dangerous tendency of all—to let a healthy sense of self-interest become self-centeredness or self-delusion.

Self-interest, the act of protecting ourselves in a dangerous world, is a healthy and natural instinct. Unfortunately, it is our nature to carry this self-protection too far, attempting to avoid pain by retreating into our own inner world, a place where emotional chatter clouds our vision and impairs our judgment.

**One result of losing touch with reality is that we can become far too impressed with our own abilities.** So impressed, that when surveyed, 70% to 94% of us will rate ourselves above average.

**We also overestimate our contributions to others.** In controlled experiments, people consistently overestimate their own fairness, charitableness, rationality and contributions to others by large margins. For example, a survey of husbands and wives asked how much each contributed to the household; the individual estimates routinely totaled 120% or more. MBAs were even worse. When a similar question was asked of teams of MBA students working on a school project, the sum of the individual contributions to the team totaled 139%.<sup>20</sup>

As we slip from self-interest to self-centeredness and finally, to self-delusion, what should be gratitude slips away, to be replaced by wounded pride.

**Likewise, we are too confident of our objectivity and memories.** We believe our observations and memories are accurate. Experiments show conclusive proof that most of our memories fade quickly; our biases shape what we notice and our memories are highly susceptible to suggestion. We often attribute memories to the wrong source and believe fantasies really happened.

**Our inward focus makes us captive to our emotions instead of drawing value and strength from them.** We tend to enjoy being victims. We focus on slights and magnify pain until we are obsessed with past hurts instead of future possibilities. We go to therapists and focus on ourselves and our past, for hours and years on end, even though studies show psychotherapy provides little benefit and that there is no measurable effect from traumatic childhood events on our adult lives. “What goes right in childhood predicts the future far better than what goes wrong,”<sup>21</sup> unless we insist on feeding painful thoughts. We may feel we cannot get bad thoughts out of our minds,<sup>22</sup> but studies show that “emotions, left to themselves, will dissipate” and you will return to your inherited baseline of happiness.<sup>23</sup>

**We push others away even though we need relationship and intimacy.** We seek unconditional love but rarely offer the same in return. Instead, we prefer to compare ourselves to others in ways that make us feel superior. We are masters at rationalization and prone to hypocrisy.

As we slip from self-interest to self-centeredness and finally, to self-delusion, what should be gratitude slips away, to be replaced by wounded pride.

## TASK TWO: LOSING YOURSELF IN A HERO'S JOURNEY

So what is the alternative to a fruitless search for happiness, power or money, a life driven by impulses and urges that inevitably will collapse into a failed tangle of self-centered illusions? Throughout history, wise men have offered the Hero's Journey as an alternative.\*

A Hero's Journey requires you to find your most precious gifts and to use them doing something you enjoy in the service of something larger than yourself.

A Hero's Journey does not promise a life full of happiness. On the contrary, it means facing "dragons and giants," challenges that stretch you to your limits and sometimes beyond. The lessons are in the journey, lessons learned alongside trusted traveling companions and guides. By the end of the journey, you will see the world differently, and have a deeper understanding of your purpose on the planet and a much stronger connection with the transcendent.

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Some hold that the Hero's Journey is really a case of inward transformation. That is not the case being made here. The Hero's Journey described here is not merely a literary device, but a real daily struggle where you use your most precious God-given gifts, in genuine service of others, as a way of transforming yourself, contributing something meaningful and reliably connecting with transcendent power.

This real-world Hero's Journey is about being of the world (understanding where you come from); being in the world (understanding the world as it is and others as they are); and being above the world (connecting with the transcendent). Only by doing all three will you realize your true self, fulfill your destiny on earth and find your peace beyond.

Have you ever been so engrossed in a challenge or activity that you lost track of time?

So how do we look past our appetites and avoid a tendency towards self-centeredness? How do we find our true selves without becoming obsessed with ourselves? How do we avoid learning life's wisdom and secrets so late in life that it's too late to enjoy them?

If the latest scientific findings and ancient wisdom literature are correct, finding the Hero's Journey you were meant to live requires you to lose your preoccupation with yourself. There are at least four ways to do this: First in overcoming challenges; then in relationship; next in gratitude; and finally, by connecting to the transcendent.

### FLOW: LOSING YOURSELF IN A WORTHY CHALLENGE

Have you ever been so engrossed in a challenge or activity that you lost track of

\* For more on the Hero's Journey, consider reading *He, She, We* and *Inner Work* by Robert A. Johnson and *The Hero Within* by Carol Pearson.

time? If so, you have experienced what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes as “flow,” the feeling that comes when “your mind or body is stretched to the limit in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile.”<sup>24</sup>

... intense periods of focused activity led to high levels of enjoyment that were sustained for much longer periods of time than sensual pleasures.

Csikszentmihalyi and his researchers discovered flow by following tens of thousands of people in dozens of countries for several decades, asking them to record their activities and happiness levels many times each day. As expected, physical and bodily pleasures, like meals or sex, corresponded to higher levels of momentary pleasure.

What was not expected was that intense periods of focused activity led to high levels of enjoyment that were sustained for much longer periods of time than sensual pleasures. This “being in the zone” meant

being so immersed in the challenge of a physical activity or a creative task that time seemed to stand still.

Flow came in many forms. From an activity like martial arts or from yoga. From flying an airplane or competing at chess or playing a musical instrument. From solving a business problem. As long as there was a challenge, with a sequence of activities, bounded by rules that required skill to complete, flow could occur.

During flow, people became so absorbed in the task that they lost track of time. Hours passed without notice. Concern for self disappeared.

The most intense episodes came when goals were clear, the task was difficult enough to cause someone to stretch, but not so unattainable as to cause anxiety.<sup>25</sup> There was a sense of control, not as much over the outcome, as over oneself. Flow was enhanced when the skills being honed remained the same, but the challenges became progressively more difficult.

Overcoming challenges releases chemicals like dopamine in our brains that make us feel good.

Over time, performing the task well began to matter more than reaching a goal. Goals, scores and targets were more important for keeping score than as rewards. Participants began to practice for the sake of mastery alone.

None of this is surprising. We like challenges, particularly those that play to our strengths. We respond to the positive feedback of early successes, so choosing something you do well will give you the confidence to charge ahead. Honing our talents to pursue goals even makes us feel good.

Overcoming challenges releases chemicals like dopamine in our brains that make us feel good.<sup>26</sup>

We like being in control, feeling like masters of our own fate and bringing order to

the world. We enjoy challenging work so much that 84% of men and 77% of women say they would work even if they inherited enough money to retire for life.<sup>27</sup>

Flow helps us grow by taking our attention off ourselves and redirecting it outward and upward. “While not occupied with our selves, we actually have a chance to expand our concept of who we are.”<sup>28</sup> This growth of self occurs when the challenge is enjoyable, goal oriented, requires a constant perfection of skill, and accomplishes something meaningful.<sup>29</sup>

Flow experiences come with the same risks of any pleasurable activity. While mastery of a skill can become an end in itself, you must consciously choose to immerse yourself. If a task begins to control you, it becomes an addiction.<sup>30</sup>

### **LOVE: LOSING YOURSELF IN RELATIONSHIP**

Long-term studies of satisfaction and fulfillment show that relationships are critical to satisfaction and fulfillment. We live in relationship with others and we need to belong. We need others to complete us.

Beginning a relationship simply requires a little curiosity about others.

People who place a high priority in caring for others have more fulfilling lives. “There are few stronger predictors of happiness than a close, nurturing, equitable, intimate and lifelong companionship with one’s best friend.”<sup>31</sup> Long-term studies on aging show that a lack of true friends would be one’s biggest crisis later in life.<sup>32</sup> People get depressed when they are alone too long. They revive when with others.<sup>33</sup>

Much of our long-term satisfaction and fulfillment will come from a relatively small group of family members and friends with whom we create the memories of a lifetime. Developing such relationships takes time, energy and courage.

You start with small steps. Beginning a relationship simply requires a little curiosity about others. Relationships grow by give and take. You ask about the other person’s goals, affirm them, and offer to help in some way. (Starting with people who have compatible goals makes it easier to invest attention.<sup>34</sup>)

Then something magical happens. You actually become more interested in others than yourself. You forget your own problems. Horizons open. Perspective broadens.

Consciously choosing who to invest in relationships with makes a difference.

Favors, attention and self-disclosure lead to trust. Obligations and constraints add more structure and meaning to life. You learn that giving is more satisfying than getting. Over time, a web of healthy relationships blossoms into a support system. Then you develop a reputation for helping others, a fragile treasure.<sup>35</sup> Extraordinary opportunities follow.

Consciously choosing who to invest in relationships with makes a difference. Want to be a better person? Surround yourself with good people.<sup>36</sup> Close friends have the most positive effect on fulfillment. (Families have only an average effect.<sup>37</sup>) Develop

relationships with all ages. Always have friends from three generations: the generation below to add freshness and energy, your generation for understanding and companionship, and a generation older for perspective and wisdom.

One relationship will matter most of all. Choosing to marry will have a profound effect on your life. Good marriages teach that compassionate love—care for another—counts for far more in the long run than passionate love, which is more of a love undertaken for its selfish effects. While there are good and bad marriages, people who are married generally are happier than those who are not.\* Almost everyone who marries is happier in the beginning. Those who are the happiest early in their marriage tend to be much happier later in life; for the rest, the increase in happiness fades but never disappears.<sup>38</sup>

### **GRATITUDE: LOSING YOURSELF IN THANKS AND GENEROSITY**

Nurturing a sense of gratitude may be the most powerful step you can take towards a more fulfilling life. Those who look back on life with a strong sense of gratitude are more likely to recognize and seize an opportunity when it presents itself. They are more forgiving and have stronger relationships. They are happier, more satisfied and more fulfilled because they see the world through a different lens, in a way that changes who they are.

Given your natural inclinations to overvalue your own abilities, reinterpret the past and negatively judge others, you easily can become disenchanted with your lot in life. If this natural inclination develops into a habit of self-pity, you can go through

life acting as a victim. You begin to reinterpret your past as a series of slights of fortune or the intentional acts of others. You selectively interpret the present, spotting ill intentions when they don't exist. Fear sets in. You attract pessimists and people of ill will.

**If you choose instead to see life as a gift, you are likely to marvel each day at your good luck and the kindness of others.**

If you choose instead to see life as a gift, you are likely to marvel each day at your good luck and the kindness of others. You will remember your past as a series of lucky breaks. You look for good in others and find it. Optimistic people seek you out. “Gratitude amplifies the savoring and appreciation of the good events gone by, and rewriting history by forgiveness loosens the power of the bad events to embitter (and actually can transform bad memories into good ones).”<sup>39</sup>

ifies the savoring and appreciation of the good events gone by, and rewriting history by forgiveness loosens the power of the bad events to embitter (and actually can transform bad memories into good ones).”<sup>39</sup>

It turns out that a few simple practices can develop a sense of gratitude and lift your eyes to the horizon and away from brooding about yourself.

#### *Compare Down, Not Up*

Break the habit of comparing yourself to people who you believe are more fortunate. Feeling down? Visit a bus station or seek out the needy to remind yourself of your blessings. Choose to live in a neighborhood you can afford rather than one where everyone is much wealthier. It is better to have a relatively nicer house in

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\*For more about happy marriages, I recommend John Gottman's *Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*.

a less prestigious neighborhood, rather than a relatively smaller house in a neighborhood you cannot afford.

### *Volunteer and Give to Charity*

Gratitude and generosity go together. People who volunteer and give to charity are happier, more satisfied and more fulfilled than those who do not.<sup>40</sup> “The afterglow of pleasurable activities (hanging out with friends, or watching a movie, or eating a hot fudge sundae) pales in comparison with the effects of a kind gesture. Research shows that when spontaneous charitable acts reinforce personal virtues, your whole day goes better.”<sup>41</sup>

Despite what you hear on television and during political campaigns, Americans are the most generous people on the planet. Generosity is one of our most widely held values; in any given year, 89% of us will contribute money or volunteer in the service of others; most will do both.<sup>42</sup> Our generosity reflects our compassion, entrepreneurial spirit and democratic values. Some even argue that generosity is why democracy and capitalism work better together in America than anywhere else.<sup>43</sup>

Training yourself to suppress negative chatter and replace it with positive thoughts does make a difference.

Surprisingly, professing concern for the plight of the poor is not correlated with helping them. Those who advocate government redistribution turn out to give far less to charitable causes than the average citizen. It is not calling on others to sacrifice that matters, what matters is direct personal action. Giving your time and your money to another human being is one of the most powerful ways to develop your own sense of gratitude.

### *Practice Being Grateful*

Psychologist Martin Seligman asked his students to participate in a “Gratitude Night” where each class member brought a guest who had been important in their lives but never properly thanked. Each student then read a letter properly thanking his or her guest. By the end of the evening, there wasn’t a dry eye in the class. More importantly, overall levels of happiness not only increased for the class, but stayed at higher levels for months. All from just one exercise in gratitude.<sup>44</sup>

### *Suppress Negative Chatter*

While traditional psychotherapy does not seem to offer long-term improvements in happiness, positive cognitive therapy has been shown to improve happiness. It turns out that having a positive attitude does make a difference and can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Training yourself to suppress negative chatter and replace it with positive thoughts does make a difference.

### *Write a Letter or Keep a Journal*

Remove yourself from the daily press of activity for reflection. Reflection creates perspective and perspective encourages gratitude. Keeping a journal has been shown by numerous studies to have a long-term effect on happiness, satisfaction and fulfillment. So does meditation and prayer.

### *Seek Role Models*

Look for charitable people you can hold as role models. Seek them out for advice and guidance. There's nothing more nurturing than a long discussion with someone who is further along a similar journey through life.

## **SPIRITUALITY: LOSING YOURSELF THROUGH A CONNECTION WITH THE TRANSCENDENTAL**

Why are we here? How ought I to live? These questions always seem to boil beneath the chatter and business of daily life. Wisdom and spirituality are supposed to increase with age, but they will not unless you are an active seeker of both.

Connection to the rest of the human race, through art, literature and especially religion, is the ultimate in a perspective-expanding relationship, a collective celebration of awe that shrinks the self as it expands consciousness. Spiritual contemplation helps set aside trivial and egocentric thoughts, and prunes bad habits through daily acts of self denial.

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Even the most agnostic, scientific researchers have found that a connection to the transcendental leads to more personal happiness, satisfaction and fulfillment. "Religious Americans are clearly less likely to use drugs, commit crimes, divorce and kill themselves." Religious people are more resilient and more effective at fighting depression. They are less affected by setbacks like divorce, unemployment, illness and death.<sup>45</sup>

Religious belief is a personal choice. A belief in a permanent God, a Heaven beyond earth and a duty to serve others, seems to be the ultimate antidote for a human race prone to be self-centered and too focused on ephemeral pleasures. A belief in Heaven instills hope.<sup>46</sup>

## **TASK THREE: GETTING STARTED ON YOUR QUEST**

### *The First Steps on Your Hero's Journey*

The hardest part of a Hero's Journey is getting started. It sounds as if you must have a grand plan before you begin. But like all great journeys, it is more a matter of putting one foot in front of the other. That means the first step is the hardest, and that first step is learning how to look beyond yourself.

After you start losing yourself in healthy challenges, relationships, gratitude and spirituality, you can start to write your own hero story.

Humans understand complex things, like life, in metaphor.<sup>47</sup> We need stories and myths to understand life and describe the journey to others. Ultimate meaning may be beyond us, but we can make our lives more meaningful, and it is meaning, not money or power, that illuminates our lives.<sup>48</sup> You want your life to be a quest for

something meaningful, not a series of petty crises. Creative vision, a positive attitude in the face of adversity and a passion for action is the stuff of hero stories and meaning.<sup>49</sup>

Begin to think about your own life as a hero story. Who are you? What challenges have you overcome? What special talents do you have? How can you invest these talents in a series of new quests to develop a mastery that will lead to a more fulfilling life? Who will you choose as worthy travel companions? Who can you talk with who is further along in the journey to ask for directions? How can you make sure you take time to enjoy special moments and celebrate minor victories? Above all else, who will you choose to serve, so you can find yourself, changed, by first losing yourself?

**In a sentence: Do you need loosening or do you need tightening?**

If you want to shape your own hero's story, you first must know yourself and then choose challenges that help you develop a sense of mastery. You must be willing to invest in the growth of others, prepare for and learn to embrace adversity and practice courageous acts of character building.

### *Know Thyself*

A Hero's Journey begins with knowing yourself. Are you naturally a Hoarder, constantly storing up treasure for bad times, or a Spender who never thinks beyond the pleasures of the moment? Are you a Maximizer, who wants everything perfect, or a Satisfier who will accept good enough?<sup>50</sup> Are you by nature an Optimist who believes things will get better soon, or a Pessimist who believes that the worst has yet to come?

In a sentence: Do you need loosening or do you need tightening?

Hoarders prepare for future calamities so as to minimize losses. Later in life, most will regret not having taken more risks. Spenders enjoy the moment but are more likely to have momentary pleasures become bad habits. Pessimists have a more accurate view of themselves and their skills<sup>51</sup> but have a harder time being grateful. Optimists hang on to the good things that have happened in life and minimize or forget the bad. Optimists make better salespeople and typically are more creative.

How will your traits affect your journey? How should this affect your choice of challenges and travel companions?<sup>52</sup>

**When it comes to work, you can choose a job, a career or a calling.**

### *From Flow to the Mastery of a Discipline to a Hero's Journey*

When it comes to work, you can choose a job, a career or a calling. A *job* is something you do from 9 to 5 to pay the bills, as a way of affording the necessities of life and an occasional pleasure once the workday has ended. People with jobs watch the clock, waiting for 5 PM to arrive.

A *career* is a climb up a predetermined ladder to success at the top. People with

careers work long hours for the promise of money, power and security to come. All too often they arrive only to find that it really is lonely at the top.

A *calling* is finding that special place where your most precious gifts allow you to do something you love, in service to others, in a way that changes the world. People with callings say: “Thank God it’s Friday so I can work the next two days without interruption.”<sup>53</sup>

Long-term studies show those who are most fulfilled sequentially mastered a series of important life tasks.<sup>54</sup> Consistent goals and investments of psychic energy lead to a coherent self.<sup>55</sup>

To begin your journey,  
focus on past flow  
experiences and  
signature strengths.

How can you choose challenges that build on each other, so you move towards a sense of mastery in a certain area? How can you choose challenges so your skills, talents and judgment increase with each task? \* How will these provide a service to others? How will this change the world in a positive way?

To begin your journey, focus on past flow experiences and signature strengths. Begin to notice how you feel at different times.<sup>56</sup> When does flow occur for you? How would you describe your past flow experiences? What do they have in common? What do you do better than anyone else?<sup>57</sup> (see [www.authentic happiness.org](http://www.authentic happiness.org) for a test of signature strengths)

For some, the task is not so much finding the perfect job, as re-crafting an existing job so it plays to your strengths.

The surest path to a calling is to string together a series of flow experiences, each which builds on itself to a point where you learn to master certain skills. Add related skills to your repertoire and you become a master of a discipline.

Weaving flow experiences together builds a foundation for mastery. Individuals who have mastered a skill or area attract those who need them to solve bigger problems. And the world seeks a master for the problems he or she can solve. Along the way, challenges and relationships combine to change you.

For some, the task is not so much finding the perfect job as re-crafting an existing job so that it plays to your strengths. How can you change your current situation to take on challenges where you can apply your signature strengths?

Be forewarned, becoming an expert in an area requires more than raw talent and usually takes ten years or longer of serious focus. Michael Jordan is an extraordinary athlete, but reaching a championship series required decades of training and remaining on the court for practice long after his teammates had gone home.

### *Nurturing the Spiritual Growth of Others through a Mission*

Scott Peck defines love as “the will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurtur-

\* Some people may experience having the benefits of flow thrust upon them by a life-threatening adversity. In other words, it is survival that forces the early development of a special skill and talent. For these people, finding success will not be as difficult as developing a sense of trust and gratitude.

ing one's own or another's spiritual growth." Love means to be willing to give of yourself to change others and yourself. Love combines near-term selflessness with long-term self-interest to overcome self-centeredness.

How can you use flow experiences to move beyond the "tit for tat" of normal relationships into much deeper relationships? If flow leads to the mastery of a discipline, it is likely to attract an opportunity that ignites a sense of mission. This is where gifts and desire can combine to become a calling.

Missions require a sense of service to others. If you can paint a compelling vision that attracts others into service of a greater good in a way that each can use their talents to experience flow, strong loving relationships will result, both between those serving, and with those being served.

Away from your calling, reserve time for your charitable activities, family and friends and you are likely to have loving relationships with people from all walks of life and from several generations. This love will not only support you on your Hero's Journey, but help change you along the way, and nurture you near the end.

Along the journey,  
learn to embrace  
mistakes and  
adversity. Take more  
chances and  
suffer more defeats.  
Extend yourself.

#### *Prepare to Embrace Adversity*

We will all experience serious adversity. None of us would seek it, but it is a part of life. Plus, heroes need dragons to slay. Adversity exposes true friends. It changes our focus to the present.

Along the journey, learn to embrace mistakes and adversity.<sup>58</sup> Take more chances and suffer more defeats. Extend yourself. Long-term research on aging shows that you are far more likely to regret what you have not done, than to regret your errors and mistakes.

You are much stronger and tougher than you think. We fear most what we never experience. Embrace adversity as a lesson in humility. Use it to remind yourself to be grateful for what you have. As Paul said in Romans: "Suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope."

Those who have experienced serious adversity earlier in life may be the luckiest. They seem to have more focus, more clarity and more humility. Research shows the best time to face adversity is in your late teens and twenties. Don't overprotect your children from the lessons adversity brings.

Prepare for adversity in advance. Hone your skills. Invest in loving relationships. Practice gratitude and reflection. Connect regularly to the transcendent. Then you will be prepared to be transformed by adversity instead of crushed by it.

#### *Hone Character and Practice Virtue*

At the end of life, you are likely to ask only three questions: "Did I accomplish

something meaningful?” “Who did I love and who loved me?” and “Was I a good person?” A calling and loving relationships are not enough for true fulfillment. You also will need character.

The word “character” comes from Greek, and means “to etch.” It is the etching on your soul of who you are, both the virtuous and the dark.

Research shows that your IQ, social intelligence, most personality traits and general level of happiness have a large hereditary component. There are limits as to how far you can change them. The same studies also show that character, as opposed to temperament, is profoundly affected by your conscious choices and environment.<sup>59</sup> Long-term aging studies have shown that you can change your character by practicing virtuous acts, and it makes a large difference in your ultimate fulfillment.<sup>60</sup>

The difficulty is not in identifying virtue. Practically every society on earth values the same virtues: honesty; wisdom and knowledge; courage; love and humility; justice; temperance; spirituality and transcendence.<sup>61</sup> The difficulty, rather, is in practicing virtue.

Conquering your appetites by directly engaging them in a contest of will is usually counterproductive.

Conquering your appetites by directly engaging them in a contest of will is usually counterproductive. Chanting: “I will not eat ice cream today” is more likely to increase your craving for ice cream than to help you lose weight. Instead, seek to replace vice with virtue. Fill your days with exercise, good food and other activities and sloth, indulgence and excessive amounts of ice cream soon will be crowded out.

Practice virtue when the pressures on you are minimal. Choose an ethical framework to follow and draw bright lines. Invest in a reputation for doing the right thing. Find someone who will hold you accountable for your moral choices. If your habits are well established during good times, when temptations arise when the stakes are much higher, you already will be in the habit of making the right choices.

## FINAL WORDS

You may think you have heard all this before. You have. The latest science (behavioral economics, experimental psychology and neuropsychology), wisdom literature (religious and philosophical writings) and common sense all agree. So do wise people who have gone before you. It’s just that we do not practice what we know to be true.

You didn’t listen before. If you are lucky, you will this time. If you are fortunate to live to a ripe old age, a lifetime of struggling with human nature will teach you these lessons. You finally will see that it’s only by losing yourself in a quest to serve others that you find your true self. That only by finding your rightful place in the world and recognizing your true nature, are you likely to connect with the transcendent.

Somehow, deep in your being, you know this to be true. Even when you are happy and satisfied, there is a deep sense that you are missing something more important, something deeper. You sense the future regrets that will come from moments lost that can never be recaptured and the feeling of foolishness that will come from having missed something so simple and yet so important.

That gnawing feeling inside isn't a lack of happiness or satisfaction. It's a sense that your time will be over soon and that your life is too precious to waste. This is a journey you only take once. Make the most of your pleasure, satisfaction and fulfillment.

Somehow, deep in  
your being, you know  
this to be true.

So find your calling. Write your own Hero story. Explore your signature strengths to discover flow experiences that will lead to mastery. Let your mastery attract opportunities in a way that serves others and changes you. "How can I be happy?" is the wrong question. "How can I create something meaningful for others?" is the right question because it helps others and will change you in a profound way.

Savor sensual pleasures. Spread them out. Enjoy them but make them a conscious choice. Do not let them become your master. Seize the moment. Let go. Keep life simple and your pleasures even simpler.<sup>62</sup> Truth and beauty don't diminish with repetition.

Develop loving lifelong relationships with your spouse and your friends. Reach out to those younger for energy and inspiration, those your age for support and those older for perspective.

Be grateful. You live in the richest country on earth, one of the freest nations on the globe, at a time when freedom and prosperity are sweeping the planet. You have extraordinary gifts. Don't take things for granted. Be generous with your time and money. It may be the secret to why American capitalism and democracy work so well together.

Face the big questions now. How you feel about God is your own business, but we all have a need to connect to the transcendent. Don't let religion and religious people get in the way of your own spiritual development. Read the Bible. Read the Torah. Read Jung.

To find your place and who you are, you must lose yourself. That's the ultimate paradox of life. Perhaps the Buddhists have it right when they tell us: "Always act as if the future of the universe depends on what you do next, while laughing at yourself for thinking that you can make a difference."<sup>63</sup>

The feeling you have at this moment comes from your deepest nature. It is as real as the trees outside or the stars above. The question is, how many more moments do you intend to waste? Choose life. Choose it now.

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