

# Martin E. P. Seligman

## *Can happiness be taught?*

Since World War II, the field of psychology has largely focused on suffering. Psychologists now measure such formerly fuzzy concepts as depression, schizophrenia, and anger with respectable precision. We have discovered a fair amount about how these disorders develop across life, about their genetics, their neurochemistry, and their psychological underpinnings. Best of all, we can relieve some of the disorders. By my last count fourteen of the several dozen major mental illnesses could be effectively treated – and two of them cured – with medications or specific psychotherapies.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, for many years interest in relieving the states that make life miserable has overshadowed efforts to enhance the states that make life worth living. This disciplinary bias has not preempted the public's concern with what is best in life, however. Most people want more positive emotion in their

lives. Most people want to build their strengths, not just to minimize their weaknesses. Most people want lives imbued with meaning.

What I have called Positive Psychology concerns the scientific study of the three different happy lives that correspond to these three desires: the Pleasant Life, the Good Life, and the Meaningful Life. The Pleasant Life is about positive emotions. The Good Life is about positive traits – foremost among them the strengths and the virtues, but also the talents, such as intelligence and athleticism. The Meaningful Life is about positive institutions, such as democracy, strong families, and free inquiry. Positive institutions support the virtues, which in turn support the positive emotions.<sup>2</sup> In its scope, then, Positive Psychology diverges markedly from the traditional subject matter of psychology: mental disorders, developmental stunting, troubled lives, violence, criminality, prejudice, trauma, anger, depression, and therapy.

But can a science of Positive Psychology lead us to happiness? Five years ago, in an effort to answer that question, I

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1 Martin E. P. Seligman, *What You Can Change & What You Can't* (New York: Knopf, 1993).

2 Martin E. P. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness* (New York: Free Press, 2002).

started to teach an annual seminar to undergraduates at the University of Pennsylvania.

This seminar is similar to the other courses I have taught for the last forty years: we read and discuss the primary scientific literature in the field. It differs, however, in an important way: there is a real-world homework exercise to do and write up every week. When one teaches a traditional seminar on helplessness or on depression, there is no experiential homework to assign; students can't very well be told to be depressed or to be alcoholic for the week. But in Positive Psychology, students can be assigned to make a Gratitude Visit, or to transform a boring task by using a signature strength, or to give the gift of time to someone they care for. The workload is heavy: two essays per week, one on the extensive readings and the other on the homework exercises.

The course begins with personal introductions that are not perfunctory. I introduce myself by narrating an incident in which my then five-year-old daughter, Nikki, told me that she had given up whining and if she could do that ("It was the hardest thing I've ever done, Daddy"), I could "stop being such a grouch." I then ask all of the students to tell stories about themselves at their best, stories that display their highest virtues. The listening skills taught in traditional clinical psychology center around detecting hidden, underlying troubles, but here I encourage the opposite: listening for underlying positive motivations, strengths, and virtues. The introductions are moving and rapport building, and they easily fill the entire three hours.

The course then spends four meetings on what is scientifically documented about positive emotion: about the past (contentment, satisfaction, serenity),

about the future (optimism, hope, trust, faith), and about the present (joy, ebullience, comfort, ecstasy, mirth, pleasure). We read and discuss the literature on depressive realism (happy people may be less accurate than miserable people<sup>3</sup>), on set ranges for weight and for positive emotion (lottery winners and paraplegics revert to their average preexisting level of happiness or misery within a year, because the capacity for pleasure, 'positive affectivity,' is about 50 percent heritable and therefore quite resistant to change<sup>4</sup>), on wealth and life satisfaction (the one hundred fifty richest Americans are no happier than the average American<sup>5</sup>), on education, climate, and life satisfaction (there is no impact<sup>6</sup>), on optimism and presidential elections (80 percent of the elections have been won by the more optimistic candidate – partialing out standing in the polls, vigor of the campaign, and funding<sup>7</sup>), on longevity and positive emotion (novitiates who at age twenty included positive-emotion words in their brief biographies live about a decade longer than more deadpan

3 Lauren B. Alloy and Lyn Y. Abramson, "Judgment of Contingency in Depressed and Nondepressed Students: Sadder but Wiser," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 108 (1979): 441 – 485.

4 Phil Brickman, D. Coates, and Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, "Lottery Winners and Accident Victims: Is Happiness Relative?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 36 (1978): 917 – 927.

5 Ed Diener, Jeff Horwitz, and Robert Emmons, "Happiness of the Very Wealthy," *Social Indicators* 16 (1985): 263 – 274.

6 Chapter 4 of my book *Authentic Happiness* reviews these data.

7 Harold Zullo and Martin E. P. Seligman, "Pessimistic Rumination Predicts Defeat of Presidential Candidates: 1900 – 1984," *Psychological Inquiry* 1 (1990): 52 – 61.

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nuns<sup>8</sup>), and on the brain and positive emotion (positive emotion correlates well with activity in left-frontal regions of the cortex<sup>9</sup>).

The scientific literature bears on interventions. In parallel to the techniques that therapists have developed for reducing misery, there exist empirically validated techniques that we have developed for enhancing the positive emotions. In our discussion of the positive emotions about the future, we focus on optimism and how it lowers vulnerability to depression and how it enhances productivity, physical health, and immune activity. We practice the skill of disputing unrealistic catastrophic thoughts, the main tool for increasing optimism.<sup>10</sup> One student wrote a long letter to her future self from her graduating-senior self, outlining her advice about optimism and sticking to her values.

Gratitude, meanwhile, is a skill, too little practiced, that amplifies satisfaction about the past. Gratitude Night is a highlight of the course.

An evening is set aside, and class members invite guests – mothers, close friends, roommates, fathers, teachers, and even younger sisters – who have contributed importantly to their well-being, but whom they have never properly thanked. The exact purpose of the

8 Deborah D. Danner, David A. Snowdon, and Wallace V. Friesen, “Positive Emotions in Early Life and Longevity: Findings from the Nun Study,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 80 (5) (2001): 804 – 813.

9 Richard Davidson, “Biological Basis of Personality,” in Valerian J. Derlega, Warren H. Jones, and Barbara A. Winstead, eds., *Personality: Contemporary Theory and Research* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1999).

10 Martin E. P. Seligman, *Learned Optimism* (New York: Knopf, 1990).

gathering is a surprise to the guests, who are honored with testimonials of gratitude from their hosts. For instance, Patty to her mom:

How do we value a person? Can we measure her worth like a piece of gold, with the purest 24-karat nugget shining more brightly than the rest? If a person’s inner-worth were this apparent to everyone, I would not need to make this speech. As it is not, I would like to describe the purest soul I know: my mom . . . You are, however, the most genuine and pure-of-heart person I have ever met . . . .

When complete strangers will call you to talk about the loss of their dearest pet, I am truly taken aback. Each time you speak with a bereaved person, you begin crying yourself, just as if your own pet had died. You provide comfort in a time of great loss for these people. As a child, this confused me, but I realize now that it is simply your genuine heart, reaching out in a time of need . . . .

There is nothing but joy in my heart as I talk about the most wonderful person I know. I can only dream of becoming the pure piece of gold I believe stands before me. It is with the utmost humility that you travel through life, never *once* asking for thanks, simply hoping along the way people have enjoyed their time with you.

There was not a dry eye in the room as Patty read her testimonial and then her mom choked out, “You will always be my Peppermint Patty.” In their evaluations of the course at the end of the semester, “Friday, October 27 was one of the greatest nights of my life” was not untypical. Crying in any class is extraordinary, and when everyone is crying, something has happened that touches the great rhizome underneath us all.

We then turn to the knotty subject of happiness in the present. The pleasures have clear sensory and feeling compo-

nents; they are evanescent and they involve little if any thinking. To enhance the pleasures, we practice in homework the skills of savoring (sharing experiences with others, taking mental photographs, collecting physical mementos) and of mindfulness (looking at experiences afresh from new angles, slowing down, and taking another's perspective).<sup>11</sup> One of the homework assignments is to design and carry out a Pleasurable Day. Experiencing many of these pleasures and having the skills of savoring that amplify them constitute what I call the Pleasant Life.

In ordinary English we fail to distinguish the gratifications from the pleasures. This is a costly confusion because it muddles together two different classes of the best things in life, and it deceives us into thinking they can each be had in the same way. We casually say that we *like* caviar, that we *like* a back rub, and that we *like* the sound of rain on a tin roof – all pleasures – as well as say that we *like* playing volleyball, that we *like* reading Andrea Barrett, and that we *like* helping the homeless – all gratifications.

*Like* is the operative confusion. *Like*'s primary meaning in all these cases is that we *choose* to do these things; we *prefer* them to many other possibilities. Because we use the same verb to characterize what pleases and what gratifies us, we are inclined to expect, erroneously, that the liking comes from the same source. And so we slip into saying, "Caviar gives me pleasure" and "Andrea Barrett gives me pleasure" – as if the same positive feeling exists underneath both sentiments and that commensurability is the basis of our choosing one or the other.

When I press people about the positive emotion underlying their experience of

11 Fred Bryant and Joseph Veroff, *Savoring* (Hillside, N.J.: in press).

pleasure, they tend to describe a felt, conscious, positive feeling. Great food, a back rub, perfume, a hot shower – all produce what Gilbert Ryle in *The Concept of Mind* calls "raw feels": salient, felt, articulable emotion. In contrast, when I press people about the positive emotion they feel when serving coffee to the homeless, reading Nozick, playing bridge, or rock climbing, they tend to describe a feeling that is elusive – one they cannot succinctly characterize as a discrete emotion. Total immersion usually blocks consciousness, so thinking and feeling are completely absent except in retrospect ("Wow. That was fun!"). Indeed, it is the total absorption, the suspension of self-consciousness, the blocking of thought and feeling, and the flow that the gratifications produce – not the presence of any felt sensation – that define liking these activities. In short, pleasure is defined by the presence of raw feels, gratification by their absence.

I suggest that the difference between the Good Life and the Pleasant Life resides in this distinction. The great benefit of distinguishing pleasure from gratification is that even the bottom half of the Gaussian distribution of the capacity for positive affect (three billion non-bullient people) is not consigned by psychology to the purgatory of unhappiness. Not remotely. Rather, these people's happiness lies in pursuing the Good Life – in the abundant gratifications that can totally absorb them.

While we moderns have lost the distinction between the pleasures and the gratifications, the ancient Greeks and the Romans of Hellenistic bent were keen on it. For Aristotle, happiness (*eudaimonia*), distinct from the bodily pleasures, is akin to grace in dancing. Grace is not a separable entity that accompanies the dance or that comes at the end

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of the dance; it is part and parcel of a dance well done. To talk about the happiness of contemplation, then, is only to say that contemplation absorbs us and is done for its own sake; it is not intended to refer to any emotion that accompanies contemplation. Eudaimonia, what I call gratification, is part and parcel of right action.<sup>12</sup> For Seneca, pleasure and virtue are wholly separate; the happy life is lived in harmony with its nature, and while it may or may not contain pleasure, it must contain virtue.<sup>13</sup> Unlike pleasure, which can be had by drugs, shopping, masturbation, and television, gratification cannot be had by shortcuts. Gratification can only be had by the exercise of strength and virtue.

“Flow”<sup>14</sup> is the way that Positive Psychology measures gratification empirically. It is the state we enter when our highest strengths meet our highest challenges. The loss of consciousness characterizes such complete immersion: time stops for us, we concentrate, we feel completely at home. The Good Life, in contrast to the Pleasant Life, is about identifying one’s strengths and virtues and using them as frequently as possible to obtain gratification.

One of my teachers, Julian Jaynes, was given an exotic Amazonian lizard as a

12 Aristotle, book 10 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Especially useful is J. O. Urmson, *Aristotle’s Ethics* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1988): “But for Aristotle the enjoyment of an activity is not the result of it but something barely distinguishable from the activity itself; for him, doing a thing for the sheer pleasure of doing it is doing it for its own sake.” *Ibid.*, 105. For the distinction between the gratifications and the pleasures, see Richard Ryan and Ed Deci, “On Happiness and Human Potential,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 51 (2001): 141–166.

13 Seneca, *Moral Essays De Vita Beata*, x–xi.

14 Mihaly Csikszentmihaly, *Flow* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990).

pet for his laboratory. In the first few weeks after getting the lizard, Julian could not get it to eat. Julian tried everything. It was starving right before his eyes. He offered it lettuce and then mango and then ground pork from the supermarket. He swatted flies and offered them to the lizard. He tried live insects and Chinese takeout. He blended fruit juices. The lizard refused everything and was slipping into torpor.

One day Julian brought in a ham sandwich and proffered it. The lizard showed no interest. Going about his daily routine, Julian picked up *The New York Times* and began to read. When he finished the first section, he tossed it down and it landed inadvertently on top of the ham sandwich. The lizard took one look at this configuration, crept across the floor, leapt onto the newspaper, shredded it, and then gobbled up the sandwich. The lizard needed to stalk and shred before it would eat. So essential was the exercise of this strength to the life of this kind of lizard that its appetite could not be awakened until it had engaged it.

Human beings are much more complex than Amazonian lizards, but all our complexity sits on top of a lizardly brain that has been shaped for hundreds of millions of years by natural selection. Our pleasures, and the appetites they serve, are tied by evolution to a repertoire of action. This repertoire is vastly more elaborate and flexible than stalking, pouncing, and shredding, but it can be ignored only at considerable cost. The belief that we can rely on shortcuts to gratification and bypass the exercise of the strengths and the virtues is folly. It leads to legions of humanity who are depressed in the middle of great wealth, who are starving to death spiritually.

This leads to my formulation of the Good Life: identifying one’s signature



strengths and virtues and using them in work, love, play, and parenting to produce abundant and authentic gratification.

To identify their signature strengths, the students take the VIA (Values-In-Action Institute of the Mayerson Foundation) questionnaire of strengths and virtues.<sup>15</sup> This instrument picks out the five highest self-rated strengths for each student from a classification (Psychology's UnDSM-1)<sup>16</sup> of twenty-four that includes love of learning, valor, perspective, kindness, optimism, capacity to love and be loved, humor, perseverance, spirituality, fairness, and the like.

The first time I taught my undergraduate seminar on the Good Life, I asked the students after they had identified their five highest strengths if they got to deploy at least one of these strengths every day at college. They all said no.

My class's homework assignments followed from this dismal statistic. We each chose an unavoidable task that we found tedious and invented a way to perform the task using one of our signature strengths. One student transformed data entry into flow. Using his strengths of curiosity and love of learning, he began to look for patterns in the mound of demographic data he had been entering for months as a research assistant. He

15 The VIA questionnaire is available at <[www.authentic happiness.org](http://www.authentic happiness.org)>. This website contains all of the leading tests of positive emotion. As of this writing, two hundred thousand people have taken the VIA on this website. We have found the web collection of psychometric data vastly cheaper and faster than paper questionnaires, and the samples are more representative of our target populations than are college sophomores.

16 Christopher Peterson and Martin E. P. Seligman, *Classification of Strengths and Virtues* (New York: Oxford University Press; Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association Press, 2004).

discovered a pattern: the higher the family income, the more likely the parents remain married. Another student transformed his lonely midnight walk from the library to his apartment using his strength of playfulness by rollerblading home and trying to set a new Olympic record on each run. Another student used her strength of social intelligence to turn waitressing into gratification by setting the goal of making each customer's interaction with her the social highlight of his or her evening.

An assignment that contrasts fun with altruism makes the distinction between pleasure and gratification clearer to my students. We each select an activity that gives us pleasure, and we contrast this with doing something philanthropic that calls upon one of our strengths. There is quite a uniform emotional experience that ensues. The pleasurable activities – hanging out with friends, getting a scalp massage, going to the movies – have a square wave offset. When they are over, they leave almost no trace. The gratification of the altruistic activities, by contrast, lingers. One junior who spontaneously tutored her third-grade nephew in arithmetic on the phone for two hours wrote, “After that, the whole day went better, I could really listen and people liked me more. I was mellow all day.” One Wharton student said, “I came to Wharton to make money because I thought money would bring me happiness. I was stunned to find out that I am happier helping another person than I am shopping.”

This assignment is the transition to the final part of the course – the study of the third happy life, the Meaningful Life. From the perspective of Positive Psychology, meaning consists in attachment to something larger. So on this account, the Meaningful Life is similar to the

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Good Life, but with one further ingredient: identifying and using your highest strengths in order to belong to and serve something larger than you are. We call these larger things Positive Institutions.

In this part of the course we read some of the primary literature on Positive Institutions (e.g., Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* and Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*) and we do a set of exercises designed to connect the students to things larger than their own successes and failures. In one exercise, they create a family tree of strengths and virtues by having their parents, grandparents, and siblings take the VIA test, and by interviewing their parents about dead relatives. In another, they mentor a younger student who is facing the specific issues they faced and solved in high school or college. In another, they write their vision of a positive human future and what their role in bringing it about might be. In another, they write their own obituary from the point of view of their grandchildren, emphasizing their own legacy.

We read George Vaillant's *Aging Well*, which seems to demonstrate that American higher education is not teaching its students the Good Life. In a sixty-year longitudinal study of the lives of 268 top members of the Harvard classes of 1939–1942 and 456 Core City men of Boston from the same era, Vaillant came up with a robust and disturbing finding: higher education made little or no difference for “success in life.” (I hasten to add that Vaillant, like I, means not champagne and Porsches, but a life well led, a eudaimonic life.) Looking at a panoply of indicators such as life satisfaction, marital happiness, physical vitality, freedom from depression, longevity, lack of alcoholism, job promotions, maturity, and enjoyment, Vaillant found that the Core City men did as well as the Harvard

graduates, save for two variables: higher Harvard incomes and more Harvard entries in *Who's Who*. My students were not at all puzzled by this, although they were discomfited that their parents were paying six figures for such an education. “We are taught the wrong stuff at college,” they said. “If college taught the material we've learned in this course, higher education would lead to success in life.”

To end the course – having read the literature on memory and hedonics that shows that what people most remember about any endeavor is how it ends<sup>17</sup> – we parallel our serious introductions with serious farewells. Each of us picks our favorite ending – of a movie, poem, or piece of music – explains it and then presents it in a final all-day session.

All in all, teaching this subject has been the most gratifying teaching I have done in my forty years as an instructor. I have seen young lives change before my eyes, and more importantly, I have never before seen such engagement and such mature intellectual performances by undergraduates. So encouraged, I am now teaching this material both at the introductory level in college and at the professional level once a week on the telephone to a massive audience of clinical psychologists, social workers, executive coaches, and life coaches.<sup>18</sup>

Teaching about the Good Life is by no means the unique province of a psychology course. Indeed, if the pursuit of eudaimonia can be taught to psychology students steeped in a century of victim-

17 Daniel Kahneman, Barbara L. Fredrickson, Charles A. Schreiber, and Donald A. Redelmeier, “When More Pain is Preferred to Less: Adding a Better End,” *Psychological Science* 4 (6) (November 1993): 401–405.

18 <[www.authentichappinesscoaching.com](http://www.authentichappinesscoaching.com)>.

ology and shallow hedonics, think how easily this lesson might be taught to students who have previously encountered the better examples of well-led lives found in the humanities. A stance, moreover, that gives the best in life equal footing with the worst, that is as concerned with flourishing as with surviving, that is as interested in building as in repairing, should find a comfortable home in most any discipline. In the end, I believe that we learn more when lighting candles than when cursing the darkness.

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