

## The Keys to the Good Life

For centuries, people have been searching to understand what makes life good. Perhaps, the reason we so frequently seek to define what makes life worth living is because we are looking for more in it. But, what exactly is this "more" about? Christopher Peterson, a psychologist and researcher in the field of positive psychology at the University of Michigan, dedicated much of his time to this question. Sadly, he passed away in October of 2012 from sudden heart failure. Nevertheless, his groundbreaking work still deeply resonates with many people as it does for me.

Peterson's research clearly showed that people need a good relationship with at least one happy individual in their personal lives so that they can feel happy themselves. In the workplace, the people who have at least one close friend who cares about them and with whom they can talk honestly, are the people who are happiest in their jobs. Taking some time to chat with friends at home, and around the water cooler, might actually help pave the way to a happier, healthier, and more productive home and workplace.

Furthermore, the good life can be taught. We can actually learn about what makes life good, and apply it to our lives. For most of us, good days have common features. A good day is usually comprised of three factors. First of all, a day has been good if we *chose* to do the things we did. Secondly, we feel good if we are *competent* at the things we chose to do. Thirdly, we feel good when we have felt *connected* to other people during the day.

Peterson was able to demonstrate that there are many factors that comprise a happy life. Most of all, *other people matter* in the good life. Of course, pleasurable activities are enjoyable and associated with positive emotions. But, we also need an *engaged* life to feel happy. We need to be immersed in activities that thoroughly absorb our attention. Losing ourselves in an activity or conversation can be a sign of "flow" or the engaged life. Wasting time playing video games or watching television creates "junk flow", which is numbing engagement in activity that often results in negative feelings. For the good life, we also need to feel connected to something bigger than ourselves and have a sense that life is meaningful. Finally, deeply social relationships are necessary for happiness. A zest for living, a curiosity about the world, and feelings of gratitude also help to create happiness in our lives.

At the heart of it all, it seems that what makes people happy changes over time. We cannot predict what will make us feel fulfilled in two or three or five years from now. We can only focus on the present, and try to meet our needs now. No one choice or thing or place or profession will guarantee happiness. We can only pursue other things, and hope that happiness will come from them. This is why hedonism ultimately causes *unhappiness*: we can never directly grasp happiness. Rather, it is an attitude and a mindset that evolves and changes over time.

However, having fun, participating in truly absorbing activities, living out your values and beliefs, keeping up relationships, and seeking out novelty can go a long way to ensuring at least

some happiness. Savour it!