

WHY RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

The best ideas aren't hidden in shadowy recesses. They're right in front of us, hidden in plain sight.

Richard Farson and Ralph Keyes

Harvard Study, Day 6 of "8 Days" Questionnaire, 2003

Q: What is the secret to aging well?

A: Happiness, caring. Watch what you're eating. Try to get out and do a little walking or exercise. Have friends. It's so good to have friends.

Harriet Vaughn, Study participant, age 80

Consider the feeling you get when you love someone, or when you know you are loved in return. Think about how you experience it in your body, the sensation of warmth and comfort. Now consider the similar but distinct feeling of connection when a close friend helps you through a hard time. Or the lasting exhilaration when someone you respect says they are proud of you. Think about what it feels like to be moved to tears. Or when you get a small boost of energy sharing a laugh with a coworker. Consider

the physical pain of losing someone dear to you. Or even the momentary pleasure of waving at the mail carrier.

These feelings, big and small, are connected to biological processes. Just as our brain responds to the presence of food in our bellies by rewarding us with pleasure sensations, so does it respond to positive contact with others. The brain effectively says to us: *Yes, more of this, please*. Positive interaction tells our bodies that we are safe, reducing our physical arousal and increasing our sense of well-being. By contrast, negative experiences and interactions create a sense that we are in danger and stimulate us to produce stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol. These hormones are part of a cascade of physical reactions that raise alertness and help us respond to situations of critical importance—the “fight or flight” response. They are a big part of what gives us that *feeling* of stress.

We rely on the signals of these stress hormones and pleasurable sensations, as they guide us through the challenges and opportunities of life. Avoid danger, seek connection.

These reactions to rewarding and threatening situations have a long evolutionary history. *Homo sapiens* have been walking around the planet for hundreds of thousands of years with these biological guides to living built inside of us. That little ping of joy you get when a baby laughs at your silly expression is biologically linked to the one your distant ancestors got when they made a baby laugh in the year 100,000 BC.

Prehistoric humans were threatened in ways we can hardly conceive of today. They had similar bodies, but primitive technology gave them only minimal protection from the environment and predatory animals, and virtually no remedies for injury or other health problems. A toothache could end in death. They lived short, hard, and probably terrifying lives. And yet they survived. Why?

One important reason is a trait that early *Homo sapiens* shared with many other successful animal species: their bodies and brains had evolved to encourage cooperation.

They survived because they were social.

The human animal is not much different today, though the project

of survival has taken on new meanings and complications. Compared to centuries past, life in the twenty-first century is changing faster than ever before, and many of the threats to our lives are of our own making. Along with challenges related to climate change, growing income inequality, and the vast complications of new communications technologies, we must deal with new threats to our internal states of mind. Loneliness is more pervasive than ever before, and our ancient brains, designed to seek the safety of groups, experience those negative feelings as life-threatening, which leads to stress and sickness. With each year that passes, civilization is presented with new challenges that were unimaginable even fifty years ago. It also presents new choices, which means life paths are now more varied than ever. But regardless of the pace of change and the choices many of us now have, this fact remains: the human animal has evolved to be connected with other humans.

To say that human beings require warm relationships is no touchy-feely idea. It is a hard fact. Scientific studies have told us again and again: human beings need nutrition, we need exercise, we need purpose, and *we need each other*.

We are often asked to summarize the findings of the Harvard Study. People want to know: What is the most important thing we've learned? Both of us are by nature resistant to simple answers so these conversations are often not as short as the questioners might like. But when we really think about the consistent signal that comes through after eighty-four years of study and hundreds of research papers, it is that one simple message:

Positive relationships are essential to human well-being.

We'll go out on a limb and guess that if you're reading this book, you are seeking wisdom or you are at least curious about what makes for a good life. You want a life that has meaning and purpose and joy, and you want to be healthy. If we go a little further out on that limb, we might even guess that you are already *trying*, to the best of your ability, to be happy

and healthy. You have some idea of who you are, of your likes and dislikes and emotions and social abilities. Day by day you try to live your best life. And if you're like most of us, you don't always succeed.

Throughout this book, we'll be addressing some of the common reasons why people have a hard time finding happiness and satisfaction in life, but there are a couple of general truths that should be acknowledged right off the bat.

The first is this: the good life may be a central concern for most people, but it is not the central concern of most modern societies. Life today is a haze of competing social, political, and cultural priorities, some of which have very little to do with improving people's lives. The modern world prioritizes many things ahead of the lived experience of human beings.

The second reason is related and even more fundamental: our brains, the most sophisticated and mysterious system in the known universe, often mislead us in our quest for lasting pleasure and satisfaction. We may be capable of extraordinary feats of intellect and creativity, we may have mapped the human genome and walked on the moon, but when it comes to making decisions about our lives, we humans are often bad at knowing what is good for us. Common sense in this area of life is not so sensible. It's very difficult to figure out what really matters.

These two things—the haze of culture and the mistakes we make in forecasting what will make us happy—are woven together and play a role in our lives every single day. Over the course of a life, they exert significant influence. The culture we live in leads us in particular directions, sometimes without our even noticing, and we follow along, outwardly pretending that we know what we're doing, but inwardly in a state of low-grade confusion.

Before we talk some more about the cultural and personal ways we can be led away from the good life, let's look at the lives of two Harvard Study participants who have already been through the entirety of life's gauntlet, and see what their experiences can teach us about what matters, and what doesn't.

THE LUCK OF THE DRAW

In 1946, John Marsden and Leo DeMarco were both at major crossroads in their lives. Both had the good fortune of recently graduating from Harvard, both volunteered to serve in the military during World War II—John could not engage in active duty because of health complications and served stateside, and Leo served in the Navy in the South Pacific. Once the war was over, both were about to step forward into the rest of their lives. They had what most people would consider a leg up (or many legs up): John's family was wealthy, Leo's was upper-middle-class, they were graduates of an elite university, and they were male and White in a society that privileged White men. Not to mention that in the aftermath of the war, a lot of social and economic support was being given to veterans through the federally funded G.I. Bill and in local communities. The good life, it seemed, was waiting for them.

While almost two thirds of the original men in the Harvard Study came from the poorest and most disadvantaged neighborhoods in Boston, the remaining third attended Harvard as undergraduates. Groomed to succeed, every one of these college men should have been a poster child for *The Good Life in America*. Like John and Leo, some came from well-to-do families, most pursued professional careers and married, and many achieved economic and professional success.

Here we see an example of common sense leading us astray. Many of us naturally assume that the material conditions of people's lives determine their happiness. We assume that people who are less advantaged must be less happy and that people who are more advantaged must be happier. Science tells a more complicated story. When you study the lives of thousands of individuals, patterns emerge that do not always fit with popular conceptions about how things are supposed to go. Individual lives like John's and Leo's offer a look at what really matters.

John had a choice: to stay in Cleveland, work in the office of his father's dry goods franchise, and eventually take it over, or to follow his lifelong dream and go to law school (he'd just been accepted to the University

of Chicago law school). He was fortunate to have that choice to make. Looking only at the trappings of his life, many people would think that John was destined for happiness.

He decided to go to law school. John had always been a diligent student, and he kept that up. According to John himself, his success was due more to hard work than any special intelligence. He told the Study that his main motivation was a fear of failure, and he even intentionally avoided dating so as not to be distracted. When he graduated from the University of Chicago, he was near the top of his class and began fielding attractive job offers, eventually settling on a firm that encouraged the kind of public service work he hoped to do. He began consulting for the federal government about the administration of public services, and also taught classes at the University of Chicago. His father, though disappointed that John had left the family business, was also very proud. John was on his way.

Leo, on the other hand, had dreamed of becoming a writer and journalist. He studied history at Harvard, and during the war kept meticulous diaries, thinking that he might use them for a book someday. His experiences in the war convinced him that he was on the right path—he wanted to write about how history affects the lives of ordinary people. But while he was overseas, his father died, and soon after he arrived home his mother was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. As the oldest of three children, he decided to move back to Burlington, Vermont, to care for and be near her, and soon found himself teaching high school.

Shortly after he started his first teaching job, Leo met Grace, a woman with whom he fell deeply in love. They were married immediately and within a year had their first child. After that, the outlines of his life were mostly set. He continued teaching high school for the next forty years and never pursued his dream of becoming a writer.

We skip ahead twenty-nine years, to February 1975. Both men are 55. John got married at 34 and is now a successful lawyer, making \$52,000 per year. Leo is still a high school teacher, making \$18,000 per year. One day they receive the same questionnaire in the mail.

Let's imagine John Marsden in his law office, sitting at his desk between appointments, and Leo DeMarco at his desk at Burlington High School, while his ninth grade students are puzzling over a history exam. The two men answer questions about their health, their recent family history, and eventually each of them comes to a set of 180 True/False questions. Among them is this one:

True or False:

Life has more pain than pleasure.

To which John (the lawyer) writes:

True.

And Leo (the teacher) writes:

False.

And this one:

True or False:

I often feel starved for affection.

To this, John responds:

True.

And Leo responds:

False.

They go on to answer questions about their alcohol use (both have one drink every day), their sleep habits, their political ideas, their religious

practices (both attend church every Sunday), and later they come to these two questions:

Complete the following sentences any way you wish:

A man feels good when . . .

John:

. . . he is able to respond to inner drives.

Leo:

. . . he senses that his family loves him despite everything.

And:

Being with other people . . .

John:

. . . is pleasant.

Leo:

. . . is pleasant (up to a point!).

John Marsden, one of the more professionally successful members of the Study, was also one of the least happy. Like Leo DeMarco he wanted to be close to people, as this last answer shows, and he loved his family, but he consistently reported feelings of disconnection and sadness throughout his life. He struggled in his first marriage and alienated his children. When John remarried at the age of 62, he quickly began to refer to that new relationship as “loveless,” though it would last to the end of his life.

Later we'll talk more about John's path to despair, and some of the factors that likely shaped his suffering, but there is one particular feature of John's life that concerns us right now: while John tried hard to make himself happy, he was preoccupied at every stage of his life with himself, and what he referred to as his "inner drives." He began his career hoping to make life better for others, but over time associated his achievements less with helping people and more with professional success. Convinced that his career and his accomplishments would bring him happiness, he was never able to find a path to joy.

Leo DeMarco, on the other hand, thought of himself primarily in relation to others—his family, his school, and his friends appear often in his reports to the Study—and he is generally considered to be one of the Study's happiest men. But when one of Harvard's researchers interviewed Leo in middle age, she wrote, "I came away from our visit with the impression that the subject was, well . . . somewhat ordinary."

However, by his own accounting of things, Leo lived a rich and satisfying life. He wouldn't show up on the evening news and his name was not known beyond his local community, but he had four daughters and a wife who adored him, was remembered fondly by friends, colleagues, and students, and throughout his life rated himself as "very happy" or "extremely happy" on study questionnaires. Unlike John, Leo found his work meaningful specifically because he took pleasure in the benefit that other people derived from his teaching.

It's easy enough now, looking back on these two men's lives, to see the links between what they each believed, the decisions they made, and how their lives unfolded. But why is it so difficult in the moment to make decisions that will benefit our well-being? Why do we so often overlook sources of happiness that are right in front of us? An experiment conducted by researchers at the University of Chicago illuminates one central piece of the puzzle.

STRANGERS ON A TRAIN

Imagine you're on a train. Strangers are seated all around you. You'd like to have the most pleasant possible train ride, and you have a choice: talk to a stranger or keep to yourself. Which do you choose?

We know what most of us do: we keep to ourselves. Who wants to deal with a random stranger? They'll probably talk our ear off. Also, we want to get some work done or just enjoy some music or a podcast.

This kind of prediction about what will make us happy is known in psychology as "affective forecasting." We are constantly making predictions about how all kinds of things in our lives, large and small, will make us feel.

Researchers at the University of Chicago turned their local train into an affective forecasting experiment. They asked commuters to predict which of two scenarios—talking to a stranger or minding your own business—would make for a more positive experience. Then they instructed one group to intentionally connect with a nearby stranger and the other group to remain disconnected. When the ride was over, they asked the commuters how they felt about the train ride.

Before the ride, people overwhelmingly predicted that talking to someone they didn't know would be a bad experience, and that keeping to themselves would be much better. They were forecasting what would make them happy, and what would make them miserable. The actual experience, however, was the opposite of what they expected. When commuters were told to strike up a conversation, most had a positive experience and rated their commute as better than usual, and those who typically worked on the train reported that the trip was no less productive when they talked to a stranger.

There is a lot of research like this suggesting that human beings are bad at affective forecasting. Not just in short-term situations like the train study, but in the long term, too. We seem particularly bad at forecasting the benefits of relationships. A big part of this is the obvious fact that relationships can be messy and unpredictable. This messiness is some of what prompts many of us to prefer being alone. It's not just that we are seeking

solitude; it's that we want to avoid the potential mess of connecting with others. But we overestimate that mess and underestimate the beneficial effects of human connection. This is a feature of our decision making in general: we pay a lot of attention to potential costs and downplay or dismiss potential benefits.

This is the situation in which many of us find ourselves. We avoid things that we *think* will make us feel bad and pursue things that we *think* will make us feel good. Our instincts don't always lead us astray, but there are important areas in which they do. Like John Marsden, many of us end up making some pretty big decisions (like which career to pursue) or the same small decisions (like never talking to strangers) over and over, based on faulty thinking that seems perfectly logical. Rarely do we get the opportunity to see the error.

This would all be difficult enough if we lived in a vacuum where no outside forces were affecting our decisions; the problem is compounded when we subject our decision making to the cultural influences we face, which themselves contain some ideas that can get us off track. We are not the only ones forecasting what will make us happy; the culture we live in is also forecasting *for us*.

UNDER THE SPELL OF CULTURE

In his commencement address to Kenyon College in 2005, the writer David Foster Wallace used a parable to point out an indelible truth:

There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, "Morning, boys. How's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, "What the hell is water?"

Every culture—from the broad culture of a nation down to the culture inside a family—is at least partially invisible to its participants. There

are important assumptions, value judgments, and practices that create the water we swim in without our noticing or agreeing to them. We simply find ourselves in this world, and we move forward. These features of culture affect just about everything in our lives, often in positive ways, connecting us to each other and creating identities and meaning. But there is a flip side. Sometimes cultural messages and practices point us in directions *away* from well-being and happiness.

So let's stop for a second, as Wallace was encouraging the graduating students to do, and notice some of the cultural water.

In the 1940s and 1950s, when John, Leo, and the other original participants of the Harvard Study were growing into adults, American culture brimmed with assumptions—as it does today, and as it will tomorrow—about what a good life looks like. These assumptions percolated down into their lives, and more importantly, into their life choices. John, for example, was convinced that pursuing law and becoming a lawyer—a respected profession—would lay the groundwork for his future happiness. The culture he grew up in created the conditions for this belief to seem like a truism.

This is complicated terrain because the things that our respective cultures encourage us to pursue—money, achievement, status, and other things—are rarely complete mirages. Money allows us to acquire important things that we need for well-being; achievements are often satisfying and aiming for them can provide goals that give purpose to our lives, and allow us to move forward into new, exciting realms; and status gives us a certain social respect that can allow us to effect positive change. But money, achievement, and status all have a tendency to overtake other priorities. This, too, is a function of our ancient brains: we focus on what is most visible, and most immediate. The value of relationships is ephemeral and hard to quantify, but money can be counted. Achievements can be listed on a résumé, and social media followers tick up in the right-hand corner of your screen. These countable victories give us small pulses of feeling that we like—pleasing sensations, remnants of those ancient signals. As we go through life we can see it all accumulating, and we pursue

these goals without always thinking about *why* we're pursuing them. Soon enough we find ourselves beyond the realm where these culturally approved pursuits affect our lives and other people in positive ways, and into the realm where they become ends in themselves. Here, the pursuits become abstracted, more symbolic than tangible, and the chase for a better life starts to look more like running in circles.

There is a lot to say about all of these objects of desire and their psychological underpinnings, but for the sake of illustration let's take a closer look at one emblematic keystone, a persistent cultural assumption, shared among many cultures all over the world, that is not only old but ancient and shows no signs of going anywhere:

The foundation of a good life is money.

Of course very few people would say it like this with a straight face, but signs of the strength of this belief are evident all around us. We see it in the equation of well-paying jobs with "good" jobs, in the fascination with the ultrawealthy, in the increasingly pragmatic educational system ("You go to school to get a 'better' job"), in the glamorous promises of consumer products, and in many other avenues of life. It is a story so much a part of the cultural water that it survives despite the fact that philosophers, writers, and artists have been warning against the seductions of wealth for thousands of years.

Aristotle, for example, outlined the problem two thousand years ago. "The life of money-making is one undertaken under compulsion," he wrote, "and wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking; for it is merely useful and for the sake of something else."

We might list a hundred similar sentiments, articulated in every era of history ("Money has never made man happy, nor will it"—Ben Franklin, or: "Don't make money your goal. Instead pursue the things you love doing and then do them so well that people can't take their eyes off you."—Maya Angelou). All of these sentiments trickle down and coalesce into that clichéd refrain: Money can't buy happiness.

The idea is so common that it has itself been folded into capitalist cultures all over the world. People tell each other all the time that money isn't

the answer, and yet money remains a central object of desire in cultures almost everywhere.

The main reason for this is not much of a mystery. The idea that money buys happiness maintains its allure because every day we see the ways it affects how people live.

In America, income inequality has been increasing for decades and is connected to all kinds of other inequalities, from discrepancies in access to health care to the fact that rich people have shorter commutes to work. The overall effect of money is so significant that people with high incomes can expect to live ten to fifteen years longer than people with low incomes. The men in the Harvard Study are no different; on average, the college men had significantly higher incomes than the Boston inner-city men, and lived 9.1 years longer.

So the idea that money may be a major shaper of happiness is, in some ways, a commonsense observation. And yet it does not reflect the whole truth. To understand the extent to which money affects happiness and well-being, we have to look a bit deeper and ask, as Aristotle was suggesting:

What is the money for?

WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT MONEY

In 2010 Angus Deaton and Daniel Kahneman at Princeton University tried to quantify the relationship of money to happiness using a year-long Gallup survey that resulted in a massive dataset of 450,000 daily responses from a nationally representative sample of one thousand people.

Deaton and Kahneman showed that in the United States, \$75,000 seemed to be a kind of magic number at that time. Once a household income was more than \$75,000 per year, which was close to the average family income in the U.S. at the time of the study, the amount of money that people earned showed no clear relationship to daily reports of enjoyment and laughter, which were used as indicators of emotional well-being.

This study finding seems to reinforce the idea that money can't buy happiness, but the other half of the finding was equally as significant: for those making less than \$75,000 per year, more income did correlate, modestly, with more happiness.

When money is scarce, and basic needs cannot be met with certainty, life can be incredibly stressful, and in this situation, every dollar matters. Having a basic amount of money allows people to meet those needs, have some control over life, and in many countries affords access to better health care and living conditions.

The study by Deaton and Kahneman is memorable for estimating a dollar amount where happiness plateaus, but the meaning of the study was not new. It is largely consistent with other research that has used different methods and been conducted across multiple countries and cultures that vary in wealth. These studies have paid attention both to how money affects individual happiness and to whether increasing wealth for an entire nation affects the overall happiness of the population. Regardless of their methods and locations, these studies point to a similar conclusion: money matters most at lower levels of income where a dollar, euro, rupee, or yuan is used to provide basic needs and a sense of security. Once you get beyond that threshold, money does not seem to matter much, if at all, when it comes to happiness. As Deaton and Kahneman wrote in their study, "More money does not necessarily buy more happiness, but less money is associated with emotional pain."

At lower levels of income, money brings tangible benefits that are necessary for survival, safety, and a sense of control. But at slightly higher levels of income (and this needn't be \$75,000) the meaning of money starts to become somewhat more abstract and becomes about other things, like status and pride.

Maybe none of this comes as a major surprise to you. Maybe for you, money is not about stuff, and not about status, but about freedom. Money has a lot of power in the world, you might think, and the more money I have, the more choice and control I will have.

It's understandable to feel this way. Money is woven deep into the

foundations of modern societies. It is tied to achievement, to status, to self-worth, to feelings of freedom and self-determination, to our ability to care for and give joy to our families, to fun. To everything. It's natural that we see it as a central medium through which we interact with the world and pursue so many things in life.

Even Leo DeMarco, the teacher, who built his life around connections with his family and students, was very conscious of money. In addition to his careful retirement savings, he set aside a small amount for many years and used those savings to buy a fishing boat (which his oldest daughter named *Dolores*). That boat featured in all of his children's memories. Leo used money as a means to achieve some satisfying personal ends—ends that connected him to the people he cared about.

However, when money becomes the point, rather than a tool, it joins ranks with other persistent objects of desire that are imbued with importance by the culture around us. Things like fame and career success. Or, as Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb framed it in their book *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, “badges of ability.” That is, personal merits that are publicly acknowledged.

Some of our happiness also depends on what we see when we look at our neighbors. It is human nature to compare ourselves to others. How big is the gap between the lives we see all around us—in the real world, in entertainment and social media—and what we believe is possible in our own lives? Research has shown that the more we compare ourselves to others—even when the comparison is in our favor—the less happy we are. And the bigger the disparities we see, the greater our unhappiness. So, like many things happiness-related, money's effect on us is simple and it's complicated. But maybe the reason we never find an answer to the question *Can money buy happiness?* is because we're asking the wrong question.

Maybe the right question is: *What actually makes me happy?*

A BOY FROM CHARLESTOWN

When Alan Silva was 14 years old he was in love with the movies. In the summer of 1942, he got a job shining shoes in Thompson Square so that twice a week he could head over to a theater in Charlestown and spend his afternoon with James Cagney or Susan Hayward. He'd go with friends, and when they weren't around, he'd go by himself. He'd see every movie twice, and if it wasn't good, the second time he'd complain to the ticket taker. On the way home he might detour to the Charlestown marina to see who he could find, since he was part of the Community Sailing Club, a local organization that taught kids to sail. If nothing too interesting was happening at the marina he'd head up to Chelsea Street and wait for the right kind of delivery truck to drive by—one with a handrail on the back—so he could sneak up behind and hop a ride back home. But he kept that part a secret. “He doesn't do any truck hopping,” his mother told the Harvard Study. “I've warned him about losing legs.”

Like most of the Boston kids in the Study, the Silva family lived in poverty. Alan's father was a Portuguese immigrant and worked as a machinist at the Navy Yard, and his income was just enough to keep food on the table. Alan, an excitable, busy kid, was blissfully unaware of the financial stress his parents experienced.

The researcher who interviewed him at 14 described him as “wildly adventurous.”

“He comes running in all out of breath,” his mother said, “and then he just talks talks talks.” She was inclined to allow him some freedom, something her mother-in-law, who lived with them in their three-room apartment, always complained about, since she thought Alan would get into the wrong group, start stealing, and his life would go down the drain.

“I'm not too strict,” his mother said. “I let him do what other kids do. It's normal. My mother was too strict and it made me moody. Now I read child psychology books.”

In addition to being adventurous, Alan was ambitious. If he wasn't at

the movies or sailing or hopping trucks, he was home tinkering with an Erector Set that his father bought him for Christmas. He wanted to learn everything he could about building things. He believed he had control over his life, which also led him to believe something many of the other Boston kids in the Study didn't: that he could go to college.

The two groups of the Harvard Study—the Boston men and the Harvard men—are different in many ways. Taken together, the two reflect some hard realities about the effect of poverty and the differences in life outcomes between the working class and the professional class.

But certain relational advantages retain their power across this socioeconomic divide. In Alan Silva's case, he had a mother who loved him; she advocated for him, believed in him, and supported his aspirations. Thanks in part to her encouragement and support, Alan Silva was one of the few Boston men who went to college. Shortly after graduating with a degree in electrical engineering he was hired by the telephone company and had a long career, retiring at age 56.

At 95, Alan doesn't care for new movies, but he catches some of his old favorites on TV. When we asked him in 2006 what he was most proud of in his life, he did not talk about his career or his college degree:

"We'll be married forty-eight years this year. Children turned out good and grandchildren, too. I'm proud of my family."

Alan's story brings to life the lessons of the Harvard Study on the power of relationships, and it reminds us of an important truth: all of us have a rich mix of things we can't control and things we can. Each of us must find ways to work with the hand we're dealt.

HOW MUCH OF OUR HAPPINESS IS UNDER OUR CONTROL?

Happiness and freedom begin with a clear understanding of one principle. Some things are within your control. And some things are not.

Epictetus, *Discourses*

Epictetus, another of the great Greek philosophers, was born a slave, so the question of control was personal to him. We don't even know the name his mother gave him; Epictetus is a Greek word meaning "acquired."

When we obsess over things that fall outside of our control, Epictetus said, we make ourselves miserable. So an important project of life is distinguishing which is which.

The theologian Reinhold Niebuhr's "Serenity Prayer" is a modern version of this idea, and while the original version is somewhat different, it is commonly quoted in this way:

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
courage to change the things I can,
and wisdom to know the difference.*

People often think, for understandable reasons, True happiness is beyond reach for me because there is so much that I can't help that is set in stone. I'm not genetically gifted; I'm not extroverted; I endured trauma in my past and am still struggling with it; I'm not privileged in the ways that seem to advantage others in this imbalanced and unfair world.

Lots of things matter in the lottery of life. We may not like it, but there are things we are born *with* or born *into* that affect our well-being and are also beyond our immediate, personal control. Genetics matter. Gender matters. Intelligence. Disability. Sexual orientation. Race. And all of these matter, of course, because of our cultural biases and practices. Black Americans, for example, are one of the least advantaged—if not *the* least advantaged—groups in the United States. On average, Black Americans

have less savings, higher rates of incarceration, and poorer health outcomes than any other racial group, all of which contribute to a persistent socioeconomic disadvantage that is difficult to break out of. And as Deaton and Kahneman's study and many others show, socioeconomic status can have an effect on emotional well-being.

This brings us back to the Harvard Study, and an important question about its ethnic makeup: How could the lives of White men like John, Leo, and Henry, men who grew up in America in the middle of the twentieth century, have anything to say about modern women or people of color, about people from entirely different countries, cultures, and backgrounds? Aren't the findings of the Harvard Study only relevant to the demographics of its participants?

When Marc is asked this question, he thinks of a startling and influential paper published in the journal *Science*. The paper sought to determine if there was a link between social connection and the risk of dying at any age, and it looked at both women and men from five studies conducted in five different places around the world.

One of these places was Evans County, Georgia, another was eastern Finland.

There are probably few greater contrasts than the life of a Black woman who grew up in the American South in the 1960s and the life of a White man living on the shore of a frozen lake in Finland. At just about any level of experience you can imagine, one would expect to see some major differences.

All five studies were prospective and longitudinal; like the Harvard Study, they looked at lives as they unfolded over time.

For both men and women, geography and race mattered, as they do in many studies. Individuals in Evans County had the highest mortality rates in the study on average, and those in eastern Finland had the lowest. Within Evans County, Blacks had a higher risk of dying at any point in their lives than Whites did, though that difference was relatively small when compared to the difference between Finland and Evans County. Taken together, these differences are stark and meaningful. But this is

only a part of the story. Pulling back a bit more, the data for the men and women in all five locations display a remarkably similar pattern: *people who were more socially connected had less risk of dying at any age*. Whether you were a Black woman in rural Georgia or a White man in Finland, the more connected you were to others, the lower your risk of dying in any given year.

This consistency of findings across different locations and demographic groups is what scientists call “replication,” the holy grail of research, and not easy to come by. Just because a scientific study found something interesting does not mean that the matter is settled. Good science requires that findings be replicated. Especially when the object of study is something as complex as human life, it is crucial that we find a consistent signal across many studies, all pointing in a similar direction. Only then can we have confidence that what we’re seeing is not a fluke.

More than twenty years after this analysis of five studies, another much larger study cemented the connection between relationships and risk of mortality. Julianne Holt-Lunstad and her colleagues looked at 148 studies conducted in countries all over the world (Canada, Denmark, Germany, China, Japan, Israel, and others) with a combined total of more than 300,000 participants. This analysis echoes the findings of the study highlighted in the article in *Science*: across all age groups, genders, and ethnicities, strong social connections were associated with increased odds of living longer. In fact, Holt-Lunstad and her colleagues quantified the association: incredibly, *social connection increased the likelihood of surviving in any given year by more than 50 percent*. Across all of these studies, the mortality rate of individuals with the fewest ties was between 2.3 (men) and 2.8 (women) times higher than that of individuals with the most ties. These are very large associations, comparable to the effect of smoking or getting cancer. And smoking, in the United States, is considered the leading cause of preventable death.

Holt-Lunstad’s study was done in 2010. As time goes on, study after study, including our own, continues to reinforce the connection between good relationships and health, regardless of a person’s location,

age, ethnicity, or background. Although the life of a poor Italian kid who grew up during the Great Depression in South Boston and the life of a 1940 Harvard graduate who went on to become a senator are quite different from each other—and even more different from a modern woman of color—we all share a common humanity. Like the Holt-Lunstad review, analyses of hundreds of studies tell us that the basic benefits of human connection do not change much from one neighborhood to the next, from one city to the next, from one country to the next, or from one race to the next. It is indisputable that many societies are unequal; there are cultural practices and systemic factors causing significant amounts of inequity and emotional pain. But the capacity of relationships to affect our well-being and health is universal.

As we proceed, we'll focus on identifying what you can do, regardless of the society you live in, or the color of your skin. We will highlight the *malleable factors* that have been shown to affect an individual's quality of life, across many disparate circumstances. Factors that can have an impact on your life and that are under your control.

But what kind of impact? How important are the things we can't change versus the things we can?

We are asked this question a lot, in different forms. One of us will be discussing our research after a talk or in a casual setting and suddenly someone will develop a worried look, and we can almost hear the question before it's asked:

"If my main worry is money and health care, is any of this relevant to me?"

Or: "If I'm shy and have trouble making friends, is the good life out of reach?"

Or as one woman recently asked Bob: "If I had a bad childhood, am I just totally screwed?"

Saying something matters and saying it seals one's fate are two very different things. In science, researchers focus on finding differences between groups. We use the unfortunate words "statistically significant" to note when these differences seem reliable. Very small differences, however, can

be statistically significant; so small that they are practically meaningless. So in addition to saying these factors matter, we need to think about how *much* they matter.

SLICING UP THE HAPPINESS PIE

The researcher and psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky has argued, with compelling evidence, that there are real answers to the question “What makes us happy?” In an analysis that would have made Epictetus proud, she examined the degree to which our level of happiness is changeable.

Building on findings from a large collection of studies, from the happiness of twins raised in different families to the connection of life events with well-being, she sought to discover the mutability of happiness. Previous research suggests that human beings have a “happiness set point,” or a baseline level of happiness that is influenced largely by genetics and personality traits. Regardless of how unhappy we feel through one period, or how great we feel through another, we are pulled toward that set point. This is a robust finding that has been discussed in the psychological literature for decades. In general, after something happens that causes us to feel happier or sadder, that boost or dip begins to dissipate, and we return to the *general* level of happiness we’ve always felt. For example, one year after winning the lottery, those lucky lottery winners are indistinguishable from the rest of us when it comes to happiness.

But if it seems like the happiness set point means that our well-being is set in stone, it’s worth pointing out that the glass is half full here—or at least 40 percent full. Lyubomirsky and her colleagues used research data to estimate that our intentional activity counts for a lot when it comes to happiness. Our actions and the choices we make account for about 40 percent of our happiness. That’s a sizable chunk that is still within our control.

These findings reveal one of the most essential and hopeful truths about human beings: we are adaptable. We are resilient, industrious, and creative creatures who can survive incredible hardship, laugh our way

through tough times, and come out stronger on the other end. But there's another side to this, as the concept of a happiness set point and research about lottery winners shows: we also get used to *better* circumstances. Our emotional well-being cannot improve into infinity. We settle in. We tend to take things for granted. This is a key point in the discussion about money. You might believe that making six figures or landing a new job or upgrading from your old Honda will make you happy, but in short order you will have gotten used to that situation, too, and your brain will move on to the next challenge, the next desire. Not even lottery winners can remain euphoric forever.

This does not point to a flaw in the human character, but to a biological fact: we meet all experiences, positive and negative, on the same psychological and neurological playing field in our brain. Here the science dovetails with a central tenet of Stoicism and Buddhism, as well as many other spiritual traditions: the way we feel in life is determined only in part by what happens around us, and to a great extent by what happens inside of us.

David Foster Wallace, in his Kenyon commencement speech that we quoted earlier, noted what modern Western culture (though it applies to others as well) has done to these mental playing fields we all have, providing us:

extraordinary wealth and comfort and personal freedom. The freedom to be lords of our tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the center of all creation. This kind of freedom has much to recommend it. But of course there are all different kinds of freedom, and the kind that is most precious you will not hear much talked about in the great outside world of winning and achieving and displaying. The really important kind of freedom involves attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day.

THE ENGINE OF A GOOD LIFE

Leo DeMarco, the high school teacher, had four children. Three of them continue to participate in the Study. In 2016 his daughter Katherine visited our offices for an interview and a series of assessments of her physical health and her approach to navigating emotional challenges. During these visits, which typically took about half a day, we asked participants to share memories of a difficult or low moment in their lives. These experiences are illuminating from both a human and a scientific point of view, since low moments are often formative and also give us some indication of how people cope with difficulties. When we asked Katherine to share a low moment, she wrote about the following experience:

When my husband and I were trying to become parents for the first time, I had four miscarriages in a relatively short period of time. This was probably the first time in my life that I felt that things were out of my control. There is the saying that you learn more from failure than you do from success, and looking back on this time is when I learned that. It tested me and my husband, and I remember being aware that we needed to be on the same page as a couple so the desire for becoming a family did not become all-consuming in our lives. This was a period that brought a lot of sadness to me and my husband. But I also look back to it as a time that we learned to really be a team when the going got tough. We also consciously chose to not let the experience of trying to start a family take over our lives. We had chosen each other as partners and we needed to take care of each other, with or without children.

Relationships are not just essential as stepping-stones to other things, and they are not simply a functional route to health and happiness. They are ends in themselves. Katherine cared deeply about having a child, but she understood that nurturing her marriage was vital and important in and of itself, whether they reached the goal of parenthood together or

not. While we try as scientists to quantify their effect on us, relationships are full of rich and constantly shifting momentary experiences, and this is part of what makes them lively antidotes to the repetitions of material life. Other people will always be somewhat elusive and mysterious, and that keeps relationships interesting and worthy of close attention regardless of their immediate utility. “Love by its very nature,” the philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote, “is unworldly.”

Because of their centrality in our daily experience, relationships are a powerful and pragmatic part of life’s puzzle. That pragmatic value has gone underappreciated in modern times. Relationships are the foundation of our lives, intrinsic to everything we do and everything we are. Even things like income and achievement that on first glance seem unconnected to relationships can in practice be hard to separate from them. What would achievement mean if there was no one around to appreciate it? What would income mean if there was no one we could share it with, no social environment to give it meaning?

The engine of a good life is not the self, as John Marsden believed, but rather our connection to others, as Leo DeMarco’s life demonstrates. The movements of the engine are those feelings inside us that our ancestors passed down, from the biggest heartbreaks to the subtle sensations of camaraderie to the sadness of loss to the exhilarations of romantic love; or as Jon Kabat-Zinn called it, borrowing a line from *Zorba the Greek*, “the full catastrophe.” It’s there that the good life happens, in the real-time, momentary experience of connection.

You might be thinking right now, Okay, sure, but how? How do I change my relationships for the better? I can’t just snap my fingers. What would change even look like? Where do I start?

Changing your life—especially your habits of daily living—can be challenging. Many of us start out with the best of intentions to improve our lives, only to be overwhelmed by the force of our well-worn mental habits and the momentum of the culture we live in. It’s tempting when confronting the complexity of life to say, I’ve tried, but I just cannot figure this out. I’ll just go with the flow.

We see it all the time in our clinical practices. When a person steers in one direction for much of their lives, and that path feels less than full, they find it difficult to open themselves to the possibility that a different, fruitful path actually exists.

Katherine's situation could have easily spiraled downward. She was able to recognize what was outside of her control—whether she could carry a pregnancy to term—and what was within her control—how she could nurture her relationship with her husband. They were able to maintain a close and forgiving relationship throughout this trial in their life. Luckily, Katherine did eventually become pregnant and give birth to a son, whom she referred to as her “Miracle Baby.” But even before that final outcome, Katherine had won an important battle. She'd faced a difficult challenge head-on, made good choices about how she would respond to it, and turned her attention toward nurturing the relationship that was most affected and that would help get her through her ordeal.

The lives in the Harvard Study and many other studies tell us that every life takes twists and turns and that the choices we make matter. These lives are evidence that rich possibilities to improve emotional well-being are available at every stage and in every situation of life.

The chapters that follow contain a lot of research and personal stories, and we hope, particularly in these stories, that you will recognize parts of yourself and the people you care about. We also hope that these stories of mistakes and redemption, of both disconnection and love, will encourage you to reflect on the similarities in your own life, to think about areas that are going well for you, and areas that you might like to improve. Each of us has a storehouse of experience to draw on that can point us in the direction of happiness.

We begin with a wide lens, a kind of satellite view of the human lifespan. Locating yourself on this map will help get you started. Because before you can get where you're going, you first have to know where you are.