

## Learning About Positive Psychology: Not a Spectator Sport

If I study, I seek only the learning that . . . instructs me in how to die well and live well. —MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE (1580)

Positive psychology courses have only been offered since the 1990s,<sup>1</sup> which means that I know something about their short history and how they have changed over the past few years. Among the very first such courses were small seminars for undergraduate and graduate students offered by Marty Seligman at the University of Pennsylvania. Taking a leave from my position at the University of Michigan, I joined him in September 2000 and co-taught these courses over the next 3 years. Early on, these were conceived as typical seminars—assigned readings, discussions in class, and written papers.

But Seligman (2004) hit upon a way to begin these courses that we have come to call *serious introductions*. Most seminars begin by the students introducing themselves like this: “My name is Jennifer. I am a sophomore studying psychology because first-year premed courses killed me and my GPA. I grew up in Cherry Hill, New Jersey. I am taking this particular course because it fits my schedule.” The instructor may say something similar, probably mentioning where he went to school and what his current scholarly interests are.

1. The Positive Psychology Teaching Task Force, headed up by Randy Ernst, has for several years collected useful resources for teaching positive psychology (syllabuses, reading lists, exercises) and made them available at <http://www.positivepsychology.org>. For some thoughtful discussions on teaching positive psychology, see Baylis (2004) and Fineburg (2004).

Introductions like these are so familiar to college students as to be clichéd. But Seligman started one of the first positive psychology courses with a different sort of introduction, which has come to be known as the “Nikki Story,” after his then 5-year-old daughter and a pivotal encounter he had with her one afternoon.

For years, Seligman was a self-proclaimed grouch—urgent about time, task oriented, and incapable of small talk. His wife, Mandy, and their children are lively, cheerful, and attuned to others, making Seligman a “walking nimbus cloud in a household radiant with sunshine” (Seligman, 2002, p. 28).

One afternoon, he was in the garden weeding, doing it like he did everything—seriously. Little Nikki was helping him, which took the form of throwing weeds in the air, dancing, and singing. That may strike many of you as a perfectly reasonable way to weed a garden, but it distracted Seligman, who yelled at his daughter. She walked away but returned in a few minutes.

“Daddy, I want to talk to you.”

“Yes, Nikki.”

“Daddy, do you remember before my fifth birthday? From when I was three until when I was five, I was a whiner. I whined every day. On my fifth birthday, I decided I wasn’t going to whine any more. That was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. And if I can stop whining, you can stop being such a grouch.” (Seligman, 2002, p. 28)

At that moment, Seligman had a realization. Actually, he had two. First was a personal insight: Raising children is not about correcting their weaknesses and fixing whatever is wrong with them. Rather, it is about identifying and nurturing their strengths. In Nikki’s case, these strengths included a precocious will to improve herself and the ability to challenge her grumpy father to find that same will within himself.

Second was a professional insight that led to positive psychology: Psychology as it existed had little to say about these remarkable strengths. Where do they originate? How can they be encouraged? To describe Nikki as *not* whiny is to miss her essence by a country mile. To describe anyone in terms of the weaknesses and shortcomings they do or do not have is to ignore half of the human condition—the good half, obviously, that makes life worth living. And yes, the garden was eventually weeded, and yes, Seligman became less of a grouch. Nikki remains delightfully herself, even as the teenager she has since become.

In telling the Nikki Story to students in his first positive psychology course, Seligman’s intent was just to put a face on a subject matter that seemed at odds with what he had spent his life studying and teaching: depression, despair, and disorder. But embedded here was a serious introduction, not just to the subject matter but to himself and his family. Here was a father who cared enough about his child to take her advice about life seriously. Here was a child who made a decision to be a better person. Here was a story about people at their best. What a good way to frame all subsequent interactions. Even when Seligman would re-

lapse into grouchiness, his students would remember Nikki and know that there was more to their teacher than his sobriety and absence of small talk.

In every positive psychology course we have since taught, all students are asked to tell an analogous story about an event in their lives that showed themselves at their very best. We have learned to preface this request by a small sermon on modesty, a virtue in many circumstances but not if it is at odds with the truth. And we say that we are not interested in achievements or performances but rather in strengths of character. As instructors, we tell our own stories, and mine goes like this:

A friend of mine at another university was preparing a new course to teach and discovered that her school library did not have any films or videotapes pertinent to the course. Showing such tapes would help bring the course material to life, so what was she to do? I offered to help, because my own university has lots of audiovisual resources. I went to the library and checked out a number of relevant tapes that were in the public domain. I bought blank videotapes and spoke to a colleague at Michigan who had a fancy videotape duplicating machine in her laboratory. I explained what I wanted to do. She told me I could use the machine and gave me a brief lesson. I sat down and started to make copies, a process that went on for hours. Every once in a while, my colleague would walk by and see that I was still at it. Finally she stopped and said, "This is taking you forever. Why don't you ask one of your students to do this for you? After all, your friend won't know that you didn't do it yourself." "True enough," I responded. "But I would know."

That was me at my best, and I am proud when I am able to act this way. Mind you, this is not me in every venue of my life. No one would confuse me with Mother Teresa of Calcutta, but it was a good day—tedious, boring, and frustrating when I would push the wrong button and undo what had been accomplished. Indeed, it was a very good day.

This story has a postscript that concerns my Michigan colleague who had chided me for wasting my time. Several times, I had to leave her lab for a few minutes to use the bathroom. I was confused that the repetitive process of inserting and removing tapes was apparently not delayed by my periodic breaks. At first, I assumed that I had so automated the steps that I was simply unaware of my progress. But then I noted that the identifying labels attached to the new tapes had a different handwriting than my own. My colleague was coming by during my breaks and helping. Although I now knew what was going on, I never said a word to her. In keeping with my own lesson, I thought it enough that *she* knew what she was doing.

In a class of 15–20 students, these serious introductions can take several hours and may stretch over several class periods, but we believe that it is time well spent. As mentioned, they frame how we all think about one another for the rest of the semester and thereafter. With apologies to my readers from the Garden State, it is

much better to know that Jennifer once went against the social currents to befriend an ostracized classmate in junior high school than to know that she grew up in New Jersey and had failed chemistry.

We have also learned that we need to tell students about appreciative listening, how to listen carefully to what is said and then to respond in a way that builds on what has been conveyed as opposed to disagreeing with it or dismissing it. Once I told my story without this preface, and one of my students—meaning well—said, “I think that is a terrible use of your time. You are a professor and very busy.” I responded as gently as I could, “And that is why the giving of my time means something.”

Positive psychology has become for us a course in rhetoric—not just one in reading and writing, but one in speaking and listening (Seligman, 2004).

Something powerful goes on during these serious introductions. During at least a third of the introductions, one of the listeners is moved to quiet tears. With or without tears, strong bonds are forged. No one sits in the corner of the classroom working a crossword puzzle. Baseball caps and sunglasses are removed without prompting. A cell phone has *never* rung. Students even drop the annoying conversational hedges “like” and “you know” from what they say because they are speaking from the heart and not just filling time. Everyone can see the principles of positive psychology in action, and this is heady stuff indeed.

Contrast this with typical classroom demonstrations. They may work in physics and chemistry, but woe be it to the psychology instructor who tries to demonstrate psychological principles in class. At best they work in the aggregate, where their effects cannot be apprehended without stopping to compute some statistical average. Even so, they often fall flat.

Positive psychology seems to be different, and we realized that we could assign exercises—inside and outside the classroom—that compellingly illustrated the ideas on which we focused each week. As our positive psychology course evolved, we accumulated, tried out, and polished different exercises. Some of the very best were suggested by our students.

Skeptics might worry that the field is too new to inspire interventions, but I have a different opinion. I agree with social psychologist Kurt Lewin’s (1947) sentiment, expressed decades ago, that the best way to understand a psychological phenomenon is to try and change it. By this view, intervention research is not something that follows basic research at a polite distance but instead is its inherent complement (Linley & Joseph, 2004b).

### Being “Cool” as the Enemy

In an ongoing project, my colleagues—Angela Duckworth, Tom Geraghty, Jane Gillham, Karen Reivich, Barry Schwartz, Martin Seligman, and Tracy Steen—and I have packaged together exercises like these into a positive psychology course that is

being taught by regular classroom teachers to ninth-graders in a high school in suburban Philadelphia. In keeping with our view of positive psychology courses as rhetoric, these are part of the language arts curriculum—not social sciences. Our eventual goal is to evaluate the effect of such a course on student well-being and achievement, and to this end, we are also looking at comparable students *not* enrolled in the course. This project fits under the rubric of character education but—we hope—goes beyond sloganeering to take a rigorous look at the long-term consequences of learning about the psychological good life (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004).

We believe that one can best learn about the good life by engaging in it, and weekly exercises done outside of class by these ninth-graders are therefore a critical component. Remember my earlier point that the best way to understand a psychological phenomenon is to try and change it? We have since learned that if you *really* want to understand something, try and change it among young adolescents.

Our ninth-grade students are bright and capable, and their school is an outstanding one. Critical thinking is constantly encouraged and frequently displayed, and students are given a great deal of autonomy. These are all good things, but they contain as well a downside that threatens the whole rationale for the course. Indeed, there is a general lesson here about any exercise in positive psychology for any group of people.

If one approaches these exercises with cynicism or half a heart, then of course they cannot work, and at least some of the students in our study do exactly this. The critical thinking honed throughout their education manifests itself as automatic criticism. They are skeptical and seemingly afraid to try something that is not only new but also on the face of it corny.

Barry Schwartz has described this barrier to positive psychology exercises as being “cool,” and although “cool” is no longer adolescent jargon, it remains an apt description of a stance of skeptical distance. Point out what is wrong in someone else’s ideas rather than what is right. Do not show enthusiasm. Do not do anything that would leave you open to ridicule. This describes much of academics, even or especially at good schools, but it is exacerbated by the peculiar features of the adolescent mind.

We all survived adolescence, but if you are like me, you have painful memories of being scrutinized and judged by “them” even if we could not put a finger on just who “they” were. Adolescence is a time of mushrooming intellectual and emotional growth, and it results in an acute self-awareness unprecedented for the young person (Strauch, 2003). It is not surprising that while experiencing these changes, the adolescent believes that no one else understands—especially teachers and parents—although of course all adults do understand because they too went through this themselves once upon a time. As adolescents, we believe that our peers are more together and less troubled simply because they are no more likely to talk about their doubts and insecurities than we are. Victor Raimy (1976) even gave a name to this phenomenon—he called it the *special person misconception*—and it contributes to coolness.

Many of the exercises we have devised for our ninth-graders involve opening themselves up to their peers, teachers, and parents. What are their long-term goals? What do they value in themselves and others? We even ask them to talk to "old" people (i.e., those over 30 years of age). These activities make them extremely self-conscious and as a result reticent. Because they are good students, they go along with our requests but at an emotional arm's length. In sum, they are too cool to try something that might make them happy.

In an unpleasant exchange I had with one of the ninth-grade students in a debriefing session one summer, I sat patiently while he regaled me for 30 minutes about my evil intents to brainwash him. He concluded, "You can't make me happy if I don't want to be!" And I blurted out, "Fine. You can be as miserable as you want to be." I was immediately embarrassed, but I admit that it felt good.

We can call this teen *angst* or adolescent *sturm und drang*, but I think that is an overinterpretation (cf. Arnett, 1999). Instead, I think kids (and most adults) want their happiness to be spontaneous, to happen rather than to be deliberately created. In a stint as a clinical psychologist, while doing therapy with couples, I encountered a similar sentiment:

"Tell your spouse what you want. Tell him what would make you happy."

"I don't want to do that."

"Why?"

"It wouldn't be real when he did it."

"But maybe he doesn't know what you really want."

"Well, he should know."

"Why?"

"He just should."

I suppose the divorce rate would be lower if we all were the mind readers that our spouses assume us to be (chapter 10). But we are not. A couple that is unhappy enough and committed enough to their marriage will eventually try out some of the standard couples-therapy exercises and usually to good effect. But there is a lingering suspicion that spontaneity has been subverted and that love deliberately given is somehow less genuine than love that just happens.

I have a different point of view. Love (or, for that matter, happiness) is not reserved "only for the lucky and the strong" but instead is hard work that may entail careful deliberation and awkward action. Happiness as positive psychology conceives it is not for sissies. I like Erich Fromm's (1956) point that our ideal should not be to "fall in love" but rather to "stand in love"—love and happiness are not heedless freefalls that just happen when gravity is on our side.

Contrast the experience with the adolescents with the experience we have had with adult volunteers to whom we have offered these exercises as a possible way to lead more fulfilling lives (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). They are eager to learn, and when they try them out, they go the extra mile, elaborate

them, and take them very seriously. They do not worry about being cool. Many are restless and somewhat unhappy. They know something is missing in their lives, and they are willing to try and change things.

So, there is a paradox here. There is every reason in the world to expect that positive psychology exercises will be most effective for those who are already happy<sup>2</sup>—remember that this was one of Seligman's original premises, that positive psychology should be concerned with fulfilling the lives of "normal" people—but it may be that someone needs to be a bit discontented to try something out of the comfortable ordinary.

### Some Examples

Mind you, not all positive psychology exercises work as intended, but enough do that the failures are not discouraging but intriguing, and they can teach us as much as the successes. For example, let me contrast an exercise that worked with one that failed.

#### *Gratitude Letters Versus Forgiveness Letters*

American society seems to lack gratitude rituals: formal ways of expressing thanks to those who have done well by us. Think of all the people—parents, friends, teachers, coaches, teammates, employers, and so on—who have been especially kind to you but have never heard you express your gratitude. This exercise tells us to write a gratitude letter to one of these individuals, describing in concrete terms why you are grateful. If possible, deliver it personally and have the person read the letter in your presence. If this is not possible, then mail or fax the letter and follow it up with a phone call.

Here is a letter sent by one of my colleagues to her favorite college teacher (L. M. Christie, personal communication, August 3, 2005):

Dear Ms. Carter:

It was back in 1979, and yet I still remember when you first walked into the classroom to teach Southern Literature. You were ten minutes late. You sat down, lit a cigarette, poured yourself some coffee from a thermos, and apologized for the delay. You couldn't find your car keys. Then you couldn't find the syllabus in the pile of papers in front of you. I thought: "This course is a bust. I'm going to have to see if I can transfer into that Shakespeare class down the hall." And then it all fell away. You started to talk about the joy of studying great literature. You had

2. The basis for this assertion is the belief among psychotherapists that therapy is most helpful for those who are the least troubled (Schofield, 1964). Although there is less room for improvement, there is less baggage to bog down the trip and more skills and assets with which to make the journey.

been teaching this particular course for seven years, and you never tired of it. You couldn't wait to hear our impressions of William Faulkner, Harper Lee, and Eudora Welty, among others. Your enthusiasm was infectious. I wanted to delve right in. You went on to say that you were not going to waste our time on the plot and character development of each book. Granted, they were critical elements, but you'd rather focus on the universal themes of human emotion, thought, and experience. These were the most valuable aspects of the written word. Lastly, you welcomed complete honesty in the classroom. What did we love or hate about a particular author's work and why? Should you, as the teacher, choose different books that better represented that person's body of work next time around? (So much for first impressions. I wasn't going anywhere, even for Shakespeare.)

The following year, I took two more courses with you. I was always impressed with the breadth and depth of your knowledge. Clearly, you loved being a teacher, and you had so much to offer your students. I particularly appreciated your open door policy when it came to office hours. You'd say: "If I'm there, come in. If I'm not, go be somewhere else." I loved your humor and directness. And I loved how you challenged me to work on my writing. You were never critical, always balanced in your critique of my papers, and it made me want to do better.

Before I graduated, I made an appointment with you to express my appreciation. You were late, and that made me smile. I'd grown fond of your idiosyncrasies and couldn't imagine you without them. When you finally came into the office, I thanked you for all of your support and guidance. And I thanked you for deepening my love of literature and spurring me to continue my studies. With my speech behind us, you graciously accepted my gratitude and started fishing through the mound of papers on your desk. You had written me a letter of recommendation in hopes that I could use it for future employment. I hadn't asked for one. I was deeply touched by your kindness.

I read in the alumni newsletter that you retired in 2004. You surely had a rich and distinguished career. I couldn't attend your retirement party, but I heard through a friend that you entertained your guests with a dead-on impersonation of Truman Capote. I wish I'd been there, but I'm sending this letter in lieu of hugs and congratulations. Thank you again, for everything. You are a gifted teacher, Ann Carter. And you are an accomplished scholar. I know that I am not alone in saying you are sorely missed in the English Department. But above all else, you are a good person.

In our experience with many dozens of gratitude letters like these, they "work" 100% of the time in the sense that the recipient is moved, often to tears,

and the sender is gratified as well. Letters are sent to mothers or fathers, friends or spouses, teachers or bosses, brothers or sisters. (Interestingly, college students rarely send them to their boyfriends or girlfriends. Perhaps the gratitude is obvious, or perhaps this is a lingering symptom of adolescent coolness.) The only hesitation we encounter is someone worrying that if he expresses his gratitude to his mother, then his father might feel slighted by implication. This does not happen, though, and Dad is always happy when Mom is thanked.

In chapter 4, I describe our more-formal attempts to evaluate this and other positive psychology exercises, and the evidence is clear that the good feelings (happiness) produced by sending a gratitude letter are reliably created (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). However, the effects on happiness of a gratitude letter dissipate after a few weeks, which is neither surprising nor disappointing if you think about it. A gratitude letter is a dramatic event but not a life-changing one unless of course you make a point to send such a letter once a week forever; then, you have changed your life and might expect permanent changes so long as you do not run out of recipients. Certainly, we know that the habitually grateful among us are happier than those who are not (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 1999; Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004; Vaillant, 2002).

Encouraged by our experience with gratitude letters, I designed an analogous exercise that entailed another positive emotion—forgiveness (McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000). Forgiveness undoes our own hatred and frees us from the troubled past. Indeed, forgiveness has been described as the queen of virtues—that is, those who forgive are much more serene than those who do not and display many other positive strengths. Forgiveness can be difficult, though, and despite its benefits, someone may have strong reasons not to forgive, which must be respected.

Accordingly, when I asked my students to craft a forgiveness letter, I told them to do so tentatively and not to send it unless they really wanted to do so and only if their forgiveness were sincere. Otherwise, the instructions paralleled those for the gratitude letter:

Think of the people who have wronged you in the past whom you have never explicitly forgiven, although you desire to do so. Write a forgiveness letter to one of these individuals describing in concrete terms why you forgive him or her and what if anything you hope will happen between you in the future.

By the way, has this individual ever apologized? If so, how did you react?

Please do not send this letter unless you really want to do so and are sincere in your forgiveness. Regardless, bring the letter to class and be prepared to discuss it.

This exercise was thoroughly unsuccessful because almost all of the students felt that delivering the letter to an individual who had never requested forgiveness

would create more bad feelings than good ones. Upon reflection, they believed that in many cases they themselves had contributed to the hurt (e.g., painful romantic breakups) and that "forgiving" the other party would imply that they had been but innocent victims as opposed to co-conspirators. The 1 student out of 20 who delivered the letter reports that she has yet to be forgiven for doing so.

This unsuccessful exercise was nonetheless informative and led to a spirited discussion of the nature of forgiveness. One consensus reached is that forgiveness is a dance that best begins with an apology. Accordingly, a more-fruitful exercise—which I have not yet tested but plan to in some future class—is to have my students write an apology letter.

One of my students made the wise observation that there are good apologies and bad apologies (Lazare, 2004; C. D. Schneider, 2000). Consider a typical apology—a bad one—made by public figures who have done something distasteful: "I apologize to anyone who was offended." This sort of apology on the surface sounds good and may even be sincere, but it contains an implicit message that all but undoes the apology: "But you should not have been offended." In contrast, a good apology is one that says more simply: "I am sorry." Along these lines, a good apology contains no excuses phrased in terms of youthful indiscretions, legalistic qualifications ("I didn't inhale"), or wardrobe malfunctions. It is up to the recipient of an apology to excuse the transgression, or not.

My colleague Karen Reivich has evolved the forgiveness letter exercise into a letting-go-of-grudges exercise. You can imagine the form that it takes. Letting go of grudges is a necessarily internal activity. You cannot—or at least should not—tell someone that he no longer annoys the hell out of you. You can only tell this to yourself—and then act differently if you really mean it.

### *Fun Versus Philanthropy*

One of the solid findings of positive psychology is that an orientation to the welfare of others is in the long run more satisfying than an orientation to one's own pleasure (chapter 4). To illustrate this, Marty Seligman devised an exercise that he calls "fun versus philanthropy," and it usually succeeds in making the point, even in the short run. The conclusion is inevitable that a lifetime of altruism will replicate this lesson over and over again.

This exercise is introduced in class with a brief discussion of things that most people would agree to be pleasurable (fun)—hanging out with friends, watching a movie, or eating a hot fudge sundae—and things that most people would agree to be helpful to others (philanthropy), like shoveling the snow for elderly neighbors, helping a younger family member with his schoolwork, or doing the family laundry. Which sort of activity would students prefer doing? Everyone chuckles, because of course fun is more fun.

Regardless, they are asked in the next week to pursue one pleasurable activity of their own choice and one philanthropic activity of their own choice. (We have

learned, by the way, that it is prudent when asking our young and even not-so-young students to do such exercises to be explicit that they should *not* do anything physically dangerous, illegal, or exploitative of others—some fun activities can border on the dark side.) Flip a coin to decide which one to do first, and spend the same amount of time at each activity. Students are asked to write a brief paper comparing and contrasting their reactions to each activity.

With few exceptions, this exercise works in suggesting some lessons for life. Fun is pleasurable in the moment, but it is a fleeting pleasure. Philanthropy in contrast lingers. One of our students told us of a marathon long-distance call in which she tutored her younger nephew in algebra. Not a mathematics whiz herself, she found the task extremely difficult. She was not even sure that she had been helpful, but regardless, she felt wonderful for having given to him the gift of her time and concern: "I had a spring in my step. I felt more mellow that day. Things did not bother me."

Marty Seligman (personal communication, September 12, 2000) loves to repeat the story told by one of his students enrolled in the prestigious University of Pennsylvania Wharton School of Business (Donald Trump's alma mater), who found this exercise to be life altering.

I don't particularly like my economics and accounting courses. I actually hate them. But I have always told myself that I am in Wharton so I can get a job with a great salary. Then I can do and buy things that will be fun. And then I will be happy. It never dawned on me that I can be happy right now and that high-priced fun is overrated and at its core really selfish. I felt wonderful just helping someone else.

I have asked you to approach these exercises in the spirit of experimentation, and part of experimentation is an even-handed look at what the results of an exercise might actually mean. Can we really take at face value the apparent lesson of the fun-versus-philanthropy exercise, or did we inadvertently bias the conclusions that our students fed back to us? Even 5 minutes into our positive psychology course, our students know that it is not like being at the Playboy Mansion. Maybe our students are closet hedonists but are smart enough not to out themselves to their instructors.

Maybe, although here is why I think we can take the results at face value. First, our students are never shy about saying what they mean, whether or not we approve, an apparently increasing trend (Twenge & Im, 2005). All the time, I read stories about college students across the nation who feel oppressed by teachers for their political opinions, and I marvel at what it would be like to have students who actually could be cowed by what I happen to believe. Oh well.

Second, more-rigorous research shows that philanthropy is associated with long-term fulfillment. In chapter 10, I describe longitudinal studies on charitable giving and volunteering, and the benefits for the giver (if not always the recipient) are indeed real.

Third, one of the defining features of pleasure (fun) is that it is fleeting because the psychological apparatus responsible for its experience is governed by a principle of adaptation (chapter 3). Contrary to the behaviorist notion that we repeat—endlessly—those actions that produce reward (aka reinforcement) is the experiential fact that all such actions lose their zing, sometimes rather quickly. Years ago, I purchased a Nintendo game and played *Space Invaders* for 8 straight hours, undaunted by the cramps produced along the way. The next day, I played for 3 hours. Then an hour on the third day. And then not at all. Just the other week, I found the Nintendo game in the back of my closet where it had resided for decades. I could only shake my head. So, if our fun-versus-philanthropy exercise does no more than teach a lesson about adaptation to pleasure, then that is a valid and valuable lesson (chapter 3).

I acknowledge that we need to do a more-rigorous evaluation of the fun-versus-philanthropy exercise. In the meantime, you can try it yourself and arrive at your own honest reaction.

Although the exercise is presented as an X-versus-Y one, this only means a comparison and contrast of the pure forms of the two experiences. In real life, we do not need to choose exclusively between fun and service to others. In chapter 4, I introduce the notion of a full life and suggest the possibility that at least some activities can be both philanthropic and pleasurable.

### *Gift of Time*

Remember the me-at-my-best story from earlier in the chapter? I have elaborated this into an exercise that I call the “gift of time.” What is the most valuable gift we can bestow on those we love?

In my positive psychology classes, I introduce this exercise by recounting O. Henry’s (1906) short story “The Gift of the Magi,” in which a young husband and wife give to each other a present made possible only by the sacrifice of that which was personally most dear.<sup>3</sup> Social scientists debate whether there really is such a thing as altruism, if by that is meant activities that *only* benefit others and that pay no personal dividend in the moment. I find this a tedious debate because it fails to go out into the real world and find examples that would resolve it. Sure, we can stand on our heads and argue—for example—that Christians who sheltered Jews in Nazi Europe, putting themselves at risk for death, “really” were rewarding themselves in some non-obvious way. But is this as scientifically parsimonious

3. If you do not know the story, here is a synopsis. This is a young couple of very modest means facing Christmas without the ability to purchase any presents whatsoever for one another. The husband’s most-prized possession is his expensive pocket watch. His wife’s most valued possession, so to speak, is her long beautiful hair. So, planning to surprise his wife, the husband sells his watch to buy combs for her hair. And the wife sells her hair to a wigmaker to buy her husband a watch fob. A sad story? Hardly.

monious as concluding that they were simply doing the right thing given how they had been raised (Oliner & Oliner, 1988)?

Many of us are not in a position to put our lives on the line for a stranger. But we all have a gift to give that is infinitely precious because it is thoroughly nonrenewable. That gift is our own time. When I think of my best teachers or my best friends, common to them all is that they gave of themselves *over time*. It was never what they gave to me that mattered but how they did it. Indeed, a few years ago, I wrote my own gratitude letter, and it was not until I was writing this section that I realized I was grateful to a very dear friend in large part because she gives to me her time:

I am grateful that you are never too busy and that our friendship has never been put on hold while crises run their course. . . . It is said that what is seen lies only in the eye of the beholder. But nothing good about you is in my eye; it is all in you and how you live and what you give, and I am grateful to be a participant in this life so well lived.

A final frame for this exercise is to think about the yuppie expression *quality time*, used to describe the 15 minutes per day that harried parents try to spend with their children. Without meaning any disrespect, I suggest that quality time is at best an oxymoron and that a brief encounter with one's child, no matter how genuine, cannot substitute for being there most, if not all, of the time.

The actual exercise is simple to describe:

Think of a person about whom you care. What might you be able to do for this person that entails nothing more than the giving of your time and indeed that takes time? Certainly, there are acts of kindness that entail gifts of money or goods, but in this exercise, time is of the essence, as it were. Plan a gift of time for this person and give it, whether it means doing something with them or something for them on your own. Spend as much time as needed to do the favor well and do not take any shortcuts. You might even consider taking off your wristwatch. Regardless, do not tell the recipient of your gift how much time you spent. Let the gift speak for itself.

This exercise has had checkered success. If it can be carried out according to the instructions, then most feel great about doing the favor. But all too often, the enemy is time itself: Someone does not have enough time to give time. Or in giving time in one arena of life, another arena necessarily suffers. One of my colleagues gave the gift of time to one of her children—spending an afternoon in a room without a clock with her older daughter and a coloring book. But she felt guilty about neglecting her younger daughter. Maybe she should have done something with the two of them, but then she would have worried that she was neglecting her husband. And so it goes.

We cannot create time out of thin air. I can remember complaining once to a friend that I had too many things to do. "So," said my friend, playing psychologist, "you have a time management problem." "No," I countered, "I manage my time perfectly well. What I have is a time problem—not enough of it!" I suppose this is really the point of the exercise, and it means we need to choose carefully how we deploy a resource for which deficit spending is not an option.

### *Three Good Things*

Several different research groups have investigated the effects of asking people to stop and reflect on those things for which they are most grateful (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000; Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). The details of this intervention differ across studies, but the results are always the same: Counting your blessings on a regular basis makes you happier and more content with life.

We call our own version of this exercise "three good things" because it entails writing down at the end of each day three things that went well (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). We experimented with these instructions and discovered—for example—that asking people to list ten good things did not work as well as asking for three and further that asking them to count their blessings at the beginning of the day was not nearly as effective as asking them to do so at the end of the day. Irving Berlin was onto something when he advised us to count our blessings instead of sheep.

We also ask people to briefly explain why each event was a good one, and our rationale here is simply that people may not be especially mindful about good events, even when they enumerate them (chapter 5). For most people, "competence requires no comment" (Ryle, 1949), which means that we usually assume that good things are our due. Accordingly, we do not think much about them and miss the potential benefits of thoughtful (conscious) gratitude. Asking for an explanation leads to "deeper" thought.

Here are the instructions for this exercise:

At the end of each day, after dinner and before going to sleep, write down three things that went well during the day. Do this every night for a week. The three things you list can be relatively small in importance ("My husband picked up my favorite ice cream for dessert on the way home from work today") or relatively large in importance ("My sister just gave birth to a healthy baby boy"). After each positive event on your list, answer in your own words the question "Why did this good thing happen?" For example, you might speculate that your husband picked up ice cream "because he can be really thoughtful" or "because I remembered to call him from work and remind him to stop by the grocery store." When asked why your sister gave birth to a healthy baby boy,

you might explain, "God was looking out for her" or "She did everything right during her pregnancy."

In our own investigation of this exercise, we found that counting one's blessings increases happiness and decreases symptoms of depression for up to 6 months of follow-up. The fine print of this finding is that the long-term benefits occurred for participants who continued the exercise beyond the suggested 1 week. This apparently was easy to do, because 60% of the participants in the study reported that they were still counting their blessings 6 months later. Some of our participants told us that they had made this a new routine in their marriage—sharing their blessings with their partner at the end of the day. If you go to sleep happy, you are probably apt to wake up happy as well. And if you go sleep next to someone else who is happy, that is good, too.

#### *Being a Good Teammate*

Here is an exercise that underscores the importance and satisfaction of being a good teammate and more generally the satisfaction of social responsibility and citizenship. At least in the contemporary United States, we are encouraged to be leaders but not followers, to heed our own drummer, and to follow our own hearts. Loyalty and teamwork may be labeled as conformity or obedience and thereby marginalized if not condemned (Asch, 1956; Milgram, 1963). What results, however, is a society which, at its worst, pits each against all (Hobbes, 1651/1982) and at its best is quietly empty at the center (Hardin, 1968). We are more likely as a people to bowl alone than to work for a common cause (Putnam, 2000), despite ample evidence that well-developed social interest benefits not just the group but the individual in the group (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

How do we work against these trends and build good citizenship? One way to do so is by encouraging participation in groups by young people. Such early experiences—not necessarily as a leader but as a follower—set the stage for a lifetime of civic participation (DeMartini, 1983; Flanagan et al., 1998; McAdam, 1989).

Citizenship and teamwork can be rather abstract, but as a teacher I have approached them at a concrete and presumably interesting level by asking my students to think of their best teammates or favorite group members. What do these people do that makes them notable? Are any lessons able to be abstracted from their examples?

Or I ask them to think about Michael Jordan, the greatest basketball player of our generation and the winner of six professional titles during the 1990s. National Basketball Association and Nike marketing strategies notwithstanding, Jordan did not win these titles by himself but instead as a member of a team that included the ultimate sidekick, Scottie Pippen. In the 1990s, it was common to hear Pippen's basketball skills dismissed with the observation that he never won any-

thing without Jordan. But in hindsight, it is just as true to observe that Jordan won little without Pippen.

Few of us can be "like Mike" in any of our own venues, but it is not so far-fetched to aspire to be a Pippen. Accordingly, here is an exercise I have asked my students to carry out:

Choose one of the ongoing groups to which you belong but of which you are not a leader. Without fanfare, resolve to be the best group member (teammate) during the next month that you can be. The characteristics of the group will dictate the details of how you should act, but one would think that being a good teammate requires:

- ✦ showing up, literally and metaphorically
- ✦ not whining or being disruptive or feeling jealous
- ✦ doing more than your share
- ✦ volunteering without being prompted
- ✦ spreading praise<sup>4</sup>
- ✦ helping the leader—and of course the group—accomplish goals

Keep track of what you did, and how it made you feel.

A teachable moment occurs when students find themselves at odds with the group or the group leader. This exercise does not require blind obedience or participation in stupid and wrong activities. Rather, good teammates dissent or disagree when appropriate, although they do so as a good group member. Consider the notion of *comity* (civility in discourse and disagreement) and the equally quaint political term *loyal opposition*.

This exercise has always worked well among my students, who report that it is not only novel but invigorating to think first of the team and how to advance its goals. Some of my students chose a discussion class as their group and worked to make discussions "good" ones. Others chose their part-time jobs, where they volunteered for the unpopular shifts. One of my students was the captain of her cheerleading squad, and she—with admitted reluctance—let a junior member choose the cheers.

4. A related exercise is called "letting someone else shine." So much of what we do in life is done in conjunction with others, and when we are done, we like to get credit and acclaim. But studies summarized by Leary and Forsyth (1987) should give us all pause because a common finding is that participants in a group project assign themselves more credit than others assign to them, so that the sum of attributed effort (from the viewpoint of each participant) always adds up to much more than 100%. This of course cannot be, no matter how mathematically challenged you are. In the letting-someone-else-shine exercise, regardless of your private opinion, you should assign your fellows all of the public credit following a group task or project. Let them make the final report or presentation. Thank them publicly, and praise them profusely. Say that you were along for the ride (in some cases, you probably were). In other words, step back and let them shine. Parents are usually pretty good about this vis-à-vis their own children and so are teachers who have achieved a certain maturity vis-à-vis their own students. I think the exercise is worth trying in other arenas of life as well.

In many cases, my students' embracing of Pippen-hood was acknowledged and appreciated by their teammates, but in a few other cases not. Even so, most of these students said that it did not really matter that their efforts had been overlooked, because there had been a clear payoff for them in the form of group success, solidarity, and morale. As the cheerleader captain said, knowing of my fascination with Kirsten Dunst, it was great that someone else was able to "bring it on."

### *Honey Versus Vinegar: Being Nice as a Way to Cut Institutional Red Tape*

One of the striking changes brought about by the modern world is the increased mobility of its citizens. Whereas previous generations were born in a given place and lived out their lives there, people today make lots of moves. In the contemporary United States, for example, as many as 30% of adults have moved from one state to another within the previous 5 years. Particularly likely to move frequently are young adults and those with a college education. Even more frequent are local moves, within the same town or state. When I was in college and graduate school, I moved in September of every year and had eight different addresses between 1968 and 1976.

Moving can be an adventure, but it also has a downside. You need to shut off the electricity, the gas, and the garbage pickup at the old place. You need to start them up at the new place. You need to change your driver's license. Get a new license plate. Change your checking account. Get a new automated teller card. Change your phone—local and long distance. Get a new cell phone. Change your Internet provider. Stop your mail. Forward it. Oops—magazines are not automatically forwarded, so you need to contact each distributor separately. Oh yes, and then you need to do all of this again when mistakes are made.

Even if you do not move frequently, you still have to battle bureaucracies on an ongoing basis, at the Department of Motor Vehicles, the college registrar's office, or the return desk at Talbot's. And although I hope you grow old with grace, independent means, and perfect health and that you never need to deal with Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, assisted living, a pension fund, a will, or inheritance taxes, none of that is likely to happen, so your battles with bureaucracies will continue to death and beyond.

Accordingly, here is a positive psychology exercise devised by Marty Seligman that may help. The next time that you go to red-tape war, take a deep breath and resolve to be cheerful. Whether you are confronting a bureaucrat face to face or on the phone (after 20 minutes of working yourself through the automated telephone "help" system), start out by asking the person how her day has been. What's the weather like in Bombay? Marvel at his patience. Say that it must be great to be in a position to help other people. As Patrick Swayze's character in *Roadhouse* advises the bar bouncers under his tutelage: "Be nice . . . be nice . . . be nice." Treat the bureaucrat as a person, and perhaps the favor will be returned.

You will probably be more successful in getting what you want if you use honey rather than vinegar. The "bureaucrat" after all is a person, and being on the receiving end of constant consumer anger can take a toll (Rupp & Spencer, *in press*). If you are nice, you may cheer up the person, and we know that good moods facilitate helpfulness (Cunningham, 1979). If nothing else, *you* might at least feel better.

You can do this exercise as a true experiment. Flip a coin before each encounter. Heads: Be nice. Tails: Kick some bureaucratic butt. After a few dozen trials, tally up the results, and draw a conclusion.

I alert you to two threats to being nice. First, some people—especially on the telephone—are on the clock, which means that they will be penalized for taking too long to resolve a request or dispute. You can figure this out pretty quickly, and in these cases, you need to be nice in a concise way. Indeed, to be concise is to be nice to someone on the clock. Second, some people may respond so well to your niceness that the two of you go off on some conversational tangent and neglect the actual reason for your encounter. For example, the last time I changed my long-distance provider, I had a wonderful conversation with "Fred" at AT&T about Allen Iverson of the Philadelphia 76ers and was so distracted that I forgot to ask when the service would begin, and my new friend forgot to tell me. I only discovered this when I received the next month's phone bill, the first half of which charged me \$1 million a minute (approximately) for my calls. Oh well.

One more objection. Are you being a phony? This question could be asked about any of the positive exercises I have described and is one to which I have already alluded in describing people's desire to have their happiness spontaneously happen rather than deliberately occur. (Never mind that we also want to "deserve" our happiness, which would seem to entail doing something to bring it about; Nozick, 1974.) All things being equal, we want to be true to our real self, but the dilemma is when our real self—at least at that moment—is an angry and resentful self. Is it disingenuous to suppress these feelings and "be nice"?

Obviously, there is no simple answer. But a phone call to a customer service agent is hardly the best occasion to be true to your most righteous self. I believe that niceness should be regarded as part of the social script for such encounters and that following this script does not make you a phony any more than deliberately using your turn signals while driving makes you a phony.

There is a saying in Alcoholics Anonymous: "Fake it until you can make it." One of the best ways to change the inner person is to change the outer person. What starts out as phony may end up being genuine (Kelly, 1955). It would be wonderful to be spontaneously cheerful with bureaucrats, but is it really so evil to feign some good cheer until the day when you might be able to do this more routinely?

**EXERCISE** *Have a Good Day*

This chapter contained a number of positive psychology exercises. Here is one more that invites you to design an exercise tailored to your own self. I especially hope that you try this one and that you let me know how it worked.

"Have a good day" is a conversational gambit we hear all the time, but suppose we take the embedded wish seriously. What might we actually do to have a good day? Different people will have different answers, and thus there are two steps to this exercise. First, you need to determine what makes a good day for *you*. Here you need to be a careful observer of your own days, the good ones as well as the not-so-good ones, to see if you can identify the relevant features. Second, assuming that you can identify these, how can you change your future days to maximize the enabling factors and minimize those that detract?

There is a simple assumption here about what makes a good day to which I call your attention because it is at odds with the premise of much of the positive psychology research described in this book. The good life is often discussed in terms of the psychological states, traits, and habits that enable it, as well as the social and institutional settings in which these states, traits, and habits are most readily manifest.

But there is another route to the good life, and that is our mundane daily activity—our behaviors, as it were—regardless of our states, traits, habits, and larger settings. To be sure, these all affect what we do and indeed are probably how they affect our happiness and well-being. But in this exercise, I am suggesting that you go straight to the concrete activities. If you can determine, for example, that a good day is one during which you talked to your mother on the phone (or not) or exercised or wrote in your journal, then there is a very practical lesson to be learned: Have more days in which you do these things and fewer days in which you do not. Duh.

What rescues this exercise from the banal is that we may never have stopped and thought about what makes for a good day, and even if we have reflected on this in the abstract, our answers may not be the right ones in the concrete (Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2004). So, get a notebook or a pad of paper or create an Excel spreadsheet and keep track of what you do during a day. Some people find it easy to journal on an hour-to-hour basis, whereas others prefer to parse their day in terms of its dominant activities. Regardless, at the end of the day, write down an overall rating:

- 10 = it was one of the best days of my life
- 9 = it was an outstanding day
- 8 = it was an excellent day
- 7 = it was a very good day
- 6 = it was a good day
- 5 = it was an average or typical day

- 4 = it was a subpar day
- 3 = it was a bad day
- 2 = it was a terrible day
- 1 = it was one of the worst days of my life

Do this for at least 2 weeks and preferably a month.<sup>5</sup> Do not review your record until you are done, but then go back and look for the pattern across the days and weeks. Compare the good days with the bad days in terms of what you were doing (or not) on those days. Everyone who has done this exercise reports that a pattern is readily apparent, and in some cases, it was one that surprised them. In my own case, I discovered that a good day was one in which I finished something that had been nagging at me, either at work (e.g., sending off letters of recommendation for a student applying to law schools) or at home (e.g., vacuuming my living room). Mind you, these activities did not spiral me into ecstasy, but they clearly contributed to a good day. In contrast, bad days were ones in which I finished nothing, no matter what else was going on or how many praiseworthy projects I had begun.

I resolved, therefore, to finish something every day, and that strategy has done well for activities that could be finished on a frequent basis. But I have been writing this book for the past few months and of course I cannot finish it in one day or on every day. But I can write 500 words a day, almost every day, and that is exactly what I have been doing, and I have had a lot of very good days as a result, including this one.

I doubt that your own formula for a good day will be as task oriented as my own, but that is the point of this exercise: to find your own formula and to devise your own strategy based on it. Once you find these, change your typical day, tempered of course by common sense. A glass of wine with dinner may contribute positively to your assessment of a good day, but there is no reason to think that two liters in one sitting will make future days proportionately better. Similarly, a good night's sleep might make for a good day, but that does not mean you should resolve to sleep your life away.

Have a good day!

## RESOURCES

### *Books and Journals*

Linley, P. A., & Joseph, S. (Eds.). (2004). *Positive psychology in practice*. New York: Wiley.

5. Saturdays and Sundays are "good" days for many of us, for obvious reasons, which means you should not limit your assessment to weekends (Egloff, Tausch, Kohlmann, & Krohne, 1995; Larsen & Kasimatis, 1990). The goal here is to find a pattern in terms of your activities—over which you have control—and not the calendar, over which you have none.

Norcross, J. C., Santrock, J. W., & Campbell, L. F. (2000). *Authoritative guide to self-help resources in mental health*. New York: Guilford.

Krieger, E., & James-Enger, K. (2005). *Small changes, big results: A 12-week action plan to a better life*. New York: Crown.

Albom, M. (1997). *Tuesdays with Morrie: An old man, a young man, and life's greatest lesson*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

#### Articles

Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). Can happiness be taught? *Dædalus*, 133(2), 80–87.

Rosen, G. M. (1987). Self-help treatment books and the commercialization of psychotherapy. *American Psychologist*, 42, 46–51.

#### Web Sites

<http://www.reflectivehappiness.com>. Requiring a paid subscription, this Web site provides exercises like those described in this chapter.

<http://www.positivepsychology.org/teachingpp.htm>. This Web site provides a variety of resources for anyone teaching or studying positive psychology.

<http://www.casel.org/home/index.php>. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) "synthesizes the latest empirical findings and theoretical developments and provides scientific leadership to foster progress in [social and emotional learning] . . . research and practice."

<http://www.actsofkindness.org>. This is the Web site of the Random Acts of Kindness Foundation, "established in 1995 as a . . . resource for people committed to spreading kindness . . . [and providing] . . . a wide variety of materials including activity ideas, lesson plans, project plans, teacher's guide, project planning guide, publicity guide, and workplace resources."

<http://www.payitforwardfoundation.org>. This is the Web site of the Pay It Forward Foundation, "established in . . . 2000 to educate and inspire young students to realize that they can change the world, and provide them with opportunities to do so."

<http://www.kindnessproject.com/home.php>. "The Kindness Project aims to prove that you can have an exponential effect on the spread of kindness around the world. It's simple—when someone does or says something kind, no matter how small, you give them a token. Taking a few seconds to pass on the token empowers you to brighten someone's day. The tokens are passed from person to person, again and again, turning the world into a kinder place." Tokens can be purchased from this Web site.

#### Films

*My Fair Lady* (1964)

*Dead Poets Society* (1989)

*Mr. Holland's Opus* (1995)