

Preface

The miracle is not to walk on water. The miracle is to walk on the green earth, dwelling deeply in the present moment and feeling truly alive.

Thich Nhat Hanh [1]

December 2008, found me facing the discovery that my heart was beating at 125 beats per minute all the time, rather than its normal rate of 70 per minute, and doing so erratically; I was suffering from atrial fibrillation. This explained the exhaustion I had been experiencing for several months. Many tests and medications later, on March 2, 2009, I found myself in the hospital, less than 24 hours away from open heart surgery. Tests conducted by my cardiologist indicated that the heart rate problem was related to the fact that a valve in my heart was leaking seriously (about a 3.5 on a four point scale of severity).

This made it three congenital heart defects that I carried around. Fourteen years earlier I had discovered that one of the two bundles of nerves that led to my heart was not functioning – and presumably never had. This meant that instead of each ventricle of my heart having its own bundle of nerves to control the firing of its muscles, both had to rely on the one functioning bundle (which meant impulses traveled down in to the left ventricle and then jumped over to the right). But further testing showed my heart seemed to have adjusted without detectable damage. The doctor said I might one day need a pacemaker to help compensate for the bundle blockage.

Then 6 years ago I was having chest pains and it turned out I had a blocked artery coming from and servicing my heart. This too appeared to be a congenital defect – the artery came out of the wrong place, connected to the wrong side of my heart, and had “kinked” like a hose, causing the blockage. A procedure to open the blocked artery and keep it open by implanting a wire mesh “stent” seemed to take care of that. But it did increase the risk of having a stroke.

Now here I was spending that first Monday night in March in the hospital in advance of surgery Tuesday morning to repair my leaking valve, wondering if this third congenital “strike” would put me out, and knowing that even if successful, the surgery would mean 8–10 weeks of painful recuperation. To his credit, the heart surgeon on the case repeated some of the tests before opening me up. The results

indicated that my valve, though still leaking, was no longer as bad as it had been only weeks earlier when the previous round of tests was completed, perhaps because the medications I was taking had slowed my heart down to a normal level and this permitted the valve to move from a 3.5 to a 1.5 on the leak scale. So I left the hospital the next morning without facing the small chance of dying in the surgery, without a massive scar on my chest, and without having to face at least 8 weeks of painful recuperation and the risk of various complications.

The same year that I did not have the surgery, about 650,000 others did. About 650 died, and nearly 40,000 had serious complications, including strokes [2]. My roommate that Monday night in the hospital had had the surgery two months earlier and was back for his third hospitalization because of complications. He was gracious enough to share my good feeling about being spared, but it was clear that what he had gone through had destabilized him psychologically. We talked about how the surgery had changed his life in ways he never anticipated – most of the worse, but some for the better.

I left the hospital the next day thinking about Thich Nhat Hanh's words about the miracle of walking the green Earth and what my hospital roommate had said about the "for the better." It was easy for me to be happy about my fate that day, of course. I was permitted to continue walking freely on the Earth. But I left reflecting on how it was that my roommate could find anything positive in *his* situation. For days after my release I thought about what it took to find the positive in human suffering as Buddhists and Christians alike are taught. I thought long and hard about what role being positive played in my own life – before, during, and now after my brush with open heart surgery. And, as I went about my business – being with my family, reflecting on my experience, and working at my job as a college professor – I realized I was ready to write this book, a book about what I have learned about the meaning of "being positive" in the face of the human reality of suffering and eventual and inevitable death.

I discerned that in six decades of living I had come to see in myself and in the world around me the quest for a spiritual appreciation of the great opportunity that being alive offers, absolutely and without expectations of comfort, pleasure, and worldly success. I experienced a renewed sense of the gift I have been given by my encounters with Buddhism and my core Christian identity. And I was ready to bring to bear my professional experiences as a psychologist in service of this quest.

While "pop psychology" has long focused upon positive themes of self-understanding, human potential, empowerment, and assertiveness, most scientific psychology in America has long and mostly focused upon either the neutral processes of mental functioning (such as memory, cognition) or the negative developments that plague human lives: studying them, preventing them, treating them. In recent years, however, scientific psychology has developed a new focus on the positive, with an emphasis on thriving, happiness, and fulfillment.

In this sense, it is rejoining the "humanistic" psychology that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s but was soon marginalized or abandoned by mainstream scientific psychology. This was in part for its methodological shortcomings, and in part for its attention to topics then thought to be inherently "unscientific" such as spirituality,

meaning, and higher purpose. This trend continued until humanistic psychology was “rescued” by psychologist–researchers Martin Seligman, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and their colleagues and followers.

The development of positive psychology in the scientific mainstream in some ways parallels the history of psychoanalysis in the sense that some of its concepts (e.g., “Freudian Slips” and “the unconscious”), which were dismissed as “unscientific” by behaviorist psychologists in the 1950s and 1960s, have been rehabilitated in more recent neuropsychological research that finds a biological basis for these concepts in modern brain research.

Students of positive psychology have taken many of the ideas in humanistic psychology and given them scientific credibility as a movement that is most closely associated with the work of Martin Seligman, who made it the theme of his presidency of the American Psychological Association in 1998. His book *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment* was a notable milestone, a lovely blend of scientific research, practical suggestions, and highly effective anecdotes [3]. Others have followed suit – e.g., Daniel Gilbert’s 2007 book *Stumbling on Happiness*, Ben Shahar’s 2007 book *Happier: Learn the Secrets to Daily Joy and Lasting Fulfillment*, and Fred Bryant and Joseph Veroff’s book on *Savoring: A New Model of Positive Experience* [4–6].

Seligman offered three “pillars” of positive psychology: the study of positive emotion, the study of positive traits (strengths, virtues, and abilities such as intelligence and athleticism), and the study of positive institutions that support the virtues, and thus the positive emotions. From these comes a focus on three themes. The first is the “life of enjoyment.” By this he refers to efforts to understand how and why people enjoy what in an earlier era would have been called “the simple pleasures of life” – their social relationships, hobbies, and other activities that entertain them, the satisfaction of ordinary living. The second theme concerns the “life of engagement.” The focus here is on investigating the beneficial results that come from giving oneself over to some pursuit. The sense of confidence, competence, achievement, and timelessness that comes from giving your all to some activity has long been recognized as important for a sense of well being, but it has become the topic of formal study most notably in the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and his concept of “flow” [7].

The third focal point identified by Seligman is the “life of affiliation.” Here the focus is on how being part of a bigger picture generates happiness through meaningfulness, the sense of being worthwhile that comes from contributing to things beyond one’s narrow slice of the larger picture in human existence, the things that endure beyond the momentary ups and downs of an individual human life. These include building institutions, preserving natural resources, helping improve the human condition, and creating culture [8].

While this movement to positive psychology is “news” for mainstream scientific psychology, it is not without its historical origins. If one wishes to name those responsible for focusing on and conceptualizing positive themes in psychological development, perhaps the best classic voices are the humanistic psychologists of the 1950s and 1960s – most notably Abe Maslow, Carl Rogers, and Erich Fromm [9–11].

Joining them have been the many students of spirituality that I have encountered (many of them Buddhists) who have offered up their voices – e.g., French-born Tibetan Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard, who, in collaboration with American psychologist Daniel Goleman, wrote *Happiness: A Guide to Developing Life's Most Important Skill* in 2007, the Dalai Lama's 1998 *The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living*, and the prolific Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, who in 2007 offered *Two Treasures: Buddhist Teachings on Awakening and True Happiness* (among so many others) [12–14].

The resurgence of positivity in mainstream psychology even owes a debt of intellectual gratitude to some psychologists whose origins lie in a psychoanalytic perspective, such as Erik Erikson and Robert White, whose concepts of mastery and challenge tap positive veins in the human psyche rather than just focusing on the classical Freudian effort to deal with negative drives. Indeed, we can trace the very concept of positive psychology to Maslow's 1954 book *Motivation and Personality* [9].

As a group, these psychologists focused on positive themes such as Maslow's "actualization," Rogers' "unconditional personal regard," Fromm's "biophilia" (love for humanity and nature), Erikson's "generativity" (building something positive in life beyond oneself), and White's "effectance motivation" (which posited a source of energy for ego that was independent of classical Freudian "negative" drive reduction) [9, 15–17]. This affirmation of the human potential for all that is good and beautiful and meaningful and spiritually uplifting has provided the core of humanistic psychology for more than half a century, even though it rested upon and generated little good science. And its adherents have labored on in workshops, books, conferences, and journals mostly treated as an eccentricity by mainstream psychology. At best it has been given lip service in reviews of "the history of psychology" that are offered to students in much the same way that pre-Einstein physics is taught to undergraduate students.

When I was in graduate school at Cornell University in the early 1970s humanistic psychology was very much on the periphery, at best considered a "Third Force" (with behaviorist and psychoanalytic concepts being considered the first two, and this latter approach itself largely discredited and marginalized in mainstream psychology). Indeed, with the rise to preeminence of "behaviorist" psychology in the 1950s and 1960s, "cognitive" psychology in the 1970s and "neuropsychology" in the 1980s, humanistic psychology seemed ever more marginalized, confined to the "softer" domains of "self-improvement" books and workshops that were often derided as "touchy feel" by those who considered themselves practitioners of "psychological science." But with the leadership offered by Martin Seligman's advocacy for positive psychology, the themes addressed by the classic Humanistic Psychologists have found new life as credible topics for serious study and as a source of important explanatory concepts.

This book follows in this revived tradition but with an appreciation for the ultimate value of spiritual exploration in understanding the fundamental human issues addressed by positive psychology. I use my own life experiences as a context for demonstrating the power of positive and humanistic psychology to join with spiritual exploration and

practices to help make sense of the human condition. These experiences include my professional activities understanding risk and resilience in war zones, on death row, in child abuse cases, in refugee camps, and as a consultant to a wide range of human service, child welfare, and educational institutions. And, they draw upon my personal experiences as a spouse, as a father, as a citizen, as a companion for dogs, as a world traveler, and perhaps most importantly, as a spiritual seeker. Each explores issues of meaningfulness through reflection on how my own life experiences have highlighted issues dealt with by positive psychology:

- How human relationships with dogs shed light on the core issues of human potential.
- How the costs and benefits of obliviousness are evident in my experience of growing up in the 1950s, and how this sheds light on the need for self-awareness in children and adults.
- How meeting the challenge of trauma reveals some of the most important issues in discovering the origins of “meaningfulness” in human experience.
- How the opposite of trauma is to be found in the positive experience of “transformational grace.”
- How narcissism as a cultural and psychological phenomenon in modern life calls for an approach that might be called the “positive death of the self” in favor of the development of the soul.
- How an exploration of the meaning of “living an ‘extraordinary’ life” brings together the core insights of positive psychology and spiritual development.

This book then is a journey within a journey, and as the classic Chinese proverb tells us, the only way to being such a long journey is with the first step.

Chicago, IL

James Garbarino

References

1. Hanh, T.H. (1990) *Peace is every step*. New York, NY: Bantam.
2. <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus>.
3. Seligman, M. (2004) *Authentic happiness: Using the new positive psychology to realize your potential for lasting fulfillment*. New York, NY: Free Press.
4. Gilbert, D. (2007) *Stumbling on happiness*. New York, NY: Vintage.
5. Ben-Shahar, T. (2007) *Happier: Learn the secrets to daily joy and lasting fulfillment*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill
6. Bryant, F. and Veroff, J. *Savoring: A new model of positive experience*. New Jersey, NJ: Erlbaum.
7. Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2008) *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial Classics.
8. Seligman, M. (2004) *Authentic happiness: Using the new positive psychology to realize your potential for lasting fulfillment*. New York, NY: Free Press.
9. Maslow, A. (1954) *Motivation and personality*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
10. Rogers, C. (1980) *A way of being*. New York, NY: Mariner Books.
11. Fromm, E. (1963) *The art of loving*. New York, NY: Bantam.

12. Ricard, M. and Goleman, D. (2007) *Happiness: A guide to developing life's most important skill*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.
13. Lama, D. (2009) *The art of happiness: A handbook for living*. New York, NY: Penguin.
14. Hanh, T.N. (2007) *Two treasures: Buddhist teachings on awakening. True happiness*. Berkely, CA: Parallax Press.
15. Fromm, E. (1963) *The art of loving*. New York, NY; Bantam.
16. Erikson, E. (1995) *Childhood and society*. New York, NY: Vintage.
17. White, R. (1959) Motivation reconsidered: The concept of competence. *Psychological Review*. 66, 297–333.

<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4419-7743-4>

The Positive Psychology of Personal Transformation
Leveraging Resilience for Life Change

Garbarino, J.

2011, XV, 121 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4419-7743-4