

Rethinking Success During these Changing Times

Prioritize Goals

Perhaps it's time to rethink the rules of success. As a child you may have felt successful if you scored good grades, got along with your friends, and made Mom and Dad happy. As a teen, success was about excelling in a sport or artistic endeavor, going to the prom with a "dream" date or getting into a good college. As a young adult, success was about getting a job, pleasing your boss, starting and raising your family, keeping a tidy home, and optimizing your earning power.

When I was a young man, and had barely begun what would become a huge part of my life's work—the psychology of aging—I had the good fortune to be invited to Berkeley, California, to partner with Dr. Gay Luce in an innovative research program that came to be known as the Sage Project. Our goal was to examine how the bodies and minds of men and women past the age of sixty-five might be refreshed so that they could continue to contribute to society or, at least, remain sufficiently engaged to enjoy their later life. This was long before yoga and meditation became popular in the US. Indeed, it was among the very first preventative health care studies in North America.

More than thirty years later, I still recall most of the names and faces of our initial fifteen volunteers, who met with us two times a week for several hours. We regularly assigned homework to our subjects—journal writing or certain physical exercises including yoga, meditation, biofeedback and tai chi—and then tried to assess which had been most helpful in turning back the aging clock. It was exciting work.

There were no formulas. This was new research.

Before long we could see that we were engaged in something special. If life is a learning process where each day we uncover one more meaningful tidbit and hope eventually to come to a full understanding of who we are and what our purpose is, then just imagine the advantage of old age. It was during my years with the Sage Project that I came to believe (and still do) that we can all be wise beyond our years if we simply take the time to listen to people who are in their twilight years and have climbed life's proverbial mountain. I was awestruck by my elderly subjects' ability to reflect honestly on their good and bad experiences, and speak coherently about what they had learned from them.

Yet a disturbing theme emerged in our research. In one assignment, our fifteen subjects were asked to chart the highs and lows of their life on a single sheet of graph paper. It was up to them to decide what that meant. There were no required inputs such as income, career advancement, marriage, children, or social status. We simply wanted to know when and for how

long they felt good about themselves. We asked our sages to draw a line across the center of a page, section it off by half decades, and then map a line above and below for all the years of their life, much as you might chart a stock price, monthly rainfall, or spotted owl sightings. Above the line were periods when the sages enjoyed their life; below the line were periods when life didn't measure up to their expectations. They could draw way above the center line or way below it as a measure of how strongly they felt about a particular high or low point.

We had no idea what to expect and, frankly, we worried that most of these elder men and women would paint the rosiest possible picture of their life; by engaging in a little revisionist history they might end up drawing a chart that had them living consistently above the line. But that is not what we got. On the day of reckoning, when our group met to discuss the charts, we gathered in a circle on comfy pillows on the floor with a breathtaking view of San Francisco Bay. Perhaps it was the relaxed setting that led to their candor. But our subjects had no trouble sharing sincere and thoughtful comments.

The first to speak was Herb, who was eighty-one. Herb was a lively sort. He had been married for many years and was successful in his line of work. He seemed content; certainly he was not unhappy. To our surprise, though, his chart was mostly below the center line and rose above it only sporadically. By his own judgment, he had lived vast parts of his life below what I'll now call the success line. Sure, there were great moments, he told us. Those generally centered on his career and children's

having them and then watching them do well. But overall his life had been a colossal disappointment. He hadn't loved his job, though he'd stayed with it for decades. His long marriage was okay, but he felt he had let his true love get away when he was a young man.

Until this exercise, Herb had never faced the critical decisions he'd made in his life. But here they were summarized, clear as day, in a chart that he had produced using his own criteria for what it means to lead a successful life. Needless to say, Herb was not pleased. His life had been wasted in many ways, he realized, and it was too late to do anything about it. He wished the insights he had gleaned from the mapping exercise were visible to him when he was younger. He would have taken more risks and focused on more meaningful pursuits, he told us, rather than have led his safe and largely routine life.

This was a poignant moment. Herb wasn't in tears. At some level, he knew he had played it safe and done mostly what was expected of him—not what he might have preferred to do. Herb said that if he had it to do over he would have focused far more on the people who mattered to him. He would have switched careers at an early age to something that would have challenged and simulated him more. He would have taken more risks and pursued his passions. He would have spent more time helping others. Our discussion was a cathartic moment for Herb, and it reminds me of the Argentinean poet Jorge Luis Borges, who in his classic *Instantaneous Laments* a lifetime of safe choices:

If I were able to live my life anew, in the next I would try to commit more errors. I would not try to be so perfect, I would relax more. I would be more

foolish than I've been, in fact, I would take few things seriously. I would be less hygienic. I would run more risks, take more vacations, contemplate more sunsets, climb more mountains, swim more rivers. I would go to more places where I've never been, I would eat more ice cream and fewer beans, I would have more real problems and fewer imaginary ones.

I was one of those people that lived sensibly and prolifically each minute of his life; of course I had moments of happiness. If I could go back I would try to have only good moments.

Because if you didn't know, of that is life made: only of moments; don't let the present moment slip away. I was one of those that never went anywhere without a thermometer, a hot-water bottle, an umbrella, and a parachute; If I could live again, I would travel lighter.

If I could live again, I would begin to walk barefoot from the beginning of spring and I would continue barefoot until autumn ends. I would take more cart rides, contemplate more dawns, and play with more children, If I had another life ahead of me. But already you see, I am 85, and I know that I am dying.

One by one, each of the elders in the Sage Project shared their life chart and their deepest thoughts, and like Herb, many expressed tremendous remorse over time wasted on things that did not bring joy and purpose to their life. One sage, Vivian, displayed a largely flat line across the page. She said there were entire decades in her life that she barely remembered because nothing special had taken place. Among the last to speak was a man named Worden McDonald. His chart contained many highs—but it had even more lows.

Unbroken happiness is a bore, wrote the 17th Century French playwright Molière. It should have ups and downs. Worden McDonald and I might agree—but only if there were significantly more ups, which does not appear to be the general experience. On average, these sages in their eighth or ninth decade of life reported that around one-third of their waking time on earth had been spent above

the success line. Low points outnumbered high points two to one. Each of them had known joy and fulfillment; they just hadn't known how to make the moments last.

The sages' peak moments revealed a pattern. They tended to cluster around three types of successful personal relationships; accomplishment or personal growth of almost any kind; and activities that transcended their own self-indulgences and made them feel their life had meaning.

A particularly noteworthy outcome was the abject disappointment the sages registered with respect to the great amounts of time they had spent going through life on autopilot, doing what was expected—so many of us do almost without thought. I learned that when you do things because other people think it's the right thing to do you usually end up disappointed. When I turn eighty-eight or ninety-two I'm sure I'll have regrets. But those regrets won't include spending too little time with my family, or pursuing a career that I didn't feel passionate about, or focusing so much on me that I failed to see the needs of others. These are things that have a purpose. At the end of the day, these are the things that count.

Success Redefined

Perhaps it's time to rethink the rules of success. As a child you may have felt successful if you scored good grades, got along with your friends, and made Mom and Dad happy. As a teen, success was about excelling in a sport or artistic endeavor, going to the prom with a dream date or getting into a good college. As a young adult, success was about getting a job, pleasing your boss, starting and raising your family, keeping a tidy home, and optimizing your earning power. It's at this time of life that you generally begin to define success by position, wealth, or power. We are practically bred to embrace that model; it can be difficult to break free from it. The reality, though, is that you must decide for yourself what defines success in the next stage of life. If you rate yourself against someone else's definition, you will never know the kind of success that

Dr Ken Dychtwald is a psychologist, gerontologist, business consultant and the author of 16 books, including the co-authored *With Purpose: Going From Success to Significance in Work and Life* from which this article has been adapted. He is widely viewed as North America's leading visionary regarding the marketing and workforce implications of the age wave. For more information about Dr. Dychtwald's work, please visit www.AgeWave.com.

Exhibit I
Happiness and Money?

Rank	Country	Score	National GDP Per Capita	Rank	Country	Score	National GDP Per Capita	Rank	Country	Score	National GDP Per Capita
1.	Denmark	8.2	\$37,400	32.	Singapore	6.8	\$49,700	64.	South Africa	5.5	\$9,800
2.	Colombia	8.1	\$6,700	33.	Venezuela	6.8	\$12,200	65.	Lebanon	5.3	\$11,300
3.	Switzerland	8.1	\$41,100	34.	Chile	6.7	\$13,900	66.	Algeria	5.2	\$6,500
4.	Austria	8.0	\$38,400	35.	Israel	6.7	\$25,800	67.	Jordan	5.2	\$4,900
5.	Iceland	7.8	\$38,800	36.	Slovenia	6.7	\$27,200	68.	Kenya	5.2	\$1,700
6.	Australia	7.7	\$36,300	37.	Uruguay	6.7	\$11,600	69.	Turkey	5.2	\$12,900
7.	Finland	7.7	\$35,300	38.	Indonesia	6.6	\$3,700	70.	Bosnia/		
8.	Sweden	7.7	\$36,500	39.	France	6.5	\$33,200		Herzegovina	5.1	\$7,000
9.	Canada	7.6	\$38,400	40.	Czech Republic	6.4	\$24,200	71.	Estonia	5.1	\$21,100
10.	Guatemala	7.6	\$4,700	41.	Greece	6.4	\$29,200	72.	Serbia	5.1	\$10,400
11.	Ireland	7.6	\$43,100	42.	Nigeria	6.4	\$2,000	73.	Uganda	5.1	\$900
12.	Luxembourg	7.6	\$80,500	43.	Philippines	6.4	\$3,400	74.	Romania	5.0	\$11,400
13.	Mexico	7.6	\$12,800	44.	China	6.3	\$5,300	75.	Azerbaijan	4.9	\$7,700
14.	Norway	7.6	\$53,000	45.	India	6.2	\$2,700	76.	Macedonia	4.9	\$8,500
15.	Netherlands	7.5	\$38,500	46.	Japan	6.2	\$33,600	77.	Mali	4.9	\$1,000
16.	Malta	7.5	\$22,900	47.	Taiwan	6.2	\$30,100	78.	Egypt	4.8	\$5,500
17.	United States	7.4	\$45,800	48.	Uzbekistan	6.2	\$2,300	79.	Ghana	4.8	\$1,400
18.	Belgium	7.3	\$35,300	49.	Kyrgyzstan	6.1	\$2,000	80.	Iraq	4.7	\$3,600
19.	El Salvador	7.2	\$5,800	50.	Vietnam	6.1	\$2,600	81.	Latvia	4.7	\$17,400
20.	New Zealand	7.2	\$26,400	51.	Iran	6.0	\$10,600	82.	Lithuania	4.6	\$17,700
21.	Germany	7.2	\$34,200	52.	Peru	6.0	\$7,800	83.	Albania	4.4	\$6,300
22.	United Kingdom	7.1	\$35,100	53.	Portugal	6.0	\$21,700	84.	Angola	4.4	\$5,600
23.	Honduras	7.1	\$4,100	54.	Croatia	5.9	\$15,500	85.	Russia	4.4	\$14,700
24.	Kuwait	7.0	\$39,300	55.	Poland	5.9	\$16,300	86.	Pakistan	4.3	\$2,600
25.	Saudi Arabia	7.0	\$23,200	56.	Bolivia	5.8	\$4,000	87.	Bulgaria	4.2	\$11,300
26.	Cyprus	6.9	\$27,400	57.	Korea, South	5.8	\$24,800	88.	Georgia	4.1	\$4,700
27.	Italy	6.9	\$30,400	58.	Bangladesh	5.7	\$1,300	89.	Belarus	4.0	\$10,900
28.	Spain	6.9	\$30,100	59.	Senegal	5.7	\$1,700	90.	Armenia	3.7	\$4,900
29.	Argentina	6.8	\$13,300	60.	Hungary	5.6	\$19,000	91.	Ukraine	3.6	\$6,900
30.	Brazil	6.8	\$9,700	61.	Morocco	5.6	\$4,100	92.	Moldova	3.5	\$2,900
31.	Dominican Republic	6.8	\$7,000	62.	Montenegro	5.5	\$3,800	93.	Zimbabwe	3.3	\$200
				63.	Slovakia	5.5	\$20,300	94.	Tanzania	3.2	\$1,300

truly matters. There is an avalanche of new research in the areas of success and happiness. One of the leading thinkers in this field is Dr. Martin Seligman, a University of Pennsylvania research psychologist, who has boiled down true happiness to three components: pleasure (things that feel good), involvement (being immersed in things like family, work, and hobbies), and meaning (using personal strengths to serve a larger end).

Of the three, Seligman says, pleasure (the one most closely linked to material gain) is the least consequen-

tial, a finding that has been reaffirmed in numerous follow-up studies worldwide. For example, studies by Dr. Ruut Veenhoven, a sociologist at Erasmus University in Rotterdam, show that the extremely poor—those earning less than \$10,000 a year—may be rendered unhappy by the relentless stress of poverty. Yet his work shows that after a poor person's income exceeds that level there is no further correlation between money and happiness. After a certain level of income, typically enough to meet basic expenses, money ceases to be a factor.

Money and happiness, it seems, really do not necessarily go hand in hand—at least not in the manner you would expect. The World Database of Happiness presents one of the most interesting examinations into whether or not money buys happiness. This database is an ongoing register of scientific research on the subjective enjoyment of life. The scores are based on responses to a question about satisfaction with life and perceptions of personal well-being, the answers to which were rated on a numerical scale ranging from dissatisfied to satisfied. Rating scales ranged from 0 to 10.

As you can see from the following list, when you place each country's GDP per capita (in current US dollars), there is not very much correlation between how much money people make and how happy they feel. For example, Guatemalans have the same happiness score as Canadians, although their income is only one-eighth as much. However, what does tend to reliably correlate with happiness is the quality of relationships with family and friends and a personal sense of belonging to one's community.

Underlying these thought-provoking results is the simple fact that more is not necessarily better when it comes to enjoying life and feeling satisfied. More may be more, but it is never enough. We're caught up in the myth that by achieving and going up the ladder and having more stuff we'll feel full inside. Yet it isn't so.

Some years ago I was helping former US President Jimmy Carter gather his thoughts for his book *The Virtues of Aging*, and at one point I said to him, "President Carter, I have a crazy question for you. I'm about the age now that you were when you were president. Have you come to any new perspectives about what matters in life, now that you're older?" His answer was to the point: "Earlier in my life I thought the things that mattered were the things that you could see, like your car, your house, your wealth, your property, your office. But as I've grown older I've become convinced that the things that matter most are the things that you can't see—the love you share with others, your inner purpose, your comfort with who you are."

So here's the thing. At the end of the day, it may be wisest to judge each of our own life successes not from the outside looking in but from the inside out. It's not about the material things I can show the world, but about how I feel about the work I do; it's about the relationships I have and the love I share.

It may well be, as novelist Edith Wharton said, that if only we'd stop trying to be happy we'd have a pretty good time.

So maybe the concept of success needs an overhaul for the next chapter of our lives. Maybe it shouldn't be primarily about money and advancement; maybe it should be about personal growth, contribution to the greater good, warm relationships, genuine happiness, and finding purpose in work.

How Will You Use Your Life?

A few years ago, I was on a lecture tour in Scandinavia. Shortly after arriving in Copenhagen I got a call from the offices of Denmark's renowned octogenarian geriatrician, Dr. Esther Mueller, who was inviting me to join her for lunch.

At lunch, we exchanged the usual small talk. Soon enough our conversation turned to professional concerns and issues. She wanted to know about my insights and research on preventive health, aging, and human potential. I was interested in her views on health care and medicine in Europe. Things were going well, and then out of nowhere she said, "Ken, you're obviously smart and ambitious. You have a keen interest in what is becoming a hugely important field as the global population ages. You have had numerous successes. But, what I want to know is this: how do you intend to use your life?"

I wasn't sure what she meant and asked, "You mean in terms of what I'm going to make of my career?"

"No."

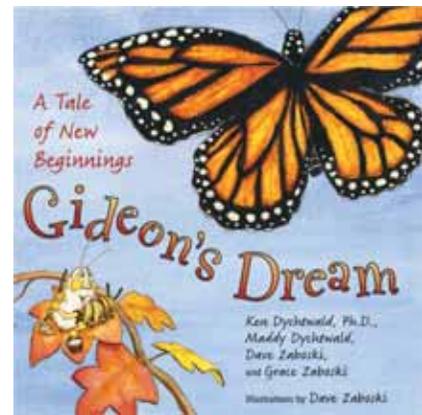
"Do you mean in terms of the books I may write?"

"No."

I thought something was lost in translation. What did she mean?

"Ken, how will you use your life?" she repeated.

My mind was stuck in concerns over my career, celebrity, and family life. How would I use my life? I was going to make some money and have a couple of kids, I said to myself. Yet I realized that she was trying to get at something deep, and at that time the meaning of her question didn't sink in. I fumbled for an answer and ended up telling her that I wasn't sure. But, her question—how will you use your life?—haunted me for years.



With time I've come to understand Dr. Mueller's point. I've got one life to live. There might be sixty years of it or eighty or a hundred. But it's one life and it can have a higher purpose. In fact, it must have a higher purpose in order to be a life truly worth living. Only now, as I approach my seventh decade of life, do I fully grasp what Dr. Mueller was saying to me back in Copenhagen: How might I pursue my interests and career and utilize whatever abilities I had in a way that helped others and might redefine success for me, not in terms of how much money I make or how many books I sell, but by the way I bring meaning and purpose to everything I do and the impact I have on others?

It is my heartfelt belief that living a longer life, as we certainly will in an age of advanced medicine and unprecedented information about healthy living, isn't simply a matter of playing longer or working longer but of reaching the point where you have gathered enough life experiences and perhaps the financial freedom to dedicate the decades of life still before you to doing good things for your family, community, country, and the world. What use could you put your skills to that might give someone else, whether you know him or not, an otherwise missed opportunity to better his life?

And so I will ask you—how will you use your life? It's never too late to begin to figure out the answer. ☺

Reference # 03M-2009-08-09-01