

WIT & WISDOM

STORIES

— For The —

Journey

Through

Life

TOM  
By GREENE.



# Six Ways to Thrive Before You Die

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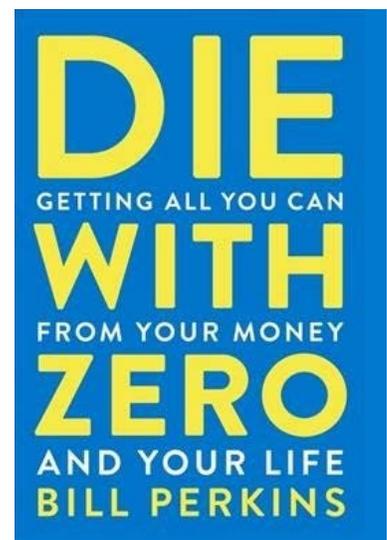
A few years ago my wife's best friend and mentor was diagnosed with terminal Cancer. On her death bed she looked deep into my wife's eyes and said, "I have some advice for you." After a dramatic pause, she whispered, "eat the fried chicken".

My wife asked her why eating more fried chicken was important. She responded: "because you love fried chicken. And, when your days on this earth are numbered, you're really going to wish you'd taken more time to enjoy the things you really love."

Beyond just eating fried chicken, doing the things you love creates meaningful, lasting memories. Memories that add richness and fullness to our lives.

Since none of us will get out of here alive, don't you think we ought to identify the things we truly love to do?

And, try to do them as many times as possible before we die? I do. And, so does Bill Perkins, the author of my new favorite book: Die with Zero.



As Perkins explains, "life isn't simply about surviving; life is about thriving". Or, as the saying goes:

“ Life’s a journey not to arrive at the grave safely in a well preserved body, but rather to skid in sideways, totally worn out, shouting ‘holy shit...what a ride.’ ”

Unknown

The goal is to thrive in our limited time here. So that at the end of the road we are full of memories and experiences that leave us satisfied with the journey. That’s the premise of Perkins’ new book and a philosophy we should all consider. The book is about making the most of your adventure on earth before it’s too late.

The book comes with numerous important lessons for creating “memory dividends” before you die. That is, memories that become more valuable over time.

## How to Thrive Before You Die

Here are the top six recommendations from the book:

### 01 Maximize Your Positive Life Experiences

We all have those positive life experiences that we wouldn’t trade for any amount of money. I remember biking through my neighborhood with my daughter on a beautiful summer day.

I remember thinking in that moment that I want to do this as many times as I can-before I die.

## 02 Start Investing in Experiences Early

Now, I know what you're thinking. I don't have the time right now to create a "memory dividend", whatever that is. I get it. But, if life really is the sum of all our memorable experiences, can you really afford not to invest in positive life experiences? Can you afford not to create "memory dividends" that will give you a return on your investment for the rest of your life? Of course not.

Having piles of money isn't the key ingredient. The key ingredient is the vision and creativity to seek out memorable and meaningful experiences, even if those experiences happen in your own backyard.

We all think that that life remains static over time. That we will always have more time later. That our friends and family will always be there. They won't. Life is in constant flux. Friends come and go; children grow up and move away; people we care about get sick and die.

The fullness of your life won't be defined by the amount of money in your 401(k). After all, isn't the point of making that money to create the flexibility to enjoy the things we love with the people we love?

## 03 Time Value of Money

The usefulness of money diminishes with age. How would your thirty year old self spend \$1M? You could get a graduate degree, buy a Porsche 911 Turbo, climb Mt.

Kilimanjaro, start a business and buy Apple or Tesla stock that will be worth millions in a few years.

But, how would your 85 year old self spend that money? You aren't likely to climb Kilimanjaro, buy a Porsche 911 Turbo or start a new business. So, the money likely becomes part of an estate plan that ultimately transfers the money to your children, who are already in their 60's-and probably don't need it anyway.

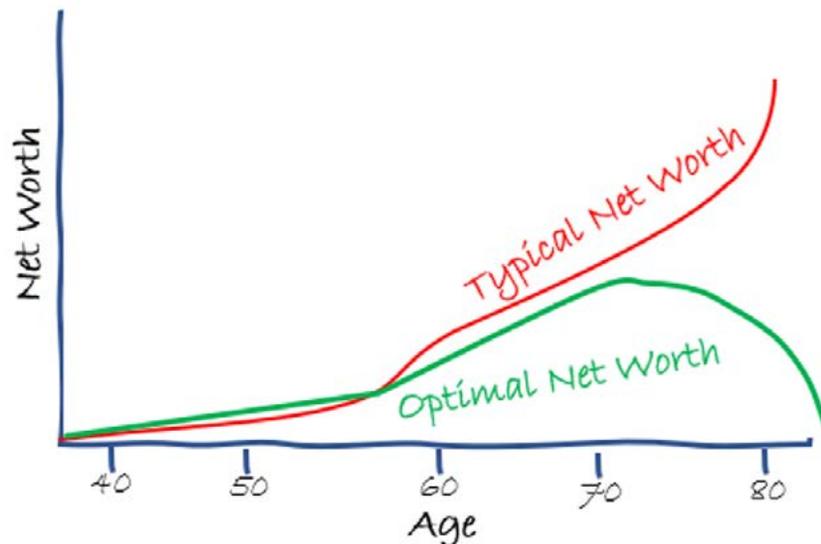
So, one might argue that the utility of money diminishes over time in direct correlation to our ability to enjoy that wealth.



## 04 Plan to Die with Zero Money

What if you spent your whole life working to save a nice nest-egg so that you could travel when you finally retire at 70 years old. That seems to be the American dream and also the advice of every financial planner on the planet. It's horrible advice. If you are 50 years old today, you only have a 50% chance of living to see age 80.

And, even if you do live to 80, there's no guarantee that you'll be in any condition to travel and do the things you dreamed about during all those years driving the desk at work. So, start spending that nest-egg now. See the chart below.



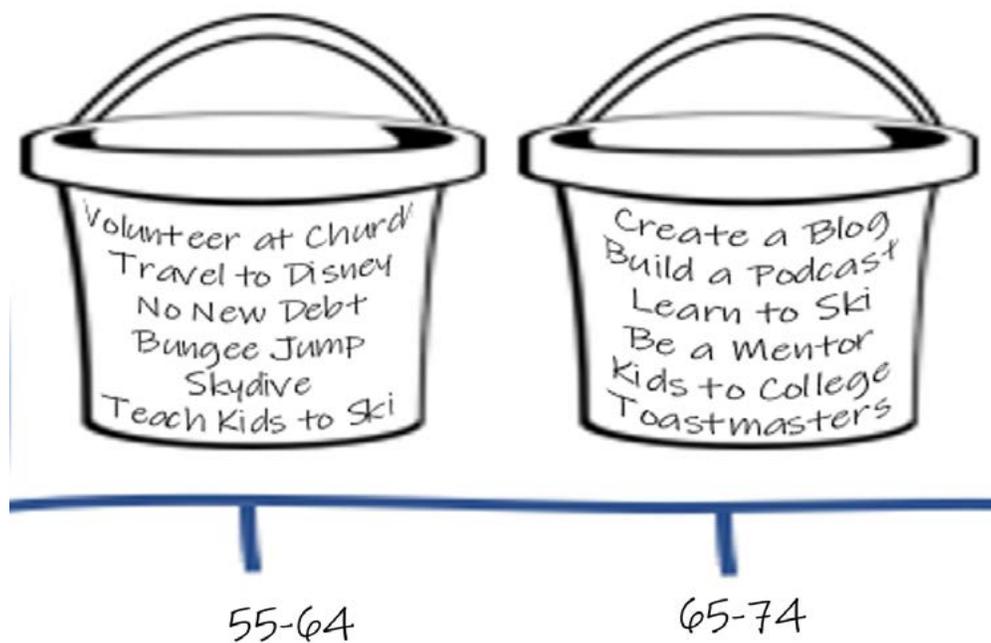
## 05 Life is Comprised of Seasons

Bill Perkins opines that life is comprised of seasons and that, more importantly, "we die many deaths in the course of our lives". For example, by the time we turn 12 or 13 the child in us dies. Then, once we graduate from college the college student dies. You get the point. But, what about the rest of our lives? Do we continue to go through seasons and watch versions of ourselves die? Unfortunately the answer is yes.

“*His summers and winters  
Scattered like splinters  
And four to five years slipped away.*”

-Jimmy Buffett

It's important to recognize the season you are in. And, what seasons lie ahead. Perkins suggests that we use "time buckets" to discover what life could look like in the future. What key experiences, activities or life events do you want to accomplish before that ten year window closes?



It's a more proactive approach to naming a season for creating those meaningful and memorable life experiences.

## 06 Take Your Biggest Risks When You Have Nothing to Lose

We all have regrets about things we didn't do when we were younger. Things like spending a semester in Washington, DC or backpacking through Europe after college. Things we had no business doing cause we were broke. But, since we were broke, what did we really have to lose? Nothing.

“*...some of it's magic, some of it's tragic  
But I had a good life all of the way.*”

-Jimmy Buffett

Always remember that **you're better off taking more chances when you are younger than when you're older.**

That's it. Just a few nuggets of wisdom for the journey. Now, go create a list of the things you love to do...and start creating meaningful memories.

“*It comes down to a simple choice, really.  
Get busy living or get busy dying.*”

-Andrew Dufresne (Shawshank Redemption)

# Why Uncertainty is the Key to Happiness

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Can it really be true that uncertainty is the key to happiness?

Many years ago there was a Chinese farmer in a small village. He owned a single horse who helped him earn a living for his family. The other villagers constantly told the farmer how fortunate he was to have such an amazing horse.

"Maybe," he replied.

One day, the amazing horse ran away from the farm. The villagers exclaimed, "Your horse ran away. How unfortunate!"

"Maybe," the farmer replied.

A few days later, the amazing horse came home, with three beautiful wild horses in tow.

"What good fortune. What an amazing blessing," the villagers exclaimed.

"Maybe," the farmer again replied.

The following week, the farmer's only son was riding one of the wild horses in the fields, when it kicked him off and broke his leg.

The villagers arrived to express their concern.  
"What terrible misfortune," they said.

"Maybe," the farmer replied.

The next month, a military officer knocked on his door recruiting able-bodied young men for the war. The farmer's son, with his shattered leg, was not selected. The villagers were elated, "your son has been spared from the war. What amazing luck!"

The farmer simply smiled. "Maybe."

The parable of the farmer and the horse is wonderful lesson in embracing uncertainty.

Friar Richard Rohr is an American author, spiritual writer, and Franciscan Friar based in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He authored a human developmental theory into three stages called Order, Disorder and Re-order. It mirrors the parable in many ways.

The theory suggests that we cannot grow unless we move through significant periods of uncertainty in our lives. The Order stage is when our lives are bumping along as anticipated. Pride is at an all-time high. The universe is cooperating. No lost horses or broken legs. things are predictable, more or less.

## Order

Order can be calming and re-affirming-and we can start to feel invincible: "pickin-em up, and layin-em down", as the kids like to say. Don't you think there is comfort in the ordinary and predictable nature of life? I do.

These are the times when every dimension is firing on all cylinders. You are at an optimal performance level emotionally, spiritually, financially, relationally, physically, occupationally and parentally. Okay, parentally isn't really a word but I'm on a roll.

Everyone and everything is following the rules of the universe....at least for a minute.

And then there is a knock at the proverbial door.....

## Disorder

Disorder is kinda the evil step-sister of the Order stage. When she shows up she is smoking a Marlboro Red and drinking a warm can of Natty Light. She is pissed off. She doesn't bother to remove the cigarette butt from her lips before she tells you to kiss her ass.

You can bet that when Disorder shows up at the party, some property is gonna get destroyed. And everything is gonna smell like cigarettes smoke and stale beer after she's gone. Think: fraternity house basement.

Or maybe Disorder is like bad Tequila. The kind that comes in a plastic bottle. The kind that makes you wish you were dead— about six hours later. The kind that makes you swear to God in heaven that you'll go to Seminary and call your mother every day if He just lets you get your face out of the toilet for five minutes. C'mon, don't act like you've never been there.

Disorder turns life upside down. Like the time I got laid off from my job, unexpectedly. And they FedEx'd me a copy of *What Color is Your Parachute?* Nothing says you're fired like a book on identifying your "parachute" color. And, all the rules of the universe went out the door.

The Disorder stage is a stark reminder that we are not in control of our lives....ever.

The Disorder stage is intended to be painful & confusing to us. Like being forced to watch a foreign movie with subtitles or watch network television shows or eat unsalted potato chips. The Disorder stage is intended to break us open enough so that new wisdom can get in. That's called growth. And that's the beginning of the Reorder stage.

The best word to define the Reorder stage is Resurrection. It's the beginning of something new. Like the very first twinkling of light when the sun rises. The fog of Disorder begins to lift.

## Reorder

We start to see things clearly again. And, it's usually about this time that we start to have a very small amount of gratitude. Gratitude for being broken open. Gratitude for being transformed. Gratitude for being kinder, stronger, wiser and humbler (yes, that's a word; I looked it up).

See, life is gonna have a certain amount of disorder. And, we are never in control of life's events. When we stop trying to coerce life to go exactly the way we want, we naturally experience a greater sense of fluidity and ease no matter what happens. Just like the Chinese farmer.

# The Importance of Delayed Gratification

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A well-known study conducted at Stanford University in the 1960s explains a lot about why it's important to delay gratification. In the study, young children were seated alone with one marshmallow on a plate. An adult researcher gave each child two choices: eat the marshmallow now, or wait 15 minutes and receive two marshmallows. Some of the children barely hesitated before shoving that marshmallow in their cake hole. Others tried to control themselves and nearly had a seizure before giving in. Only a few were able to actually hold out for the extra marshmallow, but even they struggled.

The researchers followed the participants into adulthood over a period of 40 years. The kids who were able to hold out and receive the extra marshmallow were more successful in nearly every aspect of life. They scored higher on standardized tests, had better health, and were less likely to have behavior problems.

## **Delayed Gratification is a Learned Skill**

In full disclosure, I would've shoved that marshmallow in my pie hole as soon as it hit the plate. Why? Because at six years old few children have the discipline to delay gratification. See, delaying gratification is a skill that must be developed over time. The question is whether this

generation of high school and college kids are capable of developing the ability to delay gratification. Let me explain.

People who learn to manage their need for immediate gratification will thrive more in their careers, relationships, health, and fitness. But, it's hard. We aren't wired to delay our gratification. And, today we are surrounded by more temptation than a toddler in a candy aisle. How many times have you scrolled through Tik Tok at night until your eyes could barely stay open? How many times have you binge watched a Netflix show in just three nights? And, I don't even need to ask how many times you've eaten the ice cream when you know you shouldn't.

You hated yourself later, didn't you? If it's hard for adults, imagine how much harder it will be for today's kids to resist temptation when it really matters.

See, even beyond careers, relationships and fitness, most of the world's problems are a function of delayed gratification. Ever watched an episode of Behind the Music? Or wondered why most Lottery winners file bankruptcy?

Ever wondered why Bernie Madoff got away with a multi-billion dollar Ponzi scheme for over twenty years? Or how Jeffrey Epstein convinced the world's most powerful men to sexually abuse teenage girls on a private island? Or how Elizabeth Holmes was able to raise nearly \$1 Billion for Theranos, a healthcare technology company that she knew was a complete fraud? Ever wonder why Bill

Clinton did not have sexual relations with that 22-year-old intern who could have been his daughter? Ever wonder why Richard Nixon bugged the Democratic Party headquarters when he was virtually guaranteed to be re-elected in a landslide? All of these regrettable scenarios can be attributed to the perps inability to delay one thing: gratification. Apparently none of them could wait 15 minutes for the second marshmallow.

Instant gratification can drive some of our most regrettable behaviors. Beyond those examples above, addiction to alcohol, drugs and shoplifting are a function of our inability to control the desire for instant gratification.

As a byproduct, our military [cannot meet its recruiting goals](#). Our youngsters are too fat, addicted to drugs or have a criminal attorney on speed dial. The Air Force recently revised their [previous standards](#), allowing men to be 26% body fat; women can be 36% body fat.

You can also add anger, porn and excessive credit card spending to the list. Ever watched an episode of Hoarders or Intervention? Every episode is a gross display of instant gratification gone amok.

## Why is it So Hard to Delay Our Gratification?

According to James Clear, "many studies have shown the ability to delay gratification is a crucial life skill and leads to greater success in a range of areas. Those who appear to be good at delaying gratification are actually good at

finding alternative ways to be satisfied in the moment." But, let's agree that delaying gratification is unnatural. It's hard.

We all have examples of things we regret after our impulse control short-circuited. Since it's just you and me talking, let me go first. I once chased a girl in college like a puppy chases his tail. She had absolutely zero interest, but that didn't stop me. For months I would knock on her window at late at night after too many \$1 beers. (It was the 1991 version of today's drunk texting.) Fortunately her roommates never called the police. I'd still be in jail.

One might also argue that the inability to delay gratification is biblical. The seven deadly sins of **pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth** are pretty much a handbook on delayed gratification. Some of those sins are more fun than others.

## Today's Technology Feeds Instant Gratification

Our technology and strive for efficiency is driving this trend towards immediate gratification. We've all come to love the dopamine hit from Instagram likes and Tik-Tok videos. Yes, the iPhone might as well be a syringe loaded with dopamine.

The iPhone has taken away many of the "rights of passage" experienced by prior generations. Today's youth will never know the pure panic of waiting in the carpool line and wondering if the janitor will have to drive you home cause Mom is late and cell phones haven't been invented yet.

They'll never experience the utter dismay of the President's State of the Union address interrupting their favorite television show. They'll never know the frustration of a busy signal on a telephone. They'll never know the joy of finally getting through to the DJ to request he play your favorite song. Yes, it's a brave new world but it's a world fraught with instant gratification.

“ *The world seems to be accustomed to delaying gratification less and less, which means the rewards of delaying gratification grow more and more.* ”

James Clear

Today we order up a ride from Uber and are irritated if it takes more than five minutes to arrive. We no longer wait for "Must-See TV" night to see our fav show. We binge watch the latest show and are instantly gratified at finishing the entire season in our own time. Can you imagine today's kids having to wait to find out who shot JR? They'll never experience the utter dismay of opening the fridge to find two hot dogs, some yellow mustard and a slice of American cheese. Items that turn into a surprisingly good dinner cause UberEats doesn't exist yet.

According to studies by psychologist Daniel Kahneman, "humans consistently overestimate the value or pleasure of what they don't have and underestimate the pain or loss of losing something they do have." That kind of thinking is what causes us to do really dumb things.

## How to Fight Instant Gratification

It takes willpower to resist the desire for immediate gratification. Willpower is that internal desire to keep yourself from eating the entire box of Thin Mints in one sitting.

And, the conscious desire to resist something pleasurable. Discipline, on the other hand, is the ability to form healthy habits and practice them consistently.

Instant gratification comes at the expense of willpower and discipline. Because nothing hard in life comes without a certain amount of discipline. Want to get in shape? Discipline. Want to run a marathon? Discipline. Doctors, Lawyers, Athletes, Musicians, Artists all need a certain amount of discipline. It takes discipline and willpower to delay gratification. Something nearly impossible for today's kids.

## Social Media & The Empty Promise of Instant Gratification

The challenge here is that today's high school and college kids are still in the Petri dish. They are the first generation to grow up with an iPhone and mobile Social Media. The question is whether this generation is capable of migrating from immediate gratification and dopamine hits to delayed gratification, willpower and discipline.

## The Uncertainty of Life Teaches Us to Delay Gratification

Social media teaches our kids that everyone succeeds at everything—all the time. It's full of bullshit artist who only show their successes, never their striving or their failures. There's no evidence of the hard work, the constant reps in the gym, the failures. Real life takes work, hard work, and resilience. It takes feeling uncomfortable. Too many young people shy away from these things today. But, life isn't like that. Life is full of uncertainty. Its messy, at times. It's a natural part of living and growth and developing resilience. I wrote about uncertainty [here](#).

Can the youngsters tolerate hard work? Can they tolerate the inherent messiness that comes with a disciplined (yet failed) pursuit of their dreams. Can they develop the adult skills of willpower and discipline and resilience? Can they resist the desire for immediate gratification?

Said another way, can today's young adults delay gratification and wait on the second marshmallow?

# Who Do You Spend Your Time With?

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As we travel through the various seasons of life, there is a dramatic shift in who we spend our time with. We develop relationships with friends, family, co-workers, partners, etc. But, how does our commitment to these constituencies change over time-and why?

It turns out, the people at [Our World in Data](#) spend time studying our habits. And, my friend [Sahil Bloom](#) has done a masterful job of analyzing the data. He points out that our time is limited and that, more importantly, who we spend our time with changes dramatically over time.

## Family

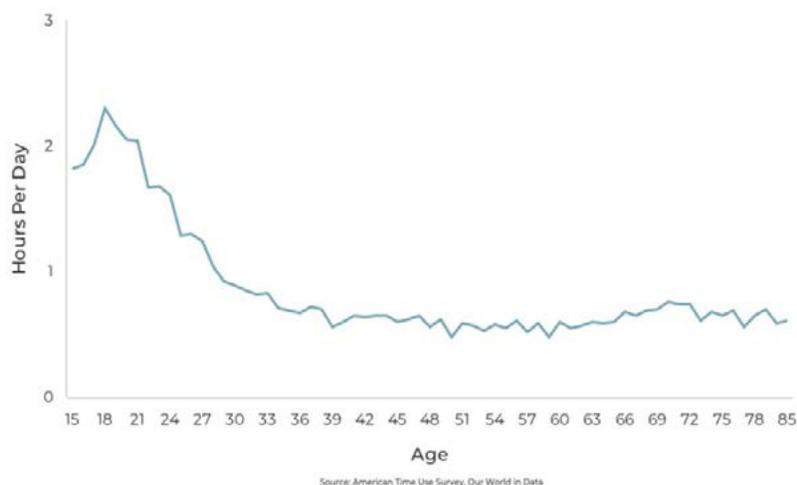
When our children are young, time moves slowly. The days are long but the years are actually very short. The first 19 years of raising a child is prime family time.

After age twenty, family time declines and it never recovers. The message here is clear: we should seek to cherish these moments as fleeting and understand each hour is precious. That appreciation of the finite nature of time can do wonders to raise our appreciation for each other.

## Friendship

Our appreciation for friendship grows over time in inverse proportion to the amount of time we get to spend with those friends. Time spent with friends peaks at age 18 and begins a very steep decline that never recovers.

### Time Spent With Friends



Perhaps that's why our appreciation for friendships grows as we age. Particularly those friendships that endure through the good times and bad. We value those friendships that deepen. We trim those that wane.

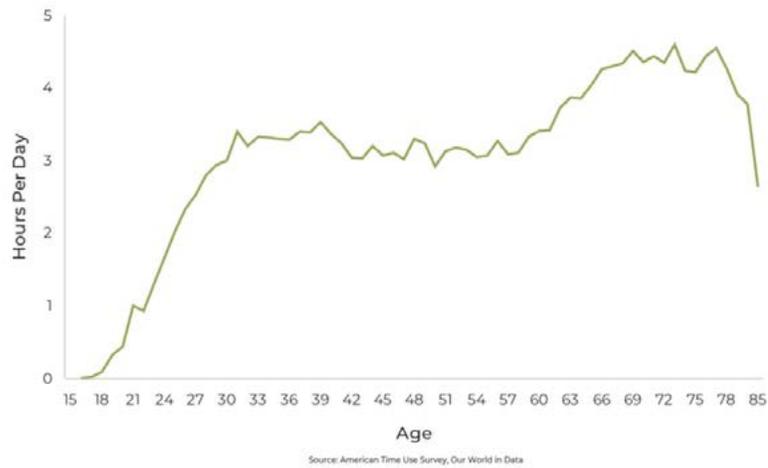
A few very committed friendships are exponentially more valuable than a large number of surface level relationships. But, as with our family, time with friends declines substantially as we age and it never recovers.

## Marriage / Partner

As I wrote about in [How to Build a Happy Life](#), our choice of life partners is our single most important life decision.

It is the only relationship where the time spent together increases over time. So, if you're miserable at 30, you can look forward to spending even more time together at 60. Choose wisely.

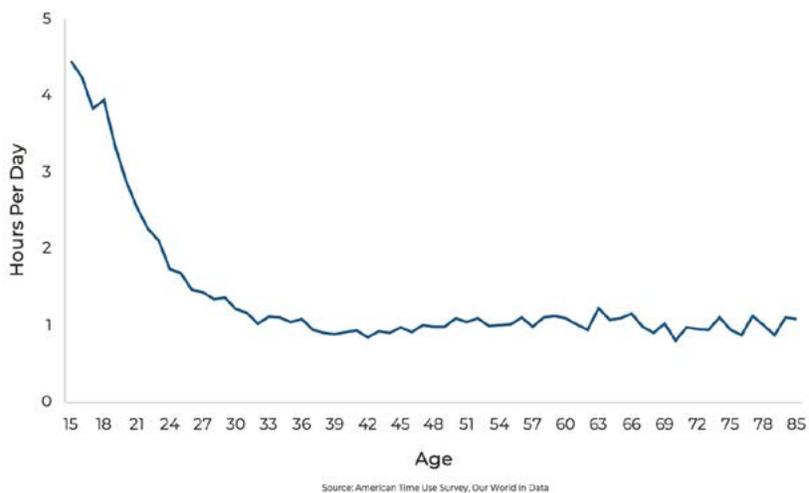
### Time Spent With Partner



## Children

No time is more fleeting or bittersweet than time spent with our children.

### Time Spent With Family

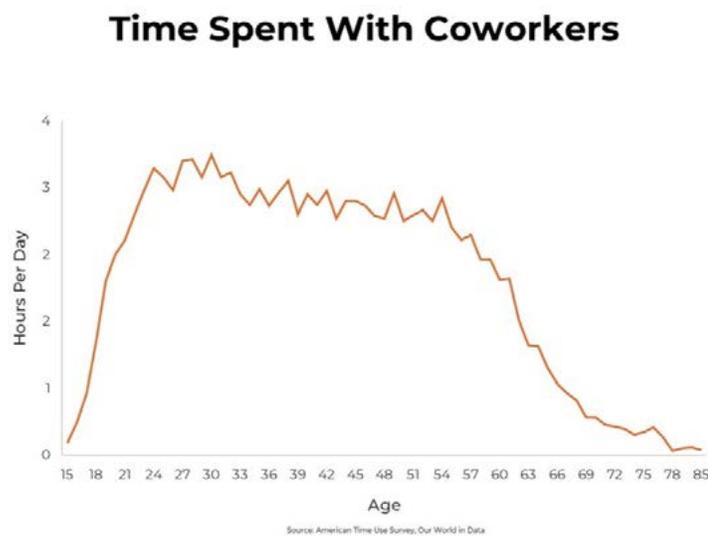


Time with our children peaks in our 30's and takes a face plant that continues into our 60's before it levels out. Yes, children make our lives infinitely more meaningful- as I outlined in this [letter](#) to my daughter on her 16th birthday:

“ *When that day comes, I want you to take comfort in one thing. You filled one man's days with more joy than he was due. A joy unknown in all my prior years. If you never accomplish another thing in your life, you will have done this. You will have exponentially and meaningfully increased the happiness in one man's life. And that is enough.* ”

## Co-Workers

During our prime working years, ages 20-60, we spend an enormous amount of time with co-workers.

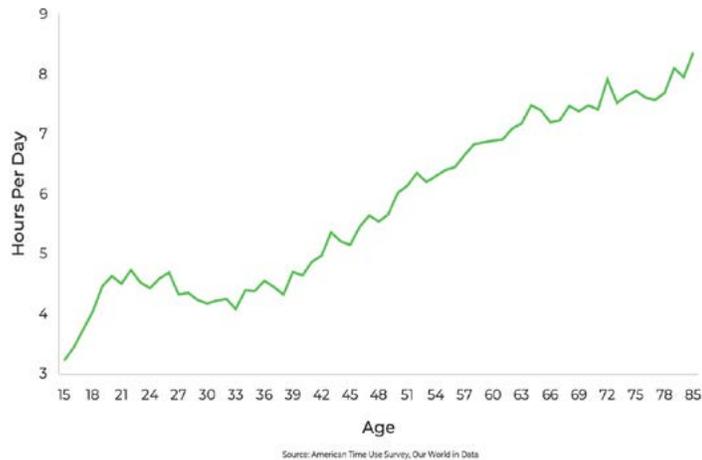


Next to our spouses/partners, no other constituency demands more of our time. That's why who you choose to work with is as important as what you choose to pursue. In a perfect world we find work that is rewarding and people that we like.

# Alone

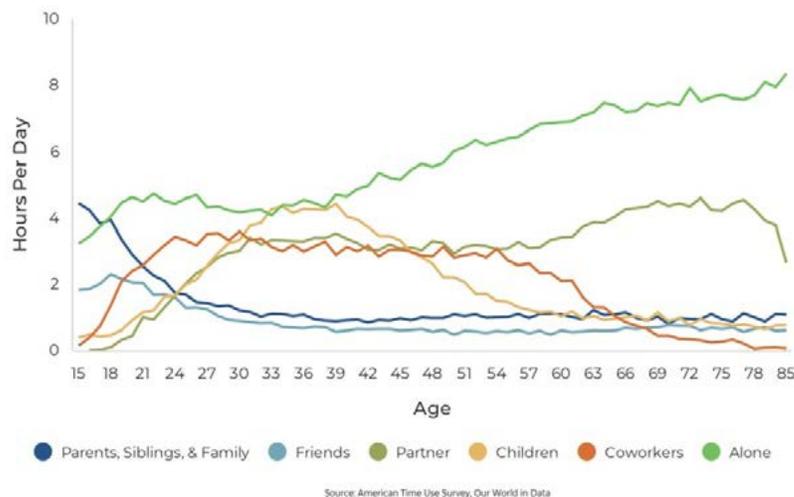
As we age, the constituency we spend the most time with is ourselves. It dramatically outpaces all others. See the green line below.

### Time Spent Alone



That's why it's incredibly important to learn to embrace solitude as we age. Part of that is learning how to embrace boredom. We must learn to find happiness and joy in the time we have to ourselves, because we will have a whole lot of alone time in our later years.

### Time Spent



That's why it's incredibly important to learn to embrace solitude as we age. Part of that is learning how to embrace boredom. We must learn to find happiness and joy in the time we have to ourselves, because we will have a whole lot of alone time in our later years.

## Summary

By looking at all graphs together, a few things become clear. In our 40's all the lines seem to cross. A time when all our constituents seem to demand the maximum amount of time. But, here is the real lesson:

The time spent with our family of origin peaks during childhood. We must prioritize our time with family and loved ones. Our time spent with friends peaks at age 18.

We must cherish the limited time we get with our friends as we age. The time spent with our spouse/partner grows as we age.

Choose wisely. The time spent with our kids peaks in our 30's. Make sure you cherish those younger years with your children. You will spend an enormous amount of time at work. Make sure you like your co-workers. Learn to embrace solitude. As you age the amount of time spent alone far surpasses all other constituencies.

# Why Are American Millennials So Darn Unhappy?

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The oldest Millennials will turn 40 years old this year. Yes, the kids are all grown up but they're terribly unhappy. Many millennials are lonely, burned out and depressed. But, why? This is the most educated, upwardly mobile generation in American history. Yet, the Millennials struggled more than any other age group during the pandemic.

Let's dig into this and see if we can learn something together.

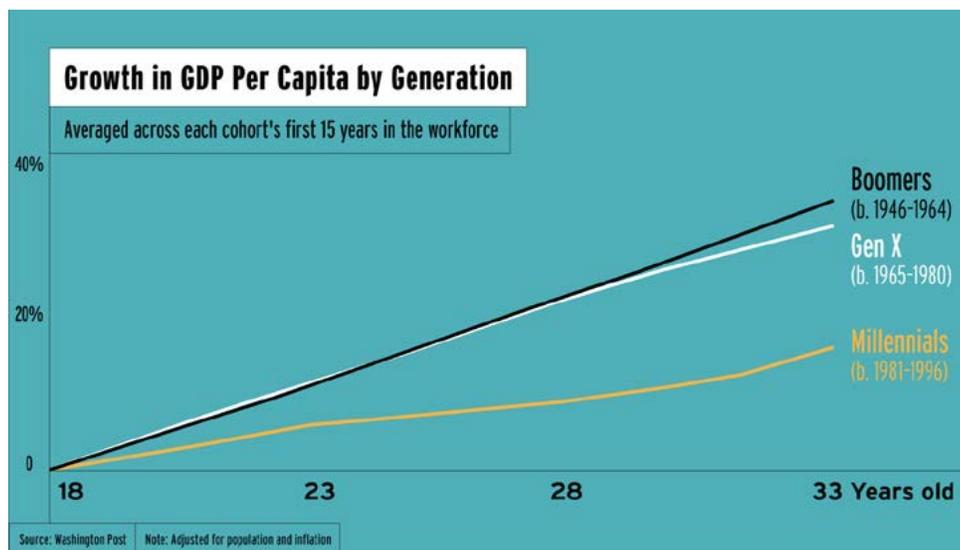
First, Millennials get a bad wrap. We still think of them as kids, but they aren't kids anymore. They are labeled as tough to manage, narcissistic, unfocused and lazy. But, I think that's more conjecture. Millennials simply want to feel a purpose and have an impact on the world. Who doesn't? And, they don't wanna sell their soul to the devil for a paycheck. Fair enough.

To their credit, the millennials have dramatically changed the workplace. Employers are more accommodating than ever before, allowing for more flexibility and mobility. Their efforts led to a step-down from business attire to all-jeans, all the time. And, for the first time ever, employees took the upper hand in creating true work/life balance. It was a nice change for everyone. And, that was before the pandemic created the ultimate employee benefit: working from home in your day-jammies.

# Parenting the Millennials

As a parent, we all want our children to do better than we did at their age. But since the first Millennials entered the workforce fifteen years ago, Millennials have experienced slower economic output than any other generation.

According to [Scott Galloway](#), for the first time in history, the millennial generation is worse off than their parents were at the same age. That's troubling considering that the Millennials now make up the largest demographic in our workforce. Perhaps that is reason number one why this generation is so darn unhappy.



## Who is to Blame?

I recently listened to a talk by Simon Sinek, a British author and inspirational speaker. He blames "failed parenting strategies" for the millennial unhappiness. It's pretty harsh, but he makes some valid points. See, many millennials grew up hearing that they are "special and talented", that "they can have anything in life".

Those seem like inspirational parenting messages, but they just aren't true. Particularly when some of those kids found themselves where they didn't belong. In Honors classes and on sports teams cause the teachers and coaches were afraid of their parents. Those same coaches handed out participation medals and trophies. Trophies that the kids themselves knew they didn't deserve.

All those participation trophies were handed out in the vacuum. But, out in the real world, kids find out quickly they aren't "special". And, they learn that they simply cannot "have anything in life". Mom can't call the boss when the promotion gets delayed. And, in Realville, few of us really get to "make an impact" with our work. Over time they learn that the promotions don't ever come as quickly as we want. And, they aren't as special as they once believed. That can feel like failure to them.

Over the longer term, the kids find themselves falling short of their parent's (and their own) lofty expectations. According to **Lori Gottlieb, author of the book, [Maybe You Should Talk to Someone](#)**, their struggles fall into three categories:

- 1. Difficulty choosing or committing to a satisfactory career path:** some of this is a result of choosing careers for which the millennials had no passion. That's a another function of trying to please Mom and Dad by choosing the high-stress, investment banking gig over teaching high school history and coaching JV Lacrosse.

**2. Struggling with relationships:** the millennials are putting off marriage until much later in life. Many of those who are in a committed relationship are simply living together outside the bonds of matrimony. There is little permanence in these relationships and certainly no spiritual foundation for the relationship. This impermanence avoids the possibility of divorce, but leads to anxiety over the future since the relationship can be terminated with ease. And, that impermanence is causing them to delay having children.

**3. Feeling a sense of emptiness or lack of purpose:** the millennials have migrated away from traditional faith in something bigger than themselves. Now that they're reaching their 40's, they feel a lack of meaning or purpose in life. Basically "life's a bitch and then you die". There is no higher power or larger point to their earthly existence. That lack of faith in a higher power or an after-life can lead to a feeling of emptiness and a host of other problems.

The simple truth is that all that mollycoddling set unrealistic expectations. And, by limiting our children's disappointments we created a generation that is simply less resilient. Because kids need to occasionally fail in order to learn resiliency. And, the result is an entire generation with lower self-esteem than others.

[Major depression rates are rising](#) at a faster rate for Millennials than any other generation.

Once the kids got to college they were mollycoddled even further. Well meaning colleges and universities set about designing "safe spaces" and "trigger warnings" to limit the millennial's exposure to opposing points of view. Even the most gifted millennials were conditioned to believe they couldn't handle opposing viewpoints at places like Berkeley and Yale. Places where free speech blossomed in the 60's. College Professors now routinely must provide "trigger warnings" if class material might possibly cause someone momentary discomfort.

## Avoidance Isn't Immunity

Deep down, we are all trying to out-parent our parents. We will do anything to keep our kids from feeling discomfort or disappointment. But, what if by taking this approach we fail our children? What if we are simply creating adults that are ill-prepared for the ordinary frustrations of adult life? Because avoidance of disappointment doesn't result in immunity from disappointment. It results in a generation of empty, anxious and confused adults.

## Lab Rats

We also can't forget that this generation is the first to grow up with technology. That alone is a lot to handle. But, it wasn't just the tech. They were the pioneers of Social Media. The lab rats for Silicon Valley.

It's in the longest running, highest stakes sociological experiment in history. That experiment is like Pavlov's mutt, who was trained to salivate at the sound of a bell. Only the bell is a series of likes and follows in a meaningless, virtual world. Constant feedback on life. And they have a hard time developing deep and meaningful relationships because they grew up watching people get cancelled and unfollowed

But Realville doesn't work that way. We don't go through life with constant attaboys over what we cooked for dinner or the memo we drafted for the boss. I imagine that it feels cold after a lifetime of affirmations. And, that lifetime in the social media laboratory is taking it's toll. A recent research study reports that certain behaviors on social media were linked to [higher likelihood of major depressive disorder](#) (MDD) in millennials.

The millennials also grew up with a sense of impatience. When you were a kid things were different. You had to go to the movie theater, the mall and the record store. You waited for the radio station to play your favorite song- or you called and asked them to play it. That created a sense of patience with the world that served you well.

But the millennials grew up in a different world. Imagine growing up with immediate gratification and a total lack of patience. That's our millennials. They subscribed to Napster and Apple Music and had access to the latest and greatest music available (often free) with the click of a button. No saving up your allowance and no trips to the record store. They introduced us to TiVo, which

allowed them to watch television shows whenever they wanted. Later they were the missionaries for movies on-demand and Netflix. They were the first generation to adopt Amazon instead of a trip to the mall. Now we order lightbulbs on-line and are incensed when they don't show up in 24 hours. And, they were the first generation to experience "go-anywhere" internet service through the magic of wi-fi.

No saving up your allowance and no trips to the record store. They introduced us to TiVo, which allowed them to watch television shows whenever they wanted. Later they were the missionaries for movies on-demand and Netflix.

In his book, *Stolen Focus*, Johann Hari opines that social media exacerbates short-term, immediate reward behavior. It's not surprising that the "lab rats" are suffering from record-levels of anxiety and depression. It's not surprising that they are feeling adrift in their careers and relationships. It's not surprising that they feel a lack of purpose and an overall sense of emptiness. They've grown up with unreasonable expectations about the speed at which life's successes should happen. And, they've grown up with a lack of patience in every other aspect of their lives. And, as they ease into their forties, these two forces are crashing into each other with nuclear force. We may well have an entire generation on our hands who will go through life feeling like they got handed a raw-deal.

And, lastly, many of the millennials first learned of a higher power during their first visit to an Alcoholics

Anonymous meeting. Going through life is challenging enough. It's a lot more challenging without some degree of confidence in a higher power than your parents.

So, what do you think about my opinion? Did I get this right? I want to hear from you. Leave me a comment below, especially if you're a millennial or a parent of a millennial. I promise you'll hear back from me.

# How to Die with a Big Fat Smile on Your Face

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Harvard professor and Social Scientist, Arthur Brooks has figured out exactly how to ensure you will die with a smile on your face. It's all outlined in his New York Times bestselling book, [From Strength to Strength](#) - *How to find success and fulfillment in the second half of life.*

Brooks, the former head of the American Enterprise Institute, is a true scholar in the arena of happiness and fulfillment. But, Brooks suggests that the foundation of your happiness later in life must be built in the first half of life.

His extensive research for this book began on an ordinary flight across country. While in flight, Brooks overheard an older man behind him say to his wife, "I'd just be better off dead." Immediately, Brooks began to surmise that this gentleman had missed out on his calling. Or, perhaps had missed out on a life of significance. Perhaps he regretted some of his life's decisions.

For the remainder of the flight Brooks ran through various scenarios that might result in such a drastic statement. Was the man terminally ill? Was he bankrupt? Once the flight reached the gate, Brooks finally had a chance to look back at the man behind him. It turns out the man was an American icon. He had truly led a

life of significance and was extremely wealthy. He often appeared on television and in the news as an expert in his field. Yet the older man had simply given up on life. Why?

## The Glass is Half Full

Research shows that when people turn age 65, one-half get happier. The other half get sadder. What is the key difference between these two groups? Before we answer that question, I think we can agree that we are all trying hard to be successful. Regardless of what your definition of success might be. But, the reality of life is that the more successful you are, the sadder you are likely to be later in life. Most people assume it's the "retirement blues", but it's way bigger than that. The resulting sadness is derived from the loss of identity, satisfaction and purpose that *success* brings.

Brooks refers to this as "the striver's curse". The higher people climb, the more attached they become to success. And, of course, the harder they fall when success ultimately begins to fade.

## The Key to Happiness

If half of the country gets happier at age 65, I want the recipe for that secret sauce. What is it that brings people true happiness later in life? According to the Italian philosopher and theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), we think "*true happiness is derived from money, power, pleasure and fame*". That statement was made over

800 years ago. Yet, I think we'd both agree that money, power, pleasure and fame and pretty good ingredients for that secret sauce. Aquinas countered that statement by writing that *"happiness is only known by the direct knowledge of God enjoyed by the blessed in heaven"*. But, since we (hopefully) aren't going to heaven any time soon, let's take a look at the alternatives.

“ The happiest people are committed to *faith, family, friendship and work that serves others.* ”

—Arthur C. Brooks

## The Happiest People

Brooks suggests that if you boil the ocean of all the research on happiness and fulfillment, you can reduce it down to the following. The happiest people are committed to faith, family, friendship and work that serves others. Even more telling is that people who are happiest in their 80's are the people who are happiest with their relationships in their 50's. To the contrary, those that are saddest in their 80's are those who underinvested in their relationships earlier in life.

So, what do success and friendships have in common? It turns out that most successful people struggle with friendships. Who knew?

## The Golden Idols

According to Brooks, the "golden idols of success, material possessions and social status represent the biggest impediments to finding true joy in the second half of life". I think what Brooks is getting at is that these "golden idols of success" are a result of marketing. See, the world does not have your true happiness at-heart. The world has it's own designs on your life.

If I watch enough network television I will be bombarded with advertisements for products intended to enhance my happiness. Those can be boiled down to the following categories: bigger pickup trucks, younger women and more stuff. Those things typically take money; a lot of money to acquire. So I work harder in order to acquire the trucks and stuff that will, ostensibly, make me happier. But, as you might imagine, true happiness is not derived from harder work, nor is it derived from bigger trucks, younger women and more stuff.

“ *Wealth is like sea-water; the more we drink, the thirstier we become; and the same is true of fame.* ”

—Arthur Schopenhauer

## Suffering

So, what does create true, lasting happiness? In a nutshell, it's relationships. See, much of life is built on suffering. As time passes, marriages fail, people get fired,

we get sick and some people we love die. The incredible joys and sorrows of life are simply unavoidable. Life can be truly painful and challenging to survive, at times. Especially if we are alone.

## Deal Verses Real

It's during these challenging and difficult times that we learn the difference between "*deal* friends and *real* friends". According to Brooks, deal friends are a byproduct of thinking that work friends are real friends. And, the biggest mistake we often make is to exchange real friends for *deal* friends. According to Brooks, "if you do not develop good friendship skills by age 25, I can guarantee you will not be happy at 75". To be successful as *people* you need other *people*.

In the words of Brene' Brown, "social media has given us this idea that we should all have a posse of friends when in reality, if we have one or two really good friends, we are lucky". But, the best way to develop really good friends is by being vulnerable. And, since vulnerability is often seen as a sign of weakness, it makes it challenging to develop deep friendships at work. And, tossing in a little more Arthur Brooks, "the happiest people are those who can relax in their weakness and stop hiding everything".

## Mike & Carol Brady

In a recent [survey](#), 36% of young men are now more likely to rely on their parents for personal support than

other people in their life. That habit can lead to missed opportunities to connect and deepen friendships. Perhaps that's the reason why the number of Americans reporting "no friends at all" has grown 400% since 1990. We clearly aren't investing the time and energy needed to maintain our friendships. If Brooks is right, all of this is shaping up to create a generation of very unhappy older Americans in a few years.

## Money, Power, Pleasure & Fame

So, what is it about successful people that makes them so miserable in their later years? The simple truth is that many successful people believe their happiness is derived from the Aquinian "money, power, pleasure and fame". As these people age, their sadness is derived from a loss of enjoyment, satisfaction and purpose; a loss of significance. Meaning that their value is diminished once the spotlight fades.

“*Nobody is ever rich enough, famous enough or powerful enough.*”

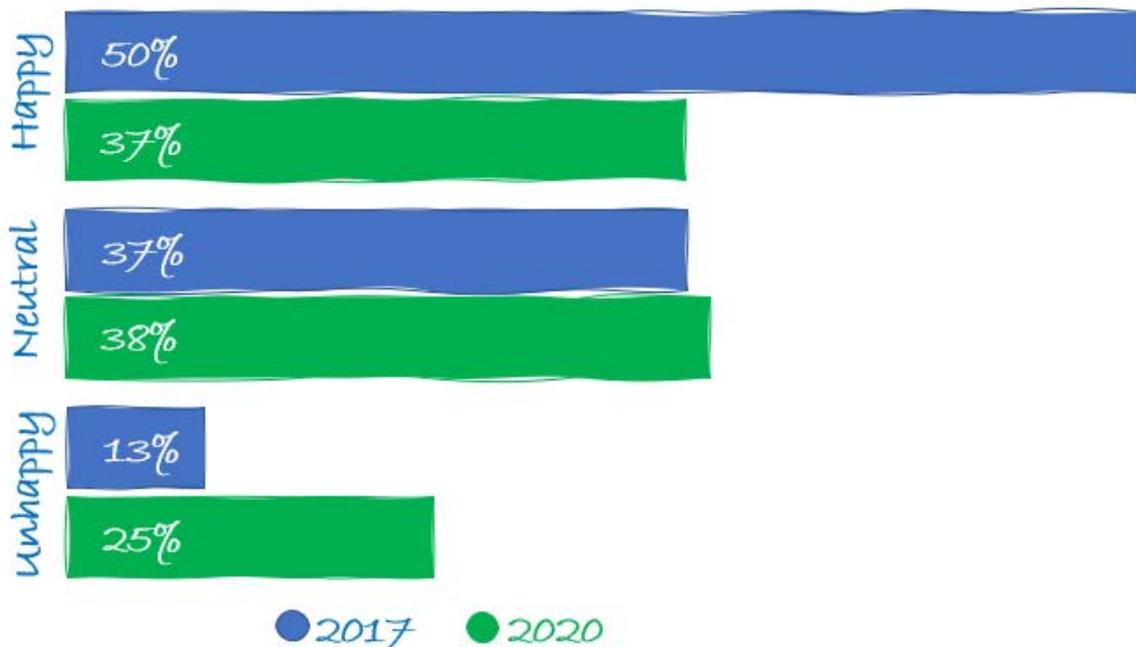
—Arthur Schopenhauer

When the spotlight goes out completely, they find themselves like the gentleman on the airplane. Feeling like they would be better off dead than alive. On the other hand, those that led a more substantive life based on faith, family, friendship and work- that serves others are happier and more relatable. They simply go to their grave happier.

So what about you? Are you going to be in the happier group at age 65? Are you going to be smiling at the Grim Reaper when he rings your doorbell and asks if you ate the Salmon mousse for dinner?(Monty Python) If not, what are you willing to do to ensure you die with a big fat smile on your face?

# How to Build a Happy Life in Six Easy Steps

A recent survey suggests that the happiness of today's young adults has crashed over the last few years. So, what's making the kids so unhappy?



Courtesy: [CivicaScience 2022](#)

Bestselling author and Professor [Scott Galloway](#) has some answers. Galloway is a very salty Professor of Marketing at NYU/Stern School of business. (Think: Larry David)

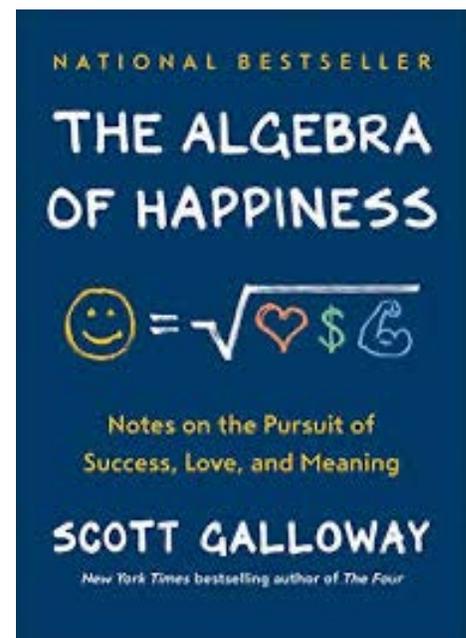
According to Galloway, young adults are stressed. It's partially a function of how we've raised them. Many grew up hearing how "special" they were. And, how they should follow their "passion" and chase their "dreams"

It turns out that most kids aren't really special. And, following their "passion" is a fast-track to a lifetime of making caramel macchiatos at Starbucks. Because no matter how special your kid may seem, they aren't likely to be the next Tom Brady or Taylor Swift. As my brutally honest dad used to say to me: "son, lucky for you, the world always needs more ditch diggers."

The problem is that parents are not always the best judge of how special their kids really are. Everybody sees their own children as a reflection of their own wants, needs, desires and regrets. And, too often, we try to encourage our children to be more like us - or at least more like we see ourselves. After all, we made them. It's the least they can do.

## Lawnmower Parenting

We no longer helicopter parent. Today's parents are more like a lawnmowers. While the helicopter parent observes obstacles from above, the lawnmower parent mows them down before the child even sniffs the obstacle. By removing any possibility of fear or failure from our kids lives we've created a generation of kids lacking any measure of resilience. Thus, the slightest obstacle or disappointment looks and feels cataclysmic to young adults. That's making life hard for them.



Professor Galloway shares these and other thoughts in his book, [The Algebra of Happiness: Notes on the Pursuit of Success, Love, and Meaning](#). He offers hard-hitting answers to life's biggest questions:

- What's the formula for a life well lived?
- How can you have a meaningful career, not just a lucrative one?
- Is work/life balance possible
- What are the elements of a successful relationship?

So, what's making the young adults so darn angsty? The simple truth is that our happiness peaks at around 18-20 years old. It declines every year until we reach our mid 50's.



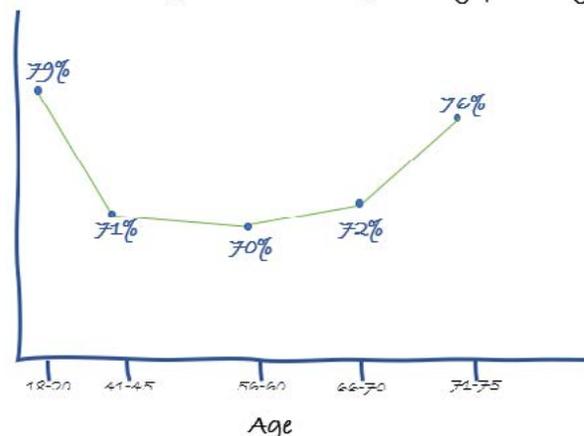
So what's the cause of the long, slow slide to melancholia? According to Galloway, "real-life" is a lot more challenging than the four-ish years of free beer and cheap sex in college. As a result, the euphoria experienced in the early years begins to wane.

In their mid-20's kids start to realize that mom and dad were F.O.S. They begin to realize that they aren't special

and can't really do anything they set their mind to. As a result, their 20's can seem like a let down.

That let down is leading to some major sociological trends, namely delayed adulthood. The irony of that delayed adulthood is that once the happiness starts to slide in your early twenties, it doesn't return until your mid-70's. So delaying adulthood only serves to delay the return of happiness. Kinda depressing, huh?

Percentage Who Say They Experienced Happiness, Enjoyment and Smiling or Laughter a Lot During the Day Yesterday



“ Show me a guy that spends weeknights watching **ESPN** and all day **Sunday** watching professional football and I'll show you a guy headed for a lifetime of anger and failed relationships. Show me somebody who sweats every day and spends as much time sweating as he does watching others sweat on **TV** and I'll show you someone who is good at life. ”

In our 40's, most people begin to realize that life is pretty good, even if they aren't Taylor or Tom. And, those with a spiritual foundation seem to reach this nirvana sooner than others. We begin to recognize our blessings and acknowledge our own mortality. We practice a little more

gratitude over what we have and hold. Our happiness slide begins to bottom out. We start a steep climb out of the pit of despair and realize that life's not so bad after all.

Professor Galloway opines that there are a few indicators of who will be happy and who will continue to wallow in the pit of despair as they age. Here they are:

## Sweating vs. Watching People Sweat

There is a direct correlation between sweating and watching people sweat on television.

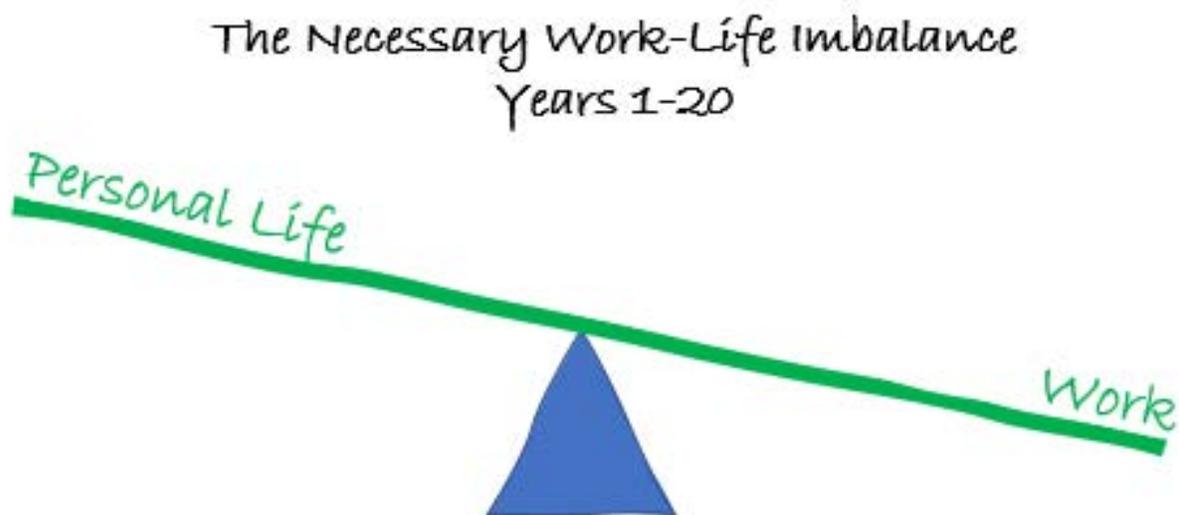
That is, those who go into the gym or practice some other form of regular exercise are happier than those who don't. And, more importantly, Galloway suggests that the ratio of time spent sweating vs. watching others sweat is a forward looking indicator of your success.

“ Show me a guy that spends weeknights watching **ESPN** and all day Sunday watching professional football and I'll show you a guy headed for a lifetime of anger and failed relationships. Show me somebody who sweats every day and spends as much time sweating as he does watching others sweat on **TV** and I'll show you someone who is good at life. ”

## “Overnight Success”

If you wanna be in the top 10% of wage earners in the second half of life, you have to plan to spend the first 10-20 years of your career working hard, very hard. Those years include lots of sacrifice, hard work, disappointment, late nights, etc.

That grinding during your younger years pays off later in life once your credentials are established. See, those who establish their credentials and find some financial security in the form of savings and equity will ultimately enjoy a great deal of freedom in the second half of life.



It's true that money can buy happiness, but only to a certain point. But, most people don't regret investing in themselves and their careers early for the trade off of time and security later in life. Especially when compound interest starts to kick in.

## Partnership/Marriage

As we've all heard before, the most important decision in life is who you choose to partner with. Those who derive their happiness from their home life are happier than those who make lots of money and are lonely. If a spouse isn't a true partner, that can lead to extreme unhappiness. Choose wisely.

According to Galloway there is a simple formula to relationships.

It takes a mutual attraction. But, it also takes an alignment of values. Those things like religion, children and politics. Then, of course, there must be an alignment as to the approach to money. In the proper proportions those things can add up to exponential pleasure and happiness.

## Understanding Wealth

Being rich isn't making a lot of money. Being rich is simply having your income exceed your expenses. No matter how much money you make, if your spending exceeds your income, you are poor.

## Life is About Experiences

While many believe that money and things will lead to happiness, research shows that happier people invest in experiences. And, those who enjoy those experiences

with their children fare better. A recognition of the finite nature of the amount of time our children are with us tends to focus the mind on spending that time wisely. You are much better off driving a ten year old Hyundai Sonata and taking your kids on a ten day vacation to Yellowstone in the summertime.

## **Booze:**

In the [world's longest running study on happiness](#), Harvard university outlines the key ingredients to living a happy life. But, more importantly, it outlines the key ingredients to unhappiness. In eighty years of analysis there is one, single item that nearly guarantees to factor into all failed marriages, career failures and financial instability: alcohol. Drink in moderation.

## **Resilience:**

If you live long enough and take a few risks in life, you will ultimately fail at something (maybe more than once). Success isn't about avoiding failure, it's about being resilient when failure happens. Economic instability can happen, but it usually passes quickly. Suck it up and get back on the horse.

# The Laziest Generation in American History

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In early 2021, employees began voluntarily resigning from their jobs, en masse. By the end of 2021, 47.4 million employees bailed out. This surprising trend has been labeled The Great Resignation.

This trend has alarmed employers, talking heads and economists as they struggle to make sense of the mass exodus from the workplace. What could possibly be causing this?

As you might imagine, part of the blame for this lies at the feet of Covid-19. We had all been operating a warp speed. Then everything just stopped. And, the sudden slow down gave many folks an opportunity to pause and reflect. It allowed workers to reimagine their careers, their stress level, and their long-term goals. Many found the unexpected down-time to be eye-opening. Workers finally got to see exactly what they were missing in life. Turns out they were missing a lot. Last month another 4.3 million pulled their best Tom Brady impression and walked off the field.

These resignations exasperate a market that needs more humans. The civilian labor force participation rate is still below pre-pandemic levels. Even with the proliferation of vaccines and wide availability of jobs, 38% of those able to work choose not to.

With fewer workers to fill openings, companies have to increase compensation to compete. That causes the price of goods and services to go up. Economists call this a wage-price spiral. It's one of the reasons why Bacon is ten bucks right now.

Over the past few decades, the United States has seen a precipitous drop in the labor force participation rate. Surprisingly, this trend is most pronounced for young men ages 20–24. The labor participation rate for this group fell by almost 10% between 1996–2016. That's a larger reduction in hours than any other demographic, male or female. At this point only 73% of those age 20–24 are even trying to find work.

Russian economists refer to this trend as a demographic drought. That is, there simply is not enough available labor in the United States to meet the supply. But, why is there such demand for labor today? Part of the answer is, of course, Covid. In 2020, US economists predicted that approximately 2M baby boomers would retire from the active workforce. Instead, the Covid virus accelerated the baby boomer retirements in excess of 3M people. That's an extra 1M retirements in a 12 month period, at a time when the economy was booming. And, because of a drop in the US fertility rate in the 1970's, there simply aren't enough Gen X'ers and millennials to fill the void. Experts predict that by 2028 there will be a deficit of 6 million workers. And, that's before contemplating the impact of The Great Resignation.

So what is causing the decline in the desire to work? Finding a good paying job is typically a high priority for 20 year olds. Some suggest it's a lack of marketable skills and training. It could also be the migration of many entry level jobs to India and Puerto Rico, so-called offshoring. One expert suggests it's something totally different. In 1996 California shocked the world by legalizing certain forms of Marijuana. By 2019, 30 states had legalized the use of marijuana. That legalization has created a tremendous supply of THC products that often find their way into non-legal states-and every hunting and fishing trip I go on. In the spirit of Bill Clinton, I tried one but I didn't chew it so it doesn't count.

A recent study by the University of British Columbia confirms what many suspect. The use of Marijuana contributes to a condition known as amotivational syndrome. That's a fancy way of saying that weed makes you lazy.

The major decline in the motivation of the 20–24 age cohort began around 2004. Not coincidentally, 2004 saw many blockbuster sequels and prequels in the video video game industry. These include Doom 3, Gran Turismo 4, Grand Theft Auto and Halo 2. Economist Edward Castranova opines that "we are witnessing what amounts to no less than a mass exodus to virtual worlds and online game environments". And, it isn't just in the US. In Hong Kong, the average male spends 113 minutes a day playing video games.

There is also the impact of legalized, mobile betting. It has literally transformed the gambling landscape in the country. DraftKings is the largest fantasy sports service with 8M users. Roughly 16 states now allow on-line betting on sports games through apps like DraftKings.

### The Meatloaf Generation

In 2015, 14.3% of all men ages 21–30 went the entire year without a single hour of work or compensation. And, 70% of lower skilled men without jobs live with a parent or close relative. They squat on relatives Netflix, WiFi and Spotify accounts and become digital parasites. With deference to Will Farrell, I like to call this The Meatloaf Generation.

An academic study from the University of Rochester confirms that since 2004, data shows that young men shifted leisure time to video gaming and recreational computer activities. And, that the attractiveness of gaming is directly correlated to the innovations in computing power and in the sophistication of the games themselves.

But, historically, access to media (music, movies, video games) was limited by our access to money. Growing up, I stayed at the arcade playing Galaga, Asteroids, Defender and Centipede only until I ran out of quarters.

Today, our media is mostly all-you-can-eat. Netflix offers an unlimited supply of movies and shows. And, video games are all inclusive. Once you purchase the game there is no limit on the number of gaming hours. Same

goes for music. So there are no financial speed bumps for the Tic-Tok generation. Everything is all you can eat. They embrace a life of premium mediocrity.

So, who is trying to fill this employment gap? Males age 62–69 are returning to the workforce in droves. Their labor participation rate is roughly +10%. Same goes for females age 60–70. So the youngest Americans are refusing to work while the older Americans are returning to the workforce in numbers higher than any other demo.

Do you find these statistics surprising? That able-bodied men are using marijuana, playing video games, gambling and watching Netflix all day? Do you have a young parasite living in you basement, eating your food and milking off your Wi-Fi, Netflix and Uber accounts. Maybe it's time for some tough love before you find yourself returning to the workforce when you should be enjoying the fruits of your own labor.

# What Happened To Healthy Masculinity And Our Boys?

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There is a boy crisis in America. By any objective measure, from Pre-K to College, boys are less resilient and less ambitious than they were a short time ago. Worldwide, boys are 50 percent less likely than girls to meet basic proficiency in reading, math, and science. And, by virtually any objective measure, girls are thriving more than ever.

It's simply a bad time to be a boy.

## The Gender Gap

Across the US, alarm bells are going off at two- and four-year colleges. According to the National Student Clearinghouse, for every four men enrolled, there are six women enrolled. It's the widest educational gender gap in history, but it isn't limited to undergraduate study. Women earned more than 60% of all master's degrees in 2020. That's a new record. Women earned 151 master's degrees last year for every 100 degrees earned by men.

“*The past 50 years have redefined what it means to be female in America. Girls today are told that they can do anything, be anyone. They've absorbed the message: They're outperforming boys in school at every level. But it isn't just about performance. To be a girl today is to*

*be the beneficiary of decades of conversation about the complexities of womanhood, its many forms and expressions.*

*Boys, though, have been left behind. No commensurate movement has emerged to help them navigate toward a full expression of their gender. It's no longer enough to "be a man" – we no longer even know what that means. ”*

– MICHAEL IAN BLACK, THE BOYS ARE NOT ALRIGHT

This gender gap was first revealed in 1980 when female enrollment outpaced men for the first time in history. It marked a watershed in the evolution of education, as women finally gained equal access. But, the trend isn't slowing down and it's shining a spotlight on boys. According to the Wall Street Journal, the overall rate of college enrollment is dropping, down 1.5 million students compared to just five years ago. And, 70% of that reduction is attributable to men.

So what is driving this sudden lack of ambition in young men?

## The Emasculation of Masculinity

As Ian Black opines above, we no longer know what it means to be a man. There is so much confusion and mixed messaging around masculinity. Toxic Masculinity has become a virtue signaling device for some. All that virtue signaling is great until your roof is on fire.

You'll want the firefighters to be more like The Marlboro Man and less like a Calvin Klein underwear model. You'll want a guy straight out of a Hollywood casting department. A super-masculine guy who isn't afraid of anything. He'll drag you out of the burning house with one arm, stopping to light his Marlboro on your flaming couch.

## The Identity Crisis

But in today's world masculinity is frowned upon. That kind of messaging is tough enough for an adult male. It's nearly impossible for a boy to understand:

- Men should be strong but not too strong.
- Men should be in control but not controlling.
- Men should be masculine, but not too masculine.

While nobody is going to feel sorry for men, it is important to recognize that men today are feeling more confused and isolated than ever before. The traditional measures of masculinity: strength, independence, courage, bravery, and assertiveness are toxic in many circles. And, it's creating an identity crisis.

Yes, these are confusing times for men. And, that's making it harder to raise boys to be good men.

## Must-See TV

Roll the clock back a few years to the time when the nation's most popular television shows were all about

family. Shows like *The Brady Bunch* and *Father Knows Best*. These shows, and many others like them, presented the typical American family. And they presented Dad as the source of wisdom and a sprinkling of tough love, when necessary. It's different today. Replace Mike Brady with Homer Simpson or goofy Phil Dunfey. Could either of them raise six children in a three-bedroom house? Mike Brady managed to support a wife, six kids, and a maid. Despite his chops and killer 70's get-up, he was quite remarkable. He was wise, calm, and demonstrated a strong moral compass. Where would those Brady kids be without him?

## Eat What You Kill

Since it's just you and me talking, I'd like to share an example. I'm a hunter. I love to be out in the woods in a deer stand or walking through the crisp, early morning fog with a pack of overeager bird dogs searching for Quail. There's nothing quite like it.

But I'm extremely careful about telling people that I'm a hunter, until now. It's frowned upon these days. The senseless and violent taking of a life for sport, etc. Except that same frowning, judgmental person waits in line at Chik-Fil-A for twenty minutes for their kid's chicken sandwich.

Historically, hunting and fishing have been wonderful adventures. Opportunities for men and boys to be .....men

and boys. To share a time-tested and healthy tradition. To be out among nature. To smear your face with camo paint and crawl on the forest floor. To overhear a dirty joke. To sneak a first sip of cold beer at the end of the day. But, these days boys aren't exposed to any real adventures. Because adventures are just too "dangerous" for our boys.

But, deep in the soul of every young man beats the heart of a warrior. A man looking for adventure, for danger. An opportunity to slay the dragon and rescue the damsel in distress.

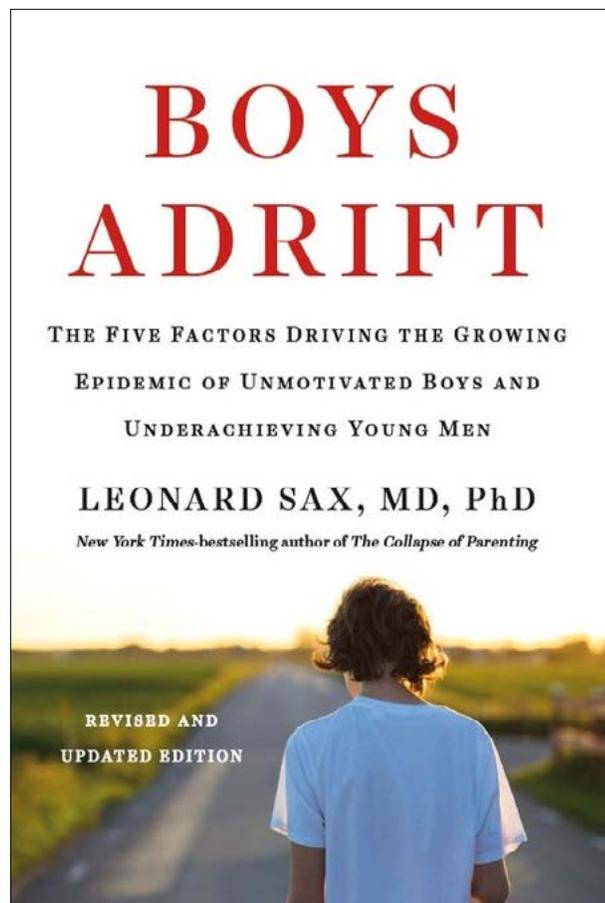
See, as John Eldredge so eloquently writes in [Wild at Heart](#), "adventure, with all its requisite danger and wildness, is a deeply spiritual longing written into the soul of man." And, further, "deep in his heart, every man longs for a battle to fight, an adventure to live, and a beauty to rescue."

## The Dopamine Addiction

Instead of a real adventure, boys are growing up with less-involved fathers. They're more likely to drop out of school, drink, do drugs, become delinquent, and end up in the basement. Instead of real adventure, boys spend time with their digital drug of choice: video games. Because when we do something we enjoy—like playing video games, the brain releases a little bit of dopamine and we feel good. Dopamine release causes adolescents to gravitate toward thrilling experiences and exhilarating sensations. (Source: The [Atlantic](#).)

Teens can literally become addicted to that little jolt of dopamine. This explains why many teens feel “bored” unless an activity, like school, includes a commensurate release of dopamine. Perhaps that research partially explains why a growing number of boys are not pursuing college degrees.

Boys play violent video games like Mortal Kombat, a blood-soaked fighting game with its graphic displays of human decapitations, beheadings, and other over-the-top bloody carnage. Not the blood of a small bird that will be eaten for dinner, but the spurting and gurgling blood of a fellow human being that you just beheaded. And, that human kill comes with an enormous jolt of dopamine. Dopamine is a tough competitor for algebra homework.



According to Dr. Leonard Sax, author of *Boys Adrift*, “... boys who have been deprived of time outdoors, who have spent more time interacting with screens rather than with the real world, sometimes have trouble grasping concepts that seem simple to us.” To put it bluntly, boys who spend most of their free time looking at screens continuously, and don't spend any time outside in play, begin to lose motivation.

Dr. Sax argues that a combination of social and biological factors is creating an environment that is literally toxic to boys. “*Because these games give boys the feeling of power and control: the power of life and death,*” writes Sax, MD. And, at some point, the virtual world becomes more real than the real world. And the real world, including school, becomes boring.

## Failure to Thrive

So how is this playing out for us, college enrollment notwithstanding? Well, according to [Statista](#), 60.1% of all men ages 18-24 are still living at home with their parents. Many bereft of purpose, feeling alienated, withdrawn, and addicted to immediate gratification. I like to call this group **The Meatloaf Generation**. It's a recipe for disaffection, isolation, and alienation.

So what's the answer here? How do we re-think masculinity and the role of young men in our society?

# Why Friendships In America Are Dying

Friendships in America are dying. Even prior to the house arrest, the role of friendship in American social life was waning. That finding is the result of a recent [survey](#) on American friendships.

According to the survey, fewer Americans now claim to have a BFF. Just imagine Thelma trying that epic road trip without Louise.

Percentage who have one person they consider to be their best friend . . .



“ *Best friends are the people in your life who make you laugh louder, smile brighter and live better.* ”

— Unknown

The main culprit for the lack of “best friends” is time. Americans are busy. Or at least we seem to be. And, life seems to get busier as we age. Our friendships take a backseat to nearly every one else in our orbit: spouses, parents, children, grandchildren. You get the point.

The secondary culprit is self-reliance. That is, Americans are simply not engaging friends for emotional support.

The trend is concerning when you consider that deep friendships are proven to enrich your life and improve your health.

More than half of respondents report that their first choice for talking through difficult personal problems is their spouse or partner. But, with the average age of first marriages rising faster than the price of Starbucks pumpkin spice latte, a surprising surrogate has stepped in to fill the gap: parents.

Young men are now more likely to rely on their parents for personal support than other people in their life. Thirty-six percent of young men say their parents are the first people they reach out to when facing a personal problem. Roughly one in four (24 percent) young women say their parents are their first call.

Another likely culprit is work. American's spend more waking hours at work than at home. And, employers are spending more time and energy creating cultures that facilitate deeper office relationships. Part of the reason is having a best friend at work is convenient and it fuels greater performance. However, the pandemic has changed all that.

Throughout 2020, employers were forced to make staffing changes to stay solvent. Those who remained employed were asked to work remotely, dramatically

reducing the amount of time that co-workers spend together. This, during a time when more than [one in five](#) Americans say the past 12 months have been much more difficult for them than usual.

Many Americans found themselves driving a 1972 Dodge Challenger (again) with a live Cheetah in the backseat. And, just like Ricky Bobby in a torn Crystal Gayle t-shirt, many of them didn't have a Cal Naughton, Jr. to lean on.

Almost half of Americans surveyed have lost touch with at least some of their friends over the past 12 months. Further, sixteen percent of women ages 18-29 report having lost touch with "most" of their friends during the pandemic. Only nine percent of men in that age cohort [report](#) similar results. This is not surprising information. Women [invest](#) more time in friendships than men do. And, those friendships are deeper [emotionally](#).

“*Nothing delights the mind as much as a loving and loyal friendship.*”

-Seneca

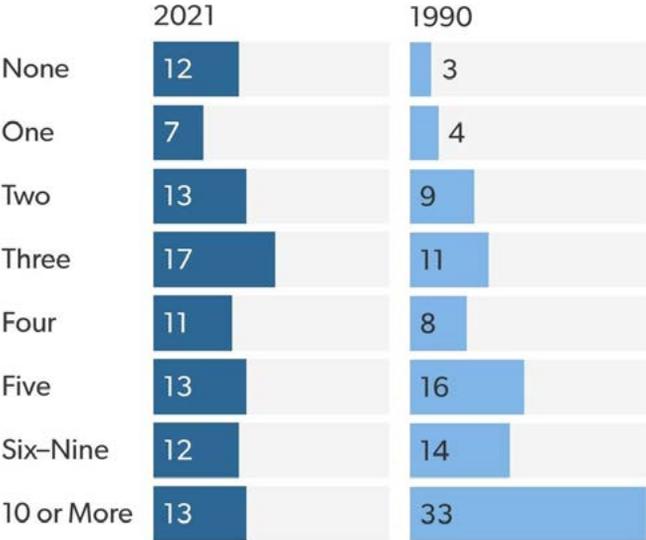
In contrast, male friendships tend to be transactional. So, while women need to see friends to connect, men are totally the opposite. Men can go months or even years without face-to-face contact and still consider someone a close friend. Men can simply pick up where they left off, despite having missed important birthdays, funerals, and bar mitzvahs.

Last year I wrote a popular piece called [Top Five Regrets of the Dying](#). Ironically, the fourth most common regret of the dying is, **"I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends"**.

Of those who do rely on friendships, many report a reduction in the number of close friends. In 1990, thirty-three percent of Americans [reported](#) having ten or more close friendships, not including relatives. Today, only thirteen percent report having that number. So, ironically, the TV show Friends would never get the green light today. It's just too unrealistic to think someone could have that many friendships.

Back in 1990, three percent of respondents [indicated](#) having no close friends. The number of Americans reporting "no friends at all," has grown 400% since 1990. And, that means we have a growing number of folks in the US that are just plain lonely. More on that topic in the weeks to come.

Percentage of Americans who say they have the following number of close friends, not counting their relatives . . .



As we age, we only devote about 30 minutes a day to maintaining friendships. That's about 90 minutes less (per day) than when we were age 18. As a result, we've replaced deep friendships with "situational friends." These friendships are casual and a byproduct of seeing people in a consistent place.

Further, 51 percent report having "activity friends," or friends as a byproduct of sports, community service, or hobbies. And, these friendships were the first to die when Covid hit.

Historically, Americans have [relied](#) on houses of worship for at least some friendships, as social relationships lie at the very heart of religion. However, our membership in houses of worship continued to decline last year, [dropping](#) below 50 percent for the first time in eighty years. In 2020, 47 percent of Americans [said](#) they belonged to a church, synagogue, or mosque, down from 50 percent in 2018 and 70 percent in 1999.

Regardless of age, our [friendships](#) are a key driver of happiness. According to the Mayo Clinic, friendships enrich our lives and make us [healthier](#).

As we ease out of our Covid hidey-hole, let's reinvest our time and energy into being happier and healthier. How about sending this article to an old friend with an invite for a pumpkin latte? It's a great way to crack the ice and reinvigorate your friendship.

# The Kindness of Strangers

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The Celtic Christians believed that there were mystical spaces, called "thin places." Where the line between the spiritual and physical is so close that we can literally feel our soul move. As if for one "God Moment" we have transcended our natural world to feel the spirit of God walking alongside us.

And, that's where the story begins...

I've walked the hallowed beaches of Normandy, France. Thousands died on those beaches in pursuit of freedom from the Third Reich.

The German bunkers are standing tall and ominous, with their rusty metal guns pointed to sea, as they did on that fateful day. I put my index finger into a bullet hole and my soul moved. Immediately I was one with the pimply faced 18 year old kid from Camden, South Carolina. He smelled of American tobacco. His cold and wet hands held the rifle. His trembling finger squeezed off the round.

It missed it's mark, leaving a permanent blemish in the wall of the bunker for me to insert my trigger finger 75 years later.

Everything is frozen in time.

When the Celtic Christians envisioned thin places, I think they envisioned Normandy, France. If you cannot find God there, you need to check your pulse cause you might be dead already.

These thin places are hard to explain.

“*The most important things are the hardest to say, because words diminish them.*”

-Stephen King

The Irish describe these places as “[the places in the world where the walls are weak](#)”, where the separation between the ordinary and the divine is suddenly changed. Some people refer to these kinds of experiences as God-moments. Moments where we are jolted out of our old, ordinary way of seeing the world. As if a pebble has been tossed into a pond. The pebble quickly disappears, but the energy creates ripples. Those ripples move outward. They touch anything in their path, long after the pebble hits the bottom of the pond.

All this mysticism got me thinking. What if the whole world is thin? What if every moment is actually a God-moment, but we are too busy to notice? Too busy driving in a hurry to get some place “important”. Too busy looking down (at our phones) to look up. Too busy to stop and care for others. Crazy thought, huh?

Religious, smarty-pants people call this **Providence**. Everything - every breath, every encounter - is a *God moment* simply waiting to be recognized.

A few days ago I was driving alone on a Sunday afternoon through Rabun County in Georgia.

I saw a group of people gathered on the side of the road. Then another group-and another-and another. You get the point. Then I started to see the First Responders. They were everywhere. It appeared to be a terrible accident. A few seconds later a convoy of tow trucks were parked in the median.

A mile or so later there were two fire trucks hoisting a giant American flag on the overpass. So clearly it wasn't an accident.

I witnessed enormous crowds waiving at the passing cars. It was the epitome of #nothingbeatsnice. People apparently putting some kindness out in the universe. Downright refreshing.

Finally after about ten miles of fire trucks, ambulances and crowds waving American flags, my curiosity got the best of me. In an extremely uncharacteristic move for me....I pulled off the highway into the dirt and put the car in Park. I walked up to the first person I saw on the roadside:

Me: "Excuse me, ma'am, I've been driving for ten miles. What's the deal with all the crowds and waving flags?"

Her: "My brother died."

Wait, what? Out of the thousands of people lining the highway, you really think I just randomly found her? No way, Jose'.

Her name is Cheryl. We chatted on the roadside for a few minutes. She felt it. I did too. It was a strangely emotional God moment with a complete stranger.

She told me that her brother was David Burch Ramey, age 50, of Wiley, Georgia. David served in the United States Army's 82nd Airborne Paratrooper Division. He deployed to Desert Storm during the invasion of Kuwait.

Like a modern day Cincinnatus, the local hero of Desert Storm returned home to Wiley, Georgia where he quietly served his community as a firefighter and an EMT. After a life full of enormous risks, David simply died in his sleep a few days ago. He leaves behind three children.

I touched her gently on the arm and offered my condolences. The moment got "thin". We both knew it. In full disclosure, I had a hard time holding it together. She did too.

A few minutes later the fire truck (above) carried David's body down the highway. His firefighter buddies made a pine casket for him-with their own hands. Gulp.

They say that when you have one of these God moments that you feel your physical presence lean into the spiritual world.

My friend Steve describes it this way:

For me, *God moments* are any moment where I can feel the hand of God. I felt it when I touched Cheryl's arm.

“*When it happens, I feel this sudden lightness of my soul and an energy coming through the top of my head like I am being “plugged in”. All I know is when it happens I want more of it.*”

Like a giant jolt of spiritual electricity exchanged between us.

God moments can be sacred moments spurred on by a spiritual practice or a deep conversation that pierces the soul. Or, perhaps, a random encounter with a stranger on the side of the highway.

Look, we live on a gigantic blue marble spinning at over 1,000mph. It circles around a ball of molten fire, next to a moon that moves the sea. Don't you think it's reasonable to assume that some higher power put this whole thing together? And, that your God might try to get your attention once in a while? I do.

So why did God stop me on a lonely highway? Why did he put Cheryl in my path on a quiet Sunday afternoon? I wasn't sure, but I was determined to figure it out.

It didn't take long.

It turns out that David spent his life in service to others. And, not just as a soldier and a firefighter. David was known to tackle home improvement projects for disabled veterans. Then have the money deducted from his paycheck at Reeves Building Supply to pay for the materials.

A life of service to others doesn't make you rich, at least financially. So, as a result of his life of service, David's young kids got left holding the bill for his funeral.

I had my answer.

So with a few phone calls, and the help of some generous friends, we cleared up David's funeral expenses. It was a small price to pay for a life of service. It's what I mean when I say "Nothing Beats Nice". And the world desperately needs some nice right now.

As my Pastor Tony Sundermeier said recently, perhaps if we expect more from the world and our politicians, maybe we should also expect more of ourselves at the same time.

I don't think one need to travel anywhere to draw closer to God or to find a hero or to practice kindness. In fact, you can find God-moments and heroes in common, everyday places. And, you can practice being kind every day. We just have to pay closer attention. And, pull off the highway. And, talk to a stranger on the roadside. And, expect more of ourselves.

See, there are thin places and heroes and opportunities for kindness nearly everywhere we go, if we are willing to put down our phones long enough to see them.

God is in a beautiful sunset and a roaring storm; in the uncontrollable laughter of children and in the sound of really great music. Simply watching the waves crash on any beach can be a thinning experience, even without the memory of blood in the foaming surf on Normandy Beach. Or He can be found on the side of a highway on a small American town, if we are willing to stop.

# Top Five Regrets of the Dying

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Okay, I know this is not exactly an uplifting title. I get it. But stick with me, my friend. Maybe we can learn something that help us get through the next few weeks of house arrest.

Every couple of years some movie Producer decides to reinvent the time tested story. The formulaic story of the couple that meets on the subway (insert airplane, blind date, internet, etc.) and instantly falls madly in love. (See also: any Hugh Grant movie and/or any movie that ever aired on The Hallmark Channel).

The couple has the storybook romance. I usually don't get too deep into the trailer before I lean over and whisper in my wife's ear: "she's gonna die."

And that's where the story begins.

Guys hate these movies. The only way you can get us into the theater is through pure trickery. There should be a law against trickery.

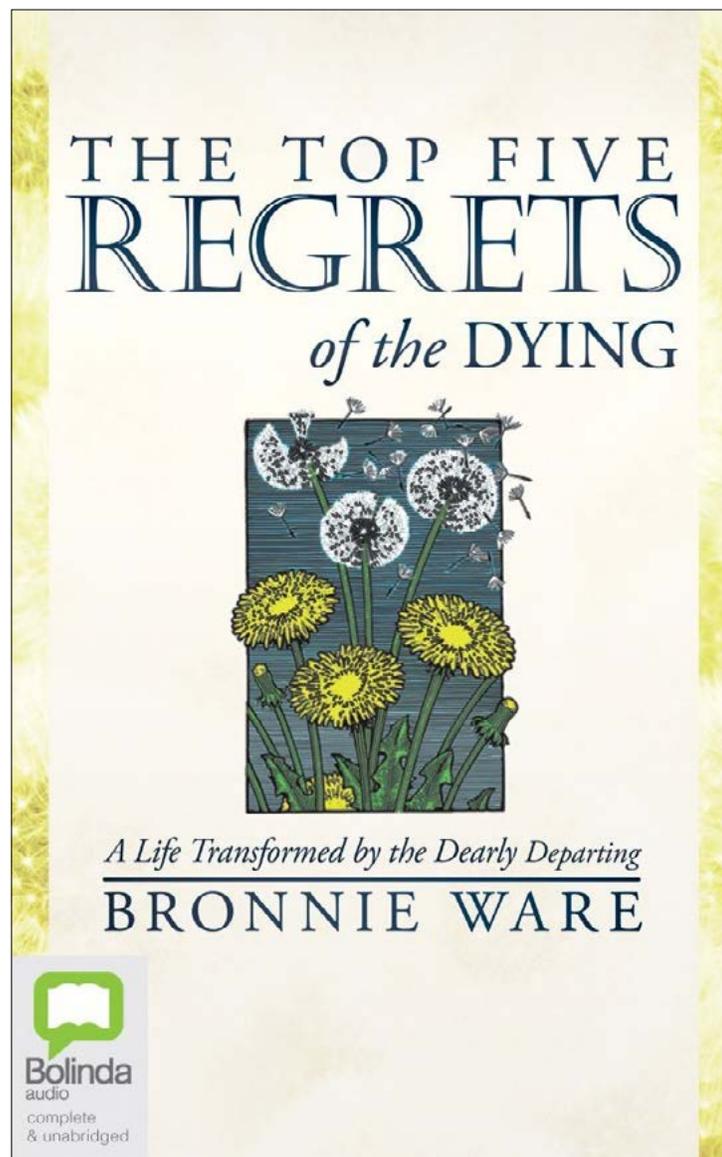
Despite my personal dislike for sappy, Rom Com turned tear-jerker, I will admit that I'm intrigued by the wisdom of the dying.

I've sadly watched a few friends and family members go through the slow, painful malignant demise. It's

awful. But there's something beautiful and instructive in the transition. Or at least it appears so in movies and television. Are you with me on this?

We all wonder how we are gonna die. Long, drawn out illness? Or like Kobe Bryant. Enjoying a Sunday afternoon with his daughter. No warning. Game over.

Perhaps the pandemic caused us to more carefully contemplate our own mortality.



1

## **I WISH I'D HAD THE COURAGE TO LIVE A LIFE TRUE TO MYSELF, NOT THE LIFE OTHERS EXPECTED OF ME.**

If you're a regular reader, you've probably heard me say that "life is a journey." It's one of my favorite sayings-and I usually follow that up with, "....and not all the roads are straight or paved." So if it's truly a journey, then isn't it logical to occasionally ask the question: "Am I going in the right direction?" Of course it is.

The problem is that we don't often choose our direction. It's either happenstance, or the journey is chosen for us.

I know a ton of lawyers who are miserable. Someone told them when they were 18 that they should go to Law School. Next thing you know they're billing hours.

According to Ware, this is the Yahtzee! of all regrets. The one that hangs up almost all people contemplating their own death. Deep down inside they've known for a very long time that they aren't on their chosen path. Ever since that boring speaker at graduation droned on and on about "going confidently in the direction of your dreams;" they've known.

Yet they pressed on, head down, leaning into the headwind. Or as David Byrne croons, "Letting the days go by." Assuming that there will be time to reorient, once they pay off the student debt, get married, or buy a house. You get the point. But life rarely works that way.

As you might imagine, clarity comes easy when time is short. People begin to realize that some of their dreams will go unfulfilled. Sorta like when you finally realize that you aren't gonna be President of the United States or climb Mt. Everest or race in the Kona Ironman. Same thing except those decisions have, at least, some measure of choice in them.

Ware supposes that the average person "had not honoured even a half of their dreams and had to die knowing that it was due to choices they had made, or not made." Heavy stuff.

The simple truth is that our health brings us a certain amount of freedom. That freedom begets procrastination. We can always do it later because time is infinite. But when time is short and our health is failing, we begin to really question the major decisions made on the journey. And that's where the regret creeps in.

## ② I WISH I HADN'T WORKED SO HARD.

Apparently working too hard is mostly reserved for men. (Hey, don't shoot the messenger I didn't write the book.) This one struck a little close to home. You may recall an earlier story I wrote on this subject. My sweet little girl came home from Kindergarten or first grade with a picture. She handed it to me and said, my teacher asked us to draw a picture of Mommy and Daddy doing what they love. My wife was drawn arranging flowers. I was drawn sitting in the window seat of a Delta jet. Ouch. That framed picture spent the last 15 years on my desk.

According to Ware, "all of the men I nursed deeply regretted spending so much of their lives on the treadmill of a work existence." That word "treadmill" got me thinking. Do the people in this story regret the amount of time they spent working? Or do the people in this story regret what they spent that time doing?

Every year, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics conducts an [American Time Use Survey](#). The Bureau asks thousands of Americans to document how they spend their time. According to the study, most people spend 8.68 hours/day **sleeping**, 7.78 hours/day **working** and 3.45 hours/day **watching television**.

I wonder if the problem here is that people do not have a sense of pride in the type of work that they perform. Therefore, the countless hours at work seem wasted—a chasing of the wind. Just a hunch. And then they simply regret the time wasted at the office...as they start to run out of time.

It wasn't about working too hard. It was about working too hard on things that seem inconsequential—in the end. Oddly, nobody seems to regret the amount of time spent watching The Voice or American Idol.

Ware goes on to say, "the chase for more, and the need to be recognized through our achievements and belongings, can hinder us from the real things, like time with those we love, time doing things we love ourselves, and balance. It's probably all about balance really, isn't it?"

3

### I WISH I'D HAD THE COURAGE TO EXPRESS MY FEELINGS.

Okay, if number two is a guy thing, #3 is a mostly a girly thing. Apparently many people regret holding their tongue. (This is likely related to Regret #1: "I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.") Maybe way back in your youth we should have pushed back on the idea of Law School. But most people say they regret suppressing their feelings to avoid discord. And that's how you end up in a Talking Heads song.

“*Sometimes we don't know until much later that a particular moment in time has changed our life's direction.*”

So people pursue things that aren't authentic. You know, careers, colleges, relationships and such. Stuff to make Mom or Dad happy. The kind of stuff you don't really figure out until it's too late to turn back. Or you're on your deathbed trying to make sense of your life. The result, it seems, is an existence that restricts one's ability to satisfy our own dreams. And an overwhelming sense of regret.

It kinda reminds me of my fav [Television commercial](#) of all time. Where the high school star sinks the buzzer-beater to win the big game. He is offered a scholarship on the spot. His dad is high-fiving him. The kid objects saying, "but Dad, I wanna dance!" And he starts to march around the court to show tunes. Hysterical and instructive.

4

## I WISH I HAD STAYED IN TOUCH WITH MY FRIENDS.

In many cases the dying do not realize their deep longing for friendship until it's too late. It becomes difficult to rekindle an old friendship when your days are numbered. "Hey Bill, how have you been? Say, let's get together and catch up. By the way I'm dying so we ought to make it this week."

Friendships take energy and effort and time. With work and family and little league games, we simply put friendships on the back burner for another day. We become so caught up in our own busy lives that we let their deepest friendships wane over the years.

“*That's why not losing touch in the first place is important. No one knows what lies ahead or when the time will come that you are longing for your friends and in between, you still have the gift of them in your life.*”

Apparently everyone misses their friends when they are dying.

According to Ware, everyone wants to "put their affairs in order". It's not money or stuff that holds importance. But ensuring that things are in order for the benefit of those that we love. Ironically, many people wait until they are too weary to begin-or finish the task.

In the final weeks of my father-in-law's life I attempted the awkward conversation. He had been in bed 24 hours a

day, for most of a year. The chat was hard on both of us. Fortunately, he knew that I loved him and that I wasn't trying to write myself into his will.

I closed the door and sat on the edge of his bed. I gently asked if his affairs were in order. He just kept saying, "I'm gonna get up." It was the hardest conversation I've ever had.

At the end of the line, particularly in the final weeks of life, all that remains is love and relationships.

## **5 I WISH THAT I HAD LET MYSELF BE HAPPIER.**

I often wonder if the things we worry about are truly the right things to worry about. That when our days are numbered that we might regret the silliness of our own neurosis. Do you think we will remember what we worried about? I don't.

Like what other people think of us. Or whether our kid is gonna make the traveling baseball team. Or whether we'll finally get that promotion to Assistant Vice President.

We become comfortable in our discomfort. All that anxiety can only seem silly when the perpetuity of life is stripped away. But anxiety is comforting. Like an old pair of sweatpants that we just can't throw away.

In this state we are not truly happy. We are merely pretending to be content—for the cameras.

Deep within their soul the dying long for silliness. To smile and laugh and giggle and tell corny jokes and have milk squirt out of their nose. The intimacy of friendship and laughter. What others think of them becomes irrelevant.

I wonder if hearing you are on "limited time" creates an unexpected sense of relief. Relief that we can finally let go of the rope-without fearing the rope burns of life. Relief that the old is stripped away and we can finally focus on what is truly important. No guilt over whether we should be on a conference call, or checking emails, or working out. No worry about the last time we had our oil changed or had our teeth cleaned. An almost childlike wonder of finally being able to see the world more clearly. As if someone finally turned on the lights and everything came into focus.

What about you? What are you worrying about today-that might seem trivial if your days were numbered?

# Reflecting the Light in the Dark Places

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I get a lot of questions about why I write stories.

Most people think I'm trying to write a book or become an internet sensation. Make a few bucks. Get on TV.

Let me tell you a story and maybe that'll help provide some context.

## The Institute for Peace

During the Second World War, German paratroopers invaded the island of Crete. When they landed at Maleme, the islanders met them, bearing nothing other than kitchen knives and hay scythes.

The consequences of resistance were devastating. The residents of entire villages were lined up and shot.

Alexander Papaderous was just six years old when the war started. His home village was destroyed and he was imprisoned in a concentration camp. When the war ended, he became convinced his people needed to let go of the hatred the war had unleashed.

To help the process, he founded the Institute for Peace at this place that embodied the horrors and hatreds unleashed by the war.

One day, while taking questions at the end of a lecture, Papaderous was asked, "What's the meaning of life?" There was nervous laughter in the room.

He opened his wallet, took out a small, round mirror and held it up for everyone to see.

During the war he was just a small boy when he came across a motorcycle wreck. The motorcycle had belonged to German soldiers. Alexander found pieces of broken mirrors from the motorcycle lying on the ground.

Later he tried to put them together but couldn't, so he took the largest piece and scratched it against a stone until its edges were smooth and it was round. He used it as a toy, fascinated by the way he could use it to shine light into holes and crevices.

He kept that mirror with him as he grew up. Over time it came to symbolize something very important. It became a metaphor for what he might do with his life.

“*I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know.*”

*“Nevertheless, with what I have I can reflect light into the dark places of this world-into the black places in the hearts of men-and change some things in some people.”*

*“Perhaps others may see and do likewise.  
This is what I am about.”*

*(Excerpted from It Was On Fire  
When I Laid Down On It by Robert Fulghum)*

## A Broken and Fragmented World

As I look around I see restlessness. People hopelessly trying to make their way in a broken and fragmented world. Like Alexander Papaderous trying to put the mirror back together.

Look, I'm not a Pastor or Therapist. There are others far more qualified for those callings. But I see and hear things in my journey. Things that indicate that people are struggling.

## College Philosophy

I remember studying Nihilism in my college Philosophy classes.

I remember thinking that Nihilism was basically translated to: "Life's a bitch, then you die". But in the meantime you might as well live it up cause there is no higher power. Dust to dust, I guess.

Surprisingly, that's where a lot of folks find themselves today, at least according to the studies.

Author David Brooks calls this "the great disembedding." We once embraced tight communities. And, hierarchical, human organizations with prescribed social norms. You know, those core institutions that made America the greatest place in earth?

Our core institutions have value, even if all institutions are flawed. For all their imperfections, core institutions are the best way to transfer goodness to future generations. We now embrace a hyper-individualistic way of life. A society almost totally devoid of social, emotional or physical contact.

“ *If it is to be, it is up to me* ”

## What Has Changed?

A few weeks ago the Wall Street Journal ran a piece by Erica Komisar. Ms. Komisar is a psychoanalyst and author. She has been in private practice in New York City for 25 years.

The article focused on why so many people are restless. Ms Komisar provides her perspective in the article:

“One of the most important explanations—and perhaps the most neglected—is declining interest in religion. This cultural shift already has proved disastrous for millions of vulnerable young people.”

According to a 2018 Gallup Study, half of Americans are church members, down from 70% in 1999. Even among those who define themselves as “religious”, church membership has fallen nine percent.

At the same time, the rates of every type of mental health issue are up. Way up.

**Addiction is up.**  
**Self-harm is up.**  
**Anxiety is up.**  
**Depression is up.**  
**Divorce is up.**  
**Everything is up.**

With so much toiling, are we looking for answers in the right places?

Perhaps Ms Komisar is on the right track.

In an age of increasing anger, loneliness, and narcissistic individualism, faith in a higher power provides an antidote. Nearly every religion I know touts generosity, gratitude and friendship. And, most importantly, believing that you are not the center of the universe.

One of the primary benefits of faith is to provide a sanctuary in which we can withdraw from the chaos of our world and seek stillness. Respite from the noise and commotion of daily life.

The antidote to restlessness is stillness.

Belief in a higher power creates, at least, the perception of interconnectedness in the random and unexplainable events in the universe. The occasional, yet incomprehensible, pain and loss that can accompany life.

**People we love get sick.**

**People we love get hurt.**

**People we love die.**

Terrible things occasionally happen to some very good people. But, we will all die someday. It's one of the few remaining things we can all agree on.

We can attempt to handle some of those events better by, at least, surmising that there is some point in all of it. How do you explain to your child that Peepaw is dead? And that he's not in heaven with Meemaw. But, in fact, is just worm food.

Dr. Tyler VanderWeele published a study in [JAMA Psychiatry](#). It found that weekly religious service attendance was associated with a 500% lower rate of suicide compared to individuals who do not attend.

If life really does boil down to "life's a bitch, then you die", doesn't that make all of life kinda meaningless?

**We are here.**

**We do some stuff. We die and turn to dust. Game Over.**

The whole thing is just a curvy road leading to a dead-end? Pointless. Ashes to ashes.

## Is There a God?

I once had a deep conversation with a "man of the cloth", named Kevin. I asked, "how can you be so confident that there is a God?" His pragmatic answer was stunning. Maybe, just maybe, the decline in our belief in a higher power has something to do with all this struggling.

“ Look, if I'm right I get everlasting life. If I'm wrong I take a dirt-nap, forever. So what have I got to lose? ”

**All this restlessness.**

**All this longing.**

**All this loneliness.**

**All this unhappiness.**

It wasn't until almost 1950 that we recognized the obvious connection between cigarettes and Cancer. That's 85 years of heart/lung damage before someone made the connection. So many people died horrible deaths. Seems pretty silly in retrospect, huh?

Perhaps it will take us another 85 years to complete the connection between a lack of faith and our current afflictions.

So to the question about why I write stories for strangers, I give you the words of Alexander Papaderous

“*With what I have I can reflect light into the dark places of this world-into the black places in the hearts of men-and change some things in some people. Perhaps others may see and do likewise.*”

And maybe along the way we can sort out some of these big questions of life together.

After all, what've you got to lose?