Mother Teresa was one of the 20th century’s greatest humanitarians. But she wasn’t perfect. Just like anyone else, she had her struggles, including depression and spiritual doubt. Before she became Mother Teresa, she was Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu. At 18, she became a nun and took the name Sister Mary Teresa. Before long, she was in India teaching children from the poorest Bengali families. But it wasn’t until she was 36 that she found her true calling. She began working with Calcutta’s poorest and sickest. She famously devoted her life to “the unwanted, the unloved, the uncared for.” She opened schools, orphanages, leper colonies, clinics, and other facilities. She worked personally with the poor and the sick around the globe. And she often did so at risk to her own health and safety. She helped so many people, that she received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979 and became a saint in 2016. Mother Teresa is remembered as a cheerful person who was always smiling, but her private letters showed another side. She called her happy appearance “the cloak by which I cover the emptiness & misery.” In the 1950s, she found herself in an existential crisis. She felt abandoned by God. But even as she struggled, she did not lose heart in her work. She continued her mission to help the poor and sick, offering love and support wherever she could. While she may not have always been as happy as she appeared, she had a deep sense of purpose. And this purpose gave her life meaning, even through her suffering. According to author Emily Esfahani, purpose is critical to a meaningful life. She says modern society is obsessed with superficial ideas of happiness. But a lack of happiness is not the reason for the despair we often see in the world. It’s the lack of meaning. Esfahani spent five years trying to find out just how a person can live a meaningful life. She found that a sense of purpose, or using one’s strengths to help others was crucial. Mother Teresa, of course, had this in spades. Esfahani also explains that a sense of belonging, moments of transcendence, and the way we frame our life stories are also important for living a meaningful life. Esfahani says we live in a world of increasing loneliness and depression. And she counsels that pursuing happiness does not actually lead to happiness. Instead, we should be seeking a life of meaning. She says, “Happiness comes and goes. But when life is really good and when things are really bad, having meaning gives you something to hold onto.” Watch Esfahani’s TED talk to learn more about her research on living a meaningful life.

According to one survey, a whopping 80% of millennials say that one of their greatest desires is to have a lot of money. And 50% want to be famous. Are they on to something or is this desire misguided? According to a Harvard University study on human health and happiness, they are way off base. In 1928, researchers started tracking the lives of a group of 724 men from all walks of life. They are still following the lives of the 60 surviving members today. Their wives and children (2,000 of them!) are now part of the study as well. With the wealth of information that they gathered, they came to some very important conclusions. Three things stand out. First, social connections increase our happiness, physical health, and lifespan. Unfortunately, 1 in 5 Americans says that they are lonely. Second, it’s not about the number of social connections one has, it’s about the quality of those relationships. They found that the men who were most satisfied in their relationships at 50 years old were the healthiest at 80 years old. In fact, relationship quality was a better indicator of future health than the usual things, like cholesterol. Not only that, at 80 years, people’s aches and pains affected their moods less if they were in a happy relationship. Third, having good relationships affected their brains too. The men who felt they could count on their partners when times got hard, had sharper memories as they grew older. Robert Waldinger, the fourth director of this 80-year-old study, is quick to point out that a good, satisfying relationship does not mean that the couple doesn’t fight. Often, there was plenty of bickering within the healthy couples. But they knew they would be there for each other. And it’s not just romantic relationships that matter. Family, friends, and community are important too. Recent studies provide some insight into how to maintain healthy relationships. Relationship satisfaction tends to be higher when you express gratitude for your partner. Open communication, even about the hard things, is also connected to healthy relationships. And, it’s important to make time for play! Couples who experience exciting and enjoyable activities together, tend to stay together. Waldinger suggests livening up stale relationships by doing new things together. He also suggests simple things like replacing screen-time with people-time, taking walks together, having date-nights, and reaching out to resolve that long-standing family feud. Like the millennials who were surveyed, many of the men of the Harvard study initially sought achievement and wealth as young men. As it turns out, that’s not what life is all about. It’s about the relationships that we cultivate. It’s about connection. And it’s about being there for each other.