

These are common and practical goals that extend across generations and borders. In many countries, from the time they are barely old enough to speak, children are asked what they want to be when they grow up—that is, what careers they intend to pursue. When adults meet new people, one of the first questions asked is, “What do you do?” Success in life is often measured by title, salary, and recognition of achievement, even though most of us understand that these things do not necessarily make for a happy life on their own. Those who manage to check off some or even all of the desired boxes often find themselves on the other side feeling much the same as before.

Meanwhile, all day long we’re bombarded with messages about what will make us happy, about what we should want in our lives, about who is doing life “right.” Ads tell us that eating this brand of yogurt will make us healthy, buying that smartphone will bring new joy to our lives, and using a special face cream will keep us young forever.

Other messages are less explicit, woven into the fabric of daily living. If a friend buys a new car, we might wonder if a newer car would make our own life better. As we scroll social media feeds seeing only pictures of fantastic parties and sandy beaches, we might wonder if our own life is lacking in parties, lacking in beaches. In our casual friendships, at work, and especially on social media, we tend to show each other idealized versions of ourselves. We present our game faces, and the comparison between what we *see* of each other and how we *feel* about ourselves leaves us with the sense that we’re missing out. As an old saying goes, *We are always comparing our insides to other people’s outsides.*

Over time we develop the subtle but hard-to-shake feeling that our life is *here*, now, and the things we need for a good life are *over there*, or in the future. Always just out of reach.

Looking at life through this lens, it’s easy to believe that the good life doesn’t really exist, or else that it’s only possible for others. Our own life, after all, rarely matches the picture we’ve created in our heads of what a good life should look like. Our own life is always too messy, too complicated to be good.

Spoiler alert: The good life *is* a complicated life. For everybody.

The good life is joyful . . . and challenging. Full of love, but also pain. And it never strictly *happens*; instead, the good life *unfolds*, through time. It is a process. It includes turmoil, calm, lightness, burdens, struggles, achievements, setbacks, leaps forward, and terrible falls. And of course, the good life always ends in death.

A cheery sales pitch, we know.

But let’s not mince words. Life, even when it’s good, is not easy. There is simply no way to make life perfect, and if there were, then it wouldn’t be good.

Why? Because a rich life—a good life—is forged from precisely the things that make it hard.

This book is built on a bedrock of scientific research. At its heart is the Harvard Study of Adult Development, an extraordinary scientific endeavor that began in 1938, and against all odds is still going strong today. Bob is the fourth director of the Study, and Marc its associate director. Radical for its time, the Study set out to understand human health by investigating not what made people sick, but what made them thrive. It has recorded the experience of its participants’ lives more or less as they were happening, from childhood troubles, to first loves, to final days. Like the lives of its participants, the Harvard Study’s road has itself been long and winding, evolving in its methods over the decades and expanding to now include three generations and more than 1,300 of the descendants of its original 724 participants. It continues to evolve and expand today, and is the longest in-depth longitudinal study of human life ever done.

But no single study, no matter how rich, is enough to permit broad claims about human life. So while this book stands directly on the foundation of the Harvard Study, it is supported on all sides by hundreds of other scientific studies involving many thousands of people from all over the world. The book is also threaded with wisdom from the recent and ancient past—enduring ideas that mirror and enrich modern scientific understandings of the human experience. It is a book primarily about the

power of relationships, and it is deeply informed, appropriately, by the long and fruitful friendship of its authors.

But the book would not exist without the human beings who took part in the Harvard Study's research—whose honesty and generosity made this unlikely study possible in the first place.

People like Rosa and Henry Keane.

“What is your greatest fear?”

Rosa read the question out loud and then looked across the kitchen table at her husband, Henry. Now in their 70s, Rosa and Henry had lived in this house and sat at this same table together on most mornings for more than fifty years. Between them sat a pot of tea, an open pack of Oreos (half eaten), and an audio recorder. In the corner of the room, a video camera. Next to the video camera sat a young Harvard researcher named Charlotte, quietly observing and taking notes.

“It’s quite the question,” Rosa said.

“My greatest fear?” Henry said to Charlotte. “Or *our* greatest fear?”

Rosa and Henry didn’t think of themselves as particularly interesting subjects for a study. They’d both grown up poor, married in their 20s, and raised five kids together. They’d lived through the Great Depression and plenty of hard times, sure, but that was no different from anyone else they knew. So they never understood why Harvard researchers were interested in the first place, let alone why they were still interested, still calling, still sending questionnaires, and occasionally still flying across the country to visit.

Henry was only 14 years old and living in Boston’s West End, in a tenement with no running water, when researchers from the Study first knocked on his family’s door and asked his perplexed parents if they could make a record of his life. The Study was in full swing when he married Rosa in August of 1954—the records show that when she said yes to his proposal, Henry couldn’t believe his luck—and now here they were in October of 2004, two months after their fiftieth wedding anniversary. Rosa

had been asked to participate more directly in the Study in 2002. *It’s about time*, she said. Harvard had been tracking Henry year after year since 1941. Rosa often said she thought it was odd that he still agreed to be involved as an older man, because he was so private otherwise. But Henry said he felt a sense of duty to participate and had also developed an appreciation for the process because it gave him perspective on things. So, for sixty-three years he had opened his life to the research team. In fact, he’d told them so much about himself, and for so long, that he couldn’t even remember what they did and didn’t know. But he assumed they knew everything, including certain things he’d never told anyone but Rosa, because whenever they asked a question he did his best to tell them the truth.

And they asked a lot of questions.

“Mr. Keane was clearly flattered that I had come to Grand Rapids to interview them,” Charlotte would write in her field notes, “and this set a friendly atmosphere for the interview. I found him to be a cooperative and interested person. He was thoughtful about each answer, and often paused for a few moments before he responded. He was friendly though, and I felt that he was like the stereotype of the quiet man from Michigan.”

Charlotte was there for a two-day visit to interview the Keanes and administer a survey—a very long survey—of questions about their health, their individual lives, and their life together. Like most of our young researchers embarking on new careers, Charlotte had her own questions about what makes a good life and about how her current choices might affect her future. Was it possible that insights about her own life could be locked away in the lives of others? The only way to find out was to ask questions, and to be deeply attentive to every person she interviewed. What was important to this particular individual? What gave their days meaning? What had they learned from their experiences? What did they regret? Every interview presented Charlotte with new opportunities to connect with a person whose life was further along than her own, and who came from different circumstances and a different moment in history.

and healthy. You have some idea of who you are, of your likes and dislikes and emotions and social abilities. Day by day you try to live your best life. And if you're like most of us, you don't always succeed.

Throughout this book, we'll be addressing some of the common reasons why people have a hard time finding happiness and satisfaction in life, but there are a couple of general truths that should be acknowledged right off the bat.

The first is this: the good life may be a central concern for most people, but it is not the central concern of most modern societies. Life today is a haze of competing social, political, and cultural priorities, some of which have very little to do with improving people's lives. The modern world prioritizes many things ahead of the lived experience of human beings.

The second reason is related and even more fundamental: our brains, the most sophisticated and mysterious system in the known universe, often mislead us in our quest for lasting pleasure and satisfaction. We may be capable of extraordinary feats of intellect and creativity, we may have mapped the human genome and walked on the moon, but when it comes to making decisions about our lives, we humans are often bad at knowing what is good for us. Common sense in this area of life is not so sensible. It's very difficult to figure out what really matters.

These two things—the haze of culture and the mistakes we make in forecasting what will make us happy—are woven together and play a role in our lives every single day. Over the course of a life, they exert significant influence. The culture we live in leads us in particular directions, sometimes without our even noticing, and we follow along, outwardly pretending that we know what we're doing, but inwardly in a state of low-grade confusion.

Before we talk some more about the cultural and personal ways we can be led away from the good life, let's look at the lives of two Harvard Study participants who have already been through the entirety of life's gauntlet, and see what their experiences can teach us about what matters, and what doesn't.

## THE LUCK OF THE DRAW

In 1946, John Marsden and Leo DeMarco were both at major crossroads in their lives. Both had the good fortune of recently graduating from Harvard, both volunteered to serve in the military during World War II—John could not engage in active duty because of health complications and served stateside, and Leo served in the Navy in the South Pacific. Once the war was over, both were about to step forward into the rest of their lives. They had what most people would consider a leg up (or many legs up): John's family was wealthy, Leo's was upper-middle-class, they were graduates of an elite university, and they were male and White in a society that privileged White men. Not to mention that in the aftermath of the war, a lot of social and economic support was being given to veterans through the federally funded G.I. Bill and in local communities. The good life, it seemed, was waiting for them.

While almost two thirds of the original men in the Harvard Study came from the poorest and most disadvantaged neighborhoods in Boston, the remaining third attended Harvard as undergraduates. Groomed to succeed, every one of these college men should have been a poster child for The Good Life in America. Like John and Leo, some came from well-to-do families, most pursued professional careers and married, and many achieved economic and professional success.

Here we see an example of common sense leading us astray. Many of us naturally assume that the material conditions of people's lives determine their happiness. We assume that people who are less advantaged must be less happy and that people who are more advantaged must be happier. Science tells a more complicated story. When you study the lives of thousands of individuals, patterns emerge that do not always fit with popular conceptions about how things are supposed to go. Individual lives like John's and Leo's offer a look at what really matters.

John had a choice: to stay in Cleveland, work in the office of his father's dry goods franchise, and eventually take it over, or to follow his life-long dream and go to law school (he'd just been accepted to the University

of Chicago law school). He was fortunate to have that choice to make. Looking only at the trappings of his life, many people would think that John was destined for happiness.

He decided to go to law school. John had always been a diligent student, and he kept that up. According to John himself, his success was due more to hard work than any special intelligence. He told the Study that his main motivation was a fear of failure, and he even intentionally avoided dating so as not to be distracted. When he graduated from the University of Chicago, he was near the top of his class and began fielding attractive job offers, eventually settling on a firm that encouraged the kind of public service work he hoped to do. He began consulting for the federal government about the administration of public services, and also taught classes at the University of Chicago. His father, though disappointed that John had left the family business, was also very proud. John was on his way.

Leo, on the other hand, had dreamed of becoming a writer and journalist. He studied history at Harvard, and during the war kept meticulous diaries, thinking that he might use them for a book someday. His experiences in the war convinced him that he was on the right path—he wanted to write about how history affects the lives of ordinary people. But while he was overseas, his father died, and soon after he arrived home his mother was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. As the oldest of three children, he decided to move back to Burlington, Vermont, to care for and be near her, and soon found himself teaching high school.

Shortly after he started his first teaching job, Leo met Grace, a woman with whom he fell deeply in love. They were married immediately and within a year had their first child. After that, the outlines of his life were mostly set. He continued teaching high school for the next forty years and never pursued his dream of becoming a writer.

We skip ahead twenty-nine years, to February 1975. Both men are 55. John got married at 34 and is now a successful lawyer, making \$52,000 per year. Leo is still a high school teacher, making \$18,000 per year. One day they receive the same questionnaire in the mail.

Let's imagine John Marsden in his law office, sitting at his desk between appointments, and Leo DeMarco at his desk at Burlington High School, while his ninth grade students are puzzling over a history exam. The two men answer questions about their health, their recent family history, and eventually each of them comes to a set of 180 True/False questions. Among them is this one:

**True or False:**

**Life has more pain than pleasure.**

To which John (the lawyer) writes:

**True.**

And Leo (the teacher) writes:

**False.**

And this one:

**True or False:**

**I often feel starved for affection.**

To this, John responds:

**True.**

And Leo responds:

**False.**

They go on to answer questions about their alcohol use (both have one drink every day), their sleep habits, their political ideas, their religious

practices (both attend church every Sunday), and later they come to these two questions:

*Complete the following sentences any way you wish:*

A man feels good when . . .

John:

. . . he is able to respond to inner drives.

Leo:

. . . he senses that his family loves him despite everything.

And:

Being with other people . . .

John:

. . . is pleasant.

Leo:

. . . is pleasant (up to a point!).

John Marsden, one of the more professionally successful members of the Study, was also one of the least happy. Like Leo DeMarco he wanted to be close to people, as this last answer shows, and he loved his family, but he consistently reported feelings of disconnection and sadness throughout his life. He struggled in his first marriage and alienated his children. When John remarried at the age of 62, he quickly began to refer to that new relationship as “loveless,” though it would last to the end of his life.

Later we'll talk more about John's path to despair, and some of the factors that likely shaped his suffering, but there is one particular feature of John's life that concerns us right now: while John tried hard to make himself happy, he was preoccupied at every stage of his life with himself, and what he referred to as his “inner drives.” He began his career hoping to make life better for others, but over time associated his achievements less with helping people and more with professional success. Convinced that his career and his accomplishments would bring him happiness, he was never able to find a path to joy.

Leo DeMarco, on the other hand, thought of himself primarily in relation to others—his family, his school, and his friends appear often in his reports to the Study—and he is generally considered to be one of the Study's happiest men. But when one of Harvard's researchers interviewed Leo in middle age, she wrote, “I came away from our visit with the impression that the subject was, well . . . somewhat ordinary.”

However, by his own accounting of things, Leo lived a rich and satisfying life. He wouldn't show up on the evening news and his name was not known beyond his local community, but he had four daughters and a wife who adored him, was remembered fondly by friends, colleagues, and students, and throughout his life rated himself as “very happy” or “extremely happy” on study questionnaires. Unlike John, Leo found his work meaningful specifically because he took pleasure in the benefit that other people derived from his teaching.

It's easy enough now, looking back on these two men's lives, to see the links between what they each believed, the decisions they made, and how their lives unfolded. But why is it so difficult in the moment to make decisions that will benefit our well-being? Why do we so often overlook sources of happiness that are right in front of us? An experiment conducted by researchers at the University of Chicago illuminates one central piece of the puzzle.

away." He talked about his involvement in the VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars) and the fact he moved up to district commander at one point, but he stepped down in 1968. "It takes a lot out of you."

When did he last talk to his older sister, and how was she doing?

Sterling seemed startled by this question. "My sister?" he said. "You mean Rosalie?"

Yes, the sister he told the Study so much about when he was younger.

Sterling thought about it for a long time, and then told George that it must have been twenty years ago that he last spoke to her. A frightened expression came over his face. "Would she still be living?" he said.

Sterling tried not to think about his relationships, and he was even less inclined to talk about them. This is a common experience. We don't always know why we do things or why we don't do things, and we may not understand what is holding us at a distance from the people in our lives. Taking some time to look in the mirror can help. Sometimes there are needs inside of us that are looking for a voice, a way to get out. They might be things that we have never seen, nor articulated to ourselves.

This seemed to be the case with Sterling. Asked how he spent his evenings, he said he watched TV with an 87-year-old woman who lived in a nearby trailer. Each night he would walk over, and they'd watch TV and talk. Eventually she would fall asleep, and he would help her into bed and wash her dishes and close the shades before walking home. She was the closest thing he had to a confidant.

"I don't know what I'll do if she dies," he said.

## LONELINESS HURTS

When you're lonely, it hurts. And we don't mean that metaphorically. It has a physical effect on the body. Loneliness is associated with being more sensitive to pain, suppression of the immune system, diminished brain function, and less effective sleep, making an already lonely person even more tired and irritable. Recent research has shown that for older people loneliness is twice as unhealthy as obesity, and chronic loneliness increases

one's odds of death in any given year by 26 percent. A study in the U.K., the Environmental Risk (E-Risk) Longitudinal Twin Study, recently reported on the connections between loneliness and poorer health and well-being in young adults. This ongoing study includes more than 2,200 people born in England and Wales in 1994 and 1995. When they were 18, the researchers asked them how lonely they were. Those who reported being lonelier were more likely to experience mental health problems, to engage in risky physical health behaviors, and to use more negative strategies to cope with stress. Add to this the fact that a tide of loneliness is flooding through modern societies, and we have a serious problem. Recent stats should make us take notice.

In a study conducted online that sampled 55,000 respondents from across the world, one out of every three people of all ages reported that they often feel lonely. Among these, the loneliest group were 16–24-year-olds, 40 percent of whom reported feeling lonely "often or very often" (more on this phenomenon soon). In the U.K., the economic cost of this loneliness—because lonely people are less productive and more prone to employment turnover—is estimated at more than £2.5 billion (about \$3.4 billion) annually and helped lead to the establishment of a U.K. Ministry of Loneliness.

In Japan, 32 percent of adults surveyed before 2020 expected to feel lonely most of the time in the coming year.

In the United States, a 2018 study suggested that three out of four adults felt moderate to high levels of loneliness. As of this writing, the long-term effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, which separated us from each other on a massive scale and left many feeling more isolated than ever, are still being studied. In 2020 it was estimated that 162,000 deaths could be attributed to causes stemming from social isolation.

Alleviating this epidemic of loneliness is difficult because what makes one person feel lonely might have no effect on someone else. We can't rely entirely on easily observed indicators like whether or not one lives alone, because loneliness is a subjective experience. One person might have a significant other and too many friends to count and yet feel lonely, while

another person might live alone and have a few close contacts, and you feel very connected. The objective facts of a person's life are not enough to explain why someone is lonely. Regardless of your race or class or gender, the feeling resides in the difference between the kind of social contact you want and the social contact you actually have. But, then, how can loneliness be so physically harmful when it's a subjective experience?

Answering that question is a bit easier if we understand the biological roots of the problem. As we discussed in Chapter Two, human beings have evolved to be social. The biological processes that encourage social behavior are there to protect us, not to harm us. When we feel isolated, our bodies and brains react in ways that are designed to help us survive that isolation. Fifty thousand years ago, being alone was dangerous. If the Homo sapiens we mentioned earlier was left at her tribe's river settlement by herself, her body and brain would have gone into temporary survival mode. The need to recognize threats would have fallen on her alone, and her stress hormones would have increased and made her more alert. If her family or tribe were away overnight and she had to sleep by herself, her sleep would have been shallower; if a predator was approaching, she would want to know, so she would have been more easily aroused, and she would have experienced more awakenings in the night.

If for some reason she found herself alone for say, a month, rather than a night, these physical processes would continue, morphing into a droning, constant sense of unease, and they would begin to take a toll on her mental and physical health. She would be, as we say, stressed out. She would be lonely.

The same effects of loneliness continue today. The feeling of loneliness is a kind of alarm ringing inside the body. At first, its signals may help us. We need them to alert us to a problem. But imagine living in your house with a fire alarm going off all day, every day, and you start to get a sense of what chronic loneliness is doing behind the scenes to our minds and bodies.

Loneliness is only one piece of the mind-body equation of relationships. It is the visible tip of the social iceberg; much more is submerged

beneath the surface. There is now a vast body of research revealing the associations between health and social connection, associations that trace back to the origins of the species, when things were much simpler. Our basic relationship needs are not complicated. We need love, connection, and a feeling of belonging. But we now live in complicated social environments, so *how we meet* those needs is the challenge.

### III BY THE NUMBERS

Think for a moment about a relationship you have with a person you cherish but feel like you don't see nearly enough. This needn't be your most significant relationship, just someone who makes you feel energized when you're with them, and who you'd like to see more often. Run through the possible candidates (there may only be one!) and get this person in mind. Now think about the last time you were together and try to re-create in your imagination how they made you feel at the time. Were you optimistic, feeling almost invincible? Did you feel understood? Maybe you were quick to laugh, and the ills in your life and the world felt less daunting.

Now think about how often you see that person. Every day? Once a month? Once a year? Do the math and project how many hours in a single year you think you spend with this person. Write this number down and hang on to it.

For us, Bob and Marc, though we meet up every week by phone or video call, we see each other in person only for a total of about two days (forty-eight hours) every year.

How does this add up for the coming years? When this book comes out, Bob will be 71 years old. Marc will be 60. Let's be (very) generous and say we are both around to celebrate Bob's 100th birthday. At two days per year for twenty-nine years, that's fifty-eight days that we have left to spend together in our lifetimes.

Fifty-eight out of 10,585 days.

Of course, this is assuming a lot of good fortune, and the real number is almost certainly going to be lower.

## WITHERING FRIENDSHIPS

Looking through the files of the Study, it doesn't take long to find men who, in their later years, regretted the way their friendships turned out. These include the cases of extreme isolation and loneliness like Sterling Ainsley (Chapter Four) or Victor Mourad (Chapter Nine), but all through the Study run currents of a more common feeling of disconnection, in which men forge ahead through the stages of their adult lives with fewer and fewer close friendships. When given the opportunity to talk about the state of their friendships—an opportunity they rarely had outside of the Study's investigations—these men almost always claimed their lack of close friendships was due to their self-sufficiency and independence. At the same time, many expressed a longing for more closeness with friends.

"Many men like me regret not having had more close friends," one participant told the Study. "I've never had a really close friend. My wife has more friends than me."

Though this experience with friends is common in the Study, particularly for men, there is no strong evidence to support the belief that men are somehow "wired" for emotional independence and stoicism and averse to intimacy. Instead, it's likely that this approach to friendships (and relationships generally) is primarily the result of cultural forces. For example, friendship patterns among LGBTQ+ individuals often differ from those of their heterosexual counterparts, and there are likely to be generational differences in how men conduct their social lives as they age.

Research indicates that differences in friendship patterns between men and women are actually small. A number of longitudinal studies show that male adolescents from many different backgrounds connect intimately with close friends in ways that defy gender stereotypes. For example, psychologist Niobe Way has studied friendships among Black, Latino, and Asian American adolescent and teenage boys who, like our own inner-city participants, grew up in modest circumstances in a major city.

"Secret sharing or talking intimately with best friends was how the boys in my studies defined a best friend," Way wrote. For example,

Mark says in his freshman year: "[My best friend] could just tell me anything and I could tell him anything. Like I always know everything about him. . . . We always chill, like we don't hide secrets from each other. We tell each other our problems." . . . Eddie, a sophomore, says: "It's like a bond, we keep secrets, like if there is something that's important to me like I could tell him and he won't go and make fun of it. Like if my family is having problems or something." While boys spoke about loving to play basketball or videogames with their friends, the emphasis with their best friends was on talking together and sharing secrets.

As boys age into late adolescence and early adulthood, friendships often become more guarded, and less free. Some of this change is in response to changing life circumstances, and occurs for both men and women—jobs and romantic relationships get in the way. But for men there is often an extra set of powerful cultural forces at work. In many cultures around the world, boys are encouraged to display their independence and masculinity as they age, and they begin to worry that emotional closeness to male friends will make them appear less masculine. Over time, certain intimacies between friends are lost.

Adolescent female friendships are certainly subject to many of their own pressures and constraints, but women in many cultures are expected to continue to maintain and nurture these intimate exchanges beyond the teen years. These expectations may help support further intimacy but they may also result in women carrying a heavier burden for navigating and solving emotional challenges in close relationships.

In 1987 the Study sent one questionnaire to the First Generation participants, and, if they were married, a second questionnaire to their wives. One of the things the Study was particularly interested in that year was the couple's experience with friends.

The men were asked, *How satisfied are you with the number of and your closeness to friends (besides your wife)?* Thirty percent said that they were not satisfied and would like much more. When their wives were asked a similar question, only 6 percent said that they were not satisfied.

Around this same time, sociologist Lillian Rubin was doing important work looking at the question of why men and women seemed to experience their friendships differently.

Women, Rubin found, were more likely than men to keep up contact with their friends. The nature of their relationships was also different—men were more likely to organize friendships around activities, women were more likely to be emotionally close, and to share intimate thoughts and feelings with each other. Women had more *face-to-face* friendships, men had more *side-by-side* friendships.

Rubin's observations have found some support in reviews of multiple studies, but as more and more research has been done on this topic, one thing has become clear: *the gender differences between what men and women seek in friendships are smaller than one might expect given our cultural assumptions.*

For example, studies show that women generally have higher expectations than men about having intimate exchanges in their friendships, but this difference is small. In psychology, small differences between groups mean that the overlap among the two groups is the rule rather than the exception. As a whole, research shows that most people regardless of gender identification want and need similar kinds of closeness and intimacy from their friends.

## THE FRIENDSHIPS AT THE HEART OF THE HARVARD STUDY

When Study participants receive a questionnaire in the mail, it doesn't just come with a return envelope. It comes with a friendly letter from the Harvard Study staff. Over the years there has been a great deal of correspondence between the staff and the participants, and a quick perusal of these letters in the participants' files reveals the depth of connections that were made. In the minds of First Generation participants, one particular name at the end of those letters came to be synonymous with the Harvard Study: Lewise Gregory Davies.

Trained as a social worker, Lewise joined the Study in its very first days, when Arlie Bock was just beginning the research. As the Study expanded, Lewise became more and more involved in the outreach to participants. They came to know her by name, would write her personal notes with news of their lives (even though their questionnaires covered most details), and if they were late in returning a questionnaire, she would check in with them and offer an encouraging reminder. Lewise saw them as friends, even as a kind of second family. Many of them responded to questionnaires and interview requests out of loyalty to her personally.

Eventually Lewise retired, but after her husband died, she found herself missing the friends she'd made at the Study, so she came back, and continued her work. It was this personal commitment to the Study, from Lewise and from others, that helped keep almost 90 percent of participants engaged in the Study across eight decades. Our participants knew that they mattered not only to the Study and to the research—most of which they would never see—but to Lewise. In 1983, after she retired for the second time, Lewise wrote a short note to all the participants in the Study, thanking them a final time for one of the defining experiences of her life:

Dear Friends,

Through these many years I have treasured my friendship with you and your families. The memories have been like a shining light in my life. Your loyalty and devotion to the Study have touched me deeply. May the years ahead be rich in happiness and fulfillment for you and those you love,

Devotedly, your old and good friend,  
Lewise

This was a relationship that might have seemed unimportant. Many of the participants met Lewise in person only once or twice, and some



## Conclusion

# IT'S NEVER TOO LATE TO BE HAPPY

Harvard Study Questionnaire, 1983:

**Q: Every investigation alters what is being investigated.**  
**Over the past few decades what alterations has the Harvard**  
**Study made in your life?**

In 1941 Henry Keane was 14 years old, and healthy. While he lived in a neighborhood defined by poverty, and this deprivation led many of the kids he knew into trouble, Henry had somehow avoided that path. Interested in understanding why, a young researcher from Harvard walked up the three flights of Henry's tenement on a rainy day to talk to Henry and his parents about participating in a cutting-edge research project. Researchers hoped to give him regular physical health check-ups and talk with him about his life periodically for several years to see what they could learn about the lives of young boys in the poorest areas of Boston. Close to five hundred other boys his age from other Boston neighborhoods were also being recruited, most of them from immigrant families like Henry's.

Henry's parents were skeptical, but the researcher seemed trustworthy. They agreed.

A few years before that, Leo DeMarco and John Marsden, both 19-year-old sophomores at Harvard College, made appointments at the Student Health Services office to meet with Arlie Bock, who signed them up for a similar study looking at what made young men thrive. After their first two-hour interviews, he had each of them come back the following week.

"I just can't imagine," John said, "what more you could possibly have to ask me. I never thought I had more than two hours' worth of things to say about myself."

Both of these studies were meant to go on for several years. Maybe ten years, if they could find more funding.

These three boys had their entire lives in front of them. Looking at their intake photos today, Bob and Marc feel a sense of wonder and nostalgia similar to what we might feel looking at the photograph of an old friend. None of the participants could know the challenges they would face, none of them could see where life would take them.

Some of their cohort, boys just like them, died in the coming war. Some died of complications related to alcoholism. Some became rich, some even became famous.

Some lives were happy. Some were not.

Eighty years later we now know that Henry and Leo are in the happy group. They grew into engaged, healthy men, with positive and realistic views of the world. We look at their files—at their lives—and within the normal flow of bad luck and tragedy and hard times, we see some lucky breaks. They fell in love, they adored their children, they found meaning in their communities. They led lives that were largely positive and that they felt grateful for having lived.

John is in the unhappy group. He started life with privileges, including material wealth, and also caught some lucky breaks. He was a brilliant student, went to Harvard, and fulfilled his dream of becoming a successful lawyer. But his mother died when he was 16 and he was also bullied as a child for many years. Over time, he developed a wariness of people and

habitually negative ways of coping with the world. He had difficulty connecting with others, and when he encountered challenges, his instinct was to withdraw from the people closest to him. He married twice, and never felt that he was truly loved.

How might we have helped John if we could go back to that day he had his picture taken at age 19? Could we use some of what John helped the Study discover to help him cope with his life? Here, we might say to him, *This is the life of someone we studied. He lived it so that you might do it better.*

But many of the most significant findings, naturally, came *after* the participants had already lived much of their lives. So they didn't have the benefit of the research we've presented at the times when it would have helped them most.

That's why we wrote this book: to share with you what we couldn't share with them. Because one thing the large body of research into human flourishing clearly shows—from our longitudinal study and from dozens of others—is that *it doesn't matter how old you are, where you are in the life cycle, whether you are married or not married, introverted or extroverted; everyone can make positive turns in their life.*

John Marsden is a pseudonym. His profession and other identifying details have been changed to protect his identity. The real man behind the name has unfortunately passed away. It's too late for him. But if you're reading this book, it's not too late for you.

## LIVING AN EXAMINED LIFE

It has often been asked about the Harvard Study: Did the Study's questions affect how participants lived? Are the data distorted by a kind of psychological Heisenberg effect, where the participants' lives are shaped by the act of self-examination?

This was a question that Arlie Bock and all the subsequent Study directors and researchers have been interested in. On one hand, it's an impossible question to answer. As the saying goes, we can never step into the

same river twice: there's no way to know what each participant's life would have been like if they'd not been involved in the Study. The participants themselves, however, had some ideas:

"Sorry, but I don't think it has had any influence," was one typical response.

"Only as a topic of conversation. Sorry!" was another.

John Marsden answered simply: "None."

Joseph Cichy (Chapter Seven) also wrote, "None," and then offered what he believed to be the reason: "I have not had feedback which I can translate into a message for me."

Others, however, acknowledged turning the Study's investigations around, and using them to consider their lives and to open themselves to the possibilities of living differently.

"The Study has caused me to reassess my life every two years," one participant wrote.

Another laid out his entire self-assessment regimen: "It makes me review, challenge present activities, take stock, clarify directions and priorities, and assess my marital relationship, which after thirty-seven years has become so basic a part of life as to be unquestioned."

"Makes me reflect for a bit," Leo DeMarco wrote. "Makes me rejoice in my circumstances; a lovely wife who generally tolerates my foibles. The questions make me aware that there are other lifestyles, other options, other experiences which are *might-have-beens* but weren't."

The fact that participants were affected by the Study's questions is itself a useful lesson for the rest of us. We may not have the Study calling us on the phone and bugging us to answer questions every two years, but we can still take a moment now and then to consider where we are and where we would like to be. It is these moments of stepping back, and looking at our lives, that can help us clear the fog and choose a path forward.

But which path?

We tend to think we know what must

know ourselves. The problem is we're so good at being ourselves, we don't always see that there might be another way.

Recall the wisdom of the Zen master Shunryu Suzuki: "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's mind there are few."

Asking honest questions about ourselves is the first step toward recognizing that we may not be experts on our own lives. When we accept this, and we accept that we may not have all the answers, we step into the realm of possibility. And that is a step in the right direction.

## IN PURSUIT OF SOMETHING BIGGER

In 2005 we had a luncheon for the inner-city Boston participants, who at that time were in their 70s. There was a table for Southie (South Boston), Roxbury, the West End, the North End, Charlestown, and all the other Boston neighborhoods represented in the Study. Some of the participants even knew each other from school or by virtue of having grown up in the same neighborhoods. Some traveled from across the country and came dressed in their best suits and ties, others just drove to the West End from around the corner, dressed in whatever they happened to be wearing that day. Some brought their wives and their children, many of whom have joined the Study themselves.

Our participants' dedication to the Study has been humbling. Eighty-four percent of our First Generation participants continued their involvement for their entire lives. The typical longitudinal study has a much higher dropout rate and does not come close to covering entire lifetimes. What's more, 68 percent of their children agreed to take part in the Second Generation study—an astonishingly high rate of participation. Even those First Generation participants who have long since passed away made contributions that will affect research for years to come. They've left us with vials of their blood, which in combination with their health and psychological data and historical assessments of Boston neighborhoods are being used to study the long term health effects of lead and other

environmental contaminants. As they approached the end of their lives, some participants even agreed to donate their brains to the Study. Honoring these requests was not easy for their families, who had to go through considerable inconvenience at a time of mourning in order to make sure that the Study could take possession of their loved ones' remains. Thanks to all of this dedication, participants' lives continue to matter, and their legacy will live on.

This has been a mutually life-enhancing project. We, the generations of Harvard Study staff members, have been enlivened by our connection to the participants. In turn, the creativity and commitment of our staff members has enabled hundreds of families to be part of something unique in the history of science. Lewise Gregory, whom we mentioned in Chapter Ten and who worked for the Study for most of its lifespan, is one of the best examples of this. Our participants responded to questionnaires during some of the busiest and most difficult times of their lives not only because they believed in the research, but also because they felt loyal to Lewise and other Study staff. A study that slowly uncovered the value of relationships was itself sustained, in the end, by relationships.

Over the years, these relationships formed a kind of invisible community. Some participants didn't meet anyone else in the Study until very late in their lives and others never knew a single other person who was involved. But they felt a connection to the Study nonetheless. Some participants, wary of self-disclosure, were reluctant in the beginning but continued anyway. Others looked forward to getting calls from the Study and enjoyed the experience of being checked on and listened to. Most, however, were proud to be part of something bigger than themselves. In this way, they thought of the Study as a piece of their own generativity, part of their own mark on the world, and they trusted that eventually their lives would be of use to people they would never meet.

This speaks to a concern that many of us have: *Do I matter?*

Some of us have lived the majority of our lives and find ourselves looking back, others have most of our lives in front of us and are looking forward. For all of us, regardless of age, it helps to remember that this

question of mattering, of leaving something for future generations and of being part of something bigger than ourselves, is not just about our personal achievements—it's about what we mean to other people. And it's never too late to start now and leave a mark.

## FILLING IN THE GAPS

In the scope of human history, the “science of happiness” is a recent idea. Slowly but surely, science is uncovering useful answers to what makes people thrive across the entire lifespan. New findings, new insights, and new strategies for how to bring happiness research into real life continue to evolve. If you want to keep track of our latest efforts, they can be found at the Lifespan Research Foundation ([www.Lifespanresearch.org](http://www.Lifespanresearch.org)).

The primary challenge of happiness research comes in the application of insight to actual lives, each of which is highly individual and does not fit neatly into any group template. The findings and ideas we've presented in this book are based on research, but science can't know the turmoil or contradictions you feel in your heart. It can't quantify the stir that you experience when a certain friend calls. It can't know what keeps you up at night, or what you regret, or how you express your love. Science can't say whether you're calling your kids too much or too little, or whether you should reconnect with a particular family member. It can't say if it would be better for you to have a heart-to-heart over a cup of coffee or play a game of basketball or go for a walk with a friend. Those answers can only come through reflection, and figuring out what works for you. For anything in this book to be useful, you will need to tune in to your unique life experience and make its lessons your own.

But here's what science *can* tell you:

*Good relationships keep us happier, healthier, and help us live longer.*

This is true across the lifespan, and across cultures and contexts, which means it is almost certainly true for you, and for nearly every human being who has ever lived.

## THE FOURTH “R”

Few things affect the quality of our lives as much as our connections to others. As we've said many times before, human beings are primarily *social* animals. The implications of that fact may be much vaster than many of us realize.

Basic education is sometimes referred to as the three Rs: reading, writing, and arithmetic. Because early education is meant to prepare students for life, we believe there should be a fourth R in basic education: *relationships*.

Humans are not born with the biological need to read and write, though the skills are now fundamental to society. We are not born with a need to do math, though the modern world would not exist without it. We are, however, born with a need to connect with other people. Because this need for connection is fundamental to a flourishing life, we believe that social fitness should be taught to children and be a central consideration in public policy right alongside exercise, diet, and other health recommendations. Making social fitness central to health education is especially important in the context of rapidly evolving technologies that affect how we communicate and develop relational skills.

There are signs that the world is catching on. There are now hundreds of studies showing that positive relationships have a health benefit, and we've cited many of them in this book. Courses in social and emotional learning (SEL) focus on helping students learn self-awareness, identify and manage emotions, and hone their relationship skills. These programs are being tested in schools all over the world. Across age, race, gender, and class, this research suggests that, compared with students who did not receive this education, students in these programs showed more positive behaviors with peers, had better academic performance, fewer conduct problems, less drug use, and less emotional distress. These programs are a step in the right direction, and their impact shows that this emphasis on relationships pays off. Efforts to bring these same lessons to adults in organizations, workplaces, and community centers are also under way.

## ADVERSITY ON THE PATH TO THE GOOD LIFE

We are living in a time of global crisis. Connecting with our fellow human beings takes on new urgency in this context. The Covid-19 pandemic put this need for connection into stark relief. As the disease spread and lockdowns began, many people reached out to solidify the most important relationships in their lives, to boost their sense of connection and security. Then, as the lockdowns stretched from weeks to months and beyond, people began feeling the effects of social isolation in strange and sometimes profound ways. Our bodies and minds, inextricably intertwined, reacted to the stress of isolation. People all over the world began experiencing health impacts as schoolkids lost regular contact with their friends and teachers, workers lost the presence of their workmates, weddings were postponed, friendships sidelined, and those of us who had access to the internet had to settle for connecting through computer screens. Suddenly it became clear that schools, movie theaters, restaurants, and ballparks weren't just about learning, watching movies, eating food, and playing sports. They were about being together.

Global crises will continue to impact our collective well-being. But as we struggle with how to confront these challenges, we must remember that every one of us has only the moment before us, in the place we stand. It is our approach to each unfolding moment and our connections to the individuals we encounter in our lives—family, friends, people in our communities and beyond—that will ultimately serve as a bulwark against whatever crises we confront.

When the Harvard Study participants were kids, they couldn't have envisioned the difficulties they would face, either in the world or in their own lives. Leo DeMarco could not have seen World War II coming. Henry Keane couldn't do anything about the poverty that the Great Depression brought on his family. And we can't foresee exactly what challenges will confront us in the future. But we know they will come.

Thousands of stories from the Harvard Study show us that the good life is not found by providing ourselves with leisure and ease. Rather, it

arises from the act of facing inevitable challenges, and from fully inhabiting the moments of our lives. It appears, quietly, as we learn how to love and how to open ourselves to being loved, as we grow from our experiences, and as we stand in solidarity with others through the inevitable string of joys and adversities in every human life.

## A FINAL DECISION

How do you move further along on your own path toward a good life? First, by recognizing that the good life is not a destination. It is the path itself, and the people who are walking it with you. As you walk, second by second you can decide to whom and to what you give your attention. Week by week you can prioritize your relationships and choose to be with the people who matter. Year by year you can find purpose and meaning through the lives that you enrich and the relationships that you cultivate. By developing your curiosity and reaching out to others—family, loved ones, coworkers, friends, acquaintances, even strangers—with one thoughtful question at a time, one moment of devoted, authentic attention at a time, you strengthen the foundation of a good life.

We'll make a final suggestion to get you started.

Think about someone, just one person, who is important to you. Someone who may not know how much they really mean to you. It could be your spouse, your significant other, a friend, a coworker, a sibling, a parent, a child, or even a coach or a teacher from your younger days. This person could be sitting beside you as you read or listen to this book, they could be standing over the sink washing dishes, or in another city, another country. Think about where they stand in their lives. What are they struggling with? Think about what they mean to you, what they have done for you in your life. Where would you be without them? Who would you be?

Now think about what you would thank them for if you thought you would never see them again.

And at this moment—right now—turn to them. Call them. Tell them.