

Science is Proving Religion is Right!

A Homily by Danny Enright

September 28, 2014

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Let me start with a story about gods and creation.

An incomprehensibly long time ago, everything that is, got started somehow. Out of all this came primates and some of them began to walk on two legs, developed a pre-frontal cortex and starting asking each other out on dates.

These were humans.

At that point, we began to wonder about things, and because we didn't have all the answers to some of the great mysteries, we figured that someone must be in control, so we created gods.

I'm thinking of submitting that story to be voted into the next edition
of the Unitarian Bible.

I hope I have your support.

It wasn't all that long ago that religious teachings were humanity's primary way of explaining how many things worked. It clumsily tried to overcome some of our basic instincts and direct us to something more...

And religion, spirituality and philosophy keeps on existing today for the same reason.

If we had just followed our instinct, we'd still be living in caves trying not to be eaten by bears. We are instinctually on alert to watch for what's wrong, or what's dangerous. It's this foundational instinct that, even today, keeps many of our views limited as we focus on what could go wrong, because THAT's where the danger is, and we need to be reminded to venture out of our caves to gaze upon the stars.

Positive psychology, like religion, encourages us to look at the stars. As I proceed through my studies for my Diploma in Positive Psychology, I am surprised by how often a specific new scientifically validated positive psychology discovery is also a truism that has been heard from hopeful mystics, wise shamans, and the learned pulpits for millennia.

I know how contentious some aspects of organized religion can be, and I certainly know better than to start a religious argument in a Unitarian church, so throughout my talk I will stick with the hopeful, non-contentious tenets of religions.

But before I talk more about religion, a bit about Positive Psychology... the other part of this discussion.

PP is NOT about Polly-Anna thinking to wish away the world's harsher realities, nor is it as simple as slapping on a yellow happy face button. Positive Psychology is the "Ying" to Therapeutic Psychology's "Yang". Positive psychology is the scientific study of the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive. It's about building resilience to better with-stand the storms life sends our way, and to help us get back up on our feet quickly when we're blown over. It's about understanding that we will absolutely make mistakes, and to develop a mindset that embraces these learning opportunities. It's about defining our reason for getting up in the morning and interacting with those people, things or events that makes time fly by. It's about researching what happy, fulfilled people and communities do to grow and prosper.

But these are not psychological concepts that have been expressed until recent times. The modern view of psychology many of us are familiar with, which sees psychology as a way to heal the emotionally wounded, developed after the second world war. Many soldiers returned home with what we would now call Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Governments were willing to pay for specialists to treat the soldiers, and psychiatrists and psychologists stepped into the void. Focusing on sickness was where the money was, so it's where the research occurred.

Then in the 1980s, the head of the American Psychological Association, Martin Seligman, revived the idea of "Positive Psychology". Instead of just taking people who were at, say, a -5 and returning them to a neutral 0, Positive Psychology explores what it is that allows some people to live at a +2, +5 or even a +8? Positive Psychologists asked "who is studying the people who were prospering? Who was learning from their lives?"

I'm not a psychologist, but merely an armchair enthusiast about the human mind. I've been blessed with a "colourful mental and emotional tapestry". (I'm sure THAT's how Positive Psychology would describe it.) My mind's recipe includes anxiety, a mood disorder that my doctor likens to bad PMS... his diagnosis, not mine. A sprinkle of OCD, ODD and ADD, and whatever other three letter acronym they could invent.

Then there's my increasingly obvious Tourettes, which is noticeable, repetitive physical and vocal tics that I have little control over. When I was young, it wasn't diagnosed as Tourettes, but merely something known by my mother as "Danny, either you sit still and cut it out or I'll give you something to quack about!"

I seemed to be smart enough, but I always had to work a bit harder to make a go of it. It always felt that I had extra fears to fight, extra distractions to ignore, extra demons to slay.

So I've become a connoisseur of neuroscience, and theology, and neural plasticity, and philosophy, and habit formation, then psychology, and then I hit upon "Positive

Psychology". I was jazzed that positive psychology says "Happiness is not only a goal, but it's a tool to be used to improve all of our lives, systems and societies."

Positive Psychologist researchers are discovering that there are measurable benefits to happiness, such as:

- increased problem solving ability,
- higher perceived quality of life,
- better health outcomes,
- higher incomes,
- longer life spans
- more social support
- to name a few.

I just want to point out that it is happy people who more often achieve the very things that we think should actually bring us happiness.

Make sense?

We think "If I could solve my problems, then I'd be happy", when it's actually people who are happy that have more creative and abundant solutions to problems.

We think "I'd be happy if I was healthier " and it's actually people who are happy first that according to statistics, are healthier. And THEN, on top of that, the people who are healthier ARE indeed happier, So there is this marvellous phenomenon in PP known as the upward spiral, which is just as it sounds... the opposite to the downward spiral.

Everything that PP purports is rigorously scientifically validated, through the use of fMRI scans, large cultural studies, decades long societal observations, chemical analysis of urine, social science experiments, and a dozen other peer reviewed methods.

By comparison, many aspects of religion or ancient philosophies are just assumed to be truths. Wouldn't it be cool if these teachings could be scientifically validated? We could then freely embrace the tenets with proven results, and discard the ones that don't serve our greater good.

Of course, we know certain things to be true because... they just ARE true! They have always been true. They will always BE true. Why do we need to test something that is proven to be true by generations?

If you'll indulge me for a moment, I'm going to cover a few simpler, lighter topics that most of us have been taught are true, but that science says are not:

SWIMMING AFTER YOU EAT WILL GIVE YOU CRAMPS.

Not true. According to the Mayo Clinic, it's perfectly safe to swim after a meal.

FEED A COLD, STARVE A FEVER.

Starving yourself while sick is never a good idea. When you're sick, your body needs nutrients. This old wives' tale may have started because, when you're really sick and have a fever, you sometimes can't keep anything down, so they assumed the body didn't need it.

CRACKING YOUR KNUCKLES CAUSES ARTHRITIS.

False. The president and CEO of the American Arthritis Foundation recently said there's no evidence that cracking your knuckles increases the risk of arthritis. So as the Egg Marketing board says, geeeeeet crackin'!

And thankfully science will never stop challenging our firmly held beliefs... Right now scientists are using federal grant money to determine if it's true that buttered bread always hits the floor buttered side down, and in separate studies if cats always land on their feet. If both are proven true, they will then strap buttered bread to the back of a cat, and drop them to see which scientific truth is MORE powerful.

For today's discussion, I'm going to focus on five long-propagated tenets of world religions and ancient philosophers to see what modern Positive Psychology is proving valid.

These are:

- Gratitude
- Forgiveness
- Charity
- Belief
- Community

Regarding Gratitude and giving thanks, ancient Roman philosophy says

“Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others.”

— [Marcus Tullius Cicero](#)

Regarding Gratitude, Positive Psychology says having a structured process through which to express gratitude brings about measurable health improvements.

In studies over the past decade, people who kept a regular gratitude practice:

- Had 16% fewer physical ailments
- Spent 19% more time exercising
- Had 10% less physical pain
- Showed reduced levels of cortisone... the stress hormone
- Had a 35% reduction in depressive symptoms
- A significant decrease in systolic blood pressure

- And regarding sleeps, test groups
 - Had an 8% less incidence of insomnia
 - took 20% less time to fall asleep
 - Had a 29% increase in the quality of their sleep
 - and a 14% increase in sleep duration

As a trainer, teacher and public speaker, it's ironic I should finish on sleep examples because I've learned the number one way to *PUT* people to sleep is to inundate them with stats, studies and research during a talk. So I promise you that will be the last time I lay out a list like that. Know that I am doing something positive by not delving too deeply into the weeds.

With Gratitude being such a great gift, it's lucky for us that it's a character strength that can be learned, and cultivated with intentional activity. As part of my Diploma in Positive Psychology, they did a character strengths analysis, and Gratitude is now one of my top 10 strengths. Believe me, during my darkest years, that certainly was not the case!

(Link to course for those who may want more information:)

<http://languagroupinstitute.com/diploma-of-positive-psychology-canada/>

And true to Cicero's quote, Gratitude has been found to be the foundation of a number of positive interventions that enhance happiness and well-being.

And you can do this one easily, every day. If you spend five-minute a day journaling about three things you're grateful for this will increase your long-term well-being and have the same life-quality impact as doubling a middle-class income. AND the results last longer as you keep journaling.

Gratitude ALSO often sends out ripples which encourages actions in yourself and others that makes the world a better place. And then even if it doesn't directly make something measurably better, it trains our mind to notice more of what's right with the world.

But this prescription for happiness does have a health warning... a gratitude exercise should NOT be prescribed to, or embarked upon, by somebody who is in the middle of clinical depression. When in the pit of despair, it may be almost impossible to imagine something to be grateful for, and that failure may actually compound the depression, and deepen the symptoms.

So religion is right; gratitude does lead to a little slice of heaven.

Related to gratitude is forgiveness.

Famous Buddhist teacher and leader Mahatma Gandhi says:

“The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.”

Positive Psychology Says forgiveness frees our minds and hearts to focus on more enriching pursuits.

Forgiveness is the flip side of gratitude. Gratitude wants us to consciously notice and reflect on something rather than just letting it drift by, while forgiveness involves consciously controlling our reaction to a transgressions we can't help but notice, by offering mercy instead of vengeance. Like gratitude, it is outward directed and intentional and recognized as a character strength we can incubate and grow. Please note that I don't yet have this as one of my top 10.

Martin Luther said that “forgiveness [is] pure happiness.” The miracle and the irony of forgiving is that to achieve this “pure happiness” and to heal from our wounds we must **CHOOSE** to give up our right to resentment and we must **CHOOSE** to re-establish compassion, generosity, and love toward the very person who hurt us.

This can be very tough.

Positive Psychology practices are certainly not always the broad, straight and easy path. But if we do NOT choose to forgive, then **WE** must carry the heavy burden of resentment and feel the negative emotions of hatred, and the helplessness of the victim. When we forgive, we are setting ourselves and our lives free. And it could very well be that the act of forgiving will directly or indirectly improve someone else's life as well.

And let's not forget that one of the most powerful acts of forgiveness is often when we forgive ourselves for some transgression.

So Positive Psychology is indeed proving that "To err is human, to forgive, devine".

Another common religious belief is Charity.

This part of the talk is brought to you by the UCV Fundraising Committee.

Regarding Charity, the Muslim Quran Says:

If you give charity in public, it is worthwhile (for it will persuade others), but if you hide and deliver it to the poor in secret that is (far) better for you (Al-Baqarah 2:271)

Regarding Charity, Positive Psychology says: People who **GIVE** are happier than those who don't. It is in the giving of help, not the receiving, that we find the greatest satisfaction, purpose and happiness.

I have one study to talk about, because it's recognized around world in PP circles, and it's from Michael Norton at UBC. Michael discovered that participants who were directed to spend a small amount of money on others (either \$5 or \$20) reported greater feelings of happiness than those who were directed to spend the same amounts on themselves. **The** dollar amount doesn't matter, AND it doesn't seem to matter whether the choice is ours or not; we still feel the happiness effects of giving away money to others.

And this experiment was repeated over and over in different countries, rich and poor, with different religions, social structures... and the 'happiness of givers result' held true in all but the Central African Republic... and we don't know why it didn't work there.

Charity touches on the whole "Hedonic" vs "Eudaimonic" happiness discussion. Hedonic happiness is, basically, temporary pleasures of the body, while Eudaimonic happiness occurs when we are pursuing our life's purpose or dream. Basically, hedonic is the pleasure derived from eating an amazing meal at a gorgeous restaurant. Eudaimonic is the pleasure derived from learning how to cook amazing meals and using that skill to open an amazing restaurant.

Research has shown that the human body is able to distinguish, on a molecular level, between a sense of well-being derived from a profound, "noble" purpose versus simple self-gratification,

Does this mean always forego simple pleasures? Certainly not! Nothing beats a big bowl of ice cream or a great snuggle. For example, if you're going to buy something, try to give that something "meaning", by using money you saved instead of using credit, or getting a hand made version, or by making it a reward for achieving a eudemonic goal.

So once again, religion was right on the money when it comes to charity.

Another is Belief... or purpose and meaning.

Jainism says that the proper Knowledge of reality, when combined with right Faith and right Conduct leads the worldly soul to liberation (Moksha).

PP Says developing, defining or discovering the meaning or purpose to our time on earth engenders many positive benefits to our health and relationships. People with purpose live longer lives with fewer physical and mental ailments.

Actually, the science of Positive Psychology advocates developing a spiritual practice as one of the most effective ways humans can connect to a sense of life-purpose.

But our fervour does not need to be spiritual and directed towards the heavens. Humans simply need to develop our own passion... it could be a passion for organic

gardening, or cycling, or stopping the Kinder Morgan pipeline. It's not WHAT drives us that matters, but simply THAT we believe in a greater purpose or cause and actively participate in it.

So again, in connecting with something greater, Positive Psychology says religion can be a great example of something that works! And if I can brag, Unitarianism is a little bit more "scientifically valid" by saying we don't all have to believe the same thing!

Our final tenet this morning is around community. Roman Catholic nun "Mother Teresa" said "I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples."

In the history of evolution, homo sapiens shared the planet with other humans species. We co-existed for a long time in Europe and the Middle East with the Neanderthals, and possibly with Homo erectus in Asia but we are now the only surviving human species.

Scientists say homo sapiens went on to prosper because we were smaller than Neanderthal and required fewer calories. We are believed to have survived Homo Erectus because we were able to rotate our shoulders to lift our arms over our heads, like this. It's pretty limiting to hunt and gather if you can't do this.

In both cases, it is believed a key reason we survive is because we were able to form communities and specialize in certain tasks, and trade and communicate with other communities. The other human species did not do this.

So we have pretty-good proof that communities are good for the survival and prosperity of our species but social scientists have gone further to identify the aspects of community that allow the individuals and groups to prosper.

Social scientists have shown that to promote a community and group wellness we have to redistribute resources, empower individuals, promotes supportive, positive relationships support the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process; support the inherent worth and dignity of every person; while Acceptance of one another and supporting one another in our search for meaning...

That's right... I was surprised to see that Positive Psychology was basically promoting the 7 principles of Unitarianism. Well, admittedly it didn't mention "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.", but I'm sure they're researching that right now.

To paraphrase Jesus, "Where two or three are gathered, I will be there." Community is next to godliness.

So much of this can be distilled down to eudemonic Happiness:

And as the Dalai Lama 14th said, "Happiness is not something ready made. It comes from your own actions."

Here are some real-world, easy steps we can take as individuals and as a community to use the tool of happiness to build more flourishing lives.

These are guaranteed to get results!

As individuals:

- Each day, write down three things you are grateful for; and introduce new things every week. Or write for 2 minutes a day describing one positive experience you had over the past 24 hours;
- Exercise for 10 minutes a day;
- Add three extra smiles to your day;
- Meditate for 2 minutes by simply focusing on your breath going in and out;
- Once a week, go out of your way to thank or praise somebody. And be specific about what they did and the effect on you. And if you write it, it's more powerful for you and for the other person.

Who knew that Hallmark cards were actually promoting sound Psychological principles!?

Here are five things we can do in our communities to be happier:

Practice the 5/10 rule.

If you pass within 10 feet of somebody, you smile and acknowledge them.

If you pass within 5 feet, you say hello.

I'd say UCV does a pretty good job at this one.

Develop one simple positive "rule" everybody can be challenged to follow. An example might be to have a "no venting in public" rule. Careless venting accomplishing nothing to resolve the problem.

Use the power lead! That is, the first one who speaks sets the tone. So set a positive one.

Use Humour. It reduces stress, helps people to remember better... It helps us to produce chemicals that cause us to bond more to other humans. Just do what you can to help yourself and others to laugh more.

And my favourite one to talk about in a church is:

Use the S.I.N. protocol...

It's a common acronym used by Change agents to help influence the culture of a group.

SIN is:

S for the Strength of the message

plus **I** for the Immediacy of the message
times **N** for the **N**umber of people delivering it.

So consider an unfriendly group you may know of...Your condo building, your workplace...And then consider introducing the 5/10 rule to this cold hearted environment...

So every conceivable communication tool at your group's disposal is used to explain and reinforce this really simple concept... that' the S or Strength.

And it's not something for some future date, like Christmas 2016, but right now for the very next person you see... That's the I or immediacy
and you multiply that message given by more and more people, you have the Numbers!

So that way, even the few grouchy people in your building who a resistant will be overwhelmed by the new cultural norm, see its positive effect, and come on board.

It works... so you might say it's been shown that SIN can make groups happier!

So let's end where we all began... by creating something, that combines scientific and religious wisdom

And we'll do this by having half the congregation pray with me, and the other half can make a pledge to enact these sound, proven principles. You can decide which half you're in.

Right here, right now, we are choosing to use the latest in scientific knowledge and ancient wisdom to show gratitude, forgive often, give freely, believe in our cause and share our gifts with our communities. We are going to use our experience and proven psychological tactics, along with an open heart and active pre-frontal cortex, to seek a rich fulfilled life and a robust, lively community. We will continue to ask questions, and to use what is proven to work, to get the positive, expansive results we seek. We do not know everything, but we will remain in wonder at the great mysteries, and use the growing field of human knowledge and lived experience to do all we can to benefit ourselves, our community, the human species and the planet that we call home.

Amen and Let's get it done!