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Title: The Good Life: What makes a life worth living?

Good evening everyone. It is a great pleasure to be back in Newcastle and particularly under the banner of the Hunter Valley Research Foundation.

I'd like to begin by asking you to remember how you celebrated the 20th March this year. I'm sure you'll recall that day of celebration, so how did you spend it? Can't remember? Blank looks around the hall ... The 20th March was World Happiness Day! How did that pass you by? I thought it would have been a day on which you would have gone about telling everyone to cheer up.

Perhaps it was the day when we were expected to pretend, just for one day, that there were no shadows falling across our lives, no bereavement, no life-threatening illnesses, no friends who disappoint us or relationships that unravel. Perhaps it was a day on which we were expected to go about chanting the mantra of positive psychology: 'the glass is half full'. We all know that old story – I'm personally drawn to the engineer, who looked at the glass and said, 'that glass is exactly twice as big as it needs to be'. The realist's perspective is not a bad place to start when you're trying to work things out.

World Happiness Day ... perhaps you were supposed to eat more yoghurt. My brand of yoghurt proudly proclaims on the pack, 'happy inside, happy outside'. That seems like a simple strategy: there is a well-documented relationship between food and mood. In fact some research just published in the UK tracked the decisions made by a Parole Board before and after lunch. I'm sure you can guess the result: Prisoners coming before the Parole Board before lunch received much tougher treatment. After lunch, when the Board was more

contented and feeling all was well with the world, prisoners got a better deal. (If you ever find yourself in that situation, do try to make sure you get an appointment after lunch.)

World Happiness Day – we have world everything day, don't we? We even have World Menopause Day, so why not World Happiness Day?

I'll tell you why not.

It strikes me that we are in the grip of an increasing, indeed obsessive, quest for happiness that is becoming a major distraction from the good life.

We seem to be obsessed with questions like, 'am I happy?', 'am I happy enough?', 'am I supposed to be happier than this?' Isn't happiness supposed to be one of the signs, one of the symptoms, of the good life? There's nothing wrong with asking ourselves occasionally about the emotional state we happen to be in, 'why am I feeling like this?', 'why don't I feel better?'. It's fine to reflect on that from time to time, but if endless introspection about your emotional state becomes central to your journey then, I think it's fair to say, you're going to miss out on some of the major thrills, some of the major and deeper satisfactions that are available to us as human beings.

As it is popularly defined, happiness is just one emotion among many. Yet, for reasons I'm going to explore, we seem to have decided that this one should get privileged status. This one should be exalted above all others, as though this is our default position; this is how we are supposed to feel.

There are a couple of problems with that.

One is we know that emotions are very easy to manipulate. People are trying to manipulate our emotions all the time, politicians, preachers, poets, parents, lovers, actors, film-makers, composers, musicians – they're all at it, and often very successfully. If you want to feel a particular emotion, choose a movie that will let you have a good cry, if that's what you feel like, or will send you away with a smile on your face, if that's how you'd like to feel.

If you can't achieve the emotional state that you want it by any of those means, then there is an entire pharmacological industry at your disposal. It seems to be no coincidence that, at the

very time when we are becoming increasingly obsessed with the right to happiness, we have seen the burgeoning of the recreational drug market. If you simply want to feel happy, there are plenty of options to smoke, swallow or inject.

The other problem with our obsession with the *pursuit* of a positive emotional state is that we are in danger of over-looking one of the most wonderful things about being human, which is that we have at our disposal a full spectrum of emotions, ranging through happiness, joy, bliss, euphoria and triumph to sadness, pain, disappointment and loss. It is the totality of that spectrum that teaches us what it really means to be human; to be *whole*. Remove any of them or relentlessly pursue any one of them, and you would miss the richness of the contrast. How, in fact, could you ever make sense of being happy if you hadn't experienced sadness? How do you know what succeeding is if you haven't tasted the bitterness of failure?

Of course, we all enjoy feeling happy. Of course, euphoria is lovely. But doesn't our folklore say that we grow through pain? Yet when the pain comes, in the present climate, we're anxious to be rid of it as quickly as possible – let's have another drink, let's have a pill, let's get rid of the pain as quickly as possible – before it has had time to teach us its lessons, or allow us to grow.

'Adversity is the great teacher,' ancient wisdom tells us, and doesn't your own experience confirm that? Isn't it often the experiences we would never wish on ourselves, or anyone else, experiences that take us into dark places, that really do have a great deal to teach us about what it is to be human, why we are the kind of people we are, and how we can more fully realise our human potential.

You might recall the experience of James Magnussen, the Olympic swimmer who failed so spectacularly in the men's relay at the London Olympics. You might also recall the next day when Magnussen was quoted as having said that he had learned more about himself in those 24 hours than he had in the previous 24 years.

None of this means we would wish failure upon ourselves, or on our children, so that we can learn the lessons failure teaches us. No one, unless you are a particular kind of neurotic, seeks trouble. But how absurd, how unrealistic it would be to pretend that they are not going to come to us, or to our children or our grandchildren!

Which is why I get very perplexed when I hear parents, especially parents of young children, saying ‘I just want my children to be happy’, as though nothing else matters, just as long as my kids are happy. It’s easy to understand why parents might say that. Of course parents are not going to say, ‘I just want my kids to be miserable’. Of course you want your kids to be cheerful, to have an optimistic disposition – but *only* that? ‘I *just* want my kids to be happy?’ When parents say that, I wonder what they mean by happiness. I wonder whether they are drawing on the wisdom of the ancient Greeks? I suspect they’re not, that their view is not that of Aristotle, who used the Greek word *eudaimonia*, which has been generally translated as happiness.

What Aristotle meant by *eudaimonia* was the experience of living in accordance with your sense of purpose, living a virtuous life, being fully engaged with the life of the community, experiencing the richness of human love and friendship – a wonderful phrase. Well, as anyone who has experienced the richness of human love and friendship knows, that isn’t all sweetness and light. Love and friendship bring us enormous joy, comfort and reassurance, but also, inevitably, pain, disappointment, failure and loss. Aristotle, when he spoke about *eudaimonia*, was speaking about something that I think would translate better into a word like *wholeness* rather than happiness.

So if, when they say, ‘I just want my kids to be happy,’ parents mean that they want their kids to live virtuously, to be fully engaged with the life of the community, etc., then *great!* But I fear that what they generally mean is that they want their children to feel good, to be emotionally buoyant, to have a positive frame of mind ... all the time. If that is what they mean, then I would like to shake them and say: ‘This is an absurd and unhelpful goal. You just want them to be happy? You want to raise emotional cripples? You want to raise kids who have not experienced pain or loss and failure, who don’t understand about disappointment and how to deal with it, who can’t accept that referees are sometimes biased, that teachers are not all as good as each other (and one year you’ll get a bad one), or that friends can sometimes let you down?’ That is what human life is really like and learning to expect it and learning how to deal with it is part of how we build *resilience* in our children.

We *just* want them to be happy? We know what *just* being happy is like. Probably everyone in the hall has been through periods of life of *just* being happy – it’s called falling in love. People who are in the first flush of romantic love are essentially dysfunctional. It’s not a state to wish on anybody as a permanent condition. They crash into things, they have appalling

misjudgements about all sorts of things, especially each other. I was at a conference not long ago, where a speaker seriously proposed that ‘next time you go to the doctor, give your doctor a piece of chocolate before he or she attempts a diagnosis. This will give the doctor a sugar hit, there will be a little emotional lift, and you’ll get a better diagnosis’. Hmm, I thought ... can this possibly be right?

Soon after, I read some research published by the University of NSW’s Professor Joe Forgas, who had been studying the relationship between mood and decision-making. The conclusion he had come to was that we make our best decisions when we are feeling slightly blue – not depressed, not in a state of anxiety or despair, just when the needle is a little bit towards the negative end of the emotional spectrum. We do not make our best decisions when we are feeling euphoric and contented ... or in love.

So I decided it was probably not a good idea to give a piece of chocolate to my doctor next time I visit.

Happiness is a word that emerged in contemporary culture as one of a cluster of key words like self-esteem, excellence, perfection. Everything is now a centre for excellence – I’m not sure if HVRF is a centre for excellence, not that you would want to be a centre for mediocrity but don’t we all do our best? Yet every primary school, every car showroom is a centre for excellence in some sphere or another. Happiness, self-esteem, excellence, perfection ... these words are symptomatic of a disease that has Western society in its grip at the moment and Australia is no exception.

My name for this disease is the ‘Utopia complex’ – the idea that all of us are entitled to a personal utopia, that we are all marching to a fabulous future, banners triumphantly aflutter. Everything is terrific, perfect teeth (this is a great time to be an orthodontist in a community obsessed with perfect teeth), perfect breasts (a great time to be a cosmetic surgeon), perfect lattes (I bet you’ve convinced yourself that you know where the perfect latte is in Newcastle), perfect marriages and if they’re not perfect, well, perfect divorces. In this perfect world we dream of, and perhaps feel entitled to, outcomes are always positive.

You may think I’m exaggerating but if you walk into any bookshop at the moment, or into your library, you will see that there is a whole section on happiness. In that section you will find books that sell the kind of proposition I have just been outlining. I want to read you just

one sentence from one of those books, which you will give you some idea of what we are up against when we are trying to take a slightly more realistic view of what to expect out of human existence. It comes from a book called *Storm before the Calm*:

“The function of life is to recreate yourself anew in each golden moment of Now in the next grandest version of the greatest visions you ever held about who you are.”

I’m not exactly sure what that means but when I read this I thought, give me a break! I just want to get on with it, I just want to do my best, I wasn’t thinking about the next grandest version, etc.: I was just hoping to lead a reasonable life.

Our language is now reflecting this hyped-up view of life. This very day, at lunchtime, the waiter in the restaurant where my wife and I were eating asked if we would like sparkling water or still and I replied ‘still, thanks’, and the waiter said ‘fantastic’. *Fantastic?* What sort of fantasy world are we living in? Signing a credit card voucher on the way to the function this evening, to negotiate the complex task of writing your name on a piece of paper, and they say ‘terrific’ as though they had never seen such a beautifully executed performance. On Friday afternoon, someone is bound to say, ‘have an awesome weekend!’ What if you had just been hoping to veg out, or to curl up with a good book? No, every weekend has to be awesome, which means you’ll have to have your awesome weekend story ready for Monday morning. There is an entire medium, of course – Facebook – that’s mostly devoted to bragging about all the awesome things people are doing.

The victims of this Utopia complex are, of course, our children. We ourselves can slink off to a counsellor in search of a reality check; we can learn to swallow our disappointments; we can cope with the realisation that we made fools of ourselves by dreaming of a fabulous life that is beyond normal human experience. But our kids don’t get off so lightly. What is it like to be a member of a generation who have grown up in an atmosphere of constant praise, who have constantly been told ‘you’re special’, who get gold stars for breathing, prizes just for turning up? I recently heard about a seven-year-old’s birthday party, where every child who attended the party got a present for turning up, as well (I hope) as a present for the child who happened to be turning seven. With pass-the-parcel now, every time the music stops there’s a present. I guess the next step will be musical chairs in which there are always enough chairs for everyone.

What happens when your parents think the greatest gift they can give you is to hype up your self-esteem – not your self-respect (which has to be earned), or your self-discipline (which has to be learnt), but your self-esteem? Pretty obviously, as kids who have grown up in this Utopian culture reach late adolescence and early adulthood, they are in for a terrible shock. They are going to discover they are not as special as their parents kept telling them they were. They're going to discover it's possible to fail exams when you get to university. Boyfriends can ditch you; you can feel blue for a week for no apparent reason; life is actually tougher, harder, carries more challenges than you were led to believe – challenges you might have been protected from by parents who just wanted you to be happy, and didn't want you to taste failure.

In an in *The Atlantic* at the end of 2011, *How to land your kid in therapy*, US psychotherapist Lori Gottlieb describes the young adults now coming into her consulting room who are the victims of what I'm calling the Utopia complex. These are the early representatives of this cohort of young people who have been told that they are so special that they were not prepared for the realisation that there are lots of other people who are more special than they and who then start to experience bewilderment, confusion, self-doubt and perhaps even a sense of failure or a worry that they have disappointed their parents; that they have fallen short of the expectations that their parents obviously had for them.

Perhaps not surprisingly, after such a sustained period of all this relentless positivity, even some of the high priests of the positive psychology movement are starting to change their tune somewhat. Martin Seligman has done some wonderful work in the field of positive psychology which has been of enormous benefit – particularly in therapeutic or clinical psychology. Yet his most recent paper shows that the best predictor of all-round success at high school is not self-esteem but self-discipline. In fact, Seligman says that self-discipline is a better predictor of all-round success at high school than IQ. Other researchers from this movement are similarly starting to retreat from the emphasis on self-esteem and to say: no, it is more about self-control; it's about self-discipline and in particular it is about having a sense of meaningfulness in your life.

Some Harvard research by Daniel Gilbert showed that, generally speaking, parents reported that they are at their happiest when they are not with their children – when they are out playing golf or having dinner together, or going to a movie. But the most meaningful activities in their lives are associated with parenting. In other words, the rich sense of a life

that is full of meaning doesn't necessarily come from the things that make us happy. Roy Baumeister, another psychologist who devoted much of the past five years to the study of self-esteem, now says meaningfulness is the great source of satisfaction in life, and that meaningfulness is mainly about giving (whereas happiness is mainly about taking). You can see the same thing in our attitudes to work. Very few people skip to work singing merry songs; few of us find work to be a great source of happiness. Yet most people report that work adds a rich dimension of meaningfulness in their lives.

So all I am saying is what ancient wisdom from all philosophical and religious traditions has always said: the good life has little or nothing to do with happiness and, in fact, little or nothing to do with the emotional state we happen to be in at any given moment. Sometimes we use this phrase, 'the good life', in an economic sense: a life of comfort and prosperity and financial security. Sometimes we use it in an emotional sense: a life in which you *feel* good most of the time. What I am suggesting is something that I'm sure you know deep within yourself already, which is that a much more useful definition of the good life is to take that word 'good' and use it in its simplest, starkest moral sense; to think of a good life as a life characterised by goodness, a morally-praiseworthy life, a life devoted to the common good.

Throughout my new book, *The Good Life*, I've included a number of miniature short stories based on people that I have encountered over the years in my research program. I want to read you an extract from one of those short stories. This one is about Vanessa.

For 20 years, Vanessa has been reading about the Sandwich Generation and now, at 45, finds herself in the thick of it; young teenage children still heavily dependent on her; her own increasingly frail parents relying on her for advice, support, reassurance and even companionship; a husband who adores her and expects his fair share of adoration in return. With the children's schedules becoming even more complicated than her own, Vanessa finds running the household a daily challenge. She has a full-time job that she wouldn't give up for anything.

Raised by an enlightened mother to be a truly liberated woman, Vanessa revels in the knowledge that she is living a rich, full (if slightly over-complicated) life, that has bestowed many precious moments on her. But her energy levels are depleted and she's beginning to feel desperate. There are times when her so-called liberation feels like another form of enslavement.

She's becoming almost obsessed by the thought of escape: a Buddhist retreat perhaps, or a spa retreat; even a short stay in hospital seems attractive (provided it was nothing serious, obviously).

One thing Vanessa wouldn't say about her life is that she's having a good time. She and her husband go out occasionally and always enjoy themselves, though he falls asleep in movies, and if they have dinner they seem to have trouble sustaining a conversation about anything other than their kids or their parents. Life isn't meant to be like this, Vanessa sometimes mutters to herself. I never expected happily ever after, but I did expect to be getting more fun out of life. I expected to have more time for me.

Vanessa is certainly entitled to want more time for 'me'. Whether she gets more fun out of life is a trivial question really but she does need more 'me' time. Her life is out of control, obviously, and she does need to set aside time for yoga or a meditation class, or bush-walking club or go to Pilates or join a book club or a choir, or do something that feeds her own inner being. She needs to replenish her own mental, emotional and physical resources in order to equip her for the demands of rest of her life.

The rest of her life, as revealed in that story, is essentially a good life. And the good life is not for the faint-hearted. This is a woman who is a devoted mother, and not all mothers are, a dutiful daughter, and not all daughters are, a loving wife, not all wives are, she is a conscientious employee, she is a good neighbour, she's a responsible citizen. All of those things are characteristic of a person leading a good life. Someone needs to explain to Vanessa that, yes, you have got to equip yourself, you've got to give yourself the resources for doing this job of leading the good life. The good life, we need to explain to Vanessa, is the life lived for others.

I said that as if I were just expressing as an opinion – a good life is a life lived for others. I assure you I am not just putting it forward as a personal opinion. It is perfectly possible to provide you with logical proof of that proposition. If you buy the first premise, then you are going to be stuck with the conclusion. The first premise depends simply on answering the question, *what is the greatest source of goodness in human life?* Your mind probably goes to the word 'love', or a number of other words that are closely associated with the idea of love, such as charity. By love, of course, I don't mean an emotion; I mean a motivation – the motivation that allows us to live with a charitable disposition, even towards people we don't particularly like.

The loving disposition is the wellspring of all the things we most admire in ourselves and in others: kindness, respect, compassion, loyalty, charity, tolerance, sensitivity.

So the first premise in the argument is that love (or charity, or kindness, if they are words you prefer) is the main source of goodness in human life.

The next question is, *how can you make sense of love except in the context of relationships?* Love is about engaging; love must be given and received. This is about how we engage with the communities, organisations, families, friendship circles, neighbourhoods that sustain us. You can't make sense of it in isolation, unless you are a narcissist (and fortunately most of us are not).

So the second premise is that love is about engagement. It is a social concept.

The conclusion is obvious, isn't it? If love is the primary source of goodness in our lives and love is about relationships, then the good life is about our engagement with others.

The US psychotherapist Carl Rogers, one of my psychological heroes, wrote that when his clients came to a full realisation of who they were it was always that they were not individuals but social creatures whose identity depended on their connection to a social network. Some of us waste years of our lives pursuing answers to the question, *who am I?* It turns out that is not a very interesting or significant question. A much more interesting and significant question is this one: *Who are we?*

We know that, as human beings, our natures are fundamentally good, altruistic and cooperative. That's not the whole story, of course. Our fundamental natures are also bad, competitive, aggressive, violent ... we are all those things as well. We are often sold the bogus idea that humans are by nature selfish creatures, when there is all this evidence before us every day that we are, equally, selfless creatures, capable of the most beautiful acts of kindness and self-sacrifice. It all depends on what we choose to nurture, the selfish side or the selfless side, the competitive side or the cooperative side, not just in ourselves but in our children.

Look at the original meaning of that ancient proverb: *charity begins at home*. In the contemporary world, many people think that means we must first be charitable to our own little circle of family and friends and, once that's sorted, then we can afford to extend our charity further afield. That is not what the proverb originally meant at all. 'Charity begins at home' was intended to convey the idea that we must nurture the charitable impulses in children *while they are at home*. Charity begins in the home, when children are young and being formed and nurtured by the example and influence of their parents.

The good life is about nurturing those positive and noble impulses. At its heart lies the most ancient idea of all, a proposition that is generally known as the 'golden rule', which various groups try to claim as their own. The Christians will say it is a Christian proposition, the Jews will cite Leviticus, the Moslems say that's what Mohammed said. Hindus, Buddhists, every religious tradition in human history has this proposition at its centre and so does every philosophical tradition, back to the ancient Egyptians, the ancient Greeks, all the way through to the most modern hard-line secular humanists. They all say that for a society to be function, **we must treat other people in the way we would like to be treated.**

Yes, that rule does need qualification to be able to serve the interests of justice. We have to serve the interests of fairness, we have to be sensitive to the idea that some people may not wish to be treated the way that we would like to be treated, but those are the exceptions. The general rule stands.

Why would we obey it? We obey it because we understand that we are social creatures. We understand that we depend on functioning communities to sustain us and that communities don't just happen. Communities only thrive because we nurture them and the way we do that is by treating other people in the way we'd like to be treated.

So if you're interested in living the good life, don't worry too much about how you feel, moment to moment. Don't worry too much about how much stuff you have accumulated and how you are doing compared to the person next door. Don't waste time searching for the meaning of life (in fact there is a section in my book discouraging you from that fruitless pursuit).

Focus instead about the meaning of your own life. Worry instead about whether you gave someone your undivided attention when they needed you to; about whether you apologised

quickly enough when you wronged someone; whether you forgave someone generously when they wronged or hurt you; whether you were there when you were needed for encouragement and support.

Before we have questions and conversations about this I want to conclude by reading a couple of sentences from the postscript to the new book.

The greatest monument to any of our lives will not be in stone but in our living legacy – the influence we have had on other people at every point of connection with the human family. You don't have to be rich to leave a positive legacy; you don't have to be intelligent, famous, powerful or even particularly well organised, let alone happy. You need only to treat people with kindness, compassion and respect, knowing they will have been enriched by their encounters with you.

That's the good life.