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The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom

by Jonathan Haidt

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129 Highlights

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 86

“There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it

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best story I can about the causes of human flourishing, and the obstacles to well being that we place in our own paths.

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The second truth in this part of the story is that we are all, by nature, hypocrites, and this is why it is so hard for us to follow the Golden Rule faithfully.

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others, and in nature. I'll present my own research on the moral emotions of disgust, elevation, and awe to explain how this vertical dimension works, and why the dimension is so important for understanding religious fundamentalism, the political culture war, and the human quest for meaning.

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the patient was asked to explain his two responses, he did not say, “I have no idea why my left hand is pointing to a shovel; it must be something you showed my right brain.” Instead, the left hemisphere instantly made up a plausible story. The patient said, without any hesitation, “Oh, that’s easy. The chicken claw goes with the chicken, and you need a shovel to clean out the chicken shed.”¹²

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that people will readily fabricate reasons to explain their own behavior, is called “confabulation.”

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The interpreter module is good at making up explanations, but not at knowing that it has done so.

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one of these modules is good at inventing convincing explanations for your behavior, even when it has no knowledge of the causes of your behavior.

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our ancestors were mere animals governed by the primitive emotions and drives of the limbic system until they received the divine gift of reason, installed in the newly expanded neocortex.

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Human rationality depends critically on sophisticated emotionality. It is only because our emotional brains works so well that our reasoning can work at all.

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The language parts work well, but there are still a lot of bugs in the reasoning and planning programs.

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You don't really know why you think something is beautiful, but your interpreter module (the rider) is skilled at making up reasons, as Gazzaniga found in his split-brain studies. You search for a plausible reason for liking the painting, and you latch on to the first reason that makes sense (maybe something vague about color, or light, or the reflection of the painter in the clown's shiny nose).

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One reason the withdrawal system is so quick and compelling is that it gets first crack at all incoming information. All

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Marcel Proust wrote that "the only true voyage . . . would be not to visit strange lands but to possess other eyes."

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You need a method for taming the elephant, for changing your mind gradually. Meditation, cognitive therapy, and Prozac are three effective means of doing so.

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WHEN THE SAGES PICK a single word or principle to elevate above all others, the winner is almost always either "love" or "reciprocity."

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We understand all of this effortlessly because we see the world through the lens of reciprocity. Reciprocity is a deep instinct; it is the basic currency of social

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Gossip is another key piece in the puzzle of how humans became ultrasocial. It might also be the reason we have such large heads.

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all over the animal kingdom, brains grow to manage larger and larger groups. Social animals are smart animals.

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We are motivated to pass on information to our friends; we even sometimes say, “I can’t keep it in, I have to tell somebody.”

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Gossip elicits gossip, and it enables us to keep track of everyone’s reputation without having to witness their good and bad deeds personally.

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People do occasionally tell stories about the good deeds of others, but such stories are only one tenth as common as stories about transgressions. When people pass along high-quality (“juicy”) gossip, they feel more powerful, they have a better shared sense of what is right and what’s wrong, and they feel more closely connected to their gossip partners.

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Concession leads to concession. In

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our condemnation of others’ hypocrisy we only compound our own.

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People who reported being most concerned about caring for others and about issues of social responsibility were more likely to open the bag, but they were not more likely to give the other person the positive task.

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instructions, was the only manipulation that had an effect. When people were forced to think about fairness and could see themselves cheating, they stopped doing it.

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“Human beings are a species splendid in their array of moral equipment, tragic in their propensity to misuse it, and pathetic in their constitutional ignorance of the misuse.”¹⁰

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thinking generally uses the “makesense” stopping rule.

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Franklin concluded: “So convenient a thing is it to be a reasonable creature, since it enables one to find or make a reason for every thing one has a mind to do.”

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subjects used base rate information properly to revise their predictions of others, but they refused to apply it to their rosy self-assessments.

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If I could nominate one candidate for “biggest obstacle to world peace and social harmony,” it would be naive realism because it is so easily ratcheted up from the individual to the group level: My group is right because we see things as they are.

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Those who disagree are obviously biased by their religion, their ideology, or their self-interest. Naive realism gives us a world full of good and evil, and this brings us to the most disturbing implication of the sages’ advice about hypocrisy: Good and evil do not exist outside of our beliefs about them.

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we have a deep need to understand violence and cruelty through what he calls “the myth of pure evil.” Of this myth’s many parts, the most important are that evildoers are pure in their evil motives (they have no motives for their actions beyond sadism and greed); victims are pure in their victimhood (they did nothing to bring about their victimization); and evil comes from outside and is associated with a group or force that attacks our group. Furthermore, anyone who questions the application of the myth, who dares muddy the waters of moral certainty, is in league with evil.

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Neither the 9/11 hijackers nor Osama Bin Laden were particularly upset because American women can drive, vote, and wear bikinis. Rather, many Islamic extremists want to kill Americans because they are using the Myth of Pure Evil to interpret Arab history and current events.

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The two biggest causes of evil are two that we think are good, and that we try to encourage in our children: high self-esteem and moral idealism.

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When you find a fault in yourself it will hurt, briefly, but if you keep going and acknowledge the fault, you are likely to be rewarded with a flash of pleasure that is mixed, oddly, with a hint of pride.

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it seems to come equipped with cognitive processes that predispose us to hypocrisy, self-righteousness, and moralistic conflict. But sometimes, by knowing the mind's structure and strategies, we can step out of the ancient game of social manipulation and enter into a game of our choosing.

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Some things are worth striving for, and happiness comes in part from outside of yourself, if you know where to look.

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when it comes to goal pursuit, it really is the journey that counts, not the destination.

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The final moment of success is often no more thrilling than the relief of taking off a heavy backpack at the end of a long hike. If you went on the hike only to feel that pleasure, you are a fool. Yet

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“the progress principle”: Pleasure comes more from making progress toward goals than from achieving them.

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good marriage is one of the life-factors most strongly and consistently associated with happiness.

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Yes, genes explain far more about us than anyone had realized, but the genes themselves often turn out to be sensitive to environmental conditions.³²

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The condition that is usually said⁴³ to trump all others in importance is the strength and number of a person's relationships.

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You never adapt to interpersonal conflict;⁴⁵ it damages every day, even days when you don't see the other person but ruminate about the conflict nonetheless.

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there are two different kinds of enjoyment. One is physical or bodily pleasure.

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there is a state many people value even more than chocolate after sex. It is the state of total immersion in a task that is challenging yet closely matched to one's abilities. It is what people sometimes call "being in the zone." Csikszentmihalyi called it "flow" because it often feels like effortless movement: Flow happens, and you go with it. Flow often occurs during physical movement—skiing, driving fast on a curvy country road, or playing team sports. Flow is aided by music or by the action of other people, both of which provide a temporal structure for one's own behavior (for example, singing in a choir, dancing, or just having an intense conversation with a friend). And flow can happen during solitary creative activities, such as painting, writing, or photography. The keys to flow: There's a clear challenge that fully engages your attention; you have the skills to meet the challenge; and you get immediate feedback about how you are doing at each step (the progress principle). You get flash after flash of positive feeling with each turn negotiated, each high note correctly sung, or each brushstroke that falls into the right place. In the flow experience, elephant and rider are in perfect harmony. The elephant (automatic processes) is doing most of the work, running smoothly through the forest, while the rider (conscious thought) is completely absorbed in looking out for problems and opportunities, helping wherever he can.

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Here's where the rider has an important role to play: Because the elephant has a tendency to overindulge, the rider needs to encourage it to get up and move on to another activity.

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The French know how to do this: They eat many fatty foods, yet they end up thinner and healthier than Americans, and they derive a great deal more pleasure from their food by eating slowly and paying more attention to the food as they eat it.

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Variety is the spice of life because it is the natural enemy of adaptation.

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Gratifications often come from accomplishing something, learning something, or improving something. When we enter a state of flow, hard work becomes effortless.

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Choose your own gratifying activities, do them regularly (but not to the point of tedium), and raise your overall level of happiness.

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Conspicuous and inconspicuous consumption follow different psychological rules.

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Conspicuous consumption is a zero-sum game: Each person's move up devalues the possessions of others. Furthermore, it's difficult to persuade an entire group or subculture to ratchet down, even though everyone would be better off, on average, if they all went back to simple watches. Inconspicuous consumption, on the other hand, refers to goods and activities that are valued for themselves, that are usually consumed more privately, and that are not bought for the purpose of achieving status.

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The elephant was shaped by natural selection to win at the game of life, and part of its strategy is to impress others, gain their admiration, and rise in relative rank. The elephant cares about prestige, not happiness,

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If everyone is chasing the same limited amount of prestige, then all are stuck in a zero-sum game, an eternal arms race, a

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what would have happened if the young prince had actually descended from his gilded chariot and talked to the people he assumed were so miserable? What if he had interviewed the poor, the elderly, the crippled, and the sick? One

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Attachment theory begins with the idea that two basic goals guide children's behavior: safety and exploration.

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For adults, the biggest rush of oxytocin—other than giving birth and nursing—comes from sex.²⁸ Sexual activity, especially if it includes cuddling, extended touching, and orgasm, turns on many of the same circuits that are used to bond infants and parents.

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Aristophanes says that people originally had four legs, four arms, and two faces, but one day the gods felt threatened by the power and arrogance of human beings and decided to cut them in half. Ever since that day, people have wandered the world searching for their other halves.

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So if passionate love is a drug—literally a drug—it has to wear off eventually. Nobody can stay high forever (although if you find passionate love in a long-distance relationship, it's like taking cocaine once a month; the drug can retain its potency because of your suffering between doses).

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sages' constant attempts to redefine love as something spiritual and prosocial sound to me like the moralism of parents who, having enjoyed a variety of love affairs when they were young, now try to explain to their daughter why she should save herself for marriage.

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Most of the life goals that people pursue at the level of “characteristic adaptations” can be sorted—as the psychologist Robert Emmons¹⁹ has found—into four categories: work and achievement, relationships and intimacy, religion and spirituality, and generativity (leaving a legacy and contributing something to society).

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people who have a relatively negative affective style (complete with more activity in the front right cortex than the front left) live in a world filled with many more threats and have less confidence that they can deal with them. They develop a coping style that relies more heavily on avoidance and other defense mechanisms. They

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Before you conclude your last session, be sure you have done your best to answer these two questions: Why did this happen? What good might I derive from it?

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Knowledge comes in two major forms: explicit and tacit.

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Tacit knowledge is procedural (it's "knowing how" rather than "knowing that"), it is acquired without direct help from others, and it is related to goals that a person values.

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Ignorant people see everything in black and white—they rely heavily on the myth of pure evil—and they are strongly influenced by their own self-interest. The wise are able to see things from others' points of view, appreciate shades of gray, and then choose or advise a course of action that works out best for everyone in the long run.

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wise people are able to balance three responses to situations: adaptation (changing the self to fit the environment), shaping (changing the environment), and selection (choosing to move to a new environment).

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the widespread philosophical worship of reason made many philosophers uncomfortable with locating virtue in habits and feelings.

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Greeks focused on the character of a person and asked what kind of person we should each aim to become, modern ethics focuses on actions, asking when a particular action is right or wrong.

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this turn from character to quandary was a profound mistake,

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Trying to make children behave ethically by teaching them to reason well is like trying to make a dog happy by wagging its tail. It gets causality backwards.

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six broad virtues, or families of related virtues, appeared on nearly all lists: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence (the ability to forge connections to something larger than the self).

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The first American colonists created enclaves of ethnic, religious, and moral homogeneity, but the history of America ever since has been one of increasing diversity. In response, educators have struggled to identify the ever-shrinking set of moral ideas everyone could agree upon.

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there are two main kinds of diversity—demographic and moral.

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Calling for demographic diversity is in large measure calling for justice, for the inclusion of previously excluded groups. Moral diversity, on the other hand, is essentially what Durkheim described as anomie: a lack of consensus on moral norms and values. Once you make this distinction, you see that nobody can coherently even want moral diversity. If you are pro-choice on the issue of abortion, would you prefer that there be a wide variety of opinions and no dominant one?

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Students wanted to be exposed to moral diversity in class, but not in the people they live with and socialize with.

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Liberals are right to work for a society that is open to people of every demographic group, but conservatives might be right in believing that at the same time we should work much harder to create a common, shared identity. Although I am a political liberal, I believe that conservatives have a better understanding of moral development

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The celebration of pluribus should be balanced by policies that strengthen the unum.

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With the wrong metaphor we are deluded; with no metaphor we are blind.

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We have all encountered something we failed to understand, yet smugly believed we understood because we couldn't conceive of the dimension to which we were blind.

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the social world has two clear dimensions: a horizontal dimension of closeness or liking, and a vertical one of hierarchy or status.

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My claim is that the human mind perceives a third dimension, a specifically moral dimension that I will call "divinity."

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most cultures are very concerned about food, sex, menstruation, and the handling of corpses.

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Disgust was originally shaped by natural selection as a guardian of the mouth:

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disgust turns off desire and motivates concerns about purification, separation, and cleansing.

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disgust is that it is recruited to support so many of the norms,

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Eliade says that the modern West is the first culture in human history that has managed to strip time and space of all sacredness and to produce a fully practical, efficient, and profane world.

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Even atheists have intimations of sacredness, particularly when in love or in nature. We just don't infer that God caused those feelings.

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People really do respond emotionally to acts of moral beauty, and these emotional reactions involve warm or pleasant feelings in the chest and conscious desires to help others or become a better person oneself.

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we did not find that elevation made people behave much differently.

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dimension, I think I'm beginning to get it. For many people, one of the pleasures of going to church is the experience of collective elevation. People step out of their everyday profane existence,

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The split between the Christian left and the Christian right could be, in part, that some people see tolerance and acceptance as part of their nobler selves; others feel that they can best honor God by working to change society

and its laws to conform to the ethic of divinity, even if that means imposing religious laws on people of other faiths.

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Awe is the emotion of self-transcendence.

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awe happens when two conditions are met: a person perceives something vast

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the vast thing cannot be accommodated by the person's existing mental structures.

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goal-striving disappear as a person feels merged with the universe

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scientists and philosophers had traditionally held an attitude of wonder toward the natural world and the objects of their inquiry. But in the late sixteenth century, European scientists began to look down on wonder; they began to see it as the mark of a childish mind, whereas

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Maslow did not believe religions were literally true (as actual accounts of God and creation), but he thought they were based on the most important truths of life, and he wanted to unite those truths with the truths of science.

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“Education must be seen as at least partially an effort to produce the good human being, to foster the good life and the good society.”

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The self is the main obstacle to spiritual advancement,

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The ethic of autonomy is well suited to helping people with different backgrounds and values get along with each other because it allows each person to pursue the life she chooses, as

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The core idea of the ethic of divinity is that each person has divinity inside, so the ideal society helps people live in a way consistent with that divinity. What an individual desires is not particularly important—many desires come from the carnal

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They want their children to live in a (particular) three-dimensional world,

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For the religious right, hell on earth is a flat land of unlimited freedom where selves roam around with no higher purpose than expressing and developing themselves.

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If the third dimension and perceptions of sacredness are an important part of human nature, then the scientific community should accept religiosity as a normal and healthy aspect of human nature—an aspect that is as deep, important, and interesting as sexuality or language (which we study intensely).

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that is happiness: to be dissolved into something complete and great.

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everything beyond tomorrow is a gift with no strings and no expectations. There is no test to hand in at the end of life, so there is no way to fail. If this really is all there is, why not embrace it, rather than throw it away?

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modern philosophy seemed sterile: It lacked a deep understanding of human nature.

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Once the Holy Question has been re-framed to mean “Tell me something enlightening about life,” the answer must involve the kinds of revelations that human beings find enlightening.

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You can't fix a plant; you can only give it the right conditions—water, sun, and soil—and then wait.

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“One can live magnificently in this world, if one knows how to work and how to love, to work for the person one loves and to love one’s work.”

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people approach their work in one of three ways: as a job, a career, or a calling.

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every path is unique, yet most of them led in the same direction: from initial interest and enjoyment, with moments of flow, through a relationship to people, practices, and values that deepened over many years, thereby enabling even longer periods of flow. Csikszentmihalyi

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William Damon at Stanford—to

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When doing good (doing high-quality work that produces something of use to others) matches up with doing well (achieving wealth and professional advancement), a field is healthy. Genetics,

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nowadays cross-disciplinary work is flourishing, spreading out from the middle level (psychology) along bridges (or perhaps ladders) down to the physical level (for example, the field of cognitive neuroscience) and up to the sociocultural level (for example, cultural psychology). The sciences are linking up, generating cross-level coherence,

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People gain a sense of meaning when their lives cohere across the three levels of their existence.³⁷

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Religions do such a good job of creating coherence, in fact, that some scholars³⁸ believe they were designed for that purpose.

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religions always serve to coordinate and orient people’s behavior toward each other and toward the group as a whole, sometimes for the purpose of competing with other groups.

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enhance peace, harmony, and cooperation within the group for the express purpose of increasing the group's ability to compete with other groups. Group selection does not end conflict; it just pushes it up

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These two areas receive input from your senses to help them maintain an ongoing representation of your self and its location in space. At the very moment when people report achieving states of mystical union, these two areas appear to be cut off.

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sense of pervasive well-being is what I recall; more specifically, a strange sense of personal enlargement; a sort of swelling out, becoming bigger than life, thanks to participation in collective ritual.⁶⁰

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The final version of the happiness hypothesis is that happiness comes from between. Happiness is not something that you can find, acquire, or achieve directly.

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striving to get the right relationships between yourself and others, between yourself and your work, and between yourself and something larger than yourself. If you get these relationships right, a sense of purpose and meaning will emerge.

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The East stresses acceptance and collectivism; the West encourages striving and individualism. But as we've seen, both perspectives are valuable.

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An important dictum of cultural psychology is that each culture develops expertise in some aspects of human existence, but no culture can be expert in all aspects. The same goes for the two ends of the political spectrum. My research³ confirms the common perception that liberals are experts in thinking about issues of victimization, equality, autonomy, and the rights of individuals, particularly those of minorities and nonconformists. Conservatives, on the other hand, are experts in thinking about loyalty to the group, respect for authority and tradition, and sacredness.⁴ When one side overwhelms the other, the results are likely to be ugly. A society without liberals would be harsh and oppressive to many individuals. A society without conservatives would lose many of the social structures and constraints that Durkheim showed are so valuable.

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good place to look for wisdom, therefore, is where you least expect to find it: in the minds of your opponents. You already know the ideas common on your own side. If you can take off the blinders of the myth of pure evil, you might see some good ideas for the first time.
