

9

A Larger Life

No Gravestone Has a Job Title or Salary on It

The humanitarian leaders profiled in this book allowed us brief glimpses into their journeys of helping those in need. Their journeys are incredibly varied, yet our interviewees described them in strikingly similar ways. What's more, many of the paths they followed on the way to helping others were difficult, littered with obstacles that would cause less hardy souls to back away or quit. So it seems reasonable to wonder at this point whether their journeys have brought our interviewees to a good place. The answer we found is consistently yes. Whatever it might be called, happiness, contentment, or more recently, subjective well-being, we have found that our interviewees like where their life journeys have led them.¹

If we return to their own words, we find our interviewees characterize their journeys in slightly different ways. Victor Dukay, you may recall, lost both parents and his sister to violence as a child and later built an orphanage in Tanzania. He said, "The Africa work has had a huge impact on me. It has helped me realize how lucky I am, how blessed I am, how fortunate I am. I've had an opportunity to use gifts I have to help others, so that they won't necessarily be in the same situation that I'm in. And, strangely enough, to give me purpose. To

allow me to get out of bed, to not be depressed, to do something with my life."

Ryan Hreljac, who has helped build wells on three continents where water is scarce, noted that his work helping others has been "a two-way street." Still in his teens, he has traveled extensively and given scores of speeches. "I've gotten to do things that I would never have been able to do because of this. It's been great."

And Lucy Helm, the codirector of a camp for developmentally challenged adults, said, "The thing that intrigues me about the camp experience is how touched and changed you can be by becoming part of someone else's different experience."

Margaret Vernon, the Peace Corps volunteer, seems to have attained a highly valued clarity about life's priorities. "Being here I've come to realize how important family and health are. Life is hard; people work long hours in 110 degree heat, and hard physical labor is a fact of life. But those things become less punishing when you have your family and health."

Larry Bradley characterized his 10 months in Iraq as a "life-changing experience, both spiritually and emotionally." A Catholic, he had always gone to church on Sunday, but he told us, "I learned how to pray. I've slowed down to be more appreciative of what I've been given and what we have on earth, in the United States especially. I don't know how to describe it, but I'm more reflective now. I never really read the Bible until I went to Iraq. Everyone said to bring books, and I said I am bringing one book with me everywhere I go."

For many of our interviewees, life has taken on qualities of discovery, intrigue, even adventure. One of the many e-mails that Liz Clibourne sent to her family and friends during one of her working stints in Africa contained the following passage, punctuated by the Swahili she has learned there:

I've been biking into Kyela every day, that's about 20 kilometers, and I haven't felt this good in a long time. But *matako yanauma*. My butt hurts. It's these cheap bicycle seats combined with the bumpy roads. Ivo, the guy I rent my bike from, has a replacement, and I'm getting it put on when I return to Ngonga. *Asante mungu*. [Thank you, God.] When I first got to the village, I rode slowly and carefully, because the road is crazy. Lately, though, I've been taking the curves and dips like the rest of these

yahoos and making pretty good time. It's too fun, the wind in my hair and all that. The bugs in my teeth are an annoyance, and I really hate it when they fly up my nose. I had a basket put on the front and I put my Discman and the portable speakers inside. I like classic rock best, and I ride at the speed of the music, singing and swerving and spitting bugs. This is the best job ever.

As we said before, these "arrivals" at new points in their journeys can be described in many different ways. But not one of our interviewees expressed disappointment with the life choices they have made. *Time* magazine essayist Nancy Gibbs summarized recent research on happiness, which includes such findings as "happiness correlates much more closely with our causes and connectedness than with our net worth." Gibbs further noted that while charitable giving declined in 2008 for the first time in two decades, "about a million more people volunteered their time to a cause." These findings led her to wonder: "Is it a coincidence that eight of the 10 happiest states in the country also rank in the top 10 for volunteering?"²

We have observed as well that our interviewees are not only happy with their own lives, they are also spreaders of happiness to others. Some of our interviews were conducted in person, others by telephone. In many cases, we spent time with our interviewees beyond the interview itself. We noticed that these interviewees were in social networks that impressed us as upbeat, positive, or happy. Recently, the landmark Framingham Heart Study, which has followed thousands of people over decades, reported that happiness clusters in groups, that it spreads across a wide range of social relationships, and that "clusters of happiness result from the spread of happiness and not just a tendency for people to associate with similar individuals."³ We believe our interviewees create and spread positive emotional energy that contributes to and sustains happiness in their social networks, and they do this largely by virtue of the qualities we have described in this book.

What then accounts for the consistency in the satisfaction our interviewees have expressed, and why do they all seem to have arrived at a good point in their life journeys? We offer the following observations.

Making a Difference Makes a Difference

The important point here is not that our interviewees made a difference. We selected them because they devoted a significant portion of their lives to helping others, and we now know that they have made a positive difference in the lives of a great many people. The important point here is that making a difference has had a profound effect on the quality of the lives of our interviewees as well. Their lives have been enriched.⁴ Let us give you a few examples.

Cheryl Perera told us about "a particularly powerful moment" she experienced in the Philippines when she visited the gravesite of a young street child who had died in 1986 and whose story was publicized around the world. "Her name was Rosario Baluyot. A tourist came and picked up Rosario and another street boy, and brought them to his hotel. He physically and sexually abused Rosario." Cheryl paused before adding, "She was found on the street, and she later died of an infection. She was 12 years old."

Cheryl was talking about the difficult, emotionally draining aspect of her work. She continued, "So that's an example of what happens. How horrible this issue is. People come up with the most ridiculous things and say, in these countries children are more sexual. But in the end, this is what happens. It was so powerful for me to stand there. This is the face of the issue." Horrible though they may be, these kinds of experiences give Cheryl Perera's life meaning and purpose. They remind her of the difference she can make, and is making, in the lives of others.⁵

Reminders come in different forms. Sherri Kirkpatrick told us about a couple she met in the Congo. "His name was Nicodemus and her name was Mama Regina. Their daughter had been one of many that had suffered from leg ulcers for years. They had been able to get just enough money together to get one treatment of antibiotics every couple of years, which ended up being the worst thing they could have done, because it made the organisms resistant.

"When I came in trying to treat leg ulcers we could help her some, but we never got it totally cured," Sherri continued. "So with that in mind, knowing that their daughter did not get a complete cure of the

leg ulcers like many people did, they walked probably about 6 miles with a little goat on their shoulders as a present to me, to thank me for even trying to help their daughter, and for making it better than it had been for her.

"For this couple, a goat is a huge gift," Sherri explained. "It would be like us giving somebody a car. A lot of times these people even go into debt or borrow to give a gift that they think is appropriate. It has impacted my life in a large way, thinking, you can't just take life for granted."

Dave Ulrich, the University of Michigan business professor and consultant who took a 3-year sabbatical to lead a mission for his church in Canada, recently moved to Alpine, Utah. He talked about the sense of community he felt when a group of people from his church volunteered to build the city a new park. Dave said he showed up with a rake and a shovel at 7 o'clock on a Saturday morning along with about 100 other people. "What do I know about building a park and cutting down trees? We all worked hard for 6 hours, and at the end of 6 hours there was a park. It sounds like we're back in the fifties, but that's kind of a nice thing for people to come together and give and help and do things." Dave added, reflecting on the importance of helping others, "There's that expression, on your gravestone they won't say what your title was or what your income was, they'll say who you cared about."

We believe that these kinds of experiences have allowed our interviewees to escape the psychophysical numbing we talked about in Chapter 3. Most of us, for example, when considering the millions of children orphaned by AIDS, sold into labor, exploited by the sex trade, or impoverished or diseased are numbed by the size and intensity of the problems. But our interviewees have life experiences that provide them concrete evidence of the difference they can make in the lives of individuals. Seeing the difference, as Sherri Kirkpatrick saw in the gift of a goat, allowed her to focus on the larger difference she makes in the lives of some children, rather than the overwhelming plight of all children. To Sherri, like all our interviewees, helping only one person is worth doing. It's a good place to be.

Citizens of the World

Some of us live in rather small worlds, with only our own concerns at the center. When our thoughts, mental energies, curiosities, and sensitivities focus more externally, beyond ourselves, our own homes, even our own neighborhoods, our world expands. We are engaged in a larger world, and consequently a larger life. Harry Leibowitz expanded on this notion: "I thought I was sensitive to and understood a lot of the issues that face children in the world. I had no idea. I really never understood the depth of the problem of child sexual slavery and predation. I knew it was out there. I knew it was a problem. I never really understood how deep and difficult it was. In fact, one of the things I found so unusual is that in some countries the culture actually accepts it. It's not considered abnormal or illegal; it's not considered unethical. That was very hard for me to deal with."

Most people may be aware of these problems, in a safe, distant, clean-hands way. Our interviewees are not only aware, they are engaged, in an up-close, rolled-up-sleeves way. Rob Taylor, the firefighter from the Puget Sound area of Washington state, exemplifies this full-engagement approach. He talked about the satisfaction he has gained from his trips to Mexico, where he and his fellow churchgoers built houses for families in need. "As far as spiritual, it's just a soul-cleansing time for me. I guess more than anything, I learned just how wasteful we are in the United States and how much simpler life can be if you don't subscribe to the top-40 pop culture of the United States. It's not what life is. Life happens when you go out and do. I can't encourage people enough to share what you are good at with somebody else, or share even what you are willing to do with somebody else. It makes me feel good about life in general."

This "larger life" attitude now has Rob and his wife, Jennifer, traveling to different parts of the world, then adopting a young African girl, Rachael. As a result, the world becomes a little larger for their three sons as well. And this family's world will continue to expand. And we have just learned that Margaret Vernon went on to live and work in Rwanda after she completed her service in the Peace Corps. Most of our interviewees have traveled broadly, spent time in

other cultures, sought out other peoples on quests or missions or labors of compassion. They are leading larger lives.

No Regrets

Among the most significant sources of unhappiness about our life journeys are the regrets we have about choices we have made. Typically, the things we did not do are regretted much more than the things we did. As the American poet John Greenleaf Whittier wrote, "For of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these, 'it might have been.'" Our interviewees answered uniformly "no" when asked if they had made life choices they regretted.

Gerry Sieck, the corporate attorney turned teacher, told us he felt a deep sense of responsibility for helping children, "those who cannot help themselves." Reflecting on his decision to coach his daughter's basketball team, a decision that eventually led him to teaching school, Gerry said he made the only choice he could. "The fourth grade girls couldn't coach themselves. Why don't you guys get together and pick a coach—not an option. They needed an adult to raise their hand, and my hand went up. It had to go up."

Kathy Magee shared with us a self-awareness she experienced after returning from assisting with surgeries at four different sites in the Philippines. "When we came back it was Christmas time. I thought, I've got to get some Christmas presents. And that's when it really, definitely hit me. I went into the stores and was like, are you kidding me? I'm going to buy more clothes, more toys, anything for my kids? That's ridiculous. This world is off kilter here!" For Kathy, the contrast of a very poor country of people working in the rice paddies with the glitter of Christmas shopping was more than venial. "From that moment on we took high school students with us," Kathy said. "We now train high school students. They have clubs. We have more than 700 around the world, and we do a conference every summer that teaches them teamwork, leadership, how to work with cultures, as well as skits for them to teach primary health care."

We believe our interviewees have no regrets because they have each taken charge of their own lives. None of them has accepted, uncritically,

lives that other people have crafted or designed for them. For better or worse—as far as we can tell, always better—our interviewees are creating their own futures.⁶ They have made real-life choices. And for each of them, a different life has emerged. The choices took Liz Clibourne from Hawaii to Africa. They took Gerry Sieck from the boardroom to the classroom. They took Bill Sergeant from being fully retired to being fully engaged. They took Kathy Magee from familiar and expected surgical surroundings to the unexpected challenges and unfamiliar wonders of different cultures. In the end, there was no resumption of a normal day. Our interviewees have created new realities.

The Path You Are On

You may be satisfied with the life you have, the path you are on. But perhaps you are considering a change in direction, however momentous or slight. Perhaps you are curious, or intrigued, by the paths taken by the people in this book. Maybe you'd like to veer off a little more in their direction.⁷ We asked our interviewees what advice they would give to those considering such a change.

Bill Sergeant, the Rotarian who led the organization's effort to eradicate polio in the world, offered, "Everywhere I turn, I see people wanting help. In my city there are so many groups doing good things. I would say offer your services, because people, in my experience, are begging for help everywhere and almost any help that they can get."

Kathy Magee advised, "Rather than saying, I can't really do anything, I'll just write the check, call up that organization you think you could possibly do something for and say, these are my talents, I'd like to offer them. I'd like to come in and be a part of the team and do what I can do."

Harry Leibowitz suggested, "Cancer, Alzheimer's, your church, pick a cause that you feel passionate about. Then find somebody who is doing something in that genre and allow yourself to learn what they are doing. Get involved with them so you can see how it works."

Peter Samuelson, of the Starlight Children's Foundation, counseled, "Just do it. Don't allow anyone to tell you that it doesn't have value. That it's all too complicated. You just go do it. Then, miraculously, you see alternate paths, and you pursue them both, or three of them, or nine of them at once. And you don't know in advance which will work. Failure is fine; it leads to success."

Meg Campbell, the founder of a charter school for underprivileged children, posed a question: "What is the thing that you do that you lose track of time when you are doing it? Maybe you love to play the flute—there are just so many ways to make the world better, that's all. Go play the flute in the hospital if you love to play the flute. I do feel that if you really want pure happiness, whatever is your passion, you can take it to an exponential level of happiness by sharing it."

Rob Taylor had a complementary suggestion. "You don't have to go outside what you are capable of. You don't have to learn a new skill to be able to help. Most of the time you just find what you are good at and you can carve out your own niche."

And Lucy Helm said, "Talk to people who do what you're thinking of doing. What has motivated them? What has worked for them, how did they work it into their schedule? I think it is very reassuring when you realize that people can add volunteer work into their lives and it's not that difficult."

Margaret Vernon reminded us, "One thing that may help is to examine your priorities and see what kind of sacrifices you are willing to make. If you take too big of a step, it's just going to be negative for everyone involved. You're not going to want to finish it and the intended beneficiaries won't see the results. I would say that the first thing you need to do is to evaluate what you are willing to give up. Then just research the possibilities."

And Craig Kielburger offered a bit of advice that summarized many of the responses: "I am a big believer in a simple philosophy. Issue plus gift equals a better world. I think a lot of the time we make it very complicated, and it really isn't. We all have an issue we care about, something that gets us angry or concerned. Something close to home that maybe affects our family or maybe something we see on

the news. All of us have something we want to change or better in our world. And then add to that your gift. We all have something that is unique to us, whether we are good at sports and we want to coach Little League or whether we are great when it comes to writing and want to share an issue for the local paper. Maybe we are compassionate listeners and we just go to a retirement home and give an ear to someone's stories. We all have very unique talents, and it's a question of just recognizing what we love to do naturally and then matching that with the issue. It's that simple."

Our interviewees were uniformly of an opinion that anyone can make a significant difference and that everyone has skills and talents that will be valued. Meg Campbell shared with us the story of an ornithologist who wanted to start a Saturday birding class at her charter school for lower-income children. "I have to admit I wasn't sure it would go over," Meg said. "The whole bird community is pretty much its own thing. I said to her, 'We'll put in a course description, but the children who are required to take a Saturday class get to choose which one, and I can't make them take this class.' So she put in the description—it was something about raptors and hawks—and she had eight boys sign up for this class. She's passionate about birds, and wouldn't you know it, I have eight boys now who are passionate about birds too. We have bird feeders; they have gone birding; they carry binoculars. They have no idea how nerdy this is." Meg added, "When anyone comes in and they want to volunteer at the school, I ask them what they're passionate about, because our need is so great that we can match them up with anything."

The suggestions coming from these extraordinary people all point to some straightforward questions we need to ask ourselves. What do I care about? What can I do or contribute? What am I willing to do? What is the first step? Our advice, as you answer these questions, is this: Pay attention to what is happening in your mind. Do things that might help you be more aware of what you are saying to yourself. Slow down the process. Make notes. Talk out loud to yourself. Talk to a friend. Externalize your thinking.⁸ Why? Because when we are contemplating life choices, when we are choosing alternative pathways for the journey, there are some subtleties that, we believe, need to be more carefully examined.

The Inner Debate

In the end, we come back to the question that Susie Scott Krabacher answered so affirmatively in the beginning of this book. Do I feel a sense of responsibility for helping others?⁹ Because Susie said yes, countless lives in Haiti have been changed for the better. One of those is the life of a young boy named Kensen, who was found abandoned in a Port-au-Prince sewage canal.

"A street vendor selling her limited supply of vegetables saw his little hand come up above the water, and then she saw his nose bob just above the water and he went back down," Susie told us. "He was not quite 1-year-old. Someone had tied a cement block around his ankle and had thrown him into the sewage canal, but only after breaking all of the bones in his legs. The child was born with clubbed feet."

Susie explained the deliberate mangling was no doubt an attempt to break the feared curse on the family of this deformed child, an illegal but not uncommon practice in a society marked by superstition. Even before the earthquake that devastated the country in 2010, Haiti was desperately poor, and child abandonment was an enormous problem as parents were more likely to give up less-than-perfect children. AIDS, tuberculosis, and other infectious diseases were at alarmingly high rates, so the average life expectancy for anyone was low. More than three-quarters of the adult population was unemployed, and hunger was so pervasive children resorted to eating cookies made of dirt.¹⁰ In this society on the threadbare fringe of civilization, an infant born with any defect, including clubbed feet, had a low chance of survivability right from the start.

"The street vendor enlisted the help of a passerby who pulled the child out, cut the rope tied to the cement block, and they carried the child to the government hospital," Susie continued. "That's where abandoned children go, and this child was obviously abandoned."

It was quickly discovered that the broken bones of the child had begun to heal, but were healing poorly. Fortunately, the government hospital had a close relationship with Mercy & Sharing, the orphanage founded by Susie that has taken over the care of abandoned children in Haiti. Mercy & Sharing managed to bring in and pay the

doctors to fix the child's broken bones and put him in a body cast that extended above his waist.

"For a year, this child wouldn't smile," Susie recalled. "He was the most depressed, sad little boy that I had ever seen. He would just barely eat, just enough to stay alive. Most of the children, after we have them for 6 months, we can get them to giggle because they start getting used to their environment. He never even smiled."

One day, Susie told us, after the child had been in a body cast for a full year, a journalist was in town covering another story. She wanted to visit an orphanage, and her hotel recommended a visit to Mercy & Sharing. The journalist entered the orphanage with her camera and began taking pictures. Susie described this unexpected moment between the journalist and the boy. "He saw her, this single woman of the world, who had no interest in a family or marriage, he saw her and convulsed with laughter. I just don't know what it was. We told her he never smiled in his life and why he was in the body cast."

The journalist couldn't get the child out of her mind. She kept coming back to the orphanage. She even postponed her trip back home. After she arrived back home, she wrote Susie and asked, "Can I please adopt him?"

This story of a child who was born with clubbed feet, who was mangled and thrown away into a sewage canal, has a happy ending. "I get pictures all the time of Kensen wearing his new little tennis shoes with the lights on them," Susie said. "I thought he would always be depressed. But he is the happiest child ever. He is absolutely perfect."

Like that of all of our interviewees, Susie's contribution to Kensen's life, as well as to the larger human condition, may be traced back to the choices that preceded it. She chose to leverage her life experiences of abuse as a child into a sense of empathy for other children in need. This connection began when Susie saw in the eyes of a neglected child on television the same look she saw in the mirror as a young girl. She chose to see fairness in the world as an act of fate, not as an entitlement. Any one of us could have been born with clubbed feet into a superstitious culture. Because of her deep, emotional connection with abused children, she chose to believe she knew something and could do something that might just make a difference. She chose to be open

to an opportunity to consider Haiti. She chose to take the first small step by visiting Haiti with a friend. When she encountered difficulties during her first few visits to Cité Soleil, she chose to persevere and stay with it. And she has chosen to lead the way by seeking the help of others through their involvement and charitable donations. Both Susie's life and the world we live in have benefited enormously because her choices have led her to helping the neglected children of Haiti.

Do I feel a sense of responsibility for helping others? The question is both critical and complex. It is critical because it defines our role in society. It is complex because either answer to the question, yes or no, carries a consequence. Here is where the internal struggle begins.¹¹

If the answer is, "No, I am not responsible for helping those in need, pain, or peril," it tells us we are more narrowly focused. Such an answer may be bothersome in its implication. I eat while others starve. I have shelter while others sleep in the street. I am safe while others live in danger. My health needs are served while others are at risk.

On the other hand, if the answer is, "Yes, I am responsible for helping others," then a personal standard is created by which to conduct ourselves. And this yes answer requires us to do something. It creates the dense weight of personal responsibility. If I believe I am responsible for helping those in need and I do nothing, then I have not lived up to my own standard.¹²

Perhaps it is for this reason that the question is an easy one to avoid asking in the first place. It's easy to rationalize our way into believing we don't have to face the question because there is no point to it. We can tell ourselves the question is irrelevant because, whether we answer yes or no, we can't make a difference. But as we all know from experience, when it's just self and conscience in a low-profile debate, we can talk ourselves into or out of almost anything. We can conclude that we are helpless; that we have no choice; that we don't matter at all; that we will never do anything, ever, because no one can make a difference.

We see in our interviews a different way of thinking. It isn't immediately obvious. If it were obvious and straightforward thinking, it would not need to be so carefully culled for clues. Through the interview process, and our analyses of interview transcripts, we have deliberately decelerated the thinking of our interviewees long enough for them to ponder the perspectives underlying their own actions.

In searching for consistencies in how they see the world and themselves in it, we are able to understand how they think about their own relevance to society and others. Our interviewees offer a different way of talking to ourselves, bolstered by seven interlocking choice points. It is an inner path that can help turn a labyrinth of rationalization into a clear and intentional decision for assuming a more meaningful role in society and thereby a larger life.

Collectively, our interviewees provide a model for how we might moderate our own inner debate. Then, when we think about shaping our lives, we can arrive at an answer that is more authentic and true to how we see ourselves, or wish to be. We can quiet the din of rationalization so that we can hear what Mahatma Gandhi described as, "The still, small voice of conscience."

Will Helping Others Make You Happier?

1. Writing in *Time* magazine, Nancy Gibbs concluded from recent research that "happiness correlates much more closely with our causes and connectedness than with our net worth." What do you think about this finding? Does this ring true in your own experience?

2. Why do you think there is so much attention now to the science of happiness, and what does this mean for your work? Do the new findings reinforce or challenge decisions you have made about your career or volunteer opportunities?

3. Each of our interviewees told us that making a difference in the lives of others improved his or her life as well. Can you give an example from your own experience of how helping others made your life happier or more fulfilling? Why do you think that was the case? What feelings did you have?

4. If helping others has also made our interviewees' lives happier, must we then conclude that altruism is ultimately a selfish act? Or, as some argue, is it a good thing that the doer of good also benefits because that will lead to more altruism in the world? (See this chapter's Note 4.) Do the motivations of the person who does good matter?

5. Many of our interviewees offered advice for others who want to get started helping others. From your experience, what suggestions would you offer? What worked for you when you were looking for a helping opportunity? Is it as simple as Craig Kielburger makes it when he says, "Issue plus gift equals a better world."

6. What is your perspective on the central question we ask at the end of this chapter: Do I feel a sense of responsibility for helping others? Why do you think some people choose to help those in need while others do not? Are there sometimes valid reasons for choosing not to help? Is giving money ever enough?

7. How would you like to be remembered? What would you want your legacy to be?