

Leading a Life of Great Satisfaction

To the 125th graduating class of Sacred Heart Academy, family, friends, faculty and staff, it is my pleasure to be here with you. And I congratulate the Class of 2008 on its fine achievements.

When Barbara invited me to join you tonight, of course, I was delighted and deeply honored. Sacred Heart has long meant a great deal to me, and I credit my experience there with so much of who I am today. So to be here with you, to be part of your special celebration is a real pleasure.

Since Barbara invited me a few months ago, I've thought a great deal about what I could offer you tonight. I decided to do what any college professor worth her salt would do, and pose a question.

How do you live a life of great satisfaction? As you sit here, anxious to get on with the life you are about to lead, what is your plan for crafting a fulfilling life, a life filled with meaning and joy?

If pushed, many of us could come up with a few ideas about experiences or accomplishments or maybe even things that might make it to our happiness list. Around the world, social scientists—psychologists, economists, and political scientists—are turning their attention to the questions about what human beings need not to survive, but to flourish. What I'd like to do tonight is to share some of what researchers are discovering to answer the question I posed.

According to Ed Diener, one of my professors at the University of Illinois, life satisfaction reflects a person's appraisal of her life as a whole. It really matters whether we are happy. People who are deeply satisfied with the lives they lead experience fewer psychological and social problems, they perform better at work, they find it easier fend off the inevitable stressors that are part of modern life, and perhaps not surprisingly, they are in much better physical health. So life satisfaction isn't just about chasing hedonic pleasure, it's the way to live a healthier, more productive life.

So what makes the difference? I'll begin with what we know doesn't matter. Psychologist Danny Kahneman, who won a Nobel prize in economics, has proof that shows what some in this room have always known—being rich does not make us happier. You know that game you play when you think about what you would do if you won the lottery? Well, despite any fantasies you might have about how much better your life would be if you won, a study of actual lottery winners shows that, after just five short years, lottery winners' levels of happiness returned to where they were before they had won the lottery. And for some, that wasn't very high. It turns out that once basic needs are met, extra income does very little to raise your life satisfaction and happiness.

My Cornell colleague, economist Bob Frank wrote a book in 2000 called, “Luxury Fever: Money and Happiness in an Era of Excess” in which he explained why extra money doesn’t translate into extra happiness. Think of a iPhone you really really want. Before you buy it, you imagine how owning it will make you really really happy. Once you buy it, you get used to it, and you begin to consider how owning the next generation of the phone will make you even happier. It seems, then, that any happiness gained from acquiring something is pretty fleeting.

Part of what explains this is that happiness is relative. It’s how we think we compare to others that makes the difference. Do a little thought experiment--think of that thing you could buy that you believe would make you happier. Maybe it’s the iPod, or a great pair of shoes or a fancy sports car. Buying the shoes or the car can make us a bit happier, like the iPod can. But, again, the happiness is short-lived. Because as soon as our friend shows up with even prettier shoes, or our neighbor pulls in the driveway with a fancier car, we’re back to square one, happiness-wise. So, beyond a certain level, money doesn’t make us happier, and trying to out-lavish our friends and neighbors just pulls us into a dissatisfying arms race of consumption.

So what might matter? How about a good education? Turns out, education does a lot of good and is a really great investment, but it cannot raise life satisfaction in any direct way. What about being young? Actually older people are more consistently satisfied with their lives than the young. How about the weather? Would living in sunny Southern California foster greater happiness than living in cloudy upstate New York? Turns out, that's not true either.

So if buying and showing off doesn't make us happy, and unending days of sunshine can't do it, what can?

For graduates of Sacred Heart, the list I will present will come as no surprise. Faculty and staff have been sharing these lessons with you since your very first days as freshmen. All I will do is put them in one place, and give one last reminder of all you've learned.

Here goes—a recipe for leading a life of great satisfaction:

- 1) Say thank you. Work by psychologist Martin Seligman at the University of Pennsylvania shows that gratitude is important to leading a satisfying life. Specifically, people who are aware of the good things that happen around them, and who express their thanks and appreciation for these good things are much much more satisfied with their lives. So focus on the positive things, and give thanks for them. You'll be happier.

- 2) Give more, take less. You know this lesson from your day of sharing experience, but a set of nifty experiments at the University of British Columbia highlight the lesson. Despite what I said earlier, you really can buy happiness for as little as five bucks a day. But there's a catch—you can't keep the money. Giving away as little as \$5.00 on any given day was enough to boost people's happiness dramatically on that day. Researchers compared the happiness of those who donated the five dollars to people who spent \$5 on themselves. No happiness bump for those who indulged themselves. As many of you already know, it makes you happier to give than to receive.

- 3) Do it, don't buy it. When you spend your money, spend it on experiences not stuff. Experiments done by my colleagues at Cornell show that people are happier when they spend money on experiences like dinners with friends or fun trips than they when they spend that same amount of money on gadgets and handbags. This isn't a surprise in light of another finding that shows that people who live life as an adventure, who approach life with a sense of excitement lead lives of much greater satisfaction than those who do not. Saying yes to life's experiences (and maybe no to that new purse) will allow you to be happier and more satisfied with the life you're living.

- 4) Keep hope alive. This is probably the most straightforward research finding of all—the more people believe in a better future, expect a better future, and feel motivated to work hard for it—that is the more hope they have—the greater their satisfaction with life. Hope is powerful and can change your life for the better.

- 5) Cultivate caring relationships. More than any other finding, what shows up time and again in research studies is that close caring relationships with family, with friends provide the kind of support that is essential to leading healthy and happy lives. In fact, studies of the happiest people show, without exception, that these people have strong positive social relationships. Researchers have concluded that close relationships are not only associated with happiness, they are absolutely necessary for happiness and for good health.

And that's the happiness list

- Say thank you
- Give more, take less
- Do it, don't buy it
- Keep hope alive
- Cultivate caring relationships.

Nothing on this list comes as a surprise you young women who have been part of the Sacred Heart community. Treasure them, and carry them with you as you seek to live lives of great satisfaction.