

What are the Secrets to a Happy Life?

by George E. Vaillant

At 19 years old, Godfrey Minot Camille was a tall redheaded boy with a charming manner who planned to enter medicine or the ministry. In 1938, Camille enrolled in a study that would follow him for the rest of his life, along with 267 other Harvard College sophomores deemed by recruiters as likely to lead “successful” lives.

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Only gradually did the study’s staff discover that the allegedly “normal” Godfrey was an intractable and unhappy hypochondriac. On the 10th anniversary of his joining the study, each man was given an A through E rating anticipating future personality stability. When it was Godfrey’s turn, he was assigned an “E.”

But if Godfrey Camille was a disaster as a young man, by the time he was an old one he had become a star. His occupational success; measurable enjoyment of work, love, and play; his health; the depth and breadth of his social supports; the quality of his marriage and relationship to his children—all that and more combined to make him one of the most successful of the surviving men of the study. What made the difference? How did this sorry lad develop such an abundant capacity for flourishing?

These are the kinds of questions that can only be answered by a study that follows participants over the course of a lifetime, and the study in which Camille participated—known as the Grant Study, because it was originally funded by entrepreneur and philanthropist William T. Grant—is now the longest longitudinal study of biosocial human development ever undertaken, and is still on-going. Through reviews of Camille’s and his Harvard peers’ medical records, coupled with periodic interviews and questionnaires exploring their careers, relationships, and mental well-being, the study’s goal was to identify the key factors to a happy and healthy life.

I arrived at the Grant Study in 1966. I became its director in 1972, a position I held until 2004. The single most personally rewarding facet of my involvement with the Grant Study has been the chance to interview these men over four decades. I’ve found that no single interview, no single questionnaire is ever adequate to reveal the complete man, but the mosaic of interviews produced over many years can be most revealing.

This was certainly the case with Camille, whose life illuminates two of the most important lessons from the 75-year, 20-million-dollar Grant Study. One is that happiness is love. Virgil, of course, needed only three words to say the same thing, and he said it a very long time ago—*Omnia vincit amor*, or “love conquers all”—but unfortunately he had no data to back them up. The other lesson is people really can change. As we see in the

example of this man's life, they really can grow.

Up from a bleak childhood

Camille's parents were upper class, but they were also socially isolated and pathologically suspicious. A child psychiatrist who reviewed Camille's record 30 years later thought his childhood one of the bleakest in the Study.

Unloved and not yet grown into a sense of autonomy, Camille as a student adopted the unconscious survival strategy of frequent reports to the college infirmary. No evidence of tangible illness was found at most of his visits, and in his junior year a usually sympathetic college physician dismissed him with the disgusted comment, "This boy is turning into a regular psychoneurotic." Camille's constant complaining was an immature coping style. It didn't connect with other people, and it kept them from connecting with him; they didn't see his real underlying suffering and just got angry at his apparent manipulations.

After graduation from medical school, the newly minted Dr. Camille attempted suicide. The Study consensus at the time of his 10-year personality assessment was that he was "not fitted for the practice of medicine," and, unloved as he was, he found taking care of other people's needs overwhelming. But several sessions with a psychiatrist gave him a different view of himself. He wrote to the Study, "My hypochondriasis has been mainly dissipated. It was an apology, a self-inflicted punishment for aggressive impulses."

Then, at age 35, he had a life-changing experience. He was hospitalized for 14 months in a veterans' hospital with pulmonary tuberculosis. Ten years later he recalled his first thought on being admitted: "It's neat; I can go to bed for a year, do what I want, and get away with it."

"I was glad to be sick," he confessed. His illness, a real one, finally ended up giving him the emotional security that his childhood—along with his hypochondriacal symptoms and subsequent careful neutrality—never had. Camille felt his time in the hospital almost like a religious rebirth. "Someone with a capital 'S' cared about me," he wrote. "Nothing has been so tough since that year in the sack."

Released from the hospital, Dr. Camille became an independent physician, married, and grew into a responsible father and clinic leader. His coping style changed as the decades passed. His transitional reliance on displacement (the unconscious avoidance of emotional intensity) was replaced by the still more empathic involuntary coping mechanisms of altruism and generativity (a wish to nurture others' development). He was now functioning as a giving adult. Whereas at 30 he had hated his dependent patients, by 40 his adolescent fantasy of caring for others had become a reality. In vivid contrast with his post-graduation panic, he now reported that what he liked most about medicine was that "I had problems and went to others, and now I enjoy people coming to me."

When I was 55 and Camille was almost 70, I asked him what he had learned from his children. "You know what I learned from my children?" he blurted out, tears in his eyes. "I learned love!" Many years later, having seized a serendipitous opportunity to interview his daughter, I believed him. I have interviewed many Grant Study children, but this woman's love for her father remains the most stunning that I have encountered among them.

At age 75, Camille took the opportunity to describe in greater detail how love had healed him:

Before there were dysfunctional families, I came from one. My professional life hasn't been disappointing—far from it—but the truly gratifying unfolding has been into the person I've slowly become: comfortable, joyful, connected, and effective. Since it wasn't widely available then, I hadn't read that children's classic, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, which tells how connectedness is something we must let happen to us, and then we become solid and whole.

As that tale recounts tenderly, only love can make us real. Denied this in boyhood for reasons I now understand, it took me years to tap substitute sources. What seems marvelous is how many there are and how restorative they prove. What durable and pliable creatures we are, and what a storehouse of goodwill lurks in the social fabric. . . I never dreamed my later years would be so stimulating and rewarding.

That convalescent year, transformative though it was, was not the end of Camille's story. Once he grasped what had happened, he seized the ball and ran with it, straight into a developmental explosion that went on for 30 years. A professional awakening and a spiritual one; a wife and two children of his own; two psychoanalyses, a return to the church of his early years—all these allowed him to build for himself the loving surround that he had so missed as a child, and to give to others out of its riches.

At 82, Godfrey Minot Camille had a fatal heart attack while mountain climbing in the Alps, which he dearly loved. His church was packed for the memorial service. "There was a deep and holy authenticity about the man," said the Bishop in his eulogy. His son said, "He lived a very simple life, but it was very rich in relationships." Yet prior to age 30, Camille's life had been essentially barren of relationship. Folks change. But they stay the same, too. Camille had spent his years before the hospital looking for love, too. It just took him a while to learn how to do it well.

How to flourish

In 2009, I delved into the Grant Study data to establish a Decathlon of Flourishing—a set of ten accomplishments that covered many different facets of success. Two of the items in the Decathlon had to do with economic success, four with mental and physical health, and four with social supports and relationships. Then I set out to see how these accomplishments correlated, or didn't, with three gifts of nature and nurture—physical constitution, social and economic advantage, and a loving childhood.

The results were as clear-cut as they were startling.

We found that measures of family socioeconomic status had no significant correlation at all with later success in any of these areas. Alcoholism and depression in family histories proved irrelevant to flourishing at 80, as did longevity. The sociability and extraversion that were so highly valued in the initial process of selecting the men did not correlate with later flourishing either.

In contrast with the weak and scattershot correlations among the biological and socioeconomic variables, a loving childhood—and other factors like empathic capacity and warm relationships as a young adult—predicted later success in all ten categories of the Decathlon. What's more, success in relationships was very highly correlated with both economic success and strong mental and physical health, the other two broad areas of

the Decathlon.

In short, it was a history of warm intimate relationships—and the ability to foster them in maturity—that predicted flourishing in all aspects of these men's lives.

We found, for instance, that there was no significant difference between the maximum earned incomes of the men with IQs of 110–115 and the incomes of the men with IQs of 150-plus. On the other hand, men with warm mothers took home \$87,000 more than those men whose mothers were uncaring. The men who had good sibling relationships when young were making an average of \$51,000 more a year than the men who had poor relationships with their siblings. The 58 men with the best scores for warm relationships made an average of \$243,000 a year; in contrast, the 31 men with the worst scores for relationships earned an average maximum salary of \$102,000 a year.

So when it comes to late-life success—even when success is measured strictly in financial terms—the Grant Study finds that nurture trumps nature. And by far the most important influence on a flourishing life is love. Not early love exclusively, and not necessarily romantic love. But love early in life facilitates not only love later on, but also the other trappings of success, such as high income and prestige. It also encourages the development of coping styles that facilitate intimacy, as opposed to the ones that discourage it. The majority of the men who flourished found love before 30, and the data suggests that was why they flourished.

We can't choose our childhoods, but the story of Godfrey Minot Camille reveals that bleak ones do not doom us. If you follow lives long enough, people adapt and they change, and so do the factors that affect healthy adjustment. Our journeys through this world are filled with discontinuities. Nobody in the Study was doomed at the outset, but nobody had it made, either. Inheriting the genes for alcoholism can turn the most otherwise blessed golden boy into a skid row bum. Conversely, an encounter with a very dangerous disease liberated the pitiful young Dr. Camille from a life of loneliness and dependency. Who could have foreseen, when he was 29 and the Study staff ranked him in the bottom three percent of the cohort in personality stability, that he would die a happy, giving, and beloved man?

Only those who understand that happiness is only the cart; love is the horse. And perhaps those who recognize that our so-called defense mechanisms, our involuntary ways of coping with life, are very important indeed. Before age 30, Camille depended on narcissistic hypochondriasis to cope with his life and his feelings; after 50 he used empathic altruism and a pragmatic stoicism about taking what comes. The two pillars of happiness revealed by the 75-year-old Grant Study—and exemplified by Dr. Godfrey Minot Camille—are love and a mature coping style that does not push love away.

Above all, the Study reveals how men like Dr. Camille adapted themselves to life and adapted their lives to themselves—a process of maturation that unfolds over time. Indeed, I have always regarded the Grant Study as an instrument that permitted the study of time, much as the telescope uncovered the mysteries of the galaxies and the microscope enabled the study of microbes.

For researchers, prolonged follow-up can be a rock upon which fine theories founder, but it also can be a means of discovering robust and enduring truth. At the outset of the Study in 1939, it was thought that men with masculine body types—broad shoulders and a

slender waist—would succeed the most in life. That turned out to be one of many theories demolished by the Study as it has followed the lives of these men. To benefit from the lessons both of the Grant Study and of life requires persistence and humility, for maturation makes liars of us all.