Why Happiness is the Wrong Pursuit
by Christine Carter

The way to lead a joyful life is not to pursue happiness for ourselves, argues Christine Carter, but to pursue it for others.

“Many persons have a wrong idea of what constitutes true happiness. It is not attained through self-gratification but through fidelity to a worthy purpose.” –Helen Keller

Money doesn’t buy happiness. Obvious, right?

On some abstract level, we know that money and other outward signs of success won’t ultimately make us happy—perhaps because we know wealthy or famous or powerful people who are deeply unhappy—but on another level, we don’t really believe it... or at least we don’t believe it applies to us. Money might not buy other people happiness, we think, but I know I’d be happier living in a bigger house in a better neighborhood, driving a different car.

Why do we experience such a disconnect between what we know to be true in the abstract and what we believe is true for us?

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I think a big part of the answer is that our choices are driven not by fame or fortune but
by the pursuit of happiness itself—and we’re going about it in the wrong way, because we’re not sure what better alternatives exist. We buy things and experiences that might bring us some momentary feelings of delight and cheer. But will they truly bring us deeper feelings of happiness and satisfaction with our lives—the feeling that our life is, in the end, meaningful?

Psychologist Roy Baumeister and his colleagues have tried to distinguish between lives high on happiness and lives full of meaning. By their definition, happiness is a positive feeling or emotion. We say we are happy when things are going well for us, when we are feeling more positive emotions than negative ones, when we feel satisfied with our lives. The time span of happiness is typically short: a good day, a stellar semester, a great year. A wedding can bring us happiness in a moment or a weekend, for example, because of the fun and love involved, because of the good food and good music and good company.

But a wedding can also bring meaning to our lives. More than a balance sheet between positive and negative feelings, meaning is the symbolic value of a given activity or situation; it is our belief about what is happening. Our weddings are meaningful because they represent a life-long commitment to love and to nourishing someone else through thick and thin, sickness and health, happiness and sadness. The time frame of meaning is much longer than that of happiness—typically something is meaningful in the context of a life stage or lifetime.

Things really get interesting when we start to consider lives that are meaningful but not happy, and lives that are happy but not meaningful. Though only a tiny percentage of people experience one without the other (typically, meaning and happiness overlap), Baumeister and his colleagues’ study found that some people’s lives are filled with happiness but are low in meaning: These folks tend to feel good, at least for a limited amount of time. Conflicts with others are rare, as is adversity. They don’t worry about much. They tend to get what they want in life, but they give little, if anything, to others. They don’t think much about the past or the future, and they don’t tend to think deeply. They are often, as the researchers note, “shallow,” “self-absorbed,” and “selfish.” Perhaps some people would choose this state, but because no life is free from adversity—much of life’s difficulty and pain is not under our control—a happy life without meaning will not last.

In contrast, while some people leading deeply meaningful lives might, at any snapshot in time, be quite unhappy, unhappiness does not usually last in the presence of meaning. Think of Martin Luther King Jr. or Nelson Mandela or Ghandi as prisoners, probably at best extremely uncomfortable and at worse in profound physical and psychological pain. Researchers would certainly not find their lives happy: Their balance of positive to negative emotions would probably weigh heavily to the negative. Their satisfaction with life? Probably nil.

But great people make it clear that however unpleasant their lives might be in a given moment, their beliefs about their respective situations imbue their lives with profound meaning. When researchers look at unhappy people leading meaningful lives, they observe that often bad things have happened to them. Unhappy but fulfilled people tend to do a lot of deep thinking, and they spend a good deal of time reflecting on their struggles and stresses and challenges.

Compelling research indicates that the pursuit of happiness—when our definition of happiness is synonymous with pleasure and easy gratification—won’t ultimately bring us deeper feelings of fulfillment; it won’t allow us to live in our sweet spot. Although we claim
that the “pursuit of happiness” is our inalienable right and the primary driver of the human race, we humans do better pursuing fulfillment and meaning—creating lives that generate the feeling that we matter.

And how do we do that? How, exactly do we pursue meaning rather than happiness? We establish our connection to something larger than ourselves; we give ourselves to others.

Fortunately, happiness tends to follow meaning. Meaningful activities generate positive emotions and deepen social connections, both of which increase our satisfaction with life. Indeed, much research shows an undeniable connection between happiness and generosity; the happiest people also tend to be the most altruistic.

When we help others in a meaningful way, for example, we are likely to feel compassion and love. We also often feel gratitude for our own situation, and maybe even pride in our ability to help. Perhaps most importantly, our connections to those we help get stronger, and strong social ties are the best predictor of happiness that we have.

In the end, the way to lead a joyful life is not to pursue happiness for ourselves, but to pursue it for others. The good life is not about getting what we want; it’s about having what it takes to give to others.

This holiday season, and in this coming New Year, what can you do that will bring joy to others? Pursue that, and happiness will follow.