

Greater Good's Top Books of 2016

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In many ways, 2016 was a banner year for books related to our themes of compassion, kindness, empathy, happiness, and mindfulness. Judging from the number of books to arrive at our office, the science of a meaningful life is hitting its full stride, with more and more people recognizing how to apply new insights to our daily lives. Yet, while the number of books was encouraging, many of them seemed to repeat old themes and research, without offering much new in the way of insight.

That's why many of our favorite books of 2016 do something a little bit extra: They take our science to a new level, looking at how schools, organizations, and society at large can apply the research to create a more compassionate world.

Invisible Influence: The Hidden Forces that Shape Behavior, by Jonah Berger

We're constantly making decisions about what to buy, wear, believe, and spend our time on. Most of us see these choices as determined by our inherent values and preferences—but according to Wharton professor Jonah Berger's book *Invisible Influence*, that is partly an illusion.

In fact, we're constantly, subconsciously affected by the thoughts and actions of others. Social influence can sometimes be harmful: Groups can easily slide into passive consensus, with whoever speaks first setting the tone of the entire discussion. The culture of certain organizations can make others feel excluded, the way "masculine" academic majors like computer science seem closed to women.

The key, Berger argues, is to use social influence for good. All it takes is one dissenting view to turn a misguided consensus into healthy disagreement. Creating a more diverse environment in your workplace or classroom can help more people feel like they belong, rather than feeling pressure to be the same as everyone else. In the end, recognizing the far-reaching power of social influence can not only make us more self-aware, Berger argues, but can also help us build a better society.

Success and Luck: Good Fortune and the Myth of Meritocracy, by Robert Frank

Read our review of *Success and Luck*.

Though we Americans tend to think that we are the masters of our own destiny and that hard work pays off, we are only partly right: Many of us succeed at work and in life because of luck, too, according to Robert Frank's book, *Success and Luck*.

Research shows that the family we are born into (and even birth order), the opportunities available in our neighborhood, the schools we attend, and whether or not we have positive adult mentors—all of which are beyond our individual control—play an important role in whether or not we succeed in life.

Still, many of us buy into the myth of the “self-made man” (or woman) because we are unaware of the many psychological biases we hold that create the illusion of personal merit. The halo effect, hindsight bias, and attribution bias all play a role in making us feel that our success (or that of others) is largely due to character or smarts, rather than to the luck of our personal life circumstances.

Why is it important to recognize this? By clinging too much to the belief that we deserve our fortune, we are less likely to treat others with empathy or fairness. Frank hopes that understanding the role of luck in success will help people to embrace public policies that achieve more fairness for those who’ve been left behind economically through no fault of their own.

The Gardener and the Carpenter: What the New Science of Child Development Tells Us About the Relationship Between Parents and Children, by Alison Gopnik

Read a Q&A with Alison Gopnik, "Are You a Gardener or a Carpenter for Your Child?"

Today, many parents and educators work vigilantly to guide children along the “right” path, hoping it will lead to a bright future. Adults naturally believe they know just what that path should look like, often drawing on their own experience or colleagues’ advice. But this top-down approach often leaves parents feeling pressured, educators struggling, and youth stressed and lagging behind their international peers.

In *The Gardener and the Carpenter*, developmental psychologist Alison Gopnik argues against this approach, saying that parents don’t need to “mold” their children; they need to raise them in safe spaces filled with warmth, freedom to explore, and safety nets. Babies and toddlers are keen observers of their world, actively and accurately interpreting what people and objects do and why they do it—like little scientists. Nurturing their exploration is crucial for the human species to innovate, evolve, and adapt to a rapidly changing environment.

The Gardener and the Carpenter is a sophisticated read, not a prescriptive, how-to-parent book. But it does allow a peek under the hood of how children develop and what they really need from the caring adults around them. The book charts a strong, philosophical course, from which specific actions and decisions naturally follow.

Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right, by Arlie Hochschild

Read a Q&A with Arlie Hochschild, "Why We Need Empathy in the Age of Trump."

Sociologist Arlie Hochschild spent five years listening to devoted members of the Tea Party to write *Strangers in Their Own Land*. Her book helps explain why people who have struggled to survive the indignities of a declining economy and environment might support politicians who want to deregulate industry and cut taxes on the wealthy, giving us insight into the narrative frames and the “hopes, fears, pride, shame, resentment, and anxiety” of many working-class Americans.

Hochschild discovers an undeclared class war—but not the one liberals and progressives see, between the one percent and the 99 percent. This class war is between the middle class, the working class—and the poor. According to her interviewees, the federal government is on the wrong side of that war, providing help to the poorest while neglecting everyone else. This opens the door to the kind of resentment that fueled the rise of Donald Trump.

Strangers in Their Own Land doesn't try to figure out how to solve the world's problems or bring together a new coalition to address them. Hochschild's mission is to open a window into the minds and hearts of people who seem alien and irrational to blue-state liberals. It's up to us to take it from here.

The Power Paradox: How We Gain and Lose Influence, by Dacher Keltner

Read our adaptation from Keltner's book, "How to Find Your Power—and Avoid Abusing It."

We tend to believe that attaining power requires force, deception, manipulation, and coercion. But, as seductive as these ideas are, they are dead wrong, according to GGSC co-founder and faculty director Dacher Keltner in his new book, The Power Paradox.

Keltner has spent years studying how people acquire and maintain power in groups and what happens to their behavior after power is granted. What he has discovered is that "empathy and social intelligence are vastly more important to acquiring and exercising power than are force, deception, or terror." Meaningful influence, the kind that endures, comes from a focus on the needs of others and is not won, but given to us by other people because of our kindness and social intelligence.

Unfortunately, when one becomes powerful in a group, that feeling of power can impair the very skills of social intelligence that are vital to maintaining power and wielding it responsibly. Once people have been granted power, they tend to ignore those around them and become less empathic. This is the power paradox.

How we handle the power paradox guides our personal and work lives and determines, ultimately, how happy we and the people around us will be—and Keltner's book aims to help us see the impact of power and how we can avoid its pitfalls.

The Happiness Track: How to Apply the Science of Happiness to Accelerate Your Success, by Emma Seppälä

Read our review of The Happiness Track.

In The Happiness Track, Emma Seppälä tries to untangle one of the knottiest problems of the modern age: our burned-out, overscheduled lifestyle. We are stuck in a jumble of feeling overwhelmed yet never accomplishing enough, trussed up by assumptions that we hold about productivity, such as Success requires stress. We have to compete with others. We can't cut ourselves any slack.

Typically, people who are stressed are advised to manage their time better: Prioritize, make to-do lists, and delegate unnecessary tasks. But this is bound to fail, says Seppälä. Instead, we need to manage our energy.

She outlines six qualities to cultivate that will contribute to both our productivity and our

happiness without making big changes to our schedules:

Full presence: Staying in the moment;

Resilience: Bouncing back from setbacks more quickly;

Calm, rest, self-compassion: Treating ourselves like we would a good friend, with support and care rather than self-criticism;

Compassion: Giving to others in need.

Joy on Demand: The Art of Discovering the Happiness Within, by Chade-Meng Tan

Read our review of Joy on Demand.

From the outside, meditation appears to be a thoroughly serious endeavor. You have to sit down, dutifully count your breaths, and practice this every day whether it's fun or not.

But in Joy on Demand, Chade-Meng Tan teaches practices and principles for cultivating mindfulness that emphasize gentleness, ease, and even humor. Through practices like the Puppy Dog Meditation, Attending to Joy, and Wishing for Random People to Be Happy, Tan offers concrete steps for incorporating mindfulness into everyday life that take as little as one breath.

Though light on research, Joy on Demand benefits from Tan's first-person perspective and personal experiences. They help bring to life the obstacles and benefits to cultivating mindfulness, making them seem particularly relevant and real. And in the light of Tan's stories of suffering, his humor and good cheer become all the more meaningful—a testament to the power of meditation to make us happier, more connected, and more resilient.

Helping Children Succeed: What Works and Why, by Paul Tough

Read a Q&A with Paul Tough, "Kids Need More Than Just Brains to Succeed."

In Helping Children Succeed, Paul Tough pulls together decades of social science research on the impacts of poverty and trauma on kids' brains and behavior to make a cogent, convincing argument for why we need to stop blaming kids for their learning difficulties or simply push them to become more "gritty."

Instead, he explains why kids who come from impoverished or abusive homes can have trouble in school and need more compassionate supports—at home and in the classroom—to help them achieve in school and in life.

Children, like adults, have a basic need for competence, autonomy, and connection, argues Tough. In his book, he points to many of the ways that teachers can encourage students to fulfill these needs in the context of learning, by providing opportunities for challenge and independence in classroom assignments, while still displaying a warm and welcoming atmosphere for all students.

Helping Children Succeed is full of the science of how kids learn, tips for educators and parents, and information about innovative programs that have shown promising results in turning around the lives of at-risk students.

Take Pride: Why the Deadliest Sin Holds the Secret to Human Success, by Jessica Tracy

Read our review of Take Pride.

Pride is often considered a negative force in human existence—the opposite of humility and a source of social friction. But in *Take Pride*, Jessica Tracy argues that pride, like other human emotions, is part of our evolutionary heritage, helping us to survive and thrive in cooperative societies by inspiring us to be the best humans we can be.

Tracy has studied the pride display—chest out, head back, and a slight smile—and found that it is recognizable in cultures around the world, connoting status, encouraging deference from others, and motivating us to work hard to gain approval from our communities. Pride displays communicate expertise and power, helping others to identify leaders in their midst. But pride has a dark side: hubris, or self-aggrandizement at the expense of others.

Tracy warns us to take heed of the difference: If you feel authentic pride and it inspires you to do good by your community's standards, great. But if you start feeling the need to live up to others' expectations, and lie or cheat to earn their admiration, chances are you are leaning toward hubris. And that could make the future darker for everyone.

America the Anxious: How Our Pursuit of Happiness is Creating a Nation of Nervous Wrecks, by Ruth Whippman

Americans are obsessed with the pursuit of happiness, and it's making us miserable, according to Ruth Whippman's *America the Anxious*. That's because we're going about it the wrong way. Instead of focusing on being happy—which research suggests makes us unhappy—we should focus on living a life of meaning with strong interpersonal relationships, where happiness is a natural by-product.

Whippman's book is an entertaining account of her explorations into the many ways Americans try to be happier. She attends meditation classes and EST-like programs, visits companies creating artificial workplace communities, and even spends time with a group of Mormons—purported to be the happiest Americans—all to illustrate how pursuing happiness can go horribly wrong.

Instead of seeking personal happiness through dubious means, she argues that we should focus on improving the social supports that science has shown actually contribute to happiness: things like universal healthcare, support for working parents in the form of paid parental leave and quality childcare, and job security for the employed. If we don't learn to accept the necessity of these in our pursuit of happiness, we are bound to continue being one of the most anxious, unhappy populations in the developed world.