I have found that true happiness in life comes from doing good deeds for those around us. This is not a well-known understanding of happiness because the country’s culture appears to prize the exact opposite in its never-ending pursuit of material things as well as the accumulation of wealth and fame as quickly as possible. It is glorified in professional sports, movies, television shows, etc. The irony is that the pursuit of happiness via the acquisition of material things is fleeting at best. While nice to have, we soon find ourselves wanting more or other things. There is no satisfaction to be found and we are always looking for ways to gain more things, especially in comparison with those around us. It is a maddening pursuit that leaves one consistently unfulfilled.

Another aspect of wanting more is that many of us envy what others have or wish we could be like them. I cannot think of anything more frustrating than wishing I was someone else. I have certainly fallen prey to this compulsion during the course of my life, but it is an
impossibility whereby, even if we had everything we coveted, we inevitably remain ourselves. One of the saddest cases of this type of envy is described in the book *Leaders* by retired U.S. Army general Stanley McChrystal, Jeff Eggers, and Jason Mangone. In the book, they profile leaders in different industries and throughout history, both good and bad, and one of the people they highlight was American conductor, Leonard Bernstein (1918–90). Bernstein achieved amazing levels of success writing musicals such as *West Side Story* (1957) as well as conducting symphonies during the course of his life, but he was never happy with himself. Nothing was good enough and, even worse, he wished instead to be composer Aaron Copland (1900–90), who was best known for his ballet scores.¹

Author Ryan Holiday has an interesting take on this aspect of our lives. In *Stillness Is the Key*, Holiday talks about the concept of enough.² For those in the never-ending pursuit of material accumulation or fame, nothing will ever be enough. For those who can resist this urge and come to a point where they have accumulated enough, or are famous enough, life tends to be much easier and happier because they are satisfied with themselves and not always seeking more. He brings up the negative example of President Richard M. Nixon.³ Nothing was ever enough for him. He ran for president several times and finally reached his goal in 1968, but it was not enough. His desire to win reelection at all costs drove him to do things that were both ridiculous and, in some cases, illegal. He directed the formation of an organization called the Committee to Reelect the President (CRP officially, but also referred to as CREEP with some level of derision). Nixon’s efforts did result in reelection in 1972, but also led to the Watergate scandal,

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³ Holiday, *Stillness Is the Key*.
where some of the leading members of CREEP broke into the office of the Democratic National Committee located in the Watergate Office Building in Washington, DC, prior to the election to steal campaign secrets. Five CREEP members were arrested, though Nixon tried unsuccessfully to cover it up and eventually chose to resign as president instead of being impeached and forcibly removed from office by Congress.4 He was an intelligent and skilled politician who had reached the pinnacle office for his chosen career, but his legacy as president is that to date, he is the only president ever to resign the office.5 His inability to recognize when enough was enough ruined him.

Ironically, the accumulation of things also leads people to incessantly worry that they will lose all that they have collected. While some consider this the pursuit of happiness, it is reminiscent of the character from the classic novel by Miguel de Cervantes, Don Quixote. Quixote was an elderly man in fifteenth century Spain who had read so many books about the knights of old that he decided to become one even though their time and usefulness was long past. Quixote traveled the Spanish countryside in a makeshift suit of armor jousting at windmills because he thought they were giants. His efforts produced no tangible results and he could not understand why. His name is often used as an analogy to represent futile causes.6

To further reinforce this point, philosopher Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (ca. 480–525 CE), in The Consolation of Philosophy, covered a number of different topics and, for each one, he offered a poem. He dealt with the issue of wanting more (or never recognizing when enough is enough) in “Man’s Covetousness”:

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6 The novel Don Quixote was originally published in two parts: El ingenioso hidalgo don Quijote de la Mancha [The Ingenious Hidalgo Don Quixote of La Mancha], pt. 1, in 1605; and Segunda parte del ingenioso caballero don Quijote de la Mancha [Second Part of the Ingenious Knight Don Quixote of La Mancha], pt. 2, in 1615.
What though Plenty pour her gifts
with lavish hand,
Numberless as are the stars,
Countless as the sand,
Will the race of man, content,
Cease to murmur and lament?
Nay, though God, all-bounteous, give
Gold at man’s desire—
Honours, rank, and fame—content
Not a whit is nigher;
But an all-devouring greed
Yawns with ever-widening need.
Then what bounds can ever restrain
This wild lust of having,
When with each new bounty fed
Grows the frantic craving?
He is never rich whose fear
Sees grim Want forever near.\(^7\)

The truth is that people rarely remember us for what we have accumulated in life. Obituaries are not filled with a tabulated listing of how much the deceased was worth or how many cars or houses they owned. Ironically, many of the richest people in history seem to have been some of the most unhappy souls at the time they lived. Read the biographies of some of the multimillionaire tycoons of the late 1800s, for example. Many died alone and in extremely poor health due to the stress they encountered amassing their wealth and trying to keep it. Nicknamed “the robber barons,” many became philanthropists, giv-

ing away large sums of money in an effort to redeem their images, though ultimately failing.⁸

A book by Timothy Keller entitled *Making Sense of God: Finding God in the Modern World* offers a much different perspective. Keller was a member of the clergy for more than 40 years and spent a good amount of that time counseling the gravely ill in hospitals. He realized that the closeness of death forced people to focus on what is most important and everything else fades away to insignificance. In talking with those who are quite literally in the last days of their lives, he found them to be most concerned with whether they had paid enough attention to the people they loved, or if they had given enough of what they had accumulated to others in the form of charity, or if they had helped those around them enough instead of paying too much attention to themselves. In essence, it is what they had or had not done for others that mattered most.⁹

Personally, I prefer to follow the historical example best set by World War II British prime minister Winston Churchill, who said in a 10 October 1908 speech in Dundee, Scotland, well before he was famous, “What is the use of living, if it be not to strive for noble causes and to make this muddled world a better place for those who will live in it after we are gone?”¹⁰ There is the rub! What people do remember us for is what we have done for them and/or others. Equate this to the eulogy test: What will people say about us at our funeral? Will it be about how we have touched other people’s lives and made a pos-

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⁸ These American barons—John J. Astor, George M. Pullman, J. P. Morgan, Leland Stanford, John D. Rockefeller, and Andrew Carnegie, for example—ruled industry at the time, amassing vast fortunes with their monopolies, exploiting their workers, committing illegal business practices, and forming trusts that benefited few.


itive impact on them? Those are lasting memories, and the personal sense of completeness that accompanies altruistic actions are rarely matched in life. Randy Travis may have expressed this sentiment best in “Three Wooden Crosses”: “It’s not what you take when you leave this world behind you. It’s what you leave behind you when you go.”

Another movie, *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past*, starring Matthew McConaughey, offers a contemporary example of this idea. McConaughey’s character is a rich, shallow womanizer who comes to a life-changing moment one Christmas when the ghost of his dead uncle, played by Michael Douglas, who McConaughey idolized as a great role model for the type of life he was living, comes back to warn him to change his ways and not replicate his life. Douglas makes his point by bringing his nephew to the scene of his own funeral, which was only attended by a couple of people. The funeral is an elaborate venue with hundreds of seats available, but only one or two are filled because Douglas was such a terrible person, offering a clear reminder of the scene in Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* when Scrooge is brought to his own funeral by the ghost of Christmas Yet to Come and sees a great celebration. He thinks it is because they love him, but then realizes that all the people, one of whom is literally dancing on his coffin, are celebrating because they all owed him money and now they do not since he died alone without anyone willing or able to pursue the debts owed by the townspeople.

During a vacation that my family and I took one year, we visited a former home of one of the original robber barons, William Randolph Hearst, at San Simeon, California. He died in 1951 and the Hearst Cas-


Figure 3. William Randolph Hearst, ca. 1905–45
Source: Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.
tle is now a museum. This American “castle” was only 1 of more than 40 homes owned by Hearst around the world. Granted, he was not an admirable human being for many reasons, but what impressed me the most was something that was said about him. Throughout the Great Depression from 1929 to 1939, when millions were unemployed, he refused to lay off any of his thousands of employees even though he was losing a great deal of money by keeping them on. Hearst did not want to add to the calamity of America’s economic downturn and he did this for the benefit of others—his workers—most of whom he did not know. This is what I remember the most about the visit.13

From a personal perspective, I spent 31 months in combat in Iraq, and there were many highs and lows during that time. One incident stands out in my memory. As the battalion commander responsible for the city of Fallujah in 2007, an Iraqi man I knew from the city council meetings approached me. His neighbor’s son had been caught up in a sweep by the battalion we had replaced in Fallujah and was languishing in the prison system. The man assured me that it was simply a matter of the young man being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and that he was not an insurgent. The neighbor personally vouched for the young man’s character and ensured that he would stay clear of any further trouble if I could get him released. Though it took several weeks, I was able to get the young man freed from jail. My security detail and I picked him up from the release point at one of our camps. As we were about to depart and return him to his family in Fallujah, I made it clear that he understood what he owed his neighbor and that he needed to stay clear of trouble. He fervently assured me he would. When we arrived at his home, he jumped down from the vehicle and

13 This comment was made by the tour guide during the visit and cannot be substantiated in primary sources, though some reference to Hearst’s efforts can be seen in Louis W. Liebovich, *Bylines in Despair: Herbert Hoover, the Great Depression, and the U.S. News Media* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994).
knelt down to kiss the ground. He then ran inside and almost imme-
diately we could hear his mother crying hysterically and thanking God
for his safe return. The young man did indeed stay out of trouble, and
I like to think that we both changed his life.

Victor E. Frankl, a World War II death camp survivor, provided per-
haps the best answer to what brings happiness in life in his book Man’s
Search for Meaning. According to Frankl, people achieve a sense of pur-
pose and fulfillment in their life when it means something—something
to live for, a cause, or mission that enables one to feel worthwhile as
a human being. His concept of logotherapy, a school of psychothera-
py, considers the search for life’s meaning as a human’s primary mo-
tivational force. It is rarely anything material, and usually entails doing
things for others, but this sense of meaning is crucial. During his time
in various Nazi death camps, where Frankl lost most of his family,
those who survived did so because they felt they had something to
live for, and those who succumbed did so because they had given up
all hope. As such, they gave up the last thing they really had—their
own life. Frankl played off German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche’s
erly work, translating an early quote to, “He who has a why to live for
can bear with almost any how.”

One of my favorite humorists is Erma Bombeck. She wrote a syn-
dicated column, “At Wit’s End,” that ran from 1965 to 1996 that focused
on the challenges of living the suburban life in America. Unfortunately,
she died from cancer in April 1996. In 1979, someone asked her what
she would change about her life if she could live it over. The column

14 Though it has since been translated and reprinted many times, the original
work comes from Ein Psychologe erlebt das Konzentrationslager [Man’s Search for
Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy] (Vienna, Austria: Verlag für Jugend
und Volk, 1946).
15 Frankl, Man’s Search for Meaning. The original quote by Nietzsche, “Maxims
and Arrows,” Twilight of the Idols (1889) reads: “If we have our own ‘why’ of life
we shall get along with almost any ‘how’.”

Good Deeds | 29
Figure 4. Viktor Frankl, 1965
Source: Viktor Frankl Archive, Dr. Franz Vesely.

Figure 5. Erma Bombeck, 1982
Source: Special Collection and Archives, Wright State University Library.
she wrote in response has remained with me since. I keep it in a file marked “Wisdom for the Ages,” and the sentiments she expresses in it are not only applicable to concluding this chapter, but also words to live by.

**If I Had My Life to Live Over**

I would have talked less and listened more.

I would have invited friends over to dinner even if the carpet was stained, or the sofa faded.

I would have eaten the popcorn in the “good” living room and worried much less about the dirt when someone wanted to light a fire in the fireplace.

I would have taken the time to listen to my grandfather ramble about his youth.

I would never have insisted the car windows be rolled up on a summer day because my hair had just been teased and sprayed.

I would have burned the pink candle sculpted like a rose before it melted in storage.

I would have sat on the lawn with my children and not worried about grass stains.

I would have cried and laughed less while watching television and more while watching life.

I would have shared more of the responsibility carried by my husband.

I would have gone to bed when I was sick instead of pretending the earth would go into a holding pattern if I weren't there for the day.

I would never have bought anything just because it was practical, wouldn't show soil, or was guaranteed to last a lifetime.

Instead of wishing away nine months of pregnancy, I’d have cherished every moment and realized that the wonderment growing inside me was the only chance in life to assist God in a miracle.
When my kids kissed me impetuously, I would never have said, “Later. Now go get washed up for dinner.”

There would have been more “I love you’s,” more “I’m sorry’s” . . . but mostly, given another shot at life, I would seize every minute . . . look at it and really see it . . . live it . . . and never give it back.

Stop sweating the small stuff. Don’t worry about who doesn’t like you, who has more, or who’s doing what.

Instead, let’s cherish the relationships we have with those who do love us.

Let's think about what God HAS blessed us with.16

Questions to Consider

1. What do you value most in your life and how do you show it?
2. What have you done for those around you lately with no expectation of anything in return?
3. What is the cause or mission for which you live your life?

Suggested Further Study


I have been trying to understand philosophy better by making myself read it. I do not have much patience for it, but this book was an exception due to the value I found in its pages, especially the quote used in this chapter.


16 Bombeck’s column originally ran in the Dayton, OH, Journal Herald, but was soon syndicated in hundreds of newspapers across the country. Erma Bombeck, “If I Had My Life to Live Over,” in Eat Less Cottage Cheese and More Ice Cream: Thoughts on Life from Erma Bombeck (Kansas, MO: Andrews McMeel Publishing; Burnham: Derek Searle, 2003).
A classic of literature and a great lesson on what is important in life.


To have survived the Nazi death camps and still be the good person that is so evident in Frankl's writings truly struck me as amazing.


One of quite a few books written by this author and I have found all of them to be of value in forming and reinforcing a personal philosophy for life.


With all the confusion that seems to exist out there, seeking answers regarding God is something I have been pursuing. This book was helpful in that pursuit.


Churchill has always fascinated me—he achieved so much and had such an eventful life—and his ability to resist and never give in despite all he experienced in life is a good example and this book serves to illustrate that fact.


A good study in leadership and what it takes to be successful in that regard.


Much like *A Christmas Carol*, this movie offers a good lesson on what is important in life.