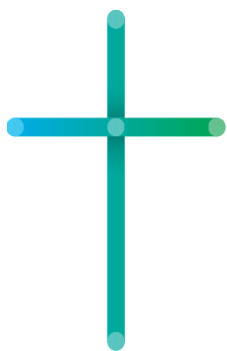


Flourishing In Ministry:

Clergy, Ministry Life and Wellbeing



FLOURISHING
IN MINISTRY

Research Insights
from the Flourishing in
Ministry Project

Matt Bloom, Ph.D.
July 2017

Flourishing in Ministry: An Introduction to the Science of Wellbeing

—
We hold these truths to be self evident,
that all men are created equal, that all men
are endowed by their Creator with certain
unalienable Rights, that among these are Life,
Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.

Declaration of Independence

There is something ridiculous and even quite
indecent in an individual's claim to be happy.

Malcolm Muggeridge

—
The science of wellbeing is young. It has been around for about three decades--only a short time in science-years. But the goal of this research is profound: to understand the best, most positive dimension of life. Scientists have learned a lot about how to help people who are suffering, which is good and important work. But we scientists also wanted to offer insights about the positive sides of living. Wellbeing is about life at its best. It includes experiences like happiness, meaning, joy and inspiration. When I first began my studies of wellbeing nearly 20 years ago I joined a rapidly growing group of researchers interested in understanding the



Flourishing happens
when ministry is a life-
enriching rather than life-
depleting experience.

positive dimensions of human life. My interest arose from my core life values: I believe in the intrinsic value of all people and I believe that human wellbeing is an intrinsic good. I believe human wellbeing is good in and of itself, not for what it can lead to (although it can lead to many good things), but because I believe all people should be able to flourish. I was familiar with Thomas Jefferson's claim that happiness is a fundamental human right and I agreed with Mr. Jefferson. I still do.

Once I started giving presentations on my research, however, I soon became familiar with people like Malcolm Muggeridge who have sometimes grave concerns with happiness. Muggeridge was a famous satirist and curmudgeon so it is hard to know if he really considered happiness to be ridiculous or indecent. His sentiments, however, seem to strike a chord with some people. Almost every audience has at least one person who has apprehensions about research on wellbeing. Top-selling author Barbara Ehrenreich

wrote Bright-sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America to convey her concerns about the pursuit of happiness.

Some of this disagreement about happiness might derive from different understandings of what happiness actually is. Socrates admonished that "the beginning of wisdom is the definition of terms." As scientists, my team and I agree. We want precision in our terms so we pinpoint what we are studying. Precision helps to ensure that our research produces verifiable knowledge and useful insights. A more precise definition will, I think, help non-researchers understand their own wellbeing better and also help explain why researchers think that happiness and other forms of wellbeing are so important.

The Four Building Blocks of Wellbeing

I want to begin with a quick comparison of wellness and wellbeing. Wellness is typically used for our physical health

The Four Dimensions of Flourishing in Ministry



while wellbeing is used for our psychological, social, and spiritual health. Wellness is about a healthy body and mind; wellbeing is about a flourishing life. Wellness and physical health provide a nice starting place for understanding wellbeing. Our wellness, for

example comprises a number of different dimensions including cardiovascular health, respiratory health, musculoskeletal health, and digestive health. Each of these wellness dimensions has particular health-related capacities. Cardiovascular health, for example,

comprises our capacity to rapidly move oxygen, carbon dioxide, nutrients, hormones and other important materials efficiently throughout our body. Our respiratory health is our capacity to bring sufficient oxygen into and remove carbon dioxide from our body. Our musculoskeletal health is our body's capacity to move and its ability to provide physical space and protection for all of the other health systems. Our overall wellness, then, is composed of the healthiness of these major

dimensions or health systems. Wellbeing is similarly made up of major dimensions. There are four:

- **Happiness**--the emotional dynamics and the subjective quality of our daily lives.
- **Resilience**--our capacity to adapt, change, and respond to life's challenges, and also our capacity to grow, learn, and to develop new capabilities and capacities.
- **Self-integrity**--our identity or

self concept which includes the beliefs we hold about who we are as physical, psychological, intellectual, social, and moral/spiritual beings; our self-image, self-esteem and self-worth; and our sense of respect and dignity.

- **Thriving**--the meaning and significance we experience in our lives; our sense of having values and beliefs that inspire us, create purpose, and provide moral guidance to our lives; experiencing deep and positive connections with others.

These dimensions are also referred to as the "building blocks of wellbeing" to emphasize that our wellbeing is an aggregate of all four dimensions. My team and I use the term flourishing to describe when someone is experiencing high levels of all four dimensions. We flourish when we experience happiness, resilience, self-integrity and thriving. In the pages ahead I provide a richer description of each of these building blocks.

When we think about maintaining

wellness we know there are complex connections among the major health systems. For example, when we engage in physical exercise, we not only strengthen our muscles and bones, we also strengthen our cardiovascular and respiratory systems. In turn, healthier cardiovascular and respiratory systems increase the health of our muscles and bones, as well as the health of our brains and other organs. These are just a few of the many important interconnections that work together to create our overall physical health. The same is true of wellbeing: There are important interconnections among the building blocks. In fact, they build on each other so when one dimension goes up it tends to boost or build up the others. Unfortunately, the reverse is also true: weakening in one building block tends to cause declines in the others. I will describe how these interconnections among dimensions are important for restoring and sustaining wellbeing.

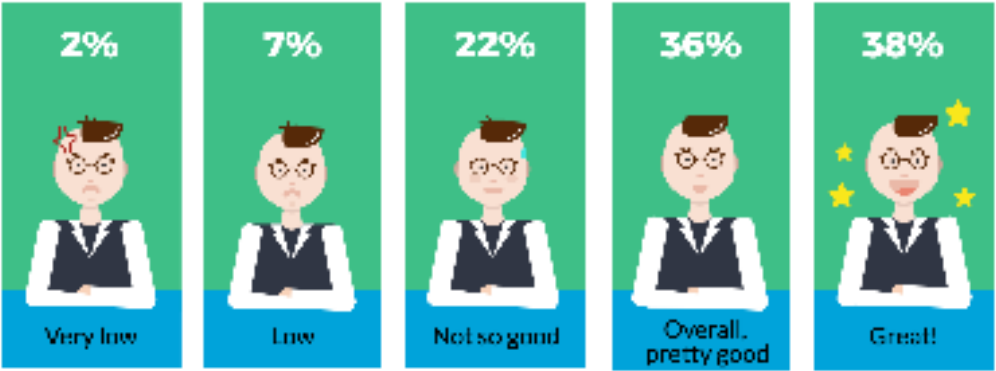
One final introductory note. The



term “self-care” is used often in caregiving professions as a catch-all for actions necessary to sustain wellness and wellbeing. I find this word troubling because it is often used in ways that seem to overlook or ignore the profound ways our health and wellbeing are impacted by the people and groups we are surrounded by. There are certainly important responsibilities each of us has for our own wellbeing, but there are also important responsibilities each of us has for each other’s wellbeing. My team and I use the phrase “ecosystems of wellbeing” to capture the social interdependencies that shape our wellbeing. The people we live and work with are part of our ecosystem, but so too are the groups and organizations that create and shape the environments in which we live and work.



Pastors level of overall happiness in life



As I describe each building block of wellbeing, I will highlight both the individual and social aspects of each dimension. It will be important to keep ecosystems of wellbeing in mind. I will begin with the dimension of wellbeing that has been the focus of the most research--happiness. I think a happy start to our journey through wellbeing will be a good start.

Everyday Happiness

People have probably always been

interested in the topic of happiness. Historian Darrin McMahon notes that one of the first books ever written discusses happiness.¹ But as the epigraphs to this chapter illustrate, and Professor McMahon confirms, happiness has always been a contested idea. Throughout history some people have viewed the pursuit of happiness as the “highest human calling, the most perfect human state,” while others, like Muggeridge, have argued it is frivolous. Some pundits have

maintained pursuing happiness is a sure road to ruin and despair.² Scientific understandings of happiness show that it is more than an ephemeral state. In fact, science says that happiness is essential for our long-term health and growth. Researchers prefer the term subjective wellbeing over happiness because it draws attention to the fact that happiness is based upon our personal, subjective experiences and evaluations of our lives. Our

subjective wellbeing or happiness arises from the real experiences we have in our daily lives and also from the way we judge or evaluate our daily lives. **Happiness=experience + evaluation.**

Our feelings, moods, and emotions are the experience part of the happiness equation.³ There are many kinds of feelings. Positive feelings range from peacefulness to cheerfulness to inspiration to awe. Researchers use the term “happy” as a short-hand for

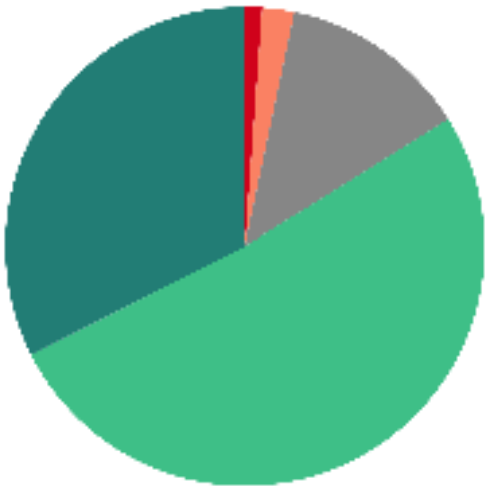


any positive mood or emotion. Feeling calm? For researchers, you are happy. Feeling cheerful? You are happy. Feeling excited? You are happy. Similarly, there is a wide range of negative feelings including boredom, frustration, irritation, sadness, anxiety, grief,

our daily lives, often without realizing we are doing it. When we say, “This is a good day” or “This is a bad day,” we are rapidly assessing the quality of our lives on that particular day. If you meet someone in the hallway at work or in the aisle at the grocery store, you

Job satisfaction

Very low (1.77%)
Low (2.17%)
Neutral (12.05%)
High (51.47%)
Very high (32.44%)



despair, and anger. Researchers sometimes use the term “unhappy” to describe any negative mood or emotion.

The evaluation part of happiness is the quick, Gestalt-like judgments we are continuously making about

might ask “How are you?” If they give you a real answer, something more than a polite “fine,” they will likely be describing their most recent life evaluations. Our feelings shape these quick evaluations, but our powerful brains are also processing a lot of information and

drawing fast conclusions about what is happening inside and around us in our daily lives. These fast conclusions are the evaluative part of happiness.

We operate on these fast conclusions. In general, this is a good thing. Once our minds grasp how things are going, we can do something about it. When things are going well, we can try to continue that good trend. When things are not going well, we can try to make adjustments to reverse things. In fact, unhappiness is usually a warning that is telling us that change should happen. An important purpose of these fast conclusions is to marshal our brain power so we can respond, and respond quickly when necessary. One reason scientists are studying happiness is to provide information that will help us make appropriate responses.

[What is Happiness Good For?](#)

Some people have misinterpreted the science of happiness as asserting that unhappiness is bad.

It is important to feel grief over a significant loss, to be appropriately angry about injustices, to feel afraid when we are in danger. Scientists would be concerned if someone does not feel sadness, anger, or fear when there are real causes. Furthermore, people who face significant stressors at work usually experience everyday unhappiness, and with good reason. Their judgments that work is too stressful are spot on. The key insight from research is that, in general and on balance, we are better off when our typical or most frequent experience is tipped toward happiness rather than unhappiness. My team and I call this everyday happiness. There are real advantages from everyday happiness.

Researchers have found, for example, that we are healthier when we experience everyday happiness. Everyday happiness is associated with stronger immune systems, more rapid recovery from illness and injury, and research indicates it may be linked to longer



life spans. We tend to make better decisions when we are happy. This is true even for the rational, logical decisions we may have been taught are best made without emotions. We are more creative when we experience everyday happiness. Our minds are more aware of new information when we experience positive emotions. Our thinking is more flexible and we are open to different ideas. There are exceptions, like the unhappy but brilliant artist--Vincent Van Gogh, Earnest Hemingway, Robin Williams--but for most of us happiness leads to more creativity.

We respond better to adversity when we experience happiness before a challenge or crisis. Part of this is because we can think better and more creatively during the crisis and, therefore, can figure out how to respond better to adversity. But everyday happiness builds reserves for dealing with challenge and stress. We are more helpful and altruistic, and engage in more positive social interactions when we are happy. In ways researchers

do not fully understand, everyday happiness seems to facilitate building new relationships and strengthening old ones. People are certainly nicer to be with when they are happy--it is really difficult to be with grumpy or morose people. But everyday happiness seems to open up other as yet unknown capacities for building and sustaining good relationships. The main point is that more and more science is showing that everyday happiness leads to good outcomes, for ourselves and for the people we love, work around, and live with.

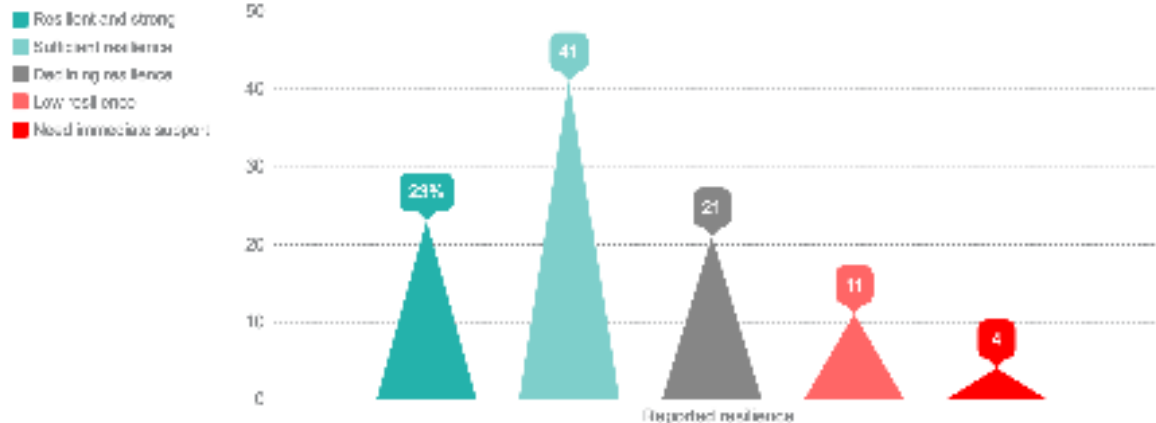
[Happiness \(and Unhappiness\) Accumulates](#)

Recall that happiness comprises many kinds of experiences: the feeling of accomplishment we get from a good day's work, the enjoyment of working with good colleagues, the excitement we get from overcoming a work challenge, the joy we experience from doing work we find meaningful. Likewise there are many experiences that cause unhappiness: anger when

someone is rude to us, frustration when we encounter a traffic jam; irritation from the guy at the office who always complains, and dejection from working hard only to be harshly criticized for failing to meet an impossible deadline. This leads me to one last research insight: happiness accumulates.

caregiving work is challenging and difficult. Caregivers are face-to-face with human suffering. Their days are long and their workload is heavy. Their work days are often full of unhappy experiences. Yet caregivers often overlook these daily experiences--they are focused on caring for others not

How resilient do pastors feel?



So does unhappiness. All of the moments and experiences of our everyday lives impact our happiness, but we may be unaware of that impact.

Someone once described being a caregiver as sometimes feeling like "death by a thousand paper cuts." The point she was making is that

themselves. Science shows that these negative experiences may be piling up. The pile of negative experiences gets bigger as one difficult day follows another. As a consequence, their health declines, their decision making suffers, they are less effective in their work and less capable of dealing with the challenges and difficulties. When



the pile gets too big, it collapses on them. This is when exhaustion and burnout set in.

Happiness research shows us that we need to pay attention to how our days are piling up. Are we experiencing everyday happiness or, like too many caregivers, is our pile of unhappy days getting larger? Do you feel like the weeks and months of your life are rushing by? If you feel this way, then step

back from the rush of life and pay attention to your everyday experience.

Resilience

When my wife Kim was pastoring a large church, Harold and Lorraine were among my favorite members of that congregation. I suppose as the pastor's spouse I shouldn't have had favorites, but I did. They were kind, compassionate, and positive, humble and strong, able

to help others and also able to accept help for themselves. They were among the "rocks of the church," those rare and valuable people who are the foundation for any strong community. Harold served on several church boards and Lorraine was one of the most skillful members of the church care team. They were always involved in some activity to help other people. But Harold and Lorraine also experienced more than their share of difficulties in life. One of their children struggled with drug addiction so they had to care for their grandchildren. Their other child was born with mental challenges that prevented him from ever living alone. Lorraine had a long-term struggle with cancer. Even so they were at church almost every Sunday, happily greeting people as they walked in for morning worship services. Every week they were doing something to care for others. Harold and Lorraine are examples of people with high resilience.

If happiness is our daily wellbeing

monitoring system, then resilience is our daily wellbeing response system. Resilience comprises our capacities to adjust to changes in the world around us, to achieve our life goals, and to keep growing and reaching toward our fullest potential. Wellbeing is not static--it goes with the flow of our lives--and so resilience is, in part, our ability to respond to the changing and sometimes challenging world around us. Resilient people are able to respond effectively to challenges and crises and they are not diminished or damaged by such experiences. They may experience temporary declines in their overall wellbeing, but because they are resilient they can recover quickly and bounce back to the level of wellbeing they experienced before the set-back. Resilience also comprises our capacities for growth and personal development. Resilient people are intrinsically motivated to increase their knowledge and abilities, develop new capabilities, and learn new things. They have a strong, internal drive to learn more about

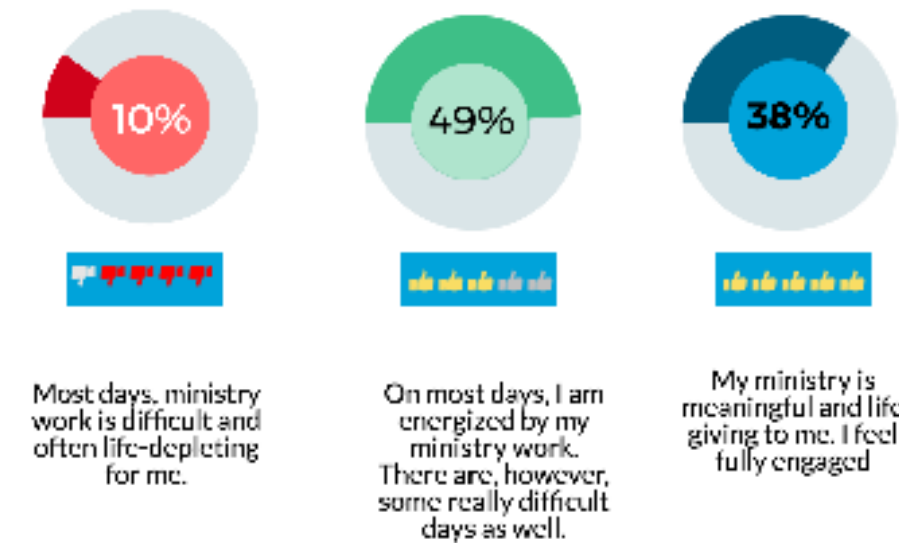
themselves so they can become a better person.

Researchers use the term self-regulating capacities to describe some of the essential elements of resilience. They are the basis for our ability to adapt, adjust, and change. They help us control our impulses, manage our desires, make good choices, focus on what is important, and set and achieve important life goals. In other words, self-regulating capacities help us maintain equilibrium in our lives. There are three self-regulatory capacities: self-awareness, self-reflectivity, and self-control. Self-awareness is the ability to step-back from the flow of life to notice what we are feeling, thinking and doing. It is the capacity to pay attention and recognize what is happening inside us and around us. Researchers have discovered that we too often live in a fog, unaware of why we do and say and feel the things we do. We can come up with apparently good explanations after the fact, but for many of us, a significant

portion of our behavior is beyond our conscious awareness. People with high self-awareness are able to get out of this fog. They have an on-going ability to notice things like “I am feeling this particular mood or emotion,” “I am thinking about this topic” or “I responded to that person in this specific way.” They also take notice of how their words and deeds affect other people. When we describe someone as being “a bull in a china shop,” we are describing someone with little to no self-awareness. Likewise self-awareness is not self-consciousness, that overly-sensitive, uncomfortable form of self-attention many of us experienced during our adolescence when we thought so much about ourselves we became ill-at-ease in (and, given to over-thinking about pimples and blemishes, sometimes with) our own skin. Self-awareness strikes a Goldilocks place of not-too-much nor too-little self-thinking.

Self-reflectivity is the ability to examine and think about our

How energized and inspired do pastors feel in their ministry work?



that response lead to positive or negative outcomes. Emotional intelligence--the capacity to recognize and understand our emotions and the emotions of others--is one example of how self-awareness and self-reflectivity work together.⁴ Self-reflectivity is not ruminating about ourselves, working each thought or feeling or action into a knotty, messy ball of hyper self-criticism. Self-reflectivity strikes another Goldilocks place of noticing what is going on inside and around us, and what role we have played in those goings-on.

control is our capacity to respond to that information. Self-control is our ability to change things in ourselves and the world around us. It includes our ability to set and achieve goals in life, to change things about ourselves (e.g., giving up bad habits), and our ability to adapt and adjust to the world around us (e.g., learning how to work better with a difficult colleague). It also includes our capacity to change the world around us to make it more suitable for ourselves and others (e.g., saying no to another request from our boss to work

late). And, as Niebuhr's prayer emphasizes, self-control is also our ability to distinguish when we should try to change the world and when we should change ourselves. Self-control is sometimes called willpower or agency. The word willpower captures our capacities to control our urges and impulses and our ability to do the right thing even in the face of difficulties. The word agency captures our abilities to take action, to think ahead and be proactive, and to set the right goals and persist in achieving them. Setting appropriate boundaries around work and then sticking to those boundaries is an example of high self-control.

Researcher Roy Baumeister uses the "muscle" metaphor to illustrate how self-control works.⁵ When we use a muscle it gets tired; rest is required to build-back its strength. Similarly, using our self-control temporarily weakens that capacity. If we have to exert a lot of willpower, say to continue working in a very challenging context, our willpower reserves are depleted. This means

that a series of bad days will likely weaken our resilience which, in turn, will diminish our capacity to deal effectively with more bad days. During that low state, even simple problems can become insurmountable. This is when we might, for example, say things we don't mean out of anger or find ourselves unable to face another day of work.

A second major element of resilience is positive life dynamics. Life dynamics give shape and form to our lives and, in turn, they shape our everyday happiness. They include things like work-life or work-family balance, the patterns and qualities of our daily social interactions, and the highs and lows--the boosters and stressors--that typify our daily lives. I describe self-regulating capacities as the capacities we have to maintain equilibrium; life dynamics are the ways that other people and groups impact our equilibrium. Life dynamics tend to endure over time and so they form an important on-going

aspect of wellbeing. My team and I sometimes call these the rhythms of resilience because life dynamics form a cadence that shapes our self-regulating capacities and our everyday happiness. Positive life dynamics are more regular, smooth, and harmonious. We can adjust to positive life dynamics and sometimes we can even adjust the life dynamic itself. Take the experiences of new parents at home with their first baby as an example. The first few days are a chaotic blur, but over time most parents learn to adjust in some ways to the baby's schedule and also help the baby develop a smoother pattern of sleep, feeding, changing, etc. The first days on a new job are often confusing, but we learn the culture of our new organization, figure out who is who and how people work here. We find the restroom, figure out how to get from our desk to the boss's office. Our work dynamic is better partly because we learn how to fit in and partly because we figure out how to make ourselves more comfortable.

It turns out that work load is one of the most important life dynamics. My team and I find that the work load of most caregivers creates a discordant, even cacophonous, rhythm in their work life. It is more than just the sheer amount of work that matters. For many caregivers, work is unpredictable and extremely diverse. Work does not come in a well-ordered flow, but is more pell-mell, a fast-paced, continuous jumble of different tasks. The extreme diversity of tasks means caregiving work also has high "switching costs." When caregivers move from one task to another, the new task requires a very different skill set and work approach than the previous task. A pastor, for example, leaves a meeting about church finances to care for a family grieving the death of a loved one. The unpredictability makes it hard to prioritize and plan work, the extreme diversity makes it hard to prepare and adjust to work tasks. Caregiving work is also irregularly punctuated by emergencies--caregivers never know when a crisis will erupt, but

they know one could happen at almost any time. This kind of work load is not just arrhythmic--it has no cadence or pattern--it is also often erratic. Erratic life rhythms constantly tax caregivers' self-regulating capacities making it nearly impossible to adjust or adapt. They also undermine everyday happiness--most people find chaos worrisome and anxiety-producing--which further diminishes resilience.

Resilient people are, for example, able to "just say no" to overworking. They notice when stress is building up and take action to reduce it. They also develop ways of rebuilding or maintaining their wellbeing that fit well into their life. We find examples from all of the caring professions we study. One resilient



humanitarian worker told us that he takes time every morning to journal about his life. It is his way of maintaining a good perspective on his work and it helps him deal more effectively with work challenges. Another humanitarian worker takes a nap everyday. He knows a nap will restore and re-energize him, so it is a priority except during emergencies. Several physicians write poetry

together because it helps them work through difficult issues from their medical practices. Poetry also helps them experience more joy in their practice of medicine. A number of Catholic and Protestant clergy use St. Ignatius' prayer of examen at the end of each day.⁶ They told us that this daily practice of reflection nourishes their spirits and helps them become better people and better pastors. These are just a few examples of how

some caregivers sustain strong resilience capacities.

One way to boost resilience is to map your life dynamics. If you map your daily experiences, some of your important life dynamics will show up in that map, but it may be helpful to focus on specific kinds of dynamics. Take, for example, work-life or work-family dynamics. Map those as well. When are things tense and difficult between work and the rest of your life? When



is there a nice rhythm between the two, when everything seems balanced and smooth? Map the patterns in your own work load. With maps like these in hand, you can start to examine what creates smooth work-life rhythms and what interrupts or disrupts positive work-life dynamics.

Self-integrity

When I was in senior high school I was shy, awkward, and very self-conscious. I always tried to fade into the background at school. I waited for the bus a block away from the stop just to avoid having to wait with other students. I did not feel good about myself. I was probably more like my peers than I knew, but I remember feeling lost with myself and alone in the world. My parents were so concerned that they had me work with a therapist in hopes it might help boost my self-esteem. Looking back on that time of my life, I would describe high school Matt as experiencing low self-integrity.

Self-integrity is the third building

block of wellbeing. Part of having self-integrity is knowing ourselves well and, on balance, feeling good about who we are. It includes what we might call balanced self-esteem and self-worth--to know our strengths and weaknesses, our good sides and our bad sides, our noble characteristics and our darker tendencies. Self-integrity includes living up to our moral standards about how we treat others and how we show up in the world. It includes striving to be a good person and to become a better person. Self-integrity is feeling that other people respect us and also treating others so they feel respected by us. Dignity and self-integrity go hand-in-hand.

Researchers describe the first part of self-integrity, knowing oneself, having a clear and positive identity. Our identity or self-concept is the way we understand and think about who we are and how we fit into the world around us. Our identity includes all of the things we attribute as being essential to who we are as a person. Our

talents and skills, our personality, the things we care about and don't care about, and our passions and interests are all part of our identity. So too is our history, the important things we did, the key events we experienced, the significant people in our lives, and how all those people and things have shaped how we think about ourselves. Our identity includes the important roles, relationships, and group memberships in our lives. Finally, our identity includes our life values and beliefs which define for us what is important, valuable, worthy, and noble in life, what matters most to us, and what we want to stand and live for. So,

my identity includes things like having a talent for learning, a love for creating new ideas, being an extroverted-introvert. My identity also includes the important roles in my life like being a professor, Kim Bloom's husband, Nicholas and Keaton's dad, and a passionate backcountry hiker. My core values--"Honoring and illuminating the dignity of each person" is one of them--are also a central element of how I understand myself and my place in the world.

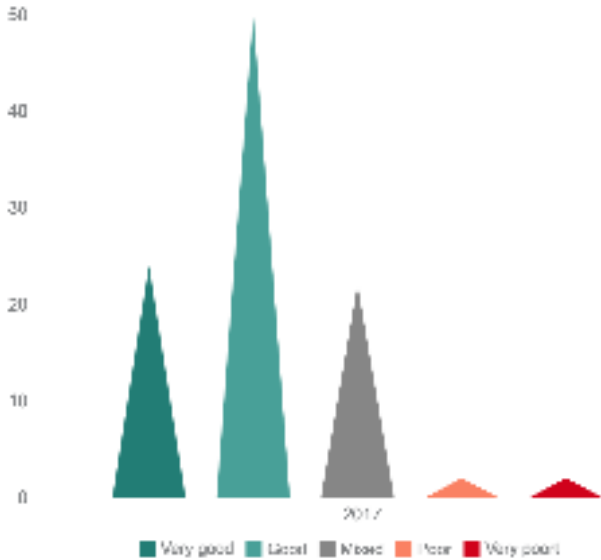
A clear identity means that we know and claim our strengths, talents, gifts and skills, as well as our weaknesses, the talents we



do not have and the skills we lack. Clarity is sometimes described as fidelity--accuracy about our good and bad characteristics, being realistic about the light and dark sides of our personality, being scrupulous about recognizing our noble features as well as foibles and flaws. A positive identity means

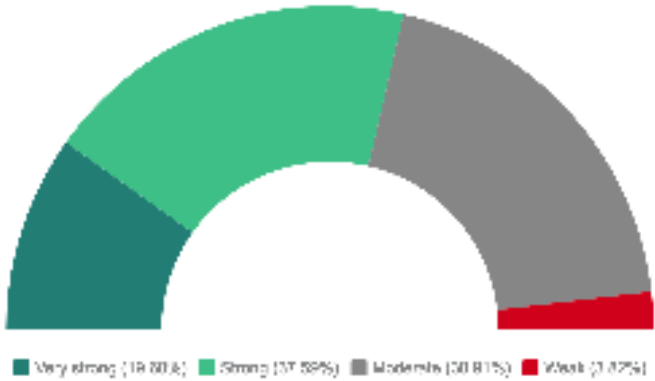
proper sense of self-worth and self-esteem. Interestingly, research shows that people with a positive identity tend to have far fewer prejudices and they are seen by other people as being respectful. People with a clear and positive identity think well of themselves and well of others.

**Quality of fit
between pastor and
local ministry
context**



that, with clarity around all that we are, we see ourselves as on balance a good person. Brené Brown describes this as “the courage to be imperfect, vulnerable, and to set boundaries.” Having a positive identity does not mean we think better of ourselves, but rather we think well of ourselves. We have a

Strength of pastors identity



world--authenticity does not mean saying or doing whatever we want whenever we want--but rather it means being able to act and behave in ways that are more consistent with our clear and positive identity. Authentic people have higher self-regulatory capacities because they are able to spend less time and energy trying to be a different kind of person than they truly are. They are prudent but not prudish. They know how to be respectful of others and respectful of themselves. They are adept at social discretion and willing to stand up appropriately for what they believe in.

A piece of advice that is often given to people new to a job is “fake it until you make it.” This may not be good advice if faking it means we are trying to act in ways that are contrary to our identity. Of course, in some new situations we have to figure out how to do things--that is learning, not faking it. Of course, to be respectful of others, we should be careful about what we say and what we do. But we should also be able to behave in ways that are true-to-ourselves. We should live out our core values and stand up for what we believe in. Self-integrity is being truthful to ourselves and prudent-

-“wise, discerning, knowledgeable; judicious, sensible”⁸--toward others. To flourish we need to feel we can be our true selves in the important domains of life, including work. When we fake it, we rarely feel good. When we can be true to our selves, we feel honest and natural. Self-integrity is part of experiencing life at its best. Our research shows that self-integrity frees people to be at their best, helps them to develop and sustain strong and positive relationships, promotes adaptability, and

increases resilience.

Thriving

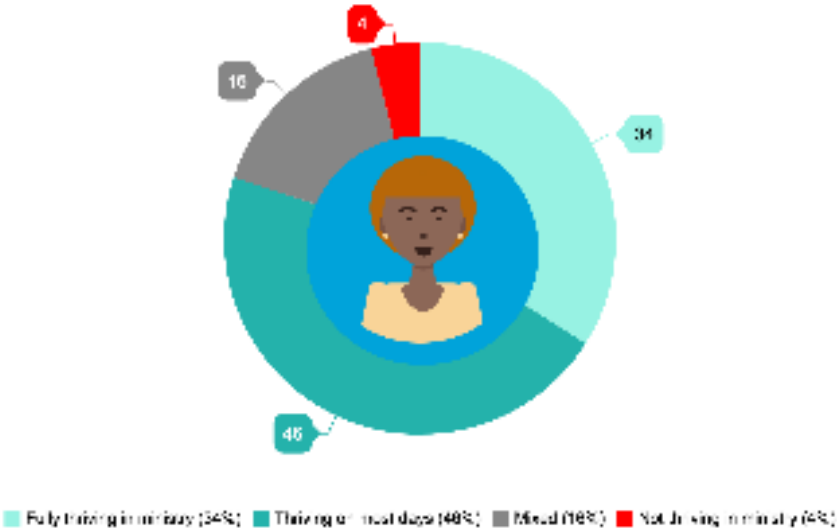
Thriving has very ancient roots, going back at least to the Greeks in the fourth century BCE. Aristotle is regarded as the first person to formally study and write about this dimension of wellbeing and so researchers have adopted his term eudaimonia as our technical term for this dimension. Unpacking the word eudaimonia provides some important insights into thriving. The Greek daimon refers to our

state of being, our soul or spirit and the prefix eu refers to good or well. So, more literally translated eudaimonia is having a good indwelling spirit, but practically understood it is living a meaningful and purposeful life, a state Aristotle thought was essential. Researchers are still searching for more precise answers to what thriving is, but there is strong consensus that it includes at least three elements: (1) an overarching system of beliefs, values and virtues that provides structure and guidance to life (meaning system), (2) a sense of contributing toward important aspirations or goals in life (purpose in life), and (3) experiencing strong, positive connections with other people, especially those with whom we share common beliefs and values (positive connections).⁹ A deeper look at each of these elements will help us gain a richer understanding of thriving.

I Believe in which he explored “the personal philosophies of thoughtful men and women in all walks of life...will talk out loud about the rules they live by, the things they have found to be the basic values in their lives.” Pearl Buck (“My faith in humanity stands firm”), James Michener (“I believe that all men are brothers”) and Jackie Robinson (“I believe in the power of free minds and free hearts at work”) were among those who shared their beliefs on the radio. This program was recreated in 2005 on National Public Radio.¹⁰ Once again, famous people shared from their meaning system. Novelist John Updike believes “most instinctively...in the human value of creative writing,” Colin Powell shared “I believe in America and I believe in our people,” and Sister Helen Prejean believes in the importance of turning our beliefs into meaningful actions.

The popularity of these radio shows points to a fundamental insight about human nature: We have an innate need to find

How many pastors are thriving in their ministry?



Meaning system

In the 1950s, Edward R. Murrow hosted a radio show titled This

meaning in our lives and our core life beliefs are essential to fulfilling that need. For centuries philosophers and theologians have asserted that all people need answers to questions like “Why am I here?” and “What should I do with my life? Modern research concurs with ancient wisdom: we need a meaning system. A meaning system provides core life values and beliefs that gives direction to our lives and sets ideals for the kind of person we should strive to become. Our meaning system operates like our life GPS: it points us toward what is most significant and consequential in life, provides us with a path we can follow to live a life of value and worth, sets life goals we can use as milestones to keep us on that path, and provides motivation that keeps us moving ever closer toward an ideal, virtuous life.

People vary in terms of the clarity and strength of their meaning system. Some people know what they believe, why they believe those things and they strive to live

those beliefs in their daily lives. Their meaning system is clear and strong and, therefore, it shapes how they view themselves, how they interact with other people, and how they live and act within the larger world around them. Other people seem lost in a world of conflicting or poorly-defined beliefs, unsure of where they stand on matters of importance. They are adrift in life without a clear sense of direction in life.. They follow one set of values at work, another set of values at church and still another when they are out with friends. Their life lacks direction and purpose because they do not have a clear and coherent meaning system.

During my early adult years I had a sense that teaching would be meaningful to me, but for a long time I ignored those thoughts. I had never taught a day in my life so I dismissed those thoughts as baseless. After I finished my Ph.D. I spent several months clarifying my core life beliefs and values. It was an important, but difficult process

for me. One of the many positive outcomes of that experience was that I finally understood why teaching would be meaningful for me. One of my core life values is to pursue truth and wisdom that will serve the wellbeing of others. I see teaching as a way I can guide other people toward new knowledge and insights that will benefit them. The subjects I select for my teaching are also chosen with this value in mind. For example, I teach classes about innovation, but I always cast the class around social innovation, creating new ideas that will enrich the lives of other people and make the world a better place. Clarifying my core values was and still is an important part of my thriving.

Researchers have consistently found that a strong and clear understanding of what is meaningful and important in life is one of the most powerful predictors of health, longevity and happiness.¹¹ When we have such a meaning system, we can invest our lives in things that we know are important. A meaning system

inspires us to strive to become our best selves and it helps us through the darkest moments of life. My team and I have found that people who have a strong meaning system, one with clear life values and beliefs, are much more likely to thrive at work. Their work is meaningful because they have chosen work that allows them to express some of their most cherished values or most deeply held beliefs in and through their work.

[Purpose in life](#)

Philosophers, theologians and researchers all believe that, in addition to finding meaning, we also have an innate need to do something with our lives that we think is important and useful. We need to know that our time on earth has mattered in some positive way.¹⁴ We need a purpose (or several purposes) in life. We can think of purpose in life as a set of overarching goals we strive to achieve and toward which we can direct our best selves. Purpose creates the milestones

in our meaning GPS, guiding us to make a positive difference in the world and leading us ever closer to reaching our fullest potential. Purpose is meaning in action.

Purpose is particularly important at work. Given the hours most of us spend at our jobs, we need to know we are using that time well. We need to feel that all of our hard work and effort are making a positive difference in the world. Common among the stories we heard from physicians was their dedication to caring for each patient as the unique person they are, bringing science and compassion together to advance healing. Teachers often expressed their purpose was helping children understand their personal value and potential through the transformative experience of education. Humanitarian workers often spoke of their passion for social justice and the sense of purpose they experienced from working to honor and uphold the dignity of all people, especially those who have been marginalized,

exploited, or victimized. Clergy spoke about their aspiration to help people find meaning and purpose in their own lives. People who feel called to their work often speak about something bigger and more important beyond themselves that inspires and motivates them in their work. They are speaking about their deep sense of purpose- they know their work contributes to something they believe really matters.

Positive connections

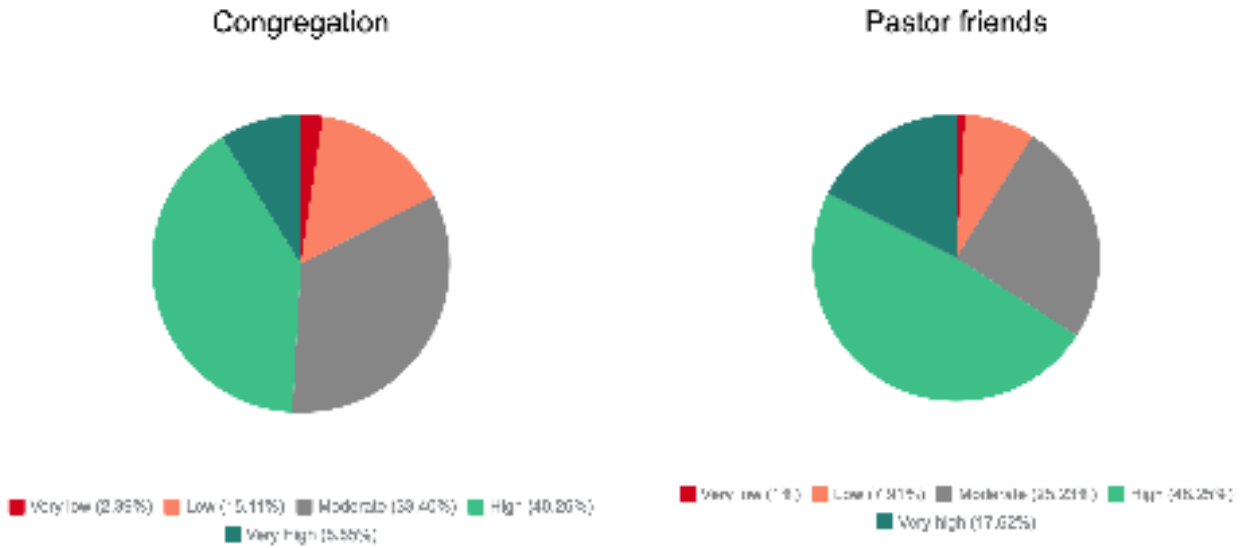
A final element of thriving is to feel connected to others in bonds of care, respect and love. We are fundamentally social beings. This is a scientific fact. Scientific research clearly shows that positive relationships with other people are essential for our wellbeing.¹² For example, research shows that isolation from others can be devastating to our physical and mental health, often having an impact greater than chronic smoking or obesity.¹³

Positive connections have

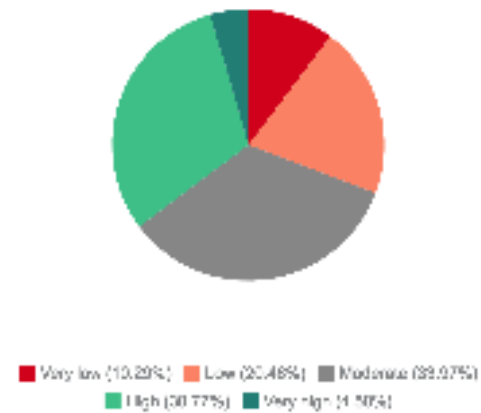
many important characteristics including mutual care and compassion, emotional support, and unconditional acceptance. In a positive relationship we feel accepted for who we are, supported in the triumphs and sorrows of our life, and encouraged to grow and develop our fullest capabilities. When we have positive relationships, we can be our authentic selves, sharing our deepest concerns, fears and weaknesses, and feeling supported and uplifted as we strive to live a life of meaning and purpose. Positive relationships are mutual: we create that space of care, support, respect and love for

those who offer it to us. We need positive connections in all of the spheres of life, including work.¹⁴ There is often a sense that “appropriate” relationships at work are all about work, nothing more. Anything “personal” is off-limits at work. Of course there are some aspects of our lives that should not be shared at work; positive connectedness does not require oversharing. It does require engaging people beyond their work role. Positive connectedness means we feel respected for who we are, accepted and validated for our strengths and talents, as well as for our idiosyncrasies, uniqueness,

Quality of social support pastors receive



Denominational leaders



and even our oddities. I can be very scatter-brained and often poorly organized. Sometimes I flit from one thing to another. In conversations, I often venture off to explore new ideas. The upside of this is that I am creative and able to see new insights in our research. The down side is that I can derail an important conversation, leaving my team mates uncertain of where I am taking the conversation. Nevertheless, I know my team mates accept and respect me, with all my goodness, weirdness, and annoyances. The care they show me opens up ways for them to help me harness my creativity in more helpful and focused ways.

Flourishing requires positive

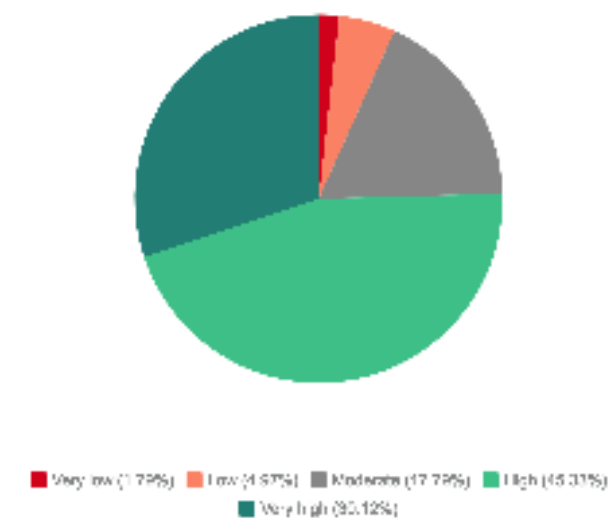
relationships. We need people who can help us deal with the ups and downs of work life. We need a boss we can trust, one who cares for us and for the work we do. We need friends and mentors rather than just business associates. We need a caring community of people who will support us in the joys and sorrows of our work and people we can support in their joys and sorrows.

Final Thoughts

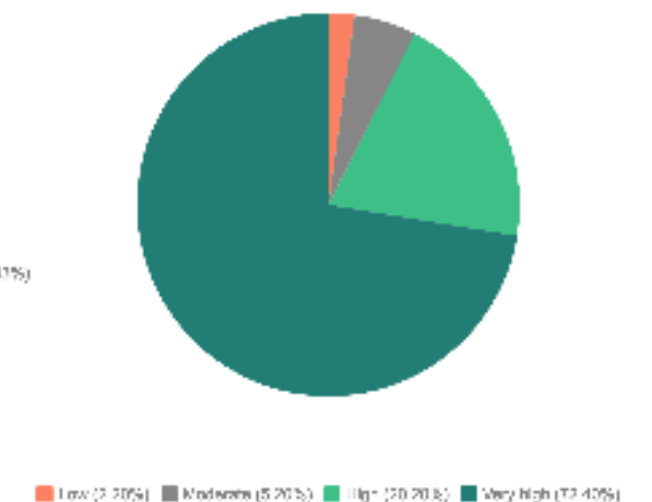
It is important to remember that wellbeing includes all four building blocks. To flourish, we need to experience everyday happiness, have high resilience, experience self-integrity, and find meaning, purpose, and positive connectedness in all of the important spheres of our lives. Many people overlook everyday happiness. The days and weeks run together in a blur of unhappiness. Taking time to map our days can help us understand how to boost our daily happiness. Resilience helps us adapt to challenges, but even more important it

helps us grow ever closer to our full potential. It is also essential for maintaining the other three domains. Self-integrity helps us feel like whole, valuable, worthy people and allows us to make meaningful contributions in our work and life. And thriving helps

Family



Spouse



us know life has meaning, that our life has a purpose, and brings us that essential care, respect, and love we need from others.

These are the four building blocks of flourishing. Equipped with this

knowledge, we encourage you to explore our other research insights and the ideas we provide about how to promote flourishing. We also hope pastors, denominations and seminaries will share ideas with each other and with us. There is much we can learn through

collaboration. Please let us know how we can continue to support you in your ministry work, whether you are a local pastor, a minister serving inside the church, in ministry beyond the local church or a leader.

Our Research Program

The Flourishing in Ministry Program is a major, long-term program of research designed to understand and support the wellbeing of clergy and ministers. We study the lives and ministries of women and men spanning Christian religious traditions including Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Mainline, Evangelical, and Historically Black. As part of our ongoing research project we have gathered surveys from thousands of pastors and conducted life-narrative interviews with several hundred clergy. We are gathering daily life information from pastors to learn more about how ministry life unfolds day-by-day.

This series of reports provides information about current research insights and results. We will continue to publish and share more reports as we advance our research.

The Flourishing in Ministry team is located at the University of Notre Dame. Our research is supported by the generosity of the **Lilly Endowment, Inc.**

We invite and encourage pastors, judicatories, and denominations to join our project. Pastors can sign-up at our website and receive their own wellbeing profile. Judicatories and denominations can receive detailed information about the wellbeing of their member clergy.

Much more information is available at our website:

flourishing.nd.edu

We can be reached directly at:

flourishing@nd.edu

574.631.7755

Endnotes

1 Darrin McMahon, *Happiness: A history*. (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2005).

2 McMahon, Happiness, front cover

3 To more fully understand how researchers define happiness we should start with our biology. We humans have an amazing wellbeing monitoring system hard-wired into us. Our brains are constantly scanning our situations, interactions, and environments to determine whether things are going well or poorly for our wellbeing and for the wellbeing of the people we care about. When our current circumstances seem to bode well for our wellbeing the system sends out positive signals "All is well!", "Life is good!" But when things seem to be going wrong the system sends out various kinds of warning signals: "Be careful!" "Take cover" "Fight!" This monitoring system is our feelings, the moods and emotions we experience during every waking and sleeping moment of our lives. We are always feeling something, whether or not we are aware of that feeling. Even when we sleep. If you have ever woken from a vivid dream, especially a nightmare, you will likely remember waking up full of emotion. Neuroscientists have discovered that our feelings arise from the region of our brain called the amygdala. This region is tightly connected to our five senses. Our senses are constantly scanning the environment around us, taking in thousands of bits of information each minute, including data on our wellbeing. The amygdala takes this information from our senses and processes it to determine how things are going for us. When things are going well, our amygdala produces positive feelings; when something seems to be going wrong, our amygdala produces negative feelings. It is a simple, but highly effective system.

4 Daniel Goleman's widely read book *Emotional intelligence* (New York: Bantam Books, 1995) brought the pioneering research of Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer to a mainstream audience.

5 Baumeister, Roy F., and John Tierney. 2011. *Willpower: Rediscovering the greatest human strength*. New York: Penguin Press,

6 Loyola Press. "The Daily Examen." Accessed December 1, 2016. <http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-examen>.

7 Kernis, Michael H, and Brian M Goldman. 2006. "A Multicomponent Conceptualization of Authenticity: Theory and Research." *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 38:283–357.

8 Oxford English Dictionary

9 The research literature on flourishing crosses disciplinary boundaries, and it is growing rapidly. Among the important discussions of elements of flourishing see Blake E. Ashforth, "Commentary: Positive Identities and the Individual," *Exploring Positive Identities and Organizations*, 2009, 171–87; Roy F. Baumeister, *Meanings of Life*, New York: Guilford Press, 1991; Edward Fischer, *The Good Life*, Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014; Susan Harter, "Authenticity," in *Handbook of Positive Psychology*, Chris R. Snyder and Shane J. Lopez (eds), 2002, 382–94; Alan S. Waterman, *The Best Within Us: Positive Psychology Perspectives on Eudaimonia*, Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2015; Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010.

10 "This I Believe." Accessed December 1, 2016. <http://www.npr.org/series/4538138/this-i-believe>, accessed July 31, 2016.

11 See Anne Colby, and William Damon. *Some do care: contemporary lives of moral commitment*, New York: Free Press, 1992; Corey L. M. Keyes, and Jonathan Haidt. *Flourishing: positive psychology and the life well-lived*, Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2003; Keith D., Markman, Travis Proulx, and Matthew J. Lindberg, *The psychology of meaning*, Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2013.

12 Howard S. Friedman, and Leslie R. Martin. *The longevity project: surprising discoveries for health and long life from the landmark eight-decade study*, New York: Hudson Street Press, 2011; George E. Vaillant, *Aging well: surprising guideposts to a happier life from the landmark Harvard study of adult development*, Boston: Little, Brown, 2002.

13 A wonderful resource on the necessity of positive relationships for human wellbeing is John T. Cacioppo, and William Patrick. *Loneliness: human nature and the need for social connection*, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2008.

14 Cacioppo and William, Loneliness.

