



## Taking a Class... on the Good Life



**I just heard a moving talk** by a woman I'll call Eva, who lives in a country with a repressive regime where an influential group actively insists that girls not be permitted to attend school.

Nevertheless, Eva has courageously founded a high school for girls, despite threats to her life.

Eva was educated in the West and could live comfortably in Europe or America—her professional training would mean she could have a cushy job. But she chooses to be in her own country pursuing this project, despite the constant anxiety she feels. She finds that providing an education for girls gives her own life meaning, and so makes her more fulfilled than working at a high-paying job in the West. All of which raises a crucial question: Is a prestigious position in a high-profile company the key to a happy life—or finding your niche where you can fulfill your sense of purpose?

Turns out research is finding that the latter—a life purpose—matters more when it comes to life

satisfaction. It's no secret that career success by objective standards like a high-level title or a large paycheck do not guarantee happiness; there are all too many harried and unhappy high-level executives.

That was the point of a course at Yale University, taught by psychologist Laurie Santos, on "Psychology and the Good Life." That course holds the title of the most popular class ever taught at Yale—about one-quarter of the school's students enrolled. And it has remained popular now as an online offering under a different name, "The Science of Well-Being by Yale University" on Coursera.

Dr. Santos believes that Yale students were interested in her class because they have had to suppress what actually makes them happy in order to get into Yale in the first place. She points to the fact that about half of Yale students seek mental health care for problems like anxiety, as a 2013 report by the Yale College Council found. As one of the students in Santos's course told the *New York Times*, Yale undergrads have had to numb

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their feelings "so they can focus on their work, the next step, the next accomplishment."

And that ladder, of course, simply gets longer once students graduate and get into a workplace. Just replace "getting into Yale" with any number of steps on the career ladder, from "making partner" to "getting into the C-suite."

New research published in the *Journal of Gerontology* assessed more than 300 men and women between ages 42 and 71 over a stretch of many years, and showed that simply finding a sense of purpose and meaning in one's work led to life satisfaction more than having a high-status job. It's how you feel about your job, the subjective reality, that makes for high levels of satisfaction.

Of course, if you can combine a wide scope of impact with your sense of purpose, all the better. In this light, I admire Jonathan Rose, founder and CEO of the Jonathan Rose Companies, which develops and acquires low-cost housing across the nation—a direct reflection of the compassionate action that Rose finds gives his life

purpose and meaning.

So far, the company has created or purchased affordable and mixed-

income housing for 22,000 people. The firm has long been a leader in green building, reducing the climate impacts of its communities, and doing the best it can to eliminate the toxic materials prevalent in almost all homes. The firm adds community rooms, computer rooms, health exam rooms, fitness rooms, and the like to each property, and then connects its residents with dozens of not-for-profit health and social service providers.

Oh yes, another thing: profitability. All of this is done with a financial acuity that has produced a greater than 15 percent internal rate of return for its investors over the last 15 years, and annual distributions of more than 6 percent with very low risk. And so, as Rose says, compassion can reduce our environmental impact, improve well-being and opportunities for lower-income people, and produce excellent returns.

Seems to me that's a trifecta. Plus, Rose strikes me as a happy guy. ■