THE SATISFACTION TRAP



By: Arthur Brooks



I glanced into my teenage daughter's bedroom one spring afternoon last year, expecting to find her staring absentmindedly at the Zoom screen that passed for high school during the pandemic. Instead, she was laughing uproariously at a video she had found. I asked her what she was looking at. "It's an old man dancing like a chicken and singing," she told me.

I came over to her laptop, not being above watching someone making an idiot of himself for 15 seconds of social-media fame. What I found instead was the septuagenarian rock star Mick Jagger, in a fairly recent concert, croaking out the Rolling Stones' megahit "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction"—a song that debuted on the charts when I was a year old—for probably the millionth time. An audience of tens of thousands of what looked to be mostly Baby Boomers and Gen Xers sang along rapturously.

“Is this serious?” she asked. “Do people your age actually like this?” I took umbrage, but had to admit it was a legitimate question. “Kind of,” I answered. It wasn’t just the music, or even the performance, I assured her. To my mind, the longevity of that particular song—No. 2 on *Rolling Stone* magazine’s original list of the “500 Greatest Songs of All Time”—has a lot to do with a deep truth it speaks.

As we wind our way through life, I explained, satisfaction—the joy from fulfillment of our wishes or expectations—is evanescent. No matter what we achieve, see, acquire, or do, it seems to slip from our grasp.

I was on a roll now. Satisfaction, I told my daughter, is the greatest paradox of human life. We crave it, we believe we can get it, we glimpse it and maybe even experience it for a brief moment, and then it vanishes. But we never give up on our quest to get and hold on to it. “I try, and I try, and I try, and I try,” Jagger sings. How? Through sex and consumerism, according to the song. By building a life that is ever more baroque, expensive, and laden with crap.

“You’ll see,” I told her.

My daughter’s mirth now utterly extinguished, she had the expression I imagine Jean-Paul Sartre’s daughter must have had every day. “So life is just a rat race, and we’re doomed to an existence of dissatisfaction?” she asked. “That sucks.”

“It does suck,” I said. “But we’re not doomed.” I told her we can beat this affliction if we work to truly understand it—and if we’re willing to make some difficult changes to the way we live.

“Like what?” she asked, her eyes narrowing with the healthy suspicion that comes from being the child of a social scientist, and thus an unwitting participant in many behavioral experiments.

I paused. It was in fact a question to which I’d devoted a lot of my time over the previous few years—not just professionally but personally, and with sometimes uneven results.

Even the most successful people suffer from the dissatisfaction problem. I remember once seeing LeBron James—the world’s greatest basketball player—with a look of abject despair on his face after his Cleveland Cavaliers lost the NBA championship to the Golden State Warriors. All of the world’s wealth and accolades were like straw in that moment of loss.

Abd al-Rahman III, the emir and caliph of Córdoba in 10th-century Spain, summed up a life of worldly success at about age 70: “I have now reigned above 50 years in victory or peace; beloved by my subjects, dreaded by my enemies, and respected by my allies. Riches and honors, power and pleasure, have waited on my call.”

And the payoff? “I have diligently numbered the days of pure and genuine happiness which have fallen to my lot,” he wrote. “They amount to 14.”

As an observer, I understand the problem. I write a column about human happiness for *The Atlantic* and teach classes on the subject at Harvard. I know that satisfaction is one of the core

"macronutrients" of happiness (the other two being enjoyment and meaning), and that its slippery nature is one of the reasons happiness is often so elusive as well.

Yet time and again, I have fallen into the trap of believing that success and its accompaniments would fulfill me. On my 40th birthday I made a bucket list of things I hoped to do or achieve. They were mainly accomplishments only a wonk could want: writing books and columns about serious subjects, teaching at a top school, traveling to give lectures and speeches, maybe even leading a university or think tank. Whether these were good and noble goals or not, they were *my* goals, and I imagined that if I hit them, I would be satisfied.

I found that list nine years ago, when I was 48, and realized that I had achieved every item on it. I had been a tenured professor, then the president of a think tank. I was giving frequent speeches, had written some books that had sold well, and was writing columns for *The New York Times*. But none of that had brought me the lasting joy I'd envisioned. Each accomplishment thrilled me for a day or a week—maybe a month, never more—and then I reached for the next rung on the ladder.

Getting off the treadmill is hard. It feels dangerous.

I'd devoted my life to climbing those rungs. I was still devoting my life to climbing—beavering away 60 to 80 hours a week to accomplish the next thing, all the while terrified of losing the last thing. The costs of that kind of existence are exceedingly obvious, but it was only when I looked back at my list that I genuinely began to question the benefits—and to think seriously about the path I was walking.

And what about you?

Your goals are probably very different from mine, and perhaps your lifestyle is too. But the trap is the same. Everyone has dreams, and they beckon with promises of sweet, lasting satisfaction if you achieve them. But dreams are liars. When they come true, it's … fine, for a while. And then a new dream appears.

Mick jagger's satisfaction dilemma—and ours—starts with a rudimentary formula: *Satisfaction = getting what you want*.

It's so simple, and yet its power is deeply encoded within us. Give a 3-year-old the french fry she is reaching for and see her satisfied expression. But then, after a couple of seconds, watch the wanting return. And that's the actual problem, isn't it? The Stones' song should really have been titled "(I Can't Keep No) Satisfaction." It's almost as if our brains are programmed to prevent us from enjoying anything for very long.

In fact, they are. The term *homeostasis* was introduced in 1926 by a physiologist named Walter B. Cannon, who showed in his book *The Wisdom of the Body* that we have built-in mechanisms to regulate our temperature, as well as our levels of oxygen, water, salt, sugar, protein, fat, and calcium. But the concept applies much more broadly than that: To survive, all living systems tend to maintain stable conditions as best they can.

Homeostasis keeps us alive and healthy. But it also explains why drugs and alcohol work as they do, as opposed to how we wish they would. While that first dose of a new recreational substance might give you great pleasure, your previously naive brain quickly learns to sense an assault on its equilibrium and fights back by neutralizing the effect of the entering drug, making it impossible to get the first feeling back. As the Bucknell University neuroscientist Judith Grisel explains brilliantly in her book, *Never Enough: The Neuroscience and Experience of Addiction*, addiction is in part a by-product of homeostasis: As the brain becomes used to continual drug-induced production of dopamine—the neurotransmitter of pleasure, which plays a large role in nearly all addictive behaviors—it steeply curtails ordinary production, making another hit necessary simply to feel normal.

The same set of principles works on our emotions. When you get an emotional shock—good or bad—your brain wants to re-equilibrate, making it hard to stay on the high or low for very long. This is especially true when it comes to positive emotions, for primordial reasons that we'll get into shortly. It's why, when you achieve conventional, acquisitive success, you can never get enough. If you base your sense of self-worth on success—money, power, prestige—you will run from victory to victory, initially to keep feeling good, and then to avoid feeling awful.

The unending race against the headwinds of homeostasis has a name: the "hedonic treadmill." No matter how fast we run, we never arrive. "At home I dream that at Naples, at Rome, I can be intoxicated with beauty, and lose my sadness," Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his 1841 essay, "Self-Reliance." "I pack my trunk, embrace my friends, embark on the sea, and at last wake up in Naples, and there beside me is the stern fact, the sad self, unrelenting, identical, that I fled from."

Scholars argue over whether our happiness has an immutable set point, or if it might move around a little over the course of our life due to general circumstances. But no one has ever found that immediate bliss from a major victory or achievement will endure. As for money, more of it helps up to a point—it can buy things and services that relieve the problems of poverty, which are sources of *unhappiness*. But forever chasing money as a source of enduring satisfaction simply does not work. "The nature of [adaptation] condemns men to live on a hedonic treadmill," the psychologists Philip Brickman and Donald T. Campbell wrote in 1971, "to seek new levels of stimulation merely to maintain old levels of subjective pleasure, to never achieve any kind of permanent happiness or satisfaction."

Yet even if you recognize all this, getting off the treadmill is hard. It feels dangerous. Our urge for *more* is quite powerful, but stronger still is our resistance to *less*. That's one of the insights that earned Princeton's Daniel Kahneman the 2002 Nobel Prize in Economics, for work he did with the late Stanford psychologist Amos Tversky.

So you try and you try, but you make no lasting progress toward your goal. You find yourself running simply to avoid being thrown off the back of the treadmill. The wealthy keep accumulating far beyond anything they could possibly spend, and sometimes more than they want to bequeath to their children. They hope that at some point they will feel happy, their lives complete, and are terrified of what will happen if they stop running. As the great 19th-century philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer said, "Wealth is like sea-water; the more we drink, the thirstier we become; and the same is true of fame."

According to evolutionary psychology, our tendency to strive for more is perfectly understandable. Throughout most of human history, starvation loomed closer than it does, for the most part, today. A "rich" caveman had a few extra animal skins and arrowheads, and maybe a few piles of seeds and dried fish to spare. With this plenty, he might survive a bad winter.

Our troglodyte ancestors didn't just want to make it through the winter, though; they had bigger ambitions. They wanted to find allies and mates too, with the goal (whether conscious or not) of passing on their genes. And what would make that possible? Among other things, the accumulation of animal skins, demonstrating greater competence, prowess, and attractiveness than the hominid in the next cave over.

Surprisingly little has changed since then. Scholars have shown that our acquisitive tendencies persist amid plenty and regularly exceed our needs. This owes to our vestigial urges—software that still exists in our brains from ancient times.

Competing with rivals for mates helps explain our weird fixation on social comparison. When we think about satisfaction from success (or possessions or fitness or good looks), there's another element to consider: Success is relative. Satisfaction requires not just that you continuously run in place on your own hedonic treadmill, but that you run slightly faster than other people are running on theirs. This is why people with hundreds of millions of dollars can feel like failures if their friends are billionaires, and why famous Hollywood actors can be despondent that others are even more famous.

At some level, we all know that social comparison is ridiculous and harmful, and extensive research confirms this: "Keeping up with the Joneses" is associated with anxiety and even depression. In a series of experiments that required subjects to solve puzzles, for instance, the unhappiest people were consistently those paying the most attention to how they performed relative to other subjects. The small rush of pleasure we get from doing better than some can easily be swallowed up by the unhappiness from doing worse than others. But the urge to have more than others, to be more than others, tugs at us relentlessly.

We live in a time when we are regularly counseled to get back to nature, to our long-ago past—in our diets, our sense of communal obligation, and more. But if our goal is happiness that endures, following our natural urges does not help us, in the main. That is Mother Nature's cruel hoax. Happiness doesn't help propagate the species, so nature doesn't select for it. If you conflate intergenerational survival with happiness, that's your problem, not nature's.

In fact, our natural state is dissatisfaction, punctuated by brief moments of satisfaction. You might not like the hedonic treadmill, but Mother Nature thinks it's pretty great. She likes watching you strive to achieve an elusive goal, because strivers get the goods—even if they don't enjoy them for long. More mates, better mates, better chances of survival for our children—these ancient mandates are responsible for much of the code that runs incessantly in the deep recesses of our brains. It doesn't matter whether you've found your soul mate and would never stray; the algorithms designed to get us more mates (or allow us to make an upgrade) continue whirring, which is why you still want to be attractive to strangers. Neurobiological instinct—which we experience as dissatisfaction—is what drives us forward.

There are many other, related examples of evolved tendencies that militate against enduring happiness—for example, the tendency toward jealous misery in our romantic relationships. (Mother Nature, while inviting us to cheat, would also like us to be highly alert to the possibility that our partner might be cheating. Studies find that men, who are at risk of spending resources to unwittingly raise children who aren't theirs, fixate most on sexual infidelity; women, who are at risk that their mate will become attached to—and thus divert resources to—another female and her children, respond most negatively to emotional infidelity.)

The insatiable goals to acquire more, succeed conspicuously, and be as attractive as possible lead us to objectify one another, and even ourselves. When people see themselves as little more than their attractive bodies, jobs, or bank accounts, it brings great suffering. Studies show that self-objectification is associated with a sense of invisibility and lack of autonomy, and physical self-objectification has a direct relationship with eating disorders and depression in women. Professional self-objectification is a tyranny every bit as nasty. You become a heartless taskmaster to yourself, seeing yourself as nothing more than *Homo economicus*. Love and fun are sacrificed for another day of work, in search of a positive internal answer to the question *Am I successful yet?* We become cardboard cutouts of real people.

It makes no sense in modern life to use our energies to have five cars, five bathrooms, or even five pairs of sneakers, but we just … want them. Neuroscientists have looked into this. Dopamine is excreted in response to thoughts about buying new things, winning money, acquiring more power or fame, having new sexual partners. The brain evolved to reward us for the behaviors that kept us alive and made us more likely to pass on our DNA. This may be an anachronism, at least to some degree, but it is a fact of our lives nonetheless.

For the faithful, satisfaction has another name: heaven.

Many religions promise heaven to believers. We rarely think carefully about what that entails—harps and clouds?—but the Roman Catholic Church is helpfully specific about it. Heaven grants us the "beatific vision": God showing himself to us face-to-face, making us know his true nature—and thereby granting us the "fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness." Or, as the English mystic Juliana of Norwich wrote of heaven, "all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well." In other words, heaven is pure satisfaction that lasts.

Why can't we seem to be so well on Earth? The 13th-century Catholic priest Thomas Aquinas answers this in his magisterial *Summa Theologiae*. He defines the satisfaction problem as one of misbegotten goals: idols that distract us from God, the true source of our bliss. Even if you are not a religious believer, Thomas's list of the goals that beguile but never satisfy rings true. They include money, power, pleasure, and honor. As Thomas puts it in the case of money,

In the desire for wealth and for whatsoever temporal goods … when we already possess them, we despise them, and seek others … The reason of this is that we realize more their insufficiency when we possess them: and this very fact shows that they are imperfect, and the sovereign good does not consist therein.

In other words, *(It don't bring no) satisfaction.* Thomas Aquinas might not fill a stadium with Boomers, but he describes the Jaggerian Dissatisfaction Matrix far better than old Mick himself.

The satisfaction problem, then, is our natural attachment to these inadequate things. If this sounds a bit Buddhist to you, it should. It is very similar to the Buddha's first "Noble Truth": that life is suffering—*duhka* in Sanskrit, also translated as "dissatisfaction"—and that the cause of this suffering is craving, desire, and attachment to worldly things. Thomas Aquinas and the Buddha (and Jagger, for that matter) were saying the same thing.

Note that neither Thomas nor the Buddha argued that worldly rewards are inherently evil. In fact, they can be used for great good. Money is crucial for a functioning society and supporting your family; power can be wielded to lift others up; pleasure leavens life; and honor can attract attention to the sources of moral elevation. But as attachments—as ends instead of means—the problem is simple: They cannot satisfy.

And this leads us back to my daughter's question: Are we doomed, in this earthly life at least, to an existence of continual dissatisfaction?

If you ever visit Taiwan, the one attraction you must not miss is the National Palace Museum. Arguably the greatest collection of Chinese art and artifacts in the world, the museum contains roughly 700,000 items whose dates range from more than 8,000 years ago, during the Neolithic period, all the way to the modern era.

If there is one problem with the museum, it is precisely its abundance. No one can take in more than a fraction of it in a single visit. That's why, one afternoon a few years ago, I hired a guide to show me a few famous pieces and explain their significance. Little did I know that, with one remark, my guide was about to help me crack my own satisfaction puzzle.

Looking at a massive jade carving of the Buddha from the Qing dynasty, my guide offhandedly remarked that this was a good illustration of how the Eastern view of art differs from the Western view. "How so?" I asked.

He answered my question with a question: "What do you think of when I ask you to imagine a work of art yet to be started?"

"An empty canvas, I guess," I responded.

"Right," he said. Many Westerners tend to see art as being created from nothing. But there's another way to view it: "The art already exists," and the job of artists is simply to reveal it. He told me that his image of art yet to be started was an uncarved block of jade, like what ultimately became the Buddha in front of us. The art is not visible until the artist takes away the stone that is not part of the sculpture, but it is already there nonetheless. Not all artistic philosophy fits this East-versus-West distinction; Michelangelo once said, "The sculpture is already complete within the marble block, before I start my work … I just have to chisel away the superfluous material." But I took my guide's point in—as it were—broad strokes.

Art mirrors life, and therein lies a potential solution to the satisfaction dilemma.

As we grow older in the West, we generally think we should have a lot to show for our lives—a lot of trophies. According to numerous Eastern philosophies, this is backwards. As we age, we shouldn't accumulate more to represent ourselves, but rather strip things away to find our true selves—and thus, to find happiness and peace. The *Tao Te Ching*, a Chinese text compiled around the fourth century B.C. that is the foundation of Taoism, makes this point with elegance:

People would be content
with their simple, everyday lives,
in harmony, and free of desire.

When there is no desire,
all things are at peace.

In my early 50s, when I visited the National Palace Museum, my life was jammed with possessions, accomplishments, relationships, opinions, and commitments. It took an offhand remark from a museum guide to help me absorb the teachings of Thomas Aquinas and the Buddha—or for that matter, modern social science—and commit to stop trying to add more and more, but instead start taking things away.

In truth, our formula, *Satisfaction = getting what you want*, leaves out one key component. To be more accurate, it should be:

Satisfaction = what you have ÷ what you want

All of our evolutionary and biological imperatives focus us on increasing the numerator—our *haves*. But the more significant action is in the denominator—our *wants*. The modern world is made up of clever ways to make our wants explode without us realizing it. Even the Dalai Lama, arguably the world's most enlightened man, admits to it. "Sometimes I visit supermarkets," he says in *The Art of Happiness*. "I really love to see supermarkets, because I can see so many beautiful things. So, when I look at all these different articles, I develop a feeling of desire, and my initial impulse might be, 'Oh, I want this; I want that.'"

The secret to satisfaction is not to increase our haves—that will never work (or at least, it will never last). That is the treadmill formula, not the satisfaction formula. The secret is to manage our wants. By managing what we want instead of what we have, we give ourselves a chance to lead more satisfied lives.

These were the ideas I related to my daughter that spring afternoon. She listened with interest, then made a brief rejoinder. “So what you’re saying is that the secret to satisfaction is simple,” she said. “I just have to go against several million years of evolutionary biology,” plus the entirety of modern culture, “and I’ll be all set.”

Obviously, I couldn’t leave the topic there. One of the reasons people often don’t trust academics like me is that we always talk about problems, but rarely provide realistic solutions. Even worse, we often ignore our own wisdom. I’ve known plenty of bankrupt economists and miserable happiness experts.

But she knew this wasn’t all just theory to me. We’d moved two years before, from Bethesda, Maryland, a power suburb of Washington, D.C., to a small town outside Boston. I’d resigned from a chief-executive position to teach and write, trading away virtually all day-to-day contact with political and business elites—and was quickly forgotten by most. I hadn’t hidden the reason for the move, and my family was fully behind it: I was taking my own advice, published in these pages three years ago, to find a new kind of success and a deeper kind of happiness. That project was not about satisfaction alone; it also involved recognizing that, professionally, most people peak earlier in life than they expect to, and decline faster—and that to resist this is counterproductive and ultimately futile. But it entailed getting off the hedonic treadmill—swapping evanescent professional thrills for more enduring fulfillment that could last well into the back half of my life. When life’s rhythms involuntarily slowed further during the pandemic, I had all the more time to think about making that transition work.

So I did have some practical suggestions for my daughter on how to beat the dissatisfaction curse—three habits I have developed for my own life that are grounded in philosophy and social-science research.

I. GO FROM PRINCE TO SAGE

One scholar who did propose real solutions to life’s problems was Thomas Aquinas. He didn’t just explain the satisfaction conundrum; he offered an answer and lived it himself.

The youngest son of Count Landulf of Aquino, Thomas was born around 1225 in his family’s castle in central Italy. He was sent to be educated at the first Benedictine monastery, at Montecassino. As the youngest son of a noble family, he was expected to one day become the abbot of the monastery, a post of enormous social prestige.

But Thomas had no interest in this worldly glory. Around the age of 19, he joined the recently created Dominican order, a group of friars dedicated to poverty and itinerant preaching. This, he felt, was his true identity. The life of wealth and privilege needed to be chipped away to find it.

Thomas pursued the work of a scholar and teacher, producing dense philosophical treatises that are still profoundly influential today. He is known as the greatest philosopher of his age. But this legacy was never his aim. On the contrary, he considered his work to be nothing more than an expression of his love for God and a desire to help his fellow human beings.

The Buddha cracked the satisfaction code in a strikingly similar way. He was born a prince named Siddhartha Gautama around the sixth century B.C., in the region that is now on the border between Nepal and India. After his mother died just days after his birth, his father vowed to protect the infant prince from life's miseries, and thus kept him shut inside the palace, where all his earthly needs and desires would be met.

Siddhartha never ventured beyond that palace until he was 29 years old, when, overcome by curiosity, he asked a charioteer to show him the outside world. On his tour, he encountered an old man, another man wracked with disease, and a decaying corpse. He was troubled by these sights, which his charioteer told him were inevitable in our mortal lives. He then encountered an ascetic who, through renunciation of worldly goods, had achieved not a release from disease and death but, rather, a release from the fear of them.

Siddhartha left his kingdom soon after, and renounced all his attachments. Sitting under the Bodhi tree, he became the Buddha. He spent the rest of his life sharing his wisdom with a growing flock that today numbers more than half a billion people.

I am no Saint Thomas and no Lord Buddha. And my current post at Harvard hardly qualifies as a repudiation of the world's rewards. Even so, I've tried to take a lesson from their lives—that satisfaction lies not in attaining high status and holding on to it for dear life, but in helping other people—including by sharing whatever knowledge and wisdom I've acquired. That's one reason I stepped down from a job in the public eye to concentrate on writing and teaching. If I take another leadership role in my career, my focus will be on what I want to share with others, not what I want to accumulate for myself.

II. MAKE A REVERSE BUCKET LIST

One practical way to whittle down our wants is to simply look at the counsel we get that is turning us into dissatisfied *Homo economicus*, and then do the opposite. For example, many self-help guides suggest making a bucket list on your birthday, so as to reinforce your worldly aspirations. Making a list of the things you want is temporarily satisfying, because it stimulates dopamine. But it creates attachments, which in turn create dissatisfaction as they grow.

I've instead begun to compile a "reverse bucket list," to make the ideas in this essay workable in my life. Each year on my birthday, I list my wants and attachments—the stuff that fits under Thomas Aquinas's categories of money, power, pleasure, and honor. I try to be completely honest. I don't list stuff I would actually hate and never choose, like a sailboat or a vacation house. Rather, I go to my weaknesses, most of which—I'm embarrassed to admit—involve the admiration of others for my work.

Then I imagine myself in five years. I am happy and at peace, living a life of purpose and meaning. I make another list of the forces that would bring me this happiness: my faith, my family, my friendships, the work I am doing that is inherently satisfying and meaningful and that serves others.

Inevitably, these sources of happiness are "intrinsic"—they come from within and revolve around love, relationships, and deep purpose. They have little to do with the admiration of strangers. I contrast them with the things on the first list, which are generally "extrinsic"—the outside rewards associated with Thomas's list of idols. Most research has shown that intrinsic rewards lead to far more enduring happiness than extrinsic rewards.

It's not just about having less stuff to weigh you down.

I consider how extrinsic things compete with the intrinsic underpinnings of my happiness for time, attention, and resources. I imagine myself sacrificing my relationships for the admiration of strangers, and the result down the line in my life. With this in mind, I confront the bucket list. I reflect on each item, telling myself that while a particular desire is not evil, it won't bring me the happiness and peace I seek. Finally, I go back to the list of things that will bring me real happiness. I commit to pursuing these things.

Given my itch for admiration, I have made a point of trying to pay less attention to how others perceive me, by turning away these thoughts when they emerge. I have let many relationships go that were really only about professional advancement. I work somewhat less than I did in years past. It takes conscious effort to avoid backsliding—the treadmill beckons often, and little spritzes of dopamine tempt me to return to my old ways. But my changes in behavior have mostly been permanent, and I've been happier as a result.

I'm not arguing here that there's anything wrong with visiting the exotic place you've always dreamed of seeing, or running a marathon, or otherwise pushing your capabilities to do or make something difficult, professionally or otherwise. Work that feels more like a mission provides purpose; travel can be inherently valuable and enjoyable; learning a skill or meeting a challenge can bring intrinsic satisfaction; meaningful activities pursued with friends or loved ones can deepen relationships. But ask yourself whether the attraction of your bucket-list items, be they professional or experiential, derives mostly from how much they will make others admire or envy you. These motivations will never lead to deep satisfaction.

III. GET SMALLER

Lately, there has been an explosion of books on minimalism, which all recommend downsizing your life to get happier—to chip away the detritus of your life. But it's not just about having less stuff to weigh you down. We can, in fact, find immense fullness when we pay attention to smaller and smaller things. The Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hanh explains this in his book *The*

Miracle of Mindfulness: “While washing the dishes one should only be washing the dishes, which means that while washing the dishes one should be completely aware of the fact that one is washing the dishes.” Why? If we are thinking about the past or future, “we are not alive during the time we are washing the dishes.”

For many years I had a beloved friend, someone a couple of decades my senior with whom I worked throughout my 20s. In his 40s, he was diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer, and given six months to live. By some miracle or another, he survived those six months, and then another six, and then almost three decades more.

He was never “cured,” however. His doctor told him the cancer was a wolf at the door, biding its time. Sooner or later the wolf would slip in, which it ultimately did a couple of years ago. But the three decades under this cloud were not a burden. On the contrary, they reminded him every day of the gift that was the current day, and thus, to look for his satisfactions not in audacious, multiyear life goals, but in tiny, everyday moments of beauty with his beloved wife and daughter.

Some years ago, a few close friends were at his home, eating and drinking out in his garden. It was dusk, and he asked us to gather around a plant with small, closed flowers. “Watch a flower,” he instructed. We did so, for about 10 minutes, in silence. All at once, the flowers popped open, which we learned that they did every evening. We gasped in amazement. It was a moment of intense satisfaction.

But here’s the thing I still can’t get over: Unlike most of the junk on my old bucket list, that satisfaction endured. That memory still brings me joy—more so than many of my life’s earthly “accomplishments”—not because it was the culmination of a large goal, but because it was an unexpected gift, a tiny miracle.

The prince will always skip the small satisfactions of life, forgoing a flower at dusk for money, power, or prestige. But the sage never makes this mistake, and I try not to either. Each day, I have an item on my to-do list that involves being truly present for an ordinary occurrence. A lot of this revolves around my religious practice as a Catholic, including daily Mass with my wife and meditative prayer. It also includes walks with no devices, listening only to the world outside. These are truly satisfying things.

My daughter went off to college a few months after our talk about the science of satisfaction. After the isolation and lockdowns of COVID-19, and the sad joke that was her senior year of high school, she made a run for the border, enrolling at a university in Spain. I am bereft. We do send each other several messages every day, though. They are almost never about work or school. Instead, we share small moments: a photo of a rainy street, a silly joke, the number of push-ups she just did.

I don’t know whether this is giving her a head start on freeing herself from the paradox of dissatisfaction, but it is like medicine for me. Each message is like the evening of the flower—a brief glimpse of the beatific vision of heaven, perhaps—bringing quiet satisfaction.

Each of us can ride the waves of attachments and urges, hoping futilely that someday, somehow, we will get and keep that satisfaction we crave. Or we can take a shot at free will and self-mastery. It's a lifelong battle against our inner caveman. Often, he wins. But with determination and practice, we can find respite from that chronic dissatisfaction and experience the joy that is true human freedom.

Want to explore more about the science of happiness? Join Arthur C. Brooks and other experts May 1–3 at *The Atlantic*'s In Pursuit of Happiness event. Learn more about in-person and virtual registration here. https://www.theatlantic.com/live/pursuit-of-happiness-2022/
