

The interesting life



(Photo by malerapaso / iStock / Getty)

I want to lead a happy life, which isn't a particularly novel aspiration. To experience some pleasure and joy in a daily way strikes me as a reasonable hope, even in seasons when life can turn brittle and hard. I don't mean feel-good experiences that bring gratification at others' expense, but rather a happy state of mind that derives from some of life's wonderful pleasures.

I also want to live a life of deep meaning in which there's a moral center: one where virtue is prized, depth of character matters, and purpose comes through serving others. In its best moments, this life of meaning gets organized less around self-centered desires and more around generous commitments that help other lives flourish.

Both of these models for life are good and full of well-being. And although they may be loosely connected with Aristotle's concepts of *hedonia* and *eudaimonia*, my inspiration for enjoying them stems from faith and a life in Christ. I can't imagine how much more selfish and depressing my instincts would be if I wasn't attached to a faith community. Belonging to a congregation pushes me beyond my own interests and idolatries enough to practice living in these kinds of ways alongside other people.

Yet I've long believed there's something more, something beyond a life of mere pleasure or a life dedicated to meaning and purpose. What about being an *interesting* person? This is something I look for in myself and want for other people. Interestingness can't be measured by some index of happiness or meaning, yet it makes for a really good life.

Take, for example, the expression of human emotion. The words of onetime NCAA coach Jim Valvano struck a chord with me early in my ministry, words spoken as he accepted the Arthur Ashe Courage Award for his struggle with terminal cancer:

There are three things we all should do every day. . . . Number one is laugh. You should laugh every day. Number two is think. You should spend some time in thought. And number three is, you should have your emotions moved to tears. . . . If you laugh, you think, and you cry, that's a full day. That's a heck of a day. You do that seven days a week, you're going to have something special.

Upon first hearing Valvano's words, I determined then and there that I wanted to try to experience the widest range of emotions I could every day. Like the preschool room poster of 30 facial expressions each labeled with a one-word emotion, I wanted my life to be internally and externally expressive. To this day, as I mentor young pastors or counsel individuals, I often encourage them to cultivate the widest range of emotions they possibly can in a given day. To feel nervous, excited, or surprised; to be aware of indifference, hopelessness, or rage; to recognize one is capable of resentment, guilt, or despair—these sorts of emotions contribute to a life that can be really good.

It turns out there's some validation for my desire to elevate interestingness as a valuable way of living. Philosopher Lorraine Besser of Middlebury College and psychologist Shigehiro Oishi of the University of Chicago have done work on what

they call a “psychologically rich” life. Studying different cultures, they’ve concluded that people who encounter a wide range of emotions through interesting and often unplanned adventures can enjoy a really good life that’s conceptually and empirically distinct from one that may be full of pleasure, achievement, or purpose. Even unpleasant experiences, they reason, can be psychologically rich. I wouldn’t want this life without the other two good lives complementing my days. But without it, life would surely be more tedious and boring.