

Chapter 4

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY FOR CAREER COUNSELORS

by Mary Jacobsen

Positive Psychology points the way toward a secular approach to a noble purpose and transcendent meaning.-- Martin Seligman

Abstract

Positive Psychology isn't just an academic endeavor, but is also a social movement with an agenda which overlaps that of Career Counseling. Both fields follow a *secular* path to the *noble purpose* of increasing the well-being of individuals and communities. Positive Psychology's distinctive contribution is to employ randomized, controlled experiments to study the good life, the engaged life, and the meaningful life. A significant finding that positive psychology offers to career counselors is to reverse the assumption of career counseling clients who believe that the *right* job will make them happy, or that success at work will lead to lasting satisfaction. Success doesn't yield happiness. Happiness yields success. Assessing and working to improve clients' overall happiness isn't just relevant to building a satisfying career, therefore, it's the foundation for success. To that end, Positive Psychology suggests numerous strategies for increasing overall life satisfaction that are easy to do, straightforward to explain, and similar in strategy and aims to those already used by many, if not most career counselors. Chief among these are (1) Express and Amplify Your Strengths; (2) Cultivate Positive Emotions; (3) Break Free from the Hedonic Treadmill; (4) Engage in Gratitude and Savoring; and (5) Find and Sustain Flow.

Chances are good that you're already using positive psychology, even if you haven't labeled it that way. Career Counselors are pioneers on the secular path toward the *noble purpose* of enabling people to find productive, enjoyable, and meaningful work. But if you're like me, even though you already use positive psychology, you may find it personally and professionally beneficial to become familiar with the burgeoning research agenda being pursued by positive psychologists today. I predict, in fact, that you will fall in love with positive psychology.

For me, the great gift of positive psychology has been to discover how much habitual negativity I harbored. It's not that I wanted to embrace

periodic bouts of discouragement or ennui. It's more that I viewed these feelings as my lot in life, to be managed and minimized but never vanquished. I thought of happiness as beyond expectation, a grace – like winning the lottery -- that was bestowed by the gods, karma, genes or other forces beyond my control. Positive psychology has shown me that happiness is more of a skill and a practice, a primary color of well-being that anyone can paint on the stage of life.

My assumption was that negative emotions were stable fixtures on the psychic landscape that could, at best, be minimized or managed, not reversed or transformed. This expectation reflects traditional psychology's emphasis on using psychotherapeutic or psychopharmacological means to the end goal of removing symptoms of anxiety, depression, or other manifestations of mental illness. Positive psychology points out that the *absence* of symptoms of depression or other types of emotional suffering is not the same as the *presence* of positive emotions toward life. Of course, removing symptoms is important and helpful. No positive psychologist would claim that it wasn't. But it isn't enough to create well-being. In fact, the condition of Languishing, or the border zone in between mental health and mental illness is far more common in the U.S. than major depressive disorders (Keyes, 2002). The opposite of languishing is Flourishing, or the presence of positive emotion and the capacity to function well both psychologically and socially; how we go beyond languishing to flourishing is the research and practice agenda pursued by Positive Psychology. Sadly, research suggests that fewer than one quarter (25%) of adults in the U.S. between 18 and 74 fit the criteria for flourishing (Keyes, 2002, p. 294). One of positive psychology's *noble* purposes is to expand flourishing to all.

Positive psychology teaches us that happiness – or as researchers prefer *subjective well-being* (SWB) is graspable for us all, more a function of what we pay attention to than a destiny to which we are either born or not. We can *seed* positivity, to use Barbara Frederickson's (2009) phrase, in our lives by identifying our own authentic sources of positive emotion. We can engage in *happiness activities*, as Sonja Lyubomirsky (2008) calls them, that give us joy; we can teach ourselves the art of savoring and practice mindfulness and gratitude; we can identify the areas we love to learn about; or we can amplify relationships that draw us to love and be loved.

Positive Psychology is *not* to be equated with the movement called *positive thinking*, or the effort to *look on the bright side* or substitute positive for negative thoughts. You can't coerce positivity; it's as transient as everything else in life. Not only can we never eliminate all negativity, we shouldn't try to do so. As Barbara Frederickson (2009) puts it, if

we ignored all negative thoughts or emotions, we wouldn't recognize the difference between and "insult and an invitation."

You may have observed by now that Positive Psychology appears to be as much a social movement as it is an academic discipline. After all, how many scholarly domains have their own *manifesto* (www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu//akumalmanifesto.htm)?

Positive Psychology is the study of optimal functioning. It aims to discover and promote the factors that allow individuals and communities to thrive. The positive psychology movement represents a new commitment on the part of research psychologists to focus attention upon the sources of psychological health, thereby going beyond prior emphases upon disease and disorder.

The manifesto proudly asserts a social agenda that integrates research with improving the psychological well-being of individuals and communities. The name Positive Psychology was applied to studies of well-being a decade ago after Martin Seligman became president of the American Psychological Association. He encouraged research psychologists to rectify what at the time was a stunningly unbalanced ratio of studies of pathology to studies of well-being of 17:1 (Seligman, 2002). Positive Psychology itself wasn't invented overnight; it's an *umbrella* term that includes preexisting research on positive emotions, resilience, and happiness. Earlier psychologists from Abraham Maslow to Carl Rogers had studied optimal functioning under the labels of Humanistic or Transpersonal Psychology. Furthermore, many of the research findings of positive psychologists are hardly *rocket science*. Their recipe for happiness resembles the wise counsel one might receive from a grandparent, pastor, sage, shaman, or rabbi, as for example, that we savor the moment and offer thanks for what we have.

The distinctive difference contributed by Positive Psychology is the *secular path* of empirical research. Positive Psychology's aspiration to clarify the good life, the engaged life, and the meaningful life certainly overlaps with humanity's timeless and universal spiritual quest for purpose and wisdom, but its methods are randomized, controlled experiments. This grounding in the unifying and universal language of science -- rather than the sometimes divisive doctrine or dogma of religious teachings or spiritual traditions -- is, I believe, the key to positive psychology's growing popularity on college campuses and on bestseller lists. As Jonathan Haidt (Haidt, Seder, & Kesebir, 2008) suggests after years of studying the emotions of elevation and awe, humans are subject to *hive psychology*. We evolved to periodically merge our individual self with a larger "emergent social organism" which bonds us together in a joyful, synchronous, collective, transcendent enterprise. We yearn for this

communal nobility of purpose shared with people we trust, but we may find opportunities to fulfill this aspiration rare in the *atomized* structures of modern life. Positive Psychology functions as an aspirational *hive* for spiritually sensitive but secular idealists who find inspiration in scientific research targeted toward the noble goal of expanding happiness for all.

One of the most significant findings positive psychology offers to career counselors is that the expectation many if not most of your clients enter your office with is wrong. People often assume that the *right* job will make them happy, or that success at work will lead to lasting satisfaction with life. It ain't necessarily so! Success doesn't yield happiness. Happiness yields success. "People high in well-being later earn higher incomes and perform better at work... They also tend to be better organizational citizens, meaning that they help people in various ways," report Ed Diener and Martin Seligman (2004). Furthermore, Nathan Bowling's (2010) meta-analysis of studies of job and life satisfaction reveal a stronger link between SWB and job satisfaction than between job satisfaction and subsequent well-being. In other words, if people are happy and satisfied in life in general, "then they are likely to be happy and satisfied at work. However, the flip side of this finding could be that those people who are dissatisfied generally and who seek happiness through their work, may not find job satisfaction. Nor might they increase their overall levels of happiness by pursuing it." Furthermore, not only does happiness yield success for individuals, it appears that happy workers yield success for the organizations that employ them. Echoing Bowling's research, James K. Harter (2010) and his colleagues at Gallup found that employees who report positive perceptions of work conditions appear to have a large impact on an organization's outcomes (i.e., profitability, retention, and customer satisfaction). Well-being, in sum, leads to successful outcomes in business, as in life.

What is the implication of these findings for career counselors? Assessing and working to improve clients' overall happiness isn't just relevant to building a satisfying career, it's the foundation for success. Positive Psychology suggests numerous strategies for increasing overall life satisfaction that are easy to do, straightforward to explain, and similar in aims to those already used by many, if not most career counselors. Chief among these are (1) Express and Amplify Your Strengths; (2) Cultivate Positive Emotions; (3) Break Free from the Hedonic Treadmill; (4) Engage in Gratitude and Savoring; and (5) Find and Sustain Flow.

(1) Express & Amplify Your Strengths

In contrast to pleasures, which arise and fade, gratifications expand and endure. And few actions provide as much gratification as enacting strengths and virtues. For this reason, Christopher Peterson and Mar-

tin Seligman (2004) developed a companion volume to the American Psychiatric Association's chronicle of symptoms and suffering, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders; their text, *Character Strengths and Virtues: a Handbook and Classification*, chronicles psychological well-being. The authors studied cultures around the world and chronicled and catalogued six ubiquitous virtues: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. Each virtue is divided into subsets of related character strengths. Humanity, for example, is divided in the strengths of kindness, love, and social intelligence. Wisdom is divided into creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, and perspective.

Strengths are distinguished from talents, in that they have a moral component; they are not innate, but are acquired and built (e.g., one can't will perfect musical pitch into being, but one can develop prudence or gratitude); and they evoke inspiration rather than thrill in an audience. Peterson and Seligman use the phrase *signature strengths* to denote our top five character strengths, and offer a free survey you can take on the website www.authentic happiness.org to learn what yours are. (You may be familiar with the Gallup Strengthsfinder popularized by Marcus Buckingham, Donald Clifton [2001], and Tim Rath [2007] in their books. Their model of 32 strengths overlaps with the Signature Strengths survey, but includes talents as well as strengths, and requires users to buy the book to acquire a code for the online survey.) Using your signature strengths yields maximal well-being for your investment of effort. In one study, using signature strengths in a new and different way every day for a week increased participants' happiness and decreased depressive symptoms for six months (Seligman, Park, & Peterson, 2005).

As a career counselor, you can use the Signature Strengths survey in two ways. First, you can encourage clients to identify and then use their signature strengths every day in work and relationships, and especially to look for new and different ways to enact them. Second, you can use signature strengths to assess the degree to which a job or career a client is considering will enable them to express their strengths, and thereby predict how gratifying the job is likely to prove on an everyday basis.

You can also help clients who are currently in an unsatisfying job or career to determine how they might use signature strengths to Recraft Work (Seligman, 2002) to deploy strengths. This can be achieved in one of three ways. First, *Task Crafting* means taking on more tasks that deploy strengths and fewer of those that do not, as for example, shifting from collaborative tasks to individual projects or vice versa, depending on one's strengths. Second, *Relational Crafting* means altering interactions at work to utilize strengths, as for example offering to mentor interns or

participate on a task force if your strengths in teamwork or leadership are underutilized. Third, *Cognitive Recrafting* means changing the lens through which you view the overarching pattern or purpose of your work (as opposed to altering discrete tasks) in order to connect your strengths with the impact of your endeavors. For example, an insurance agent might view their work as helping families heal or readjust to life after an injury or accident. Or a hospital orderly might view transporting patients as part of the mission to cultivate health.

(2) Cultivate Positive Emotions

One of the greatest gifts of Positive Psychology has been to establish the evolutionary significance and function of positive emotions. In the past, emotions such as joy, love, cheer, serenity, or amusement were viewed by researchers as merely a side effect (or *epiphenomena*) of the evolutionary struggle for survival, and therefore not worthy of scientific scrutiny. Barbara Frederickson's (2009) research reversed that assumption by demonstrating that positive emotions serve a crucial evolutionary purpose. They *broaden and build* our personal resources. Under the influence of positive emotions, we are more likely to seek out and cultivate relationships; we think more creatively; and we show curiosity and interest in more subjects. For example, research using technology to track eye movements has shown that we *literally see more* of the world under the influence of positive emotion. By contrast, under the influence of aversive emotions, eye movements narrow and we review the same perceptual field over and over.

Frederickson's findings are echoed by John Krumholz's (2004) work on *planned happenstance* as well as Richard Wiseman's (2003) research on the behavior that distinguishes lucky from unlucky people. In an experiment, Wiseman asked each group to count the number of photos in a section of newspaper. The lucky folks stopped after turning the first page, while the unlucky people kept turning pages and counting to the end. As it turns out, a half-page ad on the second page said, "Stop counting. There are 43 photos in this section." The lucky people *saw* the ad; the unlucky people were too anxious and rigid in their scanning and counting behavior to see it. When you can't observe calmly and clearly, you will miss opportunities! You will see what you are looking for and *only* what you are looking for, not what is right in front of you.

For career counselors, the implication is that helping clients cultivate positive thoughts and emotions can help ensure that they think creatively and expansively about new opportunities instead of getting *stuck* revisiting the same terrain. Also, cultivating positive thoughts and emotions can play a significant role in helping people develop greater overall life satisfaction. In fact, a steady commitment to cultivating positivity can alter

your destiny. Frederickson's (2009) research reveals that when we reach a *positivity ratio* of three positive thoughts to one negative thought, we arrive at a *tipping point* at which "people seem to take off, drawn along by an upward spiral energized by positivity. Their behavior becomes less predictable and more creative. They grow. They feel uplifted and alive." (Frederickson, 2009, p.16). Frederickson and collaborator Marcial Losada found a similar *tipping point* – or *butterfly effect* in Chaos Theory terms, in which a "seemingly trivial input [i.e., positivity] can produce astonishingly disproportionate outcomes" -- in the behavior of high performing teams within organizations (Frederickson, 2009, p. 125). At a positivity ratio of 6:1, these teams developed a *collective synergy* that kept them consistently and expansively creative and resilient. The *broaden and build* impact that positivity has on resources such as creativity and resilience may explain why happiness yields success!

Breaking Free from the Hedonic Treadmill

Affective forecasting is the name given by psychologist Daniel Gilbert (2006) to our ability to forecast our emotions, especially positive or negative reactions to experiences (e.g., getting married or winning the lottery) or acquisitions (e.g., a new plasma TV or a sports car). Gilbert and fellow psychologist Daniel Kahneman, as well as economist George Loewenstein (cited in Gertner, 2003) have discovered that almost all of our decisions are based on affective forecasts of what actions will make us happy or unhappy. We are pretty good at predicting the overall *valence* (positive or negative) of an event, but alas, we're woefully inaccurate about the intensity and duration of our emotional reactions. As Gilbert's (2006) research has shown, if you ask people who were left at the altar to make an affective forecast on the day it happens, they will say it is the worst day of their lives. Catch up with them a year later, and most will say it was the best day.

Whether it's having children or getting into medical school, our emotional reactions to events almost always prove to be less intense and more transient than our expectations. The gap between our emotional predictions and what we actually feel is called *impact bias*. The danger this bias poses is the likelihood that we will make errors in predicting what will make us happy, leading us, to use Gilbert's evocative term, to *miswant*. We'll think that we'll be worse off with a single major mishap (e.g., a broken leg or a romantic rejection) than a minor, chronic irritation (e.g., a trick knee or a tense marriage), but we're wrong. We think we want more choices, but we're happier with fewer. We think we want a large, isolated home, but we're likely to miss social interaction with neighbors and a sense of community.

We're always sure that we want more money, but a growing body of re-

search shows that while money correlates with happiness up to a certain level, once that level has been reached, increases in wealth have little or no correlation with increases in well-being, for individuals as well as for nations. In fact, over the past 50 years in the U.S., income has climbed steadily, with GDP tripling per capita, but “life satisfaction has been flat, and depression has increased 10-fold...anxiety has also increased, and social connectedness, as reflected in trust in others and social institutions, has dropped” (Diener and Seligman, 2004, p. 3).

We also suffer from what Lowenstein calls an *empathy gap*, or an inability when we are in a *cold* state of calm and rationality to predict the extreme and sometimes reckless or misguided choices we can make when we are in *hot* states of anger, fear, anxiety, craving, or excitement. We are changed profoundly by these agitated conditions, and are “more different from ourselves” under their sway than we are from “another person,” says Lowenstein, but we do not predict how they will skew our judgment, as when, for example, a panicky feeling that we’ll never find a job leads us to accept a job that we would recognize in a calmer state as a terrible fit.

We know that we adapt to changing circumstances, both good and ill, and that we have a *psychological immune system* that kicks in to restore equilibrium after emotional peaks or valleys, but we seem unable to predict that we will adapt! When we do adapt to a new job or promotion or a raise, we may then simply keep striving for the *next* new job, or a bigger promotion, or a larger raise, getting caught thereby on a *hedonic treadmill*, similar to an arms race, in which we keep wanting newer, bigger, presumably *better* things, none of which offer enduring satisfaction.

Research on affective forecasting has clear implications for career counselors regarding clients’ ability to make sound predications about careers, jobs, and the timing and location of retirement. Pointing out the danger of the *empathy gap* can help client’s commit to a *cooling off* period to prevent the job seeker’s version of *buyer’s remorse*. Fortunately, Wilson (cited in Welch, 2009) has found that affective forecasting also can be improved by teaching people to *contextualize* their predicted outcomes. In one experiment, Wilson asked University of Virginia football fans how upset they expected to be if UVA won or lost to Virginia Tech. On average, fans expected to be happy for days if their team won, and sad for days if their team lost. Not surprisingly, a single day after UVA lost, fans *adapted* and returned to their pre-game levels of happiness. Wilson asked another group of fans to contextualize before predicting their reactions by thinking ahead of time to the next day, and what they’d likely be doing at each hour of the day. These fans made much more accurate predications, because they were more likely to realize their lives would continue

regardless of the outcome, and that rather than thinking about football, they'd be thinking about homework, relationships, and so forth.

A related kind of *treadmill* clients can get stuck on is highlighted by the research of psychologists C.R. Snyder (2005), and Carol Dweck (2006). By praising groups of middle school students differentially for either effort (e.g., *you worked hard and did well*) or ability (e.g., *you're so smart*), Dweck found that the children praised for effort welcomed new, hard problems to solve and said it was fun to work on them, while the ability-praised children turned down new tasks and said it was no longer fun to work on problems. Praising effort, Dweck concluded, reinforced a *growth mindset* about learning characterized by viewing intelligence as fluid; by seeing persistence as the path to mastery; and by seeing mistakes as useful feedback to be incorporated into learning. Praising ability, by contrast, reinforced a *fixed mindset* characterized by viewing intelligence as static and permanent (i.e., you have it or you don't); by viewing effort as either fruitless or worse, a sign that you're stupid; and by shame over mistakes and often avoidance of new challenges that might result in both criticism and new learning.

The fixed mindset reflects and may contribute to what Snyder calls a "Defensive achievement orientation," which aims at warding off feelings of inferiority by cultivating feelings of superiority which are a cover for underlying anxiety, depression, and rumination upon failures. By contrast, the growth mindset equips one for a "genuine achievement orientation" based on hope, trust, purpose, and resilience. One can assemble an impressive resume of achievements based on either motive, but a defensive orientation yields little lasting psychological benefit, since it is aimed not at a positive purpose so much as avoiding negative emotions. But what do you have when you avoid something? Nothing, really. A void. Success on such terms never feels substantial, regardless of any amount of celebrity, money, or status. It is, in short, an *achievement treadmill* without an end in sight.

Gratitude and Savoring

Just as we forget that we adapt, and are therefore prone to *miswant*, we forget how much we benefit from practicing gratitude and from savoring meaningful, positive, or pleasant experiences in our lives. Counting your blessings is hardly new. But Positive Psychology contributes an impressive body of research showing that gratitude benefits us in powerful and tangible ways, boosting optimism, life satisfaction, and health (in the form of fewer symptoms and increased likelihood of exercising!). Sonja Lyobomirsky (2007, pp. 92-95) lists eight ways that gratitude boosts happiness: (1) it promotes savoring of life experience; (2) it bolsters self-esteem and self-worth by bringing awareness to the goodness in one's

life and relationships and by shifting focus away from failures and disappointments; (3) it helps us to cope with stress and trauma (gratitude was the second most commonly experience emotion -- after sympathy -- in response to 9.11); (4) it encourages moral behavior, increasing the likelihood that one will help others; (5) it builds social bonds; (6) it inhibits envy and *invidious* comparisons with others; (7) it is incompatible with and may thereby inhibit negative emotions such as anger and bitterness; (8) it counters adaptation and the *hedonic treadmill* by amplifying positive emotions and preventing us from taking goodness for granted. This impressive list makes clear why gratitude is often called the *megastrategy* for happiness, since it has so many positive outcomes embedded within it.

Savoring means basking in the glow of a past, present, or anticipated positive event or emotion, with the effect of prolonging, revisiting, or amplifying enjoyment. By definition, therefore, like gratitude, it ameliorates adaptation. The habit of savoring is related to intense and frequent happiness, reports Lybomirsky, so it is well worth the effort to practice any of a variety of savoring strategies, from relishing the moment to replaying happy days to celebrating good news with family and friends, to focusing on beauty in all its forms.

Savoring is antithetical to distraction because it requires focused attention, so it brings mindfulness in its wake. Mindfulness, in turn, tends to keep us engaged and enlivened in the present. According to psychologist Ellen Langer (2009), most boredom we experience in life, whether at work or in relationships with others or ourselves, stems from mindlessness of the constantly flowing river of experience. It is when we *hold things still* in our minds by not being fully present, that we fall into abstraction, dissociation, or boredom. "If you're not *in* the present," points out Langer, "you're not there to know you're not there." When we direct attention to mindful focus on the moment, we come into attunement with the constantly unfolding phenomena inside and outside ourselves. We are also, therefore, much more likely, as were Richard Wiseman's lucky research subjects, to notice opportunities as they arise before us.

Finding and Sustaining Flow

Before there was a name for positive psychology, there was the pioneering research on Flow done by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihaly (1990). He studied the *optimal human experience* of being so concentrated on and absorbed in what you are doing that you lose all track of self and time. By definition, flow transcends ordinary time and space, because we are merged with effortless, unselfconscious attention on goal-oriented activity.

We all stumble upon flow sometimes, but Csikszentmihalyi's research

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gives us a key to enter and sustain flow. Flow results from a perfect balance between ability and challenge. When our ability outpaces the challenge of the endeavor (e.g., an advanced tennis player matched with a novice), we get bored and unfocused. When the challenge outpaces our ability (e.g., a novice teacher given a class of rambunctious students), we get anxious and self-conscious. In a work setting, we can use this diagnostic concept to point ourselves in the direction of either upping our skills to match the challenge, or adjusting the challenge to fit our ability.

Flow combats psychic entropy, or the dissipation of energy caused by negative emotions such as fear, sadness, anxiety, or boredom. Under the influence of negative emotions, we're unable to apply psychic energy to external goals, because we're preoccupied with trying to restore inner subjective order, in other words, to finding a way to feel good. But the type of rumination we engage in when confronted with emotional distress usually just makes things worse!

Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) research revealed that most people only think of themselves when things are not going well, and thereby enter a vicious circle in which anxiety about the present affects memories of the past, and then the painful memories make the present seem ever more bleak. Of course, it's sometimes necessary and helpful to reflect upon one's self and the direction one's life is taking – tasks you no doubt ask of your clients all the time, as do I – but it is best to think about job hunting, career changing, or introspecting on strengths and values *after* establishing an upbeat mood. Better still, comments Csikszentmihalyi, is to “invest psychic energy in goals and relationships that bring harmony to the self indirectly. After experiencing flow...we feel better about ourselves without having to try.”

Flow's ultimate purpose, Csikszentmihalyi believed, is to enable us as individuals to merge consciously and constructively with the universal and timeless flow of evolution. His ennobling vision of the larger purpose of flow aligns with and amplifies the *end goal* of career counseling, which seeks to enable individuals to integrate work with a sense of life purpose and core values. Purpose in life, in Csikszentmihalyi terms, acts like a *magnetic field* that organizes and clarifies lesser goals and provides a channel for psychic energy to transform life itself into flow. His vision of harnessing the power of flow to the pursuit of ultimate and worthy goals parallels Erik Erikson's description of the successful resolution of our final psychosocial stage, that of Ego Integrity vs. Despair: as we approach the end of life, we need to find an overarching, transcendent meaning that brings coherence to the entirety of living. If a person sets out to achieve a difficult enough goal, from which all other goals logically follow, and if he or she invests all energy into developing skills to reach that goal, then

actions and feelings will be in harmony, and the separate parts of life will fit together – and each activity will “make sense” in the present, as well as in the view of the past and future. In such a way, it is possible to give meaning to one’s entire life. (Csikszentmihalyi , 1990, pp. 214-15.)

Can you think of a better articulation of the *noble purpose* to which both positive psychologists and career counselors aspire for ourselves and for all whose lives we impact? I cannot.

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