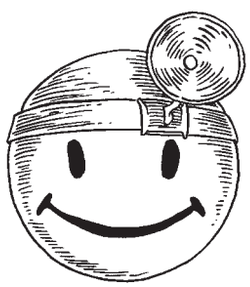
STRAWBERRY SAROYAN

THE HAPPINESS DOCTORS

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY TRIES TO APPLY SCIENTIFIC RIGOR TO THE FEEL-GOOD GOALS OF THE SELF-HELP MOVEMENT. WHY ARE ITS LEADING PROPONENTS SO GROUCHY?

DISCUSSED: *The American Psychological Association, Learned Helplessness, Carl Sagan, The Meryl Streep of Psychology, Clinically Unhappy Fifteen-Year-Olds, Positive Affect, Reviving Ophelia, Emotional Intelligence, The Overprescription of Prozac, The Moral Reset Button, Romance by Ralph Lauren, Noam Chomsky, An Emotion Called Elevation, Drinking Apple Juice out of a Bedpan, Corporate Love*

I.



It is entirely possible that if you met Dr. Martin Seligman in an airport lounge, or in a coffee shop, or in any other place conducive to encounters with strangers, and you had gotten to talking, and he had thought that you were smart or connected or otherwise worth knowing, he would have delivered his positive psychology sales pitch. Positive psychology, he might have said, was his idea for shifting his field's focus away from negative things like depression and anxiety and mental illness. A positive psychology would center on optimizing things like courage and hope and joy; it would be a science that focuses on the needs of regular, non–clinically ill people like you and me, he might have explained.

Like all good salesman, though, Seligman would likely have wanted to make sure that his pitch began, in fact, *before* it began. He might have eased you into it—told you about his professorship at the University of Pennsylvania before segueing into the fact that he was now also the head of the American Psychological Association. He might have told you about several of his books, *The Optimistic Child* and *Learned Optimism,* perhaps, and if he could find a moment when it seemed naturally relevant, he might

Illustration by Tony Millionaire

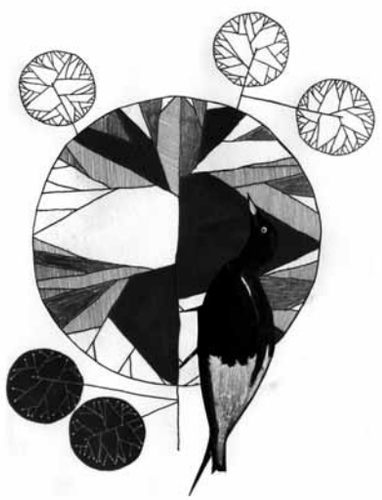
have mentioned that the latter was a best-seller.

Of course, what he would have been trying to tell you in not so many words is that he has been, in recent decades, a sort of psychology superstar—"the Meryl Streep of the field," according to one young psychologist I talked to—and that he has been renowned by his peers for his work on optimism and pessimism and a third field of research which he believes is affected by the first two, something he has termed "learned helplessness." If it seemed not too boastful a move, he might have dropped the name of a reporter or producer who'd interviewed him, one from the *New York Times* or *Good Morning America,* depending on what kind of a person you seemed to be. Or he might have told you that, as a young man, he'd been friendly with Carl Sagan, or how great Kathleen Hall Jamieson was. Oh, Jamieson's name didn't ring a bell? He would have explained.

Having set the stage, he would officially have begun the pitch. He would likely have spoken in sweeping terms at first—generational and dramatic and even millennial terms—of where we are. America is at a point in its history where we have the best of everything yet we're still not happy, he might have said. "Our young people have, by every economic statistic, by every objective index of well-being, *more*—more purchasing power, more education—but almost all of our mental health statistics are going south." And then he'd deliver the stats. We're much richer than we were forty years ago but ten times more likely to be depressed. In fact, the rate of depression is the highest it's ever been, and the average age of a clinically unhappy person's first bout with the condition has gone from thirty to fifteen years old in recent years.

And so there is a need, he would continue, and then he would probably tell you that there is also an opportunity. "This is a ripe fruit situation," he might have explained about creating this new focus for psychology. When societies are "poor, or when they're at war… it's perfectly natural that the arts and sciences and the ideology of the nation should be about defense and damage." But when societies are rich, they should turn to questions of the best things in life, of what makes life worth living. Seligman might have told you that we, right here, right now, in America, were experiencing one of those moments.

You might have agreed that it



was a compelling argument, although somewhat black-and-white, perhaps, and lacking in distinctions about who has what riches exactly. But its sheer simplicity and feel-good sense of making life better might have appealed to you. It might even have struck you as being very basically American, somehow. But it's also conceivable that you might have been on the fence. What about people who need serious psychological help, like your schizophrenic aunt or your bipolar cousin?

At this point, Seligman would probably have mentioned a story about his daughter. "I have to confess to you, even though I write books about children, I'm really not very good with little children," he might have begun, and it would have been made plain to you that he was getting, for the first time, personal. And then he would have told you about five-year-old Nikki. He was out in the garden one day with Nikki, weeding, he might have said, and she wasn't very good at it. His daughter started throwing weeds in the air and dancing around. And so, Seligman would confess, he'd yelled at her, and his little Nikki had walked away. But soon she came back. "Daddy?" Seligman would tell you she said. "I want to talk to you." She told him this: "When I turned five, I decided to stop whining, and it was the hardest thing I've ever done. And if I can stop whining, you can stop being so grumpy." Seligman would likely pause. What he realized in that moment, he would say, was

that raising Nikki "was about taking the strength that she had just displayed—which was the ability to see into my soul—and amplifying it, helping her to live her life around it."

You might have been silent for a moment. And then he might have asked you about your job or even, if you seemed particularly receptive, your marriage. And if you happened to tell him that it was OK but that you sometimes felt it didn't really have that spark anymore, he might have said that he understands. And then he might have asked you if you'd found anything that helps. And you might have said to him, sheepishly, that you'd been using some self-help books recently and gotten good results. And he might have told you, with a smile, that you had been lucky. And then he might have talked a little bit more about how positive psychology would be able to help you in a foolproof way, and he might have said the magic word: *scientifically.*

As you said your goodbyes, you might have decided that, in the final analysis, positive psychology was at the very least a harmless idea and at the most it was a great one. But as he walked away, it is also entirely possible that you might have had an odd, almost inarticulable sense that although this man who'd just told you about this new field seemed really smart, as you watched him now, from a distance, he didn't really seem that… positive.

That, roughly, is what happened to me. Of course, instead of in an airport lounge, I first encountered Martin Seligman in the science pages of the *New York Times* on April 28, 1998. I would be exposed to his ideas about positive psychology in different cities and tones and incarnations over the course of many months following, both on the phone and in person, when I covered the American Psychological Association's annual conference in San Francisco that summer for *Elle* magazine, and when I covered the first positive psychology conference in Akumal, Mexico, the following January for the *New York Times Magazine.*

When I met Seligman in San Francisco, he was in the latter half of his year as president of the APA and was beginning to look to the future. Creating a positive focus in the field of psychology, he believed, would be a large part of that future. I approached him with an APA representative in tow a couple of minutes before he was to begin a speech. If my encounter with him seemed somewhat abrupt, it also wasn't particularly illuminating. He simply shook my hand and greeted me briefly, and then left to speak with someone else. The woman from the APA and I lingered onstage and she told me in modulated tones that Seligman was very busy and tense. I could feel her wondering if she should apologize.

But in the intervening months, Seligman showed himself to be a clearly difficult subject. Once, I found myself in a silent standoff with him over the phone after I repeated a difficult question. I'd followed what I thought to be an obvious train of thought: couldn't positive psychology be seen to tread on territory which had traditionally been considered religious, religion being the main place Americans historically went to find happiness, fulfillment, and, ultimately, meaning in their lives? When he didn't answer directly—telling me instead how positive psychology was about pinpointing the ways religion was effective, but was otherwise different from it—I asked him again. But couldn't positive psychology be seen by some as aiming to fulfill a similar role? This second time I was greeted with a firmer no. I asked him why such an idea was so off base. Silence. He finally reiterated that the idea of positive psychology displacing religion was just completely wrong.

I understood his response—it would surely be a hot button, both among the religious and among psychologists, if positive psychology were trumpeted as potentially displacing religion—but I also didn't understand it. I was writing one of the first big pieces on his ideas that would appear in a widely read publication, and this was a valid question, indeed one that would probably be posed to him again, yet his response was combative to the point of being, if I had been a different sort of journalist, dangerous. The smart thing to do would have been to play me a bit—go off the record and explain his con-

cerns, or try a little humor. To put it in trendy terms, his testy response didn't seem particularly *emotionally* intelligent. After I finished reporting the article, Seligman initially refused to comply with *Elle*'s fact-checking department unless he were given a draft of the text prepublication, a request that, if granted, would have violated basic journalistic protocol. *Elle* declined, and the young researcher assigned to the story called me in a panic.

After several other uncomfortable exchanges, I couldn't help but be struck by the ironic discordance between my private experience of Seligman and his professional focus. It was an irony that for several days after I finished my piece for *Elle*—a straight reportage-style handling of his ideas that left "the man" himself almost entirely out—led me to worry that I had missed an important part of the story. It would usually be unprofessional to insert the layer of prickly personal interaction I'd experienced with Seligman into the article, and would likely appear to be motivated by a personal sense of alienation, but I began to think perhaps this was that rare case in which respecting one rule—that of getting to the truth—would require breaking another. Because placing Seligman the Man into that piece, including the way his personal foibles contrasted with his professional ideas, wouldn't have had anything to do with whether or not I particularly liked or disliked him. It was simply relevant in this case, where his personal life and his professional life are uniquely, and perhaps inversely, related. It was relevant that Seligman is a psychologist who has made positive social life his focus, and has proclaimed and fashioned himself as the leader in his field, yet he seems not only to have a particularly complex relationship with positive social interaction in his own life (which he passed off as being "grumpy"), but seems to lack an understanding that the two sides of himself—the personal and the professional—are related quite deeply. "We study what we need," someone once said, and in some ways Seligman has come to be the most poignant example of anyone I have ever met who embodies that phrase.

From the moment I first encountered positive psychology that day in the *New York Times,* I thought it was an interesting idea. But it wasn't until I met Seligman in San Francisco that I came to think it might also be a powerful one. That notion hit me in the ladies' room, after listening to a lecture by Seligman's friend and colleague Mihaly "Mike" Csikszentmihalyi, a University of Chicago psychologist who was also Seligman's positive psychology partner (although, by temperament, an often silent one). Csikszentmihalyi's talk was called "If We Are So Rich, Why Aren't We Happy?" and he delivered it to a crowd of four hundred or so in a large conference room.

At first, the speech was remarkable only for its degree of tedium. Csikszentmihalyi articulated his words in an accent so thick that they were sometimes indecipherable; he might as well have been speaking from underwater. But then, seemingly from the ceiling, a piercing alarm—a sort of stripe of noise—began sounding on and off. A comedic dance ensued between Csikszentmihalyi and this alarm, which ceased just long enough for Csikszentmihalyi to safely resume his talk, at which point it would chime in seemingly louder than ever. Through the chaos, this otherwise gruff and socially awkward scientist endeared himself to the audience more than he would have been able to if things had run smoothly.

And much of the second half of Csikszentmihalyi's talk was compelling. Psychologists in recent decades have done studies, he said, that scientifically prove that money doesn't make people happy. They have done these studies by comparing things like the mental states of permanently injured victims of violent accidents with those of lottery winners. Of course, when something "good" happens there is a rise in subjects' "positive affect," but it is only momentary and quickly declines; likewise, when something "bad" happens, there is a temporary downturn in affect. But soon, he told us, all subjects revert to their normal "pre-event" state, a state which is commonly known as one's disposition and which at this point, Csikszentmihalyi reported, is thought to be

largely genetically determined.

Csikszentmihalyi wasn't discouraged by this finding, however. He said the real work to be done is in trying to shift the predetermined degree of happiness upward. Then he discussed several studies that point to ways in which people achieve permanent increases in happiness. Religious people are generally happier than nonreligious people, and married people are generally happier than those who are single. Studies also show that people who regularly achieve "flow," his term for experiencing time stopping because one is completely engaged by the task at hand, were able to increase their positive affect on a regular basis.

As I dried my hands with a paper towel in the ladies' room after the lecture, I thought about those money studies. Science, these days, is truth. Science had proved that money and, therefore, consumerism itself, wasn't a reliable means to achieve happiness. But clearly, the word wasn't getting out. Those money studies had been conducted years ago, and apparently so few people in the relevant field itself knew about them that they were featured news at a conference for psychologists.

Yet couldn't a movement like Seligman's change all that? Wasn't there not only power in numbers, but implicit power in the media hype that would attend positive psychology's emergence—of which I myself was one of the first signs? Wouldn't a sense of urgency and competition—and trickle-down awareness in the outside world—be fostered by assembling the best and the brightest doctors to work toward this common goal of increasing human happiness? It seemed to me that it would. In fact, creating a movement around these ideas seemed to cater to that exact market phenomenon: getting the word out.

Of course, I knew and Csikszentmihalyi knew and most everyone in psychology knew that the idea of studying something that might fall under the rubric of "positive psychology" wasn't a particularly original idea. There were more than a few people who could be considered positive psychologists already out there, including Mary Pipher, who'd had a best-selling book, *Reviving Ophelia* (1994), and who, at this conference, preached a sort of down-home version of positive psychology that called for families to start having dinner again and for people to stop and watch, really *watch,* a sunset every once in a while. *New York Times* science writer Daniel Goleman's book, *Emotional Intelligence* (1995), synthesized the work of several doctors who could be considered positive psychologists, and had set the best-seller list virtually on fire with its idea that "book smarts" were only one—and perhaps not the greatest—predictor of success. (Just as important as IQ, the book postulated, is EQ, which encompasses everything from motivation to social skills.)

Going further back, positive psychology's roots could be traced to humanistic psychology, a movement founded by two maverick doctors, Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, in the late 1950s and early '60s. Their theories focused on the potential of people in general, and although Rogers and Maslow's movement didn't catch on—the doctors were branded as too flaky and theoretical by the academic world, not diligent enough about creating hard proof that their theories were correct—what they had been able to contribute to was the birth of the contemporary self-help movement: some see them as its godfathers. And while most self-help books were viewed by Seligman and his colleagues with a certain disdain regarding their methods for formulating so-called "solutions" (or rather, their lack thereof), psychologists also understood that the genre itself was of value because it had hit a nerve with the public. Millions and millions of readers and seminar-goers responded to what self-help was selling. In that sense, self-help was a real inspiration for creating a positive psychology because it was the best evidence yet that people wanted such a thing. "The elephants are already in the palace," as Csikszentmihalyi said at one point during the Akumal conference I'd later attend. And if the "elephants" wanted self-help, surely they would want positive psychology even more. Because positive psychology would be self-help without the self-doubt, without the margin of error, without the, well, *wackos.* Positive psychology would be self-

help that worked. And the reason it would work was that it would be self-help with a not-so-secret weapon: science.

Of course, the other unarticulated but very real context in which Seligman's thinking likely took place was the fact that the self-help movement in America was not only reaching millions and millions of people, but it was generating millions and millions of dollars. In 1997, for example, Americans bought nearly twenty-eight million "inspirational" books, not to mention sales of seminars, courses, and lectures that peddled similar pop psychology tools and tricks. Those were dollars that, while few psychologists would admit it, they might have felt a little entitled to receive. After all, if they could do the job better, why wasn't anyone hiring them? Why did their works often end up on a relatively few rarefied bookshelves, while it probably seemed like whenever Tom, Dick, or Harriet picked up a pen and dashed off a *pop* psychology book addressing the issues in "regular" people's lives, it flew off the shelves? It doesn't seem a stretch to say that Seligman, and many others, must have been annoyed and angry—and also known that the dollars they could generate (through books, but also other avenues) could help start an academic movement. Because in the waning moments of the twentieth century and in the dawning moments of the twenty-first, when by Seligman's estimate the funding of research on mental illness had cost roughly fifteen billion dollars over the past fifty years, starting an academic movement was a lot like starting a business.

So creating a positive psychology made sense. Its academic territory wasn't new, but its moment seemed to have arrived. There was a need being met either by laypeople with a lack of credentials or by psychiatrists who were overprescribing Prozac, in large part. Seligman could change that. He wasn't inventing the wheel, but he was about to attach it to a vehicle.

Soon it became clear to me what exactly a positive psychology would confront and how threatening it would be perceived by some to be. The two things Csikszentmihalyi had been talking about that day in his lecture—money and happiness—had been collapsed into one entity in the minds of the American public, and necessarily so, for economics' sake. As I walked out of the ladies' room, I thought about perfume. I thought about "Romance," Ralph Lauren's latest scent, touted implicitly in spread after lifestyle spread as delivering the lives of models in love to us directly. I thought about "Good Life," a cologne for men, whose ads featured the daughter of an editor I knew impersonating a perfect girl happily worshiping the man who wore it. And I thought about "Happy," the perfume from Clinique, whose commercials rife with jumping-with-joy models were sprinkled liberally, hour after hour, across the airwaves, onto our televisions and into our homes. It all made the point in expensively affecting imagery again and again: For $30 or $40 or $70, why not just buy these things—romance, the good life, happiness—at Bloomie's? What Seligman was talking about doing, to put it in terms not too heavy-handed, was calling Bloomingdale's bluff.

II.

I arrived in Cancun on January 2, 1999. I stepped off the plane from L.A. into a sort of physicalized air, the humidity and heat carrying a palpable weight.

The little town of Akumal—the site of the positive psychology conference—was still about an hour away, and so, speaking no Spanish, I approached the cabbies with as much charm and as many please-understand-me telepathic vibes as I could. I was directed to an Airporter-ish bus and driven through the seemingly only street into town. For the first few miles, I watched the worst of America's

influence through the windows. Lining beaches so smooth they can only be described as somehow *touchable* were T.G.I. Friday's and Hiltons and Tony Roma's. The idea, presumably, being: leave home without leaving home. Come here to dip into paradise with one foot while the other foot is still firmly rooted in the local mall.

Akumal was different, far away from both the gravity of Mexican poverty and the insane wonder of American tourism. It still radiated its own special brand of extremity, but it was the kind you read about in sophisticated travel magazines: quirky, stylish, expensive. My "room" at the small hotel was actually a freestanding bungalow done in a style that might be called caveman-meets-Marimekko.

After dropping off my bags, I walked over to the hotel's palm-shrouded surprisingly Italian restaurant, where I ran into three other conference-goers. We introduced ourselves. Ursula Staudinger, a sophisticated-looking woman with a Jean Seberg haircut, told us in unwittingly stern tones that she had just flown in from Berlin; Joachim Krueger was a psychologist at Brown and a new father; and Corey Keyes, from Emory University, was a sincere and vaguely humorous guy who smiled a lot.

We got a table and ordered, and ate our spaghetti and pizza and salad together and talked. Staudinger worried that others might have had travel complications because of icy winter storms—the two people with whom she was supposed to share a taxi had never shown. Kreuger concurred, saying the East Coast was a mess. Then Keyes and Staudinger fell into shoptalk. Keyes saw positive psychology as part of a holistic health scheme; Staudinger agreed, and began explaining her notion of something she termed "the art of life."

After a while, Martin Seligman appeared in a T-shirt, shorts, and sandals. He sat down and gave us all a loud hello in his baritone, and the mood changed not in terms of emotion, but in terms of tempo.

His attitude toward me seemed to have changed since our meeting at the APA conference in San Francisco. Not long after my piece appeared in *Elle,* I'd received an astonishing email from him—astonishing given his often combative conversational style with me up until then and the fuss he'd kicked up with the fact checker prior to my article's publication. He'd emailed that he wished his mother were alive to read my piece because he felt I'd captured him in a way that other reporters hadn't.

So far, his attitude in Akumal seemed consistent with this latest persona, but I didn't feel on sure footing with him. I began telling Seligman about the insights I'd had in San Francisco. "If a positive psychology actually catches on, wouldn't it be dangerous?" I asked. He said he didn't see where I was going, so I told him my basic theory. As I see it, I said, there's a fundamental war between the economics of our culture and finding happiness within our culture. Our society is predicated upon manufacturing not only consent, as Chomsky says, but on manufacturing desire. "So we create a problem that needs solving. And the solution is then sold to you." I added with a smile, "Money, not love, is what makes the world go round." Seligman seemed loose, in a good mood. He smiled back.

I continued: "When you take that problem, that desire for the material in particular, away"—I was referring to the studies showing that money doesn't buy happiness—"don't you end up with a collapsing not only of the economy but also a collapsing of the philosophical basis for America? Don't you end up turning the American Dream as we know it—boy or girl makes good, economically—on its head?"

Seligman told me that I had an interesting point, but he wasn't too worried about it. "It depends what you're selling," he said and suggested education as a tool that could be marketed in this new climate. In other words, if you clue people in to what really makes them happy, you just start manufacturing different products that fit those different needs.

After some preliminary group discussion Sunday night, the conference began on Monday. There was still at least one attendee who'd yet to show because of weather problems (although he soon would), but the rest of us had arrived safely.

That morning, we sat in a circle

in the living room of a rather grand house: the eighteen young psychologists (this first conference was for top "junior scientists" between twenty-five and forty years old), the "faculty" (as Seligman, American Psychological Association CEO Ray Fowler, and Mike Csikszentmihalyi referred to themselves), a PBS documentary reporter and camera crew, me, and a man named Don Clifton. Clifton was the white-haired owner of the Gallup organization who Seligman referred to as someone who, among other things, had written a book called *Soar with Your Strengths.*

When we introduced ourselves, it became clear that many of the psychologists were already studying areas that would naturally fall under a positive psychology label. A woman named Barbara Fredrickson, from the University of Michigan, had been looking at the role positive emotions might have played in human evolution. Another psychologist, Jonathan Haidt, had been working on the first studies of an emotion he called "elevation," which referred to the feeling one gets after witnessing moral beauty or humanity's better nature.

A young woman named Joanne Otero, the conference's administrative organizer, handed out photocopied schedules after introductions were complete. Each day there would be four presentations, she said, two in the morning and two in the afternoon. Each presentation would be an hour long, half an hour being allocated for each psychologist's talk and the remaining thirty minutes allotted for discussion. She wasn't a psychologist, Otero added by way of introducing herself. She was the only other nondoctor, besides me and the other journalist and his cameraman, at the conference.

Haidt delivered the first presentation. Seligman had suggested that we move outside, so we sat in bamboo chairs under a canopy of palms and Haidt raised his voice above the din of the wind. Elevation, he explained, was very different from the feeling he had spent previous years studying: disgust. (Later, I asked Haidt about experiments concerning disgust, and he explained one in which subjects were asked to drink out of a bedpan filled with apple juice.) Haidt read excerpts from responses to a study he'd conducted in which people described a moment when they'd felt "elevated." One girl, writing about witnessing a male acquaintance help an old lady, said she felt like "my heart was melting. I wanted to say, 'Awww,' like when you see a really cute baby." The girl described a hint even of romantic feelings for the man, and a desire to create "a beautiful poem or love song."

Haidt explained that experiencing such a reaction was akin to having a moral "reset button" pressed. "When it's pressed, we feel a kind of moral rebirth—like we want to devote ourselves to others," he said. "I think Christianity… is an organized, weekly attempt to push this button over and over and over." But, he added, "religion has no patent on this button." It seemed to me that with this last comment Haidt had possibly pushed a hot button of his own with Seligman. But Seligman just smiled and, when Haidt finished his talk, applauded.

Over the next couple of days we settled into the routine. A breakfast of jalapeno-spiced scrambled eggs, coffee, and fruit was followed by two presentations, lunch, and a reconvening in the afternoon for two more talks. Several of the presentations were nearly impossible for me to fathom beyond their rudimentary foundations. Among these was one given by a psychologist named Ken Sheldon whose talk, "The Organismic Perspective," assumed an offhand knowledge of such concepts as negentropy and alluded to Prigogine's Nobel Prize–winning work on dissipative systems in chemistry. Other talks were simply boring. A man named Michael Carey spoke in the well-intentioned but monotonous tones of a helpful accountant as he explained the equally well-intentioned but somehow also monotonous-sounding community programs he'd designed in the hopes of curtailing the AIDS epidemic.

But many of the topics and the attendees were interesting, even to a layperson like myself. On the third day, Laura King of Southern Methodist University gave a talk she'd entitled "If It's Positive, Then It Must Be an Illusion," in which she shot down the prevailing notion among academics that, as she said, "happy people are stupid."

King, who had the odd air of a hip fifth-grader (she was a little fast, one had the sense, but still did her homework), spoke of the fact that psychologists often don't seem to *like* their human subjects all that much. She outlined several studies which prove happiness and personal growth can coexist. Jonathan Schooler started off his equally engaging talk with a question: "Are we having fun yet?" he said. He recounted a moment at a dinner party when someone had asked that question and he'd realized that if they were asking, they probably weren't. He suggested there could be a similar dynamic at play when one began to focus too directly on happiness in psychology. "If you scrutinize a very faint star, if you try to stare it down, it's gone," he said. The way to find it, he concluded—and thereby to study happiness—was to look around it. On Wednesday evening, we all convened for a poetry and music share. Seligman was dressed in a tie-dyed T-shirt that had the word "yes" emblazoned across its front, and bellowed greetings as each new wave of people arrived. A scientist named Sonja recited a Caliban monologue from *The Tempest,* and several people played songs from their favorite CDs. Seligman, who had brought his wife as well as two daughters along to Akumal, read a poem with his children, their baby voices enunciating with him in unison.

Afterwards people began mingling and I walked up to one of the younger participants—one whom I thought I might be, in different circumstances, casually social with—and asked him what he thought of an insight I'd just had. Watching this scene, these psychologists seemed to me to be searching for answers to life's problems just like the rest of us. "You guys are just people, in a way, whole *people,* not only doctors—" I started. But he looked pained as I beamed him with my sudden enthusiasm. I felt awkward too.

"I'm more a brain than a person," he replied.

I didn't know how to respond, so I told him I had to go. And I did leave soon after, walking back to the hotel in the dark again.

I almost didn't sit next to Gallup owner Don Clifton the following morning, so inconsequential and, for my purposes, irrelevant did he seem. His physical presence was a composite of gray hair, pink complexion, and the slowness of a kindly old man who might trap you in a conversation about the weather for hours. And he didn't seem like an intellectual—in this company the currency of power (or so it seemed to me then). He appeared, in short, to be an innocent, much as I was. But I sat down next to him anyway.

I asked Clifton how he was enjoying Akumal. But Clifton started talking to me about business. Gallup, he informed me, isn't just a polling company. It's the biggest market research firm in the world, with clients from Disney to Citibank, and a fast-growing part of the company is its employee research division. Since the early '90s, he continued, there has been a trend away from improving products themselves to improving the relationships between companies and employees, and thereby between customers who buy products and the employees who sell products to them: Happier employees create happier customers. Companies realized, he said, "that you could work hard and improve [a product's] quality, but the customer didn't know it." To improve revenue, he explained, Gallup had been among the first to begin looking at what the customers *would* notice: how they were treated—how they *felt*—while they bought. In business-speak, Gallup began focusing on company-to-client relationships. The next wave in business strategy, he predicted, is: how do you get people—both employees and their customers—to be happy?

Clifton, I realized, had just given one possible answer to the question I'd asked Seligman that first night in Akumal, the question about positive psychology being dangerous because it could turn capitalism on its head. What he was pointing to was its potential to do the opposite: positive psychology could strengthen our consumerist capitalist culture by strengthening the salesperson-customer relationship. If American business got their hands on such a tool, I realized, positive psychology would become a very different animal indeed. Clifton, while a seemingly innocu-

ous and only vaguely introduced presence here in Akumal, was perhaps a key person at the conference.

After all, positive psychology's effects depended largely on where in the purchasing chain its thinking was applied. *Before* someone tried to buy happiness (in schools, say, if kids managed to resist the advertising that had been targeted at them almost since birth), or after someone tried to buy happiness and had been left feeling empty (in self-help, on the "recovery" shelves, for example), it could be powerfully freeing. But Clifton was talking about applying it *while* someone was in the act of trying to buy happiness. And if you did that, what you were really doing was perpetuating the capitalistic myth. You were strengthening the idea not only that money could buy happiness but that money *equals* happiness. Only now you wouldn't just be trying to communicate that to people via ecstatic models in ads. You might actually create individual experiences of happiness in stores and over the phone and even via the internet by teaching salespeople to create positive relationships.

But when you created a real sense of caring flowing from the salesperson to the client, when you created a sort of corporate love that one experienced when one bought—or even considered buying—products, didn't you undermine the point of positive psychology altogether? Of course you did, at least in my—and I suspected many other attendees'—estimation.

But positive psychology needed money to get off the ground. And these days money in America, in academia included, was sometimes coming from business. Indeed, for positive psychology money with business ties could be particularly key, because the government's health funding agencies might have difficulties endowing dollars to this new field. Seligman told me that he'd recently met with Steven Hyman, the head of the National Institutes of Mental Health, which is the largest grant-giver for psychologists' work in the country, and asked Hyman's second-in-command about their take on positive psychology. "You've got to give us some traction, Marty," Seligman said the deputy had told him. "You have to give me demonstrations that this affects our mission—and our mission is curing disease." In other words, the NIMH has a hard time funding research unless it impacts those who are lobbying for money—and happy people usually aren't.

So Don Clifton, I suspected, represented money. Clifton and people like him might be willing to be the investors in positive psychology because they might ultimately make up a large part of the market. But this meant that if the product were funded by these companies, it would probably be done so with the tacit or explicit expectation that it would be developed to cater to their needs. And if the product were created with the needs of companies in mind instead of the needs of individuals, it would become a very different product.

So although Seligman never said this outright, it isn't hard to picture the kind of internal conversation that might have been ticking away in his head as he wondered whether or not to have Clifton out to Mexico. In the end, he might have rationalized, having such a synergistic relationship with capitalism might not be such a bad idea. After all, if one were realistic, one had to face the fact that there was little chance of the government strongly getting behind and funding something that seemed custom-designed to hamper the economy in any way. So positive psychology wouldn't necessarily be at odds with capitalism for the time being. Instead of putting out a product like a truly subversive and inarguable (i.e., scientific) book or other tool on how to achieve fulfillment in life, its first product might be a series of steps scientifically designed to enhance the satisfaction felt by a customer who calls up his local RadioShack, or who e-orders another shipment from Amazon, or who unsuspectingly strolls into, to invoke it once again, the newest branch of Bloomingdale's. Positive psychology, for now, would suss out the enemy. It could always do a turnabout, couldn't it?

That afternoon Seligman had me over to his house—which he was rumored to be renting from the Grateful Dead—to conduct an interview. We sat on adjoining

couches and spoke about media, his role in positive psychology ("I'm just a cheerleader," he said), and the field's business applications. Fredrickson's work, for example, which pointed to the idea that positive emotions led people to make better creative choices, could be used in corporate environments, he said. "If I were Barb, one of the first things I would do would be to set up a controlled situation in which you, say, have to hire salesmen, in which you'd actually measure their performance when positive affect is increased and when it isn't." If Fredrickson's idea is right, he continued, and people who are experiencing positive emotions make better decisions, positive psychology could garner some huge business clients. "If I were Microsoft, and it turns out that my creative people made better decisions under positive affect, then I'd start funding research about how to get more positive affect."

It was an idea at which I felt sure Fredrickson herself would balk, for I had broached the topic of selling her ideas to business and she'd smiled with amusement but then launched into a sincere and impassioned speech about wanting to use her work to help girls with eating disorders.

It was a similar disconnect I felt when speaking with Csikszentmihalyi several days later. A spark ignited in him as he began talking about the possibilities of psychology. "We have to realize that what affects people's feelings and emotions is not what just happens in therapy, of course, but what happens in everyday life—how your parents treat you, how your teachers treat you, how your boss treats you, the kind of houses you live in, the kind of community you're in," Csikszentmihalyi said. "If you can begin to apply an understanding of what conditions make people's lives better to all of these settings and environments, then in a sense in a few generations you won't need as much therapy." So it was about creating better lives and a better *backdrop* as he met (as I knew he did) with architects and city planners and heads of factories and school principals, and with world-class economists and statesmen. It was about building something solid instead of fixing something faulty. That was why he had come to this conference: to escape the endless cycle of repair and start the generation of dreams.

Csikszentmihalyi continued, telling me about a group of colleagues in Italy, people from the University of Milan and the University of Verona, who were interested in creating flow. These colleagues were traveling around "helping to create mental health services in third-world countries that used to be in the Soviet sphere of influence, where Soviet psychiatrists came and built these enormous hospitals which were really jails where people were chained to the walls by their legs," he said. His friends were, with great ceremony, bringing in the village blacksmiths to break up the chains while everybody sang, and then taking the men who had been incapacitated and bringing them into the middle of the rooms, often next to the warm fires, and dancing with them and feeding them. After the conclusion of such ceremonies, Csikszentmihalyi told me, his friends continued to organize activities for these people that put them back in touch with life in their villages, finding jobs for them that matched their levels of ability. "These people were chained to the walls because they were diagnosed with some kind of mental problem…" he said. "And they found ways for them to return to the community."

It seemed, again, he was speaking a language different from Seligman's: Csikszentmihalyi was an idealist. As I walked into the house for one of the final presentations, I wondered whose point of view would prevail, or if everyone would be able to meet in the middle.

And so the week ended. The palm fronds blew furiously in the wind that last day, as positive psychology's "manifesto," a two-page document that several of the conference attendees had been drafting for the last couple of evenings, was read aloud. Seligman announced that the first positive psychology research money had been endowed to the field: four annual prizes, privately funded, at $100,000, $50,000, $30,000, and $20,000 each.

Later that night, I walked over to the hotel owner Maribel's house (she desires to be known only as

"Maribel") to pay for my week's accommodation. On the couch in her living room sat Joanne Otero. Otero and I had had a couple of friendly exchanges but been too busy to really talk; I'd been interviewing and listening all week, and her job had been to help attendees with everything from flight reservations to meals to snorkeling equipment. But she'd always seemed happy and upbeat and sweet. That night, however, her face was red. She had been crying, and started to do so again when she saw me. I asked her what was wrong. She released an almost incoherent torrent of grievances, many of which concerned Seligman although some touched on the other participants. "I can't believe these are *psychologists*—aren't they supposed to know better?" she said, her face alternately crumpled with hurt and alive with rage. "And all of this talk about doing something important for people, it makes me want to *throw* something!"

Maribel and I looked at her and at each other and nodded supportively. Neither one of us knew exactly what to do. After a while, Otero quieted down. Maribel harbored a similar although scaled-back set of grievances, she confessed, and told me that she'd found several of the psychologists staying in her bungalows to have "superior" attitudes. Then Joanne looked at me and said that tonight had been the last straw. No one, it turned out, had said thank you. ✯

SELECTED *MASSACHUSETTS REVIEW* STORY SUBMISSIONS, SUMMARIZED (2005)

- ✯ Sober lawyer is attracted to handsome drunk lawyer named Bacchus.
- ✯ Grieving mother brings home dying bird; her remaining children bury it.
- ✯ Kleptomaniacal nursing home attendant suspects womanizing patient is her father.
- ✯ Eddie's father tries to break Uncle Fizzy's wild horse, then they let it go.
- ✯ Obsessed ER nurse brings home unwanted baby, gets arrested, goes crazy.
- ✯ Man chases dog that stole his prosthetic hand; meets nice lady.
- ✯ Divorced lawyer wants slacker son to come to anti-pollution rally.
- ✯ Boyfriend takes girl to wake in Orange; she fucks some other guy upstairs.
- ✯ Older sister is lesbian, gets crew cut, argues with parents, disillusions younger sister.
- ✯ Vagrant picks up girlfriend in small town.
- ✯ Unicorn comes to understand wife's devotion to husband through ironing underwear.
- ✯ Wife is jealous of husband's relationship with ghost of Franklin Pierce, who haunts their bathroom.
- ✯ Becca's husband leaves her so she gets a butterfly tattoo.
- ✯ Little Jewish girl goes to goy birthday party, eats hot dog, goes home, shaves her dolls' heads, buries their hair.
- ✯ Little girl and grandfather watch fireworks, then he dies.
- ✯ Troubled suicidal boy interrupts vacation of social worker with troubled marriage.
- ✯ Daydreaming daughter frustrates high-achieving Indian-American parents but pleases Hindu priest.
- ✯ Bitter Afrikaner goes on rampage to avenge murder of Pik, also bitter Afrikaner.
- ✯ Unemployed Brooklyn slacker boys go to bar, feel their hipness slipping away.
- ✯ Sisters find dead dog in abandoned house; they may be next to die.
- ✯ American rug buyer flirts covertly, then cries through night with Peshawari rug merchant's daughter.
- ✯ Two college girls, one compelled to tell the truth, the other to act impulsively, embarrass themselves and learn to be more sincere and responsible.
- ✯ Young sisters wander in the rain; one muses about their dead grandfather, the meteorologist.
- ✯ Vietnam vet's wife leaves him; buddy joins to kayak and reminisce. As they paddle they meet other men whose wives left them.

—*Corwin Ericson*