

## How Selflessness Can Lead to Happiness



Christopher News Notes

*“Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.”*

*—Philippians 2:4*

**IT'S NATURAL FOR US TO PURSUE OUR OWN WANTS AND NEEDS, so long as they don't veer into materialism and self-indulgence. The truth, however, is that we can never be truly happy unless we also embody a spirit of selflessness and giving. This approach to life will help us become better people who grow closer to God, and change the lives of those around us for the better.**

## When We're the Happiest

August Turak was enduring a crisis. Though he made his living coaching college students on finding meaning in their lives, he suddenly realized that he himself felt empty and directionless inside. Turak sought guidance at Mepkin Abbey, a Trappist Monastery and working farm in Berkeley County, South Carolina. After spending several weekends there for prayer and meditation, he found the monks' kindness made a big impression on him.

Following Mass one winter's night, Turak headed to his room in a separate building. He heard raindrops hitting the roof and berated himself for forgetting his umbrella. Now, he would get drenched! But as he approached the doorway, Turak saw 60-year-old Irish monk Brother John standing there in his thin habit, holding an umbrella and walking people who'd forgotten theirs to their rooms.

For the next week, Turak couldn't get Brother John's gesture of kindness out of his head. The monk had anticipated the needs of others and endured discomfort in order to help them. And it was all because of his foundation of love for God and man. Turak got the message that God was sending him. He discovered the way to fill the emptiness inside himself was by practicing selflessness and love.

During a *Christopher Closeup* interview about his book *Brother John*, Turak explained, "We're all put here for the exact same reason: to be transformed from selfish people to selfless people. We may do that as a doctor or lawyer or parent or teacher or whatever...But we all have the same purpose...The paradoxical thing is: we think we want self-indulgence, but we're actually happiest when we're sacrificing, when we're giving ourselves away for something worth giving ourselves away to. We're all looking for a mission that's bigger than ourselves."

## The Idea of Sacrificial Living

Emmy Award-winning actress Patricia Heaton's grown sons had all moved out of the house, and her latest successful sitcom (*The Middle*) had

Michaelyn Hein, writing at the website [SelfSufficientKids.com](http://SelfSufficientKids.com), offers advice to parents on raising selfless children. Two of her suggestions are:

- **Model Selflessness.** "We all know kids are sponges. They absorb that which they see their parents doing. As such, they'll have a harder time learning to be service-minded if they don't regularly see it in action at home...If we want considerate children, we must be considerate ourselves."
- **Make Charity a Family Activity.** "While finding volunteer opportunities to do with little ones may be daunting, it's not impossible. With our kids, aged one to nine, my husband and I have harvested peaches and green beans for food pantries, packed meals and decorated lunch bags for area soup kitchens, and created shoebox care packages for needy children. Through such experiences, our children learn that charity is just something we do, that it's a natural part of life to care for others. That from the little or plenty we have, we can still always give something, even if it's just our time."

ended. It led to her becoming interested in people's stories of reinvention in different stages of life. She chronicled many of these stories in her book *Your Second Act* and discovered that a common thread of self-sacrifice ran through them.

For instance, Yudi Bennett spent 30 years working as an assistant director on numerous TV and film projects. But in 1997, her son Noah was diagnosed with autism at age three, becoming mostly non-verbal. There were few resources at the time for parents with autistic children, so Yudi and her husband Bob struggled to learn how to best deal with the situation. They even started a support organization called Foothill Autism Alliance to help parents like themselves. Tragically, cancer took Bob's life five years later, leading Yudi to leave the film industry to focus on raising Noah and running the Alliance.

As Noah got older, Yudi started thinking of what he—and other young people like him—could possibly do for jobs in the future. She enrolled him in an after-school animation program and discovered the work came naturally to him. Eventually, she created her own computer graphics school and studio to teach kids on the autism spectrum how to create animation. They now have contracts with major studios, such as HBO and Marvel. In the process, the students are learning to become independent and taking pride in their accomplishments. Yudi's actions wound up changing the lives of many people.

Regarding Yudi's story and others like it, Patricia Heaton told *The Christophers*, "Our life is a journey of discovery and growth, and it's those kinds of circumstances which help us to become more compassionate, sympathetic, and empathetic human beings...We should take care of ourselves as best we can, but it shouldn't be the whole goal in life to have an easy life. The goal is to live in this community and be there for each other in this world that is tough. My liaison at World Vision, Kathryn Compton, said, 'Christ commands us to do three things: help the poor, help the poor, and help the poor.' I think we can apply that to all our fellow human beings. That is going to give you more of a sense of self-worth and self-love than maybe a massage—although I love massages. But I think this idea of sacrificial living, it's been lost. I go back to my Catholic upbringing. It used to feel like a burden when I didn't understand it. I had to go away from it for a while, but I now understand it more as I'm older and the importance of it."

## God's Divine Appointment

"Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it." —Proverbs 3:27

Sometimes we choose the ways in which we practice selflessness—and sometimes God nudges us along a slightly different path. For *Hallmark Channel* actress Jen Lilley, it was a combination of the two. With a heart for children, Lilley and her husband

Jason felt called to be foster parents. Initially, she was hoping for a child that was elementary school age, particularly the eight-year-old girl that she and Jason had been mentoring. But that plan didn't go through, so the agency asked them to take in a four-month-old boy with special needs. Lilley felt reluctant to do so, but ultimately agreed. She now calls it "God's divine appointment."

She said on *Christopher Closeup*, "That process ever since has been the most rewarding, emotionally stretching, and spiritually stretching journey of my life. I would do it again, 100 times over, and I hope to foster until I die."

Parenting has also deepened Lilley's love and appreciation for her husband. She explained, "If you already have a good marriage, I highly suggest throwing kids in the mix because it opens up your heart on a whole different level."

## The Paradox of Love

Some couples open their hearts on a whole different level when unexpected illness occurs. Writing at *Busted Halo*, Susan Anthony recalls meeting George during a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. He came to pray for his 58-year-old wife Josi, who suffered from early-onset Alzheimer's and was consigned to a care facility near their Long Island, New York home. Susan and George became friends, and she learned that he visited Josi after work every day. He had decorated her room with photos from past vacations, with a Mets pennant because they were baseball fans, and with items

that reflected their Catholic faith.

One day, George invited Susan to visit Josi with him. She watched as George held Josi's hand and prayed, noting there was an intimacy between them that transcended the present situation. Susan concluded, "George is living out what St. Mother Theresa called 'the paradox of love'—if you love until it hurts, the hurt goes away and there is only love. Seeing the sacrament of marriage distilled to its essence—selfless love—is a powerful witness for me as my husband and I enter our fourth decade of marriage. I pray that George's example will encourage us to love each other better, to let go of our individual needs and love until it hurts. So maybe, one day, when we are holding hands as one of us prepares to leave the other, the true intimacy of our souls will mirror the love I witnessed in Josi's room."

## Love Your Neighbor as Yourself

Jesus, of course, is our ultimate guide to selfless giving. The Creator of the universe humbled Himself by becoming human, modeling for us the virtues of service and sacrifice, love and mercy. When asked what the greatest commandments are, Jesus responded, "The first is... 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Yes, most of us need some amount of "me time" to do things that we enjoy. Even Jesus needed time to Himself once in a while to pray. However, if we practice the kind of selfless love that Jesus refers to, we will find those actions also edify and strengthen our spirits. The key is finding the right balance between self-care and selflessness. If you don't already do so, find ways to give of yourself in your family, church, or community. You may just find that your experience of happiness is greater than it was before.

  
**"It's better to light one candle  
than to curse the darkness."**

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**"Every unselfish act of love whispers  
God's name."**

**—BOB GOFF**