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What is the Good Life? What is Happiness? | Satyan Devadoss & Varun Soni

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The Veritas Forum

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Transcript

Welcome to the Veritas Forum. This is the Veritas Forum Podcast. A place where ideas and beliefs converge.

What I'm really going to be watching is, which one has the resources in their worldview to be tolerant, respectful, and humble toward the people they disagree with? How do we know whether the lives that we're living are meaningful? If energy, light, gravity, and consciousness are a mystery, don't be surprised if you're going to get an element of this involved. Today we hear from Professor of Applied Mathematics at the University of San Diego, Satyan Devados, as well as the Dean of Religious and Spiritual Life at the University of Southern California, Varun Soni. In a discussion titled "What is Happiness? What is the Good Life?" moderated by Karen Hubner on the stage at the University of Southern California.

[applause] Hey, how are you? Awesome. I'm excited to be here with Karen and Maroon. Karen, I've just gotten to know her parents the first time in that.

She's probably one of the kindest people I've met in terms of her blockfulness and her generosity. Maroon, I've known for at least over five years, and he's one of my favorite humans in the world. So I am thrilled to be hanging out with these guys up here.

And I want to thank Bear Talk for inviting me. I was kind of surprised because the title of this is about happiness. And I'm surprised by that for a mathematician to be invited to talk about happiness.

So I'm excited that math is the cause of so much unhappiness. For so many students, a minor. If you have a social unhappiness about math, even extends to adults, you know, people I don't even know, the first time I meet them when they find out about a mathematician, they always start by saying, "Father, forgive me, for I don't understand trigonometry." So I'm going to give me a price stop at a calculus and I didn't want to go on.

You know, I'm talking to most people and I ask them, "Hey, do you remember the last "history class you took in college?" You know, talking to some adults and they're like, "Um, how about those at Japan?" Or, "What's that? Well, we're two hours." Do you remember the last English class you took? I think of Shakespeare, the sonnets, or the veil. I don't know. Say, "Do you remember the last math class you told me about math?" [laughter] I'm not a day of the final and then I'm rolling.

So here I am, I'm talking about happiness. [laughter] So, you know, I grew up in a south side of India and, and yet I'm here. I'm here in America in 21st Century America, in the west coast, in South California.

And I'm drinking whether I want to or not the cultural kool-aid that's in the air, right? That's, that's going through, through a blooded. And that kool-aid is asking us and telling us, like, what is it that you want to be happy for? There are these notions, these classic notions of what makes us happy, right? There's issues of power, you know, we just heard this week about Harvey Weinstein's case, but whoever has power has a glory to get away with what they want. And they can kind of get what they want.

The consequence of all that, you can talk about issues of fame, you know, dude, I had just a thousand more followers, right? Ten thousand more to that, but that would get what I want. Maybe issues of knowledge, but you're, you're an SC, this is one of the greatest institutions of knowledge in the world right now. And, and you can think, if I make summa cum laude, if I get into the law school I want, if I can finish that grad degree, then I would have that name.

You know, like, you have this long list of recognitions that will end up here, right? It's like, is that what it is? Like, is that the great life instead of having that long list behind your name? Or is it money? You know, money, you can go to the cool places in LA and take pictures of food. [laughter] By the party you want, you know, David Foster Wallace, a great writer, he wrote the following words, and he's talked about money in particular, and he said, "If you worship money, and when even if I worship this, if you pour your heart into it, if you worship money in things, if they are where you tap real meaning life, then you will never have enough. You never feel you have enough." And he talked about the same words for power and for fame and for knowledge, it doesn't satisfy.

You know, if you actually think about the people who have had these things, and who kind of made the good life here, you realize it's really rare for those people who have a

good life. Most of those lives that you have have incredible power, incredible money, incredible fame. There's a lot of brokenness in their lives, and with their families, there's a long, there's addictions, there's these bigger things that doesn't seem to lend to the right things.

Let me just start by giving a little bit of advice. I think y'all are too good to pursue happiness. I think it's not actually worthy of your effort, your bitterness.

Let me tell you what you should be doing. I think you should only make a cake. I really encourage y'all to go and go and make a cake.

Like some of you, my wife is like, "psychoddy" "angle and nerdy." She's not listening to this. But you know, you make a decent, "mmm, poor" "reteals, though." Really, you're like, "Mixing these away." You make awesome things, but for you, your cake's gonna suck. And then you share that, and you'll make an... That's actually worthy of your time.

It's like, make a cake with your hands, make friends, make enemies. That's actually worthy of your time. If you ask me finding the good life, it's actually not, for me, based on happiness, actually.

For me finding the good life is based on knowing what is real. I just want to know what's real. Like, what's really out there in this world? You know, if I look at the world, like, "Look at our reality, do I see under there?" I think that's what excites me.

Once I got that down, then I can figure out happiness down the line. What's real? Now, unfortunately, here's the problem, though. You see, math is not equipped to deal with that stuff.

But anything you give you, the snapshot of what I'm talking about, right? All the left here is just like that, with a little contest on the left. Over here is a page from a book in quantum mechanics. All right? And it has equation, symbols, exponential functions.

Most of you are getting repulsed at this point, right? Some of you are getting turned on. And then we'll talk about those a few later. Over here about the page on quantum mechanics, under writing, you have a page from probably one of my favorite books, it's not my favorite book in the world, which is favorable.

And my question is, which is harder? Which one of these texts is actually harder? What deals with deeper things? And you might think that this is symbolic, and it feels like you can't meet it, whereas you have words like "me" and "judgment" and "lifting" and "lute" and "man" and "outlaw". So, of course, it's easier to deal with words. But I tell you, it takes you a little bit to understand the notation, but eventually you'll understand, "Oh, so this is how energy works, and you just plug it into this formula." And it tells you how the energy is related to the structure.

I get it. I see how that relationship is. There's a symbolism, there's a kind of a nice package that makes sense of it.

But you can spend your lifetime reading "Bail". And it's beauty and complexity and I haven't scratched it sort of this. And that is not designed to deal with harder things.

It actually deals with easy things. You know, using math and science, we're going to need to put a man on a loop. And that's actually the easy stuff.

But you may not believe, it's easy. It looks hard. Race relations.

You know, it's hard issues of gender. You know, it's hard to what it means to talk about beauty. What it means to talk about pain and forgiveness and relationships and loss.

That's the hard stuff. Dude, Matt can't handle that. Have you ever had a math lesson? Talk about any of that stuff? Is there a simple equation that tells me what to plug into? What I need to do to my wife when I go hang out with her tonight? Should I smile? Should I be happy? Should I bring flowers? I have no idea.

It's the hard stuff. There is no traumatic formula for that stuff. It's way too hard.

Listen, I'm not looking for answers to math questions. That's not what I said. I love doing mathematics.

But this is what I'm excited about. The reality is, it's not math questions, but I'm looking for answers to the deepest questions. And these questions are the questions that you get asked by S.C. security guards on Saturday night at 3 in the morning.

My question is like, "Who are you?" [laughter] Where are you going? Because it's me, that's what I want you to answer. That's a question that you get asked. That's the question that I want you to answer to.

It does mean nothing but a whole bottle. But here's something interesting, right? Just about you, just about you existing. Just about you hanging out and eating and talking and having friends and having parents.

And certainly, you are already answering these questions whether you think you are or not. Let me give you the picture. So here you are.

You have already decided whether you're going to call your mom's right. You've already decided what kind of a pizza you should have bought a few days. And when you decide to, when you should skip class and go to that concert, do that.

Well, we're not based on some rules. There's a bigger story that's guiding you that you're decided on. Now, maybe the rules that you're playing is the secular humanist rule.

Maybe you're an atheist. And you're saying that's what you're reality. I'm a lived group of hooders.

That makes sense to me and that's how I'm going to make my life. Maybe you're a Muslim or a Hindu or a Buddhist. Maybe you're a Christian.

Maybe you're in this thing. I don't care. I don't even care about any of this stuff.

That's cool. But that's still a set of rules you're buying it to. Maybe you're in the American buffet rule, which is you'll take a little bit of the Muslim favor.

The little bit of the Muslim favor, the little Hindu is the mixed little Christian like that's what I like. Good for you because that's the set of rules you're playing. We're all playing the set of rules to answer these questions.

And we're all answering these questions somehow. And to me, the Christian story, this one right here is the most probable. Now, let me be really careful, right? I don't believe in a Christian faith because it's emotionally satisfying.

I'm a mathematician. I have no emotions to satisfy. It's not a Christian.

The reason I have faith in quantum mechanics, right? The reason I have faith in quantum mechanics, you know, the theory of quantum mechanics, the story of quantum mechanics, the story tells me that there are forces that are there that strong in the weak forces. There are particles that I can't see quarks, right? Up and down charges, somebody's spitting that story for me and telling me the reason I drift that story and have high quantum mechanics because that story explains the physical world in more accuracy than any other story I have. That's why high quantum mechanics.

Right, not this quantum can case me happy. The patch looks the most believable. That's what's the most real.

Now, the reason I trust a Christian story is not because it makes me happy, but I think it best explains the world. The way it works, beauty, justice, brokenness, pain, love, friendship, forgiveness. Now, let me be clear.

Let me be clear, right? Here's how much I'd buy into the Christian story. About 70%. About 70% percent.

If you ask me, like, "Hey, how much can you kind of trust into it?" Like, out of all the things, you know, out of all the things you see, like, how much do you think it's going to work? Well, it's a probability that that's the right story. I'm going to say, for me, 70% percent. 70% percent, right? But to me, the secular humanist, the atheist, right? It's a pretty cool story.

It actually makes a lot of sense to me in many ways, but it's about 50%. And then if you

ask me, like, "How's the Hindu story?" It's like, "That's quite cool too, it's about 40%!" It kind of goes down. So I have to pick some story and the best story I've got the one that needs the most sense to me, those aren't 100% is that Christian made it 70% it's all I got right now.

But the catch is, I've got to get our own some plane. I've got to live my life according to something. I'm going to pick the best planet I got right now, and that to me is the Christian story.

Now, the flip side is that I'm 100% committed to the Christian story. Although it only is 70% making sense to me, I'm 100% committed because you've got to live your life on something. And if you don't know what you live your life, and if you don't get it, that's still a choice you're making.

To me, I'm 100% in on that story. If you can convince me otherwise, I'd love to know. So I just want to close my face.

I mean, what is this Christian viewpoint that I'm kind of into, right? Now, it's not a formula, it's not an abstract truth. It's a golden tablety to me. It says that the world is absolutely gorgeous and beautiful.

But at the same time the world is broken. There's something wrong. It tells us that God actually pursues us in space and time, in history.

That is pursuing us. To set the world right, to help us flourish. And that God himself came into the world to do this.

He's not doing this working straight up here, but actually down here. Not somehow demanding our obedience, but actually just the opposite. He actually gives us all power.

He gives it all up and his own life for the people who hate him. And it also says, and I feel the thing, is that one day the world will be fixed. That's going to be the way it needs to be.

Why do I believe this story? Like, why isn't so pile of percentage to me? Why is this version of reality making the whole sense? Two things. One, I want to close it. This first is measurable.

To me, I find it measurable. I think it deals with the Bible, which is a bunch of stories. You could actually use literary criticism.

You could use issues of literature to see, does it hold? And it actually does these amazing historical things. It says God needs a talk up here, but he actually comes down in history. So you can try to use history to measure whether that's happening.

In fact, the greatest event is the event that today we kind of start the celebration for,

which is leading up to Easter. The day, there's the punchline of the Christian faith. And that day didn't happen.

The resurrection didn't happen. The living heaven matters. So somehow you can measure it using historical tools.

And finally, to me, the most attractive thing about that Christian faith that resonates is the notion of physical. Let me show you a picture. Do you know that we, as a society, are buying more vinyl now than the history of mine? That's kind of crazy to me, because we now have, unless back then in the '60s, where you only have this, we now have lossless digital files.

The music you can get now is some flawless perfection you can download digitally. And yet, we crave vinyls because we wanted to touch. [laughter] We have violence.

And we want to touch it because we sort of don't buy things, but don't have weight. We're humans. And if you ask somebody, what do you remember most about college? Very few people would say that lecture.

But most people would say, I'm one of the way that girls know. I remember how full that pizza tasted. I remember how loud the music was when we were listening to that gaming.

We are humans when we want that. You see, the Christian faith is about flesh and love. It's not about ideas.

It's about flesh and blood. It actually says matter matters. God will not destroy this earth, it says, but he'll actually renew it.

My favorite name in the world was Ice Cream. Jenny's actually my boss. Incredible.

[laughter] And it says, "In the new heaven and the new earth, the new place you're going to go, you're going to have more ice cream than food and that. That's what you're going to be losing." It is this story that makes the whole sense that explains the reality of the best. And I just want to say happiness just happens to come along.

Thank you for your time. [applause] I wish I had my first goodness at the Barlow. [laughter] I'm not going to follow.

But I'll do my best. So I'm really grateful for the chance to spend some time with you today. I'm super grateful to the Veritas teams who brought us all together.

I'd like to acknowledge Joe Fatwell, who's our Director of Christian Life. He's really the sort of central of all this. He brought all these stakeholder groups together to make this happen.

He does every year. Thank you, Joe. [applause] I'm super grateful to our student leaders.

You heard from Quincy and Jazz. I think we're all here to see him, but I'll stand there. And so thank you to all of our student leaders who made today possible, very grateful to Karen for moderating it.

Threwed to be on this panel with my Indian brother from another mother, Sluttem, thank you. He drove all the way up to San Diego to the year, and he's going to turn around after this and drive all the way back. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

[applause] Most of all, most of all, I am grateful to all of you. We're being here this evening as we collectively ask this question. What has happened? There's a question that all of us wrestle with throughout our lives.

If we grew up in the United States, especially if we grew up in the United States, I think we're told over and over and over again, from the moment we're born until the moment we die, that happiness is the goal of our lives. That's what matters. We need to be happy.

That's what we should be focused on. If we get the right degree, if we marry the right person, if we have the right job, if we make the right money, if we buy the right stuff, especially if we buy the right stuff, we can be happy. That's what gets us to happiness.

The assumption there is that if somehow we're not feeling happy in any moment of our lives, then something is wrong with us. We're not buying the right stuff. We're not doing the right things.

We don't have the right friends, etc. I was raised with a scenario. I was born in India, but I met my - I moved here when I was very, very young, six weeks old.

Basically what they call ABCD, American-born, confused ACD. It's not. It wasn't easy wearing up India in the United States.

We didn't have a lot of role models. We had Deepak Chopra and Huffleman from The Simpsons. That was about it.

I was really grateful to Deepak when I first came on Bingham. But I grew up with this idea that happiness was the goal. That's what I needed to focus on.

I had to do whatever I could to be happy. I had to do knowledge. I spent a semester living in a Buddhist monastery in India, where I studied Buddhist philosophy, where I studied scripture, where I began to practice meditation.

And it was there that I first encountered Buddha's first noble truth, which is life is suffering to live as a sufferer. And what connects us as human beings is our shared desire to be free from suffering. I struggled with this because I grew up in Newport.

I had a pretty speech with him on the Satipurm. You're at a pretty idyllic childhood. You know, I used to have this school and most surfing.

I grew up thinking life isn't suffering. Life is beauty. Life is joy.

Life is excitement. Life is inspiration. But what I began to realize is that what Buddha was saying isn't that all life is suffering.

What he was saying is that if you live, you will suffer. To live is to suffer. And that connects us all as human beings.

We all suffer, but we don't want to suffer. And so this rocked my world. How can happiness be the goal I began to think? Or how can happiness even endure if suffering is a fundamental part of the human condition? Where does happiness happen if to live is to suffer? The more time I spent the monastery, the more I realized that happiness was actually not the goal for me.

It was the wrong goal. In fact, in many ways, happiness was a trap. Because happiness arises and ceases based on the external conditions of the world.

Those conditions that are often beyond my control. Someone says something nice and happy. Someone says something mean I'm unhappy.

I get a nice car, I'm happy. I lose that car, I'm unhappy. I get in the college, I'm happy.

I don't get in the college, I'm unhappy. That gatekeepers in the world, that events of the world, that circumstance of the world were dictating my happiness in a way that I couldn't even be sort of proactive with. That I didn't have any agency over the external conditions for shaping me.

That the roller coaster of emotions that I was on weren't of my own making. And that's why happiness is often so fleeting and frustrating. Even our most aspirational document as Americans, in the country that puts happiness as the goal in life, our most aspirational document, the Declaration of Independence, doesn't guarantee happiness.

All it guarantees is the pursuit of happiness. Because happiness is a process more than it can physical. It's a journey more than it is a destination.

The more you grasp it, the more you lose a grip on it. Like grains of sand in your palm, the harder you hold it, the less you have. And so after a lot of reflection, a lot of introspection, I realized that I was looking for something beyond happiness.

Actually, I was looking for something I could control. I was looking to thrive. I was looking to flourish.

I was looking for a sense of belonging. I was looking for meaning and purpose for a plane

to get on. I was looking for significance and authenticity, for joy.

I was looking for inspiration. I was looking for what ancient Greek philosophers call eudemonia. Eudemonia is a state of human flourishing and peak performance in the Arctic living.

Because with eudemonia suffering is part of the equation. If to live is to suffer, we have to build a model where suffering is part of the equation. Suffering can't be the enemy.

When you're not happy and you're suffering suddenly, you feel terrible by yourself, but if to live is to suffer. If suffering is part of the human condition, then why should it be the enemy? Suffering builds resiliency. It builds empathy.

It builds strength. It builds humility. If the goal is only happiness, then there's no room to suffer.

There's no room for sadness. There's no room for stillness. All these emotions and experiences are fundamentally part of the human experience.

If all we're looking for is happiness, then we're disconnecting ourselves from what it means to be human. This evening we're discussing two questions. What is happiness and what is the good life? I believe these two questions are antithetical to each other.

Because in many ways, I believe happiness as a concept, as a theory, as an idea, gets in the way of us living a good life. If living the good life is the goal, if we're to focus on eudemonia as opposed to happiness, then how do we get there? How do we achieve eudemonia in our life and in our work? What does spirituality and science tell us about living the good life? The good news here is that over the last 20 years, there's been significant research done on the science of thriving, not just the spirituality, on the science of joy, not just the spirituality, on the science of eudemonia, the science of living a good life. The science of mindfulness, the science of prayer, the science of gratitude.

We suddenly have these sophisticated data sets talking about what religion and spirituality have talked about for thousands of years. And so now, religion and science are in agreement on two core practices that will empower all of us to live a life of thriving and flourishing a life of eudemonia. The first practice is to ask yourself the ultimate questions in your life, the questions of meaning and purpose, to find your plane.

Who am I? The questions of the DPS officer. I'm going to steal that. I work a lot with DPS.

I don't think they realize how mystical they are. Who am I? What is my role in the world? Not what job do I want to have, but what is my role in the world? What matters to me? Why does it matter? How do I translate my values into action? These are the questions that make us human. These are the questions that connect us across space and time with anyone and everyone who has ever lived.

To be human is to ask these questions, the questions of meaning and purpose. At USC, you've learned all the right answers. You're here because you've had all the right answers.

You would be here if you didn't have all the right answers on all your tests, on all your standardized exams, on all your essay questions, to get here. The very act of you being here is a product of you having all the right answers. When you get lead us see with your great brains and your to go on to your great life, it's because you're also going to have all the right answers.

So, so much of our life is focused on what are the right answers. Well, what are the right questions? I believe the very act of asking the questions of meaning and purpose illuminates our spiritual path. That the act of answering the questions, even if we don't know the answers, and the answers might change.

Who am I? My change, I hope it does. I hope the answer to who am I changes between the time you're five and ten and fifteen and twenty. That's what evolution is.

That's what growth is. The answers change, but the questions endure. Can we live these questions? Can we breathe these questions? Can we interrogate these questions? For thousands of years religion has provided us a language and a framework for exploring these ultimate human questions.

And in doing so, the world's religions have all situated the quest for meaning and purpose in a larger context. And that context is that we are all part of a reality that is greater than ourselves. There is a we more than there is a me.

There is a universe, not just a world. Indeed, by understanding our place in the outer universe, we can begin to explore the depths of our inner universe. And by asking the big questions, we begin to cultivate meaning and purpose our lives.

The act of asking those questions lead us to the plan. The science tells us now that having a sense of purpose and feeling that we are part of a larger whole is not only good for us personally, but also professionally. Research studies show that people who are purpose-driven are four times more likely to be engaged at work.

They are 50% more likely to be a leader at work. They are 64% more likely to have career satisfaction. And they are more likely to have a higher incoming network.

Now, that's not necessarily why you should have purpose, but that's a nice byproduct. That's what we're taught that we want. That's what we're taught we should have.

And what we're not taught is that that is the result of asking big questions in our life. Furthermore, living a purpose-driven life is a strong predictor of happiness, well-being, and a protective factor against depression. And being purpose-driven could theoretically

add seven years to your life.

There's a physical health consequence to asking these questions, to being purpose-driven, to have meaning in your life, to have something to live for that's greater than you. So, according to the spirituality and the science, asking the big questions of meaning and purpose is a necessary precondition for achieving your day-omnia and for flourishing in your life and your careers. The second practice for achieving your day-omnia is to cultivate and nurture deep and loving relationships in your life.

Period. Ultimately, the depth and quality of your loving relationships will determine how you feel about your life. And so the best way for you to thrive is to spend time making meaning and sharing life experiences with the people you love most.

In my study of comparative religion, I have found that what religion ultimately teaches us is what it means to be human. And what it means to be human is to look for a tribe and to seek a sense of belonging. And that's what the science tells us to, not just the spirituality.

In the famous Rance study, you've heard me speak, you've heard me speak about this, sort of the Rance study evangelist. In the famous Rance study, a team of researchers followed more than 200 undergraduate students from Harvard University for 75 years. This started in the 1930s to determine what conditions lead to human happiness.

And given that there were Harvard students in 1935, they were all men because Harvard wasn't co-ed until almost 100 years after USC, which was inclusive from its inception. But that's not even over there. You're just the happier you're at the USC of the West and not Harvard or the USC of the East.

So what the researchers discovered after following these young men around for 75 years, they measured everything. They measured height, weight, education, degree, salary. They measured security, celebrity status, etc.

And what they realized is that the depth of one's loving relationships is the most important factor for thriving. As the lead researcher of the Rance study concluded, "The 75 years and 20 million dollars expended on the Rance study points to a straightforward, five-word conclusion, happiness's love, full stop." That's what the Beatles told us more than 50 years ago, "All you need is love." And in some way or another, all the world's great religions have a great, have a graced this idea as a fundamental truth, but all you really need is love. Another way we can think about the good life is also to think about death, about how do we live life in the face of death.

One of the reasons we pick the topic today of hope and healing is because of the immense tragedy we all went through the last semester, where many of us lost loved ones on our campus. We lost too many students here last semester. How many of you

lost someone and you knew you lost campus lessons? You knew someone.

I mean, the pain is still with so many of us. It just doesn't go away. It was really tragic.

And I saw students, and I saw myself really wrestling with the fragility of life, the impermanence of life, and what does it all mean? What does it all mean if any of us can go at any moment? How do we live a life worth living in the face of death? Especially because death is the one truth we have in our life. The one thing I can say about your life is that you're a warning or a dual die. And yet this fundamental truth that all of us will experience is one of the things that we have a real hard time accepting or talking about.

And so I began to think a lot about this last semester. How do we live knowing that our life is impermanent? How do we use the reality, the truth of our own death to achieve the fullness of our own life? And in this, as I was thinking about this, I came across a book by Ronnie Ware. Ronnie Ware is a palliative care nurse.

She worked in hospice care. She worked with patients on their deathbed. For 15 years, she spent time sitting with patients and often had the last conversations with them that they would ever have.

She was with her patients during their most vulnerable moments, their most authentic moments. There were moments of great clarity when they were looking back upon their life, their most honest moments. And what she realized is that when people are on their deathbed, they have the same five regrets.

And so she wrote a book, appropriately titled "Top Five Regrets of the Dying," so I don't quite. And my sense is how we live a good life is we get to the end of our lives without these regrets. Can we get to the end of our lives without these regrets? To me, that's my new definition of living a good life.

Because if all of us are going to have these regrets, when we're at the end of our life, then we can reverse engineer that and start to live a life where we don't have those regrets. We know that this is what's going to happen, so how can we act now to live a life where it doesn't. The first regret is, I wish I had the courage to be who I wanted, not who someone else wanted me to be.

And I think this is a great opportunity for you as students. This is an age where you don't have any responsibilities to anyone but yourself. When you're growing up, you're responsible for making your parents happy and your teachers happy.

At some point, it'll be your spouse, your children, your employer. You have this sweet window right now between like 18 and 28, where you can just do you. You can just be you.

You can focus on you. It's not selfish to take care of yourself. It's not selfish to try and

live your dreams.

And now's your time to do it. So, I wish I had the courage to be who I wanted to be. That starts now.

This is the right time for you to have the courage to be if you wanted me. You have a safety net. You can throw 10 things to the wall.

Three might stick. You might lament the fact that seven didn't stick. But you should really celebrate the three that do.

Because you don't know what you want to do until you know what you don't want to do. The second regret. I wish I had the courage to express how I really felt.

This I think is especially appropriate to your generation. The first digital native generation ever. A generation that is grown up comparing your real lives to the Instagram curated lives of others.

Where everyone's life looks so great. Where that avocado taste toast looks so tasty. But people wear masks in the social media world.

That toast isn't that good. And that life isn't that different than yours. So now is the time to not hide behind those masks.

But to have the courage to express how you feel. Number three. I wish I had worked so hard at work.

I think maybe they would even say, "I wish school." Once again, when people get to the end of their life, they realize that all the time they were spent working, they weren't spent doing other things. It wasn't spent in the family. It wasn't spent with friends.

There's no one on their death bed who says, "I wish I had spent more time at the office." "I wish I had gotten that promotion." "I wish I had gotten that A instead of that A minus." "I wish I hadn't taken an extra semester." "No one." "I wish I had graduated the year of..." "No one says that." Number four. I wish I had kept in touch with my friends. This is tribe.

This is tribe. This is what's important. The enduring human relationships.

Right now you have the best opportunity for these kinds of relationships. You have the whole world on campus to meet and know and love and grow. You are in this room, our many of your future spouses, business partners, call-leads, peers, and best friends.

They represent the world. This is your time to meet them, to grow. This is why you're here, to meet each other.

You're not going to remember anything that happened in the classroom. Certainly not in my classroom. You will never forget the relationships you had with it.

That often happens outside the classroom. In Greek life, in residential life, in study abroad, in religious life, in recreation sports, in the daily Trojan, in undergraduate student government. Within the university framework, but outside the classroom, where you're in relationship with each other.

What I want for all of you, really, is not a thousand friends online. I want all of you to feel like you have three friends on campus who have your back. Three friends who you can tell anything to.

That's my prayer for you at USC. Just three. That's all you need.

You can only have 120 meaningful relationships in your life at any given time. So when we get caught up and know how many friends we have online, oftentimes we devalue the friends we have in life. And number five.

This is an interesting one. I wish I had allowed myself to be happier. So we get back to what is happiness.

I think many of us think is happiness is something we are or we're not. You know, I'm happier, I'm sad. And that's just it.

What people realize at the end of their life is that happiness isn't what you are or you're not. Happiness is a choice that you make or you don't make. I wish I had allowed myself to be happier.

Not I wish I had been happier. Then at some point at the end of your life you realize that the barrier to happiness was you. Your only way of seeing the world, your only way of thinking about the world, your own mental conceptions of what we're not.

And so, how do you live a good life? I think you live a good life by getting to the end of your life. And that happens in these regrets. Thank you.

[applause] To get on this path of understanding their individual good lives. Like what it takes, what practical things would you have done in your life, would you give to the students out here? I have four kids. The oldest graduate of college is working in Boston.

Isn't that crazy? It must have been like 10. The second is college. My third is a junior in high school.

We adopted this little girl. She's now eight. She's blonde, hair blue-eyed.

She's by far my favorite. That has its own complexity for about another year. But the advice I give you is sort of the advice I give my own kids.

And which is destroy yourself in all honesty. So I never actually gave any of my kids my wife and I, until they went off to college. Even after they went to college, we'd have to kind of like have a conversation about whether they really needed it or not.

And so, part of it is because when I grow up as a kid, we're maybe even better. We never had phones, right? We never had that technological kid. Even if I am addicted to my phone or even if my generation of people are addicted to technological things, I even remember times when I didn't have it.

I kind of go back to that bedrock of like, "Dude, I remember I just took a bike and went to my neighbor's house and pulled it." You know, I just remember those days what it meant to have friends and what it meant to actually knock on. I don't be like, "I just made some cookies, welcome to the neighborhood." I say, "12th," because when I always get out and do that, right? It's just like, as part of what you did about being this physical thing. And I can go back to those days, even with technology around me.

And I just wanted my kids to have that chance. I know that the moment they turn, they go off to college in 18, 19, and they all got phones by the time they were a freshman in their second semester. They're not willing to use it, and they'll use it for a couple of less than a couple of lives.

I just want to protect them for a little bit for them to kind of grow in a soil without a bit. So, I'm struggling with a person who has a father, I'm a mess of a month, but I do those kind of things. And how much to push on technology, but does that sort of mean a lot? For me, I think that what I would say is redefine success.

I think we all have a very limited idea of what success is. I was raised as an immigrant family, and success was education, providing for your family, you know, and earning a good life, good living. And I think that is a good definition of success, but it's very narrow.

If we're going to live a good life, and we know what it takes to, and we know what creates a good life, our relationships, a sense of meaning and purpose, an ethical worldview, a weak and not-meantality, a sense of something greater than ourselves, right? We know that's what makes a good life. Then why is that not success? Why is friendship not success? Why is it success when you do well in a quiz, but now when you stay up to three in the morning procrastinating before that quiz? To me, that's actually success because you're procrastinating with a friend. You never remember the quiz, but you always remember that conversation.

Why is success not courage? Why is success not bravery? You're all incredibly brave and courageous for leaving home, coming to college and trying to live your dreams. Why is that not success? Why is success only the things that other people judge us by, and not the things that we judge ourselves by? Why is success net worth and not self-worth?

Why is success something where I have to jump through everyone else's hoops, but where I have to jump through my own hoops? Why is success what other people think about me, but not what I think about myself? I think we have to expand the definition of success and include failure within that success. When you fail, you fail in the success.

Thomas Edison invented 10,000 light bulbs that didn't work before he invented one that did. He said, "I didn't fail. I just found 10,000 ways that didn't work first." Michael Jordan said, "I missed so many last second shots.

I've lost so many games. I've failed over and over again. That's why I succeed." So all the people who you admire who have had spectacular success have also had spectacular failure.

We tend to lionize the success, but that success is not possible without that failure. Once again, this is your time to fail. You have a safety net.

If you fail, it means you're outside of your comfort zone. It means you're trying something new. It means you're trying to grow and evolve.

That is success. In and of itself. Evolution, growth, doing something different, getting outside your comfort zone.

That's why you're in college. Those are the reasons why we're here. So I think we need a larger definition of success that also honors who we are, where we can proactively determine for ourselves what those metrics are.

Not just sort of outsourced that to other people. So I just concur with that in terms of learning how to embrace pain. That's something that I personally have worked on in my own life.

Pain, failure, embracing it. Not just accepting it, but actually seeing it at a value. Not something to avoid or think about it.

Or think that something is wrong with those elements in your life. Because it is part of life. Just like death is part of life and embracing it.

Or learning how to do that. So accepting those things is part of life. So I guess one more question, Quincy, for the panel for us.

Is that number two? So you mentioned about spirituality, and the purpose that you can find through that. And also relationship as being central. So what would either of you say to those students here who are not necessarily believers in the spiritual and any kind of spiritual faith tradition? So I wanted to look at it through the question.

For me, the encouragement that I gave kind of this red and butter way of living like how do you live in the practice senses. To me, being human is really related to your body.

That's the only echo I would say.

For let me tell you back when I was going on. To be the resurrection of Jesus, the punchline to the faith. And when he came to this new place in the resurrection, he actually didn't come with theological knowledge that we had.

And he actually came and said, "Hey, do you see my hands at feet?" And then in Luke 24 he said, "I'm going to be food to eat because I'm hungry." And to me, that resurrection of Jesus, my faith says, "That's what the future is going to look like." That's what everything fixed. Everything perfects in the look like. It's going to look like a place where you have a body.

So to me, when I hear the words "me, me, me" and I agree with the word, but I wanted to mean my faith would add onto it. Do things with your body. Value your body.

What I mean by that is grow vegetables. Hang out for the farmer. Literally.

I mean, touch the soil. You know what I did this morning before I came here? We have a little garden in the backyard in San Diego, but I was pulling potatoes. I'm not sure if you've ever pulled potatoes from the ground.

It is my favorite thing to do. I'm not even kidding. You just pull it off and then once you pull it off, you can then go digging because the potatoes are like, then you have to go digging for potatoes.

It's like gold. And you find what it says. Please.

What it does to you is it literally to use your body if it matters. You mentioned both finding joy and also allowing for happiness. If there's any difference, we have those two things in your opinion and how you would approach it.

Thank you. That's a great question. I do differentiate between them.

I think happiness is the trap, but joy is the goal. For me, joy is enduring. Joy comes from the inside.

Joy, you can still have suffering, but still kind of get to joy. It's more of a state of being. Happiness is something that comes and goes based on, in my opinion, the external conditions of the world.

Joy is something that endures based on the internal conditions of the world. My spiritual teacher, the man who I got to spend a lot of time with, is Sisoy and S the 14th Dalai Lama. I love Tibet.

I got to meet him when I was living in a monastery. I got to host a man on campus a few years ago, 2011. What I noticed about the Dalai Lama is that he emanates joy even

though he's not always happy.

I've seen him cry. I've seen him comfort people who are really broken. He's over him.

He's lived most of his life in exile. He's seen a lot of pain and suffering for the Tibetan people. He's carried that burden.

Once he's happy, but he's joyful and it comes from within and his laughter is infectious. It's not based on something that happens out there. It's based on something that comes from in the air.

A few years ago, he wrote a book with Desmond Tutu, both are Nobel Peace Prize lawyers, great book this leader and great Christian leader. The book was called The Book of Joy. I think for both of them, that idea of joy, Tutu went through a part diet.

He saw a great suffering. I was a lot of them who were happy, but he had joy. Same thing with the S that I'm making.

We all define these terms in our own way, but that's the differentiation I would make. That's a great question. I just wanted to echo.

I love what Ruma is saying. My only echo would be to say that to me, the joy, confusion, and a lot of the words that Ruma had given us. In other words, he's saying if you go through a tough time right now, or if you get that 8 minus instead of a day, that's the center of it, then you get messed up.

You see the bigger picture of, "Oh my gosh, this family is something that's going to give you something else." Well, this is bigger hope that you have your life set into. Then this happiness will fade in and out, but this joy because of this whole moving moment. So, I'm just going to say something even on my moderator.

But that's a question that I had to ask too. I was going to ask him, I'm so glad you did. And in my preparation for this moderating, I explored a verse actually that I've been struggling with for almost a decade.

The joy of the Lord is my strength because just for different reasons, joy kind of doesn't feel anything. I was like, "What does that verse mean?" So, for this talk, I looked up, I like etymology, so I looked up the deep meaning of joy in that verse. It's the only time that Hebrew word for joy is used there.

And it actually, the root of the meaning means to connect. Not like, "Habbon is not blissful but to connect." And it just solved. The question for me is that through my life struggles, through pain, the joy of God connecting to me becomes my strength.

That was revolutionary for me as of yesterday. (Laughter) Okay, might I read that? No. Okay.

Sorry. Is hell and judgment real in your views? And if so, should avoiding it have some priority for those seeking, lasting happiness? (Laughter) Hell and judgment. So, in one sense, my definition of hell is simply the place where God isn't there.

And so, in one, I guess it's a little complicated, but let me kind of unpack a little bit. My notion of it is that God wants us to do exactly what he wants. And he commands us to do so.

Then we'll do it. But the cool thing about it is he's given us choices for what he wants us to do. For example, you could say, "Well, the God, that thing of evil, that that person did was so evil, that we should step in and did something." And I wish you'd actually, like, old girl wrote their power to do that and push him in there.

Well, eventually, you kind of trickled that down. You could actually say, "Well, God, that guy, you know, I was gone, I was gone in four or five, and he just cut me off, and I wish you put your hand in there now that I'm cutting off." Eventually, where do you stop that thing of God allowing you to break in and doing youth action and choices on it? And the moment you're given choices that I think we get to a place that God allows us to have the freedom to either pick him or not pick him. So that's the big thing.

The little thing that I want to say about that is the bonding. The notion to me of this concept of hell is, I think to me the notion to me of this concept of hell is that we have the, gosh, let me take a look at this one thing. We have the, we have no authority or right to understand what's going to happen in an ancient brain plane.

So what I worry about is when people say, "If you do X, you will go to hell. If you do Y, you won't go to hell." That absolutely worries me because we have no control as to what's going to happen to somebody else. In fact, the Lord of the universe that I know of is so merciful, so gracious, so understanding that he is far more gracious than you could ever be.

Far more good than you could ever be. Far more loving than you could be. And the last thing I want to say about this is, to me this notion of injustice in hell is kind of hard to understand when I'm in San Diego.

A friend of mine grew up in Serbia. And for him to talk about the notion of justice is one of the easiest things to talk about. He has seen this family slaughtered.

And when he thinks of a God who is not going to give us justice, his heart hurts. But for me to think of a God who's going to give us justice, in my part, feels weird. I think God should be a lovely reversible.

For him he's going, "The definition of loving a reversible is somebody who actually sets the world right." For all the injustices that has happened to my family, somebody needs to step in. Who's going to set the world right for him? I find hell a very difficult topic to be

talking about in Saudi California. But in many parts of the world, hell is a very simple topic to be talking about, is that's where their hope is in.

One day the world will be celebrating. Hell in Southern California is traffic on the 405 way. And if you find a nice parking spot, it's like a religious experience.

I don't know what happens after we die. So I try to focus on how we live. And I think we can create the conditions of heaven and hell right here on earth.

And that's really what I want to focus on. In terms of judgments, I don't want to treat you right. I don't want to treat you with love and compassion because I'm feeling a being judged and that's the motivation.

I think there are other reasons we should treat each other with love and compassion. And if there's judgments, then that's a second order of things. But that to me is the motivation.

So heaven, hell, judgment, these are things that happen after we die. I think our real gift is to think about how we live and how we bring heaven to earth. And I find that with a lot of young people too.

Instead of waiting for judgment day for justice, instead of waiting for the end of days to get some kind of, to get to heaven. I find a lot of our younger, especially our younger Christian students, especially our younger Christian activists, want to bring heaven to earth now. It's not about waiting until judgment day.

It's about creating heaven right here right now. And that's a powerful idea for me. I also think that heaven and hell can be a mindset.

Sometimes we are living in hell because we're living in our own mind in a particular way. And sometimes we're living in heaven because we have a different kind of mindset. So heaven and hell don't have to be things that happen to you.

They can be conditions that you create in your mind and in your world right here right now. We have one more question. [Inaudible] How can all world views, which have fundamentally different truths, all point us to the same love in life? So there's a, something we know this story, there's a famous Indian parable that my grandfather used to tell me about.

The blind man and the elephant, which is that they're a blind man. They're walking through the forest. They come across an elephant.

They want to think about what is this elephant? What is the nature of the elephant? So one man grabs the tail and says, "No, the elephant is like a room." The other man grabs the tusk and says, "No, the elephant is like stone." The other man grabs the ear and

says, "No, the elephant is like leather," et cetera, et cetera. Each man touches a different part of the elephant and from their perspective, that is the elephant. The elephant is the tail.

The elephant is the tusk. But when they get together and they talk about their experiences, they build a reality that's greater than themselves. When they get together, they can build the whole elephant in a way that they can't through their individual sort of perspectival lenses.

This is the way I kind of feel about religion. I feel that we all have our own perspectives, but the truth is bigger and it can be, and that all perspectives can be true, but the truth is bigger than anyone perspective. It's kind of like a dog with physics.

Can a dog understand physics? I'm not sure. Can we understand ultimate reality? We can understand perspectives in ultimate reality. But the importance of us sitting around and sharing our different perspectives is to create a greater level, not so that we negate each other's reality, but that we lift it up in a way that connects it with the other realities around us.

I think that is how we learn. That's how we grow. That's how we build a perspective in a way that gives you a bigger sense of truth, a bigger slice of the pot.

So I don't think that just because worldviews are different means that they're opposed to each other. We tend to have binary thinking, and especially at the university, right or wrong, black or white, good or bad. Most of the world is not binary.

Most of the way we experience life is in the grades. It's in the middle. It's in the multiple perspectives, not in the dual.

And for me, just because the religions of the world have different perspectives, that doesn't mean that they are contradictory to each other. And I will be the first to admit that me saying this is very much reflected in my own Hindu worldview. This is a very Hindu thing that I'm saying.

Because I was raised as a Hindu with the idea that there are many paths of the mountain, but they're all going to the same place. Different strokes are different folks, but we're all on the same journey. You might go up the face, you might take the stairs, you might climb through the side.

Whatever your path is, we're all going to that same place. And so there's no right way of the mountain. There are different ways of the mountain.

What's important is that we're all focused on the same holes. I agree with a lot of what Guru says. I like his analogy with elephants.

And I actually really enjoy the fact that he said that is a Hindu perspective. In the sense that that's true, I think in many sense we are a green. I mean we're on the siege together encouraging you to think about these big questions.

But at the end of the day, what if the pieces actually are in conflict? Like the guys get the other, the blind men? And they're like, wait, it doesn't actually fit the other form of an elephant. Right? I'm actually looking at a part of a dog in Pullman's Tale. And you're actually looking at a part of a cheetah and like what we got.

And so what I mean by that is, the Hindu perspective would say this, but the Hindu perspective actually, our other perspectives are our tensions. And it's like, the Hindu perspective does say that Jesus is somehow this ultimate answer to reality. And what happened on Easter is a punchline to everything.

If you talk to the Muslim, they won't agree with that. That is actually wrong. That's not what the Muslim people say.

It's actually in contradiction to it. So if you put those in the bag and mix it, they don't mix together. And if you talk to a joke, they would say the same thing.

Jesus was not going to sigh out all the way before to messiah. So there are these tensions. I think there's a lot of tapestry that we can agree on.

And I think we are deeply in agreement to say, search for those things, ask these bigger questions. Being a community with one another, think about those things. But I would actually say when it comes to a certain thing, there's all the tension.

And they don't hold the tears. So there are some questions to be resolved and deeper questions to be asked. So I want to just add a little thought that I kind of live by this.

And it's a verse in Jeremiah 29. And it says, if you search for me, it's a Hebrew phrase, but I think I believe it applies to humanity, to human. If you search for me, I will be found by you.

If you search for me with all your heart, I will be found by you. So I can agree with both of you. The good life is about being on the path of searching and continually asking.

And what the meaning of life is and what the meaning of the good life. And I really trust that if you're on that path, that you're searching, he will or she will be found by you. I have no doubt.

That's just me. So I think one thing that one of my mentors told me when I was your age was that you can doubt it, free, but you can't doubt it, dance. And that always stuck with me.

I think some of the challenge we're having here is just the challenge of language. That

when you talk about any kind of truth or reality, language itself splits the world up into constituent parts. But when we experience reality, transcendence, God, awe, it's a feeling beyond any words.

That's why poetry is so powerful in spiritual and spiritual language. Because poetry uses words to get beyond words. And so we might disagree on who a particular prophet might be or what this text say versus what that text say.

But I think when we're standing in mysterious and tremendous, in the face of ultimate reality and the face of God, when we're at a point where we're having a human transcendence experience, when we're beyond words, we're all connected. And oftentimes, language is what is getting in the way of that shared human experience. So I'm going to ask our guests to reflect on one final question that you have, reach of them.

So where do you draw from the well? To find your abiding joy that you talked about that transcends. I would have even thought about these struggles and think about these different world views the best I can, again, for my moral state, through my vivid experience. As we were talking about that infinite, who are we as humans that we make perfect claims.

But the best I have is also through those in mathematics. What I mean by that is I look at all the deep measures and one of my things. I just want to know if I can test it.

I'm an early scientist, and I'm going to test whether something is true. To me, it actually is founded in historical evidence. That is what one of my favorite things is about all of this.

Is that, as I've ended the day, when we have these different notions of who God could be, whether it is a language that's keeping us apart or they're not to be in gay conduct, I do want to look at history and say, "Did God actually touch history in certain points?" And the biggest encouragement I would ask you to do, going back to searching, is to look at Easter, because it's coming up, and today it's kind of a mark of getting right away. And just to look at Easter and say, "Are there historical evidence?" That is where all my hope is, actually, that one person that I talk about is going to state in. To me, that history makes sense.

It's something that I can measure the best I can in terms of historical tools, and that's where I'm living my life, in the sense that one day God will return and set this world right to Jesus. For me, my well are my relationships. That's where I draw from.

It's... I want to be in the service of my students and of my family, but I realize that those are the relationships that nourish me too. That there's almost a selfless act about being a father, being a husband, being a professor, being a child, because I get more from those relationships than they get from me. And so that's where I get nourished.

That's where I get... That's where my garden is watered, so to speak. That's the floor I get in my water. That's the nutrient in my soil.

That's how my boat is looking too. So I think that's true for a lot of us, that we draw strength and nourishment through community. It can be religious community, it can be active community, it can be family.

It can be any community that's meaningful to you, but it's important that we have that, that we have community, that we have relationships, that we have people in our lives who are life affirming for us. We give us a sense of hope, we give us a sense of possibility. Listen, we all have things that keep us up at night, but what gets us up in the morning? We all need something that gets us up in the morning, and for me, it's you.

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(gentle music)

(buzzing)