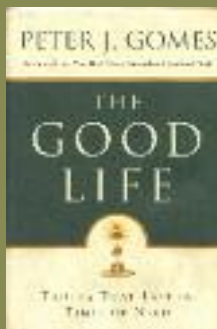


The Good Life



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*The Reverend Peter J. Gomes is Plummer Professor of Christian Morals and Pusey Minister in The Memorial Church, Harvard University. In his book, *The Good Life: Truths that Last in Times of Need* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), Professor Gomes examines what it means to make a good life, not just a good living. Distinguishing between what our culture tells us about the good life and what truly brings abiding happiness, he addresses the questions, “What do I need to be good?” and “How can I truly be happy?” Dr. Bob Kenny, executive director of More Than Money, and Dr. Pamela Gerloff, editor of More Than Money Journal, met with Professor Gomes to discuss the concept of goodness as it relates to wealth.*



An Interview with Peter J. Gomes

Interviewed by Bob Kenny and Pamela Gerloff

Kenny: You use a wonderful line in your book about participating in something that is “truly good and truly great.” I’d like to think that’s why people give money philanthropically. When I talk with More Than Money members one-on-one, they seem excited to be doing good in the world with their money. But I’ve also noticed that people who enjoy doing good are not always comfortable talking about that with others. Why do you think it’s so hard for us to talk about wanting to be both good and great?

Gomes: I think our culture has a pathological fear of exceptionalism. Nobody wants to be exceptional, although everyone wants to be *perceived* as being exceptional. Talking about moral greatness or goodness is intimidating because it implies that some are more morally acceptable than others. Yet we don’t really have a way of measuring that. There is also the question of who made those decisions—by what right does anyone make those judgments?—and that’s against our democratic and elitist nostrums. The whole notion of goodness is a discriminatory notion and is one imposed from the top, rather than from the bottom. Hence, to talk about goodness as an achievable and desirable station to aspire to is very frustrating. It’s not in our lexicon. We don’t really have the language to talk about it. One of the reasons I wrote that book is that it is essentially using practical formulas to discuss the concept of goodness.

Gerloff: What do you think the value is of talking about goodness?

Gomes: The value is in helping us define what goodness is. If you define what goodness is, it gives us something to aspire to—something that is, in my view, the ultimate object and definition of what it means to be human. We have the pursuit of happiness as the constitutional goal, but we’ve failed to understand—to our peril, I think—that happiness is not a goal. Happiness is a consequence. I think what the founding fathers really meant was life, liberty, and the pursuit of goodness.

The classics have taught us that goodness is the goal and that happiness comes from that, quite distinct from what one has, or even what one does. But in a culture that is defined by the pursuit of happiness because it is economically a viable pursuit to attain, the notion of happiness as a by-product of something else is hard to imagine. In my book, the way I’ve

schematized it, goodness is the objective, happiness is the by-product. The means are the virtues and the content of the virtuous life, and the cardinal virtues are faith, hope and charity. I outlined it that way because otherwise people wouldn't be able to visualize that there is a structure to all of that.

Kenny: In your book, you talk about the difference between making a good living and making a good life. But the good life part can be tough when you have so much money that you don't have to make a living.

Gomes: When you have nothing to aspire to and the challenges that you've defined, you have already met—like, “I'll make my first million by the time I'm 30”—you end up like young Alexander the Great. How many more kingdoms are there to be conquered? “Been there, done that” is so much the feeling of many of these achievers. So they live lives of quiet desperation, in my opinion. But the fact that one doesn't pursue the good life doesn't mean that it's not there to be pursued.

people of wealth and he says that money is as much fun to give away as it is to get. Actually even more fun.

Gomes: That's right. There was a wonderful instance many years ago: I was at a dinner at which we were honoring one of Harvard's greatest benefactors, Thomas Dudley Cabot. Mr. Cabot had given many millions to Harvard in the late '70s and was lauded for it. He stood up at the dinner and said that he and his wife had wondered what was the most fun. Was it making the money? Getting the money? Or giving it away? He concluded that giving it away was even more fun than making it.

People experienced in the management of money, over a very long period of time, almost universally testify to the great joy of giving. But for those who are new to money, the thrill of getting it hasn't yet been supplanted by the thrill of giving it.

Sometimes I talk quite frankly with some of the young and newly wealthy, and their anxiety is that the money is easy come, easy go. They know it could be gone as easily as it came. And so these multi, multi-millionaires at age 35 become extremely cau-

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We've defined the good life in terms of having as much of this world's goods as we want—not as much as we need, but as we want. When it's actually impossible to achieve what you want, and you want the wrong things, or you want inadequate things, that is all the more frustrating.

Kenny: When you have enough money to get everything that you would want, then what?

Gomes: That's a question I've asked another way: When is too much not enough? One way of framing the answer is: when it does not satisfy, when it does not give that sense of achievement or accomplishment or stability that allows you to employ and enjoy what you have. When I was a boy, we used to talk about the wealthy as the “well-to-do.” Now the phrase is banished from our lexicon. The moral implication of the phrase was that you have all you need in order to *do* something. Now, people are just rich. Wealthy. “Well-to-do” no longer works.

Kenny: I've noticed that when people have a certain understanding about their role as the well-to-do in this society, then doing good does bring them happiness. There is a sense of “Holy cow! This is more fun than buying a new house in the Hamptons.”

Gomes: That's right. My money is not being taken away from me, and I'm not throwing it away. It's *transforming* me.

Kenny: Sociologist Paul Schervish, at Boston College, studies

tious—far more so than their parents, who have next to nothing and are much more generously inclined. There is the terrible specter of their contemporaries—these dot-commers who made all that money but who never had the joy of giving it away. They made it all. They lost it all. No middle passageway.

Kenny: People are talking now about the decline of the stock market and the decline of their sense of wealth. We were talking about this recently with some More Than Money members and someone said, “I need to tighten my belts. I need to tighten my philanthropy belt because I don't have as much money as before...” But someone else suggested that, in fact, it is one belt; if giving your money away is as much or more fun than making it, then it isn't two belts. If you are going to cut back, you figure out how you're going to cut everything equally. You won't be able to give as much away, but you won't take as big a vacation either. To be a philanthropist becomes an integral part of your life.

Gomes: Yes. I know that experience.

Kenny: It seems to me that that experience comes from giving money away and realizing how much fun it is, along with some serious reflection.

Gomes: Well, interestingly enough, it's the poor who have a better experience of that than the rich, because the poor give away a higher percentage of what they have than the rich do. They have discovered that having nothing, continued on p. 14

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if you give a portion of that away, you have a good deal more than before. Where people tithe to the church, it's primarily the poor who do the tithing. It's the people of vast income who are very cautious about giving, and who wonder if they dare give ten percent to anything, let alone to the church.

That's an ancient lesson, a biblical lesson—the notion that giving is its own excuse for being. You get extraordinary dividends from it: You aid whatever is being assisted; and you get the pleasure of having done it, which builds up a kind of moral “credit” for you. But you have to be able to talk the language in the first place to have that conversation. That is what is so lacking.

Gerloff: You said that people of lesser means tend to give a higher percentage of their money away. Why do you think that having more money so often gets in the way of a good life?

Gomes: I would say that the effort to acquire money means, in some respect, that you feel you have an incredible obligation or responsibility to keep it, to maintain it. So it doesn't give you freedom, it gives you anxiety. And so you become obsessed by it as an end in itself and not a means to anything, and thus you become sort of like Scrooge McDuck, a slave to your gold coins. You get cold comfort by being able to slide up and down in them, because you're constantly worried about erosion, thievery, pilferage, loss of value, manipulation, and all those things. Living an obsessed life like that means you don't have time to live any other kind of life. It's the gated community syndrome. To those outside the gated community, the gate looks like it provides security for the insiders, but many of those inside are prisoners of their own anxiety. One does not imagine a sense of freedom or liberation on the inside of the gates. There is, rather, a sense of siege. Hence, you don't say, “What good can I do with this?” You say either, “What good is this?” or “How can I manage it or keep it, or how can I prevent somebody else from taking it?”

Gerloff: What is a solution to that?

Gomes: I think a solution is to understand from the start that money is the means to a much larger moral end. There is a self-benefit, but also another benefit. Money is meant to facilitate everything, and you have a part in helping to discern what that facilitation will be—so that instead of being rich, you want to have a sense of being well-to-do. “I have this money; therefore, there are things that I will want, even ought, to do.” That should be part of the basic syllabus of wealth, but it isn't.

The history of philanthropy is instructive in that, in the past, people found objects that would give them satisfaction in return for doing good—like hospitals or almshouses—but there is no equivalent kind of moral ambition nowadays. The idea in ancient times was that you spent your money to do

good works because that would take time off your years in purgatory or hell. But, if you make your own hell (or heaven) as is the philosophy now, and you aspire only to heaven on earth, the big motivating factor has been removed.

Gerloff: What do you think a motivating factor is now? Is it happiness?

Gomes: Personal pleasure. But it's also a sense of doing social good. I think people do have a kind of social value gene somewhere. If they can afford to do good, and they know what to do, they want to do the right thing. I think everybody feels that way, but they are inhibited—primarily by their fears. I'm no Calvinist, but I've always preached that the fundamental problem is not

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people's natural wickedness, but their temerity about being good. They want to be good. They desire it. But they don't necessarily know what goodness is, and if they do know what it is, they don't know if they dare afford it. I don't believe it's as simple as Calvin says. I don't believe in the total depravity of man. I think we're not totally depraved; we're all created in the image of God, but we're fundamental cowards. Thus, we're totally gutless, as opposed to totally depraved. So it is not the lack of a sense of goodness that keeps people from doing good; it is the lack of the will to act upon the inherent sense of goodness.

Kenny: Would you agree that given the proper support, when people have the resources, they really do want to do the good?

Gomes: I think that, if they are relieved of their fears that the good isn't really good—or their anxiety that they will get caught having to pay a price higher than they're willing to pay—and if they have the resources to do it (motive, means and opportunity), they will do the right thing. One of the lines I say here in church, when I ask for money, is, “I know that each of you knows the right thing to do, and I know you want to act upon that knowledge. I give you permission. Do the right thing.” I want to appeal to the moral intelligence. And moral intelligence, properly exercised, leads to generosity, because we want to be good and we want to be seen as doing good things. ■