

KEEPING YOUR SANITY WITH POSITIVE SUBTRACTION

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I met my wife Sue 30 years ago at a Thanksgiving party with some friends of ours. Normally I would have been with my extended family – Thanksgiving was always a favorite of my parents – but this year they hosted our family dinner on Friday instead of Thursday, so other family members could be with their respective in-laws.

Had my parents not changed the routine that year, Sue and I might never have met; we never would have been married, we would never have had our kids, and the life we know would be different in so many ways it's hard to fathom.

Many other circumstances lined up just right to lead to that night that might not have worked out – my wife might not have come to the dinner (she almost didn't), one or both of us might have lived in another town, we might not have known these particular friends...

It's pretty remarkable if you think about it, that two people *ever* meet. But people do, and we did. If you're married, it might be worth considering there's a chance the two of you might never have met.

Doing this deliberately can also make you happier.

In the classic Frank Capra movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*, George Bailey is so despondent from events that he's on the verge of committing suicide. Clarence, a new angel hoping to earn his wings, shows him what life would be like for those he cares about had George not existed. George comes to appreciate the many ways he has deeply affected people, and how much he had taken his good effect toward all those people he held dear for granted.

Seeing clearly what his absence would have meant – and would mean – for so many people he cares for puts suicide out of the question, and brings him to a state of profound gratitude.

That's more than a sweet story and a classic movie; there is something very true and strong in it that has consequences for a life well lived.

In a study by Koo, Algae, Wilson, and Gilbert, *It's a Wonderful Life: Mentally Subtracting Positive Events Improves People's Affective States, Contrary to Their Affective Forecasts*, they showed that when people consider the *absence* of a positive event – as George's angel helped him to do – they feel more positive than when they think of the positive event *itself*.

More specifically, those who wrote about how they might never have met their partner were more satisfied in their relationship than those who wrote about how they *did* meet.

This falls into the category of very worthwhile things to try. If you're married, think about what life would be like had you and your spouse never met. If you're not married, think about the people in your life whom you love and care about. What if you had never met? What if something didn't work out so that a particular person who's dear to you had never been in your life?

And we can think of the ways that a very positive event might not have ever come to pass. We get used to the

people and events in our lives; our many blessings can easily come to be taken for granted, and a strong and genuine source of joy in appreciating those blessings missed.

By actively imagining what life would be like had one or more people or events not crossed our path, we introduce an element of surprise into something that we've likely grown accustomed to – which is a way to appreciate anew the wonderful events of our life.

We are in many ways creatures of habit. We get used to our circumstances, whatever they are – and in some ways that can be a tremendous strength. It allows us to adapt to and endure hardship; to cope with and adjust to changing circumstances... But it can also make it so we lose touch with the depth of love, opportunity, and wonder all around us.

Purposefully bringing ourselves to consider what it would be like had we not met our spouse, or our friend, or our mentor, brings us to a state of gratitude; and gratitude is one of the great resources for psychological and emotional resilience.

Just as George Bailey came to appreciate his wonderful life, we can get a fresh glimpse of our own good fortune, even if things aren't as wonderful as we'd like them to be. We can always long for better times, better relationships, or more of something or other – and it can be well worth striving for improving what we have.

But sometimes, when we reflect on who we do have in our life, and just how easily we might not have ever even met them, we can find that those very things we're striving for are right there already; and may have been with us for quite some time.

Addendum. In writing this, I recalled an essay of Jack's that expressed what I have here in a uniquely different way. As it's not long, I'd like to include it as another method of "positive subtraction." Note that Jack wrote this 17 years ago almost to the day in TTP.

Pretending To Be Happy

May 13, 2005 – Jack Wheeler

Last week was the 13th birthday of my youngest son, Jackson. One evening a few days before, I was engrossed in writing on the computer when my wife reminded me it was Jackson's bedtime. He was in bed reading, waiting for me to kiss him goodnight.

As I walked down the hall towards his room, my brain was filled with thoughts about the article I was working on. I was on autopilot and all I could think about was what I would write when I got back on the computer.

For some reason, I stopped and stood still. Somehow, an extraneous thought had popped into my consciousness from nowhere.

It seemed just a moment ago when he was a little boy. Now, in just a few days, Jackson would become a teenager. The time was not far off when he will be too big a kid for me to kiss him goodnight. The time was not far off when he will not be down the hall at all.

There will come a time – and terribly sooner than I would realize – when I would give anything to have Jackson down the hall, in his room, waiting for me to come and kiss him goodnight.

I would give anything to have a time machine, to be able to come back in time to just this moment right now, to be able to have him there in his bed in his room, to kiss him good night just one more time.

I was immobilized by these thoughts. Then I realized that I did have a time machine of sorts – that of my imagination. I imagined that it really was years in the future, that Jackson was grown up and gone, that all I had were the memories – and then a genius friend invented a time machine and let me use it to transport myself back into time to this very minute.

Were that to occur, instead of walking down the hall on mental and emotional autopilot, I would be indescribably, deliriously happy and grateful. Walking down this hall, opening Jackson's door, and seeing him there once again would be impossibly thrilling.

So I pretended that's what was happening right now. Suddenly my experience was transformed. I got so excited proceeding down the hall.

When I opened his door, there he was. He looked up from his book and said blandly, "Hi, Dad." I stood in the doorway transfixed at the simple sight of him, and with forced nonchalance, replied, "Hi, buddy..."

I sat on the edge of his bed and we talked for a few minutes. I was doing a good job of acting normal and he didn't suspect anything. He related an escapade of his at school, explained how boring his science teacher was, and how cool the book was Mommy had given him to read (the current bestseller "Blink").

I hung on every word. He turned off his light, gave me a hug, and said "Goodnight, Dad." An ordinary moment that had happened hundreds of times before. But this time I would never forget it as long as I live.

Life lasts but the snap of a finger. Then it is gone, forever. There is so much in each of our lives that passes by as if it never happened at all, that we appreciate only when it's gone and too late.

There is something very precious in being able to appreciate a moment at the actual time you experience it, to transform it into an experience of magical gratitude.

It's funny that the way to do this is to pretend something is not real in order to give it a heightened reality.

To pretend the present is in the past, that what you now possess you no longer have. To pretend to be happy in this way is not to fake your happiness but to enable you to find joy in what you once took for granted.

Thanks to my time machine mind-trick, every moment with Jackson now is one of wondrous enchantment. And if I ever slip into autopilot again, all I have to do is take that time machine into the future where he is no longer there – then take it back to the present again.

Feel free to use my time machine to re-experience those you love. You can use it any time you want.

PS: *A Master's Course in Happiness* can help you to take charge of your habits and your life in ways you may not have thought possible; and my new course, *Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions* can help you grow a deep understanding and practical skills for mastering these systems and living well.

And I'm now offering both at a lower price.

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