

**Babblative and Scribblative** © April 2008  
*recorded live by the Joyologist at the Auckland Museum 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2008*  
*during a dissertation by*  
**Professor Martin Seligman**  
**“Positive Psychology and Happiness at Work”**

*These notes are not a transcript of Seligman's presentation. Rather they are my recall and experience of the session and are delivered to share with you some of the insights gained and to invite you to become an active contributor to Gross Domestic Well being.*

My friend and alliance partner Jamie Ford from Foresight Institute opened the session and introduced Professor Seligman to an audience that almost filled the auditorium at the Museum.

Seligman began by noting that after a century of “defeating” in wars such as Gallipoli, both the USA and NZ have among the highest rates of pessimism and depression in the world, and given the level of prosperity both nations experience he wondered why that was so!

He moved close to the audience and said “*It's time to study what's going right*”. At which point dear reader I must tell you I was so gleeful, having had that as a catch cry myself for some 35 years!

**He then posed that happiness has 3 themes. And the audience at this point was so in flow it was a delight to be with!**

These were :-  
*positive emotions or the pleasant life*  
*an engaged life*  
*a meaningful life*

Both he said are measurable and buildable.

For the sceptics of positive psychology he noted the following:-

He said under a big neon sign we are developing intelligent, social and physical capital. The notion that you had made it once you mastered your emotions was old school. Then he summarised the proceedings as they would unfold for us over the 2 hours.

He spoke of experiments with random placebo interventions, positive interventions that work and the notion of living the full life. He mentioned the \$16 million dollar project just begun at Geelong Grammar in Victoria, advising he would be moving there with a team of 20 and their intention was to ‘pervade the entire curriculum’. *More on this later !*

He advocated that the world is turning with the politics now being one of **well being** not victimology, at which point he repeated :- *When you experience positive emotions you lead a pleasant life. When you are positive in character you are engaged and in flow. When you identify your signature strengths and know what you are best at and use them, again you experience flow.*

If you have not done the VIA Signature Strengths survey go to [www.authentichappiness.org](http://www.authentichappiness.org) and do the VIA Signature Strengths questionnaire. It will take about 20 minutes and response is immediate.

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Print out your 24 signature strengths and carry them with you. Especially the top 5.

*My Auckland University Stress Management students consistently report on the value this adds to their daily lives. My top strength is appreciation of beauty. I take it with me everywhere !*

He discussed then how when people are involved doing meaningful work they experience a sense of belonging and feel that they serve something bigger than themselves



I was amused by his story when he likened “*this sense of meaning and purpose and being of service*” to being the same as the way in which the invertebrates have evolved as hive creatures. Each role is critical to the overall operation and each contributes to the whole.

*I am moved to write dear reader that should you perceive a gap at any time, it is because the pen and the mind work at different speeds and I did not always catch every example cited with*

*clarity, so it remains a smudge on the writing tablet!*

However, he did catch my attention when he moved on and defined flow as the absence of emotion. An interesting notion and he cited the example of a bridge playing colleague who was pretty un-emotive chap, experiencing few high moments. Yet he found meaning in what he did for work and play and was absolutely engaged when doing either. In that level of engagement he just was !

I found myself examining my own experiences ( *which accounts also for some gaps in the documentation* ) and saw the way I experienced meaning in my facilitation and conference speaking and in my art. Yet perhaps it is in my art that I experience real flow, as when I speak I experience peaks of emotion! We were led to his web [www.authentichappiness.org](http://www.authentichappiness.org), to do the gratitude questionnaire

Moving on again he said for the sceptics suffering has been trumps, with them consistently coming from the negative and gave this wonderful parallel for the negative aspect of the workings of the mind. He bid us all to have our tongue do some exploring around our teeth, if it wasn't already! Off it went exploring, probing, looking for errant food particles, constantly drawing out and identifying areas of inconsistency and problems. **Just like the default mechanism of the mind!**

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He said (for the sceptics) the mind has been built to be depressed, angry and anxious. He said Maslows hierarchy was wrong (*the progressive and sequential attainment of self actualisation*) and in particular cited the erroneous thinking that people cant achieve if in pain and suffering. In fact alongside great pain and sorrow people have achieved remarkable things.

With a laconic grin, he said there is nothing new here ... wealth longevity and lifestyle have always been part of our human pursuits. What remained fuzzy and soft in the minds of some was things like optimism and gratitude In remedial schooling he countered the mode was more like therapy than education, and closing this piece advocated an educative model that fosters the exercise of will and free will

Seligman then invited us to think of an activity that challenges us or that we don't like to do. So, yes you take a moment and find one as well! I chose filing and managing the paper war!. He then suggested we take our top signature strengths and look for ways in which they can be used to turn around that experience for us.

*Insert a big cheeky grin here as, you see, I immediately began to wonder how I was going to apply the notion of beauty to organising files.*

Under the heading of Intellectual Resource he transitioned and spoke of some experiments using sets of mood

cards. Participants were exposed to sets of ten cards that showed words of either lowered or elevated moods and tested afterwards for their responses to sets of questions. Responses ranged from 0-6 seconds and scores improved after being exposed to the cards showing elevated moods.

*I noted and wondered if this is the same kind of mental sharpness that occurs with improv acting training. First thought is always correct in improv and fostering this sharply improves thinking and decision making and development of ideas*

**Certainly he espoused this fosters creativity!** A further even more simple example was proffered. Scare a baby and it contracts, and love a baby and it relaxes. *When I toured with Patch Adams he sat one time with a two year old child with cerebral palsy, cradling her and singing crooning songs . Within minutes she had settled from being very distressed and agitated to lying relaxed and calm.*

He said positive emotion broadens our attention and jolts us into a different mode of thought.

*I am going to digress here a little. For those of you who might make presentations he showed some real gems in ensuring we all kept us with the core content and where he was in his presentation. About three times he recapped where he was at that point, what had just been covered and how*

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*many more minutes he would be in this topic and what the next one was and how long it would be.*

Have to say he rocked my boat with that ! He cited then other studies where they had examined peoples smiles and the ways in which they could be picked up as genuine or forced smiles.

He also spoke of other studies where they had monitored extremely happy people with active social lives and followed them up 15 years later. Those happier people earned \$15,000 more than those less happy

On altruism, again for the sceptic, he spoke of those who think melancholy is wonderful. In fact they say “ I hate hope!” For those who are more altruistic they don’t need the happiness police.

*Checking his podometer at this point he noted he had done some 5326 odd steps and advocated 10,000. Oh dear, I can’t even make mine work!*

He then moved on to cite the Nuns story which can be found on pages 3, 4 and 5 of his book Authentic Happiness. Essentially 178 nuns were tracked for longevity and happiness. They were asked to write an autobiographical sketch when taking their vows. Those who included words like ‘very happy and eager joy’ lived longer and were happier.

In fact 90% of the most cheerful quarter were alive at age 85 compared to 34% of the least cheerful.

54% of the most cheerful quarter was alive at age 94 compared to 11% of the least cheerful.

### **Summary**

In closing Seligman referred us to the use of positive interventions. He invoked us to look for the positive and see what is working.

The following exercise was another tool for daily application.

### **Exercise – 3 blessings**

At the conclusion of each day identify three things that went well today and why. Do that regularly. He has found that 12 weeks later people were less depressed and happier .

He countered that therapy walks with weaknesses . By that he said he meant the questions are raised about :-

- How long before issues evaporate
- The degree it is self re-enforcing
- The degree to which it is self maintaining
- The degree to which it becomes and addiction

He presented another exercise and you might like to do this. Pick a person who made big difference in your life Write 300 word letter what they said and how it affected you.

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Identify where you are now as a result and than go visit them and read it.

In his book on Learned Optimism you can get an understanding of your own explanatory style in Chapter 6 - Success at Work.

**You can also get more information in forthcoming issues of NZ Business Magazine where I am presenting some articles on SASQ profiling and there will be an opportunity to win 5 FREE SASQ's - Seligman Attributional Style Questionnaire .**

The gem from examining your own explanatory style is then learning how to dispute any negative thoughts or beliefs. He reminded us that the signature strengths lead us to flow.

In relationships he demonstrated his ACR model or active constructive responding process. This examines how people celebrate together.

It can be either

- Active
- Passive
- Constructive
- Destructive

The purpose is to support people to validate each other in a way that makes people feel happier and better

The Geelong Grammar School project was touched on, with an investment of \$16 million dollars and 20 of his staff moving to Australia. There have been 13 previous studies/programs, 11 of

which halved depression rates in teenagers.

Geelong already have master teaches and supportive school. Now they will learn to implement a program that enhances life satisfaction and prevent the depression epidemic. With a smile he said :- “it’s education as usual and we will see accomplishment.” With positive education students will experience more flow, more purpose and meaning and have better relationships.

Seligman then recounted last 100 yrs military success, economic success, and asked what is all this wealth for?

The obvious answer was to produce more wealth..BUT ...studies show that after major wins eg loto or lottery the initial elevated mood returns within 6-12 months to usual level of happiness. So its contribution to happiness is not a given.

Then looked at gross domestic product VS gross domestic well being, a term I just loved ! He said Gross Domestic Wellbeing is measurable. Citing a study Sth Tyneside and lady by name of Irene Lucas , who was noted as one of the kindest people he then invited us to ask the question “*How much well being am I producing?*”

With a further smile he cited a model of Nietchkes

- Camels moan a lot
- Rebel say no to tyranny, racism

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- Child reborn – says what can I say yes to?
- 

**The answer to “ What can I say yes to?” is this !**

You can say yes to :-

- Positive emotions
- Engagement
- Noble purpose
- And positive relationships
- And...Building enabling conditions of life

**World Health Organisation statistics were quoted, verifying depression is now world health burden number two and by 2020 it will be number one.**

*Another gem for presenters is that throughout I noted his acknowledging style as being evident at all times. Through out when questions were asked he responded always by saying:- “ its important that you asked that”*

**He asked the audience” given the level of prosperity in this nation why is there so much depression and why is morale so low?”**

He invited us to take away what we learned and contribute to the national well being. One last question he answered was whether the three themes happened in any sequence or causal way. His response was “No, they all occur simultaneously”. When asked how to implement in the

workplace and how to convince business to take it on, he said “ I don’t know. That is your challenge”.

**I know how to begin!**

I have been doing this work for some 30 years. The application of this work has helped me win the NSW Tourism Award. It helped me rid a hospital of Golden Staph infections. It helped me to write the programs that took Nurse Education in NSW out of hospitals and into Universities. It helped me develop the first series of in house education programs in aged care in Australia.

It helped me work in the face of the loss of my home and my relationship. It helped me repay with aplomb an \$80,000 debt in 2 years. It helped me to turn around results in a private training provider from 35% to 85%. And there is more, but the strategy is simple.

First decide how it will be when it is in place. Then gather a circle of influence to support you to achieve it. Then do just one thing a day towards that goal. Work to a 90 day plan and stay committed. If you are using your top 5 signature strengths daily you will achieve flow. **And if it eludes you or you would like to know more do be in touch!!**



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