

On Personal Health III: George Valliant and Vitamin D

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I recently read a magazine article (“What Makes Us Happy?,” *Atlantic*, June 2009) about the Harvard Study of Adult Development, the most exhaustive investigation of personal well-being ever conducted, and the chief analyst of its lessons, psychiatrist George Valliant. The Harvard study began in the late 1930s and followed its subjects, Harvard sophomores, all men, throughout their lives, now more than seventy years. Valliant is now in his mid-seventies, and while he has given over the reigns of day-to-day management to others he keeps a hand in the study and remains its primary spokesman.

Entering advanced old age myself, I’m 69, I was particularly interested in reading about what the Harvard study found that contributes to being happy and well at 70 and 80. The *Atlantic* article reports that Valliant has identified seven major factors in this regard: amount of education, good relationships with other people, not smoking, not abusing alcohol, healthy weight, regular exercise, and employing what he calls mature adaptations. Valliant notes that the Harvard men who had five or six of these seven factors in their favor at 50 were far more likely to be “happy-well” as opposed to “sad-sick” at 80. I consider myself to be happy-well currently, and I was interested in seeing whether the Harvard study’s findings align with my experience. The generalization: they do.

Of interest is that Valliant doesn’t highlight the things that one might expect to see on a what-makes-life-go-well list. There is nothing about power, status, achievement, accolades, money, and material possessions. The article didn’t go into it, and I haven’t read enough of Valliant’s voluminous writings to know his thinking on this for certain, but I suspect Valliant would say that while worldly success as conventionally viewed is not to be discounted it won’t cover for failures in the areas he punches up, good relationships, proper weight, not abusing substances, and so on. That is to say, don’t expect to be happy in your advanced years—or, my guess, at any time—if you don’t take care of business in these perhaps seemingly prosaic areas of your life. This week I read a couple of recent biographies of men, both now dead, that seem to confirm this assertion, the editor and writer George Plimpton and the film

director Hal Ashby (*Being Hal Ashby* by Nick Dawson and *George Being George* by Nelson Aldrich—both excellent, by the way, I recommend them highly). Both Ashby and Plimpton were talented and accomplished and applauded and lived high on the hog, and both drowned themselves in alcohol and, in Ashby's case, drugs, and neither could be characterized as happy and well in their late years.

In addition to Valliant's list, I would emphasize the importance of personal honor in achieving happiness at the end of one's life. In a writing on this site, "When They Attack," I put it this way:

At the end of our lives we make a fundamental judgment about ourselves: that we lived an honorable life or we didn't. An honorable life doesn't mean we did the right thing every time, but basically we did. Basically we didn't sell out. Living an honorable life doesn't mean we never lived irresponsibly, but basically we lived responsibly. Living an honorable life doesn't mean we never shortchanged ourselves and other people, but basically we lived life on the square. I think we always have to keep in the back of our minds that there will be a time when there is only the past and what we have done with it; and that what will someday be the past is now and tomorrow and the next day and the next month and the next year. The question today and tomorrow and next month and next year is what is the honorable thing to do? It may take a while to get ourselves to the place where we are doing the honorable thing . . . but I think if we keep plugging the best we can we have a good shot of someday, down the road, smiling peacefully and saying "Yes."

I find myself peacefully saying "Yes" these days, and that is personally very gratifying. How everything goes together, you might just take to food, drink, or drugs (or gambling, promiscuous sex, shopping, and on down the list of possibilities) to mask or suppress the fact that you aren't, or haven't, lived honorably.

But back to the Harvard study and Valliant and how it aligns with my own life and where I eventually want to focus this thought, on physical health:

On the first factor Valliant lists as contributing to being happy and well in old age, education, his reference is to formal schooling. Indeed, formal education, obtaining a doctorate, has opened doors

to me and enriched my life. It has helped me become my own person and supported me in manifesting who I am with honesty and integrity in every dimension of my life, and that has contributed significantly to my happiness. Of crucial importance for me, and especially in the last decade or so, has been informal study and reflection—I owe libraries and Google a great debt. Personal autonomy is central in my conception of a life well lived, and vital to autonomy—being your own person rather than a puppet of someone else or living a life of cliché—is achieving fine-tuned insight into what’s going on with you and the world. Self-initiated study and reflection is particularly helpful in attaining this insight. I didn’t get educated in the best sense of the word—enlightened, liberated, empowered—in school at any level. I did that on my own, and I don’t think I’m atypical in this regard. Almost invariably, and with the best of intentions, schools condition you to be part of the herd. If you are going to live your own life rather than someone else’s, the knowledge that will support that way of being will be self-appropriated, not a outcome of teachers managing your life, running you through a curriculum they’ve designed or been told to implement.

As for the second factor, good relationships, this area has not been my long suit in my life, and it has cost me. On the other hand, good relationships—family, love, friendship, work connections--aren’t produced out of thin air; they are developed in particular contexts and with particular people, and sometimes those contexts and people are bad for relationship creation. Staying with the card-playing metaphor, we all have to play the hand life deals us, and it seems to me that I’ve been dealt a pair of deuces in this relationship area. I agree that good relationships improve the quality of one’s life significantly, and I haven’t given up on them. Right now, two people are in my life that I love to the skies, and who love me, and it’s so wonderful for this to have happened, finally, at this late stage of my life.

That said, unless I am living in denial, and I don’t think I am, I seem to be happy-well even though I am almost completely isolated socially and professionally. Beyond my basic loner tendency, I believe that is to a good extent due to the fact that I am a traditionalist-bent educator working with educational progressives in a college of education, a shifty-eyed, self-conscious, individualistic, artistic type in an enclave of steady-eyed,

collectivist, social justice missionaries, and white racially conscious in a work setting and community where whites are acceptable to the extent they are minority conscious and scornful of anything that rings of white racial identity or commitment; and added to that, now I'm old, and the pattern tends to be that the older you get the more disregarded and invisible you become, professionally, socially, in every way.

In any case, I have trouble buying Valliant's assertion as quoted in The *Atlantic* article that "the only thing that really matters in life are your relationships with other people." For one thing, that declaration contradicts Valliant's conclusion cited elsewhere in the article that there are *seven* important factors that go into being happy-well and that all seven don't have to be there (he talks about how the presence of "five or six" ups one's chances of being happy-well, which leaves open the possibility that good relationships could be absent in a life that is nevertheless happy-well, and I think that is what is going on with me). If good social relationships are indeed "the only thing," then we are obliged to chase after them no matter what the people are like in our world. Truth be told, sometimes contacts with those around us, trying to win their acceptance and approval, link with them, bring us down rather than enrich us. I have concluded that while good relationships are a valued commodity, no relationships are better than inappropriate ones. I'm with Tennessee Williams who once wrote in his journal, "Better to be alone than in bad company." I've given up chasing after people I shouldn't be chasing after; it's become painfully clear to me that I've done a lot of that in the past and that it's done me no good. I'll be alone and learn to be happy with it before I do any more of that.

As for mature adaptations, Valliant, who has somewhat of a Freudian bent, especially Anna Freud, is getting at someone's responses to the pain, conflict, and uncertainty that to a greater or lesser extent are part of every life. If your parents made it clear to that you were unwanted and worthless, do you whine and drink over it, or do you use that experience, albeit it hurtful, to write a great novel? I think it has helped me enormously in my life that, for whatever reason--I'm not sure why I come at things as I do--my basic posture has consistently been to ask myself, "How can I make a gift of this hit? How can I use it to make myself and the world better, stronger, clearer, happier?" Call it a positive mental attitude,

however to label it, characteristically I have tried to transmute negative energy and situations into positive ones. I get down in response to the life's hits—they hurt, and I'm not going to try to deny that--but I don't stay down for long. I'm grateful that I've had this perspective, and I hope I continue to have it until my last breath.

With those comments on three of Valliant's seven factors in achieving happiness in old age (and, as far as I'm concerned, happiness at any age) on the record, in this thought I want to underscore and endorse the importance of the four factors Valliant identifies having to do with physical health: smoking, alcohol, weight control, and exercise. My view is that the quality of our lives is grounded in the physical dimensions of our being. Our body is our instrument, our tool, our vehicle in life. A healthy instrument in itself does not guarantee a happy life; there is also character, capability, purpose, action, and accomplishment. But without a healthy body--with a body that is abused, damaged, in need of repair, operating less than optimally--a good life is a struggle uphill at best and impossible at worst. If we mistreat our bodies, if we don't nurture and develop the physical aspects of our being, if we don't harmonize the physical parts of our ourselves with the totality of our being, if we are unhealthy physically, no matter what else is going on in our lives, we will pay a heavy price: depression, frustration, exhaustion, resentment, anger, sadness, despair, unhappiness. Simply, it doesn't feel good to be in bad physical shape, and no matter how many award dinners are organized for us, no matter how many hugs we get, we have to live with that unpleasant reality all day every day, and trying to be happy with that going is a very tough row to hoe. For sure, you can win the Nobel Prize and still be sick and miserable that same day.

I've avoided issues around nicotine, alcohol, and weight, and I've gotten regular exercise, and I think that accounts in good part why I am as clear mentally as I am—I didn't expect to be this sharp at this age--and still working and productive at almost seventy and in the happy-well category. (On the mental acuity, I've taken vitamin E supplements for decades, and I'm wondering whether that has contributed to being as conceptually quick as I think I am these days.) This is not to say, however, that I am free of health issues. In the thoughts on this site "On Personal Health" and "On Personal Health II"—this thought is "On Personal Health III"--I discuss my life-

long, medically undiagnosed issues with low energy and an “ache-all-over” feeling, which have resulted in a significantly more sedentary life than I would have preferred. It’s gotten better the past year or so, and my life has reflected that—I’m more active now than before—but it is still a problem. My read is that my low-energy/ache-all-over issue is a multifaceted problem, involving nutrition, lifestyle, and stress components, and I’ve been addressing it from all these angles the past couple of years especially.

In February of this year I was feeling especially exhausted and achy and went to see my primary care physician. He ordered lab tests and said we’d go over them at a subsequent visit. I noticed that the lab work was far more extensive than in the past: a urine sample—that hadn’t been part of the routine before; and the technician drew vial after vial of blood, at least three—before it had always been one. At the follow-up visit, the doctor came in the door with several sheets of printouts. I asked him why the lab work was more wide-ranging this time. He replied that this time I really looked sick to him and that he was concerned that something was wrong with me. So there are gradations of lab work from perfunctory to very extensive—I had never considered that possibility. I have always just taken the sheet to the lab without knowing what was being tested and gone along with whatever the doctor ordered. It struck me that I need to be more maturely engaged with the process than that from now on.

The doctor said that the only thing that showed up in the extensive lab work was a low vitamin D level. The possibility of a vitamin D deficiency had never entered my mind. That same day I received this news, I read an article *Men’s Health* magazine about the high prevalence of vitamin D deficiency with the recommendation to take 1,200 milligrams of vitamin D a day. I started doing that—actually, I’m taking 2,000 milligrams, two grams, a day. Almost immediately I felt better—more energy, fewer aches and pains, so I’ve stayed with it. Could it be, I ask myself, that all these years I could have felt better, and lived differently, more actively, if I had taken a vitamin D supplement? Of that is true, ouch! But at least I’m taking D now.

I still don’t feel as good as I’d like to, and I’m still working on the issue. I’ve been off sugar and alcohol completely for a quite a while, and that seems to have helped. And I make sure to eat three times a day—I often used to skip lunch. And I eat good food, no

junk food. And I'm working on stress reduction and avoiding conflict. And I'm taking care of my physical surroundings—the house and office are kept neat and clean. And while I'm very fit, I'm taking off the few pounds I don't need. This morning I had my last coffee for a while at least. It going to be a tough morning tomorrow, because a cup of coffee with breakfast and the newspaper is a—if not *the*--highlight of my day. But I'll try getting off caffeine and see what, if anything, happens. All these things are small in themselves, but small things can add up to something major. I don't know how much time I have left in my life, and I want to experience what it is like to live from the basis of vibrant good health, and I'm willing to pay the cost to achieve it, or as close to it as is possible for me.