

# Commentary: The Science of Life & The Art of Living

## *Balancing Your Own Wheel*

- Michael H. Samuelson

### Introduction

There is no shortage of people willing and anxious to tell you what's good for you—what you need to do to live a healthy, happy, and prosperous life. Parents, teachers, priests, rabbis, monks, brahmas, mullahs, your Aunt Betty, Dr. Phil and Oprah stand ready to offer (push) advice your way. Mostly, this advice is well intentioned, but it is often self-serving, as well.

The question is: What do YOU want? Or, perhaps better asked: What do you need? What predictably triggers and sustains those moments when you feel truly happy and satisfied? Is it the deep breathing that you learned from Andrew Weil or the imagery work taught by Jon Kabat Zinn? How about “The Secret” or “The Four Noble Truths?” Is it truly better in the Bahamas...and does it simply take a trip to Jamaica to feel all right? Perhaps, for you, wellbeing comes when you read a good book, spend time with your kids, or work till dawn on a project that comes to life and tickles you each time you give it your undivided attention? For me, it's often a quiet mountaintop, exhausted, sleeping alone in a tent surrounded by strangers who quickly become forever-memory friends. For my wife it was once the thrill of climbing out of a perfectly good airplane, hanging from the wing strut, letting go, and floating through the sky (YIKES!).

Certainly, like any seasoned health educator, I can give you a general formula consisting of helpful tips like eat healthy foods, get plenty of sleep, stay away from tobacco, drink alcohol moderately or not at all, exercise regularly, spend time with family and friends, read a good book, see your doctor annually, wear your seat belt, believe in a higher power and stay away from a steady diet of cable news. I can show you how to construct a strong skeleton but you have to lay down the muscle and tease out the connective tissue that makes your unique system work. There are countless “How To...” books outlining the objective science of life but only YOU can explore, discover, and nurture the subjective art of living.

### The Science of Life & The Art of Living

**sub·jec·tive**, \(\,)səb-'jek-tiv\: 4 a (1): peculiar to a particular individual; c: arising out of or identified by means of one's perception of one's own states and processes; belonging to reality as perceived

– Merriam-Webster Dictionary

**well-be-ing**, \wel-'bē-iŋ\: a contented state of being happy, healthy, and prosperous

– Concise English Dictionary

**well•ness**,\ˈwel-nəs\: a dynamic objective and subjective progression toward a state of complete physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. Incremental improvements can occur from pre-conception up to and including a person's last breath

– The Health and Wellness Institute

As mentioned, the science of life is general and objective. Foregoing bad genes and catastrophic events, evidence shows that a life accented by a healthy blend of proper nutrition, physical activity, intellectual stimulation, emotional support, spiritual engagement and social interaction tends to be long and relatively free from illness and infirmity. The art of living, however, is specific, subtle and subjective. To advance this art you must refine and extend your senses to seek out and build a unique existence that continuously advances your personal state of wellbeing and overall physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual and social wellness.

Healthful Nutrition – As a health educator, I can objectively present the most recent USDA food guidelines, introduce you to the five food groups and explain the difference between healthy and unhealthy oils, but I can't dictate your subjective preference for preparation, presentation, taste and texture. I can tell you to eat dark green vegetables, but you have to decide if you like broccoli, romaine lettuce or raw baby spinach.

Regular Exercise – As a health educator, I can objectively point out the importance of following physical activity guidelines from the American College of Sports Medicine and the American Heart Association. However, you and your doctor have to decide whether your personal goal is 30 minutes of moderate-intensity activity five days a week OR 20 minutes of vigorous-intensity activity three days a week. And, while I can show you a whole host of strength-training exercises, you will have to decide which 10 exercises you enjoy enough to complete eight to twelve repetitions, twice a week.

Intellectual Stimulation – As a health educator, I can objectively explain the new findings regarding brain elasticity and show you the “use it or lose it” research but you have to select activities that not only stimulate your brain but are enjoyable as well! Chess may fire up neurons but it may also drive you crazy! Is it Mozart? How about the classics or a good comic book? Learning a language will do the trick at any age but so will learning a new musical instrument. So, what language? What instrument? How about crossword puzzles and/or Sudoku? I can tell you to stay engaged and keep learning new things, but only you can make the subjective choices that will keep it fun and make you want to be a student until your dying day.

Emotional Health, Happiness & Positive Psychology – As a health educator, I can objectively guide you to research touting the importance of nurturing your emotional health and importance of striving to be happy (make that...happier). Tal Ben-Shahar from Harvard, Martin Seligman, author of “Authentic Happiness” and the Dalai Lama are among the many that will show you the evidence and present logical arguments that support positive psychology. The experts and the literature can explain the “whys” and the “hows,” but YOU have to search for, identify and protect what aids your emotional health and makes you happy (a happier you

makes for happier people around you). Is it spending time with your pet? How about time with kids and family? Maybe—for you—emotional health is buoyed whenever you complete your daily “To Do” list or spend time outside playing in the sun. You know what makes you happy so plan time each day to do it!

Spiritual Engagement and Mind/Body Development – As a health educator, I can tell you that spiritual growth puts life in context, it gives meaning to your every thought and action. Regardless of where you find it—bricks and mortar, open fields, tops of mountains, desert canyons, ocean waves, or cuddled inside a child’s laugh, spiritual essence is all around us. As the poem states, “[Spirituality is] forever present without need of definition, transparent to some, blindingly radiant to others, existing without beckon; eternally ours....”

Christ, Moses, Buddha, Muhammad, Lao Tzu, Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Winnie the Pooh, Piglet, and so many others remind us of the importance of finding and following the path to happiness and freedom for ourselves and all beings. But, where is your path? How do you know when you are traveling the right road? Where does it lead, today? Tomorrow? Tough questions. Once again, only you will know (know already) what actions, activities, people, places, thoughts, and dreams bring peace to your spirit and strength to your body.

Social Interaction – As a health educator, I can tell you that John Donne nailed it when he wrote: “No man is an Island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee.”

Though written in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, the sentiment and fact remains true. We need each other for our safety, economic growth, advancement of science and art and for our emotional and physical wellbeing...our wellness.

I can show you objective data all day long that points to the importance of staying connected with others, but I can’t tell you what form of human contact is best for you! Join a square dancing club? How about a bowling league, church choir or a softball team? Maybe you’re quiet and shy and would prefer to stay somewhat anonymous, so, how about email, a chat forum for your favorite hobby or a social networking site like “Facebook” or “ MySpace.”

No matter what form it takes...remain an active engaged member of the human race.