

What Makes You Happy?



the elul project

Tell someone you care about one thing that makes you happy. Go ahead, I'll wait.

Did you say money, awesome stuff, getting a good job? Or was that one thing actually someone? A special moment you remember savouring? Doing something you love doing so much that you lose track of time?

When I saw the wave of the current pandemic coming our way in February, I was calm and collected. I had a plan. You see, I was made redundant last year. It was the week before I was due to return to work after having our second child—I'd done the post-mat leave shopping for breastfeeding workwear, planning meals, scheduling meetings with my colleagues and reaching out to my staff. Then, suddenly, all that stopped. My career trajectory, so desperately foundational to the last twenty years of my life, wasn't off course. It hit a wall at 100km an hour.

I had options. I could freak out: I was my family's main breadwinner. I could try to drum up a job, any job, and as soon as possible: that seemed like a road to misery. I chose a third way: to consciously assess what made me happy and do it.

I thought of Martin Seligman, the father of positive psychology and a former Thinker in Residence in South Australia (incidentally Jewish), whose research has shown using your strengths makes life have meaning. I love learning, so I started courses I'd been wanting to do for years as well as some consultancy, but only for gigs I found interesting, the sort of work in which I knew I'd lose myself. Leadership is my second key strength. I realised the joy sparked by supporting my teams and mentees over the years. Suddenly my diary had all the space they wanted to chat and it left me feeling great.

I looked at other research about happiness. I made weekly key performance indicators (seriously), including a daily gratitude journal, exercise and meditation targets, connecting with people I admire and sending letters of gratitude. Elizabeth Dunn from the University of British Columbia has shown that kindness to others makes us happy, so I consciously tried to be radically kind in daily interactions.

Did all that non-Elul reflection and effort pay off? Undeniably. Is 2020 a great year? Not for me or anyone I know.

Harvard psychologist Dan Gilbert (Jewish by the way) has shown that we mis-predict what will make us happy in the long term. We also mis-predict what will make us miserable. Our brains simply grow accustomed to good things—and bad things—and we rebound to neutral. But we are smarter than our hard wiring! We can override the default to neutral by savouring what we love, by seeking to find awe in our lives. How lucky we are that our traditions have carved out time to consciously reflect. As we prepare for the holidays, may you find the space to think about your strengths and your happiness and share those sparks of joy and gratitude with others.



**ANNETAY
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Originally from Appalachian America, it has taken Annetay Henderson-Sapir 15 years in Australia to be able to pronounce "bin" and "mate" properly. She calls Adelaide home following stints in France and Israel. Annetay is President of the Jewish Community Council of SA, the peak Jewish organisation in SA, and a Vice President of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry. If you send her a complaint, she will address your concerns then send a gratitude letter to someone who deserves recognition.

ABOUT THE ELUL PROJECT

An initiative aiming to share stories and teachings from Jewish women leaders in our community. Whilst many of us are stuck at home, or isolated from family over Elul and the High Holy Days, we hope this project will serve to inspire, nurture, and uplift during this difficult time.

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