



S5E4: Transcript Happiness and Human Flourishing with Laurie Santos and Arthur C. Brooks

Tavia Gilbert: Welcome to Stories of Impact. I'm producer Tavia Gilbert. Every first and third Tuesday, journalist Richard Sergay and I bring you conversations about the science behind innovative tools that help human beings flourish.

In today's episode in our season focused on Human Flourishing, we explore human flourishing's greatest result: Happiness.

Few people are so well known for expertise in happiness as our first guest, Laurie Santos, host of The Happiness Lab, a podcast "that will forever alter the way you think about happiness." She's also a Professor of Psychology at Yale University and teacher of one of the most popular classes ever in Yale history: The Happiness Class, which tries to give students the keys to happiness and satisfaction. Here's Laurie Santos, defining happiness and human flourishing:

Laurie Santos: I think of human flourishing as a state where you are really experiencing all the benefits that come with joy and happiness. It's a sense that you're really happy and joyful in your life, and you're also really happy, joyful with your life. I think that's a recipe for human flourishing.

I think of human flourishing as being about a lot of experience of positive emotion and a rich experience of having meaning in your life. Laughter, connection, joy: all the positive emotions that bring you happiness in the moment.

Tavia Gilbert: And our second guest, Arthur C. Brooks — Harvard professor, PhD social scientist, prolific bestselling author, and columnist at *The Atlantic* — says:

Arthur Brooks: Human flourishing is a big concept. The scientific way of talking about it is subjective well-being and in the vernacular, we say happiness. This is an overlap between these three concepts: subjective well-being, human flourishing and happiness.

People from time immemorial have tried to define happiness, and they've done it in a million different ways. It's a prism that you turn over and over again. But if you look holistically at the literature, at philosophy, at history, and you take all things in balance, you could say that fundamentally, we're talking about a blend of three things; enjoyment, satisfaction and purpose.

Human flourishing, for me, means getting as much enjoyment, satisfaction and purpose as I can, given my genetics and circumstances.

Tavia Gilbert: Brooks borrows a powerful and short definition of happiness.

Arthur Brooks: And I'll sum it up in the words of George Valiant, who ran a 80-year longitudinal study of graduates of Harvard University paired up with people that didn't go to college and from all different walks of life and demographics. He looked at 80 years of data, and he said, I can sum up this entire study with five words, "Happiness is love. Full stop." And I think he's right.

Tavia Gilbert: Santos, too, sees the virtues of flourishing through the lens of love.

Laurie Santos: Having love of learning, having empathic support for other people, having a zest for life, spirituality, bravery, temperance. They're just qualities that we know from long religious traditions and just our own intuition that are, they're kind of just good, right. When we're exercising these character strengths, again, particularly the ones that we resonate with really well, those are the kinds of things that give us flow, those are the kinds of things that cause us to experience joy at work, those are the kinds of things that give us a

broad sense that what we're doing is really meaningful.

Tavia Gilbert: Why do neither Brooks nor Santos tie happiness and flourishing to material comfort or to personal achievement? Santos says:

Laurie Santos: All the research shows that meaning and purpose are critical to human flourishing. I think the problem is where we find our meaning, where we find our purpose. Our mind gets it wrong. You know, we have a ton of misconceptions about the kinds of things that are going to give us meaning in life.

The happiness boost that you get from the perfect grade, from winning the lottery, you know, from getting the perfect job, those happiness boosts are pretty short-lived unless they come with other things that give you purpose and meaning in life.

Part of what I've tried to do in my class is to teach people the kinds of things that really lead to meaning and purpose and the kinds of things that don't.

Tavia Gilbert: Santos teaches her students that happiness comes from the investment we make in relationships with others, and in the relationship we have with ourselves. In fact, she says, we need both in order to be healthy humans.

Laurie Santos: Social connection seems super critical to happiness. And the flip side is that loneliness, feeling disconnected, feeling like you don't belong, these are enormous hits on our happiness, enormous hits on our physical health, but also enormous hits on our mental health, too.

We like to think of physical and mental health as separate entities, but the research really shows that they're intertwined in ways we don't expect. Our well-being really affects our physical health, it affects our immune function, it affects whether our heart is under stress. But our mental health also seems to affect our performance. These things are really intertwined in ways we don't expect.

A flourishing life includes social connection. It involves becoming more other-oriented, focused on how your life is affecting that of other people. But what about the flourishing of introverts, you know? They don't want social connection, right? It turns out if you look at interventions that really make introverts a little bit more social, not like, go to some huge party, but like, chat with the barista at the coffee shop, what you find is that introverts get as much of a well-being boost from brief but intense social connections as extroverts do. Social connection really seems to be a thing that universally bumps up happiness, not just for some personality types, but maybe for all of us.

Happiness and flourishing is really about other people. It's being, it's connecting with them, but it's also extending that compassion to yourself.

It's a life of presence. And it's a life filled with lots of healthy practices, you know, things like moving your body, things like sleeping enough, you know, having that kind of temporal balance and time affluence. And those ingredients in particular, as far as we can tell, seem to be relatively universal.

Like, really nurturing yourself in the way you nurture a close friend. Sometimes in our quest to flourish, we beat ourselves up, which is like, the opposite of what flourishing requires. And so sticking a little bit of self-compassion in there can be really important too.

Tavia Gilbert: Brooks shares with his students that we all need each other in order to flourish, on an individual level and on a societal level.

Arthur Brooks: There is no society that has ever existed or ever will that's flourishing in which the individuals are not. And this is a mistake that we make again and again and over and over all throughout history, where leaders think that you can get the best, most flourishing society when people are afraid or people are oppressed or people are living in poverty, and it's just not true.

It's also true that you need to knit people together into a whole. There is an illusion of individuality across a flourishing society. And one of the things that I often talk about with my classes is the idea

of the aspen grove, where an individual flourishing aspen tree requires that the root system, which is common to all of the aspens in a stand be healthy. So the two things are inextricably linked.

The biggest mistake that government officials make is to think that we can have a good society where individuals are not flourishing. The biggest mistake that individuals make is to think that I can be fine when the rest of my sisters and brothers are not.

Tavia Gilbert: Brooks says it's especially important for people in the West to understand how much we need each other. The Western focus is on the well-being of the individual, and that means we're at risk of missing the deeper meaning and purpose found in the collective.

Arthur Brooks: And in the West, where we have a tendency to think a lot about self-actualization, self-realization and self-improvement — self, self, self, we think an awful lot about our happiness as well.

We think about ourselves, ceaselessly, exhaustingly, constantly about ourselves, but it's so boring. It's like watching the same television show over and over again. Something that will take us to forty thousand feet, that will give us the perspective of the cosmos, that will help introduce us to the consciousness that can lie behind everything — whether it's traditionally religious or more spiritual or simply philosophical, as long as it's really expressed in wisdom and practiced — will give us that benefit.

Tavia Gilbert: Brooks' recipe for flourishing includes four main ingredients:

Arthur Brooks: The main dishes at the happiness meal are faith, family, friends, and work. And what these things all have in common is love. Love for the divine, love for family, love through friendship.

Tavia Gilbert: Brooks isn't saying that flourishing relies on religious faith, but rather an individual sense of spirituality.

Arthur Brooks: It does not translate into a belief in God. There are all kinds of practices that don't believe in God the way that I believe in God, but they all create an enormous perspective on life itself, which is the important aspect in bringing happiness.

Tavia Gilbert: After faith, family is the next key ingredient in the happiness recipe.

Arthur Brooks: The saddest thing that I've seen recently is that one in six Americans have stopped talking to a family member because of politics in the last few years. That's such an error, that's such a happiness error. That should never happen. The family bonds that we have should be the most solid bonds that transcend all circumstance.

It's the ties that bind, the kinship that can and should not be broken. The people that we can count on at all times of need and under all circumstances, these are not conditional, these are not elective. These are the love relationships into which we're born, into which we will die.

They reliably bring love, and happiness. And these are so important to people, and the reason is because we have to be able to count on love.

Tavia Gilbert: The third ingredient is those people who make up our chosen family – our closest friends. They're essential to our joy, fulfillment, and satisfaction.

Arthur Brooks: Friendship is so woefully underrated. We're in a society today that is suffering from an epidemic of loneliness, and the reason has everything to do with friendship. Friendship is constricting in the United States and, indeed, around the world. You find that people have fewer friends, more people are likely to say nobody knows me well. You find that nearly half of people say that they don't have any close friends at all. And this has been decreasing for year after year.

How sad that is, because the elective relationships that we have are often the deepest ones that we have. We find that the couples that have deep friendships, even beyond the spouse, that these are the closest couples and the happiest couples. And beyond that, couples that consider each other to be their best friend are the most stable marriages.

Friendship is just unreplaceable, friendship in which we have a mutual love for something outside ourselves. We're not transactional with each other, we don't just admire each other.

Tavia Gilbert: Finally, as integral as relationships are to our happiness, we need the last ingredient to complete the recipe for flourishing: meaningful work.

Arthur Brooks: Meaningful work is something I've studied for years as an economist and as a social scientist. And it's interesting, because I've looked across income categories and education categories and professions, and I can't find differences across those distinctions with respect to happiness.

Rather, there are only two dimensions that matter which is service to others and a sense of earned success. Service to others and earned success. Earned success is the concept that your values and your passions and your skills are coming together around something, and you can accomplish something great, that you can achieve a state in which you are creating value with your life and value in the lives of other people. Service to others, the idea that my life makes a difference, my work makes a difference to lift other people up, and I know who they are and I know how it works.

Love is expressed through the sanctification of our ordinary work in the service of others. If you believe that you're serving other people with your work, you believe that you're earning your success with your work, that work will be meaningful, and it will be a source of enduring value and happiness in your life.

Tavia Gilbert: Santos also reports that a commitment to being of service to others leads to a good life:

Laurie Santos: You could think about the good life as a life where you're pursuing a good life in a moral sense, right, like, I'm doing good for the world. Research shows that if you're engaging in practices that are helping other people, that's a thing that can lead to your own personal joy and therefore your own personal flourishing. So you achieve both things through having a life of purpose, where you're helping other people.

Tavia Gilbert: Not only helping other people, but soliciting their unique, enriching perspective through the generous and productive act of listening.

Laurie Santos: We forget that the people around us are troves of information, cool stories, bits of wisdom, joy for us — the joy that it would spark to connect with people. But we often don't have the time or the bandwidth to do it. And so I think we need to bring listening back as a lost art. I think that kind of connection, a deep sort of listening connection, is really an important aspect of our flourishing that becomes harder and harder in the modern age.

Tavia Gilbert: Brooks agrees:

Arthur Brooks: Listening is a key component of happiness, because it denotes humility and humility is a source of happiness. When you measure the humility that people have in their lives, it goes straight up with happiness. It's a direct correlation, humility and happiness. And there are a bunch of different reasons for it, I mean, some of it's practical.

Humility brings peace. It's stressful to hold yourself erect in a state of hubris. It's hard to do that all the time. It's much easier to say, "I don't know," "Tell me what you think," "I might be wrong," "I'm going to change my mind." That's a state of nature in which you can relax into relationships, in which you can develop love. That requires listening, but it's based on humility, which is the fundamental virtue, and a good way to exercise that humility is to listen.

Tavia Gilbert: Understanding the science of happiness has made both Brooks and Santos happiness evangelists. They want to share the research behind tools like love, nurturing relationships, and listening to others so that they can help their audiences achieve deeper satisfaction and well-being, especially those who might be experiencing deep pain.

Laurie Santos: I came to the study of human flourishing in this very local way. I took on this new role on Yale's campus where I became head of a college. And so I started worrying about flourishing in my college students, where I was seeing not just a lack of flourishing, but real mental health issues, you know, rampant depression, anxiety, stress, on campus. And so I started thinking with this incredibly narrow cultural lens, you know, I was like, how can we help college students flourish more?

Arthur Brooks: We know a lot about happiness, and yet it's not generally taught or practiced. It's the most amazing thing how, what a difference it can have in people's lives, and if we taught these things more widely, if we had a curriculum in this about the understanding, applying and sharing algorithm, about the science and art of happiness, we could do much better.

A good life well lived, while not entirely under our control – there's a genetic component, a circumstantial component, to be sure – but the parts that are under our control can be maximized.

Laurie Santos: If we know the right things to do, we're much more likely to put those things into effect. It's not immediate, right, you can know what you're supposed to do and not put it into practice. But knowing what to do is really a first step to achieving those practices. So I'm convinced that studying the science of flourishing can really help us in our own daily lives flourish better.

Tavia Gilbert: Has the science of happiness led to tech tools that cultivate flourishing, or does it show that technology can actually keep us from flourishing?"

Laurie Santos: To flourish in a technology-laden world, we need to come to terms with how the technologies we're using are affecting us. You know, technology, whether that be social media or just having our phone around, it's a tool, right. We could use it to do activities that would improve flourishing. We could type in a gratitude journal or call a friend or use an exercise app, whatever.

Or we could use those technologies in ways that reduce our happiness. So it's not that the technology itself is bad, but we need a healthier relationship with it.

There's a cost of being on technology that we're not thinking of. When you engage with your technology, with these practices that make you a little bit more mindful, you can make sure you're choosing to use it in ways that really increase flourishing rather than decrease it.

Tavia Gilbert: So if we're not going to lean on a happiness app to help us make happier choices, what *can* we do to increase our flourishing?

Laurie Santos: All the interventions we know empirically seem to work, things like taking time for social connection, taking time to experience gratitude and express gratitude to other people. Taking time to be present, whether that's through practices like savoring, just noticing the things around you or more formal practices like meditation. Taking time to make sure you're prioritizing healthy habits like sleep and exercise, even things like focusing on your time, making sure you're not feeling so time-famished, subtracting things from your life.

There's incredible cultural nuance about how these things are defined and nuanced in terms of how you go about these things. But I think the recipe for a flourishing life is really one that seems to involve relatively universal ingredients.

Tavia Gilbert: But what happens when, like Santos saw with her students, we're faced with adversity – illness, injury, loss? If we're suffering, if we're in need of help ourselves, doesn't that pain keep us from flourishing?

Laurie Santos: The situations we face, the circumstances that befall us in life, they don't have as much of a clear impact on our well-being as we think. And what the science really shows is that it's about your reaction to these kinds of events.

There's also lots of evidence for what researchers call post-traumatic growth. This idea that you go through this traumatic circumstance and you come out stronger on the other side, you grow in terms of your resilience, you know, going through a traumatic event can sometimes convince you, like, hey, I have to pay attention to why I'm really here on this planet, right. And it can give you this resolve to get through tough times.

Addressing how negative emotions fit into a flourishing life is a really important question, because our instinct is that they're not supposed to be there, a flourishing life is just positive emotions all the time!

But if you look at what it means to have a well-rounded life, it's not a life without negative emotions. It's a life where you get through lots of challenges, right. It's not a life that's perfectly even keeled. It's one that has its ups and downs, but one in which you feel like you've grown from those challenges or you've made it through, you surfed those emotions.

With the right strategies, the research shows that we can grow and become more resilient on the other side and even happier because of these awful circumstances.

One recipe for a flourishing life involves coming up with strategies that you can use to navigate negative emotions. In part, realizing that there are going to be events in life that trigger negative emotions about how you react to those emotions, whether you feed those emotions, whether you notice them and can be present with them and can learn from them, you're going to have lots of different outcomes depending on how you deal with them.

Tavia Gilbert: In fact, Brooks says that for someone to experience happiness, they *have to* experience pain.

Arthur Brooks: To me, human flourishing, particularly in the purpose or the meaning part, requires not just pure bliss, not just pure joy, but a lot of pain, a lot of suffering, a lot of challenge as well.

We can't flourish without adversity. The reason is because we need purpose in our lives to truly flourish, and we need adversity to achieve purpose.

There is no way that we are not going to face deaths in our families. Doesn't matter if we can wipe out all of the food insecurity, which we should, and stop all the preventable diseases, which would be great. We're still going to die, we're still going to face tragedy, we're still going to face suffering, we're still going to face sadness.

The great paradox of happiness, of true happiness, of holistic happiness, is that it requires unhappiness. Now, Carl Jung talked about this. He said that we wouldn't understand the concept of day if it weren't for night. We wouldn't understand the concept of happiness if it weren't for unhappiness.

But it's not just a perception. Purpose requires learning, purpose requires growth and growth requires challenge. Growth requires tension. Growth requires discomfort. And so in that way, we can't flourish unless we face adversity in our lives and we deal with it in a way that helps us understand what it means to be fully alive.

There's a wonderful body of literature that shows that it is only in the most stressful and traumatizing times in our lives that we learn the most about ourselves. When we face crucibles, when we understand what we're made of, when we're able to get beyond our problems, that's when we learn the most. That's when we're most fully alive. When you ask somebody, tell me about the meaning in your life and when you learned it, nobody will say, "It was that wonderful vacation to Disneyland!" Never!

It's important to keep in mind for me that happiness requires a good measure of unhappiness as well.

So when I look at my own data, when I look at my own experience, when I look at my own life, I have to get down on my knees and be thankful for the challenges and the difficulties and the pain, because suffering is a very sacred thing.

Tavia Gilbert: Though he believes in the sanctity of pain, Brooks is not ambivalent about fellow humans' suffering from disaster or deprivation, and he certainly doesn't believe that the anguish some of our human family members face is ultimately a growth opportunity for them.

Arthur Brooks: We need to distinguish between growth and stress, and embrace that as much as we can while trying to alleviate it for our brothers and sisters.

We should not be calloused or numb to the suffering of other people that we can alleviate, particularly that which we can alleviate given the means at our disposal. That does not mean that we should alleviate all suffering or that we should medicate away all pain and sadness. But it does mean we need to continue to work to

make sure that our sisters and brothers can be brought up to levels of economic and legal equality so they're not suffering unduly, and especially at our hands.

Tavia Gilbert: But for those of us seeking happiness who do enjoy economic and legal equality, the science of happiness affirms that even though we will experience pain and suffering, if we intentionally commit to love and listening, if we seek meaning and purpose, if we embrace faith, family, friendships, and meaningful work, we will flourish.

Arthur Brooks: There's a very interesting concept called fading affect bias that we talk about as social scientists, in which we look at circumstances that were difficult transitions, insecurities, challenges, even tragedies in our lives. And the more time that passes, the more likely we are to look back at these things and say, "That was actually a good thing."

Tavia Gilbert: In two weeks, we'll be back with two extraordinary American leaders in the arts, dancer Judith Jamison and musician Wynton Marsalis, to talk about the way humans flourish through performing arts. Here's a preview of Wynton Marsalis:

Wynton Marsalis: Music teaches you how to listen harder than you play, because most of the time your experience is listening. That's why I always loved to play with great musicians, because I'm gonna be spending a lot of time listening, and it's the way to understand, because listening has to come before understanding.

Tavia Gilbert: Stay tuned for the full interview. In the meantime, if you liked today's Story of Impact, we'd be grateful if you'd help us reach new audiences by taking a moment to follow the podcast, and by rating and reviewing us. Join us on social media at Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram, and visit us at storiesofimpact.org.

This has been the Stories of Impact Podcast, with Richard Sergay and Tavia Gilbert. Written and produced by Talkbox and Tavia Gilbert, with associate producer Katie Flood. Music by Aleksander Filipiak. Mix and master by Kayla Elrod. Executive producer Michele Cobb.

The Stories of Impact Podcast is generously supported by
Templeton World Charity Foundation.