

The Things That Matter Most

Text: Psalm 8: 1, 3-9; I Corinthians 13: 1-7; Philippians 4: 4-9

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There was once a doctor by the name of Richard Cabot. He was born in Boston 151 years ago, but don't let that fool you. He was more than a century ahead of his time in understanding the variables that make people well.

Dr. Cabot received his medical degree from Harvard, followed by a divinity degree from Andover Newton Theological School; a unique hybrid of fields, medicine and spirit, holding doctorates from both schools and eventually becoming a professor at each.

His blended credentials allowed him to practice as a physician of both body and soul. As such, he was a careful observer of the factors that comprise human health. In particular, he noticed that those in his care generally fell into one of two categories.

Some were rarely taken ill at all, and when they did, they recovered rapidly and without complications. Others seemed chronically in struggle. They were symptomatic with greater frequency and had a higher degree of complications in getting well.

So the inquiring Dr. Cabot wondered. What placed some on the healthy-side and others on the ill side? Were there defining attributes? In addition, simple as this: he found that four factors increase the probability of health.

The first was the active presence of love in their lives. Not to misunderstand! He was not talking about romance (though let us not lose that!). He was referring to the primal, God-given energy at the heart of all creation.

The Bible speaks with familiar cadence: "So faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love." And the later, in the Pastoral Epistles, we are reminded that we are able to love because God first loved us.

So given this, here is a metric for us to try on. Matthew Fox, former Dominican priest silenced by the Vatican, now Episcopal priest, theologian and author advises that we - each and all - find ways to fall in love at least three times a day.

"There is so much we can love," he writes. "We could fall in love with the grandeur of a galaxy every day, and since there are a trillion of them, we could never run out. Or we could fall in love with a star of which there are twenty billion in our galaxy alone."

Or we could come to love a species of bird, or fish, or tree. We could love another human being – preferably one who is different than we are – a Salvadoran, a Latino, an Iraqi. "Well-being in life", he challenges, "has everything to do with falling in love."¹

The second variable Dr. Cabot noted was work. To be clear, he was not referring to earning a living, rather to how we contribute our energies and gifts toward a purpose and a cause greater than ourselves.

Five weeks ago, Jimmy Carter was building for Habitat. The next morning he headed off to go turkey hunting. On the way, he broke his hip and required surgery. And last Sunday, he was back teaching Sunday school! An amazing example of a purpose filled life.

“Prosper thou the work of our hands,” the Psalmist once prayed. We might as well say our feet and our hips, our muscles and shoulders and spirit. And we all have different ways that such prospering plays itself out toward the needs of the world.

I find myself doing lots of reflecting about retirement of late. No wonder about that! And I keep coming back to Erik Ericson’s seminal work in human development - and the hunger in all people for what he coined as “generativity.” That’s the need to give back.

So I’ve been asking some retired folks how they are feeling the urge to give back. I love to hear the stories. My favorite so far is a former-Senior Vice President in Marketing Research who is now busy prospering the work of his hands training Fidelco dogs!

The third ingredient in Dr. Cabot’s prescription is worship. Those who attend worship, or have an active place for it, live longer more fruitful and happier lives! And incidentally, countless studies since the day of Dr. Cabot have confirmed this.

In 1917, Rudolf Otto wrote a book called The Idea of the Holy². In it, he said that across all measures of time and space, denomination or conviction, people need to experience the holy in life. He called this the *mysterium tremendum* – that sense of awe and mystery that brings us to shudder in the best sense of the word. And he quotes Martin Luther as saying, “Modern people do not seem able to properly shudder!”

Harry Emerson Fosdick once described a boy standing on a porch at night looking at the vast sky of stars. Centered more in himself than in the mystery he twisted the old words of the song: “twinkle, twinkle little star, how you wonder where I are.”

Do you hear it? The sequence is wrong! But worship turns it right! Worship gives us the proper order. It takes us out of the middle. It confirms the design of creature to Creator, individual to Mystery, earth-bound life to the transcendence of God.

The fourth variable is play. And play enriches life and health in so many guises. It brings us generative energy for sure, and also the capacity for surrender and laughter and delight and joy.

A friend of mine wrote: “The problem with not being playful is that it causes us to be less faithful. When we avoid the fun of life; when we skirt around the enjoyment; when we refuse

to laugh at ourselves, our positions, our prized ideals, we become guilty of taking ourselves too seriously. And the cost is that we take God less seriously too.”³

A course at Yale that’s been in the news of late that is the most popular class in its 318-year history.⁴ It’s a class in application, helping students to apply themselves to values that sound deceptively simple: like joy, playfulness, gratitude, and laughter.

“You see, it’s not conceptualizing these things that’s hard, not the academic mastery part,” says Dr. Laurie Santos, “it’s the application.” So recently, with exams and papers looming and everyone exhausted and stressed, Dr. Santos decided to cancel class.

“No class today,” she said, “But there is only one rule to it all. You cannot use the gain of two hours of unexpected time to study or to write a final paper. You have to enjoy the time you are given. Go play! Your future depends on it.”

So . . . play, worship, work, and love. Although not exclusive, these are among the things that do matter most - with considerable measures of clinical verification to back them up.

And so now, I just wonder . . . if any of us went to see Doctor Cabot today would he look into our eyes and see the healthy balance that he long ago noted? Or, perchance, would he write all of us a different prescription?

Not a bad thing for any of us to ponder over these weeks of summer. May it be ever so, and, as always, in the Spirit of Jesus, who was, hands down, the greatest physician of all time - of body and mind, heart and soul. Amen.

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¹ Matthew Fox. Creation Spirituality. Harper and Row, 1991.

² Rudolf Otto. The Idea of the Holy. Oxford University Press, 1958.

³ The Rev. Dr. Douglas J. Green, First Congregational Church, Ithaca, New York.

⁴ Susan Svrluga, “Yale Offers a Course on Acing Life”, Hartford Courant, May 15, 2018, pp. D 1 and 2.
Also: David Heim, “The Life Worth Living course at Yale”, Christian Century, November 7, 2018, 32-33.