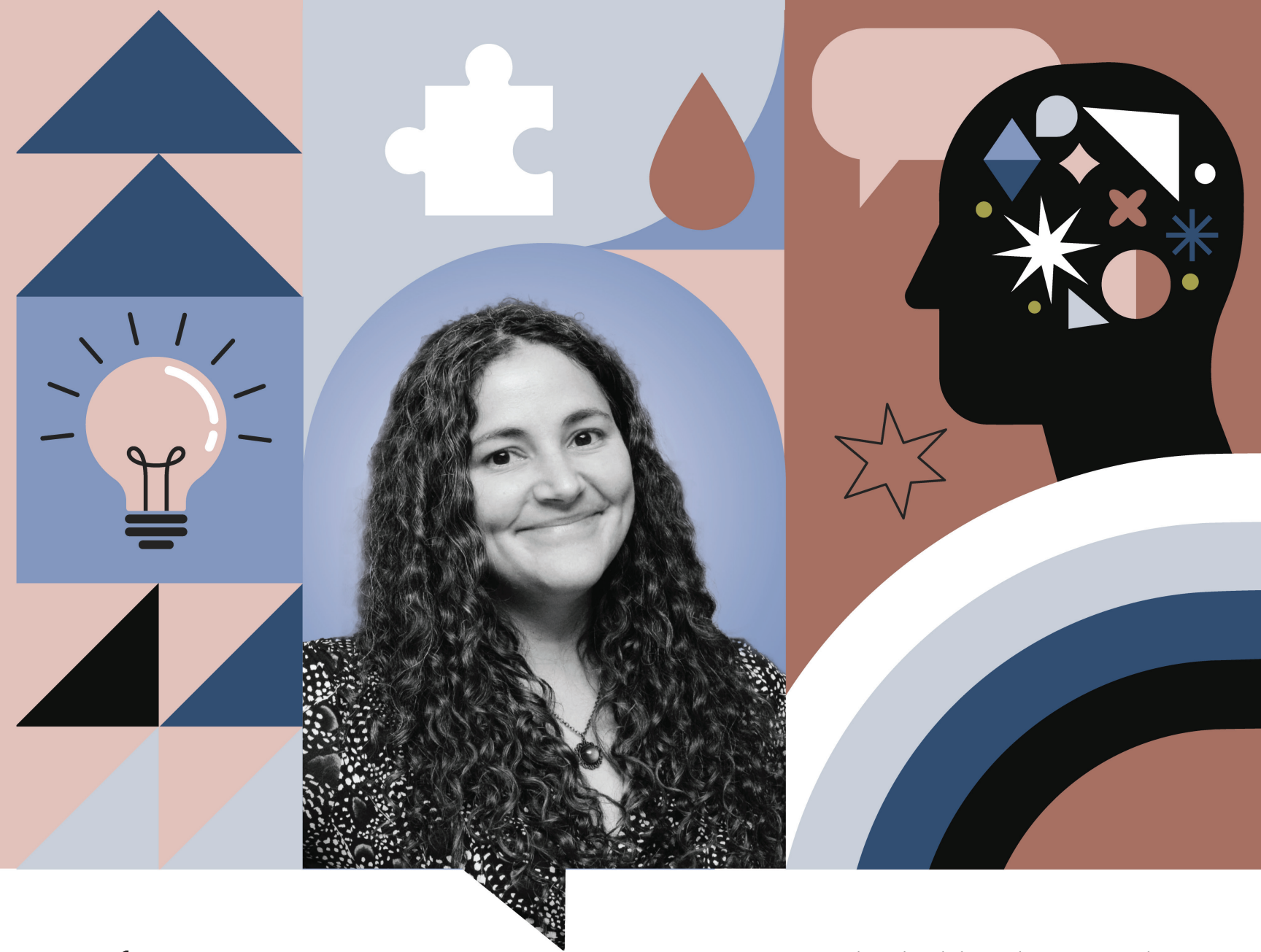




The Science of Happiness

An interview with
Dr. Laurie Santos

BY ADAM TANOUS

Laurie Santos is the Chandrika and Ranjan Tandon Professor of Psychology at Yale University and a recent speaker at the St. Luke's Wood River Foundation's annual Speaker Series. The central research question Santos focuses on is: What makes the human mind unique? As she puts it, she explores the topic "by studying the cognitive capacities of non-human animals. By comparing the cognitive abilities of non-human animals to those of humans, we can determine which domains of knowledge are unique to the human mind."

One area of Santos' research concerns the science of happiness: what does and does not make us happy. To wit, Santos teaches a class at Yale known as Psych 157, Psychology and the Good Life. With one in four Yale students taking the class, it is the most popular class in Yale's 323-year history.

This summer I had a conversation with Santos about her class and her "happiness" work. Our discussion follows. (It has been edited for length and clarity.)

AT: I'd like to go back to basics: How do you define, and measure, happiness when you're doing these studies?

LS: In terms of the definition of happiness, I think this is a very controversial question, right? We would probably define happiness in lots of different ways. I'll explain how social scientists have tended to define happiness, which is that they think of happiness as having these two parts: being happy *in* your life and being happy *with* your life. So, being happy *in* your life is the fact that you have a decent ratio of positive to negative emotions. You feel some joy, some laughter, and you have a decent ratio of those positive emotions to things like sadness and anxiety and anger. It doesn't mean you have no negative emotions, but, really, you want the ratio to be pretty good. That's kind of being happy *in* your life.

Being happy *with* your life is the idea that you have a sense of meaning and purpose. You feel satisfied with how your life is going. This is often talked about as how you think your life is going. The cognitive and the affective parts are the two parts. But being happy *with* your life is the answer to the question, all things considered, how satisfied are you with your life? If you say, '10 out of 10, I'm satisfied with my life,' then you're happy with your life. And I like this definition because you can see cases where these two parts of happiness might separate.

You also ask the different question, which is how we measure that. And I wish there was a really good 'happiness thermometer' that I could put in your mouth, and it would give me a little digital reading of your positive emotions and how satisfied you are with your life. That's just not how happiness works.

The main way we measure happiness is to ask people. When I joined this field, I was a little bit worried about that. It sounds like a silly Internet quiz, but, you know, there's a whole field of what's called psychometrics that's gone out and done really detailed studies of measures of happiness and found that they tend to correlate with things like if I did a detailed machine learning of your posts on social media to look at the emotions that are in them, or if I did detailed interviews with friends and family members about how your life is going. These really simple questions, things like, 'one out of 10, how satisfied are you with your life?' They actually map onto the kinds of things we care about. And so, it is true that all we do is ask people if they're happy, but in some ways, that's getting at something that seems to be a valid measure of how you're feeling.

AT: Do you think that happiness is a human decision, or, at least, on some level?

LS: Yeah, I guess the way I often think about happiness is that it's a choice in some sense. It's a skill that you can build up over time. I think one of the things we get wrong when it comes to happiness is that we seek it in the wrong things. We go after money, we go after a promotion at work, and we're not going after the things that really matter for happiness, which are things like social connection, changing your mindset, and so on. I guess in some ways you could frame it as a decision, right? It's a decision to learn the kinds of things that really matter for your happiness and to put those things into effect. Does that mean that everybody can decide to be 100 out of 100 on a 'happiness scale?' Probably not. You know, there's some heritable aspects to our happiness, which means it'll be trickier for some people than others to put this stuff into practice. But I think there's something that everyone can do to feel a little bit better if you're not feeling so good right now.

AT: I know you have a background in evolutionary psychology. Do you think that happiness is an advantage when it comes to natural selection?

LS: Yes, it's an interesting question. What we know now is that happiness seems to be an advantage when it comes to our performance, right? People haven't studied as much performance in terms of reproductive success, which is what natural selection is looking at. But even in terms of performance at work, researchers find that happier individuals come up with more innovative solutions; happier teams at work wind up performing better. And there's also evidence that companies that have on average happier workers wind up earning more in terms of their stock prices. They're actually making more money. And so, lots of examples showing that feeling happy is correlated with higher performance. Whether that matters for evolution, it's not clear.

If anything, it seems like what evolution is built for is to make us survive and reproduce. And that might mean that natural selection really focused on things like negative emotions. It wants us to be afraid. It wants us to be angry when our resources are violated and so on. And that might be why we're so built to have what's often called the negativity

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bias, right, where we are out looking for threats and looking for things. There's not as much advantage to taking things slowly and savoring things. So, it's a little tricky.

I also think another thing that we know is that the kinds of things that tend to make us happy were often easier to get back in the evolutionary day, right? So, take a big one that I talk about a lot, social connection. Pretty much every available study of happy people suggests that happy people are more social. They're close with friends and family members. If you look at the situations and communities in which humans evolved, that was easy, right? We were around close bands of people and friends and family members all the time. I think it's only in the strange modern world that we have to start worrying about being inside all the time, on our screens, and not connecting with as many people as we should.

So, it's not necessarily that happiness was an evolutionary advantage. If anything, being kind of really 'cravey' and upset and worried about threats and things kind of keeps you protected. It helps you survive.

AT: In your previous talks and in your class, you talk about our interest in following the money, essentially. And how when people reach this salary plateau of \$75,000 their life doesn't really get better past that. If that's true, why do people pursue money and status so fervently, and all these things that over time seem not to be doing us any good?

LS: I think we get a lot wrong when it comes to happiness. I think we just really don't have good theories about the kinds of things that make us happy. And I think money is a big one. So many of us think that more money will make us happy and, as you noted, it's complicated. You know, if you're living at the poverty line, for sure, more money will make you happy, it'll make you a lot happier. I think the inference just doesn't continue. And I think that's part of where the misconception comes from. There was a time when I was a young grad student. I wasn't making much money. And I thought, 'When I make more money as a professor, I'll be happier.' And, at the time I think I was going from something like \$25,000 or \$30,000 when I was a grad student. And I was like, 'more money, yeah, that worked.' But it doesn't keep working. And so, I think that's kind of where we go wrong. I think this can really lead people astray.

On one of my podcast episodes, I interviewed this guy Clay Cockrell, who's a mental health professional for the incredibly wealthy. And he talks a lot about how his clients often say things like, 'Well, you know, I can stop, I'll be good, I'll be happy when I earn, you know, \$500 million.' Then I get to \$500 million. It's like, 'Well, now I need a billion.' The carrot just always moves, and you think, 'Well, just a little bit more and I'll be happier.' But the research shows it doesn't work that way.

AT: I'm wondering if you have, or people you know have, studied the effect of the natural world on happiness levels.

LS: One of the reasons that being in the natural world is so positive for our happiness is that it often induces a complex but interesting emotion when it comes to happiness, which is awe. Awe is an interesting emotion because it's not purely positive. Some of these majestic seascapes can make you feel, you know, small. You're looking at the geology of the world, like a huge mountain, you're like, 'I feel tiny, right?' So, it's not purely positive. It can make you feel small and make you question big things. It's a disarming emotion in some ways.

But studies show that it's incredibly important for our happiness. And one of the surprising things that happens when you experience awe, whether that's through nature or through beautiful music or art or even seeing the moral actions of others, is that awe makes you feel more connected. Dacher Keltner, who's a professor at U.C. Berkeley, does these studies where he brings people to a beautiful place, and you look at it, and it brings his awe. And then he has you do this simple thing: 'If this circle was you and this circle was all the people you love in your community, how much overlap would there be?' So, they do this little survey, and what you find is that when you're in a moment of experience of awe you put those circles overlapping much more together. It is like you think you and your community are much closer than you would, say, if I took you to some other tourist attraction—the Mall of America or something like that.

AT: One last question: Has your research affected you, your personal happiness?

LS: Yeah, for sure. I think it's made me happier. It's made me busier, certainly. It has given me so many more opportunities for which I'm grateful. But then that comes with often having to say no to some of those because, if not, I get too time famished. So, I have to pay attention to that. But, no, overall, I think it's taught me the strategies that work for making you

happy. It's helped me overcome my misconceptions. I give myself the survey sometimes, and I'm usually about a point happier on a happiness scale than I was before starting this research. And that's really what the effect is. The happiness expert Dan Harris, the journalist, has a book called "10% Happier." And I like the title of that book a lot because most of the surveys suggests that's what you can do. You can bump up your happiness about 10% by engaging in better behavior and better mindsets. And so, I've been able to achieve that 10%. ✱

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