

Caring Relationships Build Happiness: Here's Proof!

By Jim Merhaut

Jim Townsend was serving a life sentence for murdering his wife, Alice, and their unborn child with a shotgun bullet to the face as she was finishing a bath. He really didn't mean to kill her. He feared losing her as she became more distant as her pregnancy progressed. In his twisted worldview, formed by a lifetime of violent abuse, he thought that if he could scare her enough she would come running into his arms and give him the affection he desired so deeply. His plan failed, his wife and child were dead, and he was locked up and all alone once again after a speedy trial.

Fast-forward twenty years. Jim Townsend, now in his early forties, was released from prison on parole. His release didn't come because he wanted out... it came because the prison chaplain insisted that Jim be released to go out into the world and make the same positive contributions to the free world that he had made in recent years to the prison community. The parole board agreed! Jim was not the same guy who entered prison as a violent criminal two decades earlier. He had become the model prisoner after giving his life to God and ministering to the needs of other prisoners in transformational ways.

What changed this bitter young man who solved all of his problems with violence into one of the sweetest, most compassionate, down-to-earth individuals you could ever meet? He had experienced the transforming power of a few caring relationships. He learned to pray in the context of a friendship. He learned to receive love and give love in healthy ways, and that made all the difference. Three caring relationships in particular were powerfully transformative.

Jim's first day in prison was predictably violent. He sought out the biggest guy in the prison yard and decked him with a well-placed punch to the jaw. The big guy, named Purdue, recovered and picked Jim up and then threw him to the pavement, nearly killing him. Both were locked up in solitary confinement for a few days and then released back into the general prison population after a cooling-off period. Purdue sought out Jim. Jim thought this would be the end of him, but Purdue surprised him. He asked him why he punched him. Jim said he was just trying to send a message that he wouldn't be anyone's toy. Purdue laughed and replied that he had nothing to worry about because the other prisoners were certain that this new guy was crazy. Purdue's decision not to retaliate challenged Jim's perceptions of people. He didn't expect to find any expressions of care in prison. Jim and Purdue became great friends.

Jim's overall prison experience was miserable. He wanted to escape and began to devise a plan. He was in a maximum security prison, but overcrowding was a concern and the authorities were moving well-behaved prisoners to minimum security prisons. Jim saw this as an opportunity. He faked good behavior convincingly enough to eventually get moved to a minimum security prison. Jim's record of good behavior landed him a job in the chaplain's office. Here he met prison chaplain, Fr. Richard Walsh.

Jim was responsible for cleaning the chapel, organizing materials for the chaplain's ministry and attending religious services. Fr. Walsh took a liking to Jim and treated him with respect. He always complimented Jim's good work and they engaged in very meaningful conversations about life in prison and how to deal with the rigors of it. Jim had his doubts about the possibility of having someone really

care about him and he became suspicious of Fr. Walsh's expressions of care. He wanted to uncover the truth about Fr. Walsh's motives. One evening he broke into the chaplain's office and found the file that Fr. Walsh had been keeping on him. He opened the file and was shocked by the contents. All of Fr. Walsh's notes about Jim were positive and were completely consistent with the verbal compliments he had been giving Jim from the time they met. Jim had never met anyone who cared for him so authentically. His knees grew weak and he felt deep changes stirring within him.

Months and years passed and Jim and Fr. Walsh became very close. Jim began to lead Bible studies for the other inmates under Fr. Walsh's guidance. Prison was a scary place for physically weak inmates. Jim began to want to show his concern for others in the way that he was experiencing it from Fr. Walsh. Jim was known to protect the more vulnerable prisoners from the more violent and abusive ones and even took one particularly vulnerable prisoner under his wings and protected him like he would his own son.

Jim's outstanding behavior eventually won him the Casey Martin award. This award is given annually to the inmate who displays the most exemplary behavior and who has had the most positive impact on the prison community. The award ceremony includes a special dinner and a visit from the local bishop. It is a significant honor and the awardee is bathed in expressions of care.

At the end of the ceremony, Jim returned to his cell and experienced another transformational gesture of care from an unlikely source, a prison guard. Jim had always hated the guards for their consistent mistreatment of the prisoners. This guard in particular had literally been on Jim's hit list for his intimidating behavior, or so Jim interpreted the behavior that way.

The guard was a night guard who patrolled Jim's cell block. After lights-out, the guard would walk down the cell block and stop in front of each prisoner's cell. He would pause in silence and then tap the bars of the cell three times. This behavior infuriated Jim. He was convinced the guard was playing mind games. The worst part was that the guard would stand for a longer time in front of Jim's cell compared to the time spent at other cells. Then, as with the others, he would tap the bars three times before methodically moving on.

The lockdown procedure on the night of the Casey Martin award ceremony was no different from other nights. The cells were closed and the lights were turned off. Then, like clockwork, the guard initiated his curious ritual. When he arrived at Jim's cell, he stopped as usual, but this time he spoke, "Congratulations, Jim. I want to give you this book, which has meant a lot to me in my own life."

Jim was absolutely stunned and speechless. He could barely look the guard in the eye, but finally was able to say thank you. He then confessed to the guard that he had wanted to kill him before his conversion to the Lord. He apologized for that and the guard forgave him.

Then the guard revealed the meaning of his nightly ritual. He told Jim that he walked the cell block praying for the prisoners. He did this because he knew that if it weren't for the grace of God, he would likely be on the other side of the bars. He needed prayers to keep his life in order and so he was very willing to offer prayers as an expression of care for others and as a sign of gratitude for the caring prayers he had received from others. He would tap the bars of each cell in the name of the Father, and

of the Son and of the Holy Spirit to close his prayer for a particular inmate before moving to the next cell. He also told Jim that for some reason he was compelled to stand and pray at his cell more intently than at the others. Jim again offered a sincere thank you and the guard moved on.

Every night when Jim fell asleep, he suffered the torture of a nightmare about the day he murdered his young wife, Alice. She visited him in the dream with a frighteningly distorted face and just stared at him. Then a child would appear and ask, "Why?" The nightmare often ended with Jim being awakened by the screams of his own voice echoing off the prison walls. But this night was different.

When the guard finished his caring conversation with Jim after the Casey Martin ceremony, Jim fell into a deep sleep and Alice appeared to him again in a dream. This time, though, she sat next to him on the bed and smiled at him. She stayed with him for a long time and he sensed that she wanted to say something. Then the little child appeared, looked at Jim with admiration and said, "I love you, Daddy." Jim never again had a nightmare about Alice.

Caring relationships cured Jim Townsend of the psychological traumas he suffered in the first two decades of his life. In these relationships, he learned the meaning of love. He learned how to trust people. He learned how to offer care in his own way to others. He learned how to pray and rely upon the greatest commandment to love God and love others. These simple caring expressions became the bedrock of his spiritual journey to wholeness and profound happiness.

Jim was eventually released from prison. He joined a religious order of Franciscans and participated in youth ministry and prison ministry programs for the rest of his life. He shared with others the love and care that had saved his own life.

Jim Townsend's life is an example of the power of caring relationships. In a fall 2013 study of churches practicing intergenerational ministries, John Roberto and I identified caring as a key component of church life. The results of this study are published in a book co-authored with Dr. Kathie Amidei, *Generations Together: Caring, Praying, Learning, Celebrating & Serving Faithfully*. The book offers theoretical and practical guidance on building caring relationships into church ministries as a way to transform individual lives and whole congregations.

Stories abound detailing how people's lives are changed from misery to happiness as a result of falling in love and staying in love. Are these people just lucky, or have they stumbled upon the secret to happiness?

Harvard University researchers believe that they have experienced a discernible and repeatable pattern in human relationships. People who care about others and experience loving care from others are the happiest people on the planet. In a 75-year study, the longest of its kind, researchers followed a group of men from the time they were undergrads at Harvard until they were in their 90's. They surveyed the group regularly throughout their lives about what makes them happy. The researchers released the results in 2013. Five major findings emerged that verify why churches should work diligently at promoting caring relationships in their congregations. We will review the findings and, in light of the Roberto/Merhaut survey, consider their implications for building caring relationships in congregations.

Finding #1:**Love is the strongest key to happiness.**

Without loving relationships, nothing else has the power to make a person happy. This should ring a very loud bell in the collective Christian psyche. The greatest commandment is about loving relationships: love God and love neighbor. Jesus summarized his ministry with his closest followers by giving them a new commandment: love one another as I have loved you. Yes, love does indeed make the world spin. It lifts our spirits. It fulfills our dreams. It makes us happy. It protects us from harm.

Ministries thrive when they are designed to help people express loving care for each other. Too often churches lose sight of this highest priority. In our efforts to get things done and to teach complex doctrinal concepts, we forget that the purpose for our existence is to help people care about each other in the context of their love for God.

Finding #2**Loving your career is more important than the money you make or the power you have.**

The Harvard researchers discovered that the money and power that the study participants enjoyed throughout their lives failed to produce the levels of happiness associated with a deep love for what they were doing with their lives. When people care about what they do and care about the people they serve in and through their work, they are much happier than those who chase money and power.

Churches have an obligation to help their members discern God's call in their lives. God's call is continuous throughout life. For young people, it is often referenced in the question, "What do you want to do when you grow up?" Sometimes this question persists even into adulthood. Other adults know what they want to do, but they wonder how to make what they do more meaningful. Churches can help people discern their vocations by encouraging them to reflect upon their God-given gifts and how those gifts can be used as an expression of care for others and for the community as a whole.

When people think about their careers as an expression of stewardship, they find their work to be much more meaningful. Working within the context of the biblical understanding of stewardship challenges one to identify his/her unique, God-given gifts and to share those gifts for the benefit of others as an expression of gratitude and care. This is a secret to happiness that can even transform the daily grind of a convicted murderer as we saw in the case of Jim Townsend above.

Finding #3**Don't give up on your pursuit of happiness.**

Even if you aren't happy, you can become happy if you work at building strong relationship skills and finding love. Some of the people in the study who started life in terrible circumstances ended up being among the happiest because they never gave up on searching for love. Jim Townsend again is a shining example of this finding.

Finding #3 points to the transformative power of caring relationships. People can and do change. Conversion is real and documented. Churches can help people who are suffering in misery to transform their sadness into joy by creating communities of care. When a troubled individual is wrapped in a caring

huddle of authentically loving people who commit to the long and profoundly difficult yet rewarding journey of companionship, true healing can happen.

Finding #4

Connection is a key to happiness.

Developing connections with a broadly diverse group of people increases the likelihood of long-term happiness. The more connected we are to others, the happier we become.

Some people limit their connection to their families. Others limit their connections to a few close friends. Still others only connect at work. These limited networks are not likely to produce deep or lasting happiness. The more the merrier is the mantra for building relational connections that lead to happiness. Happiness increases with each additional level of connection. The happiest people have strong relational connections with family members, with friends, with co-workers, with people from various age groups and generations, with people from different cultural backgrounds, etc. Diverse and multiple connections make for a happy life.

Churches can intentionally build diverse connections by promoting expression of care across generations, across cultures, across ability levels, across socio-economic backgrounds, etc. Developing programs that get people of diverse backgrounds together regularly and in meaningful ways is a unique contribution that churches can make to the pursuit of happiness. When people who are different from each other express care for each other in real and consistent ways, we not only build happiness, we build a visible expression of the full body of Christ, a body that finds its unity in diversity.

Finding #5

Overcoming challenges builds happiness.

You've heard it before: when life hands you lemons, make lemonade. Complaining about, denying, and/or running away from our problems is not a path to happiness or an expression of authentic care. Some people pursue happiness by trying to have fun endlessly. This has proven to be an empty pursuit. Happy people face challenges directly and move through them while relying upon the resources of strong relationships to help them overcome whatever unwelcome circumstance life throws their way.

For churches, this finding is an expression of the loving care expressed at the center of Christian faith, the death and resurrection of Jesus. The joy of resurrection faith can only be experienced by overcoming the challenges we face in life. Ministry leaders can model this by dealing directly, honestly, and kindly with challenging co-workers, family members, and congregation members. All of our other efforts to teach resurrection faith will ring hollow if we don't live it as we wade through the challenges of daily life.

As with the other findings, it is the strength of caring relationships that sustains the effort to address challenges effectively. No challenge is too great for the person with a heart filled with love.

Conclusion

I have never met a person whose life goal it is to be depressed or angry even though I have met a lot of depressed and angry people. People want to be happy, but so many don't know how to get to happiness. Those who are in tune with spiritual dynamics know that happiness is connected to relational

success. Jesus expressed this in both his actions and words. The great stories of every culture point to this truth. Now, Harvard University has seen it evidenced in a significant longitudinal study. Caring and loving relationships are the key to happiness and the power of these relationships can restore a wounded soul. Churches are in the business of building caring relationships. May we never allow lesser pursuits to get in the way of this highest calling.

Sources:

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