

THE ASPEN INSTITUTE
ASPEN IDEAS FESTIVAL 2018

From Strength to Strength: Finding Happiness and Success at
Every Stage of Life

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SPEAKERS:

Arthur Brooks

Jamie Miller: Alright. Hi, good afternoon. Thank you all for being here. My name is Jamie Miller, I'm a vice president at the Aspen Institute, and even though people are still trickling in, I think we're gonna get going now, so that Arthur has his full time to tell you all how to live a happy life, which is super important. Arthur is currently president and CEO of the American Enterprise Institute. He has announced his resignation, so he will be for another year, and then he will use his own guidance to see what's next, so maybe we'll find some clues in his talk today, but he's a great friend of the festival, and the Institute, and we really appreciate him being here and what he has to offer every year. And I see I'm not alone in that. So, welcome, Arthur.

Arthur: Thank you, Jamie. Thank you.

Jamie Miller: Alright.

Arthur: Thanks. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. I'm so delighted to be with all of you, thank you for taking some time in your afternoon. It turns out that anything that has the word happiness in the title does really well at the festival, and that says something about what we all want, doesn't it? I mean, you can only go so far by feeling bad about populism, but by the time I get done, in the next 45 to 50 minutes, your money cheerfully refunded if you're not a happier person and don't have a strategy to become happier as you move through your life. Now, I've just made a promise that I can't keep, because I don't run the Aspen Ideas Festival. However, I want to share some ideas with you that quite frankly have changed my life.

Four years ago, I was celebrating my 50th birthday. It adds up to 54 at this point, obviously. And when I was celebrating my 50th birthday, I have to say, life was pretty sweet. Where are we, are we on the title slide at this point? Okay. Life was pretty sweet. I mean, I'm the president of the American Enterprise Institute, I'm traveling around, it's a good organization, I felt like my career was going well. At the time, I actually had a book on the bestseller list, which is a great feeling! It's a great feeling. And I was doing what I ordinarily do, which was sit on an airplane, one night, I was coming back from the West Coast, from LA to Washington. It was a night flight, and I had an experience that disturbed me a lot, and that led me to do the research I'm gonna tell you about today.

See, what happened was, it was very dark, 'cause it was night, and, you know, people were asleep, or watching the movie, and I was working on my laptop, and I heard a couple behind me, in the row behind me, having a conversation. It was an older couple, I could tell by their voices. I couldn't quite make out his words, but I could make out her words very clearly. I wasn't trying to eavesdrop, but I couldn't help but overhear, and I heard mumble, mumble, mumble from the husband, I assumed it was the husband, and the wife answers, "Oh, don't

say it, it's not true that you have nothing to add anymore. Ugh." And then I heard mumble, mumble, mumble, mumble, and then she said, "Don't say it would be better if you weren't even alive."

It's really disturbing. And I started to get into my head a kind of a picture of who this guy is, it must be somebody who was underappreciated and forced to retire. What, maybe a ninth-grade teacher, or somebody who was given a gold watch and, you know, something. And I was kinda looking forward to just getting a look at him. And the lights went on, we landed at Dulles Airport in Washington, everybody stood up, and I turned around, and it was one of the most famous men in America. Somebody you all know. A hero; somebody for whom he has gotten justifiable fame for events of daring and accomplishment in the 1960s and 1970s. A household name. Now, this is very disturbing for me, and I'm walking up the aisle, and he and his wife are walking up behind me, and we get to the door of the airplane, where the pilot's always standing, saying, "Thanks for flying United, folks," you know how they always talk like Chuck Yeager? And he's saying this, and he recognizes the guy behind me, and he says, "Sir, I want you to know that you've been my hero since I was a little boy." And I turned around, and he was beaming.

And I thought, which is the real hero? This guy? Or the guy 20 minutes ago? Hm. And I thought to myself, things are going great for me right now, and I've been thinking about all the good things that are gonna happen to me. What can I do so it doesn't wind up like that? Now, I'm no hero on the plane, I'm not famous like this, but what can I do so that when I'm that age, it'll be different? And I'm gonna tell you what I found, 'cause I think I cracked the code. Now, not all of you are 50 or above, some of you are below that, but God willing, you will be, at some point, and I hope you remember some of these things, because truly, these are some of the life-changing things that I have learned. I'm gonna answer two questions in the next few minutes. Number one: what can I expect in the second half of my life with respect to happiness, and second: what can I do not to make it just bearable, but truly great? I'm gonna answer those two questions, I hope.

Now, I'm gonna give you some strategies, in your life, and not all of them are good. They're based on behavioral science, because I'm a social scientist, I'm a behavioral economist. But I'm gonna tell you a word about my sources, I'm gonna tell you a little bit about neuroscience, and a little bit about behavioral economics, and all the stuff that I really do. But I'm also give you a lot of information that comes from art and music and poetry. Why? Why is that one of my big sources? I'm gonna show you why art and music are probably the greatest sources of my life. 45 seconds, helping you understand why I'm gonna be talking to you about music today, in helping you understand happiness.

That's me. A long time ago. I was in the Barcelona Orchestra, I'm the guy on the right, but I gotta go back to the slide here. This was a time in my life when I made my living as a French horn player, from the age of 19 until the age of 31. In my heart, I'm a musician, you see, and I'm gonna tell you a little bit more

about that later, that was Shostakovich's Sixth Symphony, that was a presto movement written in 1949 under the Barcelona Symphony, under the baton of the great Franz Paul Decker. That's why I'm gonna mix these sources up. In truth, everything that I know is a blend of science and art, and I'm gonna try to convince you today, not just of the truth of the things that I'm coming to, but the truth that truth and beauty cannot be disentangled.

So let's get started. Here's my outline. I'm gonna talk about the shape of your happiness. Now, your results may vary, as they say. But, if you're like most people, this is what things tend to look like. Here's what you can expect, in other words. And then, I'm gonna spend the rest of my time on strategies; what you really can do. It's not good enough to identify problems. You have to actually exploit opportunities. So let's get started. What can you expect? It turns out there's a big literature on what happens to happiness over the course of life. And so what I'm gonna do is I'm gonna start with the first half of life. Now, this is happiness starting in the late teenage years and what ordinarily happens as people move through middle age until their early fifties. I know this is not very positive stuff, but don't worry, the story's gonna get better, I promise it's gonna end happy. It's gonna be a happy tale. N

ow, what you wanna know is, why does this first half of life look like this? 'Cause when you're in your twenties and thirties, you think things are gonna get better. You always think things are gonna get better; people are very optimistic, especially Americans. By the way, this is based on 416,000 people. It was assembled by two economists, Andrew Oswald and David Blanchflower, the world's leading experts on the trajectory of happiness over life. This was not just people who are morbidly depressed or suffering from mental illness. These are ordinary people. This is not a huge dip, but it's enough of a dip that people tend to notice it.

Why? Why does this happen? Why do people dip as they go into middle age? There's generally three reasons. One of them is expectations. We have a tendency to think that we're gonna be happier, and when we're not, that brings us down. The second is biology. There's a lot of science that looks at primates, macaques and chimpanzees, that shows that they have a big midlife crisis. They don't know they're midlife. They don't know how old they are. They don't know how long they're gonna live. But they get irritable when they're the equivalent of 50-year-old men.

Okay, but here's the big one that the literature comes to again and again and again from psychologists. The big reason that people come down. It's called "family complications." That's secret code for "teenage kids." This is the biggie. Now, I've thought about this a lot, and I have--my kids are 20, 18, and 15, so, you know, pray for me. And I have the best data on teenage kids and the midlife crisis, ever. I'm gonna show you the best data that I have ever come up with on this. These data that I'm gonna show you are called "my son Carlos."

My son is 18, and I just learned something about him: he has a YouTube channel. What's that? That's something where you broadcast ordinary events in your life for thousands and thousands of strangers. It turns out that my son Carlos has thousands of followers that he makes ordinary videos of normal occurrences, and total strangers are following his life. I just found this out, and so I'm gonna show you 60 seconds of my son Carlos' life, and I want you to sympathize with me. Alright? 60 seconds of mini-me, Carlos Brooks.

Carlos Brooks:

Hey guys. Because of a series of events that are kind of unfortunate, which I'll explain later, I have to go find another job. Well, I'm not, I didn't get fired. I didn't quit, but I need to find another job on top of this job. So, today's a job hunt, stay tuned. So I just gotta change my clothes, and I'll be ready to go. Alright, so one last thing before I head out, I gotta revise my resume, make sure it looks all spiffy. Alright, guys, I have finished my resumes, let's go!

I'm so stupid. So there's no contact information on the actual resume. I'm an idiot, a stupid idiot. You stupid idiot, Carlos. So basically, right now what I'm doing is I'm going home, I need to get the contact information on the resume, and then I need to go back and be like, "Take my new resume, please, and don't...I don't know. I don't--what do you guys think? What...you know, I...ehhhh..."

Arthur:

So, you know when they're little? And you think the--eight. And you think, someday, they're gonna grow up and move out, and it seems unthinkable! And then they're 14, and it starts to seem like an interesting idea, right? And they're 17, and it's sort of urgent, right? So what happens when they move out? What happens? Carlos moved out two weeks ago. So, let's look what happens at the second half of life! Here's the first half, you already saw this. Here, my friends, is the second half; here's what awaits me. Ahhhh. Now, the two lines, by the way, one is raw data, the other is correcting for everything. So if you think this is because of income, it's not. Think it's because of religion? It's 'cause it's not. You think it's 'cause of college? It's not. It's the same thing.

Now, here's the interesting thing to look at: that shelf at the end. What explains the shelf in your happiness? It makes it look like you get to 65 or 68, and suddenly you're just kind of sitting there for the rest of your life, right? That's not right. Here's what's really going on, I'm gonna smooth it out and tell you the story of what's going on behind these data. So there's a smooth version, okay? So here we go. 53 is the low point, and at 65, that's come all the way back up, and now something really interesting happens in these data: it breaks apart into two groups. Haha. That's what we really care about, isn't it? Because you wanna be in one of those groups, but not the other. The stranger on the plane clearly was in one of those groups. How can we be in the top half, how can we avoid the second half?

Fact number one I want you to remember: happiness usually declines, and then it rises, but it contains a ton of uncertainty, especially at the end of life, and it depends on what we do. So what should we do? I'm gonna consider three

common strategies. One is bad, and two are good. So let's get started. Strategy number one: rage against the dying of the light. Things are starting to decline; fight like crazy against it. This is a very common strategy.

ow, when I was 17, growing up in Seattle, my favorite poet was this guy, was Dylan Thomas. 1914 to 1953. Now, when I was in those days, I used to wear a lot of black. And I was kinda dark and sort of interesting, kind of like my son Carlos, in a lot of ways as a matter of fact. I hate to say it. And I used to carry around this volume of Dylan Thomas poetry. So dark and so satisfying in it's way, you know. He drank himself to death at 39, which seemed kind of interesting and cool, to me, in those days, and not so much, these days. And my favorite poem by Dylan Thomas was actually written for his own father, when his father was actually going into a decline in his health. And this was the advice that Dylan Thomas gave to his own father, and it was my favorite poem, and I learned this by heart, and I'm gonna share it with you. Because this is the strategy: to rage against the dying of the light. 90 seconds of the great poet Dylan Thomas.

Dylan Thomas:

Do not go gentle into that good night,

Old age should burn and rave at close of day;

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,

Because their words had forked no lightning they

Do not go gently into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright

Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,

And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,

Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight,

Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on that sad height,

Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray.

Do not go gentle into that good night.

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Arthur:

That's the hero on the plane. That could be any of us. Who rages against the dying of the light? Who does that? And the answer is gonna surprise you: it's high achievers. It's successful people. It doesn't make sense, does it? I mean, it seems like people who do a lot with their lives should be most satisfied as they get a little older, but indeed, you find the raging tends to occur more among people like the stranger on the plane. Why is that?

I want you to consider a study. This is a study undertaken by two social psychologists at the University of Texas at Austin, a married couple, Carol and Charles Holahan. And they talk about the burden of high achievement. These psychologists have found that, when they look at people who've done a lot, who've succeeded by ordinary terms, these are the people who have the greatest sense of regret about things that are undone. The people who should celebrate their achievements the most are the people who tend to be most unhappy at the end of their lives, and they tend to struggle.

Now, it makes sense. Why? Because it's just basic math. If you have high achievement, you've hit a strange and pronounced peak, and that means you have further to fall, and that means more pain, and that means more struggle. I want you to consider this: these are data from Benjamin Jones. He's a professor of management at Northwestern University, the Kellogg School of Management. He does work on when people peak in their careers. What these data are, are the average age at which people have done the work that won them Nobel Prizes in science, or when they've gotten major patents, and he finds that the highest likelihood of doing this incredible work, this genius work, is 39. And the likelihood of doing it after that falls precipitously. Now, the likelihood at 70 and 20 is the same, which is basically zero. Again, your results may vary. But it turns out that different professions tend to all have a peak. So, the likelihood of an entrepreneurial software startup is maximized at age 31. The highest likelihood of having a bestselling book: 51. The likelihood of becoming the CEO of a major corporation: 55.

But all of them have a peak, and then they have a decline, because what goes up must come down, and coming down is really, really hard. It's hard for me and it's hard for you, and look, I'm looking at some of the most successful people in America right now. We have to learn about this, and the right strategy. Now, the truth is, I actually know something about decline. Big, painful decline. I showed you that Barcelona Orchestra a minute ago; that was a great career, first 12 years. When I was a kid, I wanted to be the greatest French horn player in the

world. What a country, where you can have an ambition like that. And things were really on track, when I was 19, I dropped out of college--dropped out, kicked out, splitting hairs--and I went on the road doing my dream. I traveled all over the place, and it was going better, and it was going better, and it was gonna be great, and then when I was 23 years old I realized I was in decline. My playing wasn't what it once was, and I went to the greatest teachers in the world, and I doubled my practice time, and it didn't get better. It kept getting worse.

Now, all through my musical career, I had kind of markers of achievement. You always have these weird outside measures of achievement. Mine was playing in the world's greatest concert halls. The pinnacle of my career was gonna be my debut where? You got it. And there, my friends, it is. When I was 24 years old. How did I get this picture? Why does it say "intimate"? Because five years ago, somebody sent me an advertisement for Carnegie Hall, and my picture was on their advertisement. For my Carnegie Hall debut at 24. Now, I was in decline, but I didn't tell anybody; I planned to make this my triumphant renaissance, my renewal, the beginning of the second half of my career. It was gonna be better than ever. And I was this in the first half of the concert.

Lemme tell you the rest of the story. I got into the second half, and instead of being the beginning of renewal, it became a metaphor for what was wrong in my life. I fancied myself kind of a good public speaker, and so I would talk to the audience about these pieces I was gonna play. Second half of the concert, I got up from that chair--I'm the guy with the lustrous locks, playing the French horn there, by the way--I got up from my chair, and I walked out to tell the audience about what we were about to play. And I was completely engaged, I was totally impressed by my own rhetoric. And I wasn't watching my feet. And I missed the edge of the stage. And I fell five feet. Onto your lap. With my French horn. It was the world's greatest metaphor for what was going wrong with my career. And I jumped back up, and I said, "I'm okay, folks!" I mean, it was horrible, it was horrible, right? And it was written up in the Times.

And just, the greatest night of my life was the greatest humiliation up to that point. (I've had many more since then, by the way.) And you know what? I just struggled along, and raged against the dying of the light for years after that. I went to Barcelona after that, and the stuff that you saw, and I was still playing, and I was still getting worse. As a matter of fact, I went on for seven years. And I went and I got my college degree while I was doing that, but nothing was getting better, until finally I just...I had to face the facts. I quit, and I went to graduate school, and I got my PhD and became an economist, and I was a failure.

And you know where that failure ended up? When I finally stopped raging against the dying of the light, you know where I ended up? On this stage right now. What an incredible thing life is. And if I had stayed at it, and struggled and struggled and raged and raged, I wouldn't be here right now. I might be on the other side, playing in the music festival, but I wouldn't be here, and I'm so happy

right now to be talking to you. I'm so lucky to be sharing the secrets to a better life with you. And that never would have happened unless I had stopped raging against the dying of the light. It happened too late, but when it did, it changed my life. Here's the lesson: to rage is to delay progress. Are you raging? Am I? Don't do that. Do something else.

And now I'm gonna tell you the something else. Here's what you should do instead. Who's my favorite composer? People often ask me that, as a former musician. Here's my favorite composer: Johann Sebastian Bach. Maybe the greatest composer who ever lived. Lived 1685 to 1750. Incredibly prolific, he published more than a thousand works from all genres, all instrumentations, all musical combinations, incredibly productive. By the way, he also had 20 kids, which is productive. And Bach--it was incredible. In the early part of his career, he was the greatest innovator in music. All over Europe, he was known as the innovator of the High Baroque. He was the best exemplar of this period in music, and then something happened to him, 20 years before the end of his life, in about 1730. What happened? He went out of style. The High Baroque went out of style. The Classical period in music came into style, and people stopped listening to the High Baroque. High Baroque became like disco. Nobody wanted to hear it. Ironically, one of his 20 kids, Johann Christian Bach, was the most famous composer in the new era, and was eclipsing his own father.

So what did Bach do? What did Bach Senior do? Did he rage? Did he give up? No. He went from being an innovator to becoming a teacher. That was Bach's secret to success. In the last decade of his life, he didn't abandon the High Baroque; he decided to teach future generations how to do the High Baroque, because he was convinced that it was intrinsically important and beautiful and it would come back, and you know what? A hundred years after he died, Felix Mendelssohn, a composer in Germany, dusted off some of his old scores and played them for his friends, and he said, "You gotta listen to this stuff, it's great," and Bach became known, from that point on, as the greatest composer who's ever lived, a hundred years after he died. Why? Because he became a teacher, and taught future generations, instead of raging and giving up!

As a matter of fact, the last 20 years of his life were dedicated to a lot of different pieces, but his favorite piece, the thing he was most passionate about, was called the Kunst der Fuge, the Art of Fugue. Was fugues and canons all around the same theme, to demonstrate the beauty of the High Baroque. It was literally a textbook. He worked on a textbook for the last 20 years of his life, to teach. To go from innovation to teaching, and I'm gonna play you right now 60 seconds of the greatest textbook that has ever been written. Now, one other side note: he died while working on this. As a matter of fact, he died--he was writing his manuscript and suddenly, mid-measure, it stopped. And his son, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, wrote in the margins, "At this point, my father put down his pen and died." He died happy. Here's why.

Now that...what can you learn? What can we learn from this? How did Bach move throughout his life successfully, not withstanding the demand from the

world outside him? Here's how Bach started out, according to social psychologists. Bach started out using what's called fluid intelligence. Fluid intelligence is what we think of as raw cognitive horsepower, pure brains. It's problem-solving, it's innovation, it's working memory. Here's the bad news: it decreases with age, and it decreases before we want it to. This is your processing speed, my friends. This is the magnitude, how much RAM you've got, and how big your computer is, and how fast it runs. That's your fluid intelligence, and Bach was pure fluid intelligence for the entire first half of his career. Innovating like crazy, coming up with new ideas, fertile.

At some point in the middle of his career, as a matter of fact, in the last twenty years, he went to another kind of intelligence, which is described by social psychologists as "crystallized intelligence," and if the first kind is your Sherlock Holmes brain, this is your Dalai Lama brain. This is your accumulated knowledge and experience. So, fluid intelligence is a flow; crystallized intelligence is a stock. You know, nobody ever says, "You know what your virtue is? Brains." They say "Your virtue is your wisdom." This is the payoff to a good life. This is accumulated knowledge and experience, wisdom and judgment. Crucially, this is teaching ability, what Bach was doing, and here's the best part of all, here's the good news of the afternoon: it increases with age. Here's what it looks like, in the data. This is a graph that's gonna look at how fluid intelligence and crystallized intelligence change over the lifespan, from infancy all the way to late adulthood. And here's exactly what you'd expect: fluid intelligence increases and then decreases; crystallized intelligence comes on later and stays strong all the way to the end of your life.

So what do you do? What are you gonna do with this information? Don't try to keep relying on fluid intelligence as you grow into old age. As a matter of fact, even as you grow into middle age, start moving on from your fluid to your crystallized intelligence. Okay, how? How to do it? The work on this that's most interesting is from a psychologist at the University of California, Davis, named Dean Keith Simonton. World's leading expert on how people's careers advance. And he's done work, for example, on different creative fields. Scholars. What this graph shows you is the age at which different professions have done half the corpus of their lifetime work. What do you find? Poets are half done at 40. Historians are half done at 65. Better news: historians do the better half of their work in quality after 65.

This is incredible, right? Why? Because you gotta know a lot to be a historian! You can't start writing history even if you've only written and you've only read a little bit. Poets, on the other hand, are pure fluid intelligence. Being a poet is like being a startup entrepreneur. Being a historian is somebody who's using the perspective of the years. So, be a historian, not a poet! That's my advice to you. Not that helpful. Not that helpful. Here's better advice: be a teacher. See, a teacher is pure crystallized intelligence as well, because you're relying on the stock of your information; you can answer any question, you can explain things with clarity. More crystallized intelligence--better teaching ability. The most

encouraging piece of data I've ever seen is the work on teaching evaluations at universities by age. Highest teaching evaluations come to 70-year-olds.

When I was teaching at Syracuse, I was at the Maxwell School of Public Affairs for a long time, and I was full professor, and I was in my early 40s, and I would have these young professors come in, and, 30, and they would say, "What do I need to do to become a great teacher?" And the answer is "Wait 30 years." That's how you can become a great teacher. So here's your life lesson, because this is really, really applicable to every single person in this room: early on, enjoy your fluid intelligence. Rely on it. Make it the basis of your innovation, no matter what you're doing. But later--don't wait too long--move to your crystallized intelligence, your wisdom, and focus on instruction. So here's your question: what are you doing to share your wisdom in whatever you know? How are you becoming a teacher today? If you do, you win.

I have another strategy. This one's even better. This is taking away parts of your life. We always think that losing things is horrible, and you're bereft when you lose parts of yourself. That's the wrong way of thinking. What's this? This is an empty canvas, of course. This is a metaphor for something that has not been started yet. In art, and in life, what do you do? You add things to an empty canvas. You talk about somebody is an empty canvas, or a blank slate, that's how you think about it, and you add things. You add to your own life, to this canvas, if you want it to become a painting, you put ideas on there, as instantiated in paint. And experiences and emotions, that's how you do--you add more. And in your own life, if you wanna build your life, what do you do? You add more experiences with people, and you accumulate more things, and you have more experiences in the workplace. You add your canvas, right?

The problem is, that only works for as long as it works. Years ago, about four years ago now, I was in Taiwan. I was going to Taiwan a lot on business, and some afternoon, I hired an art historian to take me to the National Palace Museum in Taiwan for a private tour when the place was closed. Now, the National Palace Museum, for those of you who don't know, is the greatest collection of Chinese artifacts and art in the world. It was basically taken out when the Communists--when the Red Chinese rolled across China, and the Nationalists took it to Taiwan. And it's incredible; you have to go. I went with this art historian, I hired him, but I had one question, I said yeah, you're gonna show me great stuff, and it's gonna be beautiful, and thank you in advance, but I want you to answer one question for me: philosophically, what's the difference between Eastern and Western art? Philosophically, what's the difference? Because I know there is one, but I don't understand it.

He said, "Oh, that's an easy question to answer. You think of art as something you build up. The metaphor, for you, of art is a canvas, blank or with something on it." Here's art in China: that's a block of jade. That thing weighs a ton, literally. That's a boulder. It's from the 18th century, from the Qing dynasty, it's titled, appropriately, "Boulder With Daoist Paradise." He said this: "You westerners think of art as a canvas that you fill up with painting, and with

images and stuff; we think of art as something that's revealed when you take away all the part of the art that isn't the art.

And then I said, "What's the metaphor for my life, teacher, master?" And he said, "You know, when you get to a certain age, you have to start taking apart, taking away all the parts of your life that aren't really you, because you're in there, someplace." Had a big impact on me, because the first part of your life is the canvass that you're filling up; the second part of your life doesn't work that way. It's too dense. There's no more room. It doesn't get better. The second part of your life is this.

Now, there are a lot of ways to think about this, but ask yourself this. For your happiness, early on, you want to do more, you want to experience more, you want to meet more people. You want to be happy later? Stop doing the things that aren't truly you. Because the question that you need to answer, and I need to answer, is "Who am I?" I can't find it by adding more houses and adding more cars and adding more experiences and adding more vacations, except to the Aspen Ideas Festival. I can only do it by taking away the parts of Arthur that aren't Arthur.

Your job is to answer the question of who you are. To be happy, take away the outward markers of your success and prestige. Take away the distractions, take away the worries, and the unproductive relationships, and be free. Here's the image I want to leave you with, on this point. This is from Western China, these are the Yungang Grottoes. This is a mountain, this is three stories tall. This took 50 years of 40,000 stone-cutting artisans working full time, and was finished in the year 453. It's incredible. Now, why do I wanna show this to you? Because the first half of your life is you building up that mountain. It's your blood, sweat and tears, making this incredible mountain, and the second half of your life is taking away all the parts that are not your Buddha. That's you, inside. That's your peace, that's your happiness. Your job is to find it, and you can't find it until you chip away all the parts that are not the Buddha. Early on, add and build and enjoy your life, and then, subtract to find your best and truest self.

Here's your project, before I see you next year at the Aspen Ideas Festival, and there's gonna be a quiz: what do I need to take away, and what did I take away this year, to find my true self. Let's summarize. Happiness has its ups and downs; how we end is in our hands. Peak and decline--it's normal. Here's news: if you've got a big peak and you've got a decline, it means you're great! There's nothing abnormal about that. Don't rage against it; make progress of moving beyond it. Third: use your wisdom, become a teacher, and fourth: you're the Buddha. Treat your life like a sculpture. Take away the things that aren't you to find your true self.

One more thing: I've talked about everything as if you can do this by yourself Right? I've talked about this as if you're isolated, I've talked about this as if you are like a tree. This is an appropriate tree for this location, isn't it? This beautiful aspen tree? But metaphors, for time immemorial, have looked at successful

people, have looked at godly people, as people who are like a majestic tree, completely self-sufficient, that don't need anything else or anyone else, effectively. This quotation is from the first psalm, the third verse, some of you may remember this. "He is like a tree." We're talking about a godly, successful person. "He is like a tree, planted by streams of water, yielding its fruit in season, whose leaf does not wither and who prospers in all that He does." You do it on your own.

This metaphor is very, very deceptive, and this metaphor is actually very, very dangerous. It turns out, as you all know, we don't exist in isolation, and we shouldn't try to understand our lives in terms of our individual achievements. When I ask you, "Who are you?" don't tell me what you do for a living, or what you did for a living. Tell me about the sum of the love in your life, because that turns out to be a better metaphor for that beautiful aspen tree. Let me give you a minor biology lesson. What's the largest organism in the history of the world? Single living organism? Here it is. This, by the way, is the largest stand of aspen trees in the world, it's called Pando, it's in Utah, it's a hundred and six acres, and it weighs, altogether, six million kilograms. It's one plant. Why? Because the aspen tree has one set of roots. What looks like an individual tree is not; it's a sprout out from the same roots. It's the same tree. Look around you, and you're gonna notice this, I bet you'll remember this for the rest of the time that you come to Aspen for many, many years. When you see an aspen tree, you're seeing one part of the aspen tree. This entire complex is one plant. Incredible.

Why do I tell you this? Because that's the right metaphor for your life and my life. Not the single tree, which is an illusion. Buddhist philosophy talks about the doctrine of emptiness. Emptiness is to say that the concept of "me" as an autonomous individual is an entirely illusory experience. I don't exist apart from you. I don't exist apart from my family and my friends. And what that means is what looks like decline to me is a simple change in the organism, and I can't understand that unless the roots of the love in my life are properly fostered and properly understood. You're a stand of aspens, my friend. You wanna understand yourself? Look to the next tree over, 'cause that's you too.

The one thing I wanted to add is you can't do this by yourself. Your true self is not the sum of your achievements; you are not the "what." You are the "why," and the "why" is love. The magnitude of the love for the people in your life is who you truly are, so ask yourself: "Am I or am I not surrounded by that root system adequately?" Have you built that root system? Can you see it? Are you experiencing it?

I just wrote this, two weeks ago. I was thinking about this, and as I did that, I thought, "Am I cultivating a root system that's adequately healthy?" And I thought, too, I think of myself as a kind of a good aspen tree, and then I thought next tome is the little aspen tree, right? You met him earlier, little Aspen. Little Carlos. And as I was writing this, as I was putting together this very presentation, I was alerted to a new video on his YouTube channel! See, my son, while I'm working, and making a living for my family, my son has been in Israel.

And he has been enjoying life, and getting the experiences, the Holy Land. And so he's sent a dispatch to his thousands of adolescent female followers, to show what it's like to experience the profundities of the Holy Land. This is Little Aspen, experiencing Israel. Once again, sympathize.

Carlos Brooks: First thing we did was we went to Arezi, alright? Here's the tourism. Go. Tourism. Tourism! Tourism! Tourism. Tourism! Tourism. Tourism. Tourism.

Arthur: So I'm in decline, right? And I get to watch that grow. Good luck to all of us. I actually have high hopes, and relatively high expectations, notwithstanding what I've shown you today.

I'm almost finished, and I'm looking forward to hearing what's on your mind, 'cause we're gonna even have some time for thoughts that you have, but before I do, I wanna give you one more metaphor. Because I need to play you one more piece of music. I wanna show you the poetry, first, that talks about the best possible ending to life. You might actually find this familiar.

"Gladly, as his heavenly bodies fly on their courses through the heavens, thus, brothers, you should run your race, joyful, like a hero going to conquest."

If that sounds familiar, it was written by Friedrich Schiller, in the 18th century. If that sounds familiar to you, it's because you've heard, every single one of you knows the musical setting to this poem. It was set to music by this man: Ludwig Von Beethoven, 1770 to 1827, the greatest master of the modern orchestra in history. Beethoven used this, that text I just showed you, as the text to the Ode to Joy. The Ode to Joy, of course, is the last movement of his magisterial Ninth Symphony, the Opus 125, written in 1824. The greatest ending in the history of classical music. How appropriate! This guy, it would seem, using this, that poem, knows how to end things, and I get to play it for you right now. But I'm warning you: it's got a twist. It's actually not exactly what you think. But before I get there, 90 seconds of Beethoven that I want you to enjoy. The Ode to Joy.

Wait, what happened? Why did I cut it, why, why? You wanna know why? 'Cause here's the dirty secret of Beethoven. He had one weakness. He didn't know how to end the symphony. He used to write voluminous letters to his family, and he would agonize, "I don't know how to end the piece! I don't know what to--" He would stay up at night, "So what do I do? I don't know how to end the symphony!" And this symphony was no exception. This goes on for 12 more minutes. He couldn't get out! It was like the mafia, he couldn't get out, right? He was in his own symphony, he was trapped in his own symphony, right? Look, he's just like you, he's just like me. It's going great, it's going great, keep the party going. Keep the party going, 12 more minutes, you gotta get out, Beethoven. He finally did get out, and it's still pretty great, and for your edification, here is the last 30 seconds of the last of Beethoven's great symphonies. The last of Beethoven's Ninth.

Not bad. Not bad. Look, my symphony and yours are not gonna end like that. Because we're not Beethoven. But it could still be great. Every part of your life can be great. I want you to remember four things: don't rage against change; teach others; take away the parts of you that aren't really you; and most importantly, surround yourself with love. You know, you heard before that I just resigned my job. Why? Because of this! Because you have to move, you have to change, and you have to enjoy your life to its highest potential. I'm trying to take my own advice. Wish me luck and I'll wish you luck. And let's do it together. You know, we can put these ideas into action, but we have to do so purposively. We have to do these things on purpose. You deserve to be happy. You deserve to live your life at its highest state.

I am super grateful to you for this hour that you've given me, but more importantly, I hope you get the happiness that you deserve. I hope that my friends can actually live the lives that are the best lives at every single moment. I guess all I have left to say to you, besides God bless you, and besides thank you, is that my wish for you, and for me, and for all of us, is that together, we can truly go from strength to strength. Thank you.