

Why Good Things Happen to Good People – A Review

A Review of Stephen Post and Jill Neimark, *Why Good Things Happen to Good People. The Exciting New Research That Proves the Link Between Doing Good and Living a Longer, Healthier, Happier Life.* New York: Broadway Books, 2007, xv + 302 pp, ISBN 978-0-7679-2017-9 (hardcover), www.broadwaybooks.com.

Reviewed by Francisco Gomes de Matos, an applied peace linguist from Recife, Brazil, 2007

Book reviewing is a complex, challenging, communicative interaction: it calls for several traits, among which empathy (with the authors and with the intended readers), expertise in the subject matter dealt with, fluency in the written language, and experience in the process. Given the psychological nature of the challenge, another feature could be added: pleasurable. For reading can be one of humankind's greatest delights. One more desirable feature: the book's peacebuilding power. Having said that, the reviewer should clarify that he will do his best to be empathetic with the authors (and to the extent that it is possible, with their readers), to treat the subject matter from the perspective of Peace Linguistics (see the section on that emerging area of research in www.humiliationstudies.org), to use written English as clearly, coherently, cohesively, concisely and creatively as possible, and to apply a systematic approach to reviewing. The book's pleasurable and humanizing power will also be focused on.

As a practitioner of systematic reviewing, I have been relying on the use of Checklists, especially key-question-based ones. Here is the Checklist created for this review:

- 1- What is the book's message/philosophy or simply put, what is the book about?
- 2- Who are its authors? What do they do professionally?
- 3- Who introduces the book? What does the Preface author do?
- 4- Who has recommended the book (inside and on the back cover)?
- 5- How is the volume organized?
- 6- What is the authors' style like? What are some of their stylistic choices?
- 7- How research-based is it?
- 8- How closely does the Index reflect the conceptual-terminological repertoire used?
- 9- Does the book contribute to Communicative Peace? If so, how?
- 10- What are some of the authors' meaningful, memorable messages?
- 11- What could be suggested for a revised edition?
- 12- How would the reviewer sum up his review?

Here are my answers:

1. Let me answer by quoting the authors, from their opening chapter: "This book has one purpose: to inspire you to a healthier, more giving lifestyle" (p.2). "...it really is good to be good, and science says it is so" (p.15). The book's long subtitle (18 words) helps clarify the authors' intended goal.

2. Stephen Post is a psychologist with a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago(1983). Currently, Professor of Bioethics and Family Medicine in the School of Medicine, Case Western Reserve University and President of the Institute for Research on Unlimited Love –Altruism, Compassion, Service. For more biodata, search the Internet. Jill Neimark is a science writer, a novelist and a poet. Former features Editor at Psychology Today.
3. The book’s Preface is written by Reverend Otis Moss Jr, “the African American pastor at Olive Institutional Baptist Church in Cleveland, Ohio, and a protégé of the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.” (p.108). The 3-page Preface ends with an inspiring paragraph, featuring this wise suggestion: “When you are in a desert, plant a rose of liberation, a rose of peace, a rose of reconciliation, and a rose of faith ,hope, and love. And the desert will blossom “ (p.xv).
4. On the book’s back cover there are four statements – advance praise – by such renowned scholars as Francis S. Collins, Sister Helen Prejean, Martin E. P. Seligman, Robert H. Schuller and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. In the section More Praise, 8 statements are included by such notables as Sharon Salzberg and George Gallup Jr.
5. The book is well organized. After the publication data page (The Library of Congress cataloguing information characterizes the book as 1. Altruism – Psychological aspects 2. Helping behavior), there is a Dedication page followed by 13 chapters (length: 7 to 32 pp), 4-page Acknowledgments, an 8-page Index, About the Authors (2 p). Chapters 3 through 12 feature a section on Lessons from the Frontiers of Research and a self-test on one of the 10 domains of the Love and Longevity Scale. 4 scales share the initial letter: celebration, compassion, courage, and creativity. 2 scales begin with an L: listening, loyalty. Then there is 1 scale each for humor, respect, forgiveness, and generativity. Commendably, chapter titles are clear and concise. Examples: Chapter One: Find the fire. Chapter Thirteen: Doing Good. Living Well. Your Life Program (note the application of fine journalistic English). Chapters 3 through 13 all begin: The way of (name of domain). The author-and-subject Index features most of the key concepts-terms in the book. This reviewer noticed the conspicuous absence of **language** (cf. pp.236, 262) and **peace** (pp. 87, 89, 90, 93, 185, 186).
6. Commendably, the authors opted for an informal, communicative style, in which readers are addressed friendly, warmly as **you**. In such spirit, Post and Neimark ask “You wish to be happy?” (p.2) in which the ellipsis of **do you** mark the question’s informality. Also note this usage: “You’d like to walk into the world each day knowing that this is a place of benevolence and hope?” (p.2). A noteworthy stylistic feature is the authors’ adoption of contractions. On page 183: you’ve , we’ve, we’re, I’ve ,it’s . Then, there is what I would call a very interesting, cognitively revealing stylistic finding: the authors often **cre**activate their ability (mostly unconscious, I think) to attract readers’ attention through alliterative constructions. Here are some of them with my identification of repeated letters: C C C: compassion calms and

connects up (180), W W: Love others wisely and well (104), R R + F F: Reverence is respect's final flowering. This reviewer has compiled a list of alliterations used by the authors. The recurring of such alliterative process makes me wonder if there isn't a Law of Alliterative Attraction, which might help account for the authors' cognitive-communicative preferences. Here is an instance of C C C C C:"
Cultivating compassion can actually change our neurocircuitry permanently" (187).

7. The book is strongly research-based. In fact, the words **research** and **researcher** are high-frequency. A corpus linguist (interested in quantitative aspects of linguistic usage) would look at such data and help us see how recurring those words are in the authors' prose. Another way of answering this question would be that of listing the Areas/branches of science mentioned by the authors. Maybe one of this website's users will be interested in this type of analysis? Let me illustrate how research permeates the volume ,by quoting from chapter 5, The way of forgiveness: Set yourself free. "Before 1985, there were a mere handful of peer-reviewed studies on forgiveness. Today there are more than 1,400" (p.79). Then the authors share "some highlights of IRUL-funded and other research on forgiveness".
8. Creating an Index is a formidable challenge, as anyone who has engaged in such intellectual operation can attest. Comprehensiveness, though desirable, is seldom achieved, so let's empathize with the authors and say that the conceptual-terminological repertoire they used in their book is well represented in the Index. Ideally, a professional Indexer could have been asked to cooperate but, well,...that's expecting too much.
9. Yes, most significantly so. This book also contributes to what I call **Communicative peace**, especially in the chapter 11: The Way of Listening: Offer Deep Presence. The section on The simple beauty of listening (233- 235) includes the main author's account of his "favorite family story of listening". Since I'm sure you'll be reading this book, I won't deprive you of your pleasure of processing that section, friends in the Dignity and Humiliation network.
10. My answer could be a long list. I've used much of your busy time,so let me share three of my favorites. They're what I call **memorable, meaningful messages**: Let peace fill you (185), A healthy society is a giving society (284), Feel good when you give (285).
11. A revised edition could have a briefly annotated Bibliography which would help researchers-to-be make the most of the information provided in the chapters.
12. To sum up, this is a brilliant book by LOVisionaries. As its distinguished Preface author put it: "I hope it will change Your life." In closing, let me share a little poem I created, based on my reading Stephen Post and Jill Neimark's book:

LIFE
LOVE
Live to love

Love to live
Love-long life
Life-long love
Longer life? LOVE!