

Getting college students to ask what makes life worth living

At Yale, classrooms full of future doctors, lawyers, and hedge fund managers are contemplating the good life.

by [David Heim](#) in the [November 7, 2018](#) issue



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“It seems a little dramatic to say that the class altered my life, but some days that’s how it feels,” said Alina Lale Yaman. “It opened me to the idea of a life lived with intention.”

“I don’t think there is any other class at the school that grapples with the fundamental questions: What do you want in life, and is that worth wanting?”

commented C. J. Fowler. “It’s sad there aren’t more sections of this class at this school, where it seems everybody has bought into the existing paradigm of success: go into consulting, make a lot of money.”

“It’s different to read great texts with a sincere desire to answer the great questions of life rather than hunting the pages for an argument to prove your intellectual prowess,” said Beatrice Beressi. “The stakes of the class felt far greater than any I had taken. We were asking questions about how we live every day and why we are doing it.”

“The approach in this class changed the incentives in the classroom,” said Kevin Jiang. “Instead of trying to say something smart, students were interested in saying something that got the class closer to the truth, which often involved asking a question or admitting they were not sure of something. This commitment impelled me to change some of the ways I live my life.”

These speakers are talking about a course they took at Yale College called Life Worth Living. It was conceived by Yale Divinity School theologian Miroslav Volf in an effort to supply something he and colleagues thought was glaringly missing in the modern secular university: a class that directly asks questions about the ultimate purposes of life and about what constitutes a good life.

Such a course might seem a standard part of a liberal arts education, but it is actually a rarity, as the comments by students indicate. The modern university abandoned the role of moral guide decades ago. Its overriding aim is the expansion and transmission of knowledge, understood primarily as scientific and technical knowledge. As Volf puts it, the modern university provides the skills for reaching specified goals but has very little to say about “ultimate ends, or the table of values by which we judge what is desirable and what is not.”

Even courses offered in religion and philosophy departments generally sidestep these questions. Teachers may give close attention to the historical influence that a religious or moral tradition has had, the practices it has developed, and the texts it has generated, but typically they don’t venture into evaluating the religious and moral claims being made. Making those judgments is strictly an extracurricular activity. As a result, Volf notes, questions about ultimate ends tend to break out only in late-night conversations among friends or arise years later at a moment of midcareer doubt, with the nagging thought: Does what I’ve done with my life really

matter? What does it all add up to?

Life Worth Living is designed as a way to counter the inarticulacy of the university and its students when it comes to ultimate questions. Volf said he thought there should be at least one place in the university where religious and moral traditions are explored with intellectual rigor and without avoiding the normative questions they raise: Does this vision of a flourishing life make sense? Is it a vision I should want to follow?

Since Volf and colleagues at Yale Divinity School launched Life Worth Living in 2014, it has become a course that Yale undergraduates compete to get into. About 250 apply each year for one of about 60 spots. The course has inspired similar efforts at Colby College in Maine, the University of Sheffield in England, and the University of Hong Kong.

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The most recent version of the Yale course gave students a brief look at eight different accounts of the life worth living: Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Marxism, scientific naturalism, utilitarianism, and the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. Without endorsing any of these views, the course presses students to consider each perspective as a live option for themselves.

“We want students to bring their own lives to the table and to wrestle personally with the material,” said Ryan McAnnally-Linz, one of four instructors who’ve been teaching the course along with Volf. “We want students to realize that they haven’t really understood Islam or utilitarianism if they haven’t wrestled with them as claims on their lives.”

One way teachers encourage that level of personal engagement is by taking another step that’s unusual in the secular university: they drop the pose of scholarly objectivity to reveal their own commitments. “On the first day of class I tell students I am a Christian,” said Matt Croasmun, who directs the Life Worth Living program. This confession is not only a matter of intellectual honesty, he said; it’s a sign that in this class personal commitment is both expected and respected.

“I argue on the first day that no one is neutral,” said Angela Gorrell, another instructor. “I tell students that we all have backgrounds that shape what we believe, and we all have people in our lives who have shaped how we think.” The goal is not

to put one's commitments aside but to become more reflective and articulate about them.

For each of the eight perspectives considered, students are asked to describe its vision of the good life. What does it feel like to live according to this vision? How is one called to act? What does it mean to fail according to this tradition, and what resources does the tradition have for dealing with failure?

The initial writing assignments in the course ask students to identify the visions of the good life that have already shaped them, explicitly or implicitly. Other assignments ask them to describe what their peers think the good life is, and how they would describe Yale's vision of the life worth living.

The first weeks of class include an off-campus retreat at which students share personal stories and visions. From these conversations, students quickly find out that there is no consensus around the table. "One person will say that the life worth living is one in which you are responsible only to yourself; another will say that the life worth living is one in which you are responsible to God," said Croasmun. "We all see that there is serious disagreement on truth claims."

The reality of disagreement points to what teachers say is another goal of the class: to learn how to have a constructive conversation about differences. Disagreements over ultimate truth claims can end quickly in silence or hurt feelings. In small-group section meetings, students are invited to probe each other's beliefs rigorously but charitably. "One of the goals," said teacher Drew Collins, "is to learn how to disagree well."

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To foster constructive disagreement, the teachers said, they feel a special responsibility to create a classroom atmosphere in which students are willing both to reveal their deep beliefs and to be challenged on them. Gorrell said she tries to create this climate by being honest about how she herself wrestles with the material. "I might say, 'As a Christian, this part of Buddhism is really compelling to me.' Or I might say, 'As a Christian, I really don't agree with this.' I try to show students that they too can feel confused and disagree."

Collins said that he aims to share with students his own openness to the moral seriousness of each tradition. When a guest speaker makes the case for

utilitarianism, he notes that though he's a Christian, not a utilitarian, he's impressed: "She lives a lot more like Jesus than I do."

Constructive disagreement in the classroom can also be short-circuited by a breezy relativism. Gorrell said students sometimes try to negotiate conflict by invoking some version of "Everyone is entitled to live the way they want to live, as long as they're not hurting anybody." When that happens, Gorrell will point out that the qualifier "as long as they're not hurting anybody" is already making a universal moral claim. Furthermore, embedded in that phrase is some definition of what counts as hurting. The claims that religious and moral traditions make are not so easily avoided. "I try to help students see that we all make claims that we mean to apply to everybody, not just ourselves."

In a similar vein, Croasmun stresses that not every vision can be embraced. Pursuing any vision of the good life, he tells the students, entails saying yes to some things and no to others.

Class discussions tend to elicit moments of insight, said Collins, as students come to recognize the implications of their convictions and actions. "They find out they believe things they didn't know they believed, or they see that they are living in service of a vision that they didn't know they held."

Croasmun recalled working with one student who declared that he was a libertarian Nietzschean, a believer in personal freedom and autonomy. In talking to the student, Croasmun wondered what he would do if his mother were dying. Would he feel any obligation to respond in a particular way? If so, perhaps that sense of obligation indicated that he held a moral vision different from the one he claimed to espouse.

Teachers as well as students commented that Life Worth Living demands an unusual engagement of head and heart. In one respect, teachers remain the authorities in the classroom, the ones to explain the writings of the Buddha, or St. Paul, or Marx, or John Stuart Mill. But in another respect, they are fellow seekers of wisdom, responding to the insights of each tradition and joining the conversation about its strengths and weaknesses.

"I can't imagine being in the university without teaching this class," said Collins. He sees the class as an example of what interreligious dialogue is at its best: people sharing their beliefs and allowing those beliefs to be challenged in service of a larger purpose. The aim is not to win the argument, but "to better understand and

articulate one's own vision—and to live it.”

McAnnally-Linz said the class has underscored for him the importance of spending time with people who don't share his own assumptions. “Spending too much time with only people who share my vision of the good life raises the likelihood that I'll accept easy answers to hard questions about that vision.” The method of the class, he said, has “seeped into my whole way of approaching the world.”

Gorrell, who worked in church and parachurch positions for 14 years before arriving at Yale, said teaching the course has challenged her to rethink her own approach to ministry. How good am I at articulating a Christian vision of the good life? she asks herself. How well do I dialogue with people who come from a very different tradition? (So far all the instructors in LWL have been Christians, a reflection of the course's origins at the divinity school. McAnnally-Linz said the staff recognizes the need to involve teachers from other traditions, and “we're working on making that happen.”)

The chatter in the classroom on the final day of the semester made it feel more like the conclusion of an Outward Bound expedition or a church mission trip than the end of a college course. It was evident that students had formed close ties with one another and their teachers.

Volf used the occasion to offer a few conclusions about the life worth living that might resonate with everyone in the room. One lesson of the class, he suggested, is that the good life involves caring for something outside yourself, whether that is other people or the planet. A second lesson is that everyone's life is enmeshed in social systems and shaped by other people. That recognition, he said, should inspire a sense of gratitude.

A life worth living, he summed up, is one marked by “care and gratitude.” Such a life goes against the grain of American life, he said, since the culture encourages us to think of our lives as things we own and design.

Many students in the class will go on to careers as doctors, lawyers, corporate executives, or money managers. Will this course lead them to live against the grain? Will they continue to ask whether the things they seek in life are worth seeking? Croasmun, in his concluding remarks, challenged them to do just that. “I picture you all wherever you will be five, ten, 20 years from now . . . always asking the question: What's worth wanting here—for our company, for our community, for our nation, for my patients, for my students, for my friends, my family?”

But Croasmun also celebrated the classroom experience they had just shared. It had reminded him, he said, of the importance and power of sharing the search for the good life with people “who know you and care for you.” For these students and teachers, a community of earnest conversation about the good life was itself part of the life worth living.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Learning how to live.”