

## IDEAS

## What Monastic Mystics Got Right About Life

If this path to happiness worked for Saint Thomas Aquinas, it can work for you.

By Arthur C. Brooks

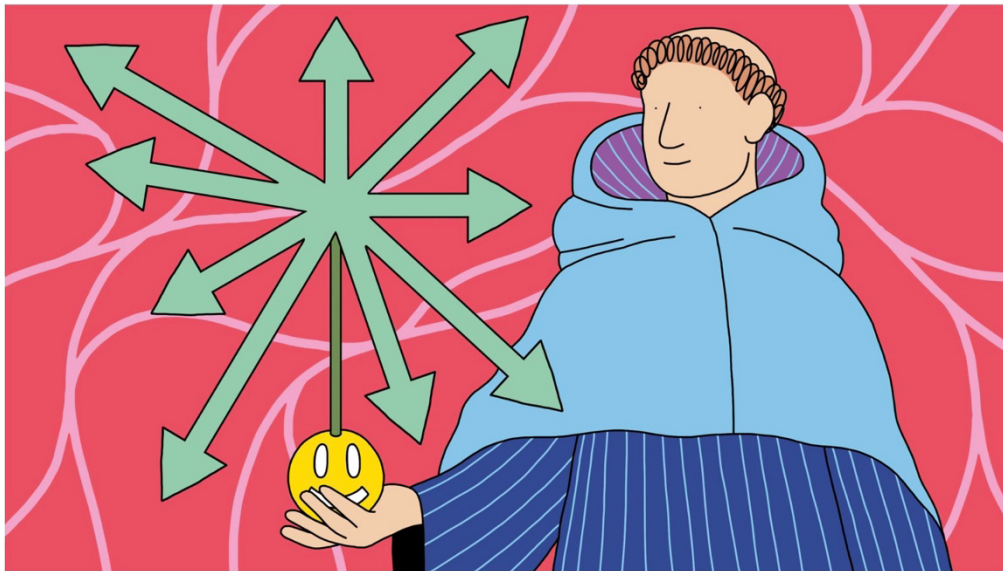


Illustration by Jan Buchczik

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SHARE & GIFT  SAVE 

An old saying commonly attributed to Mark Twain runs, “It ain’t what you don’t know that gets you into trouble. It’s what you know for sure that just ain’t so.” Misinformation—or what some call “fake news”—is clearly a huge problem in our society, leading to a great deal of conflict. But this principle is, from my observation, also the biggest obstacle facing every young adult starting out on a new life after college graduation. Focusing on all the things you don’t know yet is easy. The *greater* problem is everything the world has told you about your future that simply isn’t true.

Our culture’s propensity to spread misinformation is nothing new, of course; history abounds with instances of faddish nonsense that influenced conventional wisdom. Fortunately, history also abounds with people and

groups dedicated to stamping out fallacious error and declaring truths about life, even when doing so has been inconvenient or costly. A prime example is the Dominican order of priests, nuns, and friars—the Mendicant Order of Preachers that was officially founded in France in 1216 by the Castilian priest Dominic de Guzmán.

From their earliest days, the Dominicans have done battle with lies, folly, and ignorance, and what the Order of Preachers has taught to combat falsehood still serves today. To show what I mean, let me give three cases of patent untruths you have probably heard, the Dominican rebuttal, and the supporting evidence from modern science that can help you avoid costly errors and get a good start in the next phase of life.

### Havelock Ellis: Science and mysticism

You have probably been told that college is a place you go to figure out your career plans and life ambitions—where you discover what your passion is, what you're good at, and what the world needs specifically from you. College in particular is supposed to give you this information, in a road-to-Damascus sort of way, and you should graduate clear and confident in your goals. If that doesn't happen, well, maybe you'll never have a job you love or really succeed as a result.

This is not true.

In fact, you should *not* have your future all figured out. Not now, and not later. We learn this from the 13th-century Dominican mystic Meister Eckhart. He taught that we should “live without a why” (*sunder warumbe* in Middle High German). By this, he did not at all mean that we should be directionless or that life is meaningless. On the contrary, no one was more steadfast than Eckhart in teaching what the ultimate objective of life should be: to act in a spirit of pure love before all else, and not to let worldly aims of money, power, and prestige distract us from this objective.

By all means, we should have goals in life. But they should be *intentions* to give us direction. They should not be *attachments*, so that the priority of loving others can always take precedence.

This might sound heretical in our ambitious culture (in his time, Eckhart himself was periodically accused of heresy). But modern social science suggests that it is outstanding advice—and quite easy to follow. Social psychologists have long shown that people are happiest and most productive when they make progress toward ordinary goals for themselves in school, work, and life. To set goals such as getting a decent grade, graduating from college, finding a full-time job, and saving to buy a house is perfectly healthy.

What is *not* healthy is to be attached to worldly goals in such a way that your happiness depends on them. This leads to the so-called arrival fallacy, in which you believe that bliss attends hitting your goal, a belief that almost invariably leads to frustration and disappointment.

If you are at loose ends right now, and unsure about your future, that's just fine. It means you are fit to serve the highest good as you find it on your journey. Go ahead and set a career goal, but always resolve not to let it distract you from love and service. And that way, you also stay open to finding yourself on another, better path.

### Annie Lowrey: The monk who thinks the world is ending

The second big lie you may have absorbed osmotically through the culture has to do with pain and suffering. If one unofficial 1960s motto was “If it feels good, do it,” today's might be “If it feels bad, make it stop.” Sadness and fear are commonly considered symptoms of pathology; many people have come to see ordinary unhappiness and stress as evidence that they have a disorder. Well-intentioned parents spend a huge amount of energy trying to shield their children from pain of all kinds, physical and emotional—even though good evidence suggests that some experience of adversity can build a capacity for resilience. So those who have been too thoroughly shielded can be forgiven when starting out their life journey for seeing the avoidance of suffering as a primary goal.

Saint Rose of Lima had thoughts on this. She was a Dominican tertiary (a layperson who lives as a nun or monk, but outside a monastery) in 17th-century Peru, and was the first person born in the Americas to be canonized as a saint by the Catholic Church. Rose dedicated herself to serving the poorest of

the poor, and suffered her own ill health and torment, dying at age 31. She was a true expert on suffering, both hers and others'. You might think she would hate and resent it, but you would be wrong. "Grace comes after tribulation," she said, paraphrasing Jesus. "Without the burden of afflictions it is impossible to reach the height of grace," she elaborated. "The gifts of grace increase as the struggles increase."

Far from being a martyr to her pain, Rose was a social scientist before her time. The truth is that the people who are happiest with their lives encounter plenty of suffering too. They don't seek it, but they also do not consider it to be some sort of sickness; nor are they afraid of it. On the contrary, they know that suffering is necessary to learn and grow. Research shows that experiences of sadness can improve memory, judgment, motivation, and goodness toward others.

Similarly, fear is an essential part of the human experience because it is how we learn and develop psychological courage, which is core to our well-being. Negative or unpleasant emotions and experiences give us the resistance we need to get stronger. A strategy of evading sources of suffering is no way to live fully. Even if it were possible, it would stunt our development as human beings and lower our satisfaction with life.

Obviously, suffering can reflect a behavioral or psychological maladaptation, and it may involve an actual medical problem, such as clinical depression. But suffering per se is not evidence that you are broken; it is evidence that you are a living human, experiencing a full range of emotions. If, like Rose, you accept your suffering, that challenge can be a key part of your path to success in life: You don't have to be canonized to be sanctified.

#### Arthur C. Brooks: How to find your faith

Perhaps the biggest lie of all that can hold back your life's journey in the modern world is that you should seek your own individual truth in life. Each of us has different life experiences and struggles, and this means—the contemporary conventional wisdom proposes—that truth is relative, because you have your own truth. The goal is to find that unique personal verity, embrace it, make it your identity, and not let anyone question it.

On this issue, we turn to probably the greatest Dominican mind of all, Saint Thomas Aquinas. The 13th-century “Angelic Doctor,” as he became known, embraced Aristotelian philosophy, added in Muslim and Judaic ideas, and interpreted Christian thought in a way that arguably has more continuing influence today than the work of any other Catholic writer.

In his *Summa Theologica*, he observed that perfect happiness is not possible in this life, but we can approach it if we are “busied with one thing, i.e. the contemplation of truth.” The obvious question at this point is—to quote Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judaea who questioned Jesus—“What is truth?” The knowledge that conforms to my lived experience? No, Aquinas teaches, only one true and divine truth exists—an ineffable mystery that we can’t fully attain on Earth. But possessing that ultimate truth is not the point; what matters for your progress toward happiness is to *approach* it with an open heart and an open mind.

By this logic, establishing and living according to “your truth,” which is entirely relative, will not lead to your well-being. Quite the contrary. And past research seems to back this up. In 1984, the psychologist Daniel Lapsley was studying the causes of rising depression among early and late adolescents, a phenomenon that has only escalated since. He asked his young subjects to react to numerous statements such as “Everyone’s opinion is just as good as everyone else’s” and “There is no such thing as the truth.” His conclusion from their responses was clear: A belief in relative truth was a strong predictor of depression.

Arthur C. Brooks: Five teachings of the Dalai Lama I try to live by

To start today on a path toward enjoyment, satisfaction, and meaning, consider the possibility that you don’t need to learn anything new. Instead, you may want to *unlearn* some false lessons that have pervaded the culture over the past few years. The first untruth is that you must know your destination, the second is that a good life is one that minimizes suffering, and the third is that you must know and live your own truth. The Dominican sages and the modern scientists together show that these are all fake news and serious impediments to a happy life.

In their place, I suggest that you start your path of life by repeating each morning these three affirmations:

1. I do not know what this day will bring, but I will live it the best I can, with an attitude of love and generosity.
2. I am grateful for the good I experience today, but I do not fear the bad, which is part of being alive and an opportunity for learning and growth.
3. I do not possess the absolute truth, but today I will seek it with honesty, an open heart, and a spirit of adventure.

Even if you prefer not to adopt this practice, let me offer the one universal cheat code that can defeat almost all of the lies you will ever encounter. This is attributed to Saint Dominic himself, the founder of the Order. “Arm yourself with prayer rather than a sword,” he said, and “wear humility rather than fine clothes.”

You will notice that all of the modern untruths I’ve identified have one big thing in common: They say you should focus on *yourself*—your future, your career, your discomfort, your truth. All moral teaching aside, how boring is that? I can think of no better way to miss the awesome majesty of life than to focus egotistically on a psychodrama in which you are the star.

Happy people can zoom out to see and fully enjoy the world around them. But that means standing up to the lie that you are the center of things. That is the essence of humility and a great secret to happiness. We could add one more affirmation to complete the list above: *I will focus today on the miraculous world outside myself.*

*This column is adapted from the commencement speech delivered on May 19, 2024, at Providence College, a Catholic institution founded by Dominican friars.*

*Arthur Brooks is a contributing writer at The Atlantic and the host of the How to Build a Happy Life podcast.*

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/05/some-dominican-wisdom-we-can-all-use/678439/>

I guess Arthur can square this with “Teaching the Science of Happiness.” St. Thomas Aquinas, the most-eloquent and logical Aristotelian, after all his theorizing and system-argument-building, had an overwhelming arational experience that silenced him for the rest of his days.

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