



a journal of positive futures

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YES! #30, summer 2004 **What is the good life?**

YES! Discussion Guides are designed to help you explore your own experiences, opinions, and commitments as they relate to material found in YES! magazine. Use them in group discussions, classrooms, or study circles. We believe that when people discuss with mutual respect and caring the critical issues of our time, they create a powerful avenue for constructive social change.

You can find the articles mentioned below on our website at www.yesmagazine.org. You are welcome to download and photocopy them free of charge. If you'd like to purchase multiple copies of YES! or subscriptions for your class or group, please phone 800/937-4451 and ask for the Discussion Group Discount.

Movies that end with the heroes reclining on white sands, sipping drinks topped with little umbrellas, suggest that the good life is doing nothing. Advertisers tell us that the good life is a new car, a cold beer, or a big house. But what really makes for a satisfying life? When you look at your own life, what has brought you genuine joy? What has brought you deep and lasting contentment? In this issue, we explore the question philosophers have wrestled with at least since Socrates asked, "How should one live?"

This discussion guide centers on the following articles. You might want to discuss a different one at each session.

- David Myers, "The Secret to Happiness"
- The Cheese Board Collective, "Cheese, Bread, and Thou"
- Frances Moore Lappé interviewed by Sarah van Gelder, "Walking Through Fear"
- Jonathan Rowe, "The Demand for the Common Good"
- Pramila Jayapal, "Mother of Exiles"

The secret to happiness

You're not alone if you wish that you had more money and think you would be happier if you won the lottery. Surveys find that most people wish they were richer. Materialism surged through the end of the 20th century. But the odd thing is that those who make more than \$75,000 a year are the most likely to say they wish they were richer, suggesting that this source of the good life may recede before you as you pursue it. And while Americans were getting richer from the middle of the 20th century to the end, social psychologist David Myers found that the percent who were "very happy" went steadily down.

- Think about the happiest periods of your life. What made them happy? Discuss specific moments or images from your own life that you associate with being happy. What made them a source of happiness?
- What aspects of your life have given you lasting satisfaction?
- "Buyers remorse" is a term some use to describe the let-down that occurs after purchasing something that didn't provide the satisfaction hoped for. When have you felt remorse, either associated with a purchase or something else that was supposed to contribute to a good life but didn't?



- What experiences have you had of the good life? Have you had experiences that changed your idea of what the good life is?

Cheese, bread, and thou

Unlike most workplaces, the Cheese Board is owned by its employees and everyone is paid the same hourly wage. Employees say this sense of ownership and equality, along with the vibrant community atmosphere of the store, make working here especially meaningful and satisfying.

- Compare the experiences of Cheese Board worker/owners to your own experience of work.
- Do you find your work satisfying? What is most satisfying about it? What do you find most frustrating or least satisfying about it?
- Where does the power lie in your workplace? Is power distributed or concentrated? What type of power is formal (part of the explicit structure) and what part of it is informal? Do you feel that you have a say over decisions? Are you satisfied with how much say you have? What is the spread between the pay of the highest and lowest paid employee? Does that spread seem fair?
- What structural changes could be made to your workplace that would make your worklife more satisfying?
- What role does your workplace have within a larger community? Do you consider your workplace itself a community in which you participate?

Walking through fear

Frances Moore Lappé is a successful author and activist who has inspired many. Yet she describes in her interview with Sarah van Gelder a time when “fear seemed to grab me by the throat,” and her world collapsed.

- Have you gone through hard times like this, when you were terrified or the foundation of your life seemed to crumble? How did you make it through? What resources were most helpful to you?
- Lappé says that fear of embarrassment is one of the strongest fears. Have you ever been held back by fear of embarrassment? Lappé says that fear isn’t always a sign to stop, but rather a sign that one should push forward. What experiences have you had of overcoming fear and acting despite the fear? What gave you courage to do this? What was the result?

The demand for the common good

In a famous essay called “The Tragedy of the Commons,” Garrett Hardin argued that things used in common are inevitably prone to overuse, abuse, and destruction, and that the solution is expansion of the sphere of private ownership. Jonathan Rowe suggests that the opposite is true—that the market tends to degrade the commons and that those things we hold in common are fundamental sources of the good life. We need now to foster and protect the commons, he argues.

- What commons do you depend on in everyday life? (Such as: clean air and water, public spaces, accessible natural spaces, the air waves, active local politics, commercial-free children’s spaces, etc.) Which commons are most important to your quality of life?
- Have you lived in situations with more or less vibrant commons? How did that affect the quality of your life? Have you seen a commons in your community flourish or degrade? What caused that?
- Have you ever participated in helping revive or protect a commons? How might you foster some commons where you live?

Mother of exiles

In the United States, all of us, except for Native Americans, are immigrants or the descendents of immigrants, some willing, some not. Yet throughout U.S. history, immigration has been controversial. That controversy has again heated



up since September 11, and there was recently a struggle within the Sierra Club over immigration policy.

• Where did your ancestors come from? What brought them to the U.S.? How were they treated when they got here? Was it difficult or easy to assimilate? Did they want to assimilate?

• Does your community have a sizable recent immigrant population? How are immigrants treated? What stresses has immigration or the response to it created in your community? How has the treatment of immigrants changed since September 11?

• Do you think the rights and protections of noncitizens should differ from those of citizens?

• In the quest for security, what compromises with freedom seem reasonable to you? Who should bear the costs of these compromises? In what circumstances is it acceptable to sacrifice liberties?

• Pramila Jayapal says that environmental and social justice groups are often very divided from each other. Are you active in any environmental, civil rights, or justice groups? How might you get involved in pulling these groups closer to each other?

• Have you ever personally challenged bigotry, as Jayapal's airplane companion did? What techniques did you use? What were the results?

What are you doing?

Send us stories of what you're doing to change the world for the better. We'll publish selected stories in our Readers Take Action column. E-mail stories of up to 500 words to: Editors@yesmagazine.org

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