



CHOOSING A  
good life

*Lessons from People Who Have  
Found Their Place in the World*

ALI BERMAN



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Who Have Found  
Their Place in the World*

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This publication is not intended as a substitute for the advice of health care professionals.

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*For Gary Ploski, Magneto, and Cthulhu*

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# introduction

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THREE YEARS AGO I'm sure an outside observer would have said that I was living a pretty great life. I had a healthy marriage, I loved my job, and my husband, Gary, and I had just purchased our very first house. A relationship, employment, and home ownership—all considered the modern-day building blocks of the American dream. And yet, we weren't happy. It was just the opposite; we were downright miserable.

We were exhausted by our jobs and financially crippled by a house that seemed to require a never-ending supply of money. After finding out that our newly purchased home needed a new roof, I took on a third job tutoring at night. I would wake up at 6:00 a.m., pump out an article or two as a freelance writer for job number one, go to job number two at 8:30 a.m. and finish up at 5:00 p.m., and then head to job number three. When I eventually arrived home after a very long day, all I wanted to do was put on my pajamas, curl up with Gary (who was equally tired), and watch something on television. I wasn't working on my own writing. I wasn't reading. My friends never saw me. I barely exercised and I ate whatever happened to be stuffed in the back of the fridge. The part of my day I looked forward to most was bedtime. We were working as hard as we possibly could to bankroll a life that gave us little satisfaction. I wasn't living the life I wanted to, and I certainly wasn't balanced. I was just getting by, and just barely.

Gary and I had dreamed of owning our own home for years, and here we were with an acre of land and 2,100 square feet beneath us. Then we learned how much it cost to heat a house during a New York winter, and we got sticker shock when we saw the price tag for a new roof. If that weren't enough, Hurricane Irene dropped four feet of water in our basement, which caused mold. Plus, having bought a house in one of the only areas we could afford, we were almost an hour away from all of our friends. That yard, the garden, and those 2,100 square feet no longer seemed like a luxury; they felt like a prison that we had to pay for. And worse yet, it was a prison of our own making.

Just a few years prior we had been the kind of people who played catch in the park, went to the midnight movie on a Thursday night, saw plays, spent time with friends, traveled, and volunteered. I loved my jobs, all three of them, but working became my entire life. Very quickly, I changed into a person who not even I wanted to be around, and Gary, who had also taken on additional work, had gone from being a jovial up-for-anything kind of guy to a more practical and sullen person. We wondered: *Where were those former versions of ourselves? What happened to them and how could we get them back?*

The daily dread I felt as I turned off the alarm and sleepwalked through the day went on for a year and a half. And then on Gary's thirty-seventh birthday, we finally reached our breaking point. Thinking back on all the financial stress, regret, and isolation we had subjected ourselves to, we turned to each other and said, nearly in unison, "We have to sell the house." That decision, to unload the split-level in Yorktown Heights, New York, and take back our lives, opened us up to new possibilities and prompted us to rethink everything. We realized that rather than spending our time and money on the things we cared about, we were spending it all on things that didn't matter to us.

Working for 90 percent of our waking hours bought us a car, furniture, and a home just outside one of the most expensive cities in the United States. But we wanted to see rain forests and mountains, make films, write books, and see plays. Wouldn't those choices bring us more joy and balance than the choices we had been making?

We were paying more than three grand a month for a house we no longer wanted and were barely

using 50 percent of the space. It was time to jump ship, to stop looking for money to pay for things like water filters, a roof, and an automatic garage door opener, but never finding the funds to take the vacation or enjoy a night out at our favorite restaurant. We were living to take care of our things rather than taking care of ourselves. It was time to purge.

SIX MONTHS AFTER THIS REALIZATION, we put our house on the market, drove carloads of our stuff to the New Rochelle Humane Society Thrift Shop, and donated more than 600 books to the local library. We sold furniture, gave things away on [Freecycle.org](https://www.freecycle.org) (an international recycling network), and wondered how much space we actually needed to live.

We kept our art, a few pieces of furniture, antiques that had been passed down from our grandmothers, and the absolute minimum number of practical necessities like dishes, cookware, and scratching posts (a must for any family with cats). I recycled my old yearbooks, parted with ticket stubs, and threw out my senior prom corsage. We didn't just go through our possessions once. We went through a series of purges. I became more brutal with each. I had thoughts like, *Yes, I love Cormac McCarthy, but maybe I'll just keep Outer Dark instead of half of his body of work.* Clothes? I was still holding on to things I wore in high school. Donate. That became our motto. If we weren't using it, we decided to pass it on to people who could.

By moving day we had unloaded more than half of our worldly possessions. Every box that left the house before then was another box of stuff we didn't have to move, unpack, or take care of. We could stop worrying about the next big thing in the house breaking down and costing us our entire savings. Gary was able to quit the job he had been at for eleven years and pursue his passion for film. I stopped tutoring and cut down my other hours to focus on writing again. Downsizing (the opposite of what the American dream tells us we should do) gave us options we never had before. Without all the financial obligations and with much less stuff, we finally did what we had talked about for years.

We not only left our home, we left our state. Gary and I ditched New York and headed out west to Portland, Oregon, where the cost of living was lower and the cultural values were more in line with the people we wanted to be. We traded in that 2,100-square-foot three-bedroom house and car in the suburbs for a 698-square-foot studio apartment and public transportation in the heart of the city. Rather than sitting on the couch every night, sucked into the television vortex, I read and wrote. Together, Gary and I visited mountains and waterfalls, made new friends, went to readings, spent afternoons in the park, traveled, laughed, and created memories together. I even saw my friends in New York more often, video chatting with them on a weekly basis. After years of feeling trapped, we began *doing* rather than wishing.

I had been through some rough patches before: cancer in my early twenties and a disability in my late twenties, all out of my control. My more recent struggles with the house, with working too much, and with my negative attitude—those were in my control. Gary and I had made a series of choices that had gotten us into that mess. Although it would take some work and we'd lose some money, we realized we could make different choices for our future. We could reevaluate our entire lives, ask ourselves what we really wanted, and ditch the old life that we had come to hate. We loved each other, we cared about the world, and we had passion for our work. Weren't those the true building blocks (at least for us) of a meaningful life?

It was during that time of deconstructing my life and doing my best to put it back together in a new form that I started this book. I was open. I looked with fresh eyes at my struggles and flaws: my anxiety that caused sleeplessness, my rigid nature, and my tendency to escape sometimes difficult realities by watching television (to name a few). The pieces of my life were scattered everywhere and

ready to be rearranged. I was eager to learn new skills and techniques to change so many of my negative patterns.

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What better way to learn how to reconstruct my life than to talk to people who had achieved what I was looking for? I knew they were out there. I just had to find them. I asked friends and acquaintances, looked through articles, and even searched on Reddit (a social networking site). I was searching for people who were flexible, who enjoyed their work, who valued their relationships with others, who prioritized having fun. I wanted to find people who had purpose, who were grateful, and who handled conflict rationally and with kindness. People who had integrity and a desire to leave the world and a better life to its inhabitants better than they had found it. I wanted to interview those who felt good about their lives, not because they hadn't suffered (we all suffer), but because they had made adjustments that enabled them to live a balanced life in spite of that suffering.

And find those people I did. Five men and five women who ranged in age from thirty to ninety years old, born on three continents, all of whom exemplified the kind of existence I was searching for. I met with them and asked them about their lives, their choices, what drove them, and what they had learned. Each of them proved to be magnificent, telling me their life stories and how they came to be the kind of balanced individuals I think many of us are striving to become. What was even more spectacular was how much all of them had in common. How they resolve conflict, handle stress, keep their relationships strong, stay true to their personal ethics, and so much more. As I explored those commonalities I knew I had found the heart of this book and the methods I was going to implement in my own life. I felt as if I were being handed the keys to a much calmer and happier me.

The people I found hadn't lived charmed lives. They faced more difficult obstacles than I could even fathom—and I like to think of myself as a girl who has faced her fair share of demons. You name it, and someone in this book has likely experienced it. Divorce, war, illness, loss, poverty, bigotry—those are just some of the challenges they've dealt with. And yet, here they are, models of mental health, people who are excited about the world and its infinite possibilities. The rare subset of humanity that finds joy each and every day, no matter what life hurls at them. I asked questions to find out how they accomplished something so rare, the ability to stay balanced in a world that constantly throws us off center.

I learned many things about finding and maintaining balance through those conversations, perhaps the most important, that balance is a moving target. Our lives change so rapidly that no one recipe works for us at every stage. What I needed at twenty-two years old was different from what I needed at thirty-two. And I'm sure that who I will be at forty-two will require me to make further adaptations. However, there are tools that work under any circumstance. Patience, kindness, gratitude, purpose, healthy living, and generosity, to name a few. Those virtues can get us through even the most tragic of times and can amplify the good in our lives. Best of all, they can help us stay balanced even when the bad overwhelms the good.

As Gary and I were going through this major change in our lives, he accompanied me on almost all of the interviews to help record them. On the way home from each, we'd reflect on what we had learned. We both felt totally inspired by the superb specimens of humanity we encountered. And on each ride home, I felt better equipped to make those important changes that would lead to a happier present and future. Gary felt the same, and together, we began to transform, to become more centered, more at peace, and more courageous; better able to pursue the things that mattered to us and more able to leave behind the things that only brought us heartache.

I believe that Sungrai, Cathy, Emery, Zoe, Eric, Leanne, Michal, Daphne, Alex, and Lisa will inspire you too. Their wisdom and their life choices encompass some of the greatest lessons humanity

holds. These individuals weren't born with all the tools they have now. They acquired them over time, proving that we can all choose the kind of person we want to be.

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Like the remarkable people profiled in this book, we can all take steps to make the life we envision a reality. And, fellow travelers, I hope the life lessons and tools gathered in this book help you on your own journey, just as they have helped me on mine.

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## EMBRACING LIFE IN THE MIDST OF ILLNESS



*How does someone dealing with constant pain and the myriad of issues surrounding illness achieve contentment?*

“Once at Mount Sinai it was extremely painful. I couldn’t think. I had many helpers at Mount Sinai and especially one person—we were very close. She would always check on me when I was there. So I asked her to sing anything and that just eased my pain. And she was just singing through the night, you know, any time she would come back and that just really helped me.”

— *Sungrai Sohn*

# Sungrai, *a Master of the Violin and the “State of Flow”*

THE GROUNDS WERE THE FIRST THING I noticed when I arrived at sixty-two-year-old Sungrai Sohn's home in Suffern, New York. It was late July 2013, and although the previous week was dry from a record-breaking heat wave, Sungrai's property was lush, with meticulously groomed gardens in every direction I looked. The gardener in me was instantly in awe, not just because of their masterful design but because his entire property, with its huge ponds, mature willow trees, and forest, was a sight to behold. A deer peered out at us from behind the pond, and large koi swam beneath the surface. Later, Sungrai informed me that the animals are all so used to his presence that they look at him with idle interest rather than fleeing, running, or paddling away. His home is a sanctuary for all beings.

Sungrai had been outside all day weeding. The kale and rainbow chard were in perfect rows. If you looked at his tomato plants, you wouldn't find a single yellow leaf. Their absence can be attributed to his unwavering attention—he plucks any and all imperfections as they happen. If it's hot, he's outside at 7:00 a.m. If it's cooler, he could be out there all day. However, it's not his need for orderly kale that makes him work so hard. It's because at any moment his phone might ring and he'll have to leave his home and his garden for an unknown period of time. Maybe forever. Sungrai Sohn is waiting for a liver transplant. His second. And this time they aren't sure if he'll make it, and if he does, how long the painful recovery process will take.

He and his wife, Patricia, had invited my husband, Gary, and me for dinner before the interview, and when we entered their home, I was taken aback by one simple action. Sungrai hugged me. Knowing that he's susceptible to getting sick due to his weakened immune system, I was prepared to keep a bit of a distance. I didn't expect a handshake and certainly no hug. I was so surprised when he reached out with both arms that it must have shown on my face, and the somewhat awkward embrace that followed was due to my being un-prepared and scared that I might breathe on him. I didn't fear getting sick, but what if I were incubating something? That was *my* concern, not his. Sungrai takes necessary precautions to keep healthy, but he doesn't lock himself in a bubble or worry about getting sick. He lives his life fully, enjoying what was then about ten years of extra time.

He told me that when it comes to his health, “No, I don't worry. I didn't worry even the second time [I was hospitalized] after I thought I wasn't going to make it.” He explained, “I was at peace because I did everything I wanted to do and more. I did all the things as best as I could.”

That's why his garden is always in order. If everything is taken care of to the best of his ability, he doesn't have to worry about it. No use thinking when one could be *doing*. And Sungrai is a doer—someone who takes action—he has that in common with everyone I interviewed for this book.

After dinner, Sungrai and I went into his soundproofed music room that contains a variety of exquisite violins, a piano, and beautiful antiques. I asked him, a little shyly, if after the interview I

would mind playing a short piece for me. This is a request he gets a lot, but he humored me and said yes. Sungrai says yes to as many invitations as he can, but playing the violin—an art form he has spent his life perfecting—is something he doesn't do as if it's just some party trick. He usually reserves it for practicing or playing for crowds rather than for individuals. It's both his passion and his tool for earning his living, so he is protective of this part of his life. I settled into the interview knowing that afterward I would be in for a rare treat.

As we both set ourselves up on the couch and chair in front of the piano, I started our interview with what I considered to be the very beginning of the story: the day Sungrai discovered the violin.

When the now master was a mere four years old in his native country of Korea, Sungrai's father, an importer/exporter, brought home a movie poster that would steer the direction of Sungrai's life. "The poster—we had posters everywhere at home—had Gary Cooper playing a violin and poking somebody's eye," he told me. "So I thought, wow, that is cool. I'm going to do that. And as soon as they heard that I wanted to play violin, my father went to Japan and bought a trunk full of music and a violin. And my mother was a concert pianist. She found the best teacher, and there I was playing at four years old."

By the time he was six, Sungrai was playing on Korean television. The doctors believe he contracted hepatitis B during childhood—maybe from the wet nurse his father enlisted when they ran out of milk on the train from Seoul to Pusan at the start of the Korean war, maybe from the communal eating style common at many dinner tables at the time. They just aren't sure. They do know that hepatitis B has given him lifelong and life-threatening health problems.

In 2001, Sungrai's health was deteriorating fast. He was cold all the time, even when deep under heavy blankets and sweaters. His memory was fading, and he was unable to sleep. He was on the list to receive a liver transplant, but although he was very ill, he was not on the top of the list—there were people ahead of him who were doing even worse. Sungrai had to wait and hope that his turn would come and that when it finally arrived, he'd be strong enough to make it through the surgery. It was around that time that Patricia's brother David and his wife read an article in the *New York Times* about living donors. As soon as David read the article, he knew he wanted to donate a lobe of his liver to his brother-in-law to save his life.

At first, Sungrai and Patricia were hesitant. They hadn't even been told that getting a donation from a friend or relative was possible. And, as with any surgery, there were risks to the donor. But David and his wife were adamant. David went through the tests, both psychological and physical, and he passed with flying colors. When the social worker asked him in a variety of ways if he was being coerced or pressured into donating, he said, "Just the opposite. I was pressuring to become a living donor."

The surgery was scheduled soon after David was cleared. To the relief of everyone, it was a great success. For the first time in years Sungrai woke up feeling warm. His head was clear and he finally had a working liver again. Without that donation, Sungrai's doctor told him that he would have only lived for another month. At the time of our interview, David's gift had already added ten plus years to Sungrai's life and serves as a constant reminder that selflessness and love can indeed save lives.

For years Sungrai lived his life feeling renewed. He still suffered from hepatitis B, but the working liver allowed him to live a relatively normal existence. Unfortunately, the bile ducts within the donated liver were problematic, causing chronic cholangitis (a bacterial infection of the bile duct). They tried to fix the issue with a second surgery, but without success. Now, Sungrai needs another liver. This time a living donor won't do. He needs the full organ instead of a single lobe. Once again, he is near the top of the UNOS (United Network for Organ Sharing) list.

ONE MIGHT ASSUME THAT SUNGRAI would be devastated that he has to go through all of this again. It's just the opposite. As he explained it, all of the time he has had since his first transplant has been a gift. And he's made sure every moment has been utilized. It might sound cliché, but Sungrai has truly mastered the ability to live in the moment, giving 100 percent to everything he does. Sungrai has kept busy immersing himself in the things he loves, whether it's teaching at Sarah Lawrence College, gardening, spending time with his wife and family, playing concerts around the world, or learning something new each year, like wind surfing, flying an airplane, or riding a motorcycle, just to name a few of his hobbies.

It was a pleasure to sit down and speak with the soft-spoken man. He was spending his summer at home since he always had to be, at a moment's notice, within a four-hour drive from Mount Sinai Hospital in case a liver became available. He's quick to smile and laugh, even when talking about his illness.

SUNGRAI WAS MY FIRST INTERVIEW for this book, and exactly the kind of person I was looking for. When I initially learned about Sungrai, it wasn't his illness that made me reach out to him. Many of his personality traits drew me to him, but one in particular made me desperately want to meet him. Even though I'm not sure he had ever heard the term, Sungrai's dedication to the violin, his hobbies, and his acute interest in so many other things had made him an expert in something known in the positive psychology field as "flow," the exhilarating feeling of being so absorbed in something that the rest of the world seems to disappear. You've probably experienced this state quite often yourself but never knew it had a name. "Flow," a term coined by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, has been defined as "the creative moment when a person is completely involved in an activity for its own sake."

Shortly before his first transplant, Sungrai had a trip planned to perform in Korea, something he had done with his quartet mates for years. It took an incredible amount of planning and coordination to schedule the annual tour. Sungrai didn't want to disappoint his colleagues so he kept his commitment, even though he had nowhere near his full strength. One might think that because of his weakened state, his performance wouldn't be up to its normal standards. Despite being in pain, when he got on stage to play, nothing else mattered but the music. When he was "in flow," he wasn't sick. He wasn't suffering. He existed in a small pocket of time where nothing else mattered but the music. He told me, "When you're on the stage, you forget things and adrenaline is running. You forget— which is a good thing."

Whatever Sungrai does, whether it's gardening, playing a concert, fixing up his vintage Austin Healey convertible, or even teaching, he does it with his full attention on the task at hand. He describes his relationship with flow when he's playing the violin by saying, "I don't think about anything else, just the music."

Perhaps you participated in sports in school and remember the feeling of playing so hard that you could no longer hear the crowd. Maybe you executed a difficult maneuver and you don't even recall making any decisions. Your body and mind reacted in unison to give you the ability to make something happen—something that you might not have been able to achieve had you not been enjoying that beautiful state of flow. A pastry chef might feel the same thing while decorating a cake or a comedian as she does stand-up on stage, or a dancer in the ballet.

Sungrai's days are filled with activities he loves. He plays his violin, teaches students, and commits to learning new things all the time so he can be challenged to explore the world with his own hands, his own heart, his own mind. Time moves differently in flow state. On the days that he spends hours upon hours in his garden tending to the plants he loves, he says he barely notices that time



moving. He doesn't depend on outside stimuli to bring him joy. He finds it himself by doing. Sungrai's life is a verb. He is always active.

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Csikszentmihalyi writes, "We can be happy experiencing the passive pleasure of a rested body, warm sunshine, or the contentment of a serene relationship, but this kind of happiness is very vulnerable and dependent on favorable external circumstances. The happiness that follows flow is of our own making, and it leads to increasing complexity and growth in consciousness."<sup>1</sup>

Think about how many minutes per day you spend in a flow state. When you get home from work, are you doing something? Cooking, woodworking, sewing, fixing a car, writing? Or is it a Bravo reality television marathon? (No judgment. Okay, a little judgment.) If it's the latter, you might want to consider challenging your body and mind more regularly. Turn off the television and turn to your favorite hobby.

This ability to constantly learn new skills and take part in the activities he loves has not just brought Sungrai joy; it has also helped him cope with the excruciating pain he has had to endure during his life. In the scientific community, the act of focusing on something calming and comforting in an effort to relieve some of the stress of chronic illness is called *distraction*. Sungrai can't wind down when he's ill. He can use his mental focus to visualize a safe and pleasant experience from childhood—a tactic he utilized when the pain was so intense that he had trouble sleeping. The trick is to busy the mind—to distract oneself—with anything other than the seemingly never-ending feelings of discomfort. If the mind stays busy on something enjoyable, pain becomes easier to bear. Sungrai, for sure, has a busy mind.

Distraction, in the world of happiness research, has a lot in common with flow. I would argue that Sungrai's mastering of flow has helped him handle the cycles of pain he's endured for decades. Whether it was during the time when he was perpetually cold, or when he was recovering from his liver surgeries, or during his more recent battles with illness, Sungrai has always had music and sound as a sanctuary to retreat to when not even medicine could dull the pain.

His interest in sound began as a young boy. His mother told him he had been a quiet child. Perhaps this was because Sungrai was always listening. It's not just the violin that comforts him. It could be the insects and birds out in his garden, or a voice singing. Sungrai recalled, "Once at Mount Sinai I was extremely painful. I couldn't think. I had many helpers at Mount Sinai and especially one person—we were very close. She would always check on me when I was there. So I asked her to sing anything and that just eased my pain. And she was just singing through the night, you know, any time she would come back and that just really helped me. So it's not just violin. You can take so many pills and sometimes they don't even work because you passed that point. And so somebody like that just eased my pain."

Sungrai described teaching as another wonderful and productive method of distracting himself. He told me, "You know, you forget you are sick when you are teaching. And that really saved me through all the illness and all the pain."

The master violinist has been teaching at Sarah Lawrence College for thirty years. He recently taught violin and viola, chamber music, string orchestra, sight reading for instrumentalists, and master classes. All of that with a compromised liver. He said the pleasure comes from watching a student who has been struggling finally figure something out: "When they understand what I'm trying to do and suddenly get it—the satisfaction of that is real joy."

In fact, when I asked him what brings him the most joy in his life, he told me that right now teaching is at the top of his list. When Sungrai is working with a student, he said his identity is that

a teacher, not of a sick man. He's responsible for the education of others, a duty he takes very seriously. When someone is sick and visiting doctor after doctor, it can be easy to let the normal world fall away and feel owned by his or her failing body. Sungrai has done absolutely the opposite. He has maintained his rich world in spite of his illness. The condition of his health is just one more facet of who he is. It's not the defining one.

Although I don't know what it's like to spend decades struggling with hepatitis B and a failing liver, I do have an intimate and complex history with pain. I spent most of my twenties dealing with thyroid cancer and disabling foot problems. After Sungrai described his tactics for getting through the worst moments, I remembered using many of them myself. When doctors first suspected I had thyroid cancer, they had to take a biopsy to be sure. I'm a team player so I employed my good old standby deep breathing techniques and forced jokes to keep calm while a very long needle was stuck into the center of my neck. Unfortunately, the nodule was too hard for the needle to grab a sufficient number of cells, so that first biopsy turned up nothing. They brought me back, had a pathologist on standby and did it again. Seventeen times. Seventeen needles going straight into my neck as I did everything in my power to distract myself from the ever-worsening pain. The first needle? Not so bad. Every needle after that was more painful than the one before. And even worse than the biopsy needle was the burning anesthetic that they kept pumping into the area. In those moments and the many that followed before and after surgery, had I not been able to take control of my mind and focus on my body, on my breathing, I would have been running out the door.

As Sungrai discovered, being ill is often a full-time job. It's not just the pain that he got so good at dealing with; he also had to manage the never-ending doctor appointments, the procedures, the insurance problems, and the scheduling. With the help of his wife and family, Sungrai has mastered living with a chronic condition.

So how does someone dealing with constant pain and the myriad of issues surrounding illness achieve contentment? For the able-bodied person whose worst experience with physical suffering is the annual February sniffles or a badly stubbed toe, the ideas of living in pain and being at peace probably seem contrary. If pain is always present, how does the mind make room for joy? Sungrai has done this by learning how to manage his pain through distraction, engaging his flow state, spending time with friends and family, and accepting his condition. Acceptance doesn't mean he has stopped fighting. Sungrai makes it clear that he wants to live. He wants his phone to ring with the news of a donor so that he might be given the chance to watch his grandchildren grow up. But in spite of his deep desire to live, Sungrai fully enjoys his time in the present. When he's well, he fills his days with antiquing trips with his wife, time outside in nature, and, of course, playing the violin and arranging music. Pain is a part of his life, as is the threat of liver failure, but those two realities don't negate his other, even greater, reality. He enjoys his life and is thankful for what he has.

Part of what keeps him so engaged with the world is something he figured out early on—that being a lifelong learner benefits him in incalculable ways. The violin was his first love, both playing music and teaching it, but he also knew he wanted to branch out and look for interests totally outside of his professional life. He said, "When I was in my second year in college, I said I have to do something else. That's when I started searching to find what's really out there to learn. So I went to the airport, the local tiny little airport. I said, 'I want to fly. Anybody going up?' And one guy said, 'Yeah, I'm going up. Would you like to come?' So I did that for many times with that particular person. And then when I started touring, if I have time I just go to the local airport and I just fly with whoever is going up. So that is one way I started learning new things."

He continued, "People are so generous. When you ask them, they'll teach you how to do things

and that's how I thought maybe I should do this every year, learn something new." Sungrai hasn't stopped. And some of the things he has learned have become lifelong hobbies and interests.

ONE OF THE THINGS I FOUND most fascinating about Sungrai came out during a conversation we had about worrying. I'm talking about the kind of worry that keeps a person up at night, the kind that rules their thoughts and emotions and makes it impossible to focus on anything else—a sensation I'm fluent in. You'd think a man like Sungrai who is constantly waiting for the phone to ring, whose illness could take a serious nosedive any day, would always be on edge, overcome with anxiety. He's exactly the opposite. He sleeps soundly. He said his head hits the pillow and that's that until morning. He's able to accomplish this remarkable feat because this magical man doesn't feel worry the same way that I do. And his solution to the worry problem is also how he's been able to live with no regrets.

Sungrai said he received some of the best advice in his life when he was studying at Sarah Lawrence with his mentor Dorothy DeLay. "She said, 'A lot of people worry so much. Before the concert they worry. After the concert they worry.' And she said, 'But that didn't help anybody. Why worry? Instead of wasting time worrying, do something about it.' And I took that into my heart. So instead of worrying about it, I just go ahead and do things. If I have to learn something, I go ahead and learn it instead of worrying about it. So she really helped me in a professional way, and that really got me into a lot of other things, life in general."

Sungrai's advice is among the best I heard during the interviews I did for this book. If he thinks he may be able to effect change in a given situation, he works as hard as possible, giving it his all, to influence the outcome. At that point, even if he fails, he knows that he has done his best. He believes that if one always works as hard as they can, there is no room for regret in a life. I like to think of it this way: If I have a test coming up and study a moderate amount but know I could have worked harder, I might get a C, but I'd feel like I could have earned a higher grade. However, if I study for the test and fully dedicate myself to learning the material, giving it my very best effort, and still get the C, well, that's a different feeling. At that point, someone with Sungrai's outlook on life would probably shrug and say something to the effect of, "Well, I tried my best. No regrets. No worries." For a man like Sungrai, with chronic health problems, being able to set aside worries goes far beyond safeguarding his health.

Study after study has shown that people who are prone to worrying have higher and earlier mortality rates than those who have learned how to curb this behavior. Dan Mroczek, an associate professor of child development and family studies at Purdue University, concluded through his research that those he labeled as neurotic (meaning people who are prone to worrying; feeling excessive amounts of anxiety or depression) died sooner than their less stressed peers. Mroczek said about his research, "We found that neurotic men whose levels dropped over time had a better chance at living longer. They seemed to recover from any damage high levels of the trait may have caused. On the flip side, neurotic men whose neuroticism increased over time died much sooner than their peers."<sup>2</sup>

Ever since my interview with Sungrai, I think of him when I have problems and how he works as hard as he possibly can to come up with a solution, then acts on it. I try to emulate his behavior. When something needs to be addressed, I do it then and there instead of procrastinating. That way, it doesn't take up unnecessary space in my mind. As I said at the beginning of this story, no use stewing when one could be doing. Give it a try. Sungrai hit the jackpot with that realization, and over the past forty or so years, it appears to have served him exceptionally well. Little seems to bother him, not even

money problems.

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AS MANY OF US KNOW (often all too well), money troubles are one of the most stressful issues a person can face. Perhaps that's why many who have never had a lot of extra money (including me), dream of winning the lottery or inheriting a huge sum from some long-forgotten relative. Around many dinner tables one might hear, "If I were rich, I would . . ." Fill in the blank. Quit my job. Buy a big house. Go on a trip around the world. Some have the opposite experience. They start out with money, and then they lose it all. That's what happened to Sungrai's family.

Despite a tumultuous start during the Korean war, Sungrai grew up in a big house with servants and drivers. It didn't last. As he described it, "A lot of repressive political things happened, so my father ended up in jail and lost everything." Sungrai came to the United States on a scholarship and his family came too, all of them starting over in a new country. While in school, Sungrai struggled financially, sometimes even having trouble finding enough for food. He only had enough to pay for six months of dorm housing and then had to find a room to rent off campus. Those were difficult times for him. Less so for his father.

Sungrai explained, "For my father, he said, 'I'm free. I don't have to chase money anymore. I have enough money I can live on. I'm happy.'" His life in America, where he no longer had to maintain the lavish lifestyle the family had once enjoyed, ended up giving him a chance to relish life again. Sungrai continued, "My father was working probably 24/7. I never saw him in Korea. But when he came here, my mother and my father got so close. My mother said, 'It's like a second honeymoon now.'"

It took a bit longer for Sungrai to see the good in losing so much financial security. But he eventually learned that having to make a life for himself was more valuable than having the world handed to him. And knowing that he was able to make it even though he had no money, no comforts, was a badge he wears proudly. He told me, "If someone gave me a lot of money all the time, I don't think I'd be here. But because I did survive by myself, if somebody takes all this, I know I can survive again. For me it was a blessing in a way."

For those of us who have never experienced the pampering available to those with extreme wealth, the idea of financial freedom can be especially alluring. We might believe that more money means more happiness, because, of course, money buys things. Money means less stress and, we think, more fun. For Sungrai's father, however, working to make enough money for that luxurious lifestyle meant not spending time with his family. Losing it all gave him a freedom he hadn't known before.

During the time when Sungrai was broke, he knew of only one way to support himself—with his violin. Once he had made enough money to fulfill his most basic needs, he stopped equating art with money. He said, "That was just sheer making money, but I want to make music." A fine distinction.

How much money does a person actually need to be happy? Turns out, some researchers were able to put a number on it. In 2010, Daniel Kahneman and Angus Deaton released a study showing that once a person reached an earning level of about \$75,000, their happiness no longer increased with more money. Their life evaluation, meaning the way they reflect upon their life as a whole, may have improved upon earning more funds, but emotional well-being during day-to-day life? That hardly budged. Deaton and Kahneman write, "We conclude that lack of money brings both emotional misery and low life evaluation; similar results were found for anger. Beyond \$75,000 in the contemporary United States, however, higher income is neither the road to experienced happiness nor the road to the relief of unhappiness or stress, although higher income continues to improve individuals' life evaluations."<sup>3</sup>

I realize there is a vast difference in the levels of happiness between someone making \$4,000 a year and someone making \$40,000. When one is worrying about where their next meal will come from, happiness is hard to achieve. Sungrai faced that very problem while in college. After he was able to earn enough to fill his stomach and keep adequate shelter, he flourished without chasing higher income. As his father learned, money does not make a happy life. All the drivers, servants, and wealth he had attained in Korea became nothing more than a lifestyle he was forced to maintain by working long hours away from his family. A person creates a balanced life through their relationships, passions, and daily experiences. Money is necessary to take care of yourself and your family, but unnecessary riches? They won't make you closer to your friends or more connected with your children.

PEOPLE WHO LIVE A GOOD LIFE aren't immune to the normal ups and downs. They still feel the full spectrum of human emotions. Unlike me (and maybe you), they don't dwell in their negative emotions. If something bad happens, people like Sungrai are able to rebound faster than the typical person.

Most would say that Sungrai has the right to be sad, depressed, angry, or any combination thereof after spending so many years fighting for his life. He doesn't seem to be any of those things. When I asked him how he handled getting disappointing news, he told me, "I think I'm generally a happy person because I don't get depressed really. I thought I was depressed a few days ago, because why aren't they calling me for surgery? Time is up. Come on, let's do it. And then I thought, *Am I hoping someone will die?* And then I felt really bad. That took about five minutes of depression I guess and then I started getting busy again so I forgot everything."

What Sungrai is describing is something called the "Hedonic treadmill," the idea that good and bad life events might impact our emotional state for a period of time, but that we will always return to our baseline. Sungrai felt momentarily upset that his phone had not yet rung. Why wasn't it his turn? Hadn't he waited patiently long enough? He then realized that his desire for a new liver to save his life was directly linked to the death of another person. And this made him feel even worse. Not only had he not received a donated liver; he was, in some ways, hoping for another person to die so that he could live. That insight was enough to make him feel, as he said, "really bad." How long did it last? Five minutes. Then, Sungrai's negative emotions bounced back up to his normal level of happiness. As he said, he got "busy again." He didn't—and doesn't—dwell on what he can't control. No navel gazing. He's far too busy to sit wondering or worrying.

It's not as if someone dented his car or he stubbed his toe, small life events that would momentarily disrupt his emotional state. The man is waiting for a liver. His own liver is failing. His continued life is directly dependent on the death of another human being. If he stayed in bed for a week listening to sad music with a pint of ice cream in his hand, I don't think anyone would judge him. But that's simply not how his mind reacts to negative stimuli. Sungrai instinctively chooses to think of all the positives in his life rather than indulge in the difficulties. Focusing on the good things leaves him feeling exceptionally grateful, an emotion that helps him appreciate what he has rather than lamenting what he doesn't have.

At the dinner table before we started eating, Patricia asked if we were religious. Gary and I responded no, but said that we have no problem with a prayer. She thought about it and told us that she's not necessarily praying to God. It's more the act of saying out loud all the things that she is grateful for that she finds so important.

Sungrai was much the same. When we spoke, he kept talking about all the people in his life who

have helped get him to where he is today. His parents who he loved dearly. His wife who accompanied him to work each day just in case the phone happens to ring and they need to get to the hospital. The doctors and caregivers in his life who have helped him survive. His brother-in-law who donated a lobe of his liver. Sungrai is surrounded by goodness in the people he chooses to have in his life.

One of the hardest parts of practicing gratitude or getting up to do something new is that our negative emotions can at times feel like a cage with no exit. That can even be true when we know what tools would make us feel better. The important thing to remember is that getting up and forcing ourselves to do something, even when we'd rather stay in bed, is one of the best ways to help us regain our mental equilibrium. It takes discipline and practice. The more we do it, the more firsthand proof we will have that it works, and the next time, we'll be able to get up faster. For those of us who don't have Sungrai's natural abilities to rebound, we have to push ourselves a little bit harder.

AT THE END OF THE EVENING, as the interview was winding down, I got my wish. In addition to the natural high I was experiencing from learning so much and from being around such a positive person (it's proven that being around positive people makes you more positive!), Sungrai was going to play for me. He took out an exquisite looking violin, tucked the instrument under his chin, and created some of the most beautiful sounds I had ever heard. His eyes were closed as he played the Andante cantabile by Tchaikovsky. Gary and I sat listening, watching his fingers and the bow move perfectly in sync. What a treat. Not only was I listening to the music of a master, I was also witnessing Sungrai in flow state, the place that has brought him balance and peace since he was a child in Korea. Fifty-eight years later and it's still just as important.

While Sungrai played I thought about how I would go home and put into practice so many of the things he talked about. I felt better equipped to handle my anxiety and some of the sleep issues I had been having. I was going through a period of waking up for an hour or two every night between 3:00 and 4:00 a.m., which left me exhausted during the day. But now I had new tools to stop my brain from obsessing over the fifty things it was tossing about within its walls. And I knew that the lessons learned that night were only the beginning. I still had nine more people to talk to who would tell me about the keys that had helped them achieve balanced lives and provide clues on how the rest of us could accomplish the same remarkable feat.

ON FEBRUARY 28, 2014, the day before we moved to Portland, Oregon, I went to visit Sungrai in his office. It was seven months after our interview, and he was still waiting for his phone to ring. He looked wonderful when I saw him, but just two months earlier had spent weeks in the hospital, in pain and unsure of his fate. That's Sungrai's reality. He doesn't know what tomorrow will bring. He only knows that he has to value today, because it truly is precious.

During that lovely chat in his office, he told me something I didn't know, that his diagnosis was what prompted him to change the way he lived his life. His illness has caused him pain and years of struggle, but it's also given him an incredible gift. Sungrai has lived more fully than almost anyone I know since he learned he had hepatitis B. He doesn't put things off until tomorrow. Tomorrow he might be sick or get a call from Mount Sinai. Today matters because that's where he is right now. Planning for the future is important, but the present is the only place any of us can live our lives. It took a life-threatening chronic illness to help shape Sungrai's outlook on life. The truth is no one gets a guarantee that they will live to be 100, or that the life they lead now will be the same life they lead tomorrow. Adopting Sungrai's philosophy—to always do your best, not to worry, to make each day

matter, and to never procrastinate—is something I hope we all do. I know it’s already helped me in immeasurable ways.

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ON MAY 8, 2014, nine and a half months after our interview and more than a year and a half after he was put on the list, Sungrai received a call from the hospital. They had a liver for him. The very next day, Sungrai underwent a five-hour surgery. One of his doctors said once it was complete, “It wasn’t a good surgery, it was a perfect surgery.” On May 16, Sungrai returned home to his family.

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## NOURISHING OUR GIFTS



*How do childhood passions shape the lives we choose?*

“When I was a child, I can remember walking to school and talking with everybody, whether it was the most popular kid in school or whether it was the kid whom everybody picked on. I just talked to everybody because in my heart I just enjoyed doing that. And then I found people would talk to me about personal things that they didn’t talk to other people about. And that stroked my ego I’d say, but it also connected me. I felt helpful. They had an ear; they had someone to talk to, someone who could listen and not judge. I didn’t know that’s what it was called at the time, but I didn’t judge them. I would always imagine what it’s like to live in their situation. How would I feel? So that kind of was my life’s work laid out before me, but I didn’t know what to call it.”

— *Cathy McInerney*



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