

Dr. Daniel Cordaro (1985) is one of the top scientific researchers in the fields of emotion psychology and human wellbeing. He led some of the world's most extensive research into facial and vocal expressions of emotions while earning his Ph.D. at the University of California, Berkeley, and later he became a faculty member at Yale University. "One of the most important things that I've learned is that the pursuit of happiness is an illusion. More money, more power, more success, more recognition, only give us a temporary boost of happiness; it is short lived at best. True, indestructible wellbeing requires a radical shift in perspective," says Cordaro who, as founder and CEO of The Contentment Foundation, helps schools, families, companies, and entire nations cultivate sustainable wellbeing by using scientifically-evidenced practices.

Well-being as a benchmark for a human society

TEXT IVO VALKENBURG | EDITOR SUSAN GALVAN | LAYOUT PETER BEEMSTERBOER

Cordaro grew up in the small American town of Scranton, Pennsylvania, known for being the setting of the American version of the TV show, "The Office." In a large-scale study into the mental health of the population in all cities of America, Scranton scored the lowest. "When I was growing up, family and friends suffered from mental health problems, but nobody talked about it. Access to mental health resources and discussions around wellbeing were largely unheard of. I was like a fish swimming through water, not knowing what was

all around me. After my parents divorced when I was five, my mother began to play a critical role in my formative years. She always encouraged me to learn, and taught me that education was the key to success in life. Without being aware of it, I was regularly in the position of assisting friends in dealing with their psychological issues at a very young age. It was only a little later when I saw the research about the poor quality of wellbeing in my own hometown, that I realized why I was so subconsciously interested in psychology. I was struck by a great love and concern for humanity. I devoured every book I

could find on human emotions. I eventually met prominent psychologist Paul Ekman, who became my mentor."

Ekman (1934) was a pioneer in the field of research into emotions and facial expressions. He carefully conducted international studies that served as a model for other psychologists. He also collaborated with John Cleese in the BBC documentary, "The Human Face." Later, he advised Pixar in the hit animation film "Inside Out," and with the Dalai Lama developed *The Atlas of Emotions* (www.atlasofemotions.org), a tool to help people better understand what emotions are and how to deal with them.

"I worked intensively with Dr. Ekman for three years in the field of human emotions and deception. He became my first important mentor in psychology. I had the great fortune to stand on the shoulders of a giant to see what was possible in life."

THE SYSTEM CRISIS THAT THE WORLD IS EXPERIENCING IS ROOTED IN A SOCIETY THAT NO LONGER KNOWS WHAT IT IS LIKE TO EXPERIENCE WELLBEING WITHIN ITSELF



DANIEL CORDARO:

“EVERYTHING IS PERFECT
THE WAY IT IS.”

CONTENTMENT

“After my mentorship with Dr. Ekman, I was accepted into the psychology Ph.D. program at UC Berkeley and began working in the Berkeley Social Interaction Lab directed by Dr. Dacher Keltner. Dr. Keltner also founded the Greater Good Science Center that studies the psychology, sociology, and neuroscience of wellbeing and teaches skills that foster a thriving, resilient, and compassionate society.

In 2009, I became the director of the Universal Expression Project, where my team aimed to decode the nonverbal language of human emotion around the world. Due to the work of our team, this research grew into one of the largest cross-cultural emotion studies in history. We studied 22 emotions in 11 countries on 4 continents. We analyzed every muscle movement in 5,500 emotional expressions of people all over the world. We found over 30 nonverbal facial and vocal expressions that were recognized globally.”

“We made a few breakthrough discoveries in this study, but the most life-

changing for me was learning about the power of contentment, an emotion which had received little or no attention in the field of positive psychology. Even the word contentment is rooted in the original Latin meaning of ‘one who is whole or complete’. The ancients spoke of contentment as the highest state of being, which is consistent across all of the cultures that our team studied. It has been talked about for thousands of years across all major spiritual and philosophical traditions of humanity. It helps us to be in the world fully present to the experience of our humanity. Everyone can cultivate it; it is a skill that we can learn.”

“Contentment is a state in which you experience inner peace and completeness, regardless of the situation around you. On the other hand, the experience of happiness always requires something outside of yourself, you want to have something more, do something more or be something more. With contentment, you experience that the sunlight inside always shines, no matter what the weather is

outside. In the midst of chaos, pain, sadness or suffering, you can experience the true joy that is already within you at any given moment.”

PASSIVITY

Does *contentment* make you passive? “Not at all. In colloquial language, people often confuse contentment with passivity, complacency, or apathy. Contentment has nothing to do with these things. In fact, contentment is a very active state where we engage fully with life’s experiences, and meet life exactly as it is. Take leaders, for example. Leaders who haven’t cultivated contentment tend to be highly reactive and resistant to inevitable problems that arise. It’s hard to work with leaders like this. They get easily overwhelmed by their emotions, and often start complaining about and blaming the outside world. Remember that problems are guaranteed in life, and it’s how we relate to them that really matters. Leaders who have higher levels of contentment are calm, cool, and collected under pressure. They simply understand



Taktsang (Tigers Nest) is a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in the mountain state Bhutan and lies 3120 meters above sea level.

that a problem has come up, and they work to solve the problem. It really is that easy. They don't have to deal with their reactions to the problem; they just deal with the problem itself."

The serious challenges we face in our 21st century require a breakthrough leadership philosophy that can create businesses, schools, hospitals, or even entire countries inspired by a new wave of consciousness that is starting to transform the world. Cordaro strongly believes in a primary focus on children by teaching a path toward contentment.

"The next generation of children are going to have to solve enormous challenges that humanity has never faced before. This is going to require collaboration, trust, emotional intelligence, and the wisdom that we need

to first be the change that we want to see in the world. It is counterproductive to improve the world out of fear, anger, or trauma. We need to change the world from an inner place of inspiration, power, and determination in order to innovate solutions driven by love and compassion. Research shows that creativity flows from peaceful minds, and it also shows that anxiety and fear shut down creativity. Contentment is the root of collaboration and the foundation behind healthy relationships."

CHOK CHAY

Cordaro's love for his wife, Lisa Michiko Flynn, brought him to the Kingdom of Bhutan. "I was totally in love and wanted to impress this incredible woman that I met in 2013. Bhutan was

high on her travel wish list; and in my hubris, I promised to bring her there. She inspired our culminating study in the high Himalayas. What I never could have imagined was that Bhutan had a massive secret to share with me. In the remote mountains of Eastern Bhutan, our research team made first contact with a village that previously had no contact with the outside world. They had no newspapers, electricity, or telephones. They used the word *chok chay* as an expression of contentment – the literal translation means 'the knowledge of enough'. They described the meaning as 'right here, right now, everything is perfect as it is without needing to do anything more'. It was the start of an important inner journey for me, a journey that I'm still on to this day. It is such a joy and gift to work closely with so many people through The Contentment Foundation's global community. We're all on the same journey. We empower each other."

GROSS NATIONAL HAPPINESS

Bhutan is still very much alive in the heart of Cordaro. He was deeply touched by the beauty and wisdom of the Bhutanese people and society.

"Bhutan played an important role in the attempt to redefine what 'growth' means. According to the country, economic indicators such as GDP and people's productivity are inaccurate factors for measuring national wellbeing. The Asian kingdom has therefore been calculating its growth in gross national happiness instead of gross national product since 1970. No other country had looked at their economy in such a holistic way until that time. The emphasis is on sustainable wellbeing for people, nature and society. For example, economic activities must not affect the natural resources and quality of life. In March 2019, The Contentment Foundation was formally invited to the Kingdom of Bhutan to test whether the Four Pillars of Wellbeing curriculum could work in this country. The answer? In short – Yes!"

"Education is the basis for the transfer of knowledge in the field of human welfare."



ECONOMY OF WELLBEING

Bhutan doesn't stand alone in the holistic approach to economics any longer. The prime ministers of Scotland, Iceland and New Zealand, all women, have established a network to measure 'wellbeing' when it comes to the country's economic success. The Canadian Yannick Beaudoin, director of Ontario and Northern Canada at the David Suzuki Foundation, also recently outlined for the New Financial Magazine a worldwide movement of people, organizations and countries that are increasingly open to acting from a new paradigm: an economy of wellbeing and genuine happiness. For example, the Wellbeing Economy Alliance (www.wellbeingeconomy.org) was recently established, a worldwide platform of people, countries and organizations that are actively committed to integrating a wellbeing economy. In The Netherlands, The New Financial Forum, a nursery of renewal and vitality in the financial sector, actively supports the initiative of the Scale of Significance (www.scaleofsignificance.org), which develops a thermometer for the new economy and measures both the finan-

"IT IS MY GOAL TO SIGNIFICANTLY IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF LIFE OF ONE BILLION CHILDREN AND ONE BILLION ADULTS"

cial and social values of an organization. In 2010, the Common Good citizen movement was started in Austria as an initiative of Christian Felber. More than 2,000 companies and organizations now support the initiative, which has since spread to Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, Sweden, Chile and the UK. Over 500 companies publish a holistic annual report, a Common Good Balance Sheet. Daniel Cordaro and the Kingdom of Bhutan have not been alone for some time in their forward-thinking that economies should serve people and nature, rather than the other way around.

THE CONTENTMENT FOUNDATION

"Fortunately, many organizations are focused on alleviating external poverty, a lack of essential necessities such as food, water, shelter, education and security. We differ from these organizations in that the Contentment Foun-

dation focuses on alleviating internal poverty, the poverty of heart, mind and soul. We help children and adults to cultivate an indestructible power inwardly that is not influenced by anything in the outside world. We envision a world where people realize that they are complete and perfect as they are," according to Cordaro.

"We focus primarily on providing evidence-based, whole-school wellbeing transformations that support the entire educational ecosystem from the inside out," says an enthusiastic Cordaro. He sees childhood education, adult development, and scientific research as the basis for the transfer of knowledge in the field of human wellbeing.

"We have developed an extensive online library with the very latest and most advanced practical accessible scientific knowledge. The library is provided with a curriculum around 48 themes concerning the physical, men-

tal and emotional well-being of people. All aspects of wellbeing are discussed and a wide range of practical exercises in skills teaches how the knowledge can be integrated into the daily practice of life.”

“We also help schools, organizations and governments with measuring well-being. We work together with researchers from some of the best universities in the world to continuously study the impact of our work. In addition, we publish our own research and popular articles about the universal philosophies that unite all cultures.”

SYSTEM CRISIS

“The system crisis that the world is experiencing is rooted in a society that no longer knows what it is like to experience wellbeing within itself. When we rise from inner strength and completeness, we are able to perform what seem to be miracles. But it is nothing but a more complete manifestation of human potential. I see more and more people living a fuller potential worldwide. The greater self-awareness and inner wholeness, the more you can contribute to the well-being of all living beings on our planet earth.”

FAMILY PLATFORM

The education system hasn’t changed much in the last 200 years. Worldwide, Cordaro feels the slight beginning of a change in which education is much more focused to elevate the human condition, protect the planet and secure a beautiful future for all people and living beings. “We want to support the entire eco-system in education, including students, educators, staff and families. 50% of the learning happens at home. That’s why we developed a family platform teaching the family at home our social-emotional learning



Daniel Cordaro and his wife Lisa Michiko Flynn (Chief Culture Officer at The Contentment Foundation) in Bhutan.

program called the Four Pillars of Wellbeing. Supporting families is so important. Nowadays families are hungry to learn how to connect on a greater level with their children. Parents want to connect with their children on an emotional level, to talk about deeper level issues or problems that arise, and having meaningful conversations. Businesses and organizations also show a sincere interest in our work as a guide to how to support their employees toward greater wellbeing.”

FUTURE

After years of development, The Contentment Foundation came out of stealth mode only one year ago. 2019 has been beyond expectations. All English-speaking schools on planet earth can now have access to our platform. A core team of dedicated professionals is working hard to reduce suffering in the world by working with schools, organizations, and communities on cultivat-

ing sustainable, time-tested wellbeing philosophies. A Growth Advisory Board is installed to ensure that the organization will always have the resources, personnel, and intellectual horsepower required to bring indestructible wellbeing to one billion people within one generation.

An internal development team is the backbone of the organization, making sure that their day-to-day operations are running smoothly. Last but not least, The Contentment Foundation is intellectually, emotionally, and financially supported by some of the most incredible education advocates on the planet.

“A while ago I told one of the highest Rinpoches (spiritual leaders) in Bhutan about our work at The Contentment Foundation. He gave me a thumbs up and said, ‘really cool’. It gave me a big smile on my face. My personal goal is to significantly improve the quality of life of 1 billion children and 1 billion adults, 25% of world’s population. If we do not ensure that the future is full of truth, wisdom and indestructible wellbeing for the children of tomorrow ... who will?” ■

“IF WE DO NOT ENSURE THAT THE FUTURE IS SECURED FOR THE CHILDREN OF TOMORROW ... WHO WILL?”