Living Well Now: What Does It Take?

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Parenting, teaching and leading all require us to believe in the prospects for living well on this planet — and to have confidence in our capacity to equip others to live well without destroying those prospects for others.

These roles require us to both hold these beliefs *and* to be spokespersons for the world — ones who can make our belief in a future of opportunity credible to those we must raise, teach and lead.

Whatever forms these endeavors might take in the absence of such credible belief and confidence, they would not succeed in their proper ends. They would not enable the human beings we influence to live well together.

However, as a society we have barely begun to think about what is essential to preserving opportunity to live well.

Our policies have been dominated by the idea that a growing economy is what best enables everyone to find happiness in their own way, even as evidence has mounted that the damaging impact of human activities on planetary systems makes the explosive economic growth of recent decades unsustainable. The emergence of sustainability science, movement toward a post-carbon economy, and greater consideration of the environmental impacts of personal and institutional decisions are all signs that we are at least beginning to come to grips with the reality that we cannot persist in destabilizing the natural systems on which humanity relies without suffering severe and ultimately irreversible consequences.

The recognition that preserving opportunities to live well requires preserving the integrity of the natural systems on which we rely is a critical first step. Identifying the distinct forms of human impact and critical thresholds or *planetary boundaries*is an important further step that has been underway for some time. Nine such boundaries [have been identified](http://bit.ly/1TPeRce), including safe rates of biodiversity loss, nitrogen removal from the atmosphere, phosphorus flowing into the oceans, consumption of freshwater, and land cover converted to cropland. From a policy perspective, what will be required is to define and allocate budgets with respect to each of these boundaries through regional and global agreements analogous to the Paris climate accord.

Within the limits set by these boundaries and negotiated budgets, societies would then need to decide how best to preserve their members' opportunities to live well. A central argument of my book, [*Living Well*](https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/living-well-now-and-future)*,*is that things will go better if the science of human well-being is taken seriously — and if policies focus on reinventing institutions to make them more efficient in providing what people actually *need*in order to live well, while functioning in ways that do not encourage or compel unnecessary consumption.

A central feature of Americans' understanding and promotion of opportunity to live well has been a focused on fair terms of access to employment. Promoting fair competition for employment and equal access to the education and training needed to acquire job qualifications makes sense.

However, there is no reason to expect that the dynamics of labor markets will preserve equal opportunity over time in the face of educational and economic growth and innovation. The evolution of the kinds of occupations for which individuals compete will alter the structure of opportunityin such a way that it is not even possible to conceptualize equality of opportunity to live well over time in the way we understand equal opportunity employment. Comparing the opportunities of individuals of different generations, they do not compete for the same occupations and on the same terms on which their parents or grandparents did. Nor is there any guarantee that the institutional influences on the choices individuals and institutions make would be conducive to protecting the natural systems on which all human opportunity ultimately depends.

To make comparisons of opportunity across significant expanses of time, we must directly face the question of what is inherently involved in good work and living well. And we must use what we learn to shape the institutional settings in which people live and work and not simply rely on the market incentives entailed by workers' occupational mobility. Those incentives operate *synchronically*(in the present) and the problem of preserving opportunity over time is *diachronic*(stretching over time).

So what is inherently involved in living well?

In addressing this question, my geoscientist coauthor Ellen Metzger and I have had the benefit of collaborations with psychologist colleagues, Edward Deci and Richard Ryan. Their research in [self-determination theory](http://selfdeterminationtheory.org/), conducted over the course of four decades with a network of 500 collaborators in 39 countries, has found that the experience of happiness is regulated by the satisfaction of basic psychological needs to feel competent, self-determining, and positively related to other people in the activities of one's life. These are universal needs, observed across all stages of life and in every culture in which studies have been conducted, and they help explain the truth in the ancient ideal of *eudaimonia,*or human flourishing.

According to this ideal, living well involves fulfilling one's human potential in ways that are admirable, sustainable, and personally satisfying. My work with Ryan and Deci identifies three broad forms of potential — social, intellectual, and productive/creative — the fulfillment of which is enabled by admirable personal qualities and is psychologically linked to the satisfaction of human beings' universal basic needs for positive relatedness, self-determination, and competence. Fulfilling all three forms of potential is the key to happiness, and shaping our lives and institutions accordingly would be much more compatible with sustainability than pursuing wealth without limit.

A related finding, which is very important for the pursuit of sustainability, is that escape from poverty is important to happiness but the pursuit of wealth, status, and image as life goals is less conducive to happiness than the pursuit of life goals that directly fulfill our basic forms of potential and satisfy our related psychological needs. Societies that have promoted the accumulation of wealth without limit have not raised their general level of happiness by doing so. It should be evident to any observer of life in the U.S. that as wealth and inequality have grown, most Americans have become more painfully focused on occupational insecurity and on status competition that has simply become more expensive and less sustainable.

As counterintuitive as it may seem, we could be happier both now and in the future if we could overcome the blind faith in wealth accumulation that shaped the socially, politically and environmentally unstable world with which we must now contend.