

Brian Martin
“Introduction,” chapter 1 of
Doing Good Things Better
(Ed, Sweden: Irene Publishing, 2011)
available at <http://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/11gt/>

1 Introduction

Whenever I watch the news on television — which isn’t often — I come away with the impression that the world is a bad place. Or at least that lots of bad things are happening. Wars, murders, riots — as journalists say, “if it bleeds, it leads.” Then there are climate change disasters looming, corruption, child abuse ... the negative stories seem never to end. But then, for a change, there’s a light-hearted feel-good story — about a lost cat that travelled a thousand kilometres to return home. This sort of story usually means the news is nearly over.¹

Yet when I look around my own world, things don’t seem so catastrophic. People walking down the street seem happy enough. Some of them smile and say hello. The houses look much the same day after day. The sun is shining. So I think, there are some good things in the world too.

I work as a social scientist, studying aspects of society, and it’s obvious that social scientists give much more attention to exploitation than good feelings. There certainly are plenty of social problems to investigate: poverty, racism, inequality, war, torture, bullying, suicide, murder, arson and depression, to name a few. There’s a major sociology journal named *Social Problems* but no scholarly journal called *Good Things*.

If you study good aspects of life, others may think you must be a pupil of the fictional Dr Pangloss who taught that we live in

¹ I thank John Armstrong, Sharon Callaghan, Rae Campbell, Lyn Carson, Don Eldridge, Ian Miles, Kirsti Rawstron and Wendy Varney for valuable feedback on drafts of this chapter.

the best of all possible worlds. Suzanne Segerstrom researches optimism and encountered this sort of attitude.

... the study of “positive” topics, like optimism or happiness, attracts a lot of skepticism from people who study “negative” topics. The stereotype of people who study positive topics is that they are not serious scientists.²

This stereotype is silly. Let’s say you study depression. That means you’re concerned about people’s unhappiness and want to help understand it and make it better. But say you study elation or exuberance or getting high. Does that mean you don’t take unhappiness seriously enough?

There may be something instinctive about focusing on problems.³ Imagine a room full of children. One of them is crying loudly. Everyone’s attention turns to the crying child. The contented ones can be ignored. A suburb might be full of people who say hello on the street and are no danger to anyone, except for one fellow who scowls and mutters threats. He’s the one everyone will be talking about.

2 Suzanne C. Segerstrom, *Breaking Murphy’s Law: How Optimists Get What They Want from Life — and Pessimists Can Too* (New York: Guilford Press, 2006), 195–196.

3 Roy F. Baumeister, Ellen Bratslavsky, Catrin Finkenauer and Kathleen D. Vohs, “Bad is stronger than good,” *Review of General Psychology*, 5(4), 2001, 323–370; Paul Rozin and Edward B. Royzman, “Negativity bias, negativity dominance, and contagion,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 5(4), 2001, 296–320. On the other hand, Karen A. Cerulo, *Never Saw It Coming: Cultural Challenges to Envisioning the Worst* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), says there are perceptual and cultural reasons why people focus more on good than bad outcomes.

Being alert to problems was a survival mechanism for early humans. If a storm was brewing or a predator was nearby, it was vital to pay attention. But humans have changed their environment to eliminate many immediate dangers. Many people are physically safe much of the time, for example while sitting at home or talking to friends on the phone. Worrying about risks may not be the best approach to life.⁴

Good things

Most people can agree that some things, like murder, torture and genocide, are bad. In contrast, it’s not so easy to agree on good things.

Take friendship. Having a friend sounds worthwhile; having a good friend sounds even better. But what about criminals who are friends with each other? Friendship can be turned to evil purposes.

Developing expertise is another thing that sounds good — unless it’s expertise in developing weapons of mass destruction.

Part of the trouble here is linguistic. Take the word genocide, which refers to attempts to exterminate an ethnic group or some other category of people. Only extreme racists would think this is acceptable. However, the word genocide isn’t applied to beneficial exterminations. We don’t speak of the genocide of the smallpox virus.

There isn’t a word that restricts friendships to ones beneficial to the friends and to wider society. But that’s what I’m thinking of when I refer to good things: a combination of the

4 Gavin de Becker, *The Gift of Fear: Survival Signals that Protect Us from Violence* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), says people should rely on their instinctive responses to dangers rather than worrying about them.

thing itself, such as friendship or expertise, and service to or compatibility with wider benefits.

Methods

To obtain their objectives, militaries use tactics and so do businesses. What about tactics to protect and promote good things? This sounds a bit strange.

Tactics are methods or actions used as part of a plan for achieving a goal. Tactics are things people and groups do, as opposed to simply thinking or complaining about the ways things are.

Many good things are expected to just happen, usually when problems are fixed. When all the problems at work are fixed, then supposedly the organisation will operate at top efficiency. You imagine that when all your personal problems are resolved, you will be happy. Most attention is focused on problems, following the adage “the squeaky wheel gets the oil.” Few focus on oiling the other wheels, namely trying to improve things that are working well.

Edward de Bono, pioneer of creative thinking, says something can be excellent and yet still need improvement.⁵ That’s my view. The question then is how to improve.

I propose that five methods are important for protecting and promoting all sorts of good things.

Awareness People should be aware of the good thing.

Valuing People should appreciate it — they need to think it is a good thing.

Understanding People need to know why it is a good thing.

Endorsement Leaders, experts and other authorities should endorse the good thing.

Action People need to do the good thing.

In the appendix, I tell how I developed this framework.

There’s one complication. These five methods can apply at different levels, typically at the level of individuals, groups and societies. So think again of friendship. You can protect and enhance your own friendships by being aware of them, valuing them and so forth. At the group level — for example your neighbourhood or sporting club — attitudes and actions can support friendships at the individual level. Finally, a whole society, through policies and standard practices, can support friendships at the group and individual levels.

In the following chapters, I describe a variety of good things, from writing to chamber music. In each case, I start by describing features of the good thing and then look at the relevance of the five methods. I think the methods make most sense within case studies. In the final chapter, I pull together some themes from the case studies.

I’ve picked case studies I know something about personally or for which I could find good sources, or both. There are many other good things worthy of investigation and, more importantly, efforts to protect and promote them.

One message from this examination is the importance of paying attention to good things and putting effort into protecting and promoting them. Another key message is that efforts at the individual level have limits: for sustained improvement, changes are needed at the level of groups and societies.

⁵ Edward de Bono, *Think! Before It's Too Late* (London: Vermillion, 2009), 13.