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THOU SHALT NOT BE OVERCOME

MARTIN SELIGMAN ON ACADEMIA, LEADERSHIP, AND GOD, IN CONVERSATION WITH MICHAŁ ŁUCZEWSKI AND PIOTR CZEKIERDA*

Piotr Czekierda: A quarter of a century ago you founded the entirely new field of positive psychology (see Seligman 1999a, 1999b; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2000). Prof. Seligman, what is the state of positive psychology today?

Michał Łuczewski: After you became president of the American Psychological Association, CNN once gave you a three-word limit to describe the state of psychology in general (see Pawelski 2022), but here at *State of Affairs* we have no such limits.

Martin Seligman: Now virtually every major American university teaches positive psychology, whereas 25 years ago, no one did. In 2003 the Master of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) programme at the University of Pennsylvania was established under my leadership. When it comes to interest from the general public, we have a website called authentichappiness.org and about 4,000 unique users a day visit it and take the tests. Young positive psychologists seem to get jobs at a higher rate than other psychologists. In terms of citations, positive psychology is roughly tied across the world with cognitive neuroscience. So, it's close to the most popular new discipline in psychology. Funding has been very good, par-

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ticularly through private sources and business, for example, through the largest executive coaching company in the world, BetterUp. That company is valued in the billions of dollars at the moment.

PCz: Over the last decades, the field of positive psychology has grown from a fledgling idea to a worldwide movement. Which of the measures of success is most important for you?

MS: I've taught everything in psychology over the last 55 years. I guess I never taught statistics, but almost everything else. But I never heard the word "life changing" from my students. Even when I taught abnormal psychology, which I did for 25 years. But in teaching positive psychology at the undergraduate and graduate level, I hear "life changing" all the time. Taking positive psychology has a major effect on people, and that's most rewarding for me.

PCz: Is there any downside to the rapid development of positive psychology?

MS: I'm not particularly impressed with its scientific achievements yet. I'm looking for a real advance in knowledge. I'm still looking for a killer app. We're missing a set of applications that are for the general public to say "This really transformed my life." Also on the deficit side, positive psychology is still not really respected by the most hard-nosed, experimental, and mathematical psychologists. I've been told I've been voted the most influential psychologist in the world (Barham 2023), but I'll never be in the American National Academy of Sciences. So that's a tension between rigour and application.

MŁ: Your academic critics seem to prioritise academic rigour over application, possibly overlooking the interconnected and mutually reinforcing nature of these apparently divergent values. Building on Barry Johnson's (1992, 2020) work, we can define positive psychology's objective as creatively leveraging the polarity between rigour and application, rather than favouring one at the expense of the other. Rigour ought to complement application, just as application should enhance rigour. Your project aligns closely with the polarity management perspective. Are there any ways in which your work on positive psychology has changed you as a person?

MS: Writing my autobiography, *The Hope Circuit* (Seligman 2018), was a great opportunity to reflect on my life. And it's the only book I've written in which I knew my subject better than anyone in the world! I've tried to be dispassionate about it rather than reputation managing. It was a great fun for me to do – it's the book I most enjoyed writing. And it's the least commercially successful!

MŁ: What did you learn from the experience of writing the biography?

MS: It helped me to see that my life actually made sense. In the course of my life, three things happened together. The first was that personally, I changed from being a depressive, anxious young person to being a non-depressed, optimistic, forward-looking old person. The second thing that happened was that my field changed over that time course from being about what was going wrong in the world, pathology, weakness, misery, suffering, conflict, competition, to being about success, meaning, good relationships, love, and accomplishment. And the third thing, the most important thing, is that the world got better. I'm one of those people who very closely follows statistics on human progress and life expectancy, GDP, literacy, etc., etc. And my lifetime has been a period of enormous human progress, perhaps unprecedented human progress. The best recent book on it is *Superabundance* (Tupy & Pooley 2022). It's a mostly mathematical treatment of progress. It basically tracks how much cheaper everything has gotten and how much more resources we have, contrary to what the doomsday alarmists say. Bertrand Russell said that the mark of a civilised human being was the ability to read a column of numbers and then weep. Another mark of a civilised human being is the ability to read a column of numbers and jump for joy. While we see what's happening in Ukraine, COVID, downturns in the economy, the statistics about every material thing in the world are remarkably optimistic. I mean, Putin's a bad guy, but he's not Stalin. Stalin was a lot worse. The coronavirus is bad, but it's not the black plague and it's not the post-World War I influenza. It's the statistics – it's the column of numbers that gives me enormous hope for the future.

MŁ: However, people don't share in celebrating these statistics with you. As your colleague and positive psychologist Jonathan Haidt has argued, younger generations in particular tend to grapple with anxiety and depression (Haidt & Lukianoff 2018). Are we losing touch with our civilised, human nature?

MS: When you ask people in Great Britain or America whether the world is getting better or worse, only about 5% believe it's improving. In contrast, 40% of people in China express optimism about the world's improvement because they've witnessed it within a generation (Roser 2018). I believe that the prevailing malaise about the future is a significant distortion stemming from the media, which tend to highlight all the negative aspects without historical context. Consequently, the only exception, amidst progress in nearly every aspect of life, lies in how people perceive these advancements.

MŁ: Regardless of all the general statistics, what is the state of Martin Seligman today?

MS: We had two new grandsons born in the last year. My daughters, Lara and Nikki, both had our first grandsons, Max and Denis. I'm 80 now and almost all of my colleagues are either dead or retired. My closest colleagues died during COVID: Albert Bandura, Aaron Temkin Beck, Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, Robert Rescorla, Stanley Rachman, and Ed Diener. But because my field has really taken off, I'm as intellectually active as I've ever been. In the next 10 years, following *The Hope Circuit*, I'll likely write another book, because the field is evolving so rapidly.

MŁ: Let's come back to the beginnings. In the late 1960s, you introduced the notion of "learned helplessness" (Seligman & Maier 1967; Overmier & Seligman 1967; Maier & Seligman 2016). This concept travelled from psychology through social psychology to sociology, from America to Europe, and was used in Poland to stigmatise people who after 1989 could not find their bearings after the fall of communism (Bilewicz & Olechowski 2014).

MS: In general, communism induced learned helplessness. Learned helplessness was not a stigma, but a description of reality. Under communism, the societies became pacified and passive.

MŁ: The ubiquitous long queues snaking around communist shops were a potent instrument for instilling a sense of disempowerment (Verdery 1996). The communist system, with its centralised control over resources, effectively pilfered the citizenry's time. Indeed, the effect could be learned helplessness.

MS: We did a comparative study of West and East German society (Oettingen & Seligman 1990). In 1984 we picked 35 *Kneipen* and we measured smiles, laughter, and open posture. When we went to the eastern side of the wall, people were sad, not laughing, with a closed posture. We also compared the East German and West German newspapers reporting the same events from the winter Olympics and looked at optimism versus pessimism. We found in general that the East German reportage was much more pessimistic, even though they were the best Olympic team in the Sarajevo Olympics (see also Zullow et al. 1988). In the German literature also the difficulty assimilating East Germany into West Germany and the difficulty the older East Germans had was attributed to learned helplessness as well. The older people in East Germany had a lot more trouble with the unification than the younger ones (Schmitt & Maes 2002).

PCz: What about Poland?

MS: When I think about the Eastern European countries, as distant as I am from them, Poland seems to me to be the least helpless. I have enormous gratitude to Polish people, for their support of Ukraine and for their solidarity for Ukrainian victory…

MŁ: I appreciate your choice of the word "solidarity" – "solidarność," the name of the most hopeful and least helpless movement of the twentieth century.

MS: …I speak for many Americans. I have a great deal of contact with Poland these days. I'm an international bridge player and my entire bridge team, except for me, is Polish. My teammates are Jacek Pszczoła, Michał Kwiecień, and Włodzimierz Starkowski. They are all world champions. We're probably the leading European team now.

MŁ: The famed Polish team which goes by the name of "Seligman"!

MS: I'm also playing with Piotr Bizoń, a professor of physics, and Marek Małysa, a mathematician and a close colleague of mine.

PCz: Didn't he recently win the Alan Truscott Award presented by the International Bridge Association?

MS: Yes, last year. For his pioneering work. He developed a system for teaching bridge to individuals dealing with dementia, yielding very positive results. By the way, when Michał wrote to me, I asked Marek to do due diligence. Which he did. He said you were respectable.

MŁ: (Laughter) Thank you! I still believe I am respectable, but the atmosphere in Polish academia is changing, becoming increasingly politicised, much like in the US. Remarkably, you begin and conclude *The Hope Circuit* with your family. This serves as the underlying theme of your biography. Your book echoes the Greek motive of *nostos*, coming back home, as depicted by the story of Odysseus, who, after travelling the world and exploring new lands, returns home. The opening scene of your biography shows you in the garden with your daughter. Little Nikki teaches you an important lesson about leadership, fatherhood, and life. She says that because she could stop whining at five years old, you can stop being grumpy too. It is the moment of an epiphany that will fuel you for the rest of your life:

> Psychology could be explicitly about building the good life. The current practice and science of psychology was half-baked. Psychology started with the premise that not getting it wrong equaled getting it right. If psychology could somehow eliminate all the ills of the world – mental illness, prejudice, ignorance, poverty, pessimism, loneliness, and the like – human life would be at its best. But

> the absence of ill-being does not equal the presence of well-being. Psychology could be about the presence of happiness not merely about the absence of unhappiness. Not getting it wrong does not equal getting it right. (Seligman 2018)

MS: I understand the Odysseus reference. However, interpreting my story as circular is not accurate. *The Hope Circuit* isn't about returning, as you suggest; it refers to a specific neural circuit here in the forebrain, the medial frontal lobes. When ignited by mastery and hope, it counteracts helplessness. That's why I called it the hope circuit. The cyclical view of history is entirely alien to me. The magnitude of human progress and its unpredictability in the last 200 years, particularly since about 1780, has been so astonishing that notions like coming home just don't make any sense to me. The future will be amazing and will be almost unrecognisable for us.

MŁ: Do you believe that our academic work can foster that progress?

MS: One of my nightmares about contemporary social science is that it's badly contaminated by prescription and politics. As a scientist I think it's important that science should be purely descriptive and *not* prescriptive. That means that when I write a journal article, prescription has no role in either the method selection or the results. However, prescriptions matter in the discussion and in the introduction in regard to why we choose problems, and where we think the results might lead. Now, if one works on topics that are inherently either positive or negative – take happiness, for example – then there are naturally prescriptions that follow from the results. If you're working on a depression or schizophrenia, those are inherently value-laden and the results often have prescriptive implications. In my role as a public intellectual or leader, prescription is very important and it's not a violation of uncontaminated, pure science, but it rather says that the fields that I choose to work on have a direction.

PCz: You related your leadership roles to a sense of direction, and you've written a lot about leadership. You described a "humane leader" as someone who leveraged the polarity between effectiveness and relations: "'The effective leader is additionally humane when he or she handles intergroup relations 'with malice toward none; charity toward all; with firmness in the right'" (Seligman 2002: 151). From your perspective, what do you consider the most critical competencies for being a good leader?

MS: I actually have a firm view of that. For me, leadership is about followership and followership is about raising the PERMA of followers.

PCz: Let's unpack this acronym, which encapsulates five keys to happiness, well-being, and human flourishing (Seligman 2011b): P stands for positive emotion (being happy, feeling good, with high subjective well-being), E for engagement (being deeply involved in work or with someone you love), R for relationships (having friends, family, intimacy, or social connections), M for meaning (being part of and contributing to something larger than oneself), and A for achievement (accomplishment, mastery, and competence). What you're suggesting amounts to nothing short of a revolution in leadership studies, as you shift the focus from the leaders to the followers. It seems you're proposing that, in leadership, followers hold more importance than leaders.

MS: This would be my criticism of the field of leadership. People are hypnotised by the personality and techniques that leaders apparently have. My view is – forget all that and just measure PERMA over time and promote the ones who build it. No one has ever done what I'm suggesting.

MŁ: This brings to mind Florian Znaniecki (1998), the distinguished Polish-American philosopher, social psychologist, and sociologist, the president of the American Sociological Association. Almost a century ago, he presented the report "Leadership and Followship in Creative Action" to Columbia University. His work, based on massive empirical research involving the biographies of 700 leaders, aimed to establish the groundwork for the first global school of leadership. Znaniecki viewed creative action as the leveraging of the polarity between leadership and followership. Unfortunately, his work went unnoticed. There are striking parallels between your work and that of Znaniecki, along with his esteemed collaborator Pitrim Sorokin (Nichols 2005).

MS: In the PERMA Workshops (also known as the Penn Resilience Program), we've trained thousands of leaders, equipping them with mental resilience, strengths-based leadership, and crucial social skills, such as self-awareness, mental agility, optimism, connection, strength of character, and self-regulation. I met a lot of leaders, political leaders, scientific leaders, Nobel Prize winners, generals, corporate leaders, economic leaders. They lead in very different ways, and the techniques they use, even within a field like the United States Army, are very different. I think the techniques of leadership and the personality of leaders are very heterogeneous. What is homogeneous is followership. And followership is about PERMA. Everything I know about productivity, happiness, physical health tells me that people who have high PERMA, are more productive, they're happier, they try harder, they're more creative, they live longer. And on and on. While the

techniques of leadership and the personality of leaders may be very different, for me effective leadership is about instilling high PERMA in followers.

MŁ: What about the PERMA of leaders? Don't you focus on followers to the neglect of leaders?

MS: Aristotle hoped that truth, beauty, and goodness were all the same thing. Well, they're not remotely the same thing. And they can go in different directions. So, one can have high well-being, as I think Osama bin Laden and Putin, but I still would consider them despicable. Because of their lack of concern for people's PERMA.

PCz: How important is it for leaders to know their people?

MS: It is very important. They should know if you like orchids, good jokes, or bridge. There is only a handful of universal exercises building our PERMA, such as the practice of gratitude. A lot of building PERMA is local. For example, I could give Michał bridge lessons if I knew it would raise his PERMA.

MŁ: A quarter of a century ago, I represented Warsaw in the Polish University Bridge Championships! What's your bidding system?

MS: We use the two-over-one (2/1). It's a fairly simple system, but my teammates are highly skilled. See, that's what I mean by a specific, localised approach in building PERMA.

MŁ: What kind of leadership should we exemplify within universities, throughout institutions, and last but not least in our Two Wings Institute?

MS: If I were part of your organisation, I would measure rigorously the PERMA of those who follow leaders. What I want organisations to do is, at time one, measure the PERMA of the employees, and, at time two, measure it again. Then use techniques to get leaders to find out what they can do with the specific individuals under them to raise PERMA. From my point of view, one holds managers responsible not just for increased productivity but for increasing the PERMA of the people who work under them. That has both the benefit of more productivity and more profit, but more importantly to me, it has the benefit of more happiness. Those who increase it the most are the people I want as my leaders.

MŁ: What is your evidence for this prescription?

MS: In a recently published five-year longitudinal study of more than 900,000 soldiers we asked the question what predicted success in the army (Lester et al. 2022). Happy soldiers are the highest performers. Now, importantly, the army has 150 different jobs; it's not just infantry. There are psychologists, IT people, all sorts of jobs quite representative of any work generally. The army gives something called an exemplary work award. In the

course of five years, 12% of the army gets it. We asked the question: could we predict which 12% would get the award from day one. On day one, everyone took the questionnaire that we had designed and it turned out there were three robust predictors of winning the award. The first was high optimism, the second was high positive emotion, and the third was low negative emotion. So those are universals. The particular techniques for producing those, I think, vary from leader to leader. But the important aspect of this is if you want success, you want to promote optimism, high positive emotion, and you want to curb negative emotion. These are very robust findings. This is not a sample. This is everyone in the army.

PCz: Several decades after Florian Znaniecki, Warren Bennis emerged as one of the founding fathers of leadership studies. *Harvard Business Review* featured his article "Crucibles of Leadership" (Bennis & Thomas 2002) among the collection of classic articles on mental toughness and post-traumatic growth, alongside your "Building Resilience" (2011a). Bennis emphasised that leaders evolve through crucible experiences, overcoming adversity to emerge stronger and more committed than before. Your biography reflects numerous instances of such crucibles and triumphs. Now, my slightly provocative question is: in terms of leadership, whom would you trust more – a professional trained in positive psychology or a practitioner who hasn't engaged in any leadership programmes?

MS: I've attended faculty meetings for 55 years and I'm about to go to one in about an hour. I have yet to meet a faculty member I would trust my life to. On the other hand, I had the good fortune of training thousands of sergeants from the United States Army. These people were heroes. In Afghanistan and Iraq, I met dozens of people I would trust my life to among them. Which is to say, I think pointy-headed intellectuals are not great candidates for leadership. They're good candidates for scientific leadership, but not for political leadership. And I certainly wouldn't want them to be generals.

MŁ: One of the greatest American scholars and theologians of the twentieth century, Henry Nelson Wieman (2008: 155), wrote something that resonates with our view of academic leadership: "Except by way of tragedy we do not become conscious of the titanic struggle and the ever-recurring triumph of creativity over the destroyers of value and the life of man. […] Tragedy opens the way for man to find the meanings most rich in quality, most important for human living and most universal. […] [The art] mediates through symbols the impact of events too severe for man to endure in direct encounter." It seems that suffering is an important part of

the human condition, which cannot and mustn't be eradicated. Isn't positive psychology an attractive but dangerous utopia?

MS: Good, good, good topic. One of the most common misconceptions about positive psychology is that people think it's aimed at getting rid of negative emotion. I'm all for negative emotion, and I've spent at least half of my life working on it. Negative emotion has a pivotal place in human evolution. And it's not to be wished away. When we're fearful or anxious, it's a signal that danger is about, and again, it's a signal without which none of us would be here today. And when we're angry, it's a signal that there's trespass going on. When we are sad, it signals loss. I'm all for those emotions, but when they get out of hand and dominate your life and make it impossible to experience any of the positive emotions, we call that mental illness. So, well, I think I want to get rid of mental illness as best as we can, although the negative emotions that underlie it are essential to human life.

MŁ: Positive psychology isn't then merely a reaction against traditional psychology, which overfocuses on mental illness to the neglect of mental health. Instead, it embraces both the negative and positive aspects of human life to offer a more comprehensive and compassionate perspective that acknowledges the presence of tragedy. This sentiment was implied by Marlena Kossakowska, who is recognised as the godmother (with you as the godfather) of positive psychology in Poland. Her final book, *Living Well with a Serious Illness: Personal Growth in Chronic Conditions* (Kossakowska 2018), culminated from her lifelong research involving individuals coping with chronic diseases such as multiple sclerosis, type II diabetes, and cancer. Her work and life demonstrated the possibility of discovering meaning amid adversities.

MS: What an outstanding psychology professor she was. She did a postdoc with me in Philadelphia. Unfortunately, she passed away in 2018… That brings me to the question of suffering and wisdom. I think wisdom arises very often – although not exclusively – from suffering. I wish we could mitigate some of the unnecessary suffering, but human history and individual lives inevitably involve suffering. There is a misconception about creativity, wisdom, and suffering. And it's often said with people like Sylvia Plath and Dostoyevsky that creativity arises out of depression and misery. But these people were bipolar depressives by and large. And as best we can tell during the depressing part, the miserable part, none of the creativity occurred then. The creativity occurred in the hypomanic part as they processed the suffering of the past; so, suffering was a contributing condition. It's been an important contribution and certainly part of our heritage, but that doesn't make me an advocate of unnecessary suffering.

PCz: How do you distinguish between unnecessary suffering, which should be eliminated, and suffering that is part of being human?

MS: I think the distinction for me is human cruelty and violence. They are intentional actions. Human cruelty and violence are not to be defended. I think the part of suffering that we must tolerate is the suffering that the world brings us for being born and undergoing rejections and living in the world of scarcity and having to die.

PCz: What is then the connection between positive psychology and morality?

MS: I think positive psychology is amoral. Amoral, not immoral. A positive psychology is a description of PERMA. For example, why does one disapprove of Putin or Osama bin Laden? And I think the answer is on grounds external to positive psychology. Positive psychology is not about justice. It's not about morality. It's about well-being. My thoughts about this again assert that positive psychology doesn't tell us about justice or morality. In that sense, positive psychology is apolitical. Plenty of people disagree with me (see Davies 2015; Horgan 2011). Most of my positive psychology friends are political one way or another, and I've tried to keep it apolitical. Politics is about who should accomplish the goals the society wants; the left wanting the government to do it and the right wanting individuals to do it. But positive psychology is about what those ends should be, not who should do it. Positive psychology says the end should be human well-being, but it's neutral about left-right questions.

MŁ: How about your personal political views? Do they influence who you work with?

MS: Where I come from personally, is that the American army rescued much of my family and well, I'm not at all a triumphalist about the United States. I do believe it's a beacon of freedom and that democracy, as I understand it, is the best system that we have, and these are the people who defend it against people who want to destroy democracy, such as Putin. I have no regrets about working with the American military, just as I have no regrets about working with the corporations (Reivich et al. 2011), since I think the free market is a very good economic system. So it happens that my political beliefs influence who I work with. But those don't derive from positive psychology, and I understand that there are people who don't approve of the American military and who don't approve of capitalism and who don't approve of the free market and I have different beliefs from them.

PCz: Do you see any specific traits of academic leadership in comparison with other types of leadership?

MS: Yeah, I'm dismayed by academic leadership in America. I could have chosen a path of university president and deans and the like. And I deliberately didn't and I'm glad I didn't. And what I've watched is 40 years of cowardice by academic administrators and leaders in the United States. They basically are responding to not a vision of what academia is about but rather to the politics of the students and fear of being cancelled. And there are almost no academic presidents and deans that I have admiration for at the moment. They're not standing up with a vision that opposes the kind of majority politics that the students are espousing these days. Many of the academics come from the far left; they were the radicals of my day, and they went on not to do great academic work, but to become the deans and presidents. Polish academia is fortunate in that your academic leaders are not the radicals of the 1960s and 70s, because Poland had to win its freedom from Marxism. And so I hope you're not cursed with a bunch of administrators who are essentially Marxist. America did not have the good experience that Poland had of breaking away from Marxism. I mean that you actually experienced what communism did, so hopefully you've been vaccinated against it.

MŁ: In that case, what's your secret for staying alive in academia?

MS: Well, I don't have a secret and I don't want to be a martyr or a scapegoat, and I've avoided that, and part of it is by contending that my work is apolitical. And I mean that's part of the reason I want to promote positive psychology as a well-being discipline as opposed to sociology or psychology. Many of my colleagues frown on me, but I have avoided being an explicit target. Churchill said that: success was the ability to go from one failure to the next with undiminished enthusiasm. For me, and what my life has been, has been finding out what I was best at and matching that to what I think the world needed.

MŁ: Our friend and mentor, American Presbyterian pastor Michael Murray, who has trained more than 300,000 American managers, opined, when discussing academic leadership: "I have rarely met a happy professor. There is something about life in academia that is spirit draining. It might have something to do with the tendency to analyze, criticise, find faults, focus on mistakes and errors. The human spirit thrives, I think, on valuing, appreciating, affirming and delight" (Łuczewski et al. 2021: 263). In this statement, Murray defines the prerequisites for fostering creative interchange in academia, emphasising the necessity for authentic interactions and an appreciative understanding for academia to evolve and thrive (Palmgren 2008; Wieman 2008).

MS: I strongly agree with that. We teach people how to better identify what's wrong in academia. It's called critical intelligence, and we aren't very good at teaching people to identify what's right. I think we should point people in the direction of finding what's uniquely good about a paper we read or a student. And having people identify what they're best at and where that meets what the world needs, is a good formula for what career a young person should pursue. So we should be teaching people better about identifying what's right than we're doing now.

PCz: What practical approach should we take to academic leadership?

MS: Most importantly, it has to be more than an ideology. I think you have to have data which shows that your interventions produced more trust, more positivity. I think merely exposing our undergraduates, graduate students, and postdoc students to a positive sociology, as opposed to the victimology that most sociology I know is about, will raise their well-being. And so, beginning by presenting data on increases in well-being and trust among your students as a result of the courses and the workshops would be an important place to start. I guess I would advocate measurement and evaluation that what you're doing is actually working.

MŁ: What are your thoughts on interdisciplinary research and groups? I'm aware of your collaborations with esteemed sociologists, economists, philosophers, and historians, such as Robert Nozick or Ewa Morawska. This interview is being conducted for a journal that explicitly advocates for an anti-disciplinary approach.

MS: I'm anti-disciplinary! Disciplines in many ways are deans' fictions that were used about housing people together. You know what building should people be in? Well, I think that internet collaboration in many ways dissolves discipline. The discipline I'm in at the moment I would call well-being. And you and I would be much closer colleagues than I am with the scientist who is next door to me in my office building. I'm very interested in the possibility of a curriculum built around the well-being arts and the well-being sciences. Housing those people together so well-being now seems to me much more of a natural class than psychology or sociology or physics. Well-being cuts across the arts, the humanities, neuroscience, sociology, anthropology, business, etc. I would regroup around the notion of well-being.

PCz: Let's delve into the affinities between positive psychology and theology. There's a well-known anecdote where a famous professor, a biologist, was asked about God, and he responded, "Probably He loves beetles

a lot." This leads me to ask you, if I may, a psychologist, a most famous professor: what can you say about God, our Creator?

MS: Well, I've written about that at some length (Seligman 2014).

MŁ: Let me quote: "God has four properties in the Judeo-Christian tradition: omnipotence, omniscience, goodness, and the creation of the universe. I think we must give up the last property; the supernatural Creator at the beginning of time" (Seligman 2002: 258–260). However, you see the world progress "toward a God who is not supernatural, a God who ultimately acquires omnipotence, omniscience, and goodness through the natural progress of win-win" (Seligman 2002: 260). This vision is not solely historiosophic but also profoundly therapeutic:

> This is the door through which meaning that transcends us can enter our lives. A meaningful life is one that joins with something larger than we are—and the larger that something is, the more meaning our lives have. Partaking in a process that has the bringing of a God who is endowed with omniscience, omnipotence, and goodness as its ultimate end joins our lives to an enormously large something. (Seligman 2002: 260)

More significantly, this concept of God carries a deeply personal and intimate resonance:

> I also hunger for meaning in my own life that will transcend the arbitrary purposes I have chosen for myself. Like many scientifically minded Westerners, however, the idea of a transcendent purpose (or, beyond this, of a God who grounds such purpose) has always seemed untenable to me. Positive psychology points the way toward a secular approach to noble purpose and transcendent meaning—and, even more astonishingly, toward a God who is not supernatural. (Seligman 2002: 14)

So, your vision of God is akin to Spinoza's pantheistic vision and portrays God as God of (as) nature (who in the course of time, unfolds as omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent), God of society and history (who heals our wounds and gives us strength after traumas), and our personal God (who bestows intimate meaning).

MS: Indeed, I view the universe as a physical matter rather than a theological one. I imagine – not of our future as a human species but of

the very long-term future – that intelligent life may achieve the Godhead. God, perhaps, is the end point of this process, not the beginning. I think that this is what Isaac Asimov had in mind when writing his short story, *The Last Question,* in which basically he outlines God coming at the end (Seligman 2014). My belief is that there *is* no God, there *was* no God, but perhaps there *will be* God.

MŁ: The Book of Revelation reads: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the Ending of all things," says God, who is the Lord, the All Powerful One who is, and was, and is coming again! (Rev 1:8). Though your God is not the Alpha of creation, He is still coming (but not again!) as "the Omega Point" (de Chardin 1969; see Nichols 2005: 32). But if God is Omega, what characterises the process leading to Omega? Is God part of this process, and if so, how? Could He be the process itself? Your theological vision seems very close to process theology. Its founder, Alfred N. Whitehead (1929) depicted God as a creative force within the universe's ongoing processes – a principle embodying both boundless potentiality as well concretion, actualising all potentialities (Hartshorne 1941: 550). Henry Nelson Wieman (2008) termed this divine God-process "Creative Interchange," suggesting it transforms what we cannot transform by ourselves, including our psyche (Palmgren 2008). I sense that your concept of God aligns with the principle of Creative Interchange. He is the principle of human good and cosmic flourishing, embracing life, love, and creativity, destined for fulfilment at the end of time. You previously mentioned the potential for future forms of intelligent life, potentially transhuman or posthuman, to attain the Godhead. Is this the same Godhead you encountered in your prophetic, numinous dream as recounted in your biography (Seligman 2018)?

MS: No, I hadn't put those two things together, but I guess they do go together.

MŁ: It would mean then that the personal God and the cosmic God are one! In your vision, the old, male Godhead (intriguingly, without a body, as if He was an embodied intellect) blessed you on a new academic, or life, journey: "Seligman, at least you are starting to ask the right questions." This bass, booming voice catalysed a sort of scholar conversion (Łuczewski 2015) where you shifted from an experimental psychologist to a clinical psychologist, from an experimental researcher to a longitudinal researcher, and from an animal-researcher to an explorer of human psyche (Seligman 2018). Similarly to great writers, great scholars also undergo a conversion, one that ultimately holds a spiritual dimension. This

transformation isn't necessarily religious, but it invariably involves religious symbolism (Girard 1965: 215). You've experienced this conversion and advocate for others to embark on a similar journey. It signifies the transition from a good life to a meaningful one:

> The good life involves finding happiness through the daily use of your inherent strengths across various aspects of living. The meaningful life, however, incorporates an additional element: employing these same strengths to advance knowledge, power, or goodness. A life that achieves this holds profound meaning, and should God be present at its culmination, such a life is sacred. (Seligman 2011b: 224)

So maybe, instead of being akin to Odysseus endlessly navigating circuits of hope, you embody a forward-looking prophet.

MS: My entire book *Homo Prospectus* (Seligman et al. 2016) is about the notion of prophecy. In *Future Tense*, one of my friends, Jonathan Sacks (2009), who was the Chief Rabbi of England, wrote about the Hebrew Bible, and he argued the Jewish religion was the first philosophy that was not circular but linear, whereas the other religions much more easily were circular. I very much believe in the forward advance of human progress and not at all in the past golden age. Much of the history of psychology has been dominated by a framework in which people's behaviour is driven by past history (memory) and present circumstances (perception and motivation). The premise that if we understood everything about the past we'd be able to predict the future is all wrong. There's very little empirical evidence to believe that that's the way we predict the future and that psychology should start with the way human beings think about the future and work backwards rather than forwards. The notion of the fault circuit (the word comes from neural circuits), and the human mind as being prophetic about the future, is our great evolutionary advantage. We're the species that does the best on that and much of the frontal lobes, from my point of view, are oriented towards predicting the future. I think the past is overrated. That's what the book *Homo Prospectus* was about.

MŁ: Rabbi Marc Gopin, whose autobiography accompanies our conversation, found solace in this book, revisiting it multiple times during his struggle with severe trauma after extensive work in war-torn zones worldwide. He found particular inspiration in your shift from concentrating on depression to emphasising positive psychology. As scholars-practitioners

with Marc and Tory Baucum, we want to support Poland and Ukraine by founding the IDEAS Lab dedicated to human flourishing and peacebuilding. What guidance would you offer on this front?

MS: I was fortunate enough last February in 2022 to meet in the US Alla Klymenko from Kyiv. This was right after the invasion; she happened to be filming a meeting I was at. She's a positive psychology and public figure in Ukraine. She asked me that question. I said, I didn't want to overpromise, and I don't have a lot of money to contribute to Ukraine, but I do have something I can do. So she and I decided to create a course for Ukrainian students and Ukrainian faculty. She spent this whole year filming the course, in which a dozen of the leaders of positive psychology talk about positive psychology in the future, and try to answer part of the questions that you're asking. We will release this course for free for all Ukrainians. We're not sure about the timing. And that's because I think in the middle of a crisis like an invasion, it would be overpromising to say that high positive emotion, realistic optimism, low negative emotion are all good things. I think positive psychology has more heft and realism when the crisis is over. Alla and I are trying to time this to coincide with the Ukrainian victory, or at least peace with Russia. I would prefer a Ukrainian victory. And so there will be 12 different lectures, and then each of us will be doing an open Q&A with Ukrainian students as well. I have Angela Duckworth, Steve Pinker, Eranda Jayawickreme, and many of the leading figures, who will be giving a free 12-hour course for Ukraine. I want to do my best to help Ukrainian young people prosper, become positive psychologists, study in the United States, and make contact with us. This is all oriented to the future of young people in Ukraine.

MŁ: This reminds me of my students, Jan Kiljański, Emilia Selwa, and Tomasz Niezgoda, who researched the Greek-Orthodox ministry of Ukrainian refugees in Warsaw. As they shared the stories of the Ukrainians, their faces lit up with energy and optimism. Despite the dire circumstances, hope shines through, showing that perhaps we don't need to wait for the war's end to embrace hope in our hearts.

MS: Ukrainian hope is quite realistic.

MŁ: And what role should positive psychology play in shaping the future?

MS: When I consider what positive sociology and a well-being discipline may hold for our future, I think about Juliana of Norwich. Juliana was a monk. You had to take a male name to be a monk so she's referred to as Julian of Norwich. In the middle of the black plague, which was a hun-

dredfold worse than what we're going through now, she wrote, "He said not 'Thou shalt not be tempested, thou shalt not be travailed, thou shalt not be dis-eased'; but he said, 'Thou shalt not be overcome, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well'" (Norwich 2019: 150).

MŁ: You quoted a Christian neoplatonic mystic. Let me to reciprocate with a Hebrew psalm that began my day: "The length of our days is seventy years or eighty, if we have the strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away. […] Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom. […] May the favour of the Lord our God rest upon us; establish the work of our hands for us – yes, establish the work of our hands" (Ps 90: 10, 12, 17).

MS: It's not just for us to observe a better world; it's been vouchsafed to us to help *create* a better world. I think it's our job to have that vision and to bring it about. Unlike most of academia, we are in the disciplinary position to do this.

MŁ: We take it as an obligation to follow you.

MS: You're welcome. I'd be happy to help.

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