Wellbeing and Happiness Lecture
Martin Seligman, Opera House

On Sunday 17 February, we had the privilege of listening to Professor Martin Seligman deliver a lecture titled ‘Well-Being and Happiness’ at the magnificent Sydney Opera House.

The Wellbeing Scale
Professor Seligman spoke of his work dealing with misery and the more destructive maladies of the mind, and how the leading psychologists of his day felt that bringing patients from a position of -5 up to a position of zero (on a scale from -5 to +5) was the best we should all hope for. Seligman proceeded to take us through what has very much been The Peninsula School’s journey with Positive Psychology, concisely summing up four years’ work in around 75 minutes.

Count Your Blessings
He challenged the audience to consciously acknowledge each night three examples of gratitude or happiness, a practise he diligently continues to do to this day. The effects of this exercise have been long-felt and appreciated by members of our school community, in the guises of What Went Well, reflective journals, Share Time, etc.

The PERMA Model
He then spoke about the importance of the PERMA model and briefly described each pillar as:

Positive emotions - those that we typically associate with happiness

Engagement – when “time stands still for you”

Relationships - acknowledging that we are all connected and the importance of respectful, meaningful interactions

Meaning – feeling that we are an important part of something bigger than our own lives

Accomplishment – the satisfaction of achieving worthy goals

Prof Seligman emphasised the importance of altruism as something that brings the PERMA model into practise and believes this to be a key factor in coping effectively with depression and negative mindsets. Altruism is something that helps teenagers gain appreciation of others, a sense of purpose and lessen egocentricity. Character strengths were referred to and the model we are so familiar with was briefly discussed.

The Negativity Bias
The role of negative bias in the survival of the human species was outlined, but at the same time recognition that such a destructive force of sustained criticism was something humans have to reprogram in themselves, in order to have productive relationships in today’s world. The ratio of positive to negative comments was presented as an excellent marker to predict how a relationship, business or even national well-being is faring. The figures shown were that if a business is thriving, the positive : negative ratio of comments in the workplace could be no less than 2.9 (+) : 1 (-). For a relationship to survive, couples need a much higher ratio of 5 : 1. To ascertain how teenagers were feeling about their lives, a large sample group was tracked on Facebook. The words they typed on
their pages were fed into a program (like Wordle) to see which words were most frequent. These teenage groups were divided into gender. Examples of the most common words for girls were friends, love, meeting, hope, whilst their male counterparts most frequently typed profanities or words of aggression. There was definitely a marked difference in the way they used language to communicate and we were left to think about the choice of words and the effects of such consistent usage.

Post Traumatic Growth
Prof Seligman elaborated on the mindset that is flourishing when a person is in ‘flow’. He spoke of the work he has been involved with in the US military when he was asked to study the effects of trauma on returned soldiers. Initially he was to look at the more negative outcomes of depression and suicide but after more research he presented to the surprised supervisors that the effects of trauma are best represented as a bell-shaped curve. Whilst some personnel suffer terrible effects, most are able to assimilate the experiences and return to a comparatively regular mindset after a few months. There were those however who experienced actual personal growth as a result of extreme stress. This latter group was the one he concerned himself with to find out which strengths consistently came into play. The character strength that was the overwhelming dominant one of this group was religiousness – the belief system that an individual has that helps individuals feel a connection with something much bigger than their own situation. Other signature strengths were gratitude and kindness. He spoke of studies with people who have experienced one of a dozen tremendously stressful situations, eg divorce, death of a child/spouse, capture, torture. He documented the growth of their strengths in that their ordeal taught them things about themselves and resilience.

At the end of the lecture, Professor Seligman received thunderous applause from a grateful audience. The three of us immediately reflected on how brilliant Associate Professor Lea Waters has been for our school, as we were able to easily identify and understand all the themes Seligman raised, thanks to her educating and mentoring. In order to enjoy the lecture, a great deal of prior knowledge was necessary and we are proud to be part of a school community that has seen the value of investing so richly in this vital philosophy. To hear these messages directly from the man who initiated this new thinking was inspirational, thrilling and humbling.

We are most grateful to The Peninsula School for inviting us to attend this significant occasion, which was a professional and personal highlight for all of us.

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