Multiple Paths to Savoring
James O. Pawelski
james.o.pawelski@vanderbilt.edu
August 6, 2003

Positive Psychology identifies three different approaches to authentic happiness: the Pleasant Life, the Good Life, and the Meaningful Life. The Pleasant Life is achieved through the cultivation of positive emotion, the Good Life is achieved by applying one's signature strengths to the various realms of life, and the Meaningful Life is achieved by using one's signature strengths in the service of something larger than oneself.

Savoring is identified as one of the keys to the pursuit of the Pleasant Life. In Authentic Happiness (see pages 107-109), Martin Seligman summarizes the work in this area by researchers Fred B. Bryant and Joseph Veroff (whose work is yet to be published). Bryant and Veroff define savoring as "the awareness of pleasure and of the deliberate conscious attention to the experience of pleasure." They identify four different kinds of savoring: basking (receiving praise and congratulations), thanksgiving (expressing gratitude for blessings), marveling (losing the self in the wonder of the moment), and luxuriating (indulging the senses). Based on their testing of thousands of undergraduates, they suggest five specific techniques that promote savoring: sharing with others (for example, talking with others about how much you value the moment), memory-building (taking mental photographs or physical souvenirs of an event), self-congratulation (self-talk that acknowledges your pride in your own accomplishments), sharpening perceptions (focusing on the most salient aspects of the experience), and absorption (total immersion in sensory experience).

Building on this foundation, I would like to suggest some additional techniques for savoring. I encourage you to come up with your own, as well. Different savoring techniques work with different people, so you will want to focus on those that are particularly effective for you. Also, I suspect that part of what makes some techniques effective is the novelty of having created them--or at least further developed them--yourself.

The most obvious application of savoring is in the present. But we can also savor the past through memory, and the future through expectation.

Creating Your Own Sound Track

One of the most common ways of savoring the past is through music. We all have songs that have very strong associations for us. All we have to do is play that song (or hear it as we are out shopping) and it immediately transports us into a savoring of the past. Some of these past memories are pleasant, but some are not so pleasant. This is because the associations were created accidentally, without our planning. But what if we were to create musical associations intentionally? One way of doing this might be to buy a CD that you haven't listened to before (but that's in a musical genre you like) and take it with you on your next vacation. Play this music as you are driving through the Rockies or sitting on the beach with your family or friends. As you play this music over and over, it will become the sound track to your vacation. When you return home, stop listening to the CD, and play it only when you are looking at pictures of your vacation, when you are telling others about your experiences, or when you want to reminisce. This sound track will then be a powerful vehicle to help you savor your wonderful vacation memories.

Tandem Recall

Bryant and Veroff found that the savoring technique that most strongly predicted level of pleasure was sharing with others. Telling our friends, neighbors, and family members about a recent vacation we took can be a way of reliving and savoring the experiences we had. But this technique is not equally effective for all people. Some would agree with Hemingway's statement that "If you talk about it, you'll lose it." This may be especially true for certain types of experiences. When I spent a year studying in Germany, for example, I remember having great difficulty trying to explain to my family (none of whom had been to Europe, let alone to Germany) just what I was experiencing. Sometimes the words I used seemed to flatten and dull the experience instead of enhancing it. How is it possible to share an experience without simply talking about it in ways that all too often seem superficial? Tandem Recall and Assisted Fully-Associated Recall are two techniques I have developed that may help solve this problem. Tandem Recall (TR) is useful for savoring memories of experiences with others who were with you at the event. Assisted Fully-Associated Recall (AFAR) is useful for sharing and savoring memories with someone who was not present.
A few years ago, I attended an intensive, six-day training program with a friend. We flew across the country to Washington State, moved into rustic accommodations (I got to stay in a wonderful little cabin), and began our training. Our experience-based training was intended, in part, to help us feel and overcome fear. One lesson, for example, was the unforgettable and intense experience of paragliding. This training would have been challenging for anyone; for two academics, it was life-changing.

The problem was: how to savor it when we returned to our busy routines back home? Just talking about it didn't seem to do justice to the transformative nature of our experiences. So I got an idea, and here is what we did. We met one evening in my friend's living room. We turned out the lights and lit some candles. We went to opposite ends of the living room rug, and knelt down on the floor. I bent forward and buried my face in my arms, and then we began to relive the week of training. We began at the beginning. One of us would mention one of our activities and we would savor it, replaying the images in our minds, expressing with the tone of our voices the emotions—the awe, the humor, the intense energy—we felt as we remembered together poignant details. We relived the entire week that way. The savoring was wonderful. While words were involved, we didn't just talk about it. And we certainly didn't lose it.

Assisted Fully-Associated Recall

Is it possible to share deeply with people the memories of experiences we had when they were not with us? Again, telling stories of these experiences is usually a very effective way to savor such memories. But sometimes the words just don't seem to go deep enough. Assisted Fully-Associated Recall is a technique where someone helps us savor a memory and in the process gets to share it, as well.

A friend of mine had just returned from a cruise to Mexico. From Key West, she and a couple of her friends had sailed to the Yucatán Peninsula. They had shopped on the island of Cozumel, snorkeled at Xel-ha, and visited ancient Mayan ruins. In all, it had been a magnificent mid-winter vacation in warm and sunny climes. And then she had returned home to a cold January and piles of work. Seeing that the peace and joy she had experienced on her trip seemed to be ebbing away under the strain, I had an idea.

We sat down in comfortable chairs in a quiet room. I turned the lights off. And I began asking her about her trip. About concrete, sensory details. Like what she was wearing when she flew down to Florida. How she felt when she first met up with her friends (who had flown down separately). How the food tasted at the first meal they had together. How her skin felt when she first stepped into the Florida sunshine. What she noticed when she first saw their cruise ship. I asked her a number of these questions, and tried to ask follow-up questions that would help her intensify her feelings.

Then I asked her to pick one particular moment from her trip that she had especially enjoyed. She chose a star-gazing cruise she had gone on in Key West. Sailing out under the stars at night, she and the other passengers were able to learn about the stars by watching information on a video screen that had been set up on the deck. Then they could look up at the stars and identify the constellations that were being talked about by their guide. I asked my friend about what made that moment so special, about how it made her feel. Not only did she get to relive her powerful experience, but I also got to share in her wonder of looking into the vast reaches of the night-time sky, unhindered by the light pollution and the press of things to be done that usually keeps us from savoring the cosmic mystery by which we are at every moment surrounded.

Months later, my friend told me this revisiting of her experience had helped keep it more intensely in her memory. She also told me she had tried doing this exercise by herself to remember other experiences she had had on the trip. She reported that, although the unassisted versions were not as intense, they still were powerful ways of savoring her memories.

When I told another friend about this exercise, she said it sounded like guided imagery. And so it does. We are guiding a careful and caring questioner through our cherished memories, savoring them along the way.

Your Turn

I invite you to try the savoring techniques I have just described. How successful are they for you? How can you add your own distinctive touch to make them even more successful in the particular contexts in which you use
them? Can you think of other techniques for savoring, different from the ones Bryant and Veroff or I have described? Here is a final question to stimulate your thinking. I suspect that Tandem Recall and Assisted Fully-Associated Recall can be used, not just to savor the past, but to imagine the future. If you agree, how might you adapt them to help you create a vision for your life? For your family? For the world? How might you adapt them to help others do the same?