

HUMS S411: LIFE WORTH LIVING
Yale Summer Session 2025
Instructor: blake.trimble@yale.edu

Office Hours: Wednesday 10 am to 12 pm, by appointment in Morse College or by zoom

Course Description

What does it mean for a life to go well? What would it look like for a life to be *lived* well? In short, what shape would a life worth living take? We will explore these questions through engagement with the visions of seven modern figures and foundation texts that influenced them: Abraham Joshua Heschel and the Tanakh, Thich Nhat Hanh and the Buddhist scriptures, Mohandas Gandhi and the Bhagavad Gita, Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Bible, Robin Wall Kimmerer and North American Indigenous wisdom, A. Helwa and the Quran, and Oscar Wilde and expressive individualism. The course will also feature visits from contemporary individuals who understand their lives to be shaped by the figures and traditions in question.

Course Questions

- a. To whom or what are we responsible for living our lives a certain way?
- b. What is a human being and what is their place in the world?
- c. What does it mean for life:
 - i. to feel good? (And does it matter? Might the life worth living be miserable?)
 - ii. to go well? What is important in terms of life's circumstances?
 - iii. to be led well? What do we need to *do* in order to *lead* a life worth living?
- d. What is the role of suffering in a good life? How should we respond to suffering, our own and others'?
- e. What should we do when we fail to live a good life?

Assignments and Evaluation

All written assignments should be submitted in pdf format via Canvas assignments. Late papers will receive a grade reduction of one full letter grade (e.g., from A- to B-) for each day or part of a day that they are late.

1. **Paper 1: Yale's Vision of a Life Worth Living** - 1,250 word (maximum) paper analyzing the vision(s) of a life worth living that the *Yale community* advocates or implicitly endorses. See previously recorded baccalaureate addresses, department websites, college architecture, etc. (15 percent of final grade)
2. **Paper 2: Critical Engagement with a Tradition or Author** - 1,500 word (maximum) Select one of the authors, texts, or selection of *readings* from one course unit (though you are welcome to bring in other sources or course units) and critically engage their vision of a life worth living. (20 percent of final grade)
3. **Paper 3 Book Review** – 1,500 (maximum) Submit a book review of Volf, Croasmun, and McAnnally-Linz's *Life Worth Living: A Guide to What Matters Most*. Special attention should be paid to the relationship between a "good life" and education. (20 percent of final grade)

4. **Paper 3 Final Submission** – 2,000 word (maximum) paper outlining your *own* vision of a life worth living. (25 percent of final grade)
5. **Participation** (20 percent of final grade) - One purpose of a seminar like this one is to provide the opportunity for dialogical learning, not only between students and faculty, but also among students. Consequently, the quality of your participation in class greatly influences the relative success or failure of this course. Accordingly, your participation will be assessed. But since the goal is a flourishing seminar, not a competition for “participation points,” participation cannot be reduced to “saying smart things frequently.” Please put some thought into how you contribute to the seminar environment. As you do so, bear the following in mind: (1) Quality matters more than quantity. (A few moments of silence spent thinking things through is nothing to be afraid of.) (2) Charity counts for more than cleverness. Scoring points at another’s expense is not to be smiled upon. (3) Listening should demand more of your attention than talking. You are here primarily to learn, not to perform. Wondering how you might participate fruitfully in seminar? Consider these examples:
 - a. Ask a question or make a comment that shows you are interested in what another person says.
 - b. Ask a question or make a comment that encourages another person to elaborate on something they have already said.
 - c. Take notes when your classmates speak, so you can remember their contributions and formulate good questions and comments in response.
 - d. Make a comment that underscores the link between two people’s contributions.
 - e. Make a comment that summarizes our conversation so far and/or suggests new direction and questions to be explored in the future.
 - f. Make a comment indicating that you found another person’s ideas interesting or useful.
 - g. Contribute something that builds on, or springs from, what someone else has said.
 - h. Find a way to express appreciation for the insight you have gained from the discussion.

In order to help monitor this crucial component of the course, you will submit weekly self-assessments of seminar preparation and participation.

Thus, your participation grade is a combination of your attendance, conversation in class, and weekly submissions. Your weekly submissions will be on Canvas, 300 – 500 words, demonstrating that you have watched the online material for that week and were an active participant in class. Submissions are due at midnight, Thursday evening of each week.

Retreat: TBD for summer 2025. While accommodations will be made for students unable to attend due to religious commitments, otherwise participation in the course retreat is expected of all students. (Students in previous years have described the retreat as a highlight of the course as a whole!). Transportation from campus will be provided.

Course Policies

1. **Attendance** at all meetings is expected except in the case of emergencies or religious holidays (for a religion you actively practice). Unexcused absences will result in a reduction of the final course grade for participation at the rate of 5% per unexcused absence for a potential total of up to 20% of the final grade.
 - a. **Students are only allowed two absences. If a student misses two classes, students will be placed on “cut restriction.” This means that in the event of your third absence, students will be automatically withdrawn from the course. Only in rare and exceptional circumstances will this rule not be enforced. Of course, if you have any questions or concerns, you can contact me.**
2. **Academic Integrity**
 - a. **Academic integrity is a core institutional value at Yale. It means, among other things, truth in presentation, diligence and precision in citing works and ideas we have used, and acknowledging our collaborations with others. In view of our commitment to maintaining the highest standards of academic integrity, the Yale College Academic Regulations specifically prohibits the following forms of behavior: cheating on examinations, problem sets and all other forms of assessment; falsification and/or fabrication of data; plagiarism, that is, the failure in a dissertation, essay or other written exercise to acknowledge ideas, research, or language taken from others; and multiple submission of the same work without obtaining explicit written permission from both instructors before the material is submitted. Students found guilty of violations of academic integrity are subject to one or more of the following penalties: written reprimand, probation, suspension (noted on a student’s transcript) or dismissal (noted on a student’s transcript).**
 - i. **Cite all sources in a recognized style system (ex: APA, MLA, or Chicago). Be internally consistent and ensure that each item cited can be mapped back to its original source. Resource: [The Undergraduate Writing Center](#) provides support to learn new citation methods, cite social media sources, etc. For further guidelines on academic integrity, please read: <http://ctl.yale.edu/writing/wr-instructor-resources/addressing-academic-integrity-and-plagiarism>**
 - b. **Artificial Intelligence** - The goals of this course are for you to develop your ability to understand the visions of the good life put forward by the writers featured in the course, to discuss visions vibrantly with peers, and to articulate your own vision. Therefore, you are asked to read all materials and write all assignments yourself. You are permitted to use software aids to read materials aloud, to take dictation, and to check spelling or grammar. All other elements of ideas and style should be your own or carefully cited. If your specific project engages with artificial intelligence as a topic under the umbrella of visions of the good life, please schedule an office hours meeting to discuss appropriate boundaries for academic integrity with the instructor directly.

Readings

The Bhagavad Gita, trans. Juan Mascaró. New York: Penguin, 2003 [1962].

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013.

King, Martin Luther, Jr. *Strength to Love*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010 [1963].

Taylor, Charles. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991.

Volf, Miroslav, Matthew Croasmun, and Ryan McAnnally-Linz, *Life Worth Living: A Guide to What Matters Most*. New York: The Open Field, 2023.

Summer Resources

In order to cover the intended amount of material for this course over a 5 week period for Yale Summer Session, there will be supplemental **online materials** on Canvas including video clips of lectures, interviews, and films. The online materials will be approximately one hour worth of material per week, but these selections will be useful and drawn upon during lectures and class discussions/activities. Your weekly submissions (300-500 words) will demonstrate your engagement with the online materials.

Schedule of Meetings

Dates in the format of Tuesday and Thursday mornings

WEEK ONE

1. Introduction

Course Introduction:

What Is Worth Wanting? For yourself? For others? For Good?

Reading: Susan Wolf, "The Meaning of Lives"
Miroslav Volf, Matthew Croasmun, and Ryan McAnnally-Linz, *Life Worth Living*, xi–xvi, xxii–xvii, xxxii–xxxiv

Tanakh and Talmud plus Heschel's Vision of Life Worth Living

- Readings: Genesis 1:1–4:16; 12:1–4
Exodus 1:1–4:17; 5:1–6:9; 12; 19–20
Deuteronomy 6:1–7
Psalms 8, 19, 144–45
Isaiah 19:19–24
Kiddushin 30b.1–8
Pirkei Avot 1.1–3; 3.1, 8, 18; 4.1–2, 29; 6.2
- Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom*, 150–67
———, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, 33–36, 46–50, 98–99, 158–59, 200–1, 213–17, 273–75, 289–90,

WEEK TWO

Ancient Buddhist Texts and the Dalai Lama's Vision of Life Worth Living

- Readings: *Anguttara Nikāya* 8.1, 5–6
Majjhima Nikāya 26.1–15, 17–21, 31–42; 46.1–5, 14–22; 75
Samyutta Nikāya 12.61; 56.11–12
The Debate of King Milinda (Milindapanha) 1.1
The King of Samādhis Sūtra (Samādhirājasūtra) 1.5–6; 9.1–8, 17–20, 27–29, 33–35, 44, 48–49, 71–74
- The Dalai Lama and Thubten Chodron, *Library of Wisdom and Compassion*, vols. 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, and 8 (selections)

Wilde's Expressive Individualist Vision

Authenticity and Expressive Individualism

- Readings: Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 13–41
- Wilde, *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, 233–34, 237–40, 243–44, 262–68
———, *De profundis* (selections)

WEEK THREE

“Western Philosophical Tradition:” Agency, Ethics, Circumstance, and Affect

Readings: Cicero, *On Moral Ends* 3.26–29
John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 137, 142–43
Robert Nozick, “The Experience Machine, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 42–45
Seneca the Younger, 71.3-7, 19-28
“The Tripartite Formal Structure of Human Flourishing: A Hypothesis”

Volf, Croasmun, and McAnnally-Linz, *Life Worth Living*, 35–39, 46–48, 126–48, 153–60, 172–74, 201–4

Gandhi’s Advaita Vision and a Good Life in the “East”

Readings: *Bhagavad Gita* 1–3, 10, 12–13, 18

Gandhi, *From Yeravda Mandir*
———, *Collected Works* 43.60–62, 26.364–65, 33.83–89, 36.45–47, 37.380–81

WEEK FOUR

MLK’s Christian Vision of Life Worth Living

Readings: Amos 1–2, 5, 9
Micah 4–6
Luke 1:1–4, 26–56, 9:37–62, 10:25–37, 15, 22–24
Matthew 5–7

King, *Strength to Love*, 31–52, 65–73, 87–97, 133–43 (Chapters 4, 7, 9, and 13)
———, *Why We Can’t Wait*, 49–51

Kimmerer's North American Indigenous Vision

Indigeneity, Gratitude, and Reciprocity

Readings: Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, "A Note on Indigenous Stories"; "Skywoman Falling";
"The Council of Pecans"; "The Gift of Strawberries"; "Allegiance to Gratitude";
"The Honorable Harvest" (selections); "In the Footsteps of Nanabhozo"

WEEK FIVE

Helwa's Muslim Vision

Readings: Seyyed Hussein Nasr, "General Introduction," *The Study Quran*, xxiii–xxiv, xxxiii–xxxvi.
The Study Quran, 96; 1:1–5; 2:183–85, 196–203; 5:6–8; 7:172; 18:32–46;
20:130–32; 31:12–18; 50:19; 57:1–7; 89:15–30; 112.
Helwa, *Secrets of Divine Love* (selections)

Nietzsche's Vision

Readings: Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* §344
———, *Beyond Good and Evil* §260
———, *On the Genealogy of Morality* 1.4, 13–15; 2.16, 18–25; 3.11–12, 24–26
———, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, "Zarathustra's Prologue" §§ 3–5, 9; "On the Three Metamorphoses"; "On the Way of the Creator"; "On a Thousand and One Goals"; "On Self-Overcoming"; "On Old and New Tablets"; "The Sleepwalker Song" §§9–11