

# **The Four Pillars of the Good Life: Health, Wealth, Love, and Happiness**

*[This is a talk I recently gave at Ideaweek 2020 by [MOI Global](#).]*

When preparing the remarks to share with you, I was reminded of the [Stanford commencement speech by Steve Jobs](#) from 2005.

I remember vividly watching it in 2006 on YouTube, just as I was graduating from college, and it made a big impression on me. I even printed out some quotes from it and put them on my wall.

In it, Steve Jobs urged us, to find work that we truly love, and if we didn't find it yet, to „keep looking, and don't settle.”

I am one of those people that keeps looking. I am a seeker. I haven't found yet what I am looking for.

For a long time I sought external success. I sought recognition. I sought fame. My creative outlet for all this was founding and running internet startups.

Then, in early 2018, it all changed. I couldn't take it anymore. I became ill. Some people call it a burnout. Others call it a depression. Whatever it was, it was a serious existential crisis. I didn't choose to quit. It chose me, and I had to quit. It was one of the most challenging periods in my life.

Now, two years later, it's still early to tell. But I have a pretty strong feeling that when I look back on all this, it will be one of the best things that ever happened to me.

In his speech, Steve Jobs said: “you can't connect the dots by looking forward; you can only connect them by looking backward. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future.”

This is how I feel. I am trusting that my dots will connect, even if I have no idea how.

One of my interests is to study life and how to live well. I especially feel a connection to the old

Stoics, like [Seneca](#) and [Epictetus](#). This is how I discovered the four pillars of the good life: health, wealth, love, and happiness. I decided to make it my mantra, and reflect on it every morning.

In essence, this is what I wished I had been taught in school, instead of the unpractical and boring things I was forced to learn.

## **The first pillar is about health**

Why health? And why first? Because without health, nothing matters. Health. It's just one word. But the implications are wide and deep. It's about sleep, exercise, diet.

But also, and especially, about mental health, and spiritual health. Health in a holistic sense. This also includes our self-image, and the unconscious mind. Thanks to a suggestion by fellow MOI member Serge, I am currently doing a deep dive on [Psycho-Cybernetics](#) by Maxwell Maltz, and I can't recommend it highly enough. It has been described as the bible of self-improvement, and it has not disappointed at all.

Focusing on health is also about setting priorities. In my startup days, when I was sick or not feeling well, I just stubbornly continued to work. Now, not anymore. In the past, I couldn't relax. I was always tense.

Now, I realized how important relaxation is. I now spend hours in the bathtub, just relaxing, trying to undo my bad habits. It's remarkable how your decisions change, when you change the order of your priorities.

So, always put health first.

## **The second pillar is about wealth**

Wealth not for wealth's sake, but first and foremost, to buy freedom. Getting out of the rat race has always been important to me, and, to be honest, it was the primary driver to start my first startup.

But financial independence is just a stepping stone. It's not the end goal. It buys time and gives you space. And then, the task becomes: how to allocate this space. I'm currently in the process of thinking beyond my own freedom. How can I allocate my excess wealth, to do the most good?

I'm especially fond of a concept called "[effective altruism](#)", which uses a simple capital allocation philosophy: invest each dollar where the measurable impact is the biggest. I learned that currently, 15,000 children die every day. I somewhat knew that already. What I didn't know is that these deaths are caused by very basic, and preventable diseases.

According to the 2019 cost-effectiveness study by charity-evaluator [GiveWell](#), it takes just \$2300 dollars to prevent one such death. So, theoretically, to prevent all 15,000 daily deaths would take \$16.5 billion per year. This is totally doable, especially considering how wasteful most people in affluent countries live, me included. Other treatments, like cataract surgery to restore sight, or fistula surgery, to correct debilitating child-birth injuries, are even more cost-effective.

I have not decided yet how I exactly will allocate my time and resources. But what I can tell you is: applying the capital allocation framework to improve the lives of less fortunate people really pumps me up, and motivates me to continue to explore this area.

A fantastic book on the topic is [The Life You Can Save](#) by Peter Singer, which provides a great overview and summary of effective giving. By the way, the author has re-purchased the book rights and made the book [free](#) in 2019.

## **The third pillar is about love**

Humans are fundamentally social beings. Humans want to be useful and want to be part of a community. Humans want to feel a sense of duty. Especially towards others.

The more I think about it, the more I realize that love is likely the most fundamental energy. Maybe, who knows, it has even played a role in the creation of the Universe? So, for me, it makes sense to cultivate love. Not just romantic love. But unconditional love for everything and anything.

A great example is the love between humans and animals. It feels pure. It's also something that can be felt in products and companies. You feel when a founder puts its heart and soul into his product.

You can also feel it in movies. I felt it quite strongly in [Interstellar](#), where the love between a father and daughter was able to even transcend space and time.

## **The last pillar is about happiness**

For me, happiness is about creative expression. About new experiences. About learning and growing.

But also, about a sense of contentment and peace of mind. Being content with what is and what we have. Breaking free from the [hedonic treadmill](#).

In the speech, Steve Jobs said: „We will all die soon. There is no reason not to follow our heart.“

One of the heuristics I started to apply is: to [only do things that feel right](#). If I feel resistance, it's a sign that I'm on the wrong path. Another useful test is: do I look forward to the future with gladness and anticipation? If yes, I'm on the right path. If no, I better change something.

## Summary

In summary, the fundamental question that I ask myself is this: How do I allocate the most scarce and precious resource, my life energy?

Here's a challenging thought: we all call ourselves capital allocators. So, how well do we allocate our life energy? My feeling is, as least this applies to myself, not that greatly.

Let's challenge the status quo. Let's ask hard questions like „What's the point?“ or „What is the end game here?“ more often.

And maybe, in our investing, let me suggest a new metric which shall not called „total returns“, but instead „*life energy adjusted returns*“: What's the point of good returns, if we spend all our life's energy pursuing this goal?

What if instead of maximizing returns, we tried to minimize the input? This would free up precious life energy, that could be allocated differently. I don't know how you feel about this, but as for me, I find this idea quite inspiring.

Thank you.



Image by [28122162@N04](#)