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The secret of happiness is to achieve a balance between the challenges we take on and the skills we develop to meet them.

Around about now it is traditional for Presidents of ALIA to exhort members to consider nominating for one of the 400-odd office-bearer's positions within the Association.

The reasons why you should do so are straightforward and linked to a major justification for the provision of public and academic libraries.

Viktor Frankl, in the preface to the 1984 edition of his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, summarises an essential truth:

Don't aim at success—the more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side-effect of one's personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself...

More than two thousand years ago Aristotle concluded that, above all else, men and women seek happiness. While happiness itself is sought for its own sake, every other goal—health, beauty, money, or power—is valued only because we expect that it will make us happy.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Professor of Psychology at the University of Chicago, has spent his professional life studying what makes people happy. The secret of happiness, he reports, is to achieve a balance between the challenges we take on

and the skills we develop to meet them.

Csikszentmihalyi talks about the 'autotelic self'. The term literally means 'a self that has self-contained goals'.

For most people, goals are shaped directly by biological needs and social conventions, and therefore their origin is outside the self. For an autotelic person, the primary goals emerge from experience evaluated in consciousness, and therefore from the self proper. In other words, the autotelic individual operates in accordance with the top line, and not merely with the eye on the bottom line or the main chance.

This sense of the 'top line', as opposed to the bottom line which we usually say is the ultimate criterion of the worth of our work, is what makes the difference. Great achievers have an abiding sense of what the top line is (a concern for people and quality of life). When Abraham Maslow studied great achievers, he discovered that the difference between them and other people is that other people do all sorts of things to hide from their greatest possibilities and deny any sort of top line, a behaviour that he called the 'Jonah Complex'.

Balancing the top line with the bottom line (concerns with things, productivity, and profit) is essential for the long-term quality energy and vitality that derives from a meaningful life.

Great achievers achieve so

much purely because they continually energise themselves by enjoyment of what they do.

We are told that a major competitor for libraries is the leisure industry. Certainly public libraries are often dismissed as 'only' recreational and therefore unimportant and insupportable.

Yet Csikszentmihalyi has found that when people are pursuing leisure activities that are expensive in terms of the outside resources required—activities that demand expensive equipment—they are significantly less happy than when involved in inexpensive leisure. People are happiest when conversing or involved in some craft or hobby which requires few material resources but demands a relatively high investment of psychic energy.

Leisure that uses up external resources often requires less attention, and as a consequence generally provides less memorable rewards. Some of the most exhilarating experiences we undergo, Mihaly points out, are generated inside the mind, triggered by information that challenges our ability to think.

Librarians and Libraries are, whether we acknowledge it or not, very much in the forefront in maintaining the emotional health of the communities in which we operate. Such a mission is not only a great cause, it is also a great talking point, and, if handled well, a great justification for support. ■