Guerrilla Altruism: Maximizing Acts of Kindness for Well-Being

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Abstract
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Keywords
altruism, acts of kindness, random acts of kindness, pay it forward, guerrilla, guerrilla altruism, collaborative deconstruction, mystery, art, beauty, surprise, positive emotion, positive resonance, positive psychology, positive interventions, well-being

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities | Other Psychology
Guerrilla Altruism: Maximizing Acts of Kindness for Well-Being

Elizabeth Sheeler

University of Pennsylvania

A Capstone Project Submitted
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Applied Positive Psychology

Advisor: Meghan Keener Opp, MAPP

August 1, 2020
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Acknowledgments

There are so many people to thank—not only for their support of this Capstone project, but of my entire MAPP experience and of me. First, I’d like to express my gratitude to my advisor, Mika Keener Opp, for her openness, encouragement, understanding and enthusiasm. Her input and willingness to go along on this ride with me was invaluable, and I’m so thankful for her. A note of thanks to my thoughtful, supportive journal reader, Jan Stanley, and to my beloved Cohort 10, who always keep me smiling and laughing.

The biggest bear hug of thanks goes to my family: my husband Tim, and my kids Claire and Will, who were so supportive of my wish to go back to school and reinvent myself. They graciously reengineered their lives to support my MAPP dreams. I love you all so much. Thanks also to my parents, who taught me by example what love, compassion, altruism and beauty look like, but even more importantly what they feel like.

To Kim Agnew and Jillian Hanson: My friends, mentors and advisors who have been willing to go on a journey into the spaces in my head where guerrilla altruism was living, and to help me pull it out. I’ll never understand the serendipity that brought the three of us together (the mystery is what makes it so good!) but I’m forever grateful that it did.

This paper was written in loving memory of my mother, Patricia Quirk, one of the most creative, beautiful people I’ll ever know. She guided me in life with kindness, love and beauty, and has continued to do so, even from beyond.
добро должно быть с кулаками
“Kindness must come with fists.”
-Poet & Playwright Mikhail Svetlov, 1959

**Introduction**

We have a crisis of epic proportions in our country today. The frontline is our cities, our schools, our workplaces, our homes—it’s happening everywhere. This crisis is that of our well-being. According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health in a survey of over 600,000 U.S. adolescents and adults, the rates of major depressive episodes increased a dramatic 52% from 2005 to 2017 among kids ages 12-17, with an even more dramatic 63% increase in young adults, ages 18-25 (Twenge, Cooper, Joiner, Duffy, & Binau, 2019). While numbers are slightly less alarming among adults, it is clear that depression and serious psychological distress are on the rise. In fact, in the midst of a global pandemic and unprecedented cultural unrest, sadly, the crisis of well-being appears to be getting worse. In March 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic crisis, nearly 45% of American adults polled by the Kaiser Family Foundation reported that worry and stress due to the coronavirus epidemic had already had a negative impact on their mental health (KFF, 2020).

Clearly, we need change in many dimensions of public and private life. What if there was a way, both collectively and individually, to jumpstart, or add a spark to infuse more positivity, beauty and altruism into our lives and our communities? Could deliberate, selfless acts of kindness infused with art, surprise and a little mysterious, rebellious edge help change the quality of our lives? I propose yes, and that there may be an ideal “recipe” for acts of kindness to make the most impact to build positive emotions in individuals and positive resonance in groups and communities. Utilizing ingredients studied in positive psychology, selfless acts of kindness can
be less about randomness and more about deliberate acts of altruism designed to promote positive emotion and well-being, so that recipients feel compelled to “pay it forward.”

What is Positive Psychology?

Positive psychology is the study of human well-being and flourishing. Using science-based research and methodology, it tries to understand what makes life worth living—what makes “the good life.” Rather than focusing on what’s wrong with people, positive psychology focuses on what’s right with people. For nearly 100 years, the field of psychology largely focused on moving people and the human mind metaphorically from negative to zero. Positive psychology takes this a step further and investigates what moves people from neutral to positive. Following in the humanist and cognitive behavioral legacy of pioneers like Abraham Maslow and Aaron Beck, positive psychology picks up where they left off.

In 1998, Dr. Martin Seligman, considered the father of positive psychology, challenged his fellow psychologists at the American Psychology Association’s annual conference to consider a radical shift in the profession for both practice and research to focus on the positive. Since then, positive psychology has grown and flourished, inspiring thousands of new studies and research on topics such as resilience, grit, mindfulness, character strengths, and positive emotions like gratitude, serenity, interest, hope, pride, amusement, inspiration, awe and love, among others.

Seligman later developed a theoretical model of wellbeing called PERMA, combining the elements of Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment (2012). In this (updated) model, Seligman specifically added Relationships and Accomplishment, acknowledging that to flourish, people need both social connection, love and interaction, and to be challenged in meaningful ways.
In the early years of positive psychology, Dr. Christopher Peterson also played a critical role in the field of positive psychology. A co-founder of the movement alongside Seligman, Peterson worked for many years on the study of optimism, and then went on to develop groundbreaking research on character strengths and virtues (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004). Most pertinent to this paper, however, is Peterson’s overarching belief in altruistic motivation, and his often quoted idea summarizing positive psychology that: “Other people matter.” (2006, p. 10).

There couldn’t be a better time to introduce new ideas inspired by Peterson’s mantra, and rooted in positive psychology. Based on scientific evidence, positive psychology attempts to dissect and understand the best parts of humankind. Why do other people matter? What makes us happy? How do we experience flow? By asking these questions, positive psychology scientists and practitioners aim to develop practices and methods, often called positive interventions, to expand people’s awareness of the strengths, capabilities and power within all of us to excel and flourish.

**What are Positive Interventions?**

In the course of human existence, we are unable to control many facets of our lives. From the weather to politics to someone rear-ending your car on the way home from work, often there are few intentional choices we can make to control these events. However, one area of human experience that is within our control is our ability to set plans in motion towards our own well-being, and sometimes, the well-being of others. Particularly in our modern world, where there are so many demands to our attention, and our brains are making decisions at every moment about what is relevant to us and what is not, the order and control of intentions is critical to our well-being (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Positive interventions are helpful, elemental tools within
the practice of positive psychology that provide the structure to implement plans for increasing our well-being.

First and foremost, a positive intervention must be simply that: positive. It must stem from a hope to move the needle forward in increasing one’s own well-being or in making the world a better place. All of us inherently possess hope (Magyar-More & Lopez, 2015), and with this innate spark of hope, positive interventions offer framework to build affirmative change through intentional, measurable methods (Pawelski, in press) in order to develop or build positive emotions or feelings (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009) such as gratitude, meaning, or joy. Another important ingredient is intention. For those undertaking a positive intervention, there must be intention for positive growth and change—intent stemming from hope for creating better or for feeling better.

In plainer language, if well-being was a delicious cake, positive interventions are the recipe the chef uses in putting it all together. Of course, cakes come in all different flavors and shapes—some are grand, and elaborately decorated, while others are basic and simple. But there are fundamentals of every cake recipe that a chef must follow. No matter how big or small, decorated or plain, any successful cake must have certain ingredients and require some time to bake. There may be a variety of ingredients, variation of quantities, or different amounts of time for baking, but in every instance, to determine how the cake turned out, someone has to taste it to know just how good it is. As with a cake recipe, positive interventions provide the structure in the process of implementing change to increase well-being and improve our lives. Also, like a cake, who we prepare the cake for is up to us: we can bake the cake for ourselves, or we can bake the cake and share it with others. We can even revise and update our recipe, or make the cake a surprise. The choice is ours.
No matter the intended recipient, customizing a positive intervention is an important element in its success and longevity. Dr. James Pawelski’s The Elements Model (in press) suggests that rather than strictly working with a positive intervention as a single unit, we should embrace and adjust the variables (such as dosage, variety, sequence) to offer a more successful approach that will result in better, longer lasting outcomes. Of course, depending on the person undertaking the positive intervention, other variables and complexity come into play as well. These factors include the person’s effort, personality, social support, and motivation. In response, Pawelski breaks down the constitutional elements of positive inventions beginning with the process elements of activity, active ingredient, target system, target change, and culminating with what he calls the motivating factor of desired outcome. Pawelski’s elemental model is helpful for operationalizing positive interventions (and as positive psychology practitioners may argue, scientifically essential), but focuses almost exclusively on positive interventions as a self-focused pursuit.

Pawelski’s model ties in with much of positive psychology research and literature, in which positive interventions are treated as a self-focused activity, with the goal to impact or enhance one’s own well-being. In fact, positive psychology itself has suffered criticism for its self-focused individualism. An article by Becker and Maracek (2008) strongly criticize positive psychology as a movement rooted in personal satisfaction and determined by individual choice and self-focused interventions rather than towards an outward focused, collective well-being. Reflecting this self-focused predisposition in what is considered the formative meta-analysis on positive psychology interventions, Sin & Lyubomirsky (2009) delve into self-customized, person to person “fit” for positive interventions by effectively examining variables and outcomes. On top of important findings showing that positive interventions boost well-being and decrease
depression, their work shows that various moderators such as depression status, age, intervention format, duration and comparison group type come into play (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). An important moderator that stands out in this article is self-selection—those electing to participate in a positive intervention—because it reflects their motivation. Perhaps, this research bias arises because it is easier to track results like increased well-being and diminished depression from motivated self-selector participants than to track outcomes in unwitting bystanders who may be recipients of a kindness intervention.

**About Random Acts of Kindness (RAKs)**

Other-focused acts of kindness directed at helping others are commonly known as Random Acts of Kindness (RAKs), and they are designed as an act of kindness one undertakes to benefit another person or the outside world. The origins of the phrase “Random Acts of Kindness” seem to be as mysterious as they are random. One account traces it back to 1982 when journalist Anne Herbert asserts that she wrote the phrase “Practice random kindness and senseless acts of beauty” on a napkin while in a restaurant in California (Passmore & Oades, 2015). Another account claims that the movement began at Our Lady of Lourdes School in Mobile, Alabama with a program for children (Baskerville et al., 2000). Perhaps the best known and documented person attached to the movement is Dr. Chuck Wall, who after hearing about another “senseless act of violence” on the local news in 1993, decided to write a response in the opposite direction. A business professor at Bakersfield College, he encouraged his students to undertake “one act of senseless kindness,” and he says, a movement was born (KindnessUSA, 2017). His involvement in what he calls the “Kindness Movement” has been highlighted by media attention, including appearances on The Oprah Winfrey Show. Dr. Wall describes RAKs as:
An act that positively influences the life of both the giver and the receiver is a kindness. It doesn't have to cost money or be difficult to perform. It can be spontaneous (random) or premeditated. It can be as simple as a smile or a thank you, and as complicated as starting a non-profit organization to benefit those in need (KindnessUSA.org, 2017)

As a personal aside, I had a “Perform Random Acts of Kindness and Senseless Beauty” sticker on the bumper of my Volkswagen my freshman year of college in 1991 that inspired an Ohio State Trooper to let me off on a speeding violation. It was a memorable event forever etched in my brain, and also leads me to believe that the “movement” probably predates Dr. Wall’s 1993 account.

Acts of kindness have proven themselves to be a positive benefit to the originators or givers of the kindness, while less has been studied about the specific outcomes for recipients. It is generally observed within psychology that a wide range of acts of kindness interventions boost subjective happiness of givers, including acts of being kind to others, self-focused kindness, and observing kindness around us (Rowland & Curry, 2019). It appears both through empirical and evaluative data that kindness makes a significant impact on individuals and groups of people who serve as kindness “givers.”

In 2017, the Bluewater Health (BWH) system in Sarnia, Ontario undertook an initiative to create a “culture of kindness” (Landry, Bisson, Cook, & Morrison, 2017, p. 43) by encouraging employees to perform random acts of kindness each day. As a result, dramatic increases were observed in employee satisfaction in the workplace and in positive patient reports from both the emergency room and general hospital patients, all in all demonstrating “the effectiveness of focusing on kindness to create a better environment for staff and patients” alike (Landry, Bisson, Cook, & Morrison, 2017, p. 47).

Anecdotally, people love Random Acts of Kindness, both the idea of undertaking them and receiving them. A unique non-profit called the Random Acts of Kindness Foundation was
established in 1995 (by an anonymous donor – how wonderfully mysterious!) with the mission to “make kindness the norm” by offering free resources for individuals, employers and educators to help spread kindness. The Foundation’s web site encourages people to sign up to become “RAKtivists” (or Random Acts of Kindness activists), and it offers hundreds of ways to spread kindesses such as: being kind to your waiter, complimenting a driver on their parking job, or planting a tree (Random Acts of Kindness, 2020).

The RAK Foundation also provides a platform for RAKtivists to share their kindesses and stories. In fact, Random Act of Kindness stories are often so appealing that they garner media coverage and viral social media attention. The RAK Foundation Instagram page currently has about 23,000 followers. What exactly is it that makes these types of kindness so fascinating to us? This question captivated me, leading me to examine a variety of different types of kindness acts to understand variables or elements that may pack the biggest well-being punch for recipients.

**Guerrilla Style**

**The Flower Flash**

In 2017, I was stopped dead in my tracks by an arresting act of kindness featured in *The New York Times Style Magazine*. Called “guerrilla flower installations” (Hass, Oct. 5, 2017), the article and accompanying photos highlighted spontaneous, awe inspiring, and beautiful flower creations popping up around Manhattan featuring huge, splashy floral art arranged in unlikely places, such as city trash cans, old phone booths and barricaded construction zones. These “Flower Flashes” as they became known, were the work of Lewis Miller, an event florist by day and, by night, a guerrilla artist of a new, ephemeral type of street art.
Flower Flashes began in October 2016. After an event with a plethora of extraneous flowers, the designer and his team took to the city and created a striking, colorful rainbow creation at the John Lennon Memorial in Central Park. From the outset, there was a surprising outgrowth of the Flower Flash. Miller commented in a 2017 *Vogue* interview, that beyond the surprise, joy and delight of passersby, people began to take the flowers from the installation, slowly deconstructing the work, and adding to its impermanence and ephemeral nature.

He says:

“With our first one, the Imagine Mosaic in Central Park, we were surprised at how quickly a crowd had formed. And in this age of social media, we saw the fruits of our labor and were instantly rewarded via Instagram! We got to see how our idea translated in real time with hundreds of selfies and photographs documenting the flowers throughout the course of the day. It was really cool to see how people changed and altered the installation, sometimes by rearranging the flowers, other times by simply taking them!” (Perez, April, 20, 2017)

![Figure 1. Instagram posts of Lewis Miller’s first Flower Flash at the John Lennon Memorial in New York’s Central Park in October 2016. Photo by Lewis Miller Design. From: https://lewismillerdesign.com/flowers-for-the-people/](image)

It didn’t take long for Lewis Miller to become known for these stunning and unexpected creations, and to leave New York media, social media, and the citizens of New York wondering
when and where the next flower flash creation would show up. This sense of mystery made these guerrilla style flower art installations all the more intriguing – when would one pop up? What would it look like? Where would it be? Will I run into one? These unanswered questions allowed New Yorkers, and increasingly, the world through social media, to add their own story and meaning to them. By early 2017, Lewis Miller was gaining notoriety (especially in fashion circles) as the “bandit” behind the Flower Flash, beginning with the aforementioned *Vogue Magazine* feature in April 2017 (Perez) titled “This Florist-Bandit is the Hero We Need Right Now.”

Lewis Miller has called his floral street art installations “a gift to New Yorkers” to “create a positive, emotional response through flowers” (Lewis Miller Design, 2020). My own second hand interest in the Flower Flash led me to wonder what made these floral works of art so captivating and effective in spreading positive emotion, wonder, awe and joy to the people who experienced them in person, and like me, virtually.

As an avid gardener and floral-arranger myself, I have always loved flowers for their beauty, but also for the power they possess to elevate a space or a mood. In fact, a 2005 study showed that flowers effectively create positive emotion and authentic Duchenne smiles (Haviland-Jones, Rosario, Wilson, & McGuire, 2005) for those that receive them. A Duchenne smile is a natural smile that has been scientifically proven to show true enjoyment through the contraction of certain facial muscles (Duchenne, 1862/1990) (Ekman, Davidson, & Friesen, 1990).

But there is more at play here than flower power in the Flower Flash—although they are certainly beautiful, and very often, awe-inspiring in their floral creativity, artistry and scale. For certain, Flower Flashes are different than receiving flowers as a thank you or a gift. They are
intriguing for their beauty, spontaneity and surprise, creating a wonderful sense of mystery with a bit of an edge. Perhaps most importantly to me, Flower Flashes seemed altruistic and egalitarian: a shared gift created for the wonder and joy of others. All you have to do is happen to be in the right place at the right time, or catch it on Instagram.

Figure 2. A Flower Flash by Lewis Miller Design in front of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Trash Can: Metropolitan Museum of Art. From https://lewismillerdesign.com/flower-flash/page/2/

Over time, the worthy media and public attention has brought Lewis Miller further into the forefront, allowing him to effectively capitalize on the love and impact of the Flower Flash. He now offers a “Flower Flash Box” of lush, fresh blooms home delivered to customers, accompanied by a video of Miller himself giving a flower arranging tutorial. Ranging in price from $255 to $385, the Flower Flash boxes were soon accompanied by a line of $68 Flower Flash candles. Miller also recently teamed up with high-end fashion purveyor Moda Operandi to
offer three different themed Flower Flash box options for purchase: City Garden, Country Wildflower and Beach Bloom. Egalitarian no more!

Miller generously donates portions of the proceeds of these commercial ventures to a variety of worthy charitable causes, and he continues to mesmerize New York and social media with spontaneous flashes capturing the natural appeal of flowers, often highlighting current social issues. A recent picture posted by Lewis Miller on Instagram in response to the Black Lives Matter movement of a Flower Flash installation spelling out “Vote” in New York’s Washington Square Park has garnered over 10,000 likes. The spontaneity and the beauty of the Flash itself continues.

However, suddenly much of its edge of mystery, and more importantly, its magic sense of altruism, was lost in my eyes. Unexpectedly, Miller offering a commoditized version of the Flower Flash made it lose its purity of essence for me. What had made these guerrilla Flower Flashes so enchanting to me in the first place? I began to wonder: was it the mystery, the awe-inspiring beauty, the altruistic nature? Or was it a combination of these things? And what had the Flower Flash actually “lost” when it became commoditized? To answer these questions, I began to look for other guerrilla style acts of kindness and see what they had in common with the Flower Flash, and what about them may be different. From there, I began to consider whether aspects of these acts of kindness could be manipulated and developed—rather than for monetization or commodification—but instead, to explicitly provoke positive emotions in the recipients. Could random acts of kindness be maximized for well-being?

**The Fun Theory Piano Stairs**

In 2009, DDB, an advertising agency in Stockholm, undertook a social experiment with Volkswagen to test what they called “The Fun Theory” (Diaz, October 7, 2009) by converting
normal subway station steps into a musical set of stairs that effectively act as a working piano. The Fun Theory speculated that by making it fun to walk up the stairs, more people would choose to use the piano stairs than the adjacent escalator, effectively (or unwittingly?) choosing the healthy, more environmentally sustainable behavior over the other.

Their theory was right. Sixty-six percent more people choose to take the piano stairs than the elevator (Rolighetsteorin.se, October 7, 2009). In my opinion, fun was really only one component in this experiment’s success. One of the best parts of this intervention was that DDB filmed both the installation of the stairs, as well as people’s reaction to it. What struck me most in watching the video was not just people’s behavior change in response to the stairs, but their attitude change. Even watching it second hand on YouTube (Rolighetsteorin.se, October 7, 2009), the delight, wonder and surprise of the unsuspecting commuters happening upon the stairs is obvious and pervasive. I’ve watched this video many times—at least once in a class full of graduate students and professors. In that packed room, watching the video of subway riders discover the stairs, laughs and smiles of amusement filled the lecture room. There is real pleasure not just in watching participants’ reactions, but what Émile Durkheim coined and Barbara Fredrickson has expanded upon in her work on positive resonance as “a collective effervescence” for the participants and the viewers, even those that are watching it thousands of miles away and ten years later on YouTube. Collective effervescence is when a group of people experience the same thought or action, which causes a collective excitement and unifies the group (Durkheim 1965/1912; Durkheim & Swain, 2012; Fredrickson, 2013). But fun wasn’t the only element causing this here, so what are the other ingredients in this intervention?
The stairs were certainly creative, if not *artful*, mixing both the visual of piano keys on the stairs, along with sound that reacts to the pressure of steps upon them (reminiscent of the movie *Big*). The installation is surprising to commuters in both their novelty, and their unexpected nature on that day. And they were *mysterious*. There appears to be no signage anywhere to explain *why* these stairs were suddenly transformed.

Were the stairs awe-inspiring? For some, it appears, yes. They stop and seem to experience the typical responses of awe: wide eyes or open mouth. For others, they appear amused, or impressed with novelty and innovation but certainly not awe struck. As with any intervention, there are a number of people who don’t even seem to notice. Finally, although generated as part of an ad campaign, it appears that the people experiencing the steps that day did not know that. This intervention seemed completely *altruistic* and similar to the Flower Flash, simply placed there for the enjoyment of others. All you had to do was be in the right place at the right time.
Banksy

After considering the Flower Flash and the piano stairs, I began to think about mystery, or even the hint of mystery, and how it impacts acts or interventions. Perhaps the most widely known person using mystery to impact others in our modern world who remains completely anonymous is the artist known as Banksy. With graffiti as his medium, Banksy began creating subversive, often humorous imagery on London buildings and structures in the early 2000s to subtly provoke passersby and to poke fun at the Establishment. As Banksy’s work gained attention, his guile increasingly turned to the art world and art insiders who attempt to capitalize on his name and artwork. While Banksy’s art is irreverent and surprising and lends to its appeal, the brilliance of Banksy and what continues to make his art so intriguing is his understanding that his anonymity creates “its own invaluable buzz” (Ellsworth-Jones, February, 2013). The mystery of Banksy’s identity, as well as the uncertainty or unexpected nature of knowing when and what he will do next creates a pull to him and his work greater than most artists of our time. In fact, Banksy’s most iconic work, Girl with a Balloon, first created on a side of a building around 2002, was voted Britain’s best loved work of art in a 2017 poll (Kennedy, July 17, 2017).
So, what does Banksy have to do with well-being? He has captured the essence of guerrilla interventions. He has created his own unique recipe of art, intrigue, surprise, irreverence and altruism, and in doing so, is making art more approachable. 90% of people polled in a UK MyArtBroker.com poll said that Banksy has made contemporary art more accessible (2020).

What is “Guerrilla Style”? 

Both Banksy and Lewis Miller have been described as guerrilla artists, but what exactly does that mean? An examination of the word guerrilla and its link to activism is essential here. Guerrilla warfare has been in existence almost since the beginning of time, and is classified as “a type of warfare fought by irregulars in fast-moving, small-scale actions against orthodox military and police forces and, on occasion, against rival insurgent forces, either independently or in conjunction with a larger political-military strategy” (Asprey, November 6, 2019). Perhaps most pertinent is what has come to be understood as the modern idea of a guerrilla movement, best represented by Fidel Castro’s overthrow of Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista in 1959, and
idealized in popular culture with images of revolutionary Ernesto “Che” Guevara. The word guerrilla itself means “little war” in Spanish, and throughout history has been associated with radical, revolutionary and even terrorist movements.

In modern, mainstream use, “guerrilla” has come to symbolize strategies that employ unconventionality, creativity and surprise, such as those outlined in Jay Conrad Levinson’s 1984 book *Guerrilla Marketing*. In all of the examples given here, the use of “guerrilla” captures an essence of rebellion, irreverence, creativity, empowerment, and most importantly, mystery or anonymity in their implementation without detection.

**Guerrilla Art**

Guerrilla artists like Banksy are often called “street artists” because they use unbounded environments like city buildings for their art, instead of utilizing traditional artistic methods like canvas and paint, in which their work would hang in bounded environments like museums or galleries. These works are inspired more by the effect they may offer rather than their physical materials.

Guerrilla art follows in the path of earlier movements in art history like “happenings” and performance art. Art happenings first began in 1959 and proliferated in the art world through the 1960s. They were typically theatrical style performances that, although usually occurring in galleries, were unrestricted by gallery walls and usually incorporated the audience in some way. Performance art was a natural outgrowth of these artworks in the 1970s. Similar to happenings, performance art often uses theatrical elements–but instead of being staged in galleries, they can and do happen anywhere, at any time. Performance art emerged as a movement in the art world to retaliate against the traditional idea of static art hanging on a wall that could be easily commoditized, and bought and sold. The essence of performance art, its forebearer the
happening, and its cousin guerrilla art, lies in their spontaneous, momentary nature. Also important is that all three were certainly conceptualized as acts of rebellion and activism in the art world.

Examining the impact of guerrilla artist Banksy led me to other guerrilla style interventionists in the art world, and to explore how anonymity, surprise and mystery play into the power and appeal of actions and movements. The Guerrilla Girls, formed in 1985 in New York, are a group of female artists who use gorilla masks to hide their identities with the mission to fight racism and sexism in the art world. They do so by spontaneously appearing at art events in disguise, as well as by creating posters, billboards, books, video and other media to make a statement in their work to fight discrimination. The identity of the members are, and always have been, unknown, lending to their mystery, appeal, and longevity.

Figure 5. An early example of activist work by the Guerrilla Girls used for a billboard in New York City in 1989. The Guerrilla Girls conducted a “weenie count” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, highlighting the number of female artists represented in the museum’s collection vs. the number of female and male nudes on view. Copyright © Guerrilla Girls. Courtesy www.guerrillagirls.com

Frankly, if female artists showed up at art events protesting without gorilla masks, it wouldn’t make such a memorable and powerful statement—or it would be quickly forgotten. That the guerrilla girls hide their identities is what endures public interest and attracts continued attention. Their message is rebelliously defiant and often humorous. It is what empowers their work, and highlights the impact of the guerrilla style activism that they employ.
Other guerrilla style interventionists include the Green Guerrillas, a group of activists in the 1970s who began reclaiming dilapidated urban areas in New York City by throwing seed bombs over fences into vacant lots, planting gardens in dilapidated areas, and even planting small plots of flowers in busy intersections on the city’s streets (greenguerrillas.org, 2020). Most important to this discussion, they did these plantings often in secret and without asking anyone’s permission—acts of rebellion and beautification all at once.

Figure 6. An example of a “pothole garden,” a type of guerrilla garden installation. From My Modern Met. Photo by Paige Briethart. From https://mymodernmet.com/pothole-flowers-protest-art/

Another example of this type of activism is Guerrilla Knitting, or “yarn bombing” - a form of activism credited to artist Magda Sayeg, who started by knitting her door handle in 2005 and continued on to knit other innocuous urban structures like stop signs, catching the attention of and beguiling the public.
What do all of these guerrilla interventions have in common? They are intentional acts, and while they may appear random or surprising to viewers, they are premeditated, deliberate, purposeful—even calculated. Some of them use beauty or art. At the very least, they are all certainly attention-catching. Often there is an opposing dichotomy between the tenderness of the art form and the activist edge, creating an allure. Anonymity is an important factor in most, but not all, of these interventions. The three elements that are consistent in all of these examples are mystery, an edge of rebellion, and the creators’ altruistic and artistic impulse to put something out in the world for others. Most importantly, they very much take on a tension between something edgy in their guerrilla style activism, and something soft, like art or altruism (Elvis, 2010).

**Guerrilla Altruism (& Me)**

What do you get when you mix guerrilla style, art, random acts of kindness, altruism and positive psychology? (No, this is not the set up for a joke…)
Art, beauty, creativity and design has always fascinated me. And while I’m an equal opportunity art lover (I love it all—I’m open for any gallery opening, concert, performance, museum…), my heart truly lies with the visual arts. I loved art as a child, but until I was a teenager, I believed the only way to really be involved and to make a difference in the arts was as an artist. In turn, I took every studio class I could: watercolor painting, oil painting, drawing, life drawing, photography, pottery, weaving, jewelry-making. You name it, I’ve taken it. I always enjoyed the classes, but I was a bit of a tortured artist in that I never felt that my art was good enough to truly be impactful.

It wasn’t until my sophomore year in college when I walked into my required Survey of Art History class that I understood how and why my interest in art was valuable and important. I sat in that class in awe as we clicked through slide after slide viewing works I both knew and didn’t know. Familiar works seemed different in this context, as we explored art through the ages. Sitting in that dark classroom I realized art had real power—it had shaped cultures, changed minds, inspired lives, and challenged beliefs—and you didn’t have to be an artist to appreciate it, understand it, study it, live it, and most importantly, share it. I remember calling my parents after that first art history class and telling them that I was changing my major to art history. I knew I had to be part of that world.

Later, I landed my dream job as the Communications Director at the Akron Art Museum in my hometown of Akron, Ohio. I often mused that it wasn’t really a job in the sense that most people have jobs. How could it be? I got to meet artists, talk about art all day, stroll through the galleries on my lunch break. My job was to immerse myself in art, and I loved it. Even more important about that job for me in the long run, was that my role as Communication Director required me to do just that: to communicate about and share art. In doing so, I began to see on a
day to day basis in very real, poignant ways how art, beauty and creativity changed people: how rambunctious kids got quiet and stood in awe in front of the huge painting in Gallery 1; how the museum’s sculpture courtyard brought people together as a central meeting space in our community; how expressions on visitors’ faces would change and engage as they listened to an artist talk about their work. I already knew from my college art history classes that art and beauty had power, but I also learned how the right mix of marketing—adding a little edge here or a bit of splash there—could make art more engaging, appealing, and even cool, to a wider audience. What I realized most in that job is that I had power through my work in the arts to change myself, my community and—just maybe—the world.

I became an arts activist. I’ve found my community arts engagement work empowering and lifechanging. I’m able to nurture my own love of the arts as well as build, promote and nurture the arts throughout the community, and I relish it. I have served in leadership roles to help fundraise and build a much-needed community arts gallery; I founded and led a young professionals art organization; I helped raise capital funds for a wonderful community children’s theater. I now sit on the Board of Directors for the Akron Art Museum—I take pride in sharing its programs, mission and purpose in a different way within that institution. I’ve seen through my work how the arts can change people, bring people together, and make people and places better. There is a feeling I get when I walk into a museum, sit in a concert, or walk through a garden. It’s a buzz or a vibe, and I have felt strongly that my role is to share it so that more people can experience that feeling. It’s too good not to share.

As a student of positive psychology, I learned more about the science behind these feelings. I began to realize that all the art, beauty and creativity that I have always loved could be even more transformative than I ever dreamed. All it might take is the right mixture or recipe—
the ideal alchemy of art, beauty, creativity, surprise, and most importantly, a mysterious, rebellious edge.

This is where guerrilla altruism comes in.

The term “guerrilla altruism” was initially used by architecture professor Scott Shall, who taught a class of the same name at Temple University beginning in 2009. Shall (personal communication, June 23, 2020) explained to me that the class was designed to provoke students to think of themselves as activists by creating innovative solutions for global problems through impermanent, yet altruistic methods. Each semester, the class, which is still a popular mainstay in the Temple curriculum, is focused on a different theme, such as water or food, and students are challenged to envision concepts to build solutions that question existing ideas about how these structures traditionally function. The class symbolizes a unique blend of the elements I’ve noted previously: the edgy concept of guerrilla activism with the softness of altruism, or creating something (without asking permission) to put out into the world, with the simple goal to make it a better place.

Shall’s concept of guerrilla altruism is considered through the lens of architecture, but when guerrilla altruism is viewed and applied through positive psychology, it provides a slightly different, yet meaningful shift. In this light, I’ve defined guerrilla altruism as: a selfless, altruistic act conceived by the giver with the intention to provoke positive emotions for recipients, and created solely for the good of others using elements such as art, beauty or creativity, surprise and, most importantly mystery. While these elements may be manipulated for effect, it is essential that an act of guerrilla altruism is carefully designed and implemented so that the identity of the giver(s) remains unknown. Preferably, the act is executed without detection and devised to include an element of “collaborative deconstruction” in which
participants become active collaborators by inviting them to take part in its deconstruction. Ideally, acts of guerrilla altruism effectively combine a rebellious edge while promoting positive emotions such as love and kindness, maximizing this duality so that recipients feel compelled to pay it forward.

While my definition of guerrilla altruism may share some overlap with Shall’s, in the following sections I will outline the distinctive elements of my version of guerrilla altruism, and why I believe it may provide an ideal recipe for well-being.

**Altruism**

Altruism, as defined by Merriam-Webster, is “the principle or practice of unselfish concern for the welfare of others” (Merriam-Webster, 2020). It seems pretty straightforward: people like to help other people. Yet, psychologists and sociologists have battled for over half a century whether altruism is a type of “helping behavior” or a specific kind of “motivation” (Piliavan, 2009). There are even lines of theory that claim that there is no such thing as altruism, because every human act, even those that seem unselfish, must have some egoistic concern (Batson & Powell, 2003; Batson, 1987). At the same time, studies have shown that very young children intuitively help others, even strangers, regardless of whether or not they receive a benefit to themselves (Warneken & Tomasello, 2006), pointing to the innate human desire to help. Questions have also been considered within the altruism debate about its evolutionary role and why humans might have evolved with altruistic tendencies; it appears that groups with more altruistic people have evolutionarily out-competed groups with less altruistic people (Piliavan, 2009). Sober and Wilson (2011) offer a multi-selection model that includes larger group, reciprocal, and kin relationships, and concede that much of human behavior has evolved to benefit the larger group.
Times of terrible strife and stress in human history have shown us that even in high risk situations, there are countless instances of people offering altruistic help to one another. Examples of what has been called “stealth altruism” by Holocaust victims in Nazi concentration camps were very common, even when the risk of these acts of courage and sacrifice could result in torture or death (Shostak, 2016, p. 297). A recent movement in Holocaust studies suggests that these types of quiet, yet heroic, acts of altruism have gone under-reported and untold in history books and museums, with much more attention given to the horrors of the concentration camps. This is a vivid example of our negativity bias, the well-researched phenomenon in psychology that theorizes that bad events have a stronger impact on us than good ones, providing us with an inherent desire to focus on the worst of human behavior (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). Perhaps instead, the most altruistic among us are truly selfless, and the lack of notice paid to their acts is a result of the givers’ authentic desire to help others anonymously without any self-focused need for attention or to help themselves.

No matter which side of the altruism debate one falls under, it is clear that altruism is a type of prosocial behavior, or acts that are designed to help others. However, much of positive psychology research and literature focuses on the outcome of the behavior to the originator or the giver of the prosocial act, rather than the recipients. One specific area is that of prosocial spending through gift giving. Specifically, spending money on someone else versus spending money on oneself has been shown to predict greater happiness for the giver (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008, 2014). Other studies have focused explicitly on altruism. One found that giving through altruism in various forms such as volunteering and charitable causes enhances both physical and mental health (Post, 2005). Post (2005) goes so far as to say that people who behave altruistically tend to enjoy good health and increased longevity, as well as increased well-being
and happiness.

Perhaps most interesting in Post’s (2005) research to this paper is that of his reference of the Anderson Model (2003) in which Norman Anderson identifies key dimensions that determine health and longevity. In reference to altruism, Post specifically points to Anderson’s idea that generosity “gives rise to a love of humanity” and wherein provides a “certain delight in the affirmation of others” (p. 72), inviting the idea that the affirmation or response of recipients is important. Throughout much of altruism and positive psychology research, the focus of the intervention is on the effect of the giver’s mood or well-being. If altruism is truly unselfish, certainly more research must be placed on the end-user effect of altruistic acts, and determining what makes them most impactful for recipients.

**Prosocial Behavior**

Prosocial behavior is an overarching term used to describe intentional acts that help or benefit others (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1990). For example, these may include what are considered everyday kindnesses, such as bringing flowers to a sick friend, or acts intended to benefit the larger world. Donating blood, volunteering, and contributing money to a worthy cause are all considered acts of prosocial behavior. Research in prosocial behavior accommodates more robust data about the transactional interaction between the giver and receiver, but again, it largely treats the role of the recipient(s) simply as that—transactional—an outcome for the giver.

A substantial amount of research has been conducted to dissect prosocial behavior, specifically what *type* of behavior or motivation predicts the giver’s outcomes. While focused exclusively on the giver within their research, Weinstein & Ryan (2010) contend that *autonomous* helping versus *controlled*—or helping that is done by the giver voluntarily rather due to a feeling of pressure or demand—yields benefits for both the giver and the receiver, with
their attention on the recipient treated as more of an ancillary, positive side effect for the giver. However focused, the results do offer evidence that recipients are more likely to experience being grateful and feeling more cared for and fully supported by autonomous helpers. In effect, the outcome of the recipient parallels that of the giver, signaling the positive effects of prosocial activity on recipients, but especially those that are generated volitionally.

Understanding that other-focused giving provides positive well-being outcomes for givers, some studies have focused on the type of giving that provides the greatest increases in psychological flourishing for the giver. Nelson, Layous, Cole, & Lyubomirsky (2016) conducted a study across a sample of diverse participants showing that two different types of prosocial behavior led to increases in the givers’ psychological flourishing, versus self-focused behavior, or the control group. Within this six-week experiment, two levels of prosocial behavior were studied: one at what has been called the “mesolevel” which is a kindness undertaken to benefit one other person directly; and one at the “macrolevel” or a kindness taken at a broader level, like community service (Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin, & Schroeder, 2005, p. 365). Within these levels, participants were instructed to perform acts of kindness considered an “other-kindness,” a “world-kindness” or a “self-kindness,” along with a fourth group, a control, with the hypothesis that those undertaking the other-kindness and world-kindness would show higher levels of psychological flourishing. World-kindness participants undertook three nice things to improve the world, while the other-kindness group was instructed to perform a kindness that would simply benefit others. In contrast, the self-kindness group was instructed to perform three acts of kindness for themselves. While there is strong theory suggesting that participating in activities that produce positive emotions improve well-being (Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013), this study provides a distinction in the effects between the types of activities, and points to the significant
increase in well-being for those that undertook an “other” or “world kindness,” compared to those that participated in a “self-kindness” activity. Interestingly, the distinction between other and world kindness did not result in a significant difference in well-being effects, but it does provide clarity that activities that are focused outside of oneself, for the betterment of others, leads people to experience more positive emotions and improvements of psychological flourishing.

While the Dunn et al. (2008, 2014) articles referenced earlier outlined the distinct benefits for the giver of prosocial spending, as with much of prosocial behavior research, there is little attention paid to the benefits of such spending for the receiver of the gift. A 2018 article (Zhang, Chen, Xie, & Zhao) did delve further, and approached prosocial spending from the recipient’s perspective, with interesting results. While most attention within the study is focused on the relationship of gift (gift attractiveness, perceived intention of the gift, and the recipient’s willingness to accept the gift), it does point to some interesting outcomes for recipient’s subjective well-being after receiving a gift. Notably important to this paper is this study’s conclusion that both gift attractiveness and positive perceived intention appear to be positively related to recipients’ subjective well-being. In essence, something attractive, whether that be through its beauty, value or price, mixed with an intention of an unselfish, altruistic act is beneficial to the receivers’ well-being.

**Acts of Kindness**

**Random Acts of Kindness (RAKs): Benefits & Effects**

As noted earlier, acts of kindness are beloved by the media, and they are also a popular area of study within positive psychology. As a result, a great deal of research exists highlighting the benefits of acts of kindness generally (albeit giver-centric), effectively showing that these
activities are universally good for individuals, for those close to them, and for their communities (Rowland & Curry, 2019). In effect, the more kindness interventions undertaken, the greater the effect on happiness (Rowland & Curry, 2019).

A meta-analysis by Curry et al. (2018) reviewed 489 kindness interventions, including “Random Acts of Kindness” (RAKs). The results of this analysis showed that performing acts of kindness interventions results in improved well-being for the giver with a small to medium effect, very similar to other self-focused positive interventions such as the Counting Your Blessings exercise (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Additionally, Passmore and Oades (2015) highlight the health and mental benefits of undertaking RAKs, suggesting a one week plan of Random Acts of Kindness that “will provide psychological benefits to the giver, as well as benefits to the receiver” (p. 92), although the outcomes to the receivers are not detailed within the study. Acts of kindness interventions have also been studied cross-culturally, highlighting the positive effects of acts of kindness, but also, importantly, their universal appeal and comparable impact around the world no matter where they are undertaken (Layous, Lee, Choi, & Lyubomirsky, 2013; Otake, Shimai, Tanaka-Matsumi, Otsui, & Fredrickson, 2006).

Pay It Forward (PIF)

We know from the aforementioned studies that intentional, altruistic acts of kindness are good for people generally, but what do they do for recipients? Again, there is a lack of data, with most research focused on the outcome of kind acts for the giver and their well-being. However, a study by Pressman, Kraft, & Cross (2015) tested the effectiveness of an extension of Random Acts of Kindness, with a focus on Pay It Forward (PIF) activities. Pay It Forward style interventions, much like RAKs, are understood and beloved by popular media, including a book titled Pay It Forward, adapted into a movie in 2000. Pay It Forward even has its own day (April
28) in the calendar, with the goal to “make a difference by creating a huge ripple of kindness felt across the world” (Pay It Forward Day, 2020). Acknowledging within the article that kindness studies have historically ignored the receiver, the researchers cite a lack of research and data available about the benefits for those that receive RAK activities or interventions, and attempt to build on it by understanding the Pay It Forward interaction of repaying an altruistic behavior by helping others (rather than reciprocating to the giver of the original act).

An important distinction of PIF activities is that the givers of the kindness are usually unknown to the receivers—an interesting twist to the act of kindness, and pertinent to this paper because it highlights the importance and salience of anonymity of the act to the receiver. In fact, earlier studies in health-care settings focusing on volunteering in which volunteers who performed kind acts were not known by recipients of the kindness, resulted in a number of health related benefits, including diminished depression (Wheeler, Gorey, & Greenblatt, 1998) and significant effects on well-being (Schulz, 1976).

Perhaps, the idea that a stranger doing a truly altruistic act, with no strings attached other than putting positivity out into the world, symbolizes the good of the human spirit to the recipient. Or does the uncertainty allow the recipient to create their own story and attach their own meaning to the kind act? These are important questions and further discussion of the impact of anonymity in altruistic acts will be outlined later in this paper.

Within the Pressman et al. (2015) study, a number of important findings come to light. The first is that the outcome of the act of kindness activities are tracked for both the giver and the receiver, with 51.3% of receivers of a PIF act of kindness showing Duchenne smiles afterwards. Additionally, a subset of receivers were asked to take part in a voluntary self-report survey to track their mood and their likelihood to pay the kind act forward. Forty-eight receiver
participants completed the online survey, and a significant number reported having a positive mood, especially those that had already undertaken a kind act of their own. Those receivers who had already paid it forward trended towards more happiness, excitement and less anger (Pressman et al., 2015), and nearly all the receivers reported that they planned to pay the kind act forward at some point, with 40% of them having already undertaken their own PIF activity within 48 hours of the act of kindness they received. In effect, this type activity, in which an act of kindness is undertaken and the giver is unknown to the receiver, not only boosts mood and positive emotions, it provides a unique effect of compelling people to want to help others. Furthermore, study participants qualitatively reported that the activity was ‘fun,’ ‘inspirational,’ ‘mood-lifting,’ and even ‘life-changing,’ highlighting the impact of this distinctive combination of altruism and anonymity within the act of kindness (Pressman et al., 2015).

Elevation Elements

After reviewing different types of acts of kindnesses, I began to see a clear indication that integrating particular elements into certain acts seemed to enhance salience for givers, but especially receivers. These elements appear to act as elevation mechanisms within the act of kindness. Rather than simply serving as a nice gesture for receivers, elements like uncertainty, anonymity, mystery, surprise and creativity make these acts of kindness more memorable, attention-getting and potent. I will outline research about these elevation mechanisms, and then provide a framework for guerrilla altruism, specifically how it uses these elements to provide an ideal recipe to enhance well-being for givers and receivers alike.

Uncertainty, Anonymity & Mystery

Building on the power of anonymity and uncertainty in certain types of acts of kindness, an important and innovative study conducted at the University of Virginia in 2005 highlights the
impact of uncertainty—not just how positive events like acts of kindness can boost positive moods, but also how they cause these pleasurable feelings to last longer (Wilson, Centerbar, Kermer, & Gilbert, 2005).

In an effort to examine their “pleasure of uncertainty” hypothesis, the researchers conducted three separate, but related, studies. Their hypothesis supposed that acts of kindness with some uncertainty attached to them would make people happier, for longer periods of time, than acts that had more certain elements or identities attached to them. The experiments included a variety of Random Acts of Kindness interventions in which the certainty of the giver’s identity was manipulated. For example, “Have a Nice Day” cards were distributed, along with directives to a questionnaire with definitive information about who/what group was behind the act of kindness, while other, otherwise identical cards were distributed with much more elusive information about the originator of the kindness. Within these manipulations, the results consistently demonstrated that uncertainty is related to a more positive mood for the recipient. The third experiment tested the “pleasure of uncertainty” hypothesis by manipulating the story-ending of the movie Rudy, with viewers watching an abridged version of the film and then receiving different versions of information about what happened to Rudy after college. The group that received more uncertain information about Rudy as an adult reported feeling more positive about the movie, and remained in that positive mood for longer, confirming the “pleasure of uncertainty” hypothesis. Interestingly, the group in the uncertain condition also reported thinking about the story ending significantly longer than the group who were provided more certain information about Rudy as an adult. In essence, the uncertain control group not only felt better for longer but it was more salient for them, perhaps because they were able to attach some kind of story-telling and meaning making to their experience that they carried with them.
This research is unique in that it specifically and purposefully examines the effects of acts of kindness exclusively on receivers of the kindness, but it also mixes in the variable of uncertainty through anonymity and measures its effect. The results are compelling, and lend to my hypothesis that acts of kindness with a certain “recipe” or mix that includes mystery and uncertainty in the form of anonymity of the giver or originator of the kindness provides its own distinctive and especially potent outcome for well-being. Additionally, it shows that this ingredient enables recipients to linger longer in their good feelings because they are given the ability to envision, imagine and attach their own meaning to the uncertainty.

**Surprise**

Guerrilla style relies on surprise. An integral component of a guerrilla intervention, even in warfare, lies in its ability to effectively surprise in unexpected ways. But why? Surprise itself is a fairly common emotion, and can be perceived and felt as positive or negative (Filipowicz, 2006). What is the difference, and why could guerrilla altruism be so effective in sparking the positive side of this emotion?

A wide variety of research is available on surprise, yet it still remains difficult to understand completely. Surprise is defined (as a verb) as: to attack unexpectedly; to take unawares; to strike with wonder or amazement especially because unexpected. Synonyms for surprise include: astonish, astound, amaze, stun, shock, stagger (Merriam-Webster, 2020). I include these simplistic definitions because they provide insight into how complex surprise truly is, with multiple, often opposed meanings.

In many scenarios, like healthcare, surprises can be overwhelmingly negative, implying a lack of knowledge that creates a threat, resulting in life or death consequences. Even so, an article in *Health Care Management Review* embraces surprise in the healthcare setting from a
scientific perspective, citing that it can produce opportunities for learning and creativity, “allowing surprise to become a gift in an uncertain world” (McDaniel, Jordan, & Fleeman, 2003, p. 272). The authors assert in their general synopsis of surprise that learning occurs in our assessment of the unexpected because it allows us to re-evaluate and revise what we know and understand. Filipowicz’s article (2006) links surprise as a mediator between positive affect and creativity, highlighting it as a the most effective stimulus for creativity over other affect mediators such as happy, amused, excited, elated, distressing or funny.

Considered an “interruption mechanism” (Meyer, Reisenzein, & Schützwohl, 1997), surprise disrupts existing thoughts and actions, and provoke people to pay attention to the unexpected experience. Once the event is understood, and even later remembered, the emotion tied to the initial assessment (positive or negative) becomes attached to the surprising event as a whole (Noordewier & Breugelmans, 2013). When experiences of surprise are mixed with other emotions such as joy, it appears they are assessed and remembered as undeniably positive. Conversely, when surprising events are evaluated and the surprise emotion is mixed with a negative emotion such as anger or fear, the event is tainted as negative (Ekman & Friesen, 1975). This assessment happens quickly and somewhat unconsciously (Scherer, 1984). No matter the emotional outcome, it appears that the stimulation of surprise tends to create an emotion that is ultimately etched in memory (Vanhamme & Snelders, 2001).

Additionally, consumer research in the Journal of Economic Psychology suggests that the intensity of surprise significantly impacts the extent to which people tend to tell others about their experience, or as referred to within the article as “the frequency of word-of-mouth (WOM)” (Derbaix & Vanhamme, 2003, p. 99). Interestingly, whether the surprise was negative or positive had little effect on peoples’ frequency of WOM. The major take-home from this specific
research is certainly that to elicit surprise to produce positive emotions that will be carried forward through word of mouth and paid forward, undoubtedly, one should design and create it as a positive surprise. In the context of guerrilla altruism, imagine the learning and growth that could occur when a receiver is offered a mysterious surprise, and assesses that it was left simply as an altruistic gesture out into the world.

Art, Beauty & Creativity (ABC)

Art, beauty and creativity (ABC) are around us all the time. From music and theater to visual art, design and literature, our world is filled with creative people, creating. From the music piped in at the grocery store to colorful graffiti on the side of a building, or a poem posted on Instagram, the universal nature of the arts and humanities often allows its power in our everyday lives to be taken for granted. Yet, art, beauty and creativity can often be a profound source of special, transformative, and even sacred moments that shape or even change us. They can also be relatable, even personal. While mystery, anonymity and uncertainty can serve as elevation mechanisms for experiences and events, art, beauty and creativity (what I call the ABC’s of guerrilla altruism) are much more widely accepted and understood elements of elevation towards well-being, and often, awe and transcendence. Why is ABC so powerful?

A 2004 study aimed to explain why people are drawn to art—even sometimes conceptually complex modern art. The researchers concluded that our cognitive processing of art produces affect, which more often than not, generates experiences that are positive and fulfilling (Leder, Belke Oeberst, & Augustin, 2004). Another study looked at ordinary consumer products like cars and tea kettles, and found that participants preferred the more attractive, optimally designed prototype, effectively highlighting the human appreciation for art, beauty and creativity even in the design of everyday objects (Hekkert, Snelders, & van Wieringen, 2003).
In a recent article, Tay, Pawelski, & Keith (2017) introduce a conceptual model outlining four mechanisms through which the arts and humanities elevate and enhance human flourishing: *immersion*, referring to the feeling of being captivated by an experience; *embeddedness*, which embodies mastery and the feeling of confident creativity; *socialization*, a key component pulling individuals together to create networks; and *reflectiveness*, allowing people to assess what they know, to evaluate it, and to grow. All of these mechanisms combined together in one experience provide immediate arousal of positive mental states like creativity, expanded psychological capabilities, and general well-being effects such as positive emotions. They also enhance behaviors like altruism and activism. In essence, as deBotton & Armstrong (2013) contend in *Art as Therapy*, art helps us “lead better lives— to access better versions of ourselves” (p. 57).

While research on the arts and humanities, and their impact on human flourishing continues to expand, less can be said for the study of beauty. In *Beauty* by Sagmeister and Walsh (2018), the authors introduce Helmut Leder, a scientist studying the effect of beauty on emotions and behavior. Leder contends that there is a lack of authoritative research in the field of beauty but points to his own research citing humans’ innate love of, attraction to, and recognition of beauty. In 2011, Leder and his colleagues (Gerger, Leder, Tinio, & Schacht, 2011) studied facial muscles that control smiling and frowning, and found that participants’ smiling muscles contracted when shown attractive faces or patterns. Often, these smiles were recorded in a split second, before participants consciously recognized the images, pointing to our very human attraction to beauty, as well as its built-in effectiveness to impact our mood.

Many scientific studies have investigated how mood and psychological well-being correlate with creative output, and how to cultivate it in individuals and organizations (Amabile, 1983; Oldham & Cummings, 1996). Much like acts of kindness research, it appears that this
research is unilateral: there is little empirical exploration analyzing how witnessing, viewing or receiving creativity, exclusively and specifically, effects those on the receiving side. From an outcome perspective, creativity is often lumped together with art, and sometimes with beauty. However, a study in the UK (Cameron, Crane, Ings, & Taylor, 2013) investigating creativity and art as it relates to public health found that the “better the creative engagement,” (p. 59) the more likely it led to positive health effects, and interestingly, that experiencing acts of creativity emboldens citizens to cultivate leadership skills to help in their communities.

Civic programs like Mural Arts Philadelphia embody creativity by employing innovative methods to create dynamic murals to “transform public spaces and individual lives” (Mural Arts Philadelphia, 2020). For thirty-five years, the organization has successfully transformed Philadelphia neighborhoods to build social capital, but a 2003 study on the impact of the program assessed that quantifying the impact of murals on community well-being was challenging (Stern & Seifert, 2003). Perhaps further, ongoing empirical research into the impact of arts on well-being by the Humanities and Human Flourishing Project at the University of Pennsylvania can begin to fill in these gaps. In the meantime, we can assume that creativity impacts well-being much like art and beauty.

While the three mechanisms of ABC in guerrilla altruism are connected to each other, they are not always correlated. For example, not all art is beautiful, or all beauty artful, or all creativity beautiful or even artful. However, we are innately wired to seek, recognize and appreciate art, beauty and creativity, because these three mechanisms all enable us to elevate our lives, and to provide tangible resources towards “the good life,” a fundamental goal in the human pursuit for well-being and flourishing.

Acts of Kindness vs. Guerrilla Altruism
Following the analysis of types of acts of kindness interventions and outlining the elements that can make them most effective, it is important to delineate between an act of kindness intervention like a RAK or PIF activity, versus an act of guerrilla altruism. What is the difference, and more importantly, why does it matter? What is the alchemy—the magic mixture—that makes guerrilla altruism so potent for well-being?

Art, Beauty, Creativity (ABC) in Guerrilla Altruism

Acts of kindnesses and guerrilla altruism have many similar and overlapping elements, yet they are markedly different. An act of kindness may incorporate art, beauty and creativity into its design, but an act of guerrilla altruism always integrates ABC into its design and implementation. It may not include all three ABC elements, but every act of guerrilla altruism is marked by at least one element of art (or artfulness), beauty or creativity.

Likewise, both acts of kindness and guerrilla altruism may involve nature, natural features or a naturalistic setting as its ABC element. Although specific research about acts of kindness interventions and nature do not appear to have been conducted, a number of studies have connected spending time in nature with a variety of flourishing and well-being measures (Zhang, Howell, & Iyer, 2014). The impact of an act of guerrilla altruism that incorporates elements of nature seems to be particularly effective in provoking a deeper response for receivers than one that does not. The Flower Flash, with its organic, ephemeral floral composition, provides a captivating example.

Surprise in Guerrilla Altruism

Acts of kindness also incorporate some kind of element of surprise, or as the name Random Acts of Kindness conveys, at the very least, randomness. Specifically, in random acts of kindness, the type of kindness undertaken in the spur of the moment may act as a surprise for
both the giver and the receiver. As with other acts of kindness, the surprise element is mostly concerned with the giver and their motivation for the intervention, or what the surprise element will provide to them in their outcome. In contrast, guerrilla altruism infuses surprise solely as a tool to enhance the experience for the receiver. The surprise element is carefully designed, considered and implemented for maximum impact. Here, surprise conveys the unexpected, rather than the random. This is an important and deliberate consideration, because in an act of guerrilla altruism, the element of surprise is always coupled with the element of uncertainty, mystery and anonymity.

With this in mind, an act of guerrilla altruism is implemented or constructed without detection by the receiver(s). Depending on the scale of the act, this may be difficult or impossible, but the imperative of guerrilla altruism—á la Banksy and the Guerrilla Girls—is that even if the implementation of the act cannot remain undetected, the true identity of the giver(s) remains concealed. Again, this important element strays away from that of acts of kindness, in which the identity of the giver is usually, but not always, known to the receiver.

**Collaborative Deconstruction**

Guerrilla altruism acts are often devised and implemented with an intention for deconstruction. This means that they are designed so that their installation is temporary, and with the intention that the receiver(s) will take pieces of the installation with them as part of the offering left there. This element has a two-fold effect: First, it plays to the rebellious, anti-authoritarian edge of guerrilla activism because the space or area utilized for the act is usually a public one that has not been granted to the giver in any formal way. It has simply been claimed by the guerrilla altruist.
Secondly, it invites the receiver(s) of the act in as more than an audience—to become part of the act as collaborators. When the giver of the act offers the receiver to become a collaborator, the impact becomes that much greater because it turns the intervention into a cooperative prosocial action. In essence, it takes the interaction from being one of interpersonal helping in which the parties involved are not equal partners (i.e. an act of kindness where the giver’s intention is to help the receiver) to an interface where two or more people are coming together towards a common goal that benefits all involved (Penner, 2005).

Lewis Miller’s Flower Flash offers an ideal example of this of collaborative deconstruction. A 2019 article describes a man happening upon Miller’s team installing a Flash early one morning in New York City. He walked away, smiling and singing, with an armful of roses for his elderly mother (Brooke). Another example of this type of collaborative deconstruction is a recent series of installations around the world titled *Untitled (Fortune Cookie Corner)* by artist Felix Gonazalez-Torres (1991/2020). From a rooftop in Havana to a subway station in Shanghai and an unattended bicycle basket next to a Brooklyn brownstone, mounds of hundreds of fortune cookies have been left for passersby to ponder, make sense of, and most importantly, to partake.
Self-less Altruism

This type of intentional collaborative deconstruction in its design concept and implementation lends to guerrilla altruism’s activist edge, and in doing so, underlies its pure, self-less sense of altruism. Acts of kindness interventions, on the other hand, are often seemingly altruistic acts. They are designed and undertaken by the originator as a way to help the receiver, yet most of the research provided in positive psychology engineers the intervention as a way for the giver to improve their own well-being. As outlined earlier, the result is that a majority of research in this area has focused on the health and well-being effects for the giver, of which the data is plentiful. But if altruism is truly an unselfish act, the question around acts of kindness follows the line of greater, ongoing controversy surrounding altruism—if an intervention is conceived as a vehicle for the well-being of the giver as the prime goal, can it really be an act of
true altruism? My contention is no, and that is what fundamentally separates guerrilla altruism from acts of kindness.

**The Alchemy of Guerrilla Altruism**

Positive psychology research provides sufficient scientific evidence that intervention elements like altruism, mystery, surprise and art can offer significant increases in positive emotion. I argue that the magic of guerrilla altruism is that these elements blend together for both individuals (the initial givers and receivers) as well as for the group and community, simultaneously providing well-being benefits unlike other acts of kindness interventions. In a time when so many struggle with mental health and well-being, certainly any act of kindness serves as an affirmation of the good of the human spirit. For that reason, an act of kindness explicitly designed, created and engineered to provoke an ideal outcome for well-being is an exciting prospect. But how?

We know that positive emotions are beneficial to the human experience, both at the individual and community level. Barbara Fredrickson’s Broaden and Build Theory (Fredrickson, 2013) offers evidence that brief uplifts in emotions like those experienced during a kindness intervention broadens our awareness so that we are able to function most optimally. As a result, we are more fully capable of building our psychological resources, creating what Fredrickson (2013) describes as an “upward spiral” towards optimal health and fulfillment.

This is especially important in the human experience when conceived at a group or community level, when people can partake and share in an experience that increases positive emotions, and broaden and builds them towards an upward spiral together. Acts of guerrilla altruism can be these types of experiences. Positive resonance, as Fredrickson calls it, expands her Broaden and Build Theory to suggest that when people engage in positive emotions...
collectively, it creates a holistic experience in which people experience three key things: shared positive affect, care and concern for one another, and synchronous behavior and biology (Fredrickson, 2016). An act of guerrilla altruism, steeped in mystery, ABC, surprise, and perhaps even awe, is a prime opportunity to provide an experience of positive resonance.

Frequent opportunities for individuals to experience positive resonance compound over time to build important outcomes such as loyalty, trust and safety in communities (Fredrickson, 2013; 2016). Even more recent studies show that positive resonance is connected to better levels of positive mental health, decreased loneliness and even reduced depression (Major, Le Nguyen, Lundberg, & Fredrickson, 2018). When positive resonance happens en-masse at the community level, it becomes even more impactful. These community level moments have been described as noted earlier as “collective effervescence” and they are exemplified by acts like those of Lewis Miller’s Flower Flash or DDB’s piano stairs.

Once positive resonance and collective effervescence are achieved through guerrilla altruism, what happens next? I theorize that these unique acts, through their mixture of distinctive elements, change schema for both individuals and the larger group experiencing them. This results in recategorization, a process that changes the perception of a group’s boundaries—from what has been called an outgroup to a common ingroup (Gaertner, Dovidio, & Samuel, 2000). In essence, individuals who once had no ties to each other experience something together, like an act of guerrilla altruism, and they immediately, seemingly magically, have this experience in common. They become a guerrilla altruism ingroup, marked by their unexpected happenstance of being in this place for this remarkable event, at this time – together.

This type of schema shift is impactful because people who experience meaningful experiences like these like, and even feel compelled, to share these experiences with others, in a
couple of different ways. The first is through *capitalization*, or the communication and celebration of a positive event with others (Langston, 1994). This is well documented in our modern era by social media. Take for example, as I have before, the Flower Flash. The hashtag #flowerflash on Instagram currently shows over 10,000 colorful, flower-filled posts. As soon as people interact with these surprising, creative works of art, they want to share it, and social media provides a convenient, gratifying mechanism to do so both visually and instantly. Along with the immediate benefits of experiencing an event so good it is capitalized, research also shows that people who capitalize about a positive event enjoy increased daily positive affect, above and beyond the impact of the positive event itself (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004).

I believe that the second downstream sharing consequence from guerrilla altruism is the operationalization of the Pay It Forward effect described earlier. An optimal mix: the ideal alchemy of altruism—that includes art, beauty or creativity, mystery, surprise and a potent mix of guerrilla style collaborative deconstruction—could produce a unique type of positive emotion that would inspire those who experience these interventions to pay it forward in similar style. Seminal work by Fowler and Christakis (2008) shows evidence that happy people build clusters of other happy people. For example, one happy friend makes it more likely their friends’ friends will be happy. Whew! Let’s just say... if one guerrilla altruist pays it forward to another potential guerrilla altruist to another, the results could be significant.

**Conclusion**

In the article “Love and Other Positive Emotions in Contemporary Social Practice and Visual Art,” Claire Schneider and Barbara Fredrickson (in press) highlight a number of professional artists like the previously mentioned artist Felix Gonzales-Torres, who similar to
guerrilla altruism interventionists, creatively use art, beauty and creativity to draw in their audiences. These artists also effectively invite viewers in as collaborators, successfully pulling them together as part of a communal experience. Building on this work and the knowledge that novel art experiences have the capability to spark positive resonance, Schneider and Fredrickson call on psychologists and artists alike to create projects to “initiate social and psychological cascades toward improved health and strengthened communities” (in press, p. 21).

Certainly, as my work here has uncovered, much more research must be done to understand the impact acts of kindness have on recipients, and to discern scientific evidence that points to which elements or mechanisms – like those in guerrilla altruism – play the largest role in impacting well-being. In the meantime, I assert that one need not be an artist or a scientist to create a truly altruistic positive intervention. To create change in the world and to actively impact well-being, perhaps we simply need more guerrilla altruism—activists creating enchanting, captivating, rebellious and powerful moments, to build a movement towards well-being. Who knows? There may be a guerrilla altruist in your midst even now…
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