
Christopher M. Peterson (1950–2012)

“Other people matter. Period,” said Christopher M. Peterson when asked for a concise definition of “positive psychology,” the field he helped to found and then helped to guide through the first decade of the 21st century. He researched, taught, and lived positive psychology. When Chris died prematurely on October 9, 2012, in Ann Arbor, Michigan, from sudden heart failure, the world lost a distinguished scholar, an inspirational teacher, and a wonderful human being. He was born on February 18, 1950, and raised in Niles, Illinois. He is survived by his parents Leota and Pete and by his twin brother Carl.

Chris had a great mind and a giant heart. His brilliance was accompanied by warmth, generosity, humility, fairness, integrity, genuineness, and a gentle sense of humor. He was much admired and respected for his research and teaching, but foremost he was greatly loved. Within hours of his death, hundreds of remembrances filled the ether, and their main theme was how and why Chris was so loved. He left giant footprints not only in positive psychology but also in the lives of so many people that he touched.

Chris was innovative and productive. He was named among the world’s 100 most widely cited psychologists over the past 20 years by the Institute for Scientific Information. He was the author of more than 350 scholarly publications and 12 books including *Character Strengths and Virtues* (2004), *A Primer in Positive Psychology* (2006), and *Pursuing the Good Life: 100 Reflections on Positive Psychology* (2012).

Since 1986, he was professor of psychology and organizational studies, director of the University of Michigan Positive Psychology Center, and former director of clinical training at the University of Michigan. A National Merit Scholar at the University of Illinois (bachelor of science, 1972), he received his doctorate at the University of Colorado in 1976 with emphases in social and personality psychology and learning. He taught at Hamilton College until 1978 and then took a postdoctoral respecialization in clinical psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. There, he began his lifelong collaboration with Martin Seligman. He taught at the University of Pennsylvania and at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University until 1986.

Chris worked on good and bad adaptation, with a focus on the role played by such individual differences as optimism, personal control, and strengths of character. His scholarly contributions included the creation of new methods and measures for assessing individual differences, including tests and content analyses for measuring explanatory style, character strengths, and well-being. One of his groundbreaking works was the creation of a coherent classification of character strengths and virtues along with reliable and valid strategies for assessing them. He provided people a vocabulary for

speaking about the good life and strategies for investigating it scientifically. He also developed the Content Analysis of Verbatim Explanations technique, which allows optimism to be assessed. He found that content analysis of individuals’ verbatim quotes predicted important life outcomes, just as did his questionnaires. A pioneer in documenting empirical evidence of the link between optimism and physical health and longevity, he also was the primary developer of the Global Assessment Tool, which measures the psychological fitness of soldiers as part of the Comprehensive Soldier Fitness Program in the U.S. Army. His work had an enduring impact on health care, education, the military, business, and politics.

Chris loved teaching. When strangers asked him what he did, he always told them he was a teacher. He won two of the University of Michigan’s highest teaching honors—a Golden Apple Award for outstanding university teaching, voted on by students, and an Arthur F. Thurnau Professorship, a prestigious title given to faculty who excel at undergraduate education. He was one of the most sought after speakers in psychology worldwide, with a gift for sharing knowledge with students of all ages. His lectures were legendary. His large classes were rigorous but fun, and rarely were there any empty seats. He was a caring, generous, and wise mentor. His office door was always open, and he welcomed everyone. When students visited his office, he not only helped them with their questions but he also asked them how their lives were progressing. Students often said that when they were in his class, he made them feel that he knew them and that they mattered. He inspired many young students to develop a love of learning, to be better people, and to use their lives to serve a greater good.

Chris loved people. He was genuinely interested in getting to know others. He made everyone around him feel comfortable and respected. An understated, humble, and generous person, it was no accident that his nickname was “Mother Theresa.” He always found joy in letting other people shine and sharing the credit with them. He had a gift for seeing the best in each person. He also had a strong sense of fairness and duty without being rigid or allowing his personal feelings to obscure his judgment. He had fun whatever he did and brought fun for others. Although his scholarly contributions are significant, his lasting legacy will be what he shared with other people. So many of us are indebted to him for making us better researchers, better teachers, and better people.

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