

What Makes Us Happy?

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I realized after I preached this the first time that this sermon has an unwritten (now written) introduction. It is my journey toward the question of what makes us happy, and it started when I arrived at college. For years I'd been preparing for college. It had become for me what it is for most kids, a kind of Holy Grail. I think I thought that arriving there would be an end. So I was surprised to find after orientation ended that college meant four more years of classes and studying. It raised the question about what would make me happy, what would be an end that satisfied, and it started me taking classes in philosophy and religious studies that asked that age-old question. My first companion, the first lifeline, was Aristotle, who opens his "Nichomachean Ethics" with that very concern: What is happiness and how do we get there.

So for others, Aristotle might be dry and dusty, but for me he is associated with a quest that began with him.

We've all had our experiences of happiness. Moments of elation; stretches of a deep and quiet sense of joy and satisfaction; the contentment that comes with doing right by those we care about; the thrill of a good time. And I bet, if polled, we'd all say it is one of our life goals to be happy. But what is that? What does it mean to be "happy" and how do we get there? This has occupied the minds of science and religion for centuries, and each of us is destined to revisit it time and time again as we try to make this life worth living.

Aristotle in his "Nichomachean Ethics" wrote that "all knowledge and every pursuit aims at some good, what it is that we say political science aims at and what is the highest of all goods achievable by action. Verbally there is very general agreement; for both the general run of men and people of superior refinement say that it is happiness." That is to say, all of life aims at this thing we call "happiness," according to Aristotle. However, what we find we mean by this word "happiness" is less obvious.

Some, says Aristotle, think happiness is "some plain and obvious thing, like pleasure, wealth, or honour."

Of course, what he says is as true today as when Aristotle was alive. Then, as now, there *is* a kind of joy and fulfillment in certain kinds of physical pleasure, material comfort and honor. A warm bath on a cold day is a wonderful kind of physical joy. A safe and comfortable home is a material thing worth rejoicing over. The recognition of peers can be quite satisfying. All of these can grant us some degree of happiness. However, we also all know that each of them is not the road to happiness in and of itself.

For instance, a backrub is a lovely pleasure, but a lifetime of unending backrubs would be perhaps more painful and boring than it would be a key to eternal bliss. And although without material wealth we are cursed to a life at the bottom of Maslow's hierarchy of needs -- never able to dream or love because we are too busy finding food and a safe place to rest -- after a certain point, material wealth contributes very little to our overall happiness.

A January 2003 article from the Atlantic Monthly reported on just that -- a study on whether money did buy happiness. The study showed that income does appear "to be one of the best single predictors of overall well-being." What was interesting was that the largest increases in happiness occurred in places where increases in wealth secured basic gains like food, shelter, sanitation systems. However, there eventually came a point of diminishing returns. At that point, any increases in wealth produced little if any increases in happiness. In fact, one political scientist from Yale, Robert Lane, suggested that in the West, as wealth increases, so too does pressure to move with the job away from family. That weakening of social and familial ties actually diminishes happiness. So pleasure can only secure so much happiness and money can only buy so much.

Finally, the achievement of honor that Aristotle also mentions can also bring happiness. It is wonderful to have our accomplishments recognized, but we all know the dangers of making such validations our life's pursuit. You can end up dancing to someone else's drummer, and anyhow, a mantle of awards alone has never a truly happy man made.

So material wealth, physical comfort and honor do all contribute to our happiness, but as the philosopher would say, all in moderation. There is more to happiness than just these.

There are challenges to happiness, too.

For instance, Aristotle rightly points out that part of the difficulty in identifying what makes us happy and achieving it is that our notion of happiness constantly changes with our circumstances. For example, he notes we see happiness as "health when [we are] ill, with wealth when [we are] poor."

In addition, social scientists have pointed out that we are all pretty bad predictors of what will make us happy. What we think will make us happy, when we secure it, often does not give us the joy we expected; and what we thought would make us miserable, when it happens to us, often does not banish joy the way we thought it might. So lottery winners are famous for being surprised by the fact that they are not nearly as happy as they dreamed they'd be when they won all that money, and people asked to estimate how unhappy they'd be if they suffered a major setback (like becoming a paraplegic) are much happier than they expected to be if and when those difficult circumstances come to pass.

Finally, happiness can be elusive for us because of something the Dalai Lama calls the "comparing mind." What he means is that we human beings have a bad habit of comparing ourselves to others. What's worse is our proclivity -- once we find that *anyone* has more of *anything* than we do -- to convince ourselves that we *cannot be truly happy*

until we have what they do. Here's a stark example: In one survey, when asked whether they'd rather take a pay cut but be in an office where they made more than the rest of their colleagues, or be given a raise but have their colleagues get bigger raises than they did and so they'd make the least in the office -- those surveyed chose the former. It appears that sometimes it may not be so much that we think having more in absolute terms will make us happy, but that what we really think will make us happy is simply to have more than our neighbors. There will always be neighbors with more of something, which makes the mark of happiness an ever-elusive and receding target as long as we indulge that comparing mind.

So how do we free ourselves of the pitfalls, and what is happiness beyond wealth and pleasure and honor?

The story of Christopher Reeve can shed some light on this quest to find happiness. In "The Art of Happiness," Howard Cutler and the Dalai Lama recount a television interview with Reeve. Reeve, a well-known actor (and Unitarian Universalist), was successful in all worldly senses (wealthy, well-respected, and probably not a stranger to physical pleasure) when he suffered a horrible accident while horseback riding. That accident left him a quadriplegic, unable even to breathe without a ventilator. The first year after the accident, he said, he felt despair and depression as a result of what he had suffered. But what happened next he couldn't have predicted. He found that his sense of himself and his life shifted.

In the interview, Reeve spoke about how, after a while, he started to see not how unfortunate he was but how lucky. He saw what a supportive family he had; how the blessings of modern medicine had allowed him to survive and gave him the hope for a cure; how glad he was to have his mind functioning. Yes, at times he was struck by pangs of jealousy and sadness, like when someone said they "just had to run upstairs to get something" and he was reminded of what he had lost. However, he went on to say, "I realized that the only way to go through life is to look at your assets."

Of course, we know the rest of the story. Christopher Reeve became a cheerleader and a champion for survivors of spinal cord injuries. He helped raise funds for research, he even continued to act and did his first work directing. When he appeared on the David Letterman show in 2002, Reeve said so many times in the course of the interview that he was lucky that Letterman himself finally said: "It's just amazing that a person can undergo this circumstance and still find reason, legitimate reason, to say that you were lucky." *But in Christopher Reeve's eyes, he was.*

Reeve's experience gets at some of those challenges in the pursuit of happiness. How we can't predict what will make us happy. How it changes with our circumstances. How painful it can be to compare ourselves with those who have more or have not suffered the setbacks we have. But his words also bring to light what can take us from despair or unhappiness to contentment and even happiness. In his case, it was the act of taking stock of what he did have -- the blessings of family, the luck of his fate (to be born in a time and with the means to secure good medical care), and the gift of mental faculties that

allowed him to continue to think, to dream, to reason, to communicate. By grounding himself in gratitude, Reeve framed life as more about celebration than despair and as about possibility, not impossibility.

Perhaps, then, a first step toward happiness might be this: That we too find a way to stay grounded in gratitude. Say grace; keep a gratitude journal; get on our knees and pray to whoever is listening; at the very least admit to ourselves that we are grateful for what life has given us. Instead of comparing ourselves to those who have more, maybe we can compare ourselves to those who have less.

Do you know that, according to Gregg Easterbrook in his book "The Paradox of Progress," the *average* American lives better than 99.4 percent of human beings have in all recorded human history? Robert Frank, an economist at Cornell, says that "gas-station minimarts now sell cabernets and chardonnays 'far superior in quality to the wines once drunk by the kings of France' " (Easterbrook, p.81). We have better medical care in this country than anywhere else in the world, and whereas 14 percent of the population has no medical coverage (and we worry about that, as we *should*), medical insurance did not even exist until after World War II. Before that, only the rich were protected from ruinous medical care costs (Easterbrook, p.25). And yet, in 1997, 66 percent of Americans, when polled, said they believed that "the lot of the average person is getting worse." And the percentage of Americans who say they are "happy" has not budged since 1950 (Easterbrook, xvi).

Perhaps we're just spoiled. Perhaps like all those characters in "The Wizard of Oz," we need to decide that we already have everything we need to make ourselves happy.

There are other things we know about happiness. Studies show we are happier when we are embedded in close relationships. Studies show we are happier when involved in work that contributes to something larger than ourselves. Studies have shown we are happier when we put a smile on our face (even when it's a fake one to begin) and even that fresh flowers contribute to our bliss. Aristotle, just in case you're interested, thought happiness was activity of the soul in accordance with virtue. So goodness too, if he's right, may bring us a kind of lasting joy. But it seems to me that happiness begins with a *choice*. That choice is about grounding ourselves in what we already have and a decision to stop looking over our shoulders at what *was*, or over the neighbors' fence at what someone else has. Happiness, in other words, begins with thanksgiving.

So we end today with the words of UU poet Lynn Ungar, a poem called, appropriately, "Thanksgiving," about a call to gratitude beckoning to us, echoed throughout the whole created world.

I have been trying to read
the script cut in these hills --
a language carved in the shimmer of stubble
and the solid lines of soil, spoken

in the thud of apples falling
and the rasp of corn stalks finally bare.

The pheasants shout it with a rusty creak
as they gather in the fallen grain,
the blackbirds sing it
over their shoulder in parting,
and gold leaf illuminates the manuscript
where it is written in the trees.

Transcribed onto my human tongue
I believe it might sound like a lullaby,
or a child's prayer before bed.
Across the gathered stillness
simply this: "For all that we have received,
dear God, make us truly thankful."

Happy Thanksgiving, everyone!