

Happiness

First Unitarian Society, Wilmington DE 19803

Parry M. Norling, --- First Thursday Small Group September 5, 2013

Preparation: The poems under POETY have not been included in this Network edition because of copyright issues. The poems are available in publications and on the internet.

Check in: What's your next big celebration? How meaningful is it to you? Happy about it?

Chalice lighting:

The glow of one warm thought is worth to me more than money – Thomas Jefferson;

“As we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.”

~Marianne Williamson

Topic: Happiness from five perspectives—political, poetry, Gretchen Rubin (Author: The Happiness Project) neuroscientists, and Spiritual: Note: time does not allow exploring all five perspectives; we will do the first (political) and then decide which to do next as the spirit moves us.

POLITICAL

Reading: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

This has been called "one of the best-known sentences in the English language" containing "the most potent and consequential words in American history." The passage came to represent a moral standard to which the United States should strive. This view was notably promoted by Abraham Lincoln, who considered the Declaration to be the foundation of his political philosophy, and argued that the Declaration is a statement of principles through which the United States Constitution should be interpreted. It provided inspiration to numerous national declarations of independence throughout the world. When Jefferson replaced property with pursuit of happiness was this a big change? By "property," Locke meant MORE than land and goods that could be sold, given away, or even confiscated by the government under certain circumstances. Property also referred to ownership of one's self, which included A RIGHT TO PERSONAL WELL BEING. Jefferson, however, substituted the phrase, "pursuit of happiness," which Locke and others had used to describe FREEDOM OF OPPORTUNITY as well as the duty to help those in want.

Question: Property is a noun--A possession; Pursuit of happiness describes an action.

Do you feel that happiness is something of value for which you must work? Might a spiritual practice be involved? Is pursuit of happiness a journey? Do we “find happiness”?

POETRY

Reading: This collection of poems represents some of the hardships of life and the willingness to overcome them. In the end of life, we leave this earth and the world continues without us. All we have is the present. Let that inspire us to be courageous enough to find happiness in Today.

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“Forgetfulness” by Billy Collins

“Some Days” by Billy Collins

Question: Do you think that it takes **courage** to pursue happiness? What other questions do these poems raise about happiness?

GRETCHEN RUBIN

Reading: Gretchen Rubin is the author of several books, including the #1 New York Times and international bestseller, *The Happiness Project*—an account of the year she spent test-driving the wisdom of the ages, the current scientific studies, and the lessons from popular culture about how to be happier. <http://www.happiness-project.com/>

On her popular blog, *The Happiness Project*, she reports on her daily adventures in the pursuit of happiness :Identify your aims

The First Splendid Truth will help you identify areas to tackle in your Happiness Project. Ask yourself:

- What makes you feel good? What gives you joy, energy, fun?
- What makes you feel bad? What brings you anger, guilt, boredom, dread?
- What makes you feel right? What values do you want your life to reflect?
- How can you build an atmosphere of growth—where you learn, explore, build, teach, help?

Questions: How do you answer these questions?

NEUROSCIENTISTS

Reading: Sam Wang, neuroscientist at Princeton: Surveys on happiness tell us some interesting things—for example, that happiness is strongly dependent, not on income, but on relative wealth. Happiness also is stable over time, despite the fact that our circumstances obviously change. On whether major life events make us happy or unhappy in the long term, findings are somewhat surprising. Being married is correlated with happiness. But having children, according to these surveys, doesn’t make us any happier. Many results seem to be consistent with the concept of the hedonic treadmill: the idea that happiness seems to adapt and to have a set point. The general concept is that events that affect happiness are mostly temporary. But some circumstances are reliably associated with unhappiness or with happiness. Affiliation with a religious or political group increases happiness. But it turns out that you never adapt to commuting to work. It’s always going to make you a little cranky.... Strategies for increasing happiness include;

1. Finding ways to beat adaptation by experiencing frequent small events that are less likely to “adapt out” than one large event that then leads to a return to the set point.
2. Focusing on positive events
3. Identifying character strengths and using them
4. Remembering to be grateful.

Psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi: Flow, creativity and happiness are interrelated:

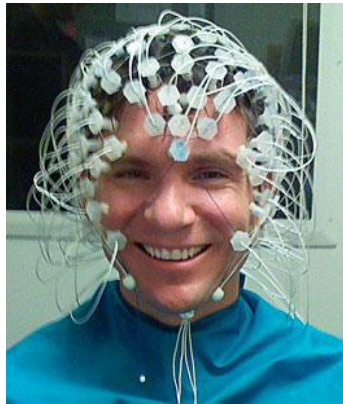
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7dSzKnf5WWg> or:

http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/en/mihaly_csikszentmihalyi_on_flow.html

What exactly is happening inside the brains of people experiencing joy and happiness?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8f-T7lgdLPI>

"It's a very complicated chemical soup," explained Dr. Richard Davidson, who has made a life's work out of studying "happy brains." His lab at the University of Wisconsin is devoted to understanding how much of our joy level is set at birth, and how much we can control.



With a skull cap containing 128 sensors, Davidson's team can watch a subject's brain respond to a series of photographs, some pleasant, some distressing.

"We can challenge the brain by presenting these emotional images and look to see how you respond to them," Davidson said.

ABC News' Bill Weir underwent the test, and by studying the activity in his left prefrontal cortex, Davidson discovered that Weir's brain was "more positive than not."

"Now, it doesn't mean that you don't have episodes of negative emotion," he explained. "But those negative emotions don't linger."

People with happy brains have their parents to thank, to a certain extent, not only for happy genes, but also for loving childhoods. Studies have shown that angry or critical parents can actually alter a child's happiness level until it's set around age 16. But can adults adjust their own feelings of happiness?

Happiness Interventions

Until recently, most research psychologists were more interested in what made people depressed than what made them happy, and pharmaceutical companies have played a crucial role in promoting happiness by developing very successful anti-depressants. But evolving research in a field known as positive psychology is getting people to ask themselves how they can become happier, not through drugs, but by making changes in how they act and think.

"Antidepressants don't make people happier, they just decrease negative emotions," says University of California-Riverside psychology professor Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky. In her new book, "The How of Happiness," Lyubomirsky argues that as much as 40 percent of our happiness "is left for the intentional activities that we can choose to engage in -- the things that we do and think every day of our lives."

What are these "intentional activities"? Scientists know that happy people practice, among other things, more acts of kindness, are able to lose themselves in whatever they enjoy doing, (Are you familiar with the concept of FLOW—Mihalyi “Chicks send me highli) and avoid dwelling on their problems.

Lyubomirsky has had lab subjects actually engage in some of these activities, and found that people can indeed force themselves to truly become happier. Not surprisingly, such happiness interventions take work, because people easily fall back to their genetically-determined happiness set points. Scientists have known for decades that a large part of our temperament is genetically pre-determined; by studying the personalities of identical twins they've found that about 50 percent of our happiness -- or unhappiness -- can be traced to our genes. Adding the 40 percent that we can control with our daily thoughts and actions still leaves about 10 percent unaccounted for. This remaining 10 percent is related to our life circumstances, such as where we live, how much money we have, our marital status, and how we look.

Hedonic Adaptation

Surprised that your life circumstances have such little influence on your happiness? Researchers have found that people eventually return to their genetically-determined happiness set points after big changes in life, as seen in lottery winners and newlyweds.

Question: Do you agree with these findings from your life and experiences and those of your friends? Are you aware of your set points?

SPIRITUAL

Reading: Dalai Lama XIV quotes: "Happiness is not something ready made. It comes from your own actions." "If you think you are too small to make a difference, try sleeping with a mosquito."

"Love is the absence of judgment." "There is a saying in Tibetan, 'Tragedy should be utilized as a source of strength.'

No matter what sort of difficulties, how painful experience is, if we lose our hope, that's our real disaster." "My religion is very simple. My religion is kindness." "Remember "Every day, think as you wake up, today I am fortunate to be alive, I have a precious human life, I am not going to waste it. I am going to use all my energies to develop myself, to expand my heart out to others; to achieve enlightenment for the benefit of all beings. I am going to have kind thoughts towards others, I am not going to get angry or think badly about others. I am going to benefit others as much as I can." "Know the rules well, so you can break them effectively." "our love for each other exceeds your need for each other." "Silence is sometimes the best answer" "Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries. Without them, humanity cannot survive" Choose to be optimistic, it feels better." "Our prime purpose in this life is to help others. And if you can't help them, at least don't hurt them." "If a problem is fixable, if a situation is such that you can do something about it, then there is no need to worry. If it's not fixable, then there is no help in worrying. There is no benefit in worrying whatsoever." "This is my simple religion. No need for temples. No need for complicated"

"Remember that sometimes not getting what you want is a wonderful stroke of luck." philosophy. Your own mind, your own heart is the temple. Your philosophy is simple kindness." "People take different roads seeking fulfillment and happiness. Just because they're not on your road doesn't mean they've gotten lost." "When we meet real tragedy in life, we can react in two ways--either by losing hope and falling into self-destructive habits, or by using the challenge to find our inner strength." "If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be

happy, practice compassion.” “Look at children. Of course they may quarrel, but generally speaking they do not harbor ill feelings as much or as long as adults do. Most adults have the advantage of education over children, but what is the use of an education if they show a big smile while hiding negative feelings deep inside? Children don’t usually act in such a manner. If they feel angry with someone, they express it, and then it is finished. They can still play with that person the following day.”

Why Do Younger Evangelicals Put Happiness and Popularity Over Morality and Truth?

Christianity is not just about being happy and feeling good and being liked by others

Written by Wintery Knight | Thursday, August 1, 2013

What’s at the root of this movement to back away from moral issues? ...When you advocate for moral causes like protecting the unborn, or school choice, or freeing the slaves, a bunch of people are not going to like you...But young evangelicals have gotten the idea that being a Christian should not involve any sort of unhappiness and unpopularity. They wouldn’t have learned this from the Bible, because the Bible emphasizes suffering and unpopularity as part of the normal Christian life. But young evangelicals have gotten the idea that being a Christian should not involve any sort of unhappiness and unpopularity. They wouldn’t have learned this from the Bible, because the Bible emphasizes suffering and unpopularity as part of the normal Christian life. It is their experience of church (and the hedonistic culture around them) that is likely to reinforce that view.

What young evangelicals learn in many churches is that religion is something that is centered on the Bible and the church building – it is not something that flows into real life. They learn that you can’t find out anything about God from the Big Bang, the DNA, the fossil record, or even from the peer-reviewed research on abortion, divorce, or gay marriage. They learn from the Bible that helping the poor is good, but then they never pick up an economic textbook to see *which economic system really helps the poor*. What you learn about in church is that religion is private and has no connection to reality whatsoever. This fits in with their view that Christianity should make them happy, because they’ve learned that it doesn’t involve any studying to connect the Bible to the real world.

What follows from having a view that Christianity only lives in the Bible and church, and not out there in the real world of telescopes and microscopes? Well, most young evangelicals interpret what their pastor is telling them as “our flavor of ice cream” or “our cultural preference”. They don’t link Christianity to the real world, they don’t think that it’s true for everyone. They think that you just accept what the Bible says on faith, and that’s all. No reasons can be given to non-Christians outside of just asking them to accept the Bible. Younger evangelicals believe that there are no facts that confirm or disprove Christianity – it’s just a blind belief. Young evangelicals think that their faith doesn’t have to be complemented with careful study of how things work in the real world.

What is the result of this anti-intellectual compartmentalization of faith? The result is that young evangelicals will balk at the idea of telling someone that they are going to Hell if they don't believe in Jesus. They will balk at the idea that feminism is to blame for the destruction of the family. They will balk at the idea that the best way to help the poor is to push for free market capitalism. They will balk at the idea that it is wrong to kill unborn children. They will balk at the idea that disarmament and pacifism embolden terrorists and tyrants to attack peace-loving people. They will balk at the idea that traditional marriage is better for society and children. They will balk at the idea that man-made catastrophic global warming is not supported by science. *They lack courage because they first lack knowledge.* They don't know how to make the case using hard evidence. They don't learn that hard evidence is important in church.

If the purpose of religion is to have happy feelings and be liked, then studying the real world to find out whether the Bible is true is bad religion. If religion is divorced from reality, then it's just a personal preference influenced by how a person was raised. No young evangelical is going to lift a finger to take bold moral stands if they think their worldview is just one option among many – like the flavors of ice cream in the frozen section of the grocery store. They have to know that what they are saying is true – then they will be bold. An example: there was a time when people believed that God did not create the first living cell, because it was just a simple lump of protoplasm that could easily come about by accident. Now we know better, and we can boldly make the case for intelligent design based on hard evidence – if we put in the time to study the evidence. And it is the same for everything – from theological claims, to moral claims, to social claims, to economic claims, to foreign policy claims. It doesn't matter if people call you names when you have the facts to support unpopular claims, *and that's why public, authentic Christianity is built on facts.* Non-Christians being offended by your claims doesn't change the way the world is.

We have to turn away from our own ignorance, laziness and cowardice if we hope to have the ability to stand up for our beliefs in public. Christianity is not about being happy and feeling good and being liked by others. In a society that is increasingly secular and relativistic, studying outside the Bible necessarily precedes an authentic Christian life. There is no shortcut. We might have been able to get away with fideism 50 years ago, but not anymore. Not now.

Question: Do you find any of this in our UU theology? Or are we of the “feel good” theology? Do we have the answers for the comments above?

Some different views on happiness. The quotes to end our trip.

- 1. Happiness is not a goal...it's a by-product of a life well lived. - Eleanor Roosevelt
- 2. I believe compassion to be one of the few things we can practice that will bring immediate and long-term happiness to our lives - Dalai Lama
- 3. It's a helluva start, being able to recognize what makes you happy - Lucille Ball

- 4. The happiness of your life depends upon the quality of your thoughts. - Marcus Aurelius
- 5. Act the way you want to feel. - Gretchen Rubin
- 6. Everyone wants to live on top of the mountain, but all the happiness and growth occurs while you're climbing it. - Andy Rooney
- . 7. The power of finding [beauty](#) in the humblest things makes home happy and life lovely. - Louisa May Alcott
- 8. Until you make peace with who you are, you'll never be content with what you have. - Doris Mortman
- 9. When one door closes, another opens; but we often look so long and so regretfully upon the closed door that we do not see the one which has opened for us. - Alexander Graham Bell
- 10. Action may not always bring happiness, but there is no happiness without action. - William James
- Some quotes that aren't so valid—why not???
- 1. Sanity and happiness are an impossible combination. - Mark Twain
- 2. Happiness in intelligent people is the rarest thing I know. - Ernest Hemingway
- 3. The most important thing is to enjoy your life—to be happy—it's all that matters. - Audrey Hepburn (It's the "all" that's the problem in this happiness quote.)
- 4. A large income is the best recipe for happiness I ever heard of - Jane Austen.
- 5. To be stupid, and selfish, and to have good health are the three requirements for happiness. Julian Barnes, Flaubert's parrot.
- Dan Gilbert: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4q1dgn_C0AU