

## Happiness is . . .

© Rev. Deborah Mero

November 14, 2010

UFWC

I mentioned in this past week's online newsletter, Connections, that I would be leaving this afternoon to spend three days with my colleagues at the Harper's Ferry Ministerial Study Group. The subject of the gathering this year is "Evil." To anticipate three days of talking about evil something subliminally told me that I needed to prepare myself so I chose "happiness" as today's topic.

Actually the original catalyst began at the end of last May when Derek Bok, the former president of Harvard, came out with his book, The Politics of Happiness. The web site, Firedoglake.com invited him to participate in a "Book Salon" a two hour session where authors engage with readers in an online discussion about their books. I thought this might be an interesting conversation and I was hoping for some hints as to how things in our country might turn around because, frankly, the political world was not adding anything to the pursuit of happiness in my estimation. One could ask why this should even be expected except for the minor detail that it is one of the founding principles of our country. The Declaration of Independence written by Thomas Jefferson states "*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.*" So I logged in to see what Dr. Bok had to say. Essentially Bok was using some of the newly gathered research on happiness to apply it to the broader social contract that we presumably are parties to.

The conversation was moderated, as it turned out, by my friend Sara Robinson who happens to be a Unitarian Universalist. Sara began by giving a synopsis of the book and some of its "discoveries:"<sup>1</sup>

"One important finding is that beyond a point, more money doesn't equate to more happiness. (Where that point is is a matter of dispute; and there will always be people for whom there is no endpoint at all.) Thanks to a century of rampant consumer culture, fed by the media and the advertising industry, money-equals-happiness is a dominant assumption in America these days; but Bok's research proves conclusively that this single-minded focus on economic growth alone is wrong-headed. Worse: in our dogged pursuit of wealth-at-all-costs, we've lost sight of many other (often less expensive) measures that have been proven, time and again around the world, to promote far greater individual and collective well-being. Specifically, these include practical policies that:

- \* *Strengthen marriages and reduce the stress of parenting*
- \* *Encourage active forms of leisure and recreation*
- \* *Cushion the financial shock of unemployment, and facilitate lifelong education and the transition to new work*
- \* *Guarantee unconditional access to competent healthcare*
- \* *Make it easier for people to prepare for a comfortable, secure retirement*
- \* *Improve preschool and early childhood education*
- \* *Ensure the mentally ill get adequate, effective, consistent treatment*
- \* *Empower doctors to deal more intelligently and effectively with under-treated conditions like sleep disorders and chronic pain, which destroy the happiness of millions*
- \* *Refocus education policy away from its single-minded emphasis on producing compliant workers; and toward creating creative, fulfilled individuals who are competent to pursue happiness on their own terms*
- \* *Restore Americans' damaged faith in their government, specifically by increasing accountability and responsiveness, raising public awareness of effective laws and*

---

1. <http://firedoglake.com/2010/05/22/fdl-book-salon-welcomes-dr-derek-bok-the-politics-of-happiness/>

*programs, enacting fair and consistently-enforced regulations, following the rule of law, and ending the culture of corruption that currently dominates our politics.*

That is a terrific list of policies which, if they were enacted, would lead to the kind of society that I would be quite happy to live in. But we've just had an election and, much to my dismay, I don't see how our nation is headed in a direction that will produce any of these kinds of policies any time soon. Where do we go from here? I think moving to Canada or to Scandinavia is probably out of the question. So how do we find a way to live in what seems to be a discordant society and find happiness?

The Dalai Lama collaborated with Dr. Howard Cutler a psychiatrist in producing the recent book The Art of Happiness in a Troubled World. Much of the book talks about prejudice, racism, extreme nationalism and violence—the elements that dominate our news and our vision of the world. What the Dalai Lama persistently answers to the many dilemmas and challenges we face is the need to build community, make real connections, counter the “me vs. we” paradigm and have a “realistic outlook” on life, that is, to look at everything with a wider perspective than we are used to doing.

For example, the statistics show that there is a marked predominance of acts of human kindness that far outweighs human cruelty. In 2004 the National Opinion Research Center found that Americans perform an average of 109 acts of altruism every year. They multiplied that number by the country's population and came up with 23,980,000,000 acts of altruism. In contrast, the reported number of crimes reported to and tallied up by the FBI were 1,367,009. For every violent crime that was committed that year there were 17,542 acts of altruism.<sup>2</sup> How much of that is reported on the nightly news or in our daily papers? Look at the big picture and this is what you see. It is so easy to become submerged in the fear and anxiety that predominates the airwaves and wind up in a downward spiral—I know. I've found myself going down that drain more frequently than I'd like to admit.

Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard, also a scholar about happiness spoke of how we cannot hold two sets of thoughts or feelings in our minds at the same time.<sup>3</sup> Exercising the spiritual discipline of replacing the negative thoughts of fear and prejudice with positive thoughts of optimism, hope and trust helps us find a deep sense of serenity and fulfillment. We can work on ourselves but again, it acquires meaning when we are part of a larger community. We need it, our society needs it.

Finding or creating happiness and peace is part of our spiritual discipline—or should be. So let us look at what constitutes happiness. Derek Bok quotes Ed Diener “happiness scholar” from the University of Illinois with this definition:

“a person is said to have high [well-being or happiness] if she or he experiences life satisfaction and frequent joy, and only infrequently experiences unpleasant emotions such as sadness or anger. Contrariwise, a person is said to have low [well-being or happiness] if she or he is dissatisfied with life, experiences little joy and affection and frequently feels unpleasant emotions such as anger or anxiety.”<sup>4</sup>

Thich Nhat Hanh wrote:

---

2. from The Art of Happiness in a Troubled World by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Howard C. Cutler, MD (New York: Doubleday, 2009) p. 122

3. [http://www.ted.com/talks/matthieu\\_ricard\\_on\\_the\\_habits\\_of\\_happiness.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/matthieu_ricard_on_the_habits_of_happiness.html)

4. Bok, Derek, *The Politics of Happiness* (Princeton University Press, 2010) pp. 9-10

“The Buddha explained that the source of true happiness is living in ease and freedom, fully experiencing the wonders of life, Happiness is being aware of what is going on in the present moment, free from both clinging and aversion. A happy person cherishes the wonders taking place in the present moment—a cool breeze, the morning sky, a golden flower, a violet bamboo tree, the smile of a child. A happy person can appreciate these things without being bound by them. Understanding all dharmas as impermanent and without a separate self, a happy person does not become consumed even by such worry and fear. Because he understands that a flower will soon wilt, he is not sad when it does.”<sup>5</sup>

Our friends in the world of Charlie Brown and Peanuts had some pretty good ideas about what happiness is as well. They sang about things which give us pleasure—two kinds of ice cream, finding a nickel, five kinds of crayons; learning new things—learning to whistle, tying your shoe, catching a firefly and setting it free; it is being engaged in activities with others—playing the drum in your school band, singing together when day is through. The lyrics written by Clark Gesner in 1965 have a high correlation with the studies that have been done in this decade in the relatively new field of “positive psychology” of which Martin Seligman of the University of Pennsylvania is one of the founding fathers, so to speak.

Whereas traditional psychology is geared toward treating what is wrong with us using a disease model, positive psychology is focused on designing interventions and pathways to make us happier. One of his early conclusions in his studies is that extremely happy people are extremely social people. But there's much more to it. On a lecture he gave to a Ted.com gathering in July of 2008<sup>6</sup> he spoke of three kinds of life paths to happiness, the Pleasant Life, the Good Life and the Meaningful Life.

The Pleasant Life revolves around enjoying the pleasures of life, indulging the senses, savoring beauty and attention, immersing in the tactile and tasty and comfortable. It is a hedonistic path— one that is attractive to those who don't live it. Think of how television networks have made hits of showing the life styles of the rich and famous. The image of beautiful people with beautiful possessions has been part of the media world since its inception. The problem with this path is that once one has had the first tasty bites of something scrumptious, the thrill is gone. It's kind of like the day after Christmas when a child grows bored with his new toys.

The Good Life is one where you are successful in work, excel in play, blossom in love. All is good with the world. This is when you do what you love and love what you do, when you are so engaged with what you do that time stops, or flies by because you are totally absorbed in the task at hand.

The third path is the Meaningful Life where you know what your highest strengths are and you are able to use them in the service of something that is larger than you are; when you are engaged in a cause or an endeavor that makes life better for others.

Seligman's work includes designing interventions or techniques to help one increase one's happiness and can be based on those three paths. For those who are pleasure challenged, a prescription could be to design a beautiful day, but in this case not one of just indulgence. Part of the design of the day is to use mindfulness to savor the sensory experiences so as to enhance them and implant the memories to be drawn on again and again.

For those needing help with the so-called Good Life he designed a “Gratitude visit.” Think about one person, still living, who did something that radically changed your life for the better. Someone that

5. Lorie, Peter & Manuela Dunn Mascetti, **The Quotable Spirit** (New York: MacMillan Press, 1996) p. 127

6. [http://www.ted.com/talks/martin\\_seligman\\_on\\_the\\_state\\_of\\_psychology.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/martin_seligman_on_the_state_of_psychology.html)

you never were able to properly thank. Write a 300 word testimonial to that person. Find them, arrange a visit and read that testimonial to them. Guaranteed are tears and hugs and a warmth that will have a lasting effect on you both. There's also a prescription for a "strengths date" where you and your loved one design an evening around both of your strengths and reinforce them for one another. These are all ways to boost and reinforce inner contentment and satisfaction with life.

In the various trials and tests that Seligman and his associates designed they tested fun v. philanthropy — having individuals or groups plan and have play or fun events and have them also plan and engage in philanthropic works. While the fun-filled events increased short-term happiness, the philanthropic works provided benefits that were long-term. In an equation where Life Satisfaction = Pleasurable experiences + Engagement + Meaning, satisfaction or happiness most consistently was highest with those who embraced a life that was meaning-filled. Second was the good life where professional engagement was high and last was a life filled with pleasure.

So we have three factors that increase one's personal happiness—doing good works that help others, being engaged in activities that are stimulating and reinforce your strengths, and having pleasurable sensory experiences—all factors that are present and available, if not fundamental within our UU community, I might add. As we increase our sense of personal happiness, the communal setting begins to take and/or offer a role for expanding and reinforcing that individual happiness. I asked Dr. Bok about the role of religion in happiness and he answered:

Yes, there is research on the relation of religion to happiness. In the United States, at least, being active in a community of faith is significantly correlated with greater happiness. Part of this is simply the positive effect that is regularly associated with joining a supportive group of people and gaining the personal associations therefrom. But researchers have also found that people with a strong religious faith tend to be significantly happier quite apart from joining with others. At least, this is true in the United States. There is some indication that religious faith may not have the same positive effect in some European countries."<sup>7</sup>

As fate would have it, I took a break from writing this yesterday to go to my mailbox and, timed exquisitely, there was a video I had ordered at last year's General Assembly. Rev. Galen Guengerich from All Soul's Unitarian Church in New York City did a series of 8 consecutive workshops at GA on "The Necessity of Virtue" framing a path that reflected Aristotle's thesis that "the key to happiness is virtue, the state of character in which we fulfill our potential by living as human beings ought to live." These virtues are Wisdom, Courage, Compassion, Justice, Temperance, Transcendence, and Hope. Guengerich postulates that Unitarian Universalists are uniquely positioned to follow a religious path that lifts up these virtues in their own right as we seek salvation by character rather than by faith or grace. What is clear is that whether it is this set of virtues, the Dalai Lama's path, Dr. Bok's societal prescriptions or Dr. Seligman's personal prescriptions, they all involve spiritual discipline of some sort that reaches inward and outward and is magnified and enhanced through community. As I look at our vision and our mission, the pursuit of happiness as laid out by these experts is what we are about. We may not see our mission as a vehicle to make us happy, but it has all the elements that the scholars and great teachers tell us are the keys. As we live our mission to grow spiritually, build community and bring justice to the world, we cannot help but increase our own happiness in the process. Funny how it works out that way.

---

7. <http://firedoglake.com/2010/05/22/fdl-book-salon-welcomes-dr-derek-bok-the-politics-of-happiness/#comment-2143359>