

HOW TO BE HAPPY

If happiness could be found in advice columns, most of us would be ecstatic. There is no lack of self-help experts telling us how to get the love we want, avoid our erroneous zones, and boost our self-esteem. But their answers are not necessarily the answers that will work for you or me. And those who have been lured by this morning's sermon title hoping to find a shortcut to serenity will probably leave here this morning even unhappier than when they arrived.

In fact, there is little agreement on what happiness even means, or how it might be measured. Way back in 1972, the king of Bhutan suggested that "Gross National Happiness" might be a better yardstick of personal well-being than the "Gross National Product" that so occupies economists. After all, every time there's a car wreck or a coronary, the GNP rises, while actual misery increases. Since then, the United Nations has tried to quantify felicity and rank nations by a number of indicators that include personal income but also life expectancy, trust, generosity, freedom to make life choices and other social goods. Finland usually tops the list of happiest places on earth, but also leads the planet in suicides per capita, which leads other researchers to question what criteria really matter? Does higher education lead to happiness, for example, or can ignorance be bliss? Is the city mouse or the country mouse more satisfied with life's pace and variety, or is it impossible to generalize about rodents or people, so that happiness is more a matter of individual taste and preference and philosophy than any set of outward circumstances? Not everybody wants to live in Finland, nor Bhutan, especially not if you're Hindu or Nepalese, who have been expelled *en masse* from that Shangri-La. Not everyone wants to live in Utah, supposedly the second happiest state in the Union.

During this holiday season there is tremendous pressure to be happy. 'Tis the season to be jolly, and sleigh bells are tinkling in the snow. But it's a moody time, a family time when so often family members are gone or absent or unpleasant, a moment for childhood remembrance when growing up and adolescence were not always the best years of our lives, a season of excess when many of us are tempted to eat too much, drink too much, spend too much in hope that the merriment will catch fire with another swipe of the credit card. Seasonal Affective Disorder is a real thing, according to the National Institutes of Mental Health, and selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors can be used to treat it, although I think some of these drugs are just ways for Big Pharma to make a

buck off the fact that people feel blue sometimes. That's why we moved to New Mexico, Dori and I, because we were tired of the dark and cold and damp of New England, even if there's a pill for that.

Because it's my belief that so far, no one has figured out how to put happiness in a bottle, patent it in pill form, or even put it on a bun. And no one who watches the evening news can be elated all the time. Chronic cheerfulness would be hard to justify. But that doesn't mean that very many of us are ready to succumb to gloom either. It's not a bad world, after all. We're not really living in Plato's Cave, or in the kind of Zombie Apocalypse movies that now seem to be dominating Hollywood and Netflix. Just this morning I saw a northern Flicker on the big elm outside my window. So why not celebrate? Maybe it's enough just to have happy moments like these, without demanding a happy life, or a happy nation, or eternal happiness here-to-come. Just a few mellow, flickery moments might be enough. Unfortunately, we live in a grievance culture. The message that I've been wronged, I've been victimized, has been drilled into us and reinforced by litigation lawyers. We see their billboards driving up to Taos. Injured? Better Call Saul! If you're hurting or aggrieved, it's somebody else's fault and they have to pay! And sometimes those lawyers have a point. The world isn't fair, and people who have been systematically mistreated do need to stand up for their rights and deserve a redress. But it doesn't help to walk around with a perpetual chip on the shoulder, either. If you have been wronged or abused, don't let your tormentors define you or determine your destiny. Get over it, because living well is the best revenge. And if you're like most people, you'd like to enjoy a modicum of happiness in this world, a reasonable portion of satisfaction, and it's not too much to ask a religious tradition like ours to provide a few clues about where to find it.

Some of these clues may seem obvious, but bear repeating anyway. One such truth is that money doesn't buy happiness. Since 1960 the National Opinion Research Center has been tracking the mood swings of the American public, how many are okay with their lives and how many are malcontent. Over the course of that period, the Gross National Product has tripled. People live in bigger houses, own more cars, and have far more gadgets than they did two generations ago. They consume more fast food and consequently have more by-pass operations, a result of all those Happy Meals. And yet roughly the same percentage of the population describe themselves as generally pleased with life as was the case back before Amazon or cell phones. Then as now about one-third of all Americans professed to be very happy with their circumstances. Two-thirds were

disgruntled at least a good portion of the time. Money matters, nobody denies it, but for most it's not the crucial ingredient in the secret recipe.

And this suggests another obvious truth, that many of us spend far too much energy worrying that someone, somewhere, might be wealthier, healthier or having better orgasms than we are. Now it's called FOMO, fear of missing out. But it used to have a much simpler, old-fashioned name. Envy, as much as greed, is a national past time. Sex researchers Robert Michael and John Gagnon, for example, discovered that most Americans wrongly imagine that the large majority of their neighbors are having much more fun than turns out to be the case. Mistaking movies and magazines for reality, they suppose that carefree singles and spouse-swapping swingers are making the scene with multiple partners in an endless round of pleasure. Mr. and Mrs. Joe Average apparently worry that their own experiences between the sheets are rather hum-drum in comparison with more freewheeling lifestyles. But in their comprehensive study on *Sex in America* the authors discovered that almost all the people who said that they were overall happy with their lives were also happy with their sex lives, and almost all of those who were happy with their sex life had just one partner--most, in fact, were married and faithful to their mates. Boring turns out to be boffo, and just average actually turns out to be better-than-average. At least in the area of our intimate relationships, the rule seems to be that fidelity and familiarity breed content.

And it's important to note that women are just as likely as men to share in that contentment. In the early 1970's, some studies indicated that women were much more likely to be depressed than men, especially if they were married, a finding that was chalked up to the patriarchal nature of matrimony. But more recent data shows that where life satisfaction is concerned, anatomy is not destiny. Being part of a couple, whether gay or straight, is usually a plus, and both sexes appear to have a pretty similar shot at wedded bliss, suggesting that the founders had it right two hundred years ago. When it comes to the pursuit of happiness, all people are created equal. Experiencing the zest of life is not primarily a matter of having the right chromosomes, or proper toilet training, or other factors beyond our control. Happiness is to at least some degree an achievement, a consequence of choices we make each day, and in this sense not just a passing mood or the gift of a lucky disposition, but an ethical and spiritual attainment.

Rene DuBos hints as much when he says that "Happiness is contagious. For this reason its expression is a social service and almost a duty. The Buddhists have a

saying about this commendable virtue: *Only happy people can make a happy world.*" And Buddhism is not the only religious tradition that makes happiness a moral imperative. "This is the day the Lord has made," as we read in the Psalms, followed by the positive commandment, "Rejoice and be glad therein!" Saying that we have a responsibility to be happy sounds odd, perhaps, but it's simply another way of stating that it would be a sin, a pity, a waste, to spend all our time moping or feeling sorry for ourselves.

Because we do have options for how to carry ourselves in the world. I was strolling on a bike path recently when I noticed something peculiar. About half the people I passed by were smiling and seemed glad to be alive. No wonder, because it was a beautiful, sunny afternoon. The leaves were brilliant and the sky was blue. But about half the people were grimacing, not just frowning but wearing expressions of irritability and woe that seemed to have been etched permanently on their faces, and carved probably into their psyches as well. All were on the same trail. All were inhabiting roughly the same point on the fabric of space and time. But from their outward appearance, you might have guessed that some were trodding on the path to heaven, and others down the road to hell.

As indeed they were. Our own spiritual forbears understood this well. Early Universalists believed that the purpose of religion was not only to make people good but also to make them happy, and the two conditions seemed inseparable in their minds. You recall that Universalists rejected the idea of damnation or retribution in the afterlife. They held that men and women are not punished for their sins so much as punished by their sins. Envy, greed, pettiness, spite, and anger (or wrath, as it used to be called) tend to pucker the heart and sour the soul. And by the same token acts of generosity, forgiveness, kindness, patience and compassion are like putting the sweetener in life's lemonade. Well-being is an extension of well-doing. Our reward isn't waiting for us when we die, it's here and now, within us and among us. Happiness is the state of being in right relationship with ourselves and others and our universe.

So there you have it. Don't worry that someone, somewhere, might be having more fun than you. Instead, hug someone you love. Grin for no good reason. Be good to yourself. Sing when no one's listening and do a good deed when no one's looking. Take joy. Shed your dreams of the perfect holiday, because it's not going to happen, and because it's not about the trimmings or trappings anyway. Don't fret if the gingerbread men don't get baked, or the *challah* comes out overdone. Whether your December tradition is fruitcake or stollen, it doesn't

matter. Because if you think that you need to have the cookie to be happy, and that having the cookie means more money, or tighter abs, or the latest iphone, you're going to be disappointed. Because life is the Christmas cookie. And enjoying it is the answer.