

The Pursuit of Happiness

Ecclesiastes 3:9-13

September 11, 2022

Consider for a moment how important happiness is:

- In our scripture reading, the narrator says “I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.” In other words, God wants you to be happy.
- In our country, our Declaration of Independence declares the belief of the Founding Fathers that all humans have the inalienable right to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Governments are created to protect those rights.
- In a nonscientific but fairly random poll, reported in the TED talk called “My failed attempt to find God”, when asked “What do you want in life?” the consensus was “To be healthy, to be happy, to be loved.”
- Even Steve Jobs said, toward the end of his too-short life, “Don’t educate your children to be rich, educate them to be happy so they know the value of things and not the price.”

Apparently, happiness is very important. If that is so, then why is there so little understanding on how to bring it about? We barely have a consensus on a definition, although the candidates seem to cluster around what the Greeks called *eudaimonia*, or a sense of well-being. After millennia of debating the point, philosophers and ethicists still don’t agree on what the goal is here – is it happiness for the individual? happiness for the collective? are they related? and so forth. The happiest character in all of fiction – Pollyanna – has become the namesake of naive innocence, not to be taken seriously. Pretty mixed message, if you ask me.

After all this time, and all the things people have tried, why are we still so confused about what makes for happiness? I mean, look at the US today: do we seem to be a happy country right now? Why is this so difficult? You will say, “But happiness is so individual. There’s no one answer for everyone.” or you will say, “It’s selfish and wrong to focus on being happy when so many people are not.” or you will say, “Happiness is too elusive to be a goal. When it does show up it never stays.” And so on.

There seem to be some major misunderstandings about what makes for happiness. Our culture, as reflected in advertising, repeatedly asserts that happiness comes to us, just to us, from the outside, through experiences and acquisitions:

- Want to be happy? Buy this new car
- Want to be happy? Take a vacation to Hawaii
- Want to be happy? Try this new diet
- Want to be happy? Buy this new gadget... etc etc

So we go and do, and buy and buy, and wonder why our happiness level doesn't really change very much. Our capitalist, free-market economy depends on our continued dissatisfaction with the present and our continued belief that the right answer is somehow out there if we just keep looking and buying... And really, we only need to be concerned about our own happiness. That's all that matters.

Maybe the problem is that we don't really understand where happiness comes from. With that in mind, here are two stories that seem relevant:

The first is about the tiny Kingdom of Bhutan, landlocked between China and India on the edge of the Himalayas. Back in the 1970's they began measuring what they called GNH, Gross National Happiness. Bhutan is not a wealthy country, but it has the basics of widespread access to healthcare and education. Over the years, the Gross National Happiness has been steadily rising. Rising, that is, until the advent of the Internet. All of a sudden, exposed for the first time to what the rest of the world had that they didn't, the GNH plummeted. Nothing had changed in their immediate surroundings, but all of a sudden they were less happy. From this I conclude two things:

1. Happiness is not a function of what you have or don't have, it's a perception that exists in your mind ("you're about as happy as you make up your mind to be" Abraham Lincoln), and
2. Envy is truly destructive.

Here's the second story:

A wise teacher once brought balloons to school, told her pupils to blow them up and write their name on one. After the children tossed their balloons into the hall, the teacher moved through the hall mixing them all up.

The kids were given five minutes to find the balloon with their name on it, but though they searched frantically, no one found their own balloon.

Then the teacher told them to take the balloon closest to them and give it to the person whose name was on it. In less than two minutes, everyone was holding their own balloon.

The teacher said to the children, "These balloons are like happiness. We won't find it when we're only searching for our own. But if we care about someone else's happiness...it will ultimately help us find our own."

We have lost two special women from our circle recently, Lynne Shafsky and Jan Lamphier, who both knew a lot about how to be happy. Lynne, who passed away just a year ago, literally lived the balloon story. Her whole life was spent helping other people. She was right when she said that Tagore saying described her life:

I slept and dreamt that life was joy;
I awoke and saw that life was service;
I acted and behold, service was joy.

And Jan, dear Jan, came to happiness through the spiritual practice of gratitude, of appreciation. In spite of dealing with considerable pain over the last few years, she *let herself* be happy in the small moments that life presented to her – a visit with a dog (although if it was a golden retriever you could expect to spend all afternoon), hugging a redwood tree, hearing certain songs, the garden in her backyard. She looked for things to appreciate and then when she found them, she expressed that appreciation with an almost childlike enthusiasm. Because that appreciation was delightful to see and share, her friends looked for ways to evoke it. Denise brought Dora to visit, Karen shared her backyard figs, Butch invited her to lunch in his redwood grove, I put songs in the Order of Worship that I knew she would like, and on and on. Jan made it easy for all of us to practice what the Buddhists call *mudita*. This is the word for the joy *you* derive from *another's* happiness. It's actually a very deep spiritual practice.

You see, happiness is not a destination, it's a state of being. It doesn't come to you from the outside, it comes from within you and you project it outward. It's a state of high vibration. There's nothing wrong or selfish about maintaining a state of high vibration; every bit of positive energy that you project out into the world is a help. The selfish part shows up if you think it's only about you. The easiest way to get to, and maintain, that state of happiness, is to focus on the well-being of other people. Your happiness is a natural by-product.

Henry David Thoreau once wrote, “Happiness is like a butterfly; the more you chase it, the more it will elude you; but if you turn your attention to other things, it will come and sit softly on your shoulder.”