

Should We Pursue Happiness?

Rev. Kenneth Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
April 13, 2008

Readings

From *The American Soul: Rediscovering the Wisdom of the Founders*, by Jacob Needleman

The pursuit of happiness, as Jefferson and the Founding Fathers understood it, is surely not the pursuit of consumer products. The happiness Jefferson spoke of is a matter of the spirit of man, his moral and intellectual faculties in harmony with nature as it exists both outside of himself in his environment and within himself in the processes of his own body and soul. As with the spiritual philosophies and traditions of all ages, for Jefferson happiness is not to be equated with the mere satisfaction of desires. And if we assume we understand what Jefferson meant by the pursuit of happiness, and in so assuming if we vaguely feel it has to do mainly with material factors, then it is very likely we misunderstand the bases upon which the American nation was formed. Men and women did not die for the right to unbounded consumer goods.

The point is that Jefferson had to fight for this view of human nature. It was not “common knowledge”; it was, in fact revolutionary. We think of the American struggle as a struggle for rights; it was, and perhaps still is, equally a struggle for a view of the human self.

From *The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living*, by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Howard Cutler, M.D.. These are the words of the Dalai Lama:

So, let us reflect on what is truly of value in life, what gives meaning to our lives, and set our priorities on the basis of this. The purpose of our life needs to be positive. We weren't born with the purpose of causing trouble, harming others. For our life to be of value, I think we must develop basic good human qualities – warmth, kindness, compassion. Then our life becomes meaningful and more peaceful – happier.

Sermon

There is a new book titled *Against Happiness*.

I haven't read it. I am not against happiness myself.

But, according to the review by Garrison Keillor, the author, Eric Wilson, protests our “American obsession with happiness,” our apparent belief that we can discover happiness “through securing stuff,” and that we might somehow achieve a happiness of “all up and no down.”

This I can relate to; but I'm not ready to throw out the baby of happiness with the bathwater of all the misdirected ways in which we go about pursuing it.

And after all, you can hardly stop Americans or anyone else from wanting to be happy. It seems wired into who we are as human beings. We want to be happy. Of course.

But should we *pursue* happiness? Is happiness something that *can* be pursued? Can it be dangerous to our spiritual health to *pursue* happiness?

As Robert Thurman, Buddhist practitioner and scholar (and father, by the way, of actress Uma Thurman) puts it: “Operating in the grip of the obsession of wanting myself to be happy is never successful.”

Hmmm. What then?

The “pursuit of happiness” is of course named and enshrined as an unalienable right in our Declaration of Independence. And, interestingly, there is no record of this phrase having been debated as our gathered founders parsed and critiqued and rewrote Jefferson’s draft. Everyone was apparently agreed on at least this point. But what did it actually mean?

Well, let’s back up a few more steps.

It’s worth knowing, to begin with, that the question of whether happiness is an appropriate goal for human life has a history. I discovered this by reading a very interesting book a couple of years ago, *Happiness: A History* by Darrin M. McMahon.

Among many other things, McMahon reminds us that the roots of our English word “happy” are the same as the word “happen” and “happenstance.” In other words, one ancient notion (common to the early Greeks among others) embedded in the very word itself – at least in English – is that we don’t have much control over whether we are happy or not, that our degree of well-being is simply and solely dependent on a combination of luck and fate – in either case not on us or our will or our plans or our deeds... not on our “pursuit.”

We see this ancient idea resurfacing today in research which suggests that every one of us has what can be called a “happiness set point” – in other words we are born with a genetic predisposition to a particular level of happiness, and that whatever good fortune or tragic event might *happen* to us, after a period of time we return to our usual “set point” level of happiness.

And we know this by either secondhand or our own firsthand experience. We are elated at the moment of some great achievement or milestone event, yet the glow of elation lasts only for a time and then fades. Or we are brought low, perhaps quite low, by a sad event or tragedy... yet... after a time – whether days or months or sometimes years – we return altogether or at least in good measure to our usual level of well-being, our personal “set point” of happiness.

But if this is all we can say about happiness – essentially you either have it or you don’t, it comes and goes.. then what meaning at all could there be in the idea of pursuing happiness?

Well, there *is* another stream of thought which in the west also begins with the Greeks, in particular with Socrates.

Socrates agreed with the indisputable fact that all human beings wish to be happy. And he saw that it is also clear that – happenstance or not – we will go about *seeking*, pursuing happiness. Yet – further, he saw too, as Thurman more recently noticed, that it is also pretty clear that our pursuit of happiness is all-too-often strangely unproductive or even counterproductive. The solution? Socrates said that our desires need to be and can be educated so that we learn to desire those things that bring us genuine and enduring happiness rather than fleeting pleasure only or even unhappiness.

Okay then. Where have we gotten to this point? We want to be happy. We know that some of our happiness is dependent on factors beyond our control – whether genetic or the chance turns of events, the “happenings” of our lives. Yet we also sense that we have at least some control over our own happiness – and we realize that sometimes we botch the job.

Well, further, we know what all this looks like and feels like.

We think that an ice cream sundae will make us happy – and it does for the moment (and there is nothing wrong with enjoying the pleasure of an ice cream sundae!). But sometimes we pay for it later with an upset stomach or an expanding waist line, neither of which make us happy in the longer term.

More extreme examples abound: pursuing happiness through alcohol or drug abuse simply does not work; pursuing happiness through more stuff, fancier toys, bigger houses... doesn’t work. In fact, researchers have concluded (by actually asking people all over the world) that beyond a certain relatively low level of material consumption, more consumption and so-called higher standards of living do not bring greater reported feelings of happiness and well-

being – and sometimes quite the contrary. And we know all too well that these same higher levels of consumption are devastating to the very natural world which sustains us.

What then? Can we, as Socrates told us we must, educate ourselves to desire those things which really *do* bring what we could call enduring happiness as opposed to fleeting pleasure only.

Maybe it's not as hard as it might sound.

As for me, I'm all for more pleasure than pain (I expect you are too). Indeed, my life like most everyone else's is in some measure organized around pleasant meals, hot showers, and a comfortable bed on which to lay my head. And I don't believe for a minute that there is anything wrong with any of those things.

But once our creature comforts are achieved, I know as well as you do that life is about *more than* our creature comforts. I know quite well – as you do too – that enduring happiness and well-being have to do with family, with friends, with the beauty of sunset and sunrise, with birdsong and flower blossom, with music and poetry and art. And I know – as you do too – that enduring happiness and well-being also have to do with opening our hearts to others and finding ways to contribute to the well-being and happiness of others, to the sustaining of the family of life. (Research bears *this* out too, just in case you need further convincing.)

To put it another way, *enduring* happiness has to do with enlarging our sense of self – to include family, friends, nature... everything and everyone.

Both of our readings this morning affirmed this, either directly or indirectly. Jacob Needleman understood Jefferson's affirmation of the unalienable right to the pursuit of happiness to be based not on pursuing more stuff, but on a view of the human self that transcended our material needs and desires, rather than remaining condemned to enslavement by them.

And the Dalai Lama, expressing in his own way the ancient truths of Buddhism (and many other spiritual traditions), was in similar territory when he spoke of our need to develop the qualities of "warmth, kindness, compassion" as a way to make our lives "meaningful and more peaceful – happier." Buddhist teaching begins with the First Noble Truth, as you heard last week, that there is suffering in life; but it goes on to affirm that relief of this suffering comes by nourishing our natural compassion, by enlarging our sense of self, by softening the boundaries and fear that divide us.

In short, enduring happiness, happiness beyond the fleeting and pleasant pleasures of life, is dependent upon developing a sense of self which reaches beyond our own skin and bones, developing the *experience* of other human beings – family, friends, everyone – as in a real sense part of who we are, and the *experience* of the natural world around us as in a real sense part of who we are.

Oddly and tragically our educational system pays scant attention to this truth of our lives, a truth essential not only to our personal well-being but to the well-being of all of us on our little home we call the earth. Instead our children (and the rest of us) are trained by incessant advertising and all kinds of media images to believe that more and more consumption of more and more stuff will bring us happiness.

And this *is* a flat out lie.

We do know better. We do know where enduring happiness lies – not in pursuing it directly, but rather in cultivating those things and qualities we know will bring greater happiness, contentment, well-being.

We do know better. But we too often forget what we know. This is why we create something like our Old Ship Covenant – promises to ourselves to care for ourselves, for one another, for all life, promises to create the conditions for greater well-being... happiness.

In *The Art of Happiness*, therapist Stephen Cutler tells the story of a young woman he was seeing. This woman was herself a counselor working with troubled youth in Phoenix. She

found great satisfaction in the work, but found Phoenix unpleasantly hot and crowded. She had been offered a job in a small town away from the city, in a beautiful area she had loved visiting; but it was a job working with adults, doing the kind of counseling she knew would not be as meaningful for her. She agonized over the decision to take the new job or not.

Inspired by his conversations with the Dalai Lama, Cutler asked her: “Do you think that moving there would bring you greater happiness or greater pleasure?”

That simple question cut through her lists of pros and cons; helped her to root her decision in the enduring truths of her life and of life in general – considerations of what brings genuine happiness and not pleasure only.

She stayed in Phoenix.

Now, our lives *will* include, in the words of poet William Blake, both joy and woe woven fine. There are things – happenstance of genes and events over which we have little or no control. Bad things happen. Good things happen. Pain and pleasure. We *can't* have all up and no down.

And some of our happiness depends on simply accepting that this is the case. Indeed, this acceptance itself can help us enlarge our experience of self to include everyone else whose lives also include joy and woe woven fine. And, somewhat paradoxically, this sympathetic experience of others can deepen our own sense of well-being. We really are part of a family of humanity and of life. We are in it together, no matter what comes. And knowing this, experiencing it, is part of our path to greater well-being, even happiness.

I'll leave you with this little exercise. As you go about your days this week, really notice other people. Just notice them. On a busy city street, notice the women and men and children walking, hurrying or strolling. Waiting at a traffic light, notice the faces of others waiting or passing the other way. In a meeting at work or around your dinner table, notice the others sharing the work with you, sharing the meal. Just notice.

We *are* part of one another. Knowing this, experiencing even a glimmer of this, appreciating this, this more expansive sense of who we are, is one wellspring of our enduring happiness in this life.

So may it be.