

STUMBLING ON HAPPINESS

Scott W. Alexander

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach

Sunday, November 14, 2010

Let me tell you a true story about happiness...genuine...heart-satisfying...soul-lifting happiness!

A few days ago, I was biking home one evening from my office here at the fellowship, after a long and somewhat frustrating work day. It was one of those days on the job (you've all had them!) when I seemed to get distracted by a constant flow of details and distractions which vied for my attentions (phone calls, e-mails, drop-in visitors...you know the drill), and when the sermon I was working on (when I managed to return to my desk and concentrate on it) just refused to neatly come together. I felt like I had kind of "spun my wheels" all day, without really getting accomplished what I had intended...and so I left the office somewhat frustrated, irritated and distracted. As I rode through town, my head was down as I reviewed the complications of the day.

But then, as I approached the Barber Bridge (heading North on Indian River Boulevard) - all of a mercifully sudden - the wondrous, wider world broke in on me in a way I simply could not ignore. I looked up and realized that I was in the midst of one of the most spectacular sunsets I had ever seen! With the sun setting hot and red in the west, the cloud-wrapped sky (and everything below...the land, the trees, the lagoon) had been ignited in a holy blaze of calming red-and-purple-and-yellow glory. It was as if all of creation had been set on fire just for the delight of my eyes and bless my soul.

Blessedly, I was able to breathe it all in...I slowed down on the bike...looked at the amazing world around me...and let creation kiss me in deep and unequivocal blessing. Suddenly - despite all the irritations and frustrations of the work day I had just left behind I was happy...totally, blessedly, simply, irretrievably happy! As I took in the astounding dance of colors around me, as I cycled I could feel the air pouring into my lungs, blood coursing through my veins, and I knew that a cold beer and simple dinner on the balcony with Collins was not far off...Dear God, what more could anyone want?...what more could anyone want?

Many years ago, the Rev. Harry Merserve - a UU minister who had retired to Maine - wrote of the meaning of such simple moments of contentment, listen to his words:

The things that make life worth living are simple things, common things, things we may possess just by claiming them, though we can never own them. What are such things? Sunshine baking into one's flesh...the sting of rain on one's face...sharing [a leisurely walk with an old friend]...feeling the rich glow of health after exertion...making a useful or beautiful object with one's own hands...receiving a cheery note from a distant friend...finding in a book the perfect expression of a thought for which one has long groped. The list is longer. Life offers the Simpleton more than he or she or anyone else

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can ever fully appreciate or use up... [and then Merserve ends] What enriches life the most are the unsophisticated pleasures, the simple joys, which can neither be bought nor sold, but can always be had for the asking and sharing.

Now I don't usually enjoy thinking of myself as "a simpleton," but in this context, it is a badge of clarity and wisdom I will wear with honor. For this is indeed how I think we human beings most often "stumble on" or discover happiness...we find it right where we live, in simple, ordinary everyday moments of awareness and pleasure.

And it turns out that leading scientists from Harvard University and other distinguished universities around the world confirm that is not just me who thinks this about happiness! The simple, genuine, heart-lifting, soul-satisfying happiness I experienced that late afternoon, as I was enveloped in the embrace of that glorious sunset, has recently been explained by leading psychologists and other academics. It turns out – a spate of recent studies on what makes for human happiness has determined – that lasting, life-enriching happiness, the kind that quietly turns our lives into works sustained satisfaction, is found not in these peak moments of ecstasy we all occasionally experience...like getting a new car in the driveway, landing a big promotion at work, or falling hear-over-heels in love but rather in what one researcher calls "THE ROUTINES OF SMALL DELIGHTS" ...the routines of small delights that we are able structure into our day-to-day lives.

It's all here in Dr. Daniel Gilbert's best selling book, *Stumbling on Happiness*, which reports the finding of Dr. Gilbert's decades-long research on the nature and dynamics of human happiness. In a nutshell, what Dr. Gilbert, who is known around Harvard as "Professor Happiness," has discovered in his psychological research and analysis is that human beings are lousy at predicting the future, most particularly how they will feel about their lives when both good and bad things happen to them. He picks up on many of the same things Barry Schwartz was observing in this morning's reading before the sermon. I quote Dr. Gilbert now at some length:

What we've been seeing in my lab, over and over again, is that people have an inability to predict what will make us happy – or unhappy...Few of us can accurately gauge how we will feel tomorrow or next week...[people routinely] overestimate how future successes and failures will affect their happiness, for the better or worse...The truth is, bad things don't affect us as profoundly as we expect them to. That's true of good things too...The good isn't as good, and the bad isn't as bad as we think it's going to be...Our research simply says that whether [its some pleasant event or a difficult one that occurs in our lives] both will matter LESS than you think they will [in terms of your

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happiness or sorrow]. [And the truth is that regardless of what happens – Good or bad] we adapt very quickly to either.

*So the good news is that going blind is not going to make you unhappy as you think it will. [And] the bad news is that winning the lottery will not make you as happy as you expect. [And then Dr. Gilbert goes on] as a species, we tend to be moderately happy with whatever we get [in life]...If you take a scale that goes from zero to 100, people, generally, report their happiness at about 75. We keep trying to get to 100. Sometimes we get there. But we don't stay long. [And conversely] we certainly fear that things that would get us down to 20 or 10 – the death of a loved one, the end of a relationship, a serious challenge to our health. But when those things happen, most of us will return to our emotional baseline [up around 75] more quickly that we'd predict. [And then Dr. Gilbert ends with his main point] HUMANS ARE WILDLY RESILIENT...A corollary finding is that a single big payoff [in life] – a fat raise, an Hermes Kelly bag, a hot cha-cha date – affects people's essential happiness much less than a ROUTINE OF SMALL DELIGHTS...[and then he ends with a sentence about where we human beings will find happiness that I just love] *There is much to be said for staying right where we are [in life], in our happy little ruts.*"*

And Dr. Gilbert gives a simple example of this from his own life, when he reports that the best thing about teaching at Harvard is not the prestige of his position or his big salary, but the simple fact that he can walk to work from his cozy little house in picturesque Cambridge. As someone who loves his commute to work on a bicycle, which is a perspective on life I can appreciate!

Let me, if I might, represent what all this recent research on happiness means to us by way of this simple chart I created. What Dr. Gilbert is suggesting is that the emotional PEAKS and VALLEYS of our lives while dramatic and intense...and certainly get our emotional attentions...have little to say about the long term and sustained happiness or sorrow we generally experience.

Let's start with the positive side of the equation. While buying a new Lexus...witnessing the birth of a new granddaughter...getting a big promotion at work...or falling in love all provide us with huge spikes of excitement and pleasure, the positive emotions of these peak experiences the psychologists tell us are not sustainable...For soon (again, because of the universal phenomenon of "adaptation" described in this morning's reading by Barry Schwartz) our moods return back down to their normative baselines in the middle range which, as Gilbert points out, means for most of us, most of the time a happiness index of approximately 75%.

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The same is true on the bottom of our happiness scales, the sorrow side of the equation. While losing your job, experiencing the death of a loved one or relationship, or being diagnosed with cancer all naturally drag our moods way down, these shocks to our emotional equilibrium are also generally not sustained as we fear when we think about them in advance...for just as with the really good stuff in life, with the “bad stuff” our moods tend to bounce back up quickly, again, into the middle range...to that good old equilibrium around the 75 percentile mark. Dr. Gilbert says that this is in large part due to the fact that when bad things happen to us, most of us quickly rationalize in a way that helps our emotions to rebound. Again Dr. Gilbert:

“We expect to feel devastated if our spouse leaves us or if we get passed over for a big promotion at work. But when things like that do happen, it’s soon [that we say to ourselves] ‘[Well] She was never right for me, or ‘[It’s a good thing I didn’t get that big job because] I actually need more free time for my family.’ People [Gilbert observes] have remarkable talent for finding ways to soften the impact of negative events [in their lives]. They thus mistakenly expect such blows to be much more devastating than they [emotionally] turn out to be.”

And so sustainable happiness, the kind that can make a genuine, positive difference in our lives over the long run, turns out to be something we can only experience in this middle-ish domain of routine life...that everyday habitat of ordinary relationships and routines and experiences that we tend, because of the way we are hard-wired as human beings, to take for granted.

Have I got you with me this morning, dear friends? Can you spiritually and emotionally buy the idea – again the idea which is supported by a wide variety of recent psychological research and analysis – that the place to look for sustainable happiness in your life lies not in the wild and expansive peaks of your life (the really spectacular, flashy, expensive, extravagant things that occasionally come your way) but rather in the steady, everyday drumbeat of your routine life...in the “*happy little ruts of your life*”...those ordinary moments when you, on a daily basis, make choices...to be with family and friends...to make productive use of your minds and hands...to enjoy nature...spend quality time with yourself...or reach out to care for another human being. It almost seems too good to be true, doesn’t it?...this idea that the stuff in our lives that has the true power to bring us happiness and contentment already lies all around us, in the habitat of our ordinary, unspectacular days...but that is what the scientists are telling us.

Now let me be clear about this...It’s OK to want a new Lexus – so long as you know, deep in your heart, that true happiness is more likely to come to you when you are driving your noisy kids to a soccer game in your old beat up mini-van.

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It's okay to dream of a luxurious-nine-day-all-expenses-paid vacation to Tahiti – so long as you know that you are more likely to find lasting pleasure by spending 4 days at Disney Land with your quirky, and sometimes difficult, extended family.

It's okay to dream about moving to a fancy house in a gated community on the Island as soon as you get that big promotion – so long as you realize that you are already rich enough to have everything you want with your family in that modest house over here on the mainland.

It's okay to want more and bigger and better...more and fancier – human beings are always dreaming of getting to a happier, fuller, economically more secure life – so long as you realize that you already have at your fingertips all that any human being needs to claim a rich and satisfying life.

It may seem like disappointing news to some of you who are always hooking your emotional star to what is next, bigger and better but the emotional and spiritual truth is that the only place any of us will ever stumble on happiness...is right here...right now...in the routine of small delights that life so generously offers us in the ruts of where we already are...day by day by day.

So, dear friends...on this unspectacular Sunday in mid-November, my message to you is as simple as it is pointed. Dream of a more spectacular personal future if you must, but the truth is that you don't need any more than you already have to discover life sustaining, life enriching happiness. All the stuff the gods would take to make heaven is already at your disposal. Today you can enjoy lunch with a few good, old friends, or get out on a bike, as I will, or into a kayak and exercise your body until it feels good. Or you can read a good book, watch a football game, go for a walk in Riverside Park, volunteer down at the soup kitchen, prepare a favorite meal, or share a cup of good coffee with an old, dear friend. This evening, as the sun sets and the temperature drops into that comfortably cool range, you can open the windows...tuck your kids into bed with their favorite blanket... and snuggle with your spouse or pet or favorite magazine until you drop off into the holy embrace sleep. The sky is the limit...dear friends...right here in this familiar, old, slightly-worn house of a life you already have. I can offer you nothing more saving and sweet than this truth today, dear friends, this is the place...right here...right now...for you to stumble on happiness...and know everything the gods have prepared for us.

AMEN.