



Happiness

The Compelling and Illusive State

by G. Raymond McCullough

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.

Does this phrase sound familiar? It's from The Declaration of Independence. Even the founders of the United States recognized the importance of happiness despite the many who would never realize this as their reality and the scores it has eluded over the ensuing centuries.

Happy is a feeling. Happiness is a state of being. With which viewpoint do you agree?

We often think of happiness as being juxtaposed with sadness or the more extreme state of despair.



Happy



Sad

I believe it is safe to assume that all of us want to experience happiness. However, it is questionable whether everyone understands what happiness

- Looks like
- Feels like
- Means to them

Many years ago, I was working with a young pregnant woman who had a severe addiction to alcohol and cocaine. She was a high school drop-out at age fourteen and had a history of being sexually and physically abused by family members and a host of partners in her very short life (she was only 22). She had a criminal record that included seven felonies (mostly drug related). She was the mother of four children, all of whom were in the care of the state.

I sat with her one day when she was in a vulnerable moment. She had had an altercation with another female in treatment. We were discussing the consequences for her involvement in the fight. It was obvious that she was feeling afraid, angry, and lost. I felt compelled to ask her, "Don't you want to be happy?" She responded with a blank stare as if she did not comprehend what I was asking. I persisted with my query about her desire for happiness, and the result was the same. At some point, I had a moment of clarity. Considering her life circumstances I concluded that I was asking the wrong question. I reframed my question, asking "Do you want to be free?" Without hesitation she responded, "Yes I do", and then she started to cry. Her tears flowed gently at first, but soon accompanied a soulful wailing.

I learned something that day from this young lady. There are many people who experience what appear to be perpetual sadness, despair, and disappointment in their lives. There is no semblance of peace or, for that matter, happiness. Happiness is only something they hear others talk about, but it has no meaning for them. However, what this young woman did come to understand in that very brief moment was that she could have happiness if she could be freed from her perpetual state of sadness, disappointment, and despair.

It took time, but she also realized that for years she had been masking her pain (sadness, despair, anger, disappointment) with alcohol, cocaine, and other drugs. With that realization, she began to understand how her compulsion to use alcohol, cocaine, and other drugs led to more problems, more sadness, and deeper despair. This realization was difficult for her to accept. However, as she learned to accept her life for what it was, she was able to develop the skills that allowed her to pursue happiness. This became possible as she identified the obstacles to her happiness and defined what happiness would look like for her. In time, she experienced happy feelings that she hoped would become a state of being.

This young woman's story is compelling to me because of a recurring dream I have about flying.



It is an ecstatic dream, marked by a sense of freedom and blissful happiness.

I would like to share with you an essay about Happiness that a 17-year-old shared with me.

Happiness

(Anonymous by Request)

Why do we spend our lives going to school for 18 years in order to pay bills and build up credit card debt? I feel like the only reason I go to classes everyday is because I live in fear of what the future would be like if I didn't.

If you could be the happiest person in the world, why would you bother spending 7 hours a day in a stuffy building doing something you didn't want to be doing with 25 other people who didn't want to be doing it either? I mean where's the logic in that? Why do the majority of us spend the short lives we have going to school, becoming middle class desk jockeys, paying bills, building our lives around material possessions, retiring, and ending up slowly dying in some nursing home because our children won't take the time to care for us.

I feel as if everything I'm doing right now is in order to become some stereotypical product of society that has gradually changed over time but nonetheless continues to be the accepted standard. If you had one chance to become the happiest person in the world, at the cost of everything material you ever loved, would you take it? Why would there be any hesitation at all? I mean true happiness? Once you were truly happy, you would have nothing to worry about. So why spend time worrying about how others see you (having a fancy home, having the latest "techno- gadgets"). The only reason I am asking these questions is so people can rethink their lives and what's truly important.

Two years ago, I had a dream. In the dream, I set off on a journey. I had no set plans of where to go—just the wind at my back to guide me. I traveled through Africa and East Asia. I left everything I had once loved behind with my friends and family. The only thing I had were the clothes on my back and one bag. During that time, I experienced a sense of freedom that I had never experienced in my entire life. It was amazing to see people with clothes (that most people would call rags) who were playing and laughing with such energy. It

startled me at first to see people who appeared to have so little be so happy. The immense glow that shined in their eyes when they played and the peaceful tone of voice when they spoke almost melted my soul. Yet, in the world I came from, they had nothing and would most likely never come to know what much of the modern world considered necessities. During that two-year exploration, I never realized what it meant to be happy.

Awake and back to living my life I finally realized through my dream that I could live without material possessions and experience happiness.

When I first read the essay, it caused me to ponder and reflect on the self-imposed complexities of my life. These complexities serve as impediments to happiness. It also took me back to a time of my youth when time seemed endless and was full of intrigue and adventure—a time when fun and happiness were limited only by my imagination and could only be disrupted by the tyrannical hands of my parents. It seemed they wanted to dispense my fun and happiness for fear I would become a slothful individual.

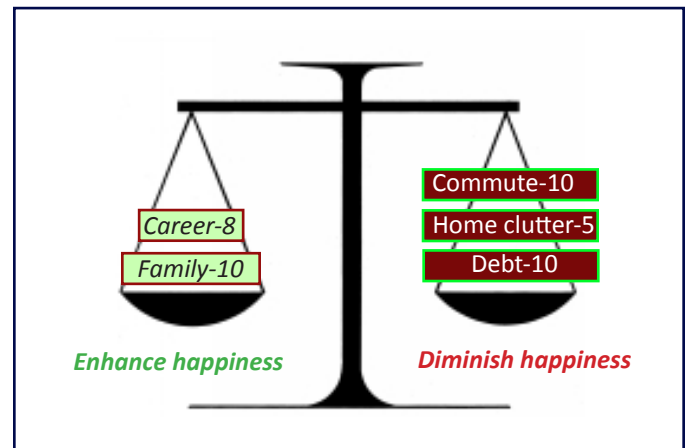
There is a core values exercise I conduct with some clients. The exercise involves having them identify 10 words that reflect what is important to them and what they consider to be their core values (e.g., achievement, family, wisdom, spirituality, education, wealth, love, health, happiness, etc.). In the next phase of the exercise, I ask them to eliminate five values; in the next phase, eliminate three of the remaining five; and in the final phase, I ask them to make a choice between the two remaining values. This is a challenging exercise for most participants. Interestingly, ninety percent of those participants who list “happiness” in their initial group of 10 core values make it their final choice.

Of course this exercise is not scientific. However, anecdotally, I believe it indicates that most people just want to experience happiness. Their happiness may be experienced through family, the development of wisdom, achievement, good health, or wealth. I suggest that you try this exercise with your significant other or family members.

Or try the following exercise:

On the left side of the scale, list all the people, places, things, rituals, habits, activities, etc. that enhance your happiness. On the right side of the scale, list all the people, places, things, rituals, habits, activities, etc. that diminish your happiness.

Now give each item a weight (scale of 1-10 lbs) that reflects the relative impact on your happiness—the heavier the weight, is the greater the impact. Finally, add the total weight on each side of the scale. Which side has the heaviest weight? What can you do today and tomorrow to ensure that the balance is tipped toward or remains weighted in the direction of increasing your happiness.



I have concluded that happiness is elusive for some and that this is dictated to some degree by life circumstances. However, once we have a taste of true happiness, we have a personal obligation to nurture that which brings us happiness. Until that happens we must continue to explore what happiness looks like, what it feels like, and what it means to us.

There are hundreds of books and papers written about happiness. Do you need some help pursuing your idea of happiness? Here is a book that may help: *The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living* by Dalai Lama.

In the mean time, start by regularly smiling and nurturing your desire for happiness.



Happiness

Complacency dulls it
Fear paralyzes it
Anger annihilates it

I thirst for happiness
A thirst that goes unquenched
An unquenched thirst that withers my soul

Sadness and despair occupy the place of happiness
This torments me when I am awake or asleep
The toll is physical, emotional, and spiritual

I resolve myself to action
I confront my fear
I silence my anger

Happiness beckons me
I am timid with uncertainty
But I am determined to be happy

Illusion and delusion vie for space
Reality braces but stays the course
Happiness wins the race and the prize is mine.

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