

The Pursuit of Happiness

The Revs. Duane H. Fickeisen and Bev Motich¹
Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley
January 28, 2007

*Those who face that which is actually before them,
unburdened by the past, undistracted by the future, these are they
who live, who make the best use of their lives;
these are those who have found the secret of contentment.*

— Albion Goodier,
Archbishop of Bombay

Call to Worship Bev Motich

When Dan Cozort found that his schedule was overbooked — even Dan can't be in two places at once — I enthusiastically volunteered to assist Duane with this week's service. There are so many things to talk about on the subject of happiness. And Dan promised in return to share with me the secret of life (which I'm still waiting for).

But I couldn't decide on a strategy for this Invitation to Worship. Should it be heavy and meaningful? Perhaps, a musical list of my favorite things? A folksy story about a happy experience? What would make you happy?

I turned to a tool that always delights me — I Googled "Happiness" and found 75 million hits! On the first page alone there was a movie called Happiness, a Happiness magazine, a Happiness Foundation, a web site called www.thehappyguy.com, full of tips

¹The Revs. Duane H. Fickeisen is parish co-minister and Bev Motich is a lay worship associate of the Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley, PO Box 207, Boiling Springs PA 17007; 717/249-8944; www.uucv.net.

on “Finding True Happiness and Self-Actualization”, even a World Database of Happiness. There are many people presumptuous enough to tell you how to be happy, or share how they have found it themselves. (“Make someone happy, and you will be happy, too!”) Wikipedia reminds us that along with life and liberty, the *pursuit of happiness* was considered to be one of the “unalienable rights” that Jefferson documented in the Declaration of Independence. It’s interesting that he chose the word *pursuit* and not just happiness itself. So it has been discussed and analyzed throughout history.

The Dalai Lama made the bestseller list discussing *The Art of Happiness* and its sequel, *The Art of Happiness at Work*. A 2005 article in Time Magazine, titled “The New Science of Happiness,” examines factors that lead people to say they are happy. 80% of people say they generally wake up happy. 79% consider themselves optimists. If that’s true, then why so much research, philosophy and discussion on happiness? And is it an Art or a Science?

Maybe it’s because the definition differs vastly for each of us. Happiness is as individual as we are, and can also change from time to time for the same person. What brings me happiness and utter contentment right now is caring for my four month old grandson Aaron, but this is not something I would even have dreamed of wanting to do when I was in my twenties.

Today Duane and I will explore some of the current research on happiness, and maybe we’ll find that secret of life Dan promised to talk about.

Come, let us explore happiness, and worship together.

**“The Purpose of Life”
by Tenzin Gyatso, The Fourteenth Dalai Lama**

“I believe that the purpose of life is to be happy. From the moment of birth, every human being wants happiness and does not want suffering. Neither social conditioning nor education nor ideology affects this. From the very core of our being, we simply desire contentment. I don’t know whether the universe, with its countless galaxies, stars and planets, has a deeper meaning or not, but at the very least, it is clear that we humans who live on this earth face the task of making a happy life for ourselves. Therefore, it is im-

portant to discover what will bring about the greatest degree of happiness. “

**from *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*
by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi**

“...happiness is not something that happens. It is not the result of good fortune or random chance. It is not something that money can buy or power command. It does not depend on outside events, but, rather, on how we interpret them. Happiness, in fact, is a condition that must be prepared for, cultivated, and defended privately by each person.”

**Sermon
The Pursuit of Happiness
by Duane Fickeisen**

Among the fundamental (and radical) rights that our forefathers asserted as a justification for self-governance and independence from the monarchy of King George is the pursuit of happiness. They called it inalienable and wrote it into the civic creed right alongside life and liberty. They pledged their fortunes, their honor, and their very lives in its defense.

For more than two-and-a-quarter centuries women and men have fought with courage and conviction in defense of those inalienable rights and in the effort to protect them and to extend them to others. Some of the battles have been against those who would take freedom away or deny it to some segments of the population. Some of the battles have been fought on American soil, some far away. And more in the halls of Congress and in small town council chambers, in the courtrooms, in the boardrooms, and on the streets. Lives have been taken, bodies and hearts broken, fortunes lost. And more often than not justice has eventually been won, usually not soon enough, often at a high price.

Immigrants — legal and not — our ancestors — have fled repression to seek refuge and opportunity, often leaving family, lovers, history, culture, language, and treasures behind.

Their sacrifices have been great. Our debt to them is immense. And perhaps the best way we can honor their lives — their commitment, their courage, and their dream — is to make the fullest

manifestation of those inalienable rights as we are able. We ought never to squander the opportunities we have inherited.

So this morning we consider the pursuit of happiness. In addition to being a part of our civil creed, for many it is a religious value and perhaps even — as the Dalai Lama asserts and as process theologians would agree — the very purpose of life — its essence and core.

A super majority of Americans say they are happy. In a survey taken in mid-December of 2004 (a time when you might expect anxiety over the approaching holidays and the effects of seasonal deprivation of natural light to have depressing effects), 78% of respondents said they were happy either most or all of the time. Only 5% said not very often.

When asked if they generally wake up happy, 80% said yes, and about the same number said they consider themselves optimistic. When asked if they would say they have lived the best possible life they could have, a very good life, a good life, a fair life, or a poor life, only 17% picked a fair or poor life. Half said they had lived the best possible or a very good life. That's a lot of happy people!

But wait a minute. Intuition says those numbers are too high. Another survey, taken in the 1950s and periodically since shows a very steady 1/3 of Americans are "very happy." In 50 years the number has not changed significantly. The polls phrased the question in different ways and they aren't strictly comparable. But even if only a third of us a "very happy," that's still a lot of happiness.

At the same time the rates of clinical depression have jumped in two generations by as much as ten-fold. (Each year something like 1 in 15 Americans experiences an episode of severe depression.) Whether the actual incidence of depression has risen that much or if some of the increase is because we are more likely to seek treatment and the reporting is improved is less clear.

We have some experts among us. As you identify those who seem happy, why not ask them to share their secrets? Notice how they move in the world, what draws their attention, and how they dedicate their energy.

Dan Cozort, who is teaching in our children's religious education program this morning, offered a freshman seminar at Dickin-

son College on happiness and he was very helpful in pointing us toward several resources. Happiness has been the topic of several recent studies and books as well as a special issue of Time magazine two years ago. The Time issue is a goldmine of information and you can find it at your local library. If you want to explore happiness more deeply, I'd suggest starting there.

Ann Gero has studied the quality of life of older women. She's analyzing her data and writing it up. Her work shows that attitude, involvement in a community, and self-care all contribute to well being. Self care was particularly important.

And Liz Hoffman and her son, Chris Hoffman, have recently published a self-help book, *Staying Focused in an Age of Distraction*, that offers several practical steps to help pay attention to what really matters as a means of increasing your sense of well-being.

I have been thinking about happiness more as a measure of contentment with one's life than an ecstatic joy. Fun, joy, and pleasure are a part of the formula and the experience and memory of them contribute to overall well-being, to be sure, but a deeper and lasting sense of happiness requires more.

The pleasures of life can be exciting and fun to experience, but usually they are short-lived and closely tied to an event or a particular activity. We're apparently hard-wired for happiness, but it is fleeting. It's an adaptive mechanism that improves the odds of our producing offspring. From an evolutionary standpoint, if it didn't fade, we'd lose some of our motivation to mate.

Research shows that pleasurable experiences contribute much less than other factors to an overall sense of a happy, satisfied life. The degree of your engagement with life, with others, with work and hobbies and the degree of meaning that comes from using your personal strengths to serve a larger end are much more important factors according to Martin Seligman, the leading spokesperson for the Positive Psychology movement.

If we were exclusively focused on joy and ecstasy as sources of satisfaction, many more of us would likely be addicted to recreational drugs and behaviors that provide short term ecstatic experience, but may well alter our brain chemistry, making it even harder to get the next high.

There are other ways to slice the pie when researchers examine factors that contribute to overall happiness. David Lykken

studied 4000 sets of twins and by comparing identical and fraternal twins concluded that genetic makeup is responsible for about half of our satisfaction with life. Less than 10% comes from particular life circumstances like gender, income, marital status, religion, or health. In his original work, he suggested that the rest comes from what he termed “life’s slings and arrows.” Consequently, he argued, we each have a set-point on the happiness scale and he said that trying to make ourselves happy was “as futile as trying to be taller.” Later he retracted that, saying “I made a dumb statement.... It’s clear,” he said, “that we can change our happiness levels widely, up or down.” He’d missed the importance of our actions on our happiness, lumping the unexplained sources in his study as events that happen to us rather than considering our role as agents of our own behavior.

In fact, others argue that even if the things we can’t control — our genes and some of the circumstances of our lives — are responsible for about half of how happy we are, the things we do control — our actions and our thoughts — are responsible for the other half and that’s good news — we can make a difference by the choices we make, where we direct our attention, and how we live our lives.

Another way to look at happiness is to consider the factors that are linked with a satisfying life. Take a moment to think about what you would put into your life if you could design it for optimal happiness. What would you want?

The first thing many of us consider is wealth — how many times have you thought that if you just got a windfall — winning the lottery, for example — you’d be set for life? Well, research shows that once your basic needs are met, additional wealth does very little to increase happiness. Lottery winners may indeed experience euphoria, but it’s short lived and in the long term they prove no more happy than us losers.

Or maybe you would expect a good education to be an important factor in happiness. It’s not. Neither is a high IQ. Or maybe you’d anticipate that perpetual youth would be important. It’s not either, in fact older people are more consistently satisfied with their lives and less prone to dark moods than are young adults.

Maybe you’d opt for a sunny climate, but even though those who live in sunny places think they are happier, folks in the mid-west are actually happier than Californians.

Married people tend to be happier than singles, but the research suggests the causal relationship is the other way around — happy people are more likely to get — and stay — married than are unhappy people.

Religion is another complicated one. There is a positive correlation between religious faith and happiness, but it isn't clear if it's the God part or belonging to a community and contributing to its well-being that matters more in terms of happiness. And some research suggests that it's more important to believe something rather than nothing, even if the framework of your belief is pure science or secular humanism. Having some system to organize meaning is beneficial to happiness.

What does stand out as a consistently significant contributor to happiness is having strong, robust, mutually nurturing relationships. The most consistent shared characteristic among the happiest 10% of people is that they have close friends and strong family ties. Those who make the commitment to spend time with friends and family and to nurture their relationships are happiest and have the fewest signs of depression.

It's clear to Edward Diener, dubbed Dr. Happiness, who has made a 25-year career out of studying the psychology of happiness, that among the most important things to work on if you want to improve happiness are your social skills, developing closer interpersonal relationships, and creating strong social support networks.

Around here you can do that by getting involved in UUCV's Small Group Ministry program — covenanted small groups meet monthly to explore matters of the soul and spirit.

Maybe you thought about some of the things you would exclude from your ideal happy life with the idea of banishing them. Again the research may be surprising. Human beings are remarkably adaptable and even unexpected and drastic changes in circumstances don't necessarily preclude being happy.

Even the happiest people experience sadness, disappointment, grief, and other emotions that we wouldn't necessarily welcome as companions on the path toward happiness.

As the song says, though, "joy and woe are woven fine." The very definition of life involves change, and change inevitably includes loss. Even when the change is something we've chosen and

welcomed, perhaps worked to make happen, some loss is involved. Moving to a new town means leaving the old one behind. Entering into union with a life partner or expanding a family means giving up some independence. Sending a child off to college means an empty nest.

And of course there are the changes in our circumstances that we don't choose. Illness, abuse, loss of faculties, a partner's infidelity, the death of family members and close friends come when we least expect them. These sometimes life-changing events are traumatic, they impact our well-being, but they need not have a permanent impact on our contentment.

In her work with empowerment in the face of huge and seemingly overwhelming global issues like nuclear weapons and more recently climate change, Joanna Macy, who is an engaged Buddhist and scholar of whole systems, has advocated for increasing our capacity to take in the world's pain and our despair and for breathing through it. She argues that if we are stuck in despair and expend all our energy on blocking out the pain, we can't move forward with solutions to problems.

Her work includes guided meditations that open us up to the suffering around us as a means of working through despair and empowering action. If we block out the sadness and grief in our lives, we also block out our opportunities for healing and contentment.

Probably one of the reasons that having strong relationships is so vital to happiness is that they help us cope with the inevitable losses. Knowing that we are not alone in our struggles and having others to lean on for support is a critical factor in adapting to our changed circumstances and to putting a new life together.

Two factors do seem to have long lasting negative effects on happiness. The death of a life partner is one of them, and research indicates that it takes a widow five to eight years on average to regain her previous sense of well being. Of course the average is not prescriptive and everyone experiences grief and recovery on their own terms. Men may even fare worse psychologically than women after losing a spouse. The loss of a primary relationship is one of the highest sources of stress among life events.

The other factor that can knock us off track is the loss of a job, which has effects that linger even after one has found new em-

ployment. I suspect that's because loss of a job is often a triple whammy. The loss of income may well impact your household economy and postpone or preclude realization of some of your dreams. Second, it may be hard not to feel that the loss is a reflection on your competence and a blow to your self-esteem. And third, your workplace is often the place where you find a community and support system. Loss of the relationships with coworkers often has a depressing effect.

In a study of people who were seriously injured in accidents and lost the use of limbs, most experienced a short-term loss of happiness, but in the longer term they bounced back. A week after their injury, they tended to have high anxiety and to be angry, but after eight weeks happiness was their strongest emotion. Daniel Kahneman, a Nobel laureate whose research involves flaws in our judgment and memory of what makes us happy, says the ability to bounce back is a matter of how the accident survivors allocate their attention.

And that's the point of the book that Liz and Chris wrote: take charge of your attention and how you allocate it. Focus on what really matters despite the distractions that compete for your attention.

If you want to increase your happiness, to stay happy, or to increase your resilience against the inevitable woes of life, the research offers some very practical suggestions to help allocate your attention toward the things that will actually make a difference.

Sonja Lyubomirsky was surprised and fascinated by all the smiles she encountered after she immigrated to the United States from Russia at age 10. It began a career in researching the psychology of happiness. She offers eight actions to lead toward a more satisfying life. They are in the insert in your order of service. You can take them home and put them on your refrigerator or in your planner. But more importantly, put them into practice if you want to pursue increased happiness!

- Count your blessings. Keep a gratitude journal and make a practice of writing down the three to five things for which you are thankful every week — or even better, every day.
- Practice acts of kindness. Make them both random and systematic. Not only will it make you feel competent and generous, but it will enhance your sense of connection with others.

- Savor life's joys. Stop and smell the roses. Notice what gives you pleasure and take delight in it.
- Thank a mentor. Express appreciation to someone who has helped you get through a rough spot.
- Learn to forgive. You can't move on until you do.
- Invest time and energy in friends and family. Strong personal relationships seem to have the biggest positive influence on happiness, so give them your attention.
- Take care of your body. Exercise regularly, eat well, stretch to stay limber, sleep long enough for good rest, avoid ingesting anything harmful, be careful.
- Develop strategies for coping with stress and hardships. Nurture a strong support network, care for your soul, develop a regular spiritual practice.

The list may seem obvious, but I'd wager that most of us don't practice many of the items on it as consistently as we might.

The pursuit of happiness is your inalienable right. It's what your ancestors dreamed for you and fought to protect. Don't squander your inheritance, but start today to practice management of your attention so that you might enjoy increased well-being, contentment, and happiness.

It's what I believe God wants for you. It's part of your purpose in life. It's your gift. So make the most of it!

Closing Words
Birthday Letter to a Friend's Young Daughter
(June 22, 1830)
by Jeremy Bentham

"...Create all the happiness you are able to create: remove all the misery you are able to remove. Every day will allow you to add something to the pleasure of others, or to diminish something of their pains. And for every grain of enjoyment you sow in the bosom of another, you shall find a harvest in your own feelings; while every sorrow which you pluck out from the thoughts and feelings of a fellow creature shall be replaced by beautiful peace and joy in the sanctuary of your own soul."

For More Reading

- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. (New York, Harper Colins, 1990)
- Gilbert, Daniel. *Stumbling on Happiness*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006)
- Hoffman, Elizabeth Hanson, and Christopher D. Hoffman. *Staying Focused in the Age of Distraction*. (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2006)
- Layard, Richard. *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*. (New York: Penguin Press, 2005)
- Seligman, Martin E. P. *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment*. (New York: Free Press, 2002)
- Time*. Special Issue, January 17, 2005.

Eight Steps Toward Happiness and Satisfaction in Life

adapted from work by Sonja Lyubomirsky

Ref. *Time* (January 17, 2005, pp. A8-A9)

1. **Count your blessings.** Keep a gratitude journal and make a practice of writing down the three to five things for which you are thankful every week — or even better, every day.
2. **Practice acts of kindness.** Make them both random and systematic. Not only will it make you feel competent and generous, but it will enhance your sense of connection with others.
3. **Savor life's joys.** Stop and smell the roses. Notice what gives you pleasure and take delight in it.
4. **Thank a mentor.** Express appreciation to someone who has helped you get through a rough spot.
5. **Learn to forgive.** You can't move on until you do.
6. **Invest time and energy in friends and family.** Strong personal relationships seem to have the biggest positive influence on happiness, so give them your attention.
7. **Take care of your body.** Exercise regularly, eat well, stretch to stay limber, sleep long enough for good rest, avoid ingesting anything harmful, be careful.
8. **Develop strategies for coping with stress and hardships.** Nurture a strong support network, care for your soul, develop a regular spiritual practice.