

The Happy Doctor

Unitarian Church of Vancouver 2010.09.05

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I'd like to recount a life changing greeting I wandered into one day. I walk into a show in a typical east side cafe, my sandals sticking to beer on the floor. Off to one side is a long bench of friends I haven't seen in a while. I sit down next one character, we'll call him "Doc" and I ask, "how you doing?"

He confidently and peacefully says, "I'm the happiest man alive."

As a founder of the Happiness Club, I had made quite a study of happiness, and figured it was more likely the happiest person alive would be a robed figure in the Himalayas, not some East Side drummer.

Many greetings go in one ear and out the other:

Pretty good, but the rain is really getting me down.

Can you believe those liberals?

But I will never forget Doc, "I'm the happiest man alive,"
so I'd like to come back to this later.

A few weeks ago Phil and Patrick were talking to me about this service in one of the rooms over in the hall, and I became as excited as a Unitarian in a bookstore. Phil and Patrick were a little more subdued. Giving me a taste of what "Doc" must feel like, I was the happiest person in the room.

Not being the happiest person on earth, makes me the perfect candidate to explain what happiness is not.

Happiness is fleeting. It is an emotion, to drive us towards those people, things, and happenings that make us feel good: A guidance system to put us in motion. Eating an orange on Christmas day can make us feel happy, because it is good for us. Then have another on Boxing Day, and the next, New Year's Day, all the way to Valentine's Day. On that chocolaty day of hearts that

orange would be just as good for us, but it no longer makes us happy. Our internal guidance system eMotion is constantly resetting itself. It's a biological mechanism to keep us moving in a good direction.

Studies have shown that major life events, like a big promotion, or buying a house increase our happiness, but only briefly. In just a few weeks our happiness is restored to the same level as before these life changing events. Research describes this as a happiness set point. People that win a lottery or suffer a serious injury typically report returning to this set point, after a few months of adjustment. Spending a million dollars on a dream home in the pursuit of happiness, is just not cost effective. Climbing the corporate ladder is the same; we can work years for that next opportunity, for a few weeks of happiness, soon resetting our desire to the next rung.

It's a lie to say money cannot buy you happiness. Studies done in Princeton and at UBC have revealed a very close correlation between income and happiness to a point. Plot how people rate their own happiness for incomes of \$0-20K it's practically a straight line. However, after this basic level of income is reached, money has almost no correlation. It just doesn't matter, if you have a million or a few hundred in the bank. If you have a roof over your head, have the freedom to roam, and know that there will always be another meal, when you want it; you have all the money you will ever need to be happy. While happiness cannot be bought, poverty is unhappy.

If I can't buy happiness, is my sense of happiness predestined, like the color of my eyes? Twin studies show that there is some truth to this. Identical twins separated at birth report a statistically significant similarity of their own sense of happiness. Fortunately for those who wish to be happier, happiness is not fated. Mahayana Buddhists have been working with scientists for decades proving there are well known paths to happiness.

Speaking of happy people, if the "Doc" were here today, he would talk about what makes him happy: community, music, and food. The Dali Lama might talk of the importance of connecting with other beings, being kind, and peaceful.

However, if you are like me, I hope it has been worth pondering what happiness is not.

I invite Patrick and all of you to begin the exploration of what happiness is through music. We are blessed with one of the true secrets of long term happiness in this sanctuary. Let us sing and feel the magic of being together with the aspiration of making the lives of those around us better.

Good people make us happy. Like a dog, I am happy to sit beside you because I love you. To reach out in community and help one another, makes us feel good: to sing and dance together. Think of the happiest times of your life, most likely it was in a community of people you loved, there was music and food. It makes perfect sense that our guidance system pulls us towards this.

It is interesting that happiness around the world does not vary that greatly. The difference between rich and poor nations is subtle. The most notable exception is that of the former eastern block. Not all communist countries, only those that discouraged intermediate institutions such as youth groups, volunteer organizations, charities and churches. People in those countries surveyed as unhappy, even compared to poorer nations like Nigeria and China. This highlights the importance of self organizing communities.

Studies have shown our friends have more to do with our happiness than any other external factor. Economist Professor Oswald at Wirwick University valued friendships at \$80,000. I have no idea how this works, because you can't buy happiness, and selling friends is just not right.

But if you did have money that you wanted to spend, spend it on experiences. You don't need a doctor to tell you that doing something fun make you happy. I'd bet that to fly with a friend to an amusement park in Paris, would lift your spirit for weeks, and certainly costs much less than a Vancouver Special. To date there is no controlled study proving my hypothesis, where group A is flown with a friend to Paris, group B is given a home theatre system, and group C is given nothing as a control. If anybody is interested in funding such a study, then perhaps you can make a lot of people incredibly happy.

In fact, if you want to buy happiness, just flip your thinking slightly. We can give away happiness. Studies show giving as little as a dollar makes the donor happy. Give often and plenty and you will find the true meaning of long term happiness. So, if you would like to fund the Paris study, my friend Doc would be happy to help.

Give because you are blessed. Give, if you have a deep sense of gratitude. I live a beautiful life filled with family, music and friends. Over the years I have received love, guidance, and a helping hand countless times that if it all stopped today, I would be buried in a deep sense of gratitude. I love the work the people are doing in the kitchen at this very moment. They will feed us, and share the proceeds of their labor with people who could use a little charity. Refugees, who, if filled with a true sense of gratitude will become great givers, and builders of community, as soon as they acquire the basics they need to then pursue the true meaning of happiness.

In this spirit I ask you now to consider the work of this Church and make an offering of any gift you feel is right for you.

Whether you give or not please take a gratitude stone, and after the collection I will explain magic of these little stones.

These stones were once the star dust of a super nova in our part of the universe in a time before the Sun. Through the awe inspiring forces of gravity and the miracle work of water, they have been conveniently formed to be shared with you today. Put them in your pocket or purse. Everyday you see it, hold it between your fingers, and rub it and feel the star dust, the journey it took to be in your hands: Those hands that have brought you food, and made possible the happiest moments of your life. Be grateful, and observe the wonderful things in your life. If you do this every morning, as you fill your pockets, and at night, when the day is done, this rock will do more for your sense of happiness than anything you can buy.

For the scientific, the circuitry of happiness is wired in the neurons of the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain above our left eye. High activity in this part of the brain is associated with low levels of cortisol (a hormone produced by the adrenal gland, and is released as a stress response). This hormone is essential in controlling our immune system, and greatly affected by our circadian rhythm. In fact taking action such as cognitive behavior therapy to escape depression to become happier will extend you life more than quitting smoking. Professor Ed Diener from the University of Illinois, calculated that the average life is extended by nine years, for increasing your set point of happiness, while quitting smoking only six.

So, if you are a depressed smoker, what should you do? Observe the methods of those in pursuit of Nirvana.

Mahayana Buddhists have been working with scientists using magnetic resonance imaging MRI, revealing a more active prefrontal cortex, and lower cortisol based on the monks degree of experience in the tradition. With the second happiest man alive, the Dali Lama, lighting up the MRI like the night time sky of Times Square on New Year's Eve. Scientists observed these robe clad monks that practice material detachment, who sit breathing for hours in silence, eat modestly and gently, as their set point for happiness increases year after year. Their brains are literally being wired for happiness.

The practices of this tradition that are known to make people happy are meditation, love and kindness, and an acceptance of all things in the interconnected oneness of the universe. Does this sound like the flap of a book picked up by the Unitarian in the bookstore.

All religions have practices that reduce stress, which will make you happier. I highlight the Buddhists, because they have been working on long term scientific studies.

Happiness is a motivator moving us away from stress, and towards a peaceful mind. Take care to mitigate stress, and you will be happier. Sleep well, exercise, and eat good food. Surround yourself with good people, or learn how to interact with those that you are blessed to share your life with, in an emotionally intelligent way. Try not to stress yourself, or others out. Be forgiving, because to not forgive increases the stress of others and yourself.

Buddhists spend hours daily doing something many of us do just a few times a year. They sit in the world quiet and still and be one with the universe. Many of us race out of this city for a vacation. As we sit on a rock, and listen to the lapping sound of the waves, hear birds and crickets, feel the wind, and watch the Sun go down into a sky of crimson, we feel happy.

The "Doc" is a man of modest wealth, who is richly involved in more than one community. He is grateful for the experiences he lives everyday. He shares his talent freely, and travels the world playing music with his friends. It is no wonder that he is the happiest man alive.

As Phil leads us into meditation, I'm going to ponder my dealings with the "Doc" and see if there is anything I can do to live a little more like him.