

The Secret to Long Term Happiness

Unitarian Church of Vancouver 2011.07.31

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Last year I told a fun story about the happiest man on Earth: Doc, a West Coast drummer.

It was one of those Unitarian sermons stuffed with science,
so to avoid the classic mind numbing drone driving little boys to scream,
“When’s that man going to stop talking.”

I tried to fill it with every gag and joke with the hope of keeping your attention
long enough to share the secret of happiness.

Today I’ll try a different approach.

After the service, a sad soul said to me, “It must be easy for you to be happy, you have a
wonderful family.” I’ve been mulling that over, like a hot spiced wine.

Yes I have: a fabulous wife
delightful children
a great job
an amazing life!

But it: “happiness” has not been easy.

Kahlil was so prophetic with “Your joy is your sorrow unmasked.”

How I’ve wanted to pull off that mask.

I was one miserable kid: arrested as a teenage punk for theft. I’ve had my share of fist fights. My
father was an angry drunk. Drank pretty much every day I remember. The one exception I can
think of, he was in such a rage he kicked me out of the house. I was sixteen, and happier to leave
than stay. I was one pissed off and depressed kid; eventually to be diagnosed as a bi-polar 2
hypo-manic depressive, who has made a couple of feeble attempts to kill myself.

I remember watching the blood drip down my arm: thinking I’m going to do everything I
possibly can to never feel this much sorrow again.

Happiness has not been easy.

Fortunately when I'm depressed, I'm totally * useless.
I can't wash the dishes let alone take my own life.



It was time to pull off the mask and discover joy. This began my determined study into the secret of happiness.

It was a slow journey: going to Al-Anon meetings,
eventually Therapy,
reading just about every self help book I could find,
meditation and the pursuit of Buddhism,
eventually reaching a point where I decided to form The Happiness Club,
and more recently Dream Chasers.

On a recent discussion of happiness, a good friend asked,
“why should we, who are so blessed, pursue happiness,
especially when there are those who suffer so much.”

I can think of a few reasons:-

- 1) Happiness is contagious
- 2) Like a see-saw there is joy and sorrow:
there is happiness and depression
- 3) Why not?

Life Study



What is happiness?

Happiness is fleeting. It is an emotion to drive us towards those people, things, and events that make us feel good: A guidance system to put us in motion. Imagine eating an orange on Christmas day. It makes us 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 is 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.

So how can we catch a fleeting emotion?



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.

To buy a home, or climbing the corporate ladder; we work years, for a brief taste of happiness, soon resetting our desire to the next great thing.

Imagine going for a roller coaster ride to some great height, crazy dips and bumps, and moments of total elation, having gravity pull us back to the same platform level we started.

I've never had the opportunity to ask a Vancouver Real Estate Mogul, if buying property makes him happy. If I ever do, I would love to ask that when the market is in decline.

If you do have extra money to spend in the pursuit of happiness, the evidence is strong that you should spend it on experiences not physical possessions.

The truth is there are only a few things we can do that quickly elevate our happiness, such as eating, drinking, dancing, and sex. The real trick is to develop habits that create a life more prone to inspire happiness.

Fate



So was my set point 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 striking similarity of their own sense of happiness. There is a genetic component to happiness just as there is with depression.

Most likely I am genetically wired to suffer bi-polar depression.

Then with the environmental factors of my upbringing in an unsafe home, I was destined for quite the emotional roller coaster ride.

But like those genetically disposed to develop diabetes, as an adult I was free to lay off the 7-11 Slurpies and forge my own fate. 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. We are free to set that point a little higher.

Yes I was destined to go for a ride, but I was not required to crash.

Turns out I didn't have to piss off police officers.

I didn't have to fight.

I didn't have to mess up my relationships.

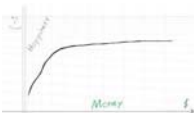
These were just options I had pursued.

I am delighted to share with you

that I have not suffered a serious bi-polar depression for the better half of a decade.

Setting that happiness point a little higher has made a world of difference to me.

The Pursuit of Happiness



Can you buy happiness? Not really. Studies reveal a tight correlation between income and happiness to a point. Plot how people rate their own happiness for incomes of nothing to the modest threshold of middle class it's practically a straight line. However, after this basic level of income is reached, money has such a muted correlation to happiness.

It really doesn't matter, if you have a million or a few thousand in the bank.

If you have a roof over your head,
know you will be fed,
and have the freedom to roam,
then you have more than enough money to be happy.



Basically needs fulfillment, Maslow's Hierarchy of needs. A psychological concept introduced by Abraham Maslow suggesting that people are motivated to fulfill basic needs before moving on to other needs. This is most often displayed as a pyramid. The lowest levels of the pyramid are made up of the most basic needs. Often described as deficiency needs, and without those people suffer. The pyramid peaks with growth needs, social, self esteem, and eventually self actualization.

Though happiness cannot be bought, poverty is a sad state.

I certainly did not know all the answers as a young man, so I did what I could.

What I knew how. Not ready for self actualization, I made a vow,
no matter how depressed I get, I am going to eat good healthy food.

Turns out



broccoli makes us happy.



As a teenager I was unprepared to achieve self actualization, and had no faith.
For me, faith has been one of the most elusive secrets to happiness.
Practically as a child I was an atheist.
So for me, the early years of this pursuit of happiness
lay in the low hanging fruit: music, friends, food, and sex.

Luckily, I found you, and now have a deepened sense of faith,
and am happy to share this with you.

Body Spirit and Mind

The real secret to long term happiness is buried in our spirit, body and mind.

Good people make us happy.

Be with good people and love good people.

Reach out in community and help one another, this 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.

For the men of this congregation, please note
there is the Hey-U-Men weekend retreat October 14-16 at Lake Sasamat:
a collection of good men guaranteed to make you happy.

It might also make a number of the women of this congregation happy
to have you out of the house for a weekend.

Of Faith



You are here and a side view.

Pursuing and finding faith makes us happy: Nirvana, Redemption,

The interconnected oneness of us all now joined as:

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,
these particles have been conveniently formed to be you.

And in moments some of those particles you feel are you
will be the air I breathe, and soon, I would argue, be me.

Mathematically it is overwhelming likely that a fraction of the oxygen you feel is you,
was once the air of the Buddha, and perhaps Jesus Christ. The question not being about the
statistical likelihood of us sharing this star dusted air, but more in question as a Unitarian do you
believe in Jesus.

It doesn't really matter what you believe, we should all be free to believe whatever we decide to
believe. Being faithful to your own true heart raises the set level of your own happiness. It's still
a roller coaster ride; it just starts a little higher, doesn't dip as low, and has a much better view.

And, if you want a grand slam of happiness,
be grateful drop another donation in oak box by door,
in faith of our interdependent web,
and share a plate of broccoli with some good friends.

Which reminds me. **Treat your body well**, it is a temple. It is your temple. Exercise as you are
able. Learn more about the food you eat. Sleep and play.

Taking care of your body is so important that I believe I've discovered the **baby sleep paradox**.
Studies have revealed that having kids does not really modify our overall level of happiness.
Soon to have our third child I would love to bet children make us happy,
but that sleep deprivation and perhaps those long car rides with, "Are we there yet!"
bring us delighted parents right back down to the same reality of joy and sorrow
as those who forgo the pleasures of parenting.

It just goes to show that you must take care of your body,
and a screaming baby does care how long you've been asleep.
And you can't dress them up cute enough to make up for a years of sleep deprivation.

So for anybody who isn't rich, or have a house full of kids, no worries... no worries
and if you happen to be rich...

Think of Gratitude and Giving

If you have achieved needs fulfillment
and would like to buy happiness, flip your thinking.

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. Give because you are blessed. Give, if you have a deep sense of gratitude.

Fake it, if you don't. Be thankful for the food you eat. Because gratitude rolls back into your life like a snowball, reinforcing itself and your life with crystals of joy.

Last year we gave out gratitude stones in the collection plate. If you already have gratitude stone remember:

Be grateful, and observe the wonderful things in your life.

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 could possible buy.

If you do not have a gratitude stone,
go find a beautiful reminder of how we are all stardust in a pocket sized rock,
and carry it with you as a reminder to be grateful and happy.

Put it in your pocket or purse.

Every day you see it, hold it between your fingers, rub it, and feel the stardust, 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.

Friends

Studies reveal 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, and wonder, if I have so many friends, why am I still driving a 20 year old Volvo. Would anybody like to buy a used friend for half price?

Exploring the secret to unlock friendship, requires more of your time than I should consume today; however, because friendship is key to happiness, I'd like to highlight a few of the most important things to remember:

- Be vulnerable, and share your truth
- Proximity: live close to others and touch, shake hands, pat backs, hug
- Be present: be in the moment with those around you and seek to understand
- Find similarities
- Remember names



Mind: Why Pursue Happiness?

Let us consider the alternatives. Remember I am coming at this from the point of view of a suicidal hypo-manic depressive.

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. Thus take care of your body, and the baby paradox.

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.

And sorry to play on last year's joke, but: if you are a depressed smoker, what do 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 perhaps the happiest man alive the Dali Lama, lighting up the MRI like 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 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. Check our library over in the Hall for these reoccurring themes.

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.

Antithesis:

Both brain science and spiritual lore indicate the antithesis of happiness is stress driven depression and anxiety. Our lizard brain sprays a fire hose of cortisol into our poor little monkey brain, and we are freaked out. The good news is we get out of danger, leave the stressed of pack, and find new food sources and homes.

The bad news is we have to feel like crap to be motivated to leave our mammalian dependencies.

The alternative to the pursuit of happiness is depression, anxiety, fear and anger.



Consider any of pearls of wisdom I have shared (broccoli), the gems of research that have been revealed.

Consider them as fuel to ignite a passion for this most delightful life choice that we can make: to be happy:

Consider the alternatives there really isn't any choice.

Stress Snowballs

I have this theory that we have evolved ourselves into stress snowballs.

Ten thousand years ago, if we were stressed out as a pack, we ran back to the cave, and groomed each other and waited for the danger to abide.

We were in community, and we likely came out beating our drums and having a great feast.

Now, when we get stressed, we run to our cave, but so often alone, and retreat from our community, and get more depressed and anxious watching the TV and listening to the news.

It is likely we need to be brave and courageous; accept and share our vulnerabilities during these times we are stressed, and be involved with our community.

Well that bit is just a theory, like the baby paradox,
 but I promise you this there is much truth in all of this that I have shared with you today.

And if music makes us happy,

I would like to invite David Hamilton to play us a song in my favorite key

B Major,

Be happy, thank you.

