

In Pursuit of the Pursuit of Happiness

A sermon delivered August 3, 2014 by Jeff May at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden, CT

The British comedian Eric Idle once observed (and I paraphrase), *“Life took over 4 billion years to evolve into you, and you only get about 80 years or so to enjoy it. Don't just pursue happiness, catch it.”*

I guess if one is looking to find the key to happiness the words of a comedian are probably a good place to start.

As I began to work on my words for this morning I found myself wallowing for quite a while in what I am sure is a common state of mind of most of us as we begin to figure out what it is we have to add to such a lofty topic as this. How presumptuous of me to believe I have anything to add to this. After all, what makes me an expert on the subject of happiness? Certainly I tend to be a cheerful and positive individual, at least most of the time – but I'm no Dalai Lama! So what is this “happiness” thing anyway, and how does one embark upon its pursuit?

If you Google the phrase “happiness quotes” the ubiquitous search engine returns almost thirty-seven million responses. The top site in that vast sea of webpages is something called “BrainyQuote.com” – which by the way is likely to be the first search result if you request vegetable quotes, weather quotes, sex quotes, or orangutan quotes. Apparently the BrainyQuote folks have the market cornered on the collective wisdom of the ages – and on the topic of happiness they have compiled some 40 pages of citations. It seems that just about everybody throughout history has had something to say on the subject. They range from the sorts of things you might expect . . . the first quote on the first page is a simple but profound observation by the Dalai Lama . . . to whimsical observations of the superficial to a few that are quite thought provoking. Directly below the Dalai Lama's words are those of Martha Washington, *“I am determined to be cheerful and happy in whatever situation I may find myself. For I have learned that the greater part of our misery or unhappiness is determined not by our circumstance but by our disposition.”* The second-century Persian thinker and philosopher Omar Khayyam said quite succinctly, *“Be happy for this moment. This moment is your life.”* John Barrymore reminds us that *“Happiness often sneaks in through a door you didn't know you left open”* Epictetus opined that *“There is only one way to happiness and that is to cease worrying about things which are beyond the power of our will.”*, and Helen Keller observes that *“Everything has its wonders, even darkness and silence, and I learn, whatever state I may be in, therein to be content.”* All of this on the first page which, by the way contains two entries by the Dalai Lama, the first: *“Happiness is not something ready-made. It comes from your own actions.”* and near the bottom of the page, *“If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.”*

In considering the myriad of perspectives on the subject it appears that there are a few common threads of thought, but most of those that resonate with me can be summed up in a few basic ideas:

- Happiness comes from within. If I am unhappy it's not the external circumstance that is making me unhappy, it is how I have decided to react to that circumstance.
- Happiness that is attained by achieving a goal or acquiring a desired possession is fleeting. Once the newness has worn off it's on to the next goal, the next bobble, the next whatever it is I have decided stands between me and true joy.
- The happiest people seem to be those who have cultivated an "attitude of gratitude" within themselves.
- The happiest people are often those who have dealt with the greatest of misfortunes, overcome unspeakable loss, endured unimaginable hardship and yet find their bliss in the here and now.
- The happiest people tend to be those who focus their energies and efforts on being compassionate and devoting themselves to the service of others.

When you think about it, the idea of "the pursuit of happiness" is a bit of an oxymoron. If one is in pursuit of something it sort of implies that one has not yet acquired the object of the pursuit. As I think about the various ways and situations in which I have engaged in the pursuit I realize that like most of us I spend far too much time wishing I could remove myself from some circumstance, some situation that I have decided stands between me and my bliss, and that it is so often the pursuit of happiness that prevents its attainment – and what is more central to who we are than the desire to be happy?

And perhaps that is what Adams and Jefferson were trying to say as they framed the contextual justification for the separation of the colonies from Great Britain. There are some things that are just so essential to being human that no government should have the right to deprive people of their enjoyment: the right to life itself, the right to enjoy freedom in thoughts or in manner of living, and the right to find happiness in one's own way. And perhaps what they meant by "the pursuit" of happiness is not that happiness was supposed to be the object of an unobtainable quest, but rather that they could not presume to create a government that would guarantee its attainment – but only the right to find it each in our own way.

What could be more important than happiness? My mind is drawn back to an event that happened some 30 years ago. Sandy and I had flown to New Hampshire in the plane he owned at that time to attend a family gathering in observation of my father's 65th birthday. While the subject of my relationship with Sandy was something we had never discussed it had certainly by that point in time become obvious to my parents that our relationship was more than casual. Finding himself alone with me for a few minutes on my brother's back porch my dad seized the opportunity to say something to me that I will never forget.

"You know Jeff, it's really great having all of you kids here and I look at each of you and see how different each of you are and what each of you are doing with your lives. And whether or not I agree with the decisions you make and how you choose to live, I really only want two things from my kids. I want to know that you are kind people, and I want you to be happy. I hope that whatever you do with your life is that which will make you happy."

That was pretty heavy on many levels, some I would not realize for many years, but the essence of the message that day was, “I know you are gay, I know you have a relationship with Sandy, and I really don’t know how to process this or even talk about it, but despite my personal convictions on the subject I need you to know that if this is what makes you happy – and you are sure of it – than I can be okay with it.

That conversation – pretty much one-sided as such revelations of his innermost thoughts were extremely rare, and my dad had left me speechless – touched a nerve with me and every time I reflect on that moment so long ago I gain new insight.

What can you be okay with?

What makes you happy?

What stands between you and happiness?

Joy and woe are woven fine, wrote William Blake in a poem paraphrased in a selection found in our blue hymnal reminding us that as humans we must experience the full range of emotions, that all of our experiences are part of a tapestry of life.

*It is right it should be so;
Man was made for joy and woe;
And when this we rightly know,
Thro' the world we safely go.*

*Joy and woe are woven fine,
A clothing for the soul divine.
Under every grief and pine
Runs a joy with silken twine . . .*

*Every night and every morn
Some to misery are born,
Every morn and every night
Some are born to sweet delight.*

We are human. In the midst of turmoil, frustration, it takes an incredible amount of inner peace to pull back and find grace in the moment – certainly more than I have, but the more we practice finding inner peace the faster we can come back to joy.

The Indian mystic Dada Vaswani says, “*Happiness, true happiness, is an inner quality. It is a state of mind. If your mind is at peace, you are happy. If your mind is at peace, but you have nothing else, you can be happy. If you have everything the world can give - pleasure, possessions, power - but lack peace of mind, you can never be happy.*”

Where do you go to find peace? Is it a walk on the beach, the solitude of a good book, the quiet of a lonely path in the forest with a gentle stream nearby, or gazing into a star-filled sky?

Let's take a journey, shall we. This is a brief guided meditation that I have found helpful in centering myself and I will share it with you now. If you chose not to participate, please enjoy the background music.

Take a moment to place yourself in a comfortable position. Loosen any tight clothing. Let your hands rest loosely in your lap. Now close your eyes...and relax.

With your eyes closed, you begin to connect with your inner world of thought and feeling.

Allow the the external world will fade from your awareness. For the next few minutes, give yourself permission to enjoy this relaxing experience.

You are free from all your responsibilities at this time, so put aside any thoughts of tasks or concerns that may be waiting for you.

If you find that your mind wandering, simply bring your awareness back to the sound of my voice, and back to a place of deep relaxation and inner stillness.

Now take a long, slow, deep breath in...and then release that breath. Feel yourself relaxing.

Again, take a long, slow, deep breath in...and then let that breath go.

Take another deep breath in...and exhale completely.

Notice how calming it is to breathe this way. Notice the feelings of relaxation that are beginning to spread throughout your whole body. Continue to breathe slowly, deeply and gently. With each breath you take, your thoughts become lighter.

You may sense a feeling of spaciousness opening up inside you.

Relax now.

Allow the gentle movement of your breath to guide you into an even more relaxed state.

In ... and out ...and deeper you go.

In... and out ...allow your mind to gradually slow down all by itself.

In ... and out ...

You are now in a state of relaxation, and it's time to enjoy a guided journey to an inner place of serenity and bliss. As I speak, just allow images to form in your mind naturally, in your own time.

If mental pictures don't come easily to you, then simply sense your imagined surroundings rather than seeing them. Let go of all your expectations, and allow yourself to experience this guided journey in whatever way comes naturally to you.

Imagine that you are standing in a beautiful grassy field.

You can feel the warmth of the sun on your face and body.

You can feel the lush green grass, soft beneath your bare feet.

You can hear the sounds of nature around you.

You are very much at home in this peaceful place.

You have all the time in the world.

You feel safe and happy here.

Take a moment to appreciate your surroundings...

You notice a large tree growing nearby.

Begin to walk towards the tree.

Take your time. Be in the moment and experience each step.

As you walk, feel yourself slipping even more deeply into a state of total relaxation.

Now you stand beneath the tree. Its strong branches and broad leaves hang right over your head.

Notice that the tree is covered in delicious fruits of many shapes, sizes and colours. Imagine if you will that these fruits are filled with the nectar of joy.

Reach up and take a piece of fruit from the tree. Study it for a moment. Notice the colour, the texture, the weight of it in your hand.

Now take a bite.

As the fruit slides down your throat and into your stomach, something wonderful begins to happen...

A feeling of happiness begins to glow deep inside you.

The sensation begins in your stomach, and then it spreads to your chest and your heart.

Let go of thinking, and concentrate on feeling. Nurture this sensation of happiness and love. Feel yourself gently glowing with it.

Take another bite of the fruit now. Taste it. Savour it.

Now the wonderful feeling intensifies a little more.

Feel yourself gently radiating this pleasant sensation of love and happiness.

Now take a third bite of the fruit, take as much as you want.

Relax and allow yourself to swell up with this delightful feeling. Don't try. Just let it rise effortlessly within you. Allow it to increase as much as you like.

Stay with these blissful feelings and enjoy a few more moments of peaceful meditation.

When you are ready, simply open your eyes. Please give yourself a few minutes to adjust before you get up.

"Life took over 4 billion years to evolve into you, and you only get about 80 years or so to enjoy it. Don't just pursue happiness, catch it."

Thus may it be.