

HAPPINESS IS . . .

Minister's Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

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Do any of you watch the TV program “Dancing with the Stars”? I of course do not watch it regularly, but I have a close acquaintance (who shall remain anonymous) who watches occasionally and lures me into watching brief segments. For those of you who are not familiar with this show, I will tell you that it features celebrities and celebrity-wannabe’s from a variety of fields—acting, sports, music, politics, TV news and entertainment—who are each paired up with a professional dancer over a period of several weeks. The dancers are rated by a panel of professional dance judges, but they are also voted on by the public viewing audience. Based on these combined ratings, one dance couple is eliminated from the competition each week, culminating in a melodramatic final announcement of the overall winner.

The most recent iteration of “Dancing with the Stars” did indeed produce a dramatic final winner—a veteran of the Iraq War named J. R. Martinez, whose severe facial scars are a visible reminder of the land mine that nearly killed him in 2003. He was burned over 40 percent of his body, and his recovery from his burn wounds was excruciatingly slow and painful. “After five weeks in the hospital, he insisted on seeing himself in a mirror. The nurse hesitated, but Martinez reasoned, ‘I’m going to have to live with this for the rest of my life. I might as well start learning how to live with it now.’ He was not prepared for his reflection. ‘All my life I was told, “You are handsome.” I slowly looked up and what I saw was Freddy Krueger [the disfigured villain of the movie *Nightmare on Elm Street*]. His stunned reaction? ‘That’s a freak. That’s not me,’ he says. ‘I went into this anger and depression. I never did anything in my life that deserved this punishment.’” With the support of his mother and the dedicated staff of the military hospital in San Antonio, J. R. not only recovered from his physical injuries, but also converted his story into a source of inspiration for other wounded war veterans. He says, “I think I was kept in this world to use my experience to help others.” Had it not been for this horrible experience, he says, “my life would not be what it is today: full of joy, happiness, and positivity.” [Monica Rizzo, “*Dancing’s True Hero*,” *People* magazine, 11/7/11]

How is it that people such as J. R. Martinez are somehow able to transform tragedy into triumph and happiness? Some significant answers to that question can be found in a book by Jonathan Haight titled *The Happiness Hypothesis*, which is quite simply the best book I have read in years. Haight is a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia. What I love most about his book is the graceful way he combines insights from ancient wisdom traditions, modern psychological research, and his own personal experiences. His background as an undergraduate major in philosophy provided a solid foundation in both Western and Eastern thought. His graduate training at the University of Pennsylvania in what has come to be known as **positive psychology** provided exposure to the methods and findings of contemporary psychology.

The question about how to lead a happy and meaningful life is nothing new. It is clear that neither physical pleasure nor material wealth can provide lasting satisfaction. The counsel of many ancient sages was to abandon the pursuit altogether. “Buddha, Epictetus, and many other sages saw the futility of the rat race and urged people to quit. They proposed a particular happiness hypothesis: *Happiness comes from within, and it cannot be found by making the world conform to your desires.* Buddhism teaches that attachment leads inevitably to suffering and offers tools for breaking attachments. The Stoic philosophers of Ancient Greece, such as Epictetus, taught their followers to focus only on what they could control, which meant primarily their own thoughts and reactions. All other events—the gifts and curses of fortune—were **externals**, and the true Stoic was unaffected by externals. . . . You must work on your **internal** world. If the hypothesis is true, it has profound implications for how we should live our lives, raise our children, and spend our money. But is it true? It all depends on what kind of externals we are talking about.” [Haight, p. 87]

Let me now introduce to you the positive psychologists’ formula for happiness:

$$\mathbf{H} = \mathbf{S} + \mathbf{C} + \mathbf{V}$$

Now let me explain what each of these letters represents. The **H** of course stands for happiness. The **S** stands for **setpoint**, which is determined largely by your brain chemistry—the delicate yet surprisingly stable balance of neuron activity that makes you feel happy or unhappy over time, which is sometimes called your **temperament**. This factor seems to be determined largely by

your genes and physiology— perhaps influenced as well by prenatal development. Parents of two or more children can attest to the fact that children within the same family often display dramatically different temperaments from birth—or even before birth. As applied to happiness, Haight uses the analogy of a thermostat that has been preset to 58 degrees (for pessimists prone to depression) or 75 degrees (for optimists). The setpoint affects a person’s basic level of happiness independent of their environment. As Jonathan Haight puts it, “Good fortune or bad, you will always return to your happiness setpoint—your brain’s default level of happiness—which was largely determined by your genes.” [p. 86]

The other two factors—**C and V**—are related to external influences. The **C** stands for **conditions** of your life, including facts about your life that you can’t change (such as race, age, sex, disability) as well as things that you **can** change (such as wealth, relationships, living conditions). A considerable amount of attention has been devoted to studying the relationship between income and happiness. Does personal wealth buy happiness? One recent study concluded that, up to a certain point, increased household income does indeed lead to increased happiness, but once that threshold has been reached, increased wealth does not guarantee increased happiness. This particular study estimated the threshold figure to be around \$75,000 per year, depending on several other factors. Just as importantly, the farther below this critical threshold, the greater amount of unhappiness, sadness, and stress. [Jenifer Goodwin, “After \$75,000, Money Can’t Buy Day-to-Day Happiness, *Bloomberg Businessweek*, 9/7/10]

Now we turn to the most intriguing factor in happiness: **V** stands for **voluntary** (or intentional) behavior that leads to a heightened sense of happiness and well-being. One of the pioneers in this field is Mihalyi Cszenzmihaly (“cheeks sent me high”) who studied the experience of what he called **flow**. Flow is the mental state of “total immersion in a task that is challenging yet closely matched to one’s abilities. . . . Flow often occurs during physical movement—skiing, driving fast on a curvy country road, or playing team sports. Flow is aided by music or by the action of other people (for example, singing in a choir, dancing, just having an intense conversation with a friend). And flow can happen during solitary creative activities, such as painting, writing, or photography. The keys to flow: There is a clear challenge that fully engages your attention; you have the skills to meet the challenge; and you get immediate

feedback about how you are doing at each step.” [Haight, p. 95] One of the keys to discovering your potential for flow experiences is to identify your **strengths**. This is one of the lasting contributions of positive psychology. Jonathan Haight suggests that in making a New Year’s resolution, we should focus on our applying our **strengths** rather than fixing our flaws.

Ironically, one of the greatest enemies of happiness is the **self**. One of my most gratifying professional experiences was the grooming of Mark Leary, one of my psychology students at West Virginia Wesleyan College. Mark has since gone on to a distinguished career in psychology and currently holds an endowed chair at Duke University. Among his many published books is one titled *The Curse of the Self*, in which he discusses the mixed blessing of self-awareness, which bestowed not only the skills to survive as a species, but also an inner “personal tormentor” who often drowns our thoughts with negative chatter about our failings and threats to our self-worth. The self is a problem for all of the major spiritual traditions. Eastern traditions offer ways to quiet the chatter of the self, primarily through spiritual disciplines such as meditation. Jesus challenged his followers to lose themselves and include those who were rejected by the conventional rules of their society.

The paths prescribed by these ancient sages are even more difficult to follow in a culture like ours that is obsessed with self-expression and self-fulfillment. David Wilson’s book titled *Darwin’s Cathedral* suggests that mystical experiences provide an “off” button for the chattering self. The work of Andrew Newberg offers empirical support for this view. His studies of the brain activity of meditators from a variety of spiritual traditions revealed that the portions of the brain that are normally devoted to distinguishing between the self and its surroundings are **suppressed** during meditative states. “The person experiences a loss of self combined with a paradoxical expansion of the self out into space, yet with no fixed location in the normal world of three dimensions. The person feels merged with something vast, something larger than the self.” [Haight, p. 237] I am guessing that this type of brain activity—a profound loss of a sense of separateness—may also help us to understand near-death experiences as well.

In the meantime, we do not need to have mystical or near-death experiences in order to transcend the self and enjoy lasting happiness. Here is Jonathan Haight’s answer to the question

of what we can do to have a happy life: “I don’t believe there is an inspiring answer to the question, ‘What is the purpose **of** life?’ Yet by drawing on ancient wisdom and modern science, we can find compelling answers to the question of purpose **within** life. The final version of the happiness hypothesis is that happiness comes from between. Happiness is not something that you can find, acquire, or achieve directly. You have to get the conditions right and then wait. Some of these conditions are within you, such as coherence among the parts and levels of your personality. Other conditions require relationships beyond you: Just as plants need sun, water, and good soil to thrive, people need love, work, and a connection to something larger. It is worth striving to get the right relationships between yourself and others, between yourself and your work, and between yourself and something larger than yourself. If you get these relationships right, a sense of purpose and meaning will emerge.” [pp. 238-39] Out of this ongoing balancing act, you may indeed find lasting happiness.

I will close with a quote from Robert Ingersoll, the great 19th century orator, humanist, and close personal friend of Walt Whitman: “Justice is the only worship. Love is the only priest. Ignorance is the only slavery. Happiness is the only good. The time to be happy is now. The place to be happy is here. The way to be happy is to make others so.” [Bartlett’s *Familiar Quotations* (16th ed.), p. 520]