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 Arlington Street Church
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Cold, Dark, and Happy

With many thanks to Eric Weiner

Sunshine is overrated. You could have fooled me, but according to the World Database of Happiness – this is real; I kid you not – some of the happiest people in the world live in Reykjavik. In some surveys, Iceland ranks as number one in happiness. Yes, Iceland, as in “land of ice.”

Here's the view from National Public Radio correspondent Eric Weiner's book, *The Geography of Bliss: One Grump's Search for the Happiest Places on Earth*:

“[In the dead of winter,] I arrive to blowing snow and an inky black sky as dark and vast as outer space. It is 10 a.m.

“When does the sun rise?’ I ask the nice man at reception.

“The sun? Oh, I don't think you'll be seeing the sun today.”

And it can't be the weather that's keeping them cheerful! It's freezing. It's *Iceland*.

Eric Weiner explains that Reykjavik feels like a cosmopolitan village – think small town neighborly ... with sushi. The entire population of Iceland is only 300,000, which means there really are no strangers. Having run into a parade of friends on the way to work is a valid excuse for being late. There *is* a wee bit of a problem in that geneticists have found that everyone in the country is related to everyone else, going back seven or eight generations; Iceland is not a good place to have an affair. But it is a good place for *creativity*. As you slide around on the ice, Eric Weiner writes, every other building is an art gallery or a music store and recording studio or a cafe filled with writers. And there's “no creative elite; art is produced – and enjoyed – by everyone.”

In his book *Cities in Civilization*, British historian Peter Hall notes that a sure sign of a golden age is a relative lack of *envy*. Describing Parisian artists of the early 1900s, he

writes, “They lived and worked in each other's pockets. Any innovation, any new trend, was immediately known, and could be freely incorporated into the work of any of the others.” In Iceland, ideas flow unencumbered by envy. The sharing – and the resultant creativity – are rich and deep. Icelanders compete, notes Eric Weiner, but “in the way the word was originally intended. The roots of the word 'compete' are the Latin *competere*,” meaning “to seek with.”

Something else about happiness: It may well depend on a very different relationship to *failure* from what many of us were taught. Larus Johannesson has earned a living as a professional chess player, journalist, construction company executive, theologian, and music producer. He describes this as a “typical” Icelander's resume. When asked why his tiny nation produces more artists and writers per capita than any other, he responds, “*Failure*.... Failure doesn't carry a stigma in Iceland. In fact, we admire failures.... We like people who fail if they fail with the best intentions.” Eric Weiner comments, “... If you are free to fail, you are free to try.... It's the trying that counts.”

Cliffs and sea loom around every corner of the city. High above, volcanic mountains hiss and spit. “Reykjavik itself seems less than solid; [it feels] fleeting, temporary.” Eric Weiner writes, “I half-expect to hear someone shout, “Cut, that's a wrap,” and see stagehands cart away the place en masse.” The ephemeral nature of the land fuels inspiration for what great thinkers have linked throughout the ages: creativity and happiness.

Taking this insight further, I would link both creativity and happiness to an awareness of living on the provisional nature of life, living on the brink. I'm not thinking so much about the adrenaline rush of danger, but of the exhilaration of living awake to the prospect of death without being ruled by it.

And there's something else about living on the edge: we need one another. Now we're talking! As it turns out – again, according to the numbers-crunchers at the World Database of Happiness – the happiest places on earth are not those with eighty-degree sunshine, warm water, beaches, palm trees, and blue-drinks-with-little-umbrellas obtained at swim-up bars. “All things considered, cold or temperate climes produce happier people than warm, tropical ones.” Eric Weiner's get-along-or-die theory supporting this data states that in warm places, “life is too easy; your next meal simply falls from a coconut tree. Cooperation with others is optional. In colder places, though, cooperation is mandatory. Everyone [works] together to ensure a good harvest ... or

everyone dies. Together.”

What does all this have to say to us, as New England turns to the darkest and coldest time of year?

I invite you to join me in taking a page from the people of Reykjavik. I experience Arlington Street – this beloved community of memory and hope – as a village in the city: a good place for a parade of friends, a good place for creativity for everyone, by everyone. All good things can flow without envy: there is enough to go around, more than enough for everyone. Here, we can be free to fail, and so free to try. And we can be happy because we do not deny death, do not deny the fact that we will not go on forever. At best, we remember that this moment is *the* moment: there is no better time – no better gift – than the present. And the harvest – in this place, the spiritual harvest – depends on each of us claiming our rightful place, doing the very work to which we are called to fulfill our divine purpose, and doing it in the context of spiritual community.

Beloved spiritual companions, even as the days shorten and the darkness grows deeper, let us give ourselves to being cold, dark, and happy. So much is possible! I close with an adaptation of the blessing of Franciscan Friar Fra Giovanni Giocondo, penned on Christmas Eve of 1513.¹ He writes,

I salute you.
 I am your friend, and my love for you goes deep.
 There is nothing I can give you that you do not have.
 but there is much, very much, that, while I cannot give it, you can take.
 No heaven can come to us unless our hearts find rest in today.
 Take heaven!
 No peace lies in the future that is not hidden in this present little instant.
 Take peace!
 There is a radiance and glory in darkness, could we but see.
 And to see, we have only to look.
 I beseech you to look!
 The gloom of the world is but a shadow.
 Behind it, yet within our reach, is joy.
 Take joy!

¹ Adapted from a passage from a letter written to Countess Allagia Aldobrandeschi