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 Arlington Street Church
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Happiness: The Routines of Small Delights

After an equestrian accident left him paralyzed from the neck down, unable to breathe without a ventilator, Christopher Reeve, *Superman's* Superman, said, “I didn't appreciate others nearly as much as I do now.”

After committing sixty-nine ethics violations and being forced to resign in disgrace, Jim Wright, former Speaker of the United States House of Representatives, said, “I am so much better off physically, financially, mentally, and in almost every other way.”

Upon being released from the Louisiana State Penitentiary, where he served thirty-seven years for defending himself against the Ku Klux Klansman who'd shot him, Moreese Bickham said, “It was a glorious experience.”

How is it that quadriplegia, public humiliation, and unjust incarceration – loss of mobility, a job, and freedom – left these three men happy?¹

Harvard psychologist Dr. Daniel Gilbert, known as Dr. Happiness, writes, “I know, I know. It sounds suspiciously like the title of a country song, but the fact is that most folks do pretty darn good when things go pretty darn bad.”²

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“Lori and Reba Schappel may be twins,” he continues, “but they are very different people. Reba is a somewhat shy teetotaler who has recorded an award-winning album of country music. Lori, who is outgoing, wisecracking, and rather fond of strawberry daiquiris, works in a hospital... They occasionally argue, as sisters do, but most of the time, they get on well, complimenting each other, teasing each other, and finishing each other's sentences. In fact, there are just two unusual things about Lori

¹ Dr. Daniel Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness*, pp. 165-166

² *ibid*, p. 167

and Reba. The first is that they [are joined at the forehead, and] ... have spent every moment of their lives locked together, face-to-face. The second ... is that [these conjoined twins] ... are happy – ... joyful, playful, and optimistic.³

“When asked about the possibility of surgical separation, Reba says, 'Our point of view is *no*, straight out *no*. Why would you want to do that? For all the money in China, why? You'd be ruining two lives in the process.’”

In fact, the “desire to remain together [is] so widespread among communicating conjoined twins as to be practically universal.”⁴

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What is happiness?

Throughout the ages, people have tried to answer that question. “The poet Alexander Pope devoted [nearly] ... a quarter of his *Essay on Man* to the topic, ... and concluded ... 'happiness is happiness.’⁵ Apparently, it is the “you-know-what-I-mean' feeling.”

It is both wildly subjective and universally understood: you know it when you feel it. And when you feel it, “you can have “no doubt about its ... importance.” Daniel Gilbert writes, “Everyone who has observed human behavior for more than thirty continuous seconds seems to have noticed that [we] are strongly, perhaps even primarily, perhaps even single-mindedly, motivated to feel happy. If there has ever been a group of human beings who prefer despair to delight, ... they must be very good at hiding, because no one has ever seen them.

“[We] want to be happy.”⁶

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Dr. Sigmund Freud weighs-in: “The question of the purpose of human life has been raised countless times; it has never received a satisfactory answer, and perhaps does not admit of one....

“We will therefore turn to the less ambitious question of what [people] show by their behavior to be the purpose and intention of their lives. What do they demand of life and wish to achieve in it? The answer to this can hardly be in doubt,” he concludes.

3 N. L. Segal, *Entwined Lives: Twins and What They Tell Us About Human Behavior* (New York: Dutton, 1999)

4 N. Angier, “Joined for Life, and Living Life to the Full,” *New York Times*, 23 December, 1977, F1

5 A. Pope, *Essay on Man*, *Epistle 4* (1744)

6 Gilbert, *op cit*, p. 35-36

“They strive after happiness; they want to become happy, and to remain so.”⁷

On November 1st, 1915, the Antarctic explorer, Ernest Shackleton, watched his ship, *The Endurance*, sink in the Weddell Sea, stranding him and his crew on Elephant Island. Seven months later, on the morning of May 15th, 1916, he and five sailors set out to cross eight hundred miles of “frigid, raging ocean” in a small lifeboat. Three weeks later, frostbitten and starving, they reached South Georgia Island. As they prepared to “cross the island on foot, in hopes of reaching a whaling station on the other side”⁸ – a trek no one had ever survived – Ernest Shackleton wrote, “We passed through the narrow mouth of the cove with the ugly rocks and waving kelp close on either side, turned to the east, and sailed merrily up the bay as the sun broke around us. We were a curious-looking party on that bright morning, but we were feeling happy. We even broke into song, and, but for our Robinson Crusoe appearance, a casual observer might have taken us for a picnic party sailing in a Norwegian fjord or one of the beautiful sounds of the west coast of New Zealand.”⁹

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One person's happiness is another person's hell. But the prevailing theory of happiness is that it is closely linked with our resilience. Daniel Gilbert writes, “... [The] world is *this* way, we wish it were *that* way, and ... human beings are unusually inventive when it comes to finding the best of all possible ways.... Our experience of the world – how we see it, remember it, and imagine it – is a mixture of stark reality and comforting illusion. We can't spare either.

“If we were to experience the world exactly as it is,” he continues, “we'd be too depressed to get out of bed in the morning. But if we were to experience the world exactly as we want it to be, we be [utterly] ... deluded.... [W]e cannot do without reality, and we cannot do without illusion. Each serves a purpose, each imposes a limit on the influence of the other, and our experience of the world is the artful compromise that these tough competitors negotiate.”¹⁰

Resilience, in other words, can be understood as a kind of psychological immune system. It “must not defend us too well, ... and [it] must not fail to defend us well enough.... A *healthy* psychological immune system strikes a balance that allows us to feel good enough to cope [with a challenge], but bad enough to do something about it....

7 S. Freud *Civilization and its Discontents*, vol. I of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* pp. 75-76

8 Gilbert, *op cit*, p. 58

9 E. Shackleton, *South*, p. 192

10 Gilbert, *op cit*, pp. 176-177

We need to be defended – not defenseless or defensive – and thus our minds naturally look for the best view of things while simultaneously insisting that those views stick reasonably closely to the facts.”¹¹

In other words, in the balance, “the good isn't as good, and the bad isn't as bad, as we think it's going to be.”¹²

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Let's touch down for a moment on the power of regret. Let's revisit that “thin slice of melodrama [that] is among the most memorable scenes in the history of cinema.” The year is 1942, the film is *Casablanca*, and, at its close, “Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman are standing on the tarmac as she tries to decide whether to stay in Casablanca with the man she loves, or board the plane and leave with her husband.”¹³ Bogey says, “Inside, we both know you belong with Victor. You're part of his work, the thing that keeps him going. If that plane leaves the ground and you're not with him, you'll regret it. Maybe not today. Maybe not tomorrow. But soon, and for the rest of your life.”¹⁴

Avoiding regret has been a strong guiding factor in my choices, and I'm sure I have preached as much to you. But the research says I'm wrong. “[I]n the long run, people of every age and in every walk of life seem to regret *not* having done things much more than they regret things [that] they did.... [W]e regret inactions more than actions.” If the research is right, had Ingrid Bergman stayed in Casablanca, she might have felt terrible in the short-run, but in the long run – and for the rest of her life – she would have been happy.¹⁵

Hmmm.

How do we nourish a healthy psychological immune system and build our resilience? How do we sign up for happiness? This is the sentence from Daniel Gilbert that started me on the path of this morning's reflection: Very simply, he wrote, “[A] single big payoff ... affects people's essential happiness much less than a routine of small delights.” A single big payoff affects people's essential happiness much less than a routine of small delights.¹⁶ In other words, in the long run, a visit to Oz can't hold a candle to waking up in our own beds.

11 *ibid*, pp. 177-178

12 Daniel Colman, “Three Cheers for the Same Old Thing,” *The New York Times*, 15 January, 2006

13 *ibid*, p. 196

14 M. Cutiz, *Casablanca*, Warner Brothers, 1942

15 Gilbert, *op cit*, p. 197

16 Daniel Colman, “Three Cheers for the Same Old Thing,” *The New York Times*, 15 January, 2006

A routine of small delights. Dr. Gilbert writes, “The joys of variety are vastly overestimated in every domain of pleasure.” Those of us who are “incessantly trying something new for variety's sake ... are generally less happy than people who stick to their tried-and-true favorites.”¹⁷ If we want to be happy, it's all in the every day – not a secret or a mystery, but as plain as the very least of what we love and have loved, over and over.

I spoke last month about the power of keeping a gratitude list. This, then, is a finer point: happiness is in the familiar, more small than large. Make your list: What makes you happy? Zen master Suzuki-roshi would say, “First thought, best thought.” *What makes you happy?* The moment the shower gets hot. The first sip of morning tea or coffee. Opening the paper or tuning in to “our” radio station. A landmark on our commute. Laughing with a friend or coworker. Finding a favorite fruit or flower at the market, back in season. A message. A phone call. The color of the sky at twilight. Opening the door to home at the end of a long day. A hug.

Here's a poem I love by Lisel Mueller, Called *Alive Together*.

Speaking of marvels, I am alive
 together with you, when I might have been
 alive with anyone under the sun,
 when I might have been Abelard's woman
 or the whore of a Renaissance pope
 or a peasant wife with not enough food
 and not enough love, with my children
 dead of the plague. I might have slept
 in an alcove next to the man
 with the golden nose, who poked it
 into the business of stars,
 or sewn a starry flag
 for a general with wooden teeth.
 I might have been the exemplary Pocahontas
 or a woman without a name
 weeping in Master's bed
 for my husband, exchanged for a mule,
 my daughter, lost in drunken bet.

¹⁷ *ibid*

I might have been stretched on a totem pole
 to appease a vindictive god
 or left, a useless girl-child,
 to die on a cliff. I like to think
 I might have been Mary Shelley
 in love with a wrong-headed angel,
 or Mary's friend. I might have been you.
 This poem is endless, the odds against us are endless,
 our chances for being alive together
 statistically nonexistent;
 still we have made it, alive in a time
 when rationalists in square hats
 and hatless Jehovah's Witnesses
 agree it is almost over,
 alive with our lively children
 who – but for endless ifs –
 might have missed out on being alive,
 together with marvels and follies
 and longings and lies and wishes
 and error and humor and mercy
 and journeys and voices and faces
 and colors and summers and mornings
 and knowledge and tears and chance.

Beloved spiritual companions,

 May the 'you-know-what-I-mean' feeling infuse our lives:

 May artful compromise nourish our resilience.

 Remembering that we will regret inaction more than action,
 may we choose to act.

 May a routine of small delights fill our days,

 May we, too, say, “It was a glorious experience!”

 And though shipwrecked and hungry, may we, too,
 break into song.

 I am so happy to be alive with you.

