

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
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Happiness

On the afternoon before she died, Arlington Street member Katherine Alison was having lunch next door with a group of friends. I walked up to her table just as she was saying of her former husband, “We were happy then, but we didn’t know it.”

I thought of that, as I wrote her memorial service. She had been happy after worship that day, too, and had she known it? Do we know we’re happy when we’re happy, or do we stop being happy the moment we start thinking about whether or not we’re happy?

I looked up “happy” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, to see when the word was first used in English, in writing: 1340.

Six hundred and sixty-eight years, this concept of happiness ... recent, in the great scheme of things. On the other hand, it’s been many moons that we’ve been trying to get it right, to get “happy.”

I started thinking about this when my friend and teacher, Sylvia Boorstein, recently published a second book with “happiness” in the title. In some bookstores, she’s no longer filed under Buddhism; “happiness” is its own section. We North Americans are in pursuit of our “inalienable right” in a big way, but would Thomas Jefferson be proud?

Over the past 50 years, our country has become amazingly wealthy. “We have twice as many cars per person, our houses are twice as big, and we eat out almost three times as often.” *And* ... “the divorce rate has doubled, suicide has tripled, and violent crime has quadrupled.”¹ I’m not sure how to line up these statistics, but it doesn’t strike me as rocket science to conclude that wealth is not what’s making us happy.

¹ David Bornstein, “Pursuing Happiness,” *World Ark*, 11-12/07, p. 12

Jonathan Haidt, author of *The Happiness Hypothesis*, concludes that human beings are not designed to make ourselves happy. The unconscious mind, he writes, “was shaped by natural selection to win at the game of life.... [P]art of its strategy is to impress others, gain their admiration, and rise in relative rank. [Our unconscious mind] cares about *prestige*, not happiness.... It looks eternally to others to figure out what is prestigious....”²

Here’s a fabulous illustration of this truth, from Abd Er-Rahman III, ruler of Spain. The quote is from the year 960 in the common era, over a thousand years ago:

“I have now reigned about 50 years in victory or peace,” he says, “beloved by my subjects, dreaded by my enemies, and respected by my allies. Riches and honors, power and pleasure, have waited on my call, nor does any earthly blessing appear to have been wanting to my felicity.

“In this situation, I have diligently numbered the days of pure and genuine happiness which have fallen to my lot. [In 50 years,] they amount to fourteen.”³

Today, “Three out of four students entering North American colleges ... consider it ‘very important’ or ‘essential’ that they become ‘very well off financially.’” That’s “nearly double the proportion in 1970.”⁴ In other words, we’re increasingly mixing up fulfilling our drive to win with becoming happy. We’re hardwired to always want more, but wanting is not a happy state, and getting brings us no lasting sense of well-being. This is where our success fails. When the good life becomes all about wealth, the American Dream becomes a nightmare.

Gerald Chertavian is the grandson of an Armenian immigrant. He grew up in Lowell in a middle class family, attended public schools, graduated from Bowdoin College, and went to work on Wall Street. Then he launched a little internet company with a group of friends; in 1999, they sold it for \$83 million. Gerald Chertavian was 34 years old.

“I was very wealthy,” he said. “But a lot of people were saying, ‘You can go and do it again. You can make ten times as much money....’”

² *ibid*

³ http://www.wisdomquotes.com/cat_happiness.html

⁴ Bornstein, *op cit*, p. 12

Overwhelmed, he called his father for advice. “Don’t make any decisions for now,” his father said. “Just take some time.”

Gerald Chertavian thought about what he most loved, what had really made him happy in his short life. He had first become a Big Brother in college; in New York, he mentored a shy 9-year-old named David Heredia, who lived in a housing project on Manhattan’s East Side. Eventually, Gerald put him through art school, and David now lives in L.A. and works in animation for Walt Disney. “David taught me,” he said, “that the opportunity divide in this country can be closed.” The idea made Gerald happy. He decided to run with it, and created and funded a program called *Year Up*.

“*Year Up* trains urban youth between the ages of 18 and 24 in technical, computer, professional, and communications skills.” They take classes for six months, and, if they’re successful, they earn a corporate apprenticeship for another six months. Today, *Year Up* works in Boston, New York, Providence, and D.C. It has graduated more than 800 students who, 90 percent of the time, move on to higher education and high-level careers.⁵

This is what Gerald Chertavian did with his wealth: he chose to turn the tide of what he calls the “soft bigotry of low expectations.” And there is nothing that gives him greater joy than his students’ success. Gerald Chertavian is a wealthy, happy man.

In the interest of saving ourselves hours of reading the raft of self-help books about happiness, here’s their collective directive – a short list: “simplify your life; ... take care of your body; ... reflect on your feelings; find meaningful work [not necessarily your job!]; ... cultivate relationships; ... count your blessings; ... [and] express gratitude.” Psychologist William James said that, to feel most alive, we need to seek out and follow the “inner voice” that says, “This is the real me.” But happiness is not going to be achieved by focusing solely on ourselves, any more than through amassing wealth.

Storyteller and teacher, Grandmother Twyla Nitch, and Cherokee lineage holder and teacher, Dhyaní Ywahoo, were seated across from me in a fire circle one late-summer night. Grandmother Twyla told the story of the well on her land going dry, and people rallying to help her family restore their

⁵ Naomi R. Kooker, “Gerald Chertavian: The Equalizer,” *Boston Business Journal*, 10/20/96

water. “All I could offer them in return,” she said, “was my laughter. Laughter is a good gift.” We sat together in silence for along time. Then Dhyani taught, “When you feel the poorest, that is the time to give a gift.”⁶

British Philosopher John Stuart Mill⁷ observed, “Those only are happy who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness; [on] the happiness of others, on the improvement of [hu]mankind, even on some art or pursuit, followed not as a means, but as itself an ideal end. Aiming thus at something else, they find happiness by the way.”

Years ago, Kem and I had the opportunity to hear naturalist and author Peter Matthiessen give a reading. One of the things he spoke of that day was a trip he had taken with Zen master Bernie Glassman to Southern Poland, where a group of descendents of Holocaust survivors and descendents of Nazi sympathizers had joined in a seated meditation retreat on the railroad tracks leading to Auschwitz.

Only a mind as spacious as Bernie Glassman’s could have conceived of such a gathering. And only Bernie would have told Peter Matthiessen, who, at the time, was suffering from a deep clinical depression, that he needed to come to Auschwitz.

I can’t imagine the courage it took for Bernie Glassman to gamble with his friend’s mental health that way. Going to visit a concentration camp sounds like a prescription for depression. Sitting there in silence, day after day, and then, night after night, processing what has arisen from the day’s spiritual practice with the other participants, who had been taught to hate one another, sounds like a prescription for a complete breakdown. Instead, Peter Matthiessen found the entire journey both healing and uplifting. Sitting on the tracks, bearing witness to incalculable suffering and the greatest evil known to humankind, he emerged from the depression, he said, like breaking through the surface of the cold ocean.

My spiritual companions, happiness will never come from getting more of what we think we want. Happiness is proportional to the choice to do our part in making the world a better place. I’ll give the last word to our Unitarian forbear, Dr. Albert Schweitzer. He said, “I don’t know what your destiny will

⁶ These are paraphrases, not quotations.

⁷ 1806-1873

be, but one thing I do know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve.”⁸

Let us seek, and find.

⁸ http://www.wisdomquotes.com/cat_happiness.html