

The Pursuit of Happiness

David J. Hudson, Nov. 9, 2014

I pulled down the bill of my cap to shield my eyes from the late afternoon sun. It was mid-October and still warm there in the low country of South Carolina - still a miracle to a Northerner.

The air was dry and clear, the gift of a recent cold front. A stiff, steady breeze from the west filled the big sail. At the helm, Kate had the mainsheet pulled in tight. An extra wrap around the cleat helped her hold it. We heeled to the east, the leeward rail dipping under the surface now and again. I sat on the windward rail to hold us upright.

The boat sliced through the water, surging to the north, pulled by the wind, that strange invisible force born of the heat of the sun and the rotation of the earth. Foam rose from the bow; water bubbled and gurgled beneath the hull; our wake curled out behind us, evidence of our passing. We had crossed the sound from Habersham Creek and Port Royal Island – home – and were headed now toward the mainland and the vast salt marshes that bordered it. The tide was high – the earth full, as Kate says; riding above it now, we could see out across the grass, a rich, brilliant green, its emerging seed fronds glowing golden in the late afternoon light.

We entered Hazzard Creek, surging on the incoming tide, dolphins in our wake, leaping out of the water playfully as they followed us. Terns called and dove around us. Smiles lit our faces. Could I be any happier than I am right now, I wondered. I thought of the topic that Bob Mihalik had given me a few months before – happiness – one word. Was this it?

When he gave me the topic, I thought first of Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence – and what he calls the self-evident Truth that “we are endowed by our creator with certain unalienable rights among which are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” What is this thing, “happiness”, and how do we pursue it?

Is it joy? Is it comfort? Is it soft and cuddly? Like a puppy? Is it a soft, cuddly *feeling*? Or is it something more substantial? Security? Freedom from want - or fear? Success?

Back in April Bob sent me something to chew on in preparing this sermon - a column that David Brooks had written on the subject - titled *What Suffering Does*. In it Brooks takes issue with our national obsession with happiness. Our pursuit of happiness is misguided, he says. We don't find the real rewards of life by chasing happiness.

On the contrary, he says, we find those rewards – true happiness - through the pain and darkness of suffering. Although he didn't write it as a theological statement, it certainly read like one to me. Referring to theologian Paul Tillich, he speaks of the *holiness* of the passage through suffering – of suffering taking us *beneath the routines of life* – of healing feeling like some *natural or divine process beyond our control* – of the grieving *hurling themselves deeper and more gratefully into their lives*. This

sounded to me very much like the message of the Christian mystic Richard Rohr, whose work I've been reading a lot lately.

Psychology tells us that the pursuit of happiness is *pointless*. We are evolutionarily constructed to pursue *success* – to achieve, to win, to prosper, to be strong, to appear strong – in order to maximize the chances of our genes moving into the next generation. But success is not the same thing as *happiness*, psychology says, echoing the common wisdom that wealth, fame, prestige, and comfort do not bring happiness.

Psychologist Jonathan Haidt is one of the leading theorists on this subject. His book *The Happiness Hypothesis* – written in 2006 – is a sweeping psychological treatise for lay people that reviews both the scientific literature and the wisdom literature of the world's major religions and proposes, as the title reads, a new *happiness hypothesis*. His hypothesis is based in the interesting dilemma that, although happiness is a real, attainable thing, we can't attain it by pursuing it directly.

Haidt examines the ancient happiness hypothesis of the Buddha - that happiness resides in letting go of attachment to the physical world, and declares it only a partial truth. Happiness is more than an inner experience, he says. He notes that, when the Buddha left the sheltered life of his father's castle and discovered pain and suffering and poverty in the world, he didn't interview the poor and the suffering. If he had, Haidt says, he might have discovered that some of them were not *unhappy*. In fact, the evidence is that those suffering physical hardship are often happier than those who are not.

Isn't this Jesus' message in the Beatitudes?

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are the meek,
for they shall inherit the earth.
Blessed are they who mourn,
for they shall be comforted.
Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for justice,
for they shall be satisfied.

Happiness is complicated, Haidt says. It is influenced by many factors – some of which we can control, many of which we can't.

Happiness has a large *genetic* component; we inherit a certain happiness "set point". Some of us are happy and optimistic by nature; some are not. And it is the kind of *neural activity* in our brains that determines which. Those who have more neural activity in the *left* frontal cortex of their brains are happier than those who have more activity in the right frontal cortex. It's just a fact. Haidt says that these people, optimists, like me, have *won the cortical lottery*. This probably explains why I won the "most enthusiastic camper" award at summer camp in Maine in 1959.

The happiness set point is the "S" in the happiness equation of positive psychology: H (happiness) = S + C (the conditions of your life) + V (voluntary activities). Until recently it was very difficult to affect one's set

point. One could do it – and still can - with a great deal of hard work through meditation and cognitive therapy. Now one can accomplish the same thing with drugs –Prozac – or any of the class of serotonin re-uptake inhibitors. At one time Haidt looked askance at this method; he now enthusiastically endorses it.

The effect of the *conditions* of our lives on happiness - the “C” in the formula – is tricky. Some conditions we can change easily; some with more difficulty; and some conditions we can’t change at all – our age and stage, our parents, our history, background, and upbringing.

And, changeable or not, some conditions have little effect on our happiness. Curiously, socio-economic status is one of those. The poor can be happy; the rich very unhappy. Two principles help explain this: our happiness quickly readjusts to our set point after changes in our life condition, like water seeking its own level. And, two, we are happier pursuing a goal than having achieved one.

One of the most important conditions of life – and perhaps the biggest happiness factor – is *love*. *Of course*, we say; that’s intuitive, obvious. But Haidt says that science supports this common wisdom. I was happy in my childhood, first and foremost, he would say, because I was loved and because I knew it viscerally. I felt safe and secure in the love of my family and friends. Love is fundamental to happiness, he says. Secure attachment to others, of *some* kind, romantic love or not, is absolutely necessary for our healthy development and well-being. He dismisses Freud’s notion that it is important to withhold unconditional love and affection from infants and children, so that they can develop strong egos. Charles Schulz was right: love is a warm puppy.

The love we felt – or did not feel – in our childhood is not something we can change; it is what it is. But we *can* affect our attachments to and connections with others in our *present* lives; we can seek and grow love in our lives – in friendship, romantic love, and community – and become happier.

And we can most affect our own happiness through what Haidt calls our voluntary activities - the way we live our lives and engage in the world. This is the “V” in the happiness formula. Next to love, Haidt says that *work* is the most critical happiness factor. He defines work broadly – as not just our vocation, but hobbies and avocations, and any engagement with life. We are ultrasocial creatures – not solitary. We form and live in communities, and we are driven to engage in the world. We are driven to mastery and competence - to doing things well.

One of the tricks of life is aligning our talents with our work and other pursuits. Haidt quotes Aristotle as saying: “The good life is in developing your strengths, realizing your potential, becoming what is in your nature to become.”

I was most happy as a child when I was able to engage fully in activities that spoke powerfully to me. In rural Massachusetts I discovered that I loved nature and exploring it - streams, ponds, fields, and forests – finding salamanders, snakes, and turtles – learning the birds – searching for them. I’ve told you before about those birding experiences – banding puffins and terns on Matinicus Rock off the coast of Maine, watching hawk migrations in Pennsylvania, combing the Connecticut countryside with my high school biology teacher.

This kind of full engagement in the world psychologists call *vital engagement*. Vital engagement they define as being absorbed in a challenge that is within the range of one's capabilities – that does not overwhelm us - and that draws on our skills and talents. When we are *totally immersed* in such a task, we experience what psychologists call *flow* or “being in the zone”. Exploring nature I was in a state of flow; I was in the zone.

In my short teaching career I was often “in the zone” – when my fourth grade students were also fully engaged in our work, when a lesson clicked, when I felt that I was teaching and the kids were learning. That it was getting through. I was engaged in a task that drew on my strengths and interests and that was within the range of my capabilities.

The conditions of my life and work there were conducive to flow and happiness. Classes were small; the faculty was engaged, friendly, helpful, bright; and the bucolic setting of the school in Concord didn't hurt. Kate and I could walk our dogs over the Concord River, past Ralph Waldo Emerson's house, and across the Old North Bridge. When I arrived at the Fenn School at age 27, I felt that I had reached a workplace nirvana. “Why would I ever want to work anywhere else?” I thought.

Skiing the wild backcountry of Mt. Bachelor a couple of years ago – above the timber line and the clouds – on top of the world – swooping down toward the tree line through deep untracked powder snow – was an experience of flow. Some flow experiences, Haidt says, are purely physical; they produce flashes of *pleasure*, a kind of happiness. Those that are not *purely* physical produce what he calls *gratification*, a happiness longer lasting than sensory pleasure. On Mt. Bachelor I felt the sensory flow or rush, but I was also happy because I was with my sons. So it is with my sailing experiences, when Kate is with me.

When I have been unhappy, perhaps the biggest factor has been a lack of *coherence* among the elements of my personality and the dimensions of my life. As we grow and develop and struggle to come to know ourselves, we craft and re-craft a life story from our understandings of our basic personality traits, our values and beliefs, our coping mechanisms, and the ways in which other people see us. We are happiest when these elements in are sync – when they *cohere*.

The angst and despair of my adolescence had to do with a complete lack of coherence. I had no real sense of my basic traits, no sense of my identity as separate from my father's, and little appreciation of my talents. My values, beliefs, and coping mechanisms were still developing, and, like all young people, I had only a very preliminary life story.

When I was unhappy in my last few years at Georgia-Pacific, it was because my work was out of sync with my values – not all of them – but some important ones, and because I was doing work that wasn't the best fit with my talents and interests.

One of the happiest periods of my life has been the 13 years since Kate and I joined UUMAN. There are many factors; vital engagement - flow - has been an important one; I have been totally absorbed in the life of this place at times. I am in flow when I write a sermon.

But perhaps the biggest factor has been *coherence*. I have experienced it on the strictly *personal* level; I realize now that I have spent the last thirteen years writing the story of my life in a way that made sense

– in a way that recognized my basic personality traits and coping mechanisms, that reconciled my values and beliefs with the ways I live my life, that forgave my failures and mistakes, that recognized my talents and gave me the courage to use them, and that integrated the way others see me.

In these thirteen years a strong *coherence* has also developed horizontally, as Haidt says, between me and *others*. Those others are, for the most part, you – the UUMAN community. And, finally, my life has gained coherence on what Haidt, an atheist, calls the *vertical dimension* – the connection to or understanding of something larger than oneself. This is very subjective; we give it many names – spirit, God. Whatever we call it, *here* I have come to incorporate in my life an awareness of something larger than me and us, and I have done that with others – you. This is religion and its power.

Science says that religious people are happier; *coherence* – personal, horizontal, vertical – must be a reason.

The psychological term *coherence* sounds to me an awful lot like the religious term *wholeness*. After all, the word religion means “to bind together”. And, if it is genuine, religion is doing that for us, binding us together, making us more whole, helping us create a sense of coherence in our lives – helping us understand our lives and helping us create life stories that have meaning.

The process theologians, to whom Rev. Cynthia referred last week, and the Christian mystics tell us that happiness lies in the shedding of the false self and the discovery or re-discovery of the True Self – a kind of re-writing of one’s life story.

Last week in our Saturday morning centering prayer group meeting Mary McGrath suggested that the dualistic distinction between a False Self and True Self is confining. She said this: We construct a self-image and life story – in part through our interaction with others – to help us get through our lives. These images we paint of ourselves are beautiful; we should embrace them, as imperfect as they are, she says. These images – these stories – are ever changing as we grow, she says. Perhaps it is better to think of ourselves as *growing* toward a *Truer* Self. I would call this “growing toward *wholeness*”.

We construct a narrow, hyper-focused sense of self when we are young to help us make our way in the world – develop a career, put food on the table. We aspire and achieve; we seek control. But, as we age, as we experience adversity, loss, and suffering, we understand that we are not our victories or titles or wealth – or our losses, and that, ultimately, we are not in control of our condition. Our sense of self broadens, becomes more inclusive. As we become more aware of our connection to all that is, our self-image grows to include the *other*.

Our happiness, say the mystics, lies in this sense of pure and complete relatedness, connection with all that is, and the awareness of a power of life and love that sustains us – Haidt’s vertical dimension. This wisdom comes to us only through experience; we know of the extraordinary power of life and love, because we have experienced it in our own lives. Our lives, at some level, are testimonials to this fact of existence. *This connection and power is what I feel on the sailboat*

Happiness is real, but we cannot achieve it by pursuing it. As we chase it, it evaporates in front us, like mist warmed by the rising sun. Wealth, awards, possessions, success, power all prove not to be

happiness. But love and vital engagement with the world, strengthened in the crucible of adversity, can help us shake off these false gods and help move us from a narrow, limited sense of self to a truer, wider, interconnected self – to Wholeness. By bringing coherence and alignment to our lives, love and vital engagement bring a sense of meaningfulness that imparts richness to our experience, says Haidt. *This* happiness– a meaningful and fulfilling life – is one to which we have an unalienable right. And this, ultimately, is the purpose of our religious life.

May it be so.

David R. Hudson

Nov. 9, 2014