

The Pursuit of Happiness
Rev. Kathleen Ellis
6 January 2008

“Happy New Year!” is the greeting of the season for at least the first few days of January. For weeks we have wished one another “Happy Holidays” to encompass a range of winter celebrations. Last night was officially the final night of Christmas merrymaking, the eve of Epiphany in the Christian calendar, or Twelfth Night, that old secular day of shenanigans when men dressed like women and servants dressed like masters. This kind of mistaken identity, so common in Shakespearean plays, also shows up in his *Twelfth Night*. The main character is Viola, who spends most of the play disguised as the young man Cesario. I hope that all of your holidays were filled with as much fun as a Shakespearean comedy.

When we apply “Happy New Year!” to the new calendar year, we typically mean prosperity, success, health, peace and plenty. Young adults need to acquire money, possessions and status as they establish their independence. As we grow older, though, some of these objectives are likely to change.

The pursuit of happiness has been embedded in U. S. history, as incorporated in the Declaration of Independence:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.”

The Rev. Forrest Church, in his book *The American Creed*, points out that these self-evident truths are not original with Thomas Jefferson, and they were far from self-evident in 1776. Never had a government been established on so equal a footing. The wording

did not say “all white men,” and in the language of the day, women were included in the term “men,” though equality clearly was not extended to all persons. It just took a couple of hundred years to make inclusion more inclusive.

We as humans, as Westerners, as Americans, as privileged, cling to the belief that the future will be better so long as we are alive, and free, and full of potential for happiness. Then why is there so much unhappiness in the world?

Eric Weiner is one self-described grumpy reporter who set out to discover where in the world people tend to be happy. His book is called *The Geography of Bliss*. He described Switzerland as one happy place where the streets are clean and trains run on time. The Swiss also vote 7 or 8 times a year in public referenda, so they have a real voice in the way government works. And they have the attitude that if you have money, hide it—don’t flaunt it like we typically do in this country. Weiner believes that envy is an enemy of happiness.

In the Kingdom of Bhutan, tucked away in the Himalaya Mountains, Weiner received some unexpected advice: “To be happy, you need to set aside five minutes a day to think about death.” That’s another thing we don’t do well in this country. We’ll talk about religion, sex, and politics, but we don’t like to talk about death. People tend to feel happier when they recognize that life is too short to waste in negativity.

It’s too short to cling to criticism, fear, anger, and hatred, but it IS long enough for forgiveness. Gerald Jampolsky, author of *Love Is Letting Go of Fear*, says that “forgiveness is letting go of all hopes for a better past.” The hurt or anger you feel keeps you tied to the person or people who caused you harm. It is possible to believe the source of your pain is a flawed human being just like you and I are defective in so many ways.

Substitute love for hate and relieve yourself of the burden you carried. You won’t forget the pain, and you will continue to need safety from further harm, but you need not let it control your life. Jampolsky calls forgiveness “the greatest healer of all.” Your own peace of mind just might be the first sign of healing. You might even be able to forgive yourself.

Eat, Pray, Love, a bestseller by Elizabeth Gilbert, describes another approach to happiness. The publisher's description puts it very nicely:

“In her early thirties, Elizabeth Gilbert had everything a modern American woman was supposed to want—husband, country home, successful career—but instead of feeling happy and fulfilled, she felt consumed by panic and confusion. This wise and rapturous book is the story of how she left behind all these outward marks of success, and of what she found in their place. Following a divorce and a crushing depression, Gilbert set out to examine three different aspects of her nature, set against the backdrop of three different cultures: pleasure in Italy, devotion in India, and on the Indonesian island of Bali, a balance between worldly enjoyment and divine transcendence.”

I have never been to any of those geographical locations where Liz spent four months each, but I have experienced a share of crushing depression following divorce and the deaths of too many loved ones— brother, mother, mother-in-law, aunt, sister, father, father-in-law.

Grief took a toll that pretty much absorbed a great deal of my energy for several years. But even during the darkest periods of sorrow in my life, I harbored the belief that there would come a brighter day. When a person loses that belief, there are many ways to keep oneself mired in despondency: drugs of every kind, work, volunteerism, eating disorders, loneliness, frantic activity, you name it, all the way to suicide, the option of no return.

So I avoided alcohol and country/western music and indulged myself with private pleasures like chocolate and bubble bath, and reached out to friends and a therapist who could listen without premature advice. Sometimes the best I could do was to sit in the sunshine and weep, while believing that the sun could recharge my weakening batteries.

Every new loss is a reminder of every loss that once brought me to my knees in grief. Yet through it all is the knowledge that I did survive. As with many children, my first experience of loss was through the death of a pet. We learn, as Liz Gilbert did, that

“Eventually, everything goes away” (p. 174). Grief takes many forms; it is a sign of love; your friends will help you through.

Sources of grief are pretty obvious, but where does happiness come from? Consider this list: Keep your heart free from hate, your mind from worry, live simply, expect little, give much, sing often, pray always, forget self, think of others and their feelings, forgive the past, fill your heart with love, scatter sunshine, share the love.

On New Year’s Eve, National Public Radio aired an interview with Christine Carter. She is a sociologist and the executive director of the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California in Berkeley. Among other things, they study the science of happiness, from what makes us smile to which muscles we use when we do it sincerely.

This is a part of the positive psychology movement that diverges from traditional psychology in which the objective is to find out why you’re so miserable. Instead, Carter is interested in the science of happiness: what makes people happy, and how the answers can be applied to everyone who wants a happier life.

She said the best predictor of happiness revolves around friends and social connections—the quantity and quality of relationships in your life. Genetics play a part in our general happiness, but only about 50%. That leaves a lot of room to generate a life full of positive emotions, the hallmark of a happy life.

All of us, whether we are generally happy or grumpy, can take Carter’s advice: research shows that the more you practice gratitude, the happier you actually will be, and the benefit will be lasting. For example, keep a gratitude journal in which you jot down things you’re grateful for. Think of someone you appreciate and write a letter saying why. If possible, deliver the letter in person and read it out loud. The act of expressing gratitude will pay off far beyond the effort you make.

Just as we learned—the hard way—about loss and grief, we learned—the happy way—about pleasure and bliss. Those are the moments when the world looks totally okay from where we stand.

Happiness is not just about prosperity, success, health, peace and plenty. It's more often about personal contentment wherever you happen to find yourself or perhaps the courage to move into a better space for you and yours at this time.

Sources of happiness include gratitude for every little thing, the opportunity to serve others, forgiveness, and love. Isn't love the common denominator among us? Two weeks ago my friend Maggie Olmstead went home to visit family in Decatur, Georgia, for Christmas. The neighborhood has changed over the years, ever since Tyson built a chicken processing plant nearby. Maggie's nieces, white girls 9 and 4 years old, made friends with black and Hispanic kids in the neighborhood. Skin color doesn't matter much to them—it's more important to know who has a bicycle to share, or whose mom serves milk and cookies after school.

As December rolled around, all the kids started talking about Santa Claus, about how he would come around and bring gifts to all the good boys and girls. However, to recent immigrant families around the neighborhood, Christmas is more about the birth of Jesus than it is about Santa Claus.

On Christmas morning Maggie's nieces were gifted many times over with everything they wanted and more. When their Guatemalan friends came over, the question was, "What did Santa Claus bring you?" "Well, he didn't come at all," said the friends.

Stunned by this new reality, the 9 year old quickly figured it all out. She said, "Oh, I know what happened! Santa Claus left all the neighborhood gifts over here by mistake! These were meant for you." And she handed over her beloved new baby doll. Her little sister caught on and gave away her new teddy bear. They played Santa up and down the block for the rest of the afternoon.

That night when she tucked them into bed, their mom hid her tears. Never had her daughters been happier than when they gave out of their abundance to those who had so little. Share your happiness and watch it multiply.

Amen