

## Be Happy February 14, 2010

A number of years ago, there was a little ditty that began with the words, "Don't worry; be happy." Don't you wish it were as easy as that? All we have to do is to stop worrying, and we're going to be happy people. While that may sound a little farfetched, I think there's a grain of truth to it. I suspect most of us, if questioned would say that we want to be happy, but if we're really honest, we might have to admit that some of our thoughts and actions move us in the entirely opposite direction.

For instance, I read somewhere recently a formula that was guaranteed to lead us to the brink of unhappiness. If we want to be truly unhappy people, all we need to do is to adhere to the following:

1. Let little things bother us
2. Lose our perspective on things and failing to put first things first
3. Worry
4. Be a perfectionist
5. Be right all the time
6. Be suspicious of everyone and everything
7. Always compare ourselves with others
8. Take everything personally

I hope you know this is all tongue-in-cheek, because our purpose today is not to make ourselves miserable, but to point out some of the things we all do or think or feel that have a way of contributing to a degree of unhappiness. How might it be otherwise in our lives? How do we become happy people? That's what I want us to reflect on this morning.

Stan shared a quote with me that I think could fit many of us. It's this: "When I was 5 years old, my Mom always told me that happiness was the key to life. When I went to school, they asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wrote down "happy." They told me I didn't understand the assignment and I told them they didn't understand life."

Do we understand life and happiness? What are the elements that make up happiness? Is it what Albert Schweitzer once said, "Happiness is nothing more than good health, and a bad memory," or is it something else? Something more?

In my view, there are many things that combine together to render us happy people, and one of them might be the bad memory that Schweitzer mentioned. I know a common theme among some therapists is pouring over one's past and trying to delineate all the pain and hurt that happened in the course of our lives. While that may serve some useful purpose at times, living that way can cause us to get stuck in our past and keep hanging onto old hurts.

According to Richard Carlson, in his book *You Can Be Happy No Matter What*, learning to keep our attention in the present moment allows us to live at peak efficiency and without the distraction of negative thinking. He writes, "The present moment is where we find happiness and inner peace." While that's something I doubt we can carry off 24-7, it certainly is a good reminder of the importance of being in the moment, not dragging out the past and dreaming about the future.

You see, the reality is that happiness isn't something we search for "out there." It's not about acquiring or attaining this or that; it's not about how wealthy we are or how much status we think we have. It's not anything external at all. As the title of John Powell's book stated, *Happiness is an Inside Job*. It has nothing to do with outside circumstances; it has to do with our state of mind and state of spirit. It is an inside, internal thing.

There are some parts of happiness that might be worth considering however, and one of them is found in our Bible passage for today. Now, let me warn you, the main point of this story is not my focus. It's typically referred to as the parable of the talents, and every commentary I consulted talked only about the main point that Jesus made in telling this story. However, that's not what I want us to notice. Let's look at it together, and see if you can figure out where I'm going.

Our version reads like this: "After a long time, the master of those servants came back and settled accounts with them. The servant who had received five thousand coins came in and handed over the other five thousand. 'You gave me five thousand coins, sir,' he said. 'Look! Here are another five thousand that I have earned.' 'Well done, you good and faithful servant!' said his master. You have been faithful in managing small amounts, so I will put you in charge of large amounts. Come on in and share my happiness."

Does anyone have any idea what caught my attention, for the first time ever? It's

the line that reads, “Come on in and share my happiness,” and if we were to read further, we would find it repeated again.

What prompted the master to make that statement? What’s he referring to? I think it is simply this: one element that causes us to be happy, fulfilled people is using the skills and abilities we have been given to the greatest extent possible. Leo Rosten said the same thing I believe Jesus meant when he said, “Happiness, in the ancient, noble sense, means self-fulfillment and is given to those who use to the fullest whatever talents God or luck or fate bestowed upon them. Happiness to me, lies in stretching, to the farthest boundaries of which we are capable, the resources of the mind and heart.”

Others have made similar statements in different ways. In an article in *O Magazine* a while back, Gabrielle LeBlanc said that people who are happy “find their most golden self.” She wrote that happiness, or good spirit, “means striving toward excellence based on one’s unique talents and potential—Aristotle considered it to be the noblest goal in life.”

In the book I’m currently reading, *How Remarkable Women Lead*, the authors state, “Happiest are those who know who they are.” I believe a piece of being a happy person has to do with knowing who we are, knowing our gifts and talents, and then using those abilities to further a cause or make this world a better place.

There’s yet another element of happiness that is inherent in that phrase from our Bible passage, “Come on in and share my happiness,” and it’s the word “share.” Sharing implies that we’re connected in some way to one another, and of course, that we have a connection with the one who is greater than we.

When I googled the word happiness, Wikipedia offered an extensive definition that’s worthy of our consideration. One statement in particular caught my attention: “Human relationships are consistently found to be the most important correlation with human happiness.” Furthermore, a 2008 study in the *British Medical Journal* reported that happiness in social networks may spread from person to person. The results suggested that happiness is in some ways contagious the way a virus is, but a good virus.

You may recall that several months ago, we used segments of the Michael J Fox TV special about optimism and hope. That special included a part we didn’t use where he visited

Bhutan, a country that has happiness as part of its constitution. In fact, Bhutan measures its prosperity not in terms of GNP—Gross National Product, but in terms of GNH—Gross National Happiness.

One of the things that was so prevalent in that segment was how important a good social network is to one’s well-being. That means good relationships with family and friends, and it’s stated again and again that happiness is based on strong relationships. It is promoted and sustained with good relationships at the family level, as a community, as a nation, as brothers and sisters on this earth. Let’s hear this in their own words:

Part of what the Bhutanese shared was the importance of spirituality in their lives, and in my mind, that’s an extension of the importance of relationships. We can know a sense of happiness when we have a personal relationship—in whatever way that means for each of us—with God.

It’s interesting to note that Augustine, one of the early church “fathers,” talked about this in his *Confessions*. Apparently, Augustine lived much of his life without God, and was searching for happiness in all the wrong places, trying to find it in the world around him. Finally, after the death of a dear friend, he turned to God for answers, and eventually became a Christian. In the end, Augustine found that true happiness can only come from a relationship with God and appreciating God’s creation.

I think he was onto something—as I said earlier—happiness isn’t out there; it really has nothing to do with our external circumstances. It has only to do with the state of our heart, mind and soul. How are we with God and with one another? Each of us will have to answer that for ourselves, but I hope we can say “I’m happy.”

Closing:

There’s so much more we could expound upon when it comes to happiness, but perhaps Denis Waitley said it well with these words: Happiness cannot be traveled to, owned, earned, worn or consumed. Happiness is the spiritual experience of living every minute with love, grace and gratitude.”

I totally agree. Have a good Sunday and go in peace. Amen.