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The Search for Happiness

OPINIONS DIFFER from age to age as to what happiness is. Popular "how to" books of the 18th century were chiefly concerned with the subject of how to die a good death; those of the 19th century moved on to the subject of how to make a good living; and those of the 20th century are devoted to telling us how to live happily.

Many people — perhaps the majority of people — would say that the greatest happiness they could achieve would be freedom and ability to do what they want to do. That is not a very good description of happiness, because it is difficult to be sure just what one wants today, let alone next year and twenty years from now.

Human beings are changeable. What may seem the supreme material good today may be completely out of date within a few months.

What is happiness?

Happiness arises largely from the mental qualities of contentment, confidence, serenity, and active goodwill. It includes the pain of losing as well as the pleasure of finding. It thrives best in a crowded life. The men and women who are recorded in history and biography as most happy were people with always somewhat more to do than they could possibly do. Every waking hour of their lives was occupied with ambitious projects, literature, love, politics, science, friendship, commerce, professions, trades, their religious faith, and a thousand other matters. The secret of happiness may be found by making each of these interests count to its utmost as part of the fabric of life.

Aristotle summarized this view in his *Ethics*, written in the hey-day of Greek thought 2,300 years ago: Happiness lies in the active exercise of a man's vital powers along the lines of excellence, in a life affording full scope for their development.

We need to avoid the extremes of sluggish placidity and feverish activity. We are not going to be satisfied with felicity which resembles that of a stone, un-

feeling and unmoving, but will look back from future years with sorrow and regret if we run to and fro, giving in to what Socrates called "the itch".

Happiness obviously includes two sorts of behaviour: active and passive. We may say that the active part consists in searching and sharing, while the passive part is made up of security and possession. Neither part is complete of itself, and neither yields full satisfaction if it is over-emphasized. Philosophers from the ancient Greeks to Buddha and Balzac and Pascal and Pitkin have been extolling a balanced life as the most happy life, and many unhappy people can, when they face the issue, trace their discontent to imbalance.

The recipe for happiness cannot be given in any single word, because its many virtues have to be combined in their proper quantities, at the proper times, for proper purposes.

Dr. Martin Gumpert, who leans toward belief in physical well-being as the foundation of happiness, provides this prescription in his book called *The Anatomy of Happiness*: prevent physical suffering; prevent guilt; do not accept illusions; accept the reality of death; do what you like to do; keep learning; accept your limitations; be willing to pay for everything you get; be willing and able to love; avoid secrets.

About seeking happiness

It is legitimate to seek happiness. We cannot help observing that while followers of some schools of thought are telling us to avoid seeking happiness, they intimate that if we do so we shall be happy.

The search requires a plan. We need to know what sort of happiness we seek, what the ingredients are, what are our strongest wants, and what we have to start with. We should train ourselves to keep the programme simple and free from complications and side trips, to pay attention to little things, to deflate quickly after being praised and to bounce back quickly from disappointment, to seize or create opportunities to put our special abilities to work, to seek excellence

in everything we do, to remain modest, and to review and revise periodically.

Most of us do not really have to seek far and wide. Happiness grows at our own fireside, if we cultivate it.

The romantic minds of young people are likely to imagine that happy events and happiness-bringing people will make their entrance to the sound of drums and trumpets, but when we look back from the vantage point of maturity we see that they came in quietly, almost unnoticed. As Benjamin Franklin remarked in his autobiography, "Human felicity is produced not so much by great pieces of good fortune that seldom happen, as by little advantages that occur every day."

Succeeding in a job

Emphasis on the little things applies in whatever profession or business we take up. Look at the multitude of little things included in the three insistent problems of industrial management: the application of science and technical skill to raw material; the systematic ordering of operations, and the organization of team-work and sustained co-operation.

The worker who can do the little things well for which he is responsible contributes to the success of the biggest enterprise, and the man who devotes himself to his task with zeal and determination, using his best ability, will have a sense of achievement, which is an ingredient of happiness.

One mark of a man who is determined to achieve happiness in his work is that he does not ask as a preliminary to taking a job whether the seat is soft or the building air-conditioned. He is in too much of a hurry to get busy.

A medical writer points out some of the virtues in work aside from the pay we get for it. Work is a physical and mental exercise without which we would get sick and waste away. It is vital for development of personality. It maintains our contact with the outside world, and — very important physically — it guarantees the pleasure of rests.

Know the job well

If it is true that there is no happiness in ignorance, this is doubly true about ignorance of one's work. One needs, as a preliminary to success and contentment on a job, to know the job thoroughly. Only the man who has experienced it knows the wonderful sense of power that comes from the simple assurance that he is equal to his tasks.

By learning his job, a man gains insight that qualifies him to accept responsibility. One requirement of good management is that the manager shall be in the secret of why events occur, and that is revealed only to those who study the reasons for and the causes of business practices.

How do they get that knowledge? By asking questions. No matter what activity we engage in, we need to ask questions. At first they will pertain to the learning of procedures and techniques, but as we progress we will be well-advised to challenge and probe ideas which other people take for granted as settled once and for all.

After the raw material of information has been gathered, then we must turn it to account in our lives. Knowledge is the material stored; intelligence is the capacity for putting it to use. Capacity in a job is ability to do it well; it is genius that takes what is known, injects imagination, improves the product of one's work, and thus leads into wider fields of opportunity.

Above all, be active

Happiness loves action, and the philosophers agree that happiness must include some form of worthy activity. Life demands work, but happiness requires dreaming, planning, aspiring, doing, and pressing on from one attainment to another still greater.

Indolence is a distressing state. It leads only to a feeling of futility. Our greatest delight is the satisfaction which follows full honest effort. Pleasure, enjoyment and recreation are the wages we have; but when night falls the real question is: "What of my day's work? What have I accomplished?"

The enthusiasm which prompts us to be usefully active needs to be tempered by art, good sense and discretion. When an inspiration for something big strikes us, let us take it for a long, cool walk. Brahms said the reason for much of the bad music in the world is haste: the composers imagine that every splutter of their hastily-driven goose-quills is part of a swan-song. Even if our grand conception is realized only in part, it is better to accomplish something exquisitely right than to engage excitedly in something that can be, at best, mediocre.

To seek what is impossible is madness. We must front the facts, find our strengths and weaknesses, apply our mental vigour, and choose to do that which is according to our nature and capacity.

Self-confidence

Out of such self-government there arises self-confidence. The world is likely to believe in a man who believes in himself, providing he shows that his self-reliance is grounded upon a true appraisal and is well managed.

No one can be great in business or a profession or an art who wants advice before he does anything important. Self-reliance is the end expression of many qualities: emotional stability, willingness to face facts and to bear responsibility, discipline, faith in one's judgment, and practice in making decisions and abiding by them.

We must admit that to make a decision — or, still more, to revise one — is the most responsible and most exacting part of the process of living. “No blunder in war or politics,” said Scott in his *Life of Napoleon*, “is so common as that which arises from missing the proper moment of exertion,” and his warning is quite applicable to business. The man who trains himself to make quick energetic decisions, even about small matters such as writing a letter or keeping an engagement, is contributing to his happiness by realizing his capacity as a vigorous, accomplishing, character.

Such a person, having set one idea upon its feet, springs another. He knows that, for him, happiness does not abide in imitation or conformity, but arises from his ability to think and do new things.

On choosing wisely

Those succeed best in their search for happiness who form definite ideas of what they are going to do before they start to do it. Aim is necessary, and it must be specific and within the bounds of reality. Lots of people get nowhere simply because they do not know where they want to go.

What do we seek in order to be happy? Our decision need not be one of self-enclosed finalities, but we should plan for definite goals, each of which will be the starting place for a new effort. Our first plan is merely the sketch of a picture still to be painted.

To choose our course means more than wishing we were at its end. We must run the course. That means leaving something behind and passing scenes which invite us to linger for their enjoyment. There is a loss and a gain in every step forward, and acceptance of this unalterable fact is involved in making our choice. But the happiness of the person who sets up a good and worthy goal and goes all-out toward it is far more sublime than that of one who achieves pleasure without sacrifice.

To choose the goal requires wisdom, the highest type of thinking. It silences useless discussion of insignificant things and concentrates on reaching judgments about important affairs.

Good judgment involves recognition of our life's possibilities and limitations. It informs us when to put forth effort and when to meditate. It recalls to us that there is a time to hurry in our enterprises, and a time to go slowly. When timid Adeimantus said, referring to the Olympic games: “Those who rise in the games before their time are flogged,” Themistocles replied, “Yes, but those who loiter are not crowned.”

Wisdom does not plod along in ruts, but is scouting far and wide in search of truth. It is likely to challenge our cherished beliefs, prompting us to ask ourselves: “How did I come to think that?” The more answers we get, the less likely are we to judge intolerantly, because we find that a few things are altogether good or true, and nothing is altogether bad or false.

To choose wisely demands that we give a proposed plan our concentrated attention. Dispersion of thinking is a grievous fault. We should not reach any decision while our minds are occupied with other matters. Many of us divert just enough attention from one thing to take care of another. Such casual consideration, born of our miserly measuring out of our attention, is an obstacle to great achievements. It robs our conclusions of the decisiveness that marks the judgments of great executives.

If we concentrate, we can accomplish, both in thought and in work. Concentration is the secret of the success of versatile men from Leonardo da Vinci, who was sculptor, musician, architect, mathematician, engineer, and painter of the immortal *Mona Lisa*, to Dr. Wilder Penfield, internationally respected surgeon, neurologist, scholar, director of research, first man to “map” the human brain, and author of the novel *No Other Gods*. All men of many talents have had in high degree the ability to concentrate on one activity, one problem, one thought, at a time and forget all the others.

In choosing our route toward happiness we should not forget that the pursuit will demand courage. When we refuse to accept some insipid fate instead of happiness, we throw down a gage to life. We make a gesture of heroism. We assert our ability to maintain a course we have decided upon and in some slight way to steer the ship in inevitable storms.

Aids to happiness

There are some things which will make our search for happiness easier, though never easy. Good habits, for example, will accustom us to free our minds and hands of petty chores so that we may devote our strength of mind and body to our life job.

Civilization advances by extending the number of important operations we can perform without thinking of them. The skills which we develop into habits save time and energy, accustom us to disposing of unpleasant tasks, make us exercise the virtues of punctuality and shun the vices of procrastination, and, generally, free us to pay particular and undistracted attention to matters that are significant.

If pattern living takes over the routine tasks, freeing us from the necessity of deciding less important things afresh every day, that is a good thing, but we must not carry habit to the point where it becomes our master. The year in which a man's habits become sacred and untouchable marks the beginning of his old age.

Good health is an essential part of happiness. When our nervous system has a surplus of energy at its disposal we take pleasure in working it off and in recuperating. Absence of health, or indulgence in pleasure beyond the limit of our stored force, causes unhappiness.

In keeping the balance so often referred to between income and outgo of energy, emotion, social feeling, and the other forces which influence our happiness, we discover the virtue that resides in self-control.

Self-control does not mean merely surface composure. Down among our nerve cells and fibres the molecules are counting every discomposure and every mental disturbance. Nothing we ever do is, in strict scientific literalness, wiped out. The emotions we allow to seethe under a tranquil exterior appearance leave their mark upon the record, and we must make an accounting, debit or credit.

To sit quietly in a room with nothing but one's thoughts, or with the companionship of someone with whom we are in intellectual communion, in an atmosphere of tranquillity and the appreciation of vital matters — that can be a happiness in itself and the parent of more happiness.

Things to do

Just as a business executive conducts his affairs by comparing today's liabilities and assets with yesterday's, and proceeds to project plans for tomorrow by a study of the movement thus indicated, so we can do in the business of living.

No reading of books or of essays like this will take the place of a candid, honest examination of what one has recently done and what one is about to do. The person who floats along on life or on his job without thinking of whence he came or whither he is going may be contented, but it is the contentment of a clam in the mud-flats of the harbour.

This personal inventory is an important, if not vital, factor in the life of anyone seeking happiness. The Greek philosopher said: "Know thyself"; the Roman philosopher improved this by saying "Be yourself"; and St. Paul struck the complete chord when he said: "Neglect not the gift which is in you."

It is knowledge of his clear-cut objective and his capability in management that enables the executive to run his business straight and true; it is knowledge of his sure foot that gives the steeple-jack confidence; it will be self-knowledge, leading to self-improvement, that will guide everyone of us into the path of happiness.

This self-appraisal should not linger too lovingly in the past, or embrace too heartily the present, or anticipate tomorrow in too rosy tints. It should preserve a proper proportion. One can no more find happiness by backing into the future than by fleeing into the past.

Living in society

Never are we alone with our lives. We are enmeshed in families, in offices, in factories, in groups, and in obligations. We cannot be content with self-maintenance. A machine that does no more than keep

itself going is of no value whatever. Making a contribution is essential to realization of happiness.

Dr. N. V. Peale quotes this recipe in his deservedly best seller *The Power of Positive Thinking*: "The way to happiness: keep your heart free from hate, your mind from worry. Live simply, expect little, give much. Fill your life with love. Scatter sunshine. Forget self, think of others. Do as you would be done by. Try this for a week and you will be surprised."

Self-love — the narcissistic stage of life — is the most tragic of all fixations. It prevents our adapting ourselves to social relations. Our own conceit blinds us to the esteem and admiration we might enjoy from others. Those who are so self-centred remind us of Aesop's fly. It sat upon the axle-tree of a chariot wheel and said: "What a dust I raise!"

Happiness must be won

We cannot buy a ticket to happiness. It is a destination reached only as we search for a trail and follow it. Nothing good, and that includes happiness, is ever reached without labour or won without toil. The mark of an overcoming man is to be able to say with Euphron in Goethe's *Faust*: "Unto me hateful is lightly-won spoil."

The condition of winning happiness in life — social, business, professional — is the opposite of inertia, and it includes little of accident. It demands direction and growth. The things which help to make up happiness, like health, wealth, honour and successful business endeavour, are in themselves neutral. They are good or bad according to the use made of them. If a man does not know how to use them, he is better off without them. If he fails to use them well, they wilt and die.

There is no place in the search for happiness for lotus-eaters, those people who cling to a static life. But it is a mistake to hurry unduly. We cannot leap to heights we were meant to climb. No artist can paint all creation on one canvas; he balances his effort in the confines of a frame.

The principles we live by, in business and in social life, are the most important part of happiness. We need to be careful, upon achieving happiness, not to lose the virtues which have produced it. The person who is successful in his daily work should not forget prudence, moderation and kindness, the qualities essential to his success. Life can be beautiful for its grace and goodness as well as for its strength and accomplishments.

We should find comfort in the thought that happiness, though it may be menaced and buffeted by many forces, is saved by hope. Everyone has, or may attain, the faculty of making use of what befalls. If we can say at the end of a day that it was not an empty, not a lost day, and that we are glad to be alive because tomorrow is coming, is that, perhaps, happiness?