

Resolutions for Happiness

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Why does it often seem so hard to be happy? Can't we just cross over to the sunny side of the street? Sometimes it seems as though trying to be happy is like jumping from the roof of a burning building onto a blanket that's being held by several people. The urgency is certainly there. We want to escape the burning building of unhappiness. But what is it that we're leaping toward? That postage stamp of a blanket way down there? Can we actually hit the target when we jump? If we're lucky, maybe those holding the blanket will be able to move to catch us without tripping over their feet or arguing over which way to go.

It's great to have a goal, a target to aim for. But how will we know when we've been successful? Most of the time we're just aiming at a vaguely pleasant fantasy the details of which might or might not actually lead to or follow from happiness. The Greek philosophers believed it was their job to explain happiness and make it possible to hit the target. But they defined happiness quite differently than we do in our culture.

The Greek aphorism, "Call no man happy who is still alive," is so far from our point of view that it seems absurd. But for them happiness wasn't a state as much as a status, the evaluation of a life as good. And for them, you didn't know how a life turned out until you knew how it ended.

Aristotle sought to move beyond this belief, exploring the nature of happiness and the way to its realization. He saw happiness as the natural goal and purpose of human life, calling it an "activity of the soul expressing virtue." He defined happiness as

"Prosperity combined with virtue; or as an independence of life; or as the secure enjoyment of the maximum of pleasure, or as a good condition of property and body, together with the power of guarding one's property and body and making use of them..."

"From this definition of happiness it follows that its constituent parts are: good birth, plenty of friends, good friends,

wealth, good children, plenty of children, a happy old age, also such bodily excellences as health, beauty, strength, large stature, athletic powers, together with fame, honor, good luck and virtue.”

What Aristotle gains in precision he loses in practicality. Each requirement narrows the field to an increasingly smaller group of potentially happy people. Finally, when you include luck as a factor, you find that the fickle finger of fate falls on everyone sooner or later. Aristotle’s happiness, while clearly articulated, is essentially impossible to achieve.

The ancient Hebrews took a different approach to happiness, ascribing it as an article in their covenant with God, who guarantees their security and prosperity as long as they fulfill their side of the bargain. This can help take the sting out of misfortune by calling it justice. If you believe this, you can praise and thank God even while you suffer. Of course, it wasn’t always clear just who had violated which article of the covenant – consider the story of Jonah.

We’ve all heard about Jonah and the whale, but do you remember how the story started? God told Jonah to go to the city of Nineveh and warn them of the error of their ways. Jonah said, “No way,” and ran away to where he thought God couldn’t find him. He took a boat across the Mediterranean to Egypt. But as soon as they were out of sight of land, they were struck by a great storm. While Jonah slept in his cabin, the crew tried to figure out whose fault the storm was. Baffled, they rolled dice to find out who was at fault (games of chance were seen as a way for God to speak in those days), and the dice told them it was Jonah. They went below, woke him up, and he confessed that he was running from God, and told them to throw him overboard for their own safety. They didn’t want to kill him, though, and tried to outrun the storm. When that failed, they reluctantly threw Jonah overboard and the storm stopped immediately. Oh yeah, and the fish ate Jonah – but that’s a story for another day.

This may seem odd to us, but this reasoning helped the Hebrews to feel safe. They knew that well being was a result of their covenant and if things went badly, at least it was someone’s fault.

Although early Christians found happiness here and now in this world, about a thousand years ago they began a shift toward the view that happiness was

unavailable in this life and moved it to the afterlife where a heaven of eternal happiness was the reward for their faith.

None of this seems very likely to help us reach our goal of happiness. Maybe it would be useful to define the target with a little more precision. One of our prevailing definitions seems to be happiness is comfort and pleasure. We're all pretty much primed to aim at this target: if it feels good, do it. This makes an attractive target – we don't just aim at it, we're pulled toward it by desire. But this particular blanket might not be ready to cushion our fall; it might just be lying on the ground. The wisdom of the ages says that this goal is a false one. We can hit it, all right, but it will hurt.

Aristotle and the Greeks were united in at least one belief about happiness: it was unavailable to those who were motivated by desire.

The Buddha said that desire was always going to lead to unhappiness because it is the nature of life to want things we can't have and to get things we don't want.

Even our own experience teaches us that living from satisfaction to satisfaction is unfulfilling. Peaks are meaningless without valleys in between. We've got to be hungry before we can enjoy eating, and hunger is not a pleasant sensation. Even the most dedicated hedonist has to come to terms with delayed gratification.

Happiness's quandaries have become significantly less confusing with the development of Positive Psychology by Martin Seligman and others. They've done a great deal of research into the nature and achievability of happiness. The results are pretty interesting.

For example, money can't buy happiness. Winning the lottery doesn't make people happier. Once you attain a basic level of prosperity, roughly \$50,000 a year family income, further wealth has no impact on happiness. It's interesting that we can believe that we're happier than we are. I was in my forties before I realized I had an unhappy childhood. The majority of Americans think that Californians are happier than the rest of us. They are not. Californians incorrectly think they're happier, too. The happiest Americans live in Kentucky, Tennessee and Mississippi. Go figure.

Seligman has discerned three components of happiness: pleasure and comfort (the “smiley face” piece), engagement (the depth of involvement with one’s family, work, romance and hobbies) and meaning (using personal strengths to serve some larger end). Of these three roads to a happy, satisfied life, pleasure is the least consequential. This is newsworthy because so many Americans build their lives around pursuing pleasure. It turns out that engagement and meaning are much more important.”

Here are eight tips guaranteed to increase your happiness, courtesy of psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky:

1. Count your blessings. One way to do this is to keep a “gratitude journal” in which you write down three to five things for which you are currently thankful – from the mundane (your peonies are in bloom) to the magnificent (a child’s first steps). Do this once a week, say, on Sunday night. Keep it fresh by varying your entries as much as possible.

2. Practice acts of kindness. These should be both random (let that harried mom go ahead of you in the checkout line) and systematic (bring Sunday supper to an elderly neighbor). Being kind to others, whether friends or strangers, triggers a cascade of positive effects – it makes you feel generous and capable, gives you a greater sense of connection with others and wins you smiles, approval and reciprocated kindness – all happiness boosters.

3. Savor life’s joy. Pay close attention to momentary pleasures and wonders. Focus on the sweetness of a ripe strawberry or the warmth of the sun when you step out from the shade. Some psychologists suggest taking “mental photographs” of pleasurable moments to review in less happy times.

4. Thank a mentor. If there’s someone whom you owe a debt of gratitude for guiding you at one of life’s crossroads, don’t wait to express your appreciation – in detail and, if possible, in person.

5. Learn to forgive. Let go of anger and resentment by writing a letter of forgiveness to a person who has hurt or wronged you. Inability to forgive is associated with persistent rumination or dwelling on revenge, while forgiving allows you to move on.

6. Invest time and energy in friends and family. Where you live, how much money you make, your job title and even your health have surprisingly small effects on your satisfaction with life. The biggest factor appears to be strong personal relationships.

7. Take care of your body. Getting plenty of sleep, exercising, stretching, smiling and laughing can all enhance your mood in the short term. Practiced regularly, they can help make your daily life more satisfying.

8. Develop strategies for coping with stress and hardships. There is no avoiding hard times. Religious faith has been shown to help people cope, but so do the secular beliefs enshrined in axioms like “This too shall pass” and “That which doesn’t kill me makes me stronger.” The trick is that you have to believe them.

I’d like to return now to Seligman’s three components of happiness: one, pleasure and comfort (the “smiley face” piece); two, engagement (the depth of involvement with one’s family, work, romance and hobbies); and 3, meaning (using personal strengths to serve some larger end). We noted that component number one, pleasure and comfort, was the least of these. That’s an incredibly powerful understanding, especially when we realize that almost all our irritations, annoyances, and angers derive from either failing to feel comfortable or blaming someone else for making us uncomfortable.

It’s also the only one of the three that is not under our own control! Others may be able to influence our level of comfort or pleasure, but engagement and meaning are entirely up to us. How odd is that the principal indicators most of us use to measure unhappiness – irritation, annoyance, or anger – do nothing of the sort? They just basically measure how dependent our happiness is on factors beyond our control – how we have failed to take responsibility for our happiness.

Last fall we had a New Minister Start-Up Retreat. It was well attended and yielded many valuable insights, but the most important was probably the degree to which people told each other what they valued, what they wanted from themselves and each other. This kind of communication that builds community, that builds the basis for Seligman’s factors number two and three: engagement in

depth with the people and communities in your life in service of something greater than ourselves.

In fact, given that the two most powerful factors in actual happiness are depth of engagement and meaning, our church is revealed as a powerful resource for the creation of happiness.

But we have to actually engage with our church in order for this to work. And in order to be able to engage, we need to be able to trust one another in community. We need to be able to feel safe here.

Trust is a big issue. On the second day of the retreat, church leaders were asked to tell each other what they needed from each other and what they would promise in return. The responses were both specific and diverse. Almost everybody wanted something different, but at the same time, they all wanted to feel safe, that they could trust one another. There also emerged a broad consensus in favor of a congregational covenant that could serve as the basis for that trust.

Trust can be a complex issue, especially when we have different expectations for how we and others should behave in community. Our expectations can be like those little blankets we contemplate from the burning buildings of our irritation and anger. How can we leap to safety onto a blanket unless we know it is being securely held?

Our acceptance of individual autonomy and diversity of belief can also create a situation in which trust is impossible. We can't trust each other unless we know what we expect of each other.

In order for this to be a truly happy new year, I invite you all to consider the meaning of membership in the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley. Some of us come in the spirit of a consumer mentality: we want to get something and we're angry or disappointed if we don't get it. This is living by Seligman's first factor, pleasure and comfort. If this is what church means to us, we have failed to appreciate its real value, its power to help us to grow into more complete, fulfilled human beings. It's like using a gold bar as a paper weight.

What does it mean to be a member of this church? Could it mean we have a responsibility to set aside personal agendas and come to an agreement about how we behave and what we expect from one another?

When we know what is expected of us and what to expect of others, we can begin to trust. We can begin to build a truly beloved community. But trust must come first.

An important first step to creating a foundation for trust is finding a way to agree on what church is for. Why church? A church can do many things, serve many needs, accomplish many things. People may favor one or several of these. But it's important to find the root usefulness of a church, the source of its energy and power that makes everything else possible.

This morning I invite you to consider that the purpose for church is to help us to grow, to grow into more complete, fulfilled human beings. This includes loving compassion, responsible stewardship, social justice, religious education, and more. These are all means of growth. There are many ways to pursue these ends in our society without transformative personal and relational growth at their root – these ways are not religious, they are not church.

We should do all these things, but as a means for growth. Since growth is change, membership would mean an acceptance of change, some of which would probably be uncomfortable.

Membership would also mean engagement. Just showing up is not engagement. Members would give of themselves in the form of time, talent and treasure to deepen their engagement with the church. Engagement means deepening relationships, more than just an hour on Sunday morning.

And membership would be meaningful. We explore the depths as we support one another in the responsible search for truth and meaning. Since there are important forms of truth and meaning that are beyond the grasp of reason and language, membership must ultimately rest on the bosom on the great unanswerable mysteries of life.

This year I offer you a powerful resolution to explore the meaning of membership in this community of faith. What does it mean to you and how can this congregation come to a clear and shared understanding of that meaning?

Engage with time, talent, and treasure. And quest for deeper meaning and trust with an open heart as well as an open mind. There is treasure. There is treasure here.

The Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley can offer the key to happiness, to the transformation of individuals and society, if you will only pick it up, place it in the lock and turn it.

That key is trust.

CLOSING WORDS

(Erik Walker Wikstrom)

If you are who you were, we have failed

If you are who you were,
and if the person next to you is who he or she was,
if none of us have changed
since the [moment] we came in here –
we have failed

The purpose of this community –
of any church, temple zendo, mosque –
is to help its people grow.

We do this through encounters with the unknown – in ourselves,
in one another,
in “The Other” – whoever that might be for us,
however hard that might be –
because these encounters have many gifts to offer.

So may you go forth from here this morning
not who you were,
vut who you could be

So may we all.