

The Happiness Factor

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Epiphany IV**

**Psalm 1
John 15:9–12**

Have you noticed that happiness is all the rage? Everyone is talking about it. We have histories of happiness, surveys of happiness, philosophies of happiness, and now, even, I have to confess, a theology of happiness, or to be more precise an ethics of happiness.

It seems that the more we talk about it the more difficult happiness is to define. One of its leading proponents—who is not a proponent of happiness?—Daniel Gilbert, a Harvard social psychologist, popularized happiness research for a general audience in his book *Stumbling on Happiness* but never offered a clear definition. He treated happiness as a constellation of ephemeral moments of pleasant feelings stimulated by things like eating Godiva chocolates, seeing your new granddaughter smile at you, smelling your lover's shampoo, directing a tourist to the museum, and yes, recreational cocaine-snorting.

We are inundated with happiness talk. Undergraduates take courses on how to be happy. Social scientists make up questionnaires ranking people by how happy they are. Happiness hits on the internet run in the hundreds of thousands. Governments are seeking policy recommendations from psychologists and sociologists on how to direct government programs to raise the happiness quotient of their people. There is even a *Journal of Happiness Studies* based in the Netherlands now in its second decade. Recent studies show that wealth is not the best indicator of happiness: health, safety, and strong social relationships are equally important. At some point, money is not enough to make us happy.

To sort through this plethora of ideas on happiness, some researchers distinguish hedonic notions of happiness from eudaemonic ones. Both words come from the Greek: hedonia meaning pleasure and eudaemonia meaning flourishing. So, Daniel Gilbert's focus on passing pleasant feelings is a hedonic take on happiness—it comes and goes with the passing experience—while the scales to measure subjective well-being (or SWB as the social scientists put it) are a eudaemonic perspective. Whether a life is a happy one is a considered judgment that accounts for the quality of a whole life.

There is so much talk of happiness that we now inevitably have a growing anti-happiness literature. Happiness is overrated, or unreliable. As one man said to me walking past me after a lecture I once gave on the topic: “there are more important things to think about.” Well it is true that there are more important things to think about, but the topic has rarely been out of reach, even in times when we are out of touch with what we are looking for. Ancient moral philosophy was all over the topic. Aristotle wrote the most important treatise on happiness, but the Platonists also had something to say on it as did Epicurus,

and the stoics. They were all offering visions of the happy life, even though they disagreed on how to achieve it.

Christians have too-often relegated happiness to the heavenly hereafter on the grounds that life is hard and precarious, something to be got through. Heaven became the light at the end of the tunnel because passing feelings, and the good fortune needed for flourishing were deemed to be too adventitious, too unreliable to put much trust in. Still, two of the most important Christian theologians of all time, Augustine and Aquinas, both wrote treatises on the topic and references to happiness appear throughout their voluminous writings.

Be that as it may, before I knew much about the current happiness industry, an event in my life brought me up short. It was like a movie. One day my husband, having never been sick a day in his life—not even a common cold—developed a pain in his right clavicle. Three weeks later the oncologist said he had only palliative treatment to offer us. Eight months after that my beloved companion and friend of 40 years was dead at the age of 57. In my destitution, I struggled to ask if I could ever be happy again. Thrashing around I turned to the Bible and there I read Psalm 1:

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. They succeed in all that they do. (Ps 1.13).

Happiness, psalm 1 says, comes from within not from without as Gilbert holds. It comes from the way one lives one's life not what happens along the way. This is Aristotle's point. Further, psalm 1 offers guidance for how to go about living well, even excellently. The law of the Lord is the way to a successful life. Indeed, my husband had lived just such a life, and I had said to him that although the cancer might kill him it could not harm him. For he walked the way of the righteous of psalm 1. And so, a year later when I had his stone carved, I had written on it psalm 15.1–2: "O Lord, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy mountain? Those who walk blamelessly, live justly, and speak the truth from their heart."

I kept rummaging through the Bible and among many other clues to happiness that I found there, the notion of eternal life that I found in John's Gospel stood out. I suppose that like many people I had always thought that eternal life meant to refer me to some other world, some other life beyond this one that had about it some kind of alluring glow and where I didn't have to do anything anymore. But as I sank into the text of John I saw that eternal life was about this life. Like psalm 1, it too was about a way of being in the world, but it was also about a way of knowing the world: "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (Jn 17.3). The eternal life offered through receiving Jesus as sent by his Father to bring us into union with them both was a way of seeing the world outward from the unity of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. That is, eternal life is dwelling richly in the word that Jesus brings of his Father; it is dwelling in the love that binds them together, along with the HS, the triune God and living from and through that love.

Well, so then I had these and more cuttings lying on the floor in my study: happiness is delighting in the law of God; eternal life is dwelling in the love that Jesus brings from God the Father and sending it back out into the world through the quality of our loving. And to that he adds something that seems both to pull these two very different texts together and concretize the Johannine teaching: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 15:9–12).

From these fragments, I designed a Johannine trinitarian ethics of happiness that goes something like this. Happiness is abiding in the love that binds us to the love of Jesus and God the Father for one another so that we love one another as they do and we learn to love ever better by loving and being loved by them. That is, happiness is loving as God loves—that is, well.

Well, loving well is not easy as I suspect you have discovered. Stuff gets in the way. We get in the way of loving well. Loving well requires the right moment, the right skills, the right resources, the right touch. But when we manage it we sparkle. There are times when we get it just right, and when that happens whatever we have managed to love just right, our garden, our pet, our work, our friend, our child, our spouse, our parent sparkles too, even if only in a limited way and even if only for a moment. And that is a hedonic experience. Now, my thought about these sparkling moments is that I believe we can grow them. That is, when we sparkle by loving well a little bit of that sparkle sticks to us. That is, we learn something from it because we have a sense of accomplishment. That little bit of sparkle encourages us to think that we might love well another time, in another setting caring for another little speck of God’s creation. That is, loving well builds our hope and confidence that “God’s power working through us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine” as Ephesians 3.20 puts it. It begets itself so to speak. I call this proper Christian self-love.

So now, like so many academics, I had constructed a theoretical model but could it work? I looked around and found some examples. One is pretty trivial. Eva, a math teacher, was driving on a city street during rush hour. As she approached an intersection, an obviously lost dog was wandering in the street amid the cars on their way. She pulled over and approached the dog. He was collared but had no identifying tag. Unsure of what to do, she called her husband for advice and he suggested calling the animal rescue squad. She was not satisfied with that, sensing that the dog lived near-by and was confused. Grabbing his collar, she started walking the dog around the neighborhood. Eventually, the dog began heading on his own and went directly to his house. When the family opened the door, they were overjoyed with cries of ‘where have you been?’ and so on. At that point, the dog turned to Eva, happily licking and jumping on her in thanksgiving.

The incident was rewarding, and it strengthened Eva’s confidence in serving God well as psalm 1 would have us do. She was slightly inconvenienced by the dog, but that mattered little in the face of her success. She was pleased and could count it as overall gain. She experienced momentary pleasure, and because the incident increased her self-confidence

and went into the store of experiences that constitutes her personal strength, the momentary pleasure joined with a deeper eudaemonic happiness. In being obedient to God, she was being the person God calls her to be. Being obedient to God is being obedient to herself and this is enduringly pleasing.

My other example is the story of a Donald, a lifer. God called Nancy and her husband Bob to care for a floundering abused inner-city child, when he was 6 years old. Despite their extensive care including taking him into their home, after Bob died when Donald was 11, the boy fell apart. He eventually murdered Nancy when he was 16 in the course of taking money from her that she had set aside for him. He is now serving a life sentence. After the murder, Barbara, who had known Donald since he was 11, read Matthew 25.36: "I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me" and was called to complete Nancy's unfinished work of rescuing one child.

The work has been discouraging and rewarding by turns over the past 20 years. Over his years of incarceration, remarkably—given administrative corruption and the negative influence of prison life—Donald has been inching toward the repair of the shattered image of God that he had become. Slowly he is separating himself from the destructive yet emotionally satisfying patterns of lethal behavior that both his original and current circumstances keep before him. It is terribly trying for him but, although society has let him go, God has not.

He is now Barbara's son and she is his mother. Barbara's support has been costly. It took years to gain Donald's trust. He told her half-truths (partly because he cannot speak freely on the phone), wangled money to pay illegal prison debts, was cited for various infractions of prison rules, got into fights with inmates and officers and repeatedly failed to act on his own behalf. Yet, over time, the joy and pleasure from the relationship have outweighed the frustration, for it has honed Barbara's ability to love more effectively.

There have been flashes of momentary elation when together Donald and Barbara celebrate his progress. Barbara's happiness comes from being an agent of love. Through their relationship, the divine image is being restored in both of them. They have learned just how tender love is and how costly distorted love is. They have learned that Christ's wounds are his power to heal others. Donald had to be broken of his self-pity seeing himself only as a victim. Barbara had to work past her exalted "messiah complex" and be purged of self-congratulation at her "do-gooding." so that her ministry could become proper Christian self-love in being the midwife of Christ's healing power to destroy Donald's savagery and bring life from death.

Well, by now you realize that I know these people very well. So, now, look around your life and find where it sparkles with Christian self-love that enables you to love beautifully and wisely. And then find where other people's lives sparkle because they are obedient to God and walk in the love of Jesus and God the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit.