

Order of Service
The Happiness Formula
April 11, 2010

Call to Worship and Chalice Lighting

Sometimes, on days when we are low,
Or in weeks that sometimes drag to months,
A simple smile is enough.
For a second your eyes take mine
And your face opens,
And I am called from my depths
To return your greeting,
A shy smile gracing even my own care-worn face.
Then, warmed by your presence,
I am grateful for this quiet moment
Of pure radiance.
Thus do we worship together.

Story for All Ages

Rev. Bruce Davis

Form an arch for the children as they go to their classes.
Sing and rejoice. Sing and rejoice.
Let all things living now sing and rejoice. (4X)

Meditation and Prayer

Winding our way from the noisesome activities of our lives,
Back through the thoughts and concerns of our days,
Back through the field of our lively emotions, and
Back even through quieter feelings,

The subtlety of contentment.
Back finally to the silence itself,
The still core of our Being.

(Silence)

And then we return, having dipped our bucket at the well,
Ready to pour peace and joy
Back into our lives.

Amen.

Readings

“Finding Happiness,” by the Dalai Lama

If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.

Consider the following. We humans are social beings. We come into the world as the result of others' actions. We survive here in dependence on others. Whether we like it or not, there is hardly a moment of our lives when we do not benefit from others' activities. For this reason it is hardly surprising that most of our happiness arises in the context of our relationships with others.

Happiness is determined more by the state of one's mind than by one's external conditions, circumstances or events- at least once one's basic survival needs are met.

Happiness can be achieved through the systematic training of our hearts and minds, through reshaping our attitudes and outlook.

As long as there is a lack of the inner discipline that brings calmness of mind, no matter what external facilities or conditions you have, they will never give you the feeling of joy and happiness that you are seeking. On the other hand, if you possess this inner quality, a calmness of mind, a degree of stability within, then even if you lack various external facilities that you would normally consider necessary for happiness, it is still possible to live a happy and joyful life.

“To a Skylark,” by William Wordsworth

To A Skylark

William Wordsworth

UP with me! up with me into the clouds!
For thy song, Lark, is strong;
Up with me, up with me into the clouds!
Singing, singing,
With clouds and sky about thee ringing,
Lift me, guide me till I find
That spot which seems so to thy mind!

I have walked through wildernesses dreary
And to-day my heart is weary;
Had I now the wings of a Faery,
Up to thee would I fly.
There is madness about thee, and joy divine
In that song of thine;
Lift me, guide me high and high
To thy banqueting-place in the sky.

Joyous as morning
Thou art laughing and scorning;
Thou hast a nest for thy love and thy rest,
And, though little troubled with sloth,
Drunken Lark! thou would'st be loth
To be such a traveller as I.
Happy, happy Liver,
With a soul as strong as a mountain river
Pouring out praise to the ... Almighty Giver,
Joy and jollity be with us both!

Alas! my journey, rugged and uneven,
Through prickly moors or dusty ways must wind;
But hearing thee, or others of thy kind,
As full of gladness and as free of heaven,
I, with my fate contented, will plod on,
And hope for higher raptures, when life's day is done.

I begin today with a reality. We are not all happy. And none of us is always happy. I will be talking today about a Happiness Formula. That's like saying there's a *route* up Mount Everest. It still takes a lot of work to get there. For some, sadness or depression is a reality in their lives, and at times, happiness is only a relative term. Happier today than yesterday. So when I indicate that we *can* work toward happiness in our lives and we *can* be successful in the endeavor, I am not glibly maintaining that by following the directions on the back of the cereal box we will all be happy tomorrow. What I do hope for, in my own life, is a continuing commitment and a steady practice toward *more* happiness.

My wife, Mary, enjoyed working with youth at the University Unitarian Church in Seattle. One of her specialties was to work with high school youth on our fourth principle, the search for truth and meaning, and to this end she adapted our wonderful Build Your Own Theology curriculum to the needs of those at the brink of their adult years.

In one particularly meaningful session, after each person had shared a personal statement of purpose, the youth got into a conversation aimed at determining what life is fundamentally about. At the end of their passionate conversation there was unanimity among these wise, young seers. When all was said and done, *happiness* prevailed among them as the single most important purpose in life.

We who have weathered many more decades would do well to open our ears to the wisdom of our youth. With the passing years other priorities and other habits overwhelm the simpler values of a good life. Such tasks as preparing for a career, getting a job, supporting a family, striving for abundance, taking care of all the stuff we accumulate, seeking comfort and saving the world all take our time and attention through the passing years of adulthood. The risk is that we may forget how essential simple happiness is as a foundation for everything else.

Our youth are not alone in this assessment. The great spiritual teachers of the world emphasize that happiness is central to spiritual awakening. Meher Baba, realized saint of Islam and Sufism, offers as one of his central teachings the simple dictum, "Don't worry, be happy." Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, world-wide teacher of meditation and guru to the Beatles, indicates that "the happy

person is doing his share for world peace.” The Dalai Lama exhorts us to embrace happiness as our foremost spiritual purpose, as *the* necessary step before we can begin to share kindness and compassion effectively toward others. Even as revered a saint as Alfred E. Newman, of *Mad Magazine* fame, says, “What, me worry?”

There is a powerful practice formula taught especially by the Buddhist teachers that can expand our experience of happiness. It begins by sitting comfortably, closing the eyes lightly, and bringing up an image of our own face, smiling and happy. Then, silently to yourself repeat the wish or intention, “May I be healthy. May I be peaceful. May all my good purposes be fulfilled.” Don’t just do this mechanically. Actually intend it to be so, and feel the feelings of that intention. The next step is to apply the formula to a dear and respected teacher or mentor in your life. Then to a close friend. Then to a neutral person you know of but don’t know personally. And finally apply the practice to a person you find to be hostile or difficult. Carry on the process perhaps half an hour daily to begin. The key is to keep at it!

The meditation does two things. First, it enlivens the intention that you have for your own well-being and happiness. Imagine falling in love with yourself. Imagine calling yourself “dear” or “cherished.” But the second movement of this meditation is even more powerful. Wishing or intending beneficence to others during the practice, even enemies, brings up a well-spring of happiness from within.

When I think of a happy person, my Grandfather, David Lyle Davis comes immediately to mind. His life was far from easy, filled as it was by two wars and a great depression. He came from simple folk in Nebraska, and he had to work for every penny he got. Nor was his relationship with my grandmother a piece of cake. Somehow her primary life-orientation was much more driven than his. Achievement, especially her husband’s achievement, was a continuing pressure for her, and of course she put this pressure on him, as well. He worked in a bank, and my grandmother wanted him to be a bank president. Gramps was just not interested. He spent more time mentoring other younger bankers to their career achievements than ensuring his own success. He looked forward to the time in the evening when he could be in his garden for a couple of hours, and he looked forward to retirement when he could be in his garden all day.

Retired during the years I knew him, Gramps loved the time he spent outside. I would work in the yard next to him or sit down by the lake and listen to his stories while he smoked his corn-cob pipe, a holdover from his life in Nebraska. He seemed to me near imperturbable. He seemed happy almost all the time.

When I stayed overnight at my grandparents' nearby home, I remember the mantra he always gave as the last word before we tumbled into sleep. "Wake up in the morning, smiling and happy." One year, as a young adult coming home for the holidays, I arrived at my parents house for dinner. I knocked on the door, and Gramps opened the door wide. I noticed that he had aged dramatically since I had seen him last, and in his senility he didn't recognize me. His words of greeting, a big smile on his face, were these: "I don't know who in the world you are, but it's Christmas. I'm happy to see you. Come on in!"

It's as if Gramps was born happy. It was as if he had a set point in his nervous system that ensured simple contentment, in spite of the obvious challenges that war and poverty had presented.

Honestly, I think I got more of my grandmother's set point, being as I am somewhat more driven and having a penchant to worry about things. Don't get me wrong, I like happiness! I turn towards it whenever I remember to do so. It's just that sometimes I forget. I have to work at it more than Gramps ever did.

When I was in India for three weeks, I had the opportunity to spend hours in meditation and quiet contemplation. I ambled daily along the Ganges, a simple walking meditation, noticing the happy children playing on the shore, observing the life of the people, avoiding the cows, smelling the wildflowers, and putting my feet into the clear, cold river. I was sensing a lot, but thinking less than any other time in my life. Just hanging out. Just being there.

I noticed when I came back home to the Northwest how light my life was. My marriage, my family, my relationship with this beloved community, and even my relationship with my own self was light and happy. For several days I went through the dance of my life as it is reflecting on how wonderful it was and how few problems I faced. I was, quite simply, happy.

It was in about the second week that I noticed a shift. It wasn't my life situation that changed but my relationship to it. I found myself slipping into seriousness, getting heavier, and *letting things bother me* that in themselves were of no real significance. Like feeling my anger rise against the weather because my lettuce starts would be nipped by the frost. Like interpreting someone's words as if they were negative, when no negativity was

even intended. Honestly it was like shadows slipping out from the dark corners of my own mind, robbing me of the simple happiness I was enjoying.

Please notice that I *noticed* this process taking place. This is so key. So often the stress in our lives slips in without our awareness, depleting our well being for no reason we can determine. When we are able to *notice* ourselves slipping into a negative state of mind or when we notice that our own shadows are beginning to cloud the world we are seeing, we can respond accordingly. The awareness itself is healing.

For me the greatest gift of spiritual retreat, like my recent time in India, is not so much the *happiness itself* that fills me, though that's surely a wonderful thing. The greatest gift is the expansion of the *awareness*, the capacity to *notice* more, and more subtly, the inner and outer processes of my life. The more I can notice the blocks to happiness as they arise, and the sooner I can identify the stress that's coming up for me, the more they will simply dissolve, making space for happiness to flow in once again. The key here is noticing how much that negates my happiness comes from my own mind.

The spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle uses the term "pain body" to talk about the stressful mental conditioning that we bring to our present experience. Without awareness, the amalgamated stresses of our past will emerge as inner and outer discontent. We will feel that stress and think it's coming only from our present challenges. Tolle suggests that we bring awareness to the pain body, not pushing it away or pretending it isn't there, but instead noticing it, feeling it, bringing presence to it, and transforming it into useful and positive life energy. According to Tolle, the resolution of stress will happen without much effort if we have worked on expanding our capacity for awareness, allowing the happiness to shine through more of the time.

Human happiness has been evaluated extensively in scientific studies. I anticipate that continuing research will help us to understand this at times underrated aspect of our existence. The happy person may live about nine years longer than the unhappy one, according to some research. The things that we think might increase happiness, like more wealth, often don't. And some activities we do for the sake of our happiness, like more TV time, actually increase unhappiness.

The research of Peter Cohen is particularly interesting as we try to understand happiness more scientifically. His work has been picked up by spiritual teachers like the Dalai Lama and Deepak Chopra who are known to integrate modern scientific understanding with ancient wisdom.

According to Cohen, happiness is a function of three things:

- The first is the happiness *set point*. That refers to the personal characteristics of nature and nurture, especially genetics and early childhood experiences. It has to do with the conditioning of our lives, mentally and biologically. According to the research, the happiness *set point* accounts for about 43% of a person's ability to be happy. This is like the difference between my Grandfather, David, and my grandmother. His set point for happiness was, at an early age, established at a higher level than my grandmother.
- The second factor has to do with the on-going conditions of living that we have, such as health, financial position, community, and friendships. What is remarkable in the research is that this factor only accounts for about 7% of our happiness. The research shows that happiness is more what we *bring to* our ongoing life situation, rather than our life situation bringing happiness to us.
- The third factor has to do with voluntary actions we take in the world. Short term actions that lead to pleasurable outcomes are surely a factor in our happiness. But even more important are long term actions that lead to meaning and higher purpose, especially actions taken to provide health and happiness to other persons. This factor accounts for about 50% of the happiness that comes to us.

To some extent our tendency is to be misguided in this formula. When we spend huge life energy on the second factor, trying to change our life situation, we don't end up having the impact on happiness that we hoped for. A new house, a high paying job, or social status don't really correlate with happiness. It does help, however, if basic needs are met, but happy people in poverty throughout the world reveal that people who actually have very little are at the same time very happy.

One thing that many of us have discovered, and this is true in the wisdom traditions of the world, as well, anything we can do for the well-being and happiness of others has a powerful impact on our own lives. The more directly hands-on you can be in rendering service toward another person's benefit, the more deeply will arise that simple happiness from within yourself.

But what about that third factor: the *set point*. It accounts for about half of our happiness level. Can we reach back to our earliest years and change how we were impacted by the challenges of childhood experiences? Can we reach into the DNA and shift those genetic factors? If we could, we would be able to help a morose Eeyore, in Milne's *Winne the Pooh*, become more like his jovial and bouncy friend, Tigger. Well, the research here is interesting! It says we can!

We *can* change our life-long habitual responses. It takes courage and practice, but the research shows that the fundamental set point can be altered if we really work on it.

The approach here is twofold. First is to attend to the habitual behaviors that we have in response to early life experiences. Even emotional reactions are in themselves measurable behaviors that can be modified. The psychology research shows that the Behavioral Cognitive Therapy approach can cause us even to change unhealthy and unhappy patterns of our thinking that go back to early years. One of the foremost self-help teachers in the area of Behavioral Cognitive growth is named Byron Katie. Turns out both Pam Gerke and I have had the chance to work with her directly over the years. What she is enormously good at is helping people identify self-destructive patterns of thinking and feeling that lead to suffering, in turn helping them to free themselves from those patterns. This whole approach deserves more of our attention, and I plan to offer a sermon and a workshop on Byron Katie's work next fall. In the mean time you can learn all you need to know by checking out her website: www.thework.com.

The second approach, taught in virtually every wisdom tradition, is deep meditation. The happiness set point is affected by the practices of meditation, yoga, breathing exercises, and the like, in two distinct but related ways.

On the one hand, dipping into the silence and stillness of pure consciousness increases the awareness that we bring into our active lives. We simply notice more, particularly when our actions may cause unhappiness to ourselves or others. Likewise, we are more awake to actions that may promote our happiness and that of those we encounter.

With the deep rest and body awareness that meditative practices bring, we release the stresses and blocks that cloud our perception. We clear the way

for more simple, more fundamental, and more direct experiences of happiness and contentment.

Frankly, the happiness formula, as it is described by such figures as Chopra and the Dalai Lama, starts sounding a lot like the intentions of Unitarian Universalism. Realizing that the material conditions of our lives are not powerful in the formation of enduring happiness, we seek and find spiritual practices that are uniquely suited to ourselves. Then, we turn our attention to voluntary actions in the world, aiming at the wellbeing and happiness of others. I like the way UU minister Tom Owen-Tolle puts it in the title of one of his popular books, that we are *Freethinking Mystics with Hands*.

Happiness is our birthright, but for most of us we have to work at it a bit. May it be that we find in our lives our own version of the happiness formula: embracing practices that transform us from the ground up, and serving the wellbeing of others in our world in ways that provide deep meaning, purpose, and happiness to our own lives.

Amen.