

PURSUING HAPPINESS    November 26, 2017, presented by the Worship Committee

The Keys to Happiness

by Susan Selbe

I figured out a few decades back that to achieve happiness I needed 3 things--living in a place I love, with a partner I love, working at a job I love. I usually could hit 2 out of 3 of them. Incidentally, I would now add reasonably good health and balanced brain chemistry to that list.

I've recently run into some wisdom about happiness penned by a fellow named Rolf Dobelli and I'm going to quote liberally from his writings in the next few minutes.

The famous investor Warren Buffett asks: "Would you rather be the world's greatest lover, but have everyone think you're the world's worst lover? Or would you rather be the world's worst lover but have everyone think you're the world's greatest lover?"

In other words, does your self-worth come from within or without? The opinions of others are less significant than you think. Whether they're praising you to the skies or dragging your name through the mud, the actual impact on your life is considerably smaller than your pride or sense of shame would have you believe.

So liberate yourself from the opinions of others!! You'll be spared the emotional roller coaster and you'll have a clearer idea of what makes you happy.

My dad used to say worry was humanity's most useless emotion. He usually said this after one of us was late coming in from a date.

Leading a happy life has a lot to do with how we handle our anxieties and worries. Mr. Dobelli advises getting a notebook and titling it My Big Book of Worries. Then every day spend 10" writing down everything that's worrying you, no matter how trivial. Once this is done, theoretically, your day is worry free because you've not ignored them. You will notice your daily list will be largely a repeat of the lists from prior days.

Mr. Dobelli also advises that focused work is the best therapy against brooding. Fulfilling work is better than meditation, or can actually be a sort of meditation. Focusing on work is one of the best distractions from worry, unless one of your worries is how much you hate your work.

After a time, you may come to appreciate Mark Twain's late-in-life insight--"I am an old man and have known a great many troubles, but most of them have never happened."

Six percent of all people who have ever lived in the past 300,000 years are alive right now. There's a 94% chance we could have been born into another era: imagine yourself a slave in the Roman Empire, a geisha during the Ming dynasty, a water carrier in ancient Egypt. What are the chances we would have even had indoor plumbing, not to mention all the incredible comforts we enjoy?

I appreciate that I don't have to get up at 5am to help milk 30 cows, as my dad did from the age of 6. I am so thankful I don't have to clean every cupboard, drawer, nook and cranny every time a dust storm ravaged the land, as his mother had to.

Remember that everything we are, everything we have and can do, is the result of blind chance. And of course, of all the work our predecessors and ancestors did.

Putting our self-worth into perspective, putting our worries into perspective, focusing on work, putting our lives into historical perspective--these are some of Mr. Dobelli's suggestions in pursuing a happy life.

We'd best recognize we've already won the lottery. Even if we've had our fair share of tussles with fate, we must admit we're awfully lucky.

Happiness heals

by Mike Luce

I used to work in community mental health with some of the folks most at risk of re-hospitalization, jail, homelessness, substance abuse. It was a really rewarding career but it also involved being witness to some pretty disturbing stuff on occasion. Tough, demanding job but it fit me like a glove. It also left me a little drained sometimes.

For a long time, Friday evenings were almost sacred for me. The Humble Farmer had a program on MPBN playing jazz. Big band tunes, Django, Stephan Grappelli, stuff that meshes right into my brain and body. I'd be listening to this down in my woodshop at seven, doing my thing.

So here I am, maybe cutting dovetails. Here's the music in the background. Sara Vaughn's just finished caressing some song with that fine, fine voice of hers. Now Humble slaps on some New Orleans jump tune and I'm bouncing around this cramped, dusty shop that looks like Giupetto might be lurking in a corner with a finely honed chisel in my hands. Don't think too long about what a fat old hippy dancing looks like. It isn't pretty but it makes me happy.

Now no matter what I was doing in life, I'd like this stuff, but this was so much more so because of context and that's what I think a lot of happiness is about. Happiness compared to what? If I

didn't get hit by that train I wouldn't be particularly happy unless I'd just jumped off the tracks, but that's a different kind of happy isn't it? That's elated happy. That's whooooo! I'm still here. Listening to Django after a trying week and feeling the stress wash out of me is a whole different thing. That's feeling happy and in harmony with things. That's happiness that heals, which is what I'm talking about.

One of the folks I used to have in my group home was one of the most paranoid guys I ever met, and after 30 years of doing this, that's saying a lot. He lived a lot of his life knowing that he was in danger from all kinds of threats. If I believed what he did I'd be screaming for lawyers guns and money. Somehow, though, he was able to take a break from those thoughts with his magical rocks. Over the years he built up quite a collection. I knew of this guy up here in Portland who ran a gem and mineral shop out of his home. He was one of these older than dirt guys who kept his shop out of love and habit. I brought Sam. This old guy, I wish I could remember his name, pretty soon got the idea about where Sam was coming from and just proceeded to join him. Sam could talk about all of the magical properties of a particular rock to nods and uh huhs. Sam was validated. Something changed.

The rest of us never really saw what Sam saw. He knew that. Now he knew someone else who knew about rocks, who knew what he knew. Sam had always been a little less focused on his fears when messing with his rocks but now, now a real expert acknowledged him and his take on rocks. We were able to go up a couple more times before the shop closed. He gifted Sam with a used tumbler and some supplies. Sam had his own ideas about new and innovative ways to use a tumbler ant that needed a little monitoring but we got through that.

It'd be nice if I could talk about some miracle but what this brought to Sam was a relative happiness. He never got below, call it 'yellow alert' status. But he knew how to polish his rocks and reveal the beauty.

The state Sam achieved in his happy place and the state I achieved in my happy place were far apart but covered the same emotional distance. Taking time to find our happy place isn't going to fix everything, but whatever the load you're carrying in your own life, picking up a little happiness along the way lightens it.

## The List

by John Howard

One way to ponder happiness is to ask, what do people want? I'm going to tell you now. Are you ready? Everybody wants four basic things: they want to be connected to others, to belong; they want to be good at something, to be competent; they want to love and be loved; they

want to have some control over their lives. Four things. Anywhere you find unhappiness, one or more of those things is probably lacking.

I don't really know who thought this up, except that a friend brought it back from a workshop he attended about Motivational Interviewing, and he uses this in his work at the Portland Recovery Community Center on Forest Avenue where I often attend a support group he facilitates.

There is usually lots of healthy debate over this list. Right off someone will say, what about basic needs like shelter and food? How can you talk about happiness in the absence of those? And yet people with all the luxuries can be miserable while some people seem to be happy with a lot less than is optimal. The injustice behind the scarcity is the problem, but that is dealt with in the idea of having control.

People tend to have their favorites. One person says she needs more belonging, that this is what is missing most in her life. Well, for me, I've got this church and other affiliations besides – I've been very lucky that way. My problem has been giving away control by allowing others too much power. Working on assertiveness has been the challenge, and also changing bad habits such as procrastination and clutter, which have often left me feeling overwhelmed and frustrated.

You see, there's usually work involved once a lack in one of these has been identified. Love may be the toughest, and many need to work hard to heal old wounds, though Cupid can sometimes intervene here in a serendipitous way. I like the one about having something you're good at. The trick there may be really believing it, or finding the context for it where it is appreciated and needed. I worked for years in an office setting doing something I wasn't very good at, and I'm awfully glad I'm doing something with my hands now instead. Belonging can be tough for people who always feel disappointed by others – maybe this is low self-esteem in disguise. I could do a whole reflection on control, pointing to run-away consumerism, all the role models we have for out-of-control behavior, and the acceleration of the rate of change, especially the technological variety. Getting off the corporate merry-go-round, turning off the TV, a yoga and meditation practice – these are things that are helping many of us regain a sense of control, and with that, something even more important: hope.

Anyway, take this list home with you and play with it a little. I think it can be a useful tool for increasing happiness in our lives. And isn't it nice that we have A2U2 as a place where we can practice it; love, connection, appreciation for a job well done, and gaining a sense of control through small steps towards a better world.

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Thomas Jefferson

This is of course, from the Second paragraph of the declaration of independence written by Thomas Jefferson in 1776. It seems to me to be a very like Maslow's hierarchy of needs with the pursuit of happiness coming third. Maslow, the famous American psychologist, taught that as the world comes safer and our basic needs for food, shelter and family are met, our aims turn to fulfillment of the needs of the self. He called these self-esteem and self-actualization.

There is something that's true for everyone in this room.

We all want to be happy, although what happiness means is different from one person to another. We know from personal experience and scientific research confirms that having more stuff does not bring happiness. Researcher Nancy Etcaff states that we are "wired to pursue happiness". This in part explains the explosion of a drug seeking culture. People take drugs because they want to experience happiness. Like obtaining obtaining stuff, drug use does not result in lasting happiness. But what is happiness anyway? For the purpose of this discussion I will define it as positive emotions such as pleasure compassion gratitude. Research has shown that being in the natural world can restore happiness. This is called being biopics. People who have experienced a major change in their worldview, which affected a positive value shift, generated a list what was important both before and after this attitude change.

Etcaff's research has found that while originally people felt that family, independence, career, fitting in, attractiveness, knowledge, self-control, to be loved, happiness and wealth were paramount in their lives. After a quantum changes, such recovery from depression, the values listed shifted to: growth, self-esteem, spirituality, Happiness, generosity, personal peace, honesty, forgiveness, health and creativity. What is consistent and both lists is happiness. So we know what we want but how to get there? Matt Killingsworth has said being happy means staying in the moment. This means being fully present and to being engaged. Through Killingsworth studies he has shown that there is a correlation between mind wandering and happiness. When a person's mind is wandering and we are less focused we are less happy. When we are fully engaged in the present and focused we are happier. Thus, the more the mind wanders in and the less happy we feel. I can relate to this personally when I think back to being in grade school. I believe I spent more than the average amount of time looking out the window my mind wandering. When asked a question pointedly by a teacher I had no idea what she was talking about. I felt board and Unhappy.

Research Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi as written about being in "the flow." He states "Any living thing feels most fully alive when they can express who they are. When we are fully expressing

our moral, physical, artistic self you experience something that makes life matter. That state can be called the flow.”

He also says that this can easily be achieved and happens when we sing dance or engage in sports but could also happen when we work read or have a great conversation with someone.

For me being in Flow happens most easily and most consistently when I’m singing with the group of people like the choir here at church. Learning how to read musical notes, understanding rhythm, working on creating a harmonious balanced sound with others requires my full attention and I often find the time spent working together with Dale and the other singers goes by all too quickly. If the piece is too easy or too challenging, either extreme, I fall out of flow and become either frustrated or bored. However, I’m often fully challenged because I only became a singer late in life the last 15 years or so and did not at that time know how to read music.

To quote from the Musical “You’re a good man Charlie Brown.”

HAPPINESS IS SINGING TOGETHER WHEN DAY IS THROUGH,

AND HAPPINESS IS THOSE WHO SING WITH YOU.

### Importance of Play by Keith Prairie

I’ve been thinking about being playful, having fun and also about things I find funny. Having been a folk musician for many years I think of songs that have a playful nature or tell a story with a punch line.

When I was a child the boys would often play cops and robbers, war or combat, or time honored Cowboys and Indians – but no - make that Bovine herders and Native Americans. Back then we didn’t know about being politically correct. I liked being on a team and I liked it when my team seems to be ahead. There were games like football, soccer, and baseball where one needed to be coordinated and athletic and I was neither of those. Competition was at the center of much of it. I also like playing the individual games Hide and Seek, Red Rover, and depending on who and how old the other kids were, I might be more likely to excel and win and feel good about myself. And there were things like wrestling, or tickling with other kids.

When I got older I enjoyed volleyball. At College of the Atlantic we would often play after lunch until it got too cold and then there were team games at a local school.

It was also at College of the Atlantic where I started going to Contra-Dances. Contra-Dances are held in halls where a live band plays fiddle tunes and a caller calls the dance. Couples form sets and weave up and down the lines through other couples and everyone moves to beat and the

rhythm and flow. After going through several dances and learning the basic steps, and finding there were always new ones to learn, I began to feel very alive and in my body in ways I never felt comfortable before.

And then there is Space Ball an amalgamation of volleyball, football and Soccer. A playing field is laid out and teams are sorted. The idea is to keep the ball in your teams control as you move about the field passing the ball between players on your team. If you can pass the ball between players on your team 10 times your team gets a point. If the ball goes out of bounds or hits the ground or intercepted your team passes the ball to the other team and then it's their turn to try for a point. Its action packed, and an active game that i have played at Mainely Men retreat a bunch of times, and although it seems competitive, it's always played with compassion and caring.

And there is Cosmic-Wimp out, a dice game with rules too complex to go into here.

But in the end I feel I must keep myself from getting too competitive and attached to the winning or being disappointed if I lose. It's the excitement and challenge of play that's important and special.

### Thumbthing about which to be happy

by Rick Kimball

Let us open the good book to Genesis, chapter 1, verse 3. "And God said 'Let there be light,' and there was light." That's light, but not light-hearted worship services. And the Bible does not report that God said "Let there be happiness." God left happiness to us.

Fortunately, God gave us certain bodily parts to make us happy. Think about a few: eyes to see rainbows with, ears to hear Beethoven with, and mouths to chew jelly beans with. Plus thumbs.

Look at your thumbs. Imagine little happy faces painted on the nails. And hey! One of those faces just smiled. Hey again! The other just winked.

Want to be happy? Use your thumbs. They're thumbthing elth. I mean else. Want to be in a better place? Put your thumb out and hitch a ride. Want to make some other people happy? Give 'em thumbs up. Want to have a happy garden? Paint your thumbs green. Want to connect happily with distant loved ones? Get out your smart phone and thumb them a message. You know, like the kids do. The kids are all thumbs, and that's a good thing.

Don't text with your fingers, the way I do, poking in one letter at a time just fast enough to write a whole tweet between breakfast and lunch. Use your thumbs. Turn them into happy little Shakespeares. And if they won't learn fast enough, give them a little thumbping. Speaking of Shakespeare, by the way, his characters sometimes happily insulted other characters by biting thumbs or thumbing noses at them.

Learn from the babies who happily suck on their thumbs. Listen to Isaac Newton, who said, "In the absence of other proof, the thumb alone would convince me of God's existence." Or to Mark Chagall, who said, "The fingers must be educated. The thumb is born knowing." Celebrate the romantic triumphs of Thumbelina. And remember Little Jack Horner, who sat in the corner, eating his Christmas pie. He stuck in a thumb and pulled out a plum, and said, "What a good boy am I."

Thumbs are so flexible they can be used not just to build happiness but to counter unhappiness. When I was a camp counselor some decades ago I occasionally encountered a sobbing, homesick boy. I had a sure cure. I stuck out my hand and said, "Let's thumb wrestle." So we did, locking fingers and struggling mightily to pin each other's thumb. And every time, the sobbing stopped. Often a grin appeared. It's tough to sob and thumb wrestle at the same time.

Scientists speak of "opposable" thumbs that can fold against the other fingers and thus secure humans first place in the hierarchy of evolution. But I say opposable thumbs are for opposing other thumbs in thumb wrestling matches.

In the junior youth group that Tirrell and I sometimes lead, we have occasionally used thumb-wrestling as a warm-up activity. If you have been in the Memorial Room where our group meets, you may have noticed a locked cabinet that only the elite can open. You know what's in it? Thumb splints, in case our contests get too rough. But that has never happened.

Preparing for this service, I thought maybe I should ask you all to turn to your neighbors, stick out your hands, and thumb wrestle. But I decided against that. Sometimes happiness is not having to thumb wrestle in the middle of a worship service.

But I invite you to challenge each other in the foyer during coffee hour. Or later at home. And to try painting faces on your thumb nails, too, so you can see them smile and wink, so you can be happy. Because God did not say, "Let there be happiness." God – and/or the big bang – left happiness to us.