The Pursuit and Practice of Happiness

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching

June 16, 2019, Unitarian Universalist Society

Hymns: #21 For the Beauty of the Earth; #23 Bring Many Names; #305 De Colores.

Reading

The reading today is from a commencement address given by the Reverend Howard Thurman. An African American minister, he founded one of the first inter-racial congregations in the United States, The Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, in San Francisco. In the spring of 1980 he spoke at Spellman College, a historically black university that was a women's college. Thurman was 80 at that commencement, and he died less than a year later.

The title is **The Sound of the Genuine**. Howard Thurman said:

There is something in every one of you that waits,/ listens/ for the genuine in yourself—

and if you cannot hear it, you will never find whatever it is for which you are searching. /

[And] if you hear it and then do not follow it, it was better than you had never been born. You are the only **you** that has ever lived; your idiom is the only idiom of its kind in all the existences, and if you cannot hear the sound of the genuine in you, you will/ all of your life spend your days/ on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls.

Sermon

These weeks of late spring are the traditional time for graduation ceremonies. Part of that tradition is the invited commencement speaker. Often this person gets an honorary degree celebrating an achievement or their legendary life story. Then the speaker reflects on important questions, gives advice to the graduates, and makes a joke or two. After the commencement, the reception, and the parties, "life is going to get back to being a lot tougher," in the words of writer Kurt Vonnegut in one of his many commencement addresses.

Commencement speakers often engage the larger questions of life: what is success? What makes for a good life? How can I find happiness?

Happiness. What is it, anyway? Here are a couple of definitions from current experts. Happiness is a state of heightened positive emotion, writes Emma Seppala, a psychologist. Martin Seligman, another psychologist, defines a happy life as one that is "pleasurable, engaging and meaningful." It sounds like a good thing to experience. A worthy pursuit.

The origin of the words *happy* and *happiness* goes back to Middle English, before 1500. And in that origin, happiness means good luck, good fortune. A happy occurrence is a good thing that happens to you. This doesn't imply that happiness is a condition we can pursue. For example, there's the saying: "I was as happy as a clam at high tide." The clam to which I refer didn't do anything, it just waited for high tide—*ahh!*

Yet these days we human beings are all about going after happiness. Written by Thomas Jefferson in 1776, the Declaration of Independence affirms this goal as one of our divinely endowed human rights: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. To be sure, in those early times, none of these rights was honored as belonging to most kinds of people. Unless you were a white man who owned property, your life was undervalued, and often it was precarious. Your liberty was limited, or it was denied outright. Consequently, for most people, the pursuit of happiness was all but impossible. In fact, for most of human history, few people "lived for happiness the way we do today"[1] in the prosperous western world.

Fortunately, the past couple of centuries have seen ever-widening extensions of human rights, and braver demands by many people who long to have their life protected, their liberty preserved, and their pursuit of happiness empowered. This is a happy development. Yet we still aren't sure what happiness looks like or how to get it.

With the click of a computer mouse and our credit card number, we can accumulate the goods we desire. Many of us can upgrade our gadgets and appliances without worry, stress or hardship. Even so, many of us are not happy.

Surveys have indicated that a large fraction of U.S. Americans don't have a sense of happiness, contentment or well-being. We may *pursue* happiness, but it seems elusive. The late Peter Gomes was the minister at Memorial Church on Harvard University's campus for nearly four decades. In his book *The Good Life*, he bemoans the recent obsession about "what it takes to make modern people happy." He says: "The search for the good life…which often is defined in terms of 'things' and the means to get as many 'things' as possible, has turned into a dead end as more and more people/ *have* more and more."[2]

The late William R. Murry, a Unitarian Universalist minister and seminary president, has expressed the same perspective as Peter Gomes. In *Becoming More Fully Human,* Murry writes that "happiness is not something we find by seeking it directly. It is a by-product of the kind of life we live, the things we do, the way we do them, and the way we understand them." Murry says happiness is a practice, not a pursuit. It is a spiritual practice—like the discipline of paying attention. Paying attention… to notice the present moment, to recall the reasons for our gratitude, to show kindness, to be generous. Murry says that happiness is "not a spiritual goal, but a by-product of living spiritually."

Happiness is not a pursuit but a gift we can open ourselves to receive. Nineteenth century American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote: "Happiness is a butterfly, which, when pursued, is always just beyond your grasp, but which, if you will sit down quietly, may alight upon you."[3]

Many modern thinkers in prosperous western countries assert that happiness does not come from material things. Happiness does not depend on circumstances, but on attitude. I find myself sharing that perspective, but I wonder if it doesn't just arise out of privilege. It's easy to disavow material things while you're writing on a computer in a room with electric lights in a house with food in the fridge, clean running water, heat and air conditioning.

When I think about happiness as an attitude not a matter of circumstances, I can't help thinking about the circumstances of the people who don't have enough to eat who live in the cities or towns of Africa, South Asia, or the United States. I can't help thinking of the desperate parents in Central America who send their children north, or bring them north, to flee the violence of governments and mobsters. I can't help thinking of the Syrian, Palestinian, Sudanese, Burmese and other refugee children who are growing up in refugee camps, and whose own children might spend their lives in camps as well. When the stakes are about survival, happiness can seem like a privilege, a luxury, an indulgence.

These images have caused me to try out a broader definition of happiness. Happiness comes from an experience of the full flourishing of an individual, of a family, or of a community. Happiness is the flourishing of one's nature, the full expression of who and what we are. The practice of happiness is to notice when we have the gifts or conditions that enable us to exist and flourish. The pursuit of happiness is to expand in the flourishing of ourselves. Beyond ourselves the pursuit of happiness is to extend the ability to flourish to others. In words and actions for justice, we can aim to protect human beings, extend human liberty, and enable a greater experience of happiness.

Happiness is the right and the ability to have a genuine experience of who and what we are. We can recognize this right for other people—to flourish as who they are. Moreover, we can recognize that all other beings who share this world with us have a right and a longing to express the fullness of who they are. In his 2002 book *Authentic Happiness* Martin Seligman tells a story about his pet lizard. At one point, his lizard seemed sick. It was getting weaker and slower. (That must be pretty slow for a lizard.) Day after day, week after week, the pet reptile wasn't eating any of the food Seligman offered it. Then one day, as the lizard sat nearby, Seligman made himself a sandwich for lunch. He stepped away from it, and the lizard pounced on the sandwich and began to eat! Seligman concluded that what the lizard had been denied was the challenge of the hunt. Being spoon-fed was making it unhappy. Seligman was keeping it from the full flourishing of its nature and its being.[4] The lizard knew this instinctively. For most of us, however, we need to pause and pay attention to figure it out.

In his 1980 address to the women graduating from Spellman College, the Reverend Howard Thurman said the "only true guide that you will ever have," is the sound of the genuine in you. So his advice to them was: "Cultivate the discipline of listening to the sound of the genuine in yourself." He warned: "If you cannot hear the sound of the genuine in you, you will/ all of your life spend your days/ on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls."

Yet Thurman also called on our capacity for empathy and love, and our need for connection and solidarity. We all can learn how to wait and listen for the sound of the genuine in other people. He said: "I must wait and listen for the sound of the genuine in you. I must wait. For if I cannot hear it, then in my scheme of things, you are not even present. And everybody wants to feel that everybody else knows that she is there."[5]

For me Thurman's words provide an important reminder/ that what I think other people should do or should have in order to be happy may not be what they need or long for. With every good intention, perhaps, what I try to do for others might clash with or drown out the sound of the genuine in them. None of us can decide what happiness looks like for another. We can scarcely figure it out for ourselves.

Murry writes: "The greatest determinant of happiness seems to be the relationship between [our] expectations and [our] actual [experience]." After my mother passed away, a friend of hers recalled to me some stoic advice my mother had given. She said: "Don't expect too much; that way you won't be disappointed." Though amusing, this advice always struck me sadly. Yet my mother was not a sad person. Indeed, most relatives remembered her as consistently fun to be with. She enjoyed many things about life—reading newspapers, playing bridge, watching basketball games, and shopping for good deals. She loved humor and she loved talking to her sister, her friends, and anybody who would listen. In Mom's later years, emphysema limited her activities and shrank the space in which she could navigate. Yet she kept a good attitude. She enjoyed newspapers, television and conversation, as she always had. Stuck in her nursing home bed for the last few years, she was glad to have a sunny view out the window, the TV remote in her hand and a phone by her side. Losing her breath and strength could be agonizing and scary sometimes, yet her basic outlook was cheerful. I guess my mother/ had made friends with the sound of the genuine in herself.

In Emma Seppala's book *The Happiness Track*, the psychologist and business consultant says that too many of us pursue success in life by overextending ourselves—working too hard, staying online and on screen too many hours of the day and night. We short-change our need for rest, exercise, and the nourishment of community. Seppala says we have been fooled into thinking that the sacrifice of our serenity is necessary for success. *And* we think success will bring us happiness. Yet the result is not happiness, but rising levels of stress and anxiety. This reminds me of Thurman's warning: "If you cannot hear the sound of the genuine in you, you will/ all of your life spend your days/ on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls." Even if that somebody else is the culture around us, the whole society in which we live.

Seppala writes: "Decades of research have shown that happiness is *not* the outcome of success but rather its precursor."[6] So if we want to succeed, it's a good idea to cultivate the habits, attitude and outlook that will deepen and reflect a sense of well-being. This is the practice of happiness.

And as we heard earlier from William Murry, this is like other spiritual practices—paying attention, showing kindness, being generous, and expressing our gratitude. All these writers agree, the intentional practice of happiness can sustain us in times of hardship in our lives, in our families, and in our larger world.

One habit that interferes with the experience of happiness is to compare your own measures for happiness to those of others. This happens to me. I fall into comparing my life with that of others—their good luck, talents, achievements, financial success, even the closeness of their family and their family's relative non-dysfunctionality. This is not helpful. I even compare myself to the way other people express their happiness. Some folks are so enthusiastic, bubbly and cheerful about things! In contrast to them I am a dud. A true happiness failure.

Yet if I take some time, I can remember how much I have to be thankful for. I remind myself how much I've been able to do in my life, that I have good health, that I was taught how to read and write. I can feel the sunshine in the day and the cool air at night. I realize how many people have helped me out in small ways and large ones. I remember the many lovely people I know, the people who trust me and whom I can trust. This IS helpful. All of this gratitude can renew my sense of well-being. I guess my experience of happiness is more like the butterfly than the lizard. Instead of pouncing on happiness, I can allow well-being to settle into my awareness.

The practice of praise and gratitude is a happiness practice. One popular speaker at graduation ceremonies, was Kurt Vonnegut, a writer born in 1922 in my hometown of Indianapolis. In every graduation speech he gave, he remembered his Uncle Alex. He said he was "an insurance agent in Indianapolis who was well-read and wise."

Kurt Vonnegut said: "One of the things he found objectionable about human beings was that they so rarely noticed it when they were happy. He himself did his best to acknowledge it when times were sweet. We could be drinking lemonade in the shade of an apple tree in the summertime, and Uncle Alex would interrupt the conversation to say, 'If this isn't nice, what is?' So I hope you will do the same for the rest of your lives. When things are going sweetly and peacefully, please pause a moment, and then say out loud, 'If this isn't nice, what is?'"[7]

I understand Vonnegut to mean that when many things are NOT going so peacefully, easily or happily for us, we can still notice when moments of sweetness do appear. And we can praise them. We can appreciate the gestures of peace, the blessings of kindness, the gifts of beauty that happen upon us--and we can give thanks.

The practice of happiness looks like a lot of other aspects of spiritual practice. Happiness can grow by our use of them. Paying attention to notice the moment at hand, to recall the reasons for our gratitude. Paying attention to show kindness, to be generous. Paying attention to listen for the sound of the genuine in ourselves so that we may follow it. Paying attention to listen to the sound of the genuine in one another, so that we may honor it.

So may we strive to live, moment by moment, one day at a time. Amen.

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[1] *Happiness: Tend Years of n+1* (Faber and Faber, Inc.: New York, 2014),3.

[2] Peter Gomes, *The Good Life: Truths that Last in Times of Need* (HarperCollins: New York, 2002), 2.

[3] *Illustrations Unlimited*, edited by James S. Hewett (Tyndale House: Wheaton, Ill., 1988), 278.

[4] Cited and paraphrased in Emma Seppala, *The Happiness Track* (Harper Collins: New York, 2017).

[5] Howard Thurman, "The Sound of the Genuine," excerpt from 1980 commencement address at Spellman College; posted on Daily Good, November 30, 2017; accessed June 14, 2019. http://www.dailygood.org/story/1846/

[6] Emma Seppala, *The* Happiness Track (Harper Collins: New York, 2017), 8.

[7] Kurt Vonnegut, *If This Isn't Nice*: Advice to the Young (Rosetta Books, Seven Stories Press, New York, 2014). See the Kurt Vonnegut Memorial Library: www.vonnegutlibrary.org