

Order of Service
February 5, 2006

“In Pursuit of Happiness”

Welcome

Good Morning. Welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Hendersonville. Welcome on this first day of February. Welcome where the walls today display the works of as Katherine Price said “perhaps the unschooled artist, but not the unschooled heart and the perceptive eye.” These African American artists lend depth, experience understanding and play through their skilled art and help ground our reflections on the pursuit of Happiness. Today is also Super Bowl Sunday. This morning’s paper quoted a professor saying that “this is a new kind of holiday. It is not a holiday connected with religion or war or some tragic event. In some ways, it is a celebration of consumption by secular America.” Today we gather before the life of the spirit, the life of the heart and the life of commitment as this community of faith in the company of each other, this art and these artists. Welcome.

Prelude

Opening Words: This is also the end of the week in which Coretta Scott King died. She supported the Civil Rights Movement through supporting Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in life and then carrying on his work after he died. Our Opening Words are Number 419
Attributed to Kalidasa

Look to this day!
For it is life, the very life of life.
In its brief course lie all the verities
And realities of your existence:
The bliss of growth,
The glory of action,
The splendor of beauty;
For yesterday is but a dream,
And tomorrow is only a vision;
But today, well lived, makes every yesterday
A dream of happiness
And every tomorrow a vision of hope.
Look well, therefore, to this day.

Chalice Lighting

Opening Hymn No. 1000: Morning Has Come

Stones of Community: Introduce with Reading no. 439 “We Gather in Reverence.”

Reading from Homo Viator by Gabriel Marcel: You feel you are hedged in; you dream of escape; but beware of mirages. Do not run or fly away in order to get free: rather dig in

the narrow place which has been given you; you will find God there and everything. God does not float on your horizon; he sleeps in your substance. Vanity runs, love digs. If you fly away from yourself, your prison will run with you and will close in because of the wind of your flight; if you go deep down into yourself it will disappear in paradise.”

Sermon

“In Pursuit of Happiness”. The important part of this title became “in pursuit of”. As I looked into happiness, I became overwhelmed. I felt miserable. There was too much to pull together in such a short time. Had happiness actually made me miserable? How had that happened? There are so many different approaches to the subject.

We are in the midst of what Tricycle magazine calls “The Happiness Craze.” Last week a new book was reviewed on NPR called Happiness: a History by Darrin McMahon. It tells the story of 2000 years of changes in the Western notion of Happiness. Our own Ron Partin has written talks on Happiness and introduced me to positive psychology and the works of Martin Seligman, such as Authentic Happiness. The understandings and perspectives are fascinating, helpful and promising yet I felt a little alienated by this third leg of the inalienable rights Thomas Jefferson consecrated for all Americans. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Too much information, too much to take in, too much to do and too little time. Where should I focus? Why not just watch a movie? If happiness is feeling right with life or flourishing, I didn’t and wasn’t.

I was not only caught between the two aspects of happiness recognized by the Greeks, the one the hedonistic focus on my self and immediate pleasures, the other the nature of true happiness as virtue. I was also stuck in the background noise of the simple restlessness and the anxiety of an obscure longing that seems to be a part of the human condition, but that wasn’t all of it either. Nope. I seemed also caught in what McMahon calls “the burden that we have added since the age of Enlightenment; the unhappiness of not being happy.” Only in the last two hundred years, the notes say, have “human beings begun to think of happiness as not just an earthly possibility but also as an earthly entitlement, even an obligation.”

Unhappy about an opportunity to explore happiness. Now that makes a lot of sense. So I stepped back from the pressure a bit, and looked around and thought what an opportunity this was. I gave myself a little freedom. I don’t have to get Happiness just right this one time. This can be part of an ongoing opportunity. This is a beginning of a series. Today is an introduction to a process, hopefully exploring this wide wisdom on the pursuit of happiness.

Easing up the pressures on one’s self does make more room for happiness. In this case it works if I’ve properly assessed the risk. The problem is that much of the pressure comes from what Buddhists call the Eight Mundane Concerns. These concerns are important enough that the absence of any one is something I want to avoid. It’s just that we mistake them “for the true pursuit of happiness: acquisition of wealth and not losing it; acquisition of stimulus-driven pleasures and avoiding pain; praise and avoiding abuse or ridicule; and desire for a good reputation and fearing contempt or rejection.” Still these are the major components of the practical layers of happiness that I live in for the most part. And a good talk goes a long way toward having many of the eight remain mundane.

This week and last we have spent a lot of time working on the sound system. Trying to get it right. I 'm struck how the work is a lot like the pursuit of happiness. It sounds straight forward in the first utterance. You work on it with the skills you have while you go on about other things. During all of this the system is in the service of everything we do. And when you finally stop to study it and take it apart you find how many layers there are and no matter what people may tell you, [they all have their take on what needs to be done] in order to clear up the system, someone has to (you have to) take the time to track down the different noises and problems. You have to have the faith to keep at it until it sounds right to you. You have to have the patience and persistence to keep addressing one layer of components at a time. There's no other way to sort it out. Everything contributes something to the quality of the sound. [Let me stop to take this opportunity to thank the sound men from the past particularly Dick Blount and then Paul Kintner who put so much time and effort into this system. After all these years it was just past time for some maintenance.] It's like happiness in you. How you are wired is important. Many things are questions of wiring. Individuals have different set points for mood in their genes. Behavioral geneticists in one study of 3000 twins both fraternal and identical put the heritability of happiness as high as 80 percent. Outside influences matter. Just as we live in a building with power lines right outside, we live in a culture that bombards us with the empty message to work hard to make money to buy stuff in order to be happy. The unskillful pursuit of happiness is a large part of the fuel that drives much of our economy. There's feedback or an annoying hum that seems like you can never get it to go away. There's internal noise. And if you turn up the gain beyond a certain point you don't gain much but you do increase the distortion. Money does make a difference in happiness up to a point but after that point there is very little change for large increases in spending.

“People living in poverty report consistently lower levels of subjective well being than people who are comparatively better off. When average national income is plotted against average reported happiness on a graph, the curve shoots up steeply at first. But then a curious thing occurs; it levels off somewhere around the \$10000-13000 mark. After that point a rise in income seems to produce diminishing happy returns. One of the leading researchers in the field concludes, “Among advanced industrial societies, there is practically no relationship between income level and subjective well-being.” As David Myers put it in *The Pursuit of Happiness*: “Enduring happiness doesn't come from making it. Wealth is like health; its utter absence breeds misery, but having it (or any circumstances we long for) doesn't guarantee happiness.”

So if happiness were just like a sound system you could track the important things down, adjust the knobs to the right levels, sit back and enjoy the clarity and resonance of sound that comes through or can come through. By the way, it does help to have a schematic, a manual and we couldn't find one for the sound system. Ron Partin did give me one for happiness extracted from David Myers book. The one page handout is entitled “Research Based Suggestions for a Happier Life.” Ten points that cover the practical as well as attitude and include a nod to the spiritual. It has what we've already said about wealth. Time is another resource. Take control of your time, it coaches. It covers health, with rest and exercise.

Suggestions for attitude include the effects of simply acting happy and counting your blessings. Noticing the moments. I wonder if the burden and expectations of being

happy often keep us from noticing the happiness in and around us. Buddhist practitioner and author, Pema Chodron says in “True Happiness”: “We’re always trying to free ourselves from misery but we go about it in the wrong way. There are a lot of small sweetnesses in life that we ignore because they’re so fleeting. It’s very important to look at what lifts our spirits and brings us happiness – to cherish those moments and cultivate appreciation. Happiness comes from being receptive to whatever arises rather than frantically trying to escape what’s unpleasant.”

The list recognizes the importance of close relationships. It also holds up the concept of “flow.” That mix of work and leisure that engages your gifts and virtues, your particular skills and interests and challenges them without overwhelming them. Within all these helpful guidelines and throughout history there is always a universality to the pursuit of happiness. True happiness reaches beyond the self. Compassion, love and work for a more just and caring world are essential to our human sense of being right with life. And finally the list or manual addresses the existential component of happiness. It says that it exists and names what form it has around and within us. The list simply notes to take care of the soul. “Faith,” it says very matter of factly, “provides a support community, a sense of life’s meaning, feeling’s of ultimate acceptance, a reason to focus beyond self and a timeless perspective on life’s woes.” Like a schematic this is a good list to keep on hand.

But of course, we are not sound systems, we are creatures. We are living beings and any schematic should be in the service of these lives we live. We love, hate, are courageous, worried and scared, we get together, are lonely, we are upbeat and depressed, we are celebrating and mourning. We are living out the music of our lives making up the tune as we go. We are living beings with genetic requirements, particularities and tendencies, we are social animals. How we feel depends a lot on being a part of a group a family, a tribe. We are cultural beings. Creatures of history, society, effected by expectations and requirements.

And yes, we are individuals with our own perspectives, attitudes and imaginations, each at different places in our life stories, each with different parts of our lives in focus right now. For example some are beginning careers, some have finished. Some have new children, some have raised theirs, and some have devoted their caring energy in other directions. Some take health for granted, some struggle to find it, others fear of losing it. Some are financially secure and feel that way, some aren’t so and are ok with where they are and some feel the pressures of a lack of money. Some are lonely, some are alone and may or may not be lonely, and some are looking for their own space. The diversity goes on and on.

Life is multifaceted and happiness or feeling right with life is as multifaceted as life. To pursue happiness too far in any one direction is a mistake. While we may and should address our needs and trying to address them skillfully and reflectively helps, there is also simply something at the core of being, a happiness beneath desire, one that just is. If happiness is being right with life and our faiths tell us that life is good and life supporting, then there is happiness in life. Well-being. It exists within the contingencies that are living itself. It exists within our individual lives in the service of life.

As I thought about happiness, I was drawn back to the insights of certain feminist and womanist writers who writer Sharon Welch says share “a deep and abiding joy in the wonder of life.” She writes of the transformative happiness possible in life – a happiness

borne of love of oneself, the earth, and others. At one point, she shares author and theologian Mary Daly's memories of childhood wonder and contentment, and then points out how an illusory notion of fulfillment and stability is substituted for a "dynamic ever-changing process of responding to the wonder and challenge of life."

Welch also emphasizes the point that no one can respond to the wonder and challenge of life and a happiness born of love without facing the realities of pain. Pain is a reality in the gift of life. Both Emotional and physical. It is a reality that quite naturally we seek to avoid. And it is this avoidance alongside the omnipresent availability of pleasures and gratifications in the modern world that make it hard to do what McMahon says "many in the contemporary world find it hard to [do, that is to] set long term narratives that give hope, conviction and purpose to their lives." (p.475 McMahon)

Many times when I think of happiness, I am drawn back to a moment in Welch's analysis of Toni Cade Bambara's novel, *The Salt Eaters*. In the book a community activist, Vera, who is distraught over recent failures and the death of her mother asks healer, Minnie Ransom, for a pill to make the pain go away. "Minnie is appalled: her mama died, she's supposed to feel bad ... bless her heart, just a babe of the times. Wants to be smiling and feeling good all the time." This quote has stuck with me for almost 15 years now.

In going back I also see where healer Minnie knowingly advises that to embrace one's history and to develop one's narrative one has to want to be well. We've said that Happiness is well being. But, as Minnie says, "one has to want to be well where wellness does not mean conquering pain or having happiness unshaded by terror, struggle, anger, or disappointment." (Welch). Welch says that healer Minnie Ransom is the voice of old wisdom, the recognition that health does not mean undifferentiated bliss, but the ability to face challenges, the ability to dance with nonbeing, not conquering it but learning with it. As Minnie tells Velma, "...wholeness is no trifling matter. A lot of weight when you're well."

Today brings together an auspicious coincidence of events and subject in this sanctuary and for this community. Sharon Welch's analysis of the deep happiness possible in life and in work for justice with and for others is grounded in the experience of the Civil Rights Movement. The joy and success, the happiness, along with the struggle of that Movement are commemorated in many of the pictures on the sanctuary walls today and remembered this week in the work of Coretta Scott King and Martin Luther King Jr. The pictures on the walls and the lives lived testify to the possibility and efficacy of the commitment to long term narratives that give hope, conviction and purpose to the world. The pictures particularly speak to the transformative happiness possible in life, a happiness borne of love of oneself, the earth and others. Take your time to look and walk around the sanctuary. Be with these colors, artists and moments and your own understanding of Happiness may change.

Today, I have noticed many aspects or layers to the notion of happiness, some seemingly innate, some culturally imposed, all real and effecting. Not to worry, you hold the take home message in your hand. It is in the cover picture on the Order of Service [A very cute little girl, under two, sits sideways on a bench with a double dip ice cream cone in her hand. Her young Cocker Spaniel dog is also sitting on the bench and reaching out toward the cone that the little girl holds leaning a little in his direction.] Notice you first

reaction is to smile. You can't help it. You recognize that as a precious, happy moment. It is there in the age, the day and the situation. Now step back from the picture and look at it as a grown up, a parent. Notice your concern for her safety sitting sideways on the bench. Perhaps you think about the sugar and fat in the ice cream or as a dog lover, you know that he is lactose intolerant. [many more concerns are possible here]. But step back even more and think about the world that she will grow into. What will it be like for her? What am I doing to increase the chances that it will be a more just, compassionate place for her to be? How am I helping to carry that real happiness of the moment we are born with into the strong, deep transformative happiness that is possible in the conscious choices we must make as adults? What does that look like? The meaning we seek is found within all these overlapping perspectives. The deeper meaning of happiness resides in how we interact with the underlying joy of life and how we help it grow in the world. This little girl, her ice cream, her dog, the moments and focus of our lives.

Stick with me. I have one more image to share that helped me with this mix of perspectives. It helped me surface when I felt bogged down and overwhelmed by all I had to do. I still smile when I think about it. How many of you have seen the movie, "The Rookie?" It is a true story about a man, Jimmy Morris, who is in his 30s. He is a high school chemistry teacher and baseball coach in a small, football supporting Texas town. Jimmy is married and has two children. In his younger days Jimmy pitched in minor league professional baseball but he got hurt before making it to the majors. He challenges his underachieving boys to believe in themselves and make something good happen. They challenge him right back and say that if they win the state championship, he has to try out for baseball again. They do, he does and he gets a spot as a relief pitcher working his way up in the farm system. Eventually he makes it as a relief pitcher for the Tampa Bay Devil Rays, but that's the end of the movie. There is a time where he is discouraged by his progress, his age, the travel, the bills piling up, his time away from home and wife and children. He is not having fun and is ready to quit. And then comes the turn around. You know it is happening as one evening he watches part of a Little League game on the field next to the motel where the team is staying. The next morning he comes into the locker room, a smile on his face, slaps his friend on the shoulder and says with enthusiasm that surprises everyone around him; "Guess what we get to do today, Brooks. We get to play baseball!"

Yes, the important words are "get to" and "play" and even "today", and it all came together in the scene and the line and a memory that made a difference for me as I struggled with all there was to do and think about as I worked on this talk and subject. "Guess what you get to do today, McKinley. You get to pursue happiness."

Now change pursue to notice or find or glimpse or feel. And I know many of us are in more serious life moments than saying this may seem to recognize, but I think there is an underlying truth that as long as we are alive and somehow carrying on with that living, happiness exists around us and in us. It is ours to notice. And for you who are here this morning, "Guess what you get to do today, whoever you are, wherever you are in your life; you get to notice happiness."