

“The Happiness Project”
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As you know, when I or someone else presents a Sunday service, we not only have to create our sermon or presentation, but we also have to also find appropriate hymns and readings that reflect the topic or theme. When I’m in search of hymns or readings, I always find it interesting to see what is not listed as a category or included in the index, even though it’s a worthy subject for a service.

For me, a basic spiritual truth is that “the very purpose of our lives is to enjoy life and be happy.” (Dalai Lama) Have you ever tried to find a hymn that celebrates happiness? Or find a UU reading on happiness? Well, as far as I’m concerned, it’s slim pickin’s. What does that say about us as Unitarian Universalists? I don’t have an answer to that question. I think we’re in favor of happiness. Clearly, though, it’s not an expressly stated goal. And I find that a little bit surprising.

Although it is true that, in contrast to some Eastern religious traditions like Buddhism, Judeo-Christian teachings don’t usually have much to say about happiness as a spiritual goal. And Unitarian Universalism does come out of Judeo-Christian tradition.

On the other hand, a number of Western philosophers comment on the ubiquitous nature of the seeking of happiness. Aristotle called happiness the “summum bonum,” or chief good; he said that people desire other things, such as power or wealth, because they believe they will lead to happiness, but their real goal is happiness. The 17th-century French thinker Blaise Pascal observed, “All [people] seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end.”

People all over the world, when asked what they want most from this life, and what they want most for their children, say they want happiness.

Yet, at least here in this country, there seems to be a lot of ambivalence about happiness. Writer Gretchen Rubin discovered this when she began her own study

of happiness. She says, “Happiness, some people think, isn’t a worthy goal; it’s a trivial, American preoccupation, the product of too much money and too much television. They think being happy shows a lack of values, and that being unhappy is a sign of depth.”

Rubin recalls being at a party, where a guy said to her, “Everyone’s too worried about being fulfilled; they’re so self-indulgent. It’s there in the Declaration of Independence, and people think they should be *happy*. Happiness isn’t the point.”

Rubin asked him, “If happiness isn’t the point, what is?”

He replied, “Working for goals like social justice, peace or the environment is more important than happiness.”

“But,” she countered, “you think it’s important to help other people, to work for the benefit of others and of course it is –but why? Why worry about children living in poverty or malaria in Africa unless, at bottom, it’s because you want people to be healthy, safe, and prosperous –and therefore happy? If their happiness matters, doesn’t yours? Anyway,” she plunged ahead, “studies show that happier people are more likely to help other people. They’re more interested in social problems. They do more volunteer work and contribute more to charity...So being happy actually makes you more likely to work for the environment or whatever.”

The guy responded by laughing derisively, and at that point, Rubin decided that, for her own happiness factor, it was best to change the subject.

This party guest, though, did raise the most common criticism of happiness: that it’s not right to be happy when there’s so much suffering in the world. But on closer examination, does this really make sense? Refusing to be happy because someone else is suffering is a little bit like eating every speck of food on your plate because children are starving in Zimbabwe. Even though cleaning our plates is what our mothers told us to do, it doesn’t actually help anyone. Similarly, our unhappiness isn’t making anyone else happier. It only makes us unhappy.

Some people think it's cooler to be ironic, sarcastic and critical. Sometimes people like this are even seen as more sophisticated than those who always seem cheerful and happy.

A lot of people believe that unhappiness is selfless and that happiness is selfish. But it's a misguided belief. It's actually more selfless to act happy. It takes energy, discipline and generosity to maintain a happy demeanor, yet people tend to take the happy folks for granted. Maybe it's because they make happiness look easy.

And then there are the superstitious people. I know someone who is afraid to admit she's happy, because she thinks it will cause something bad to happen. And then there are others who anticipate trouble and tragedy in the belief that their thoughts will keep bad things from happening.

And, unfortunately, there are people who just don't seem to *want* to be happy, for whatever reasons. Perhaps their unhappiness serves them in some way. I do want to distinguish here between unhappiness and depression. Unhappiness can be changed through our own efforts. Depression is a condition that can be serious and that we usually can't overcome on our own. If anyone here this morning believes they might be depressed, please consider coming and talking to me or trusted friend about it, because there is help for depression.

Now, I want to return to my original premise: that is, that happiness is one of our most important spiritual goals. As we are given the gift of life, I believe that we have an obligation to make the most of that life. And that includes finding ways to be happy, and to spread that happiness in the world.

(Story of the Dalai Lama at a hotel in Arizona, from The Art of Happiness, pp 15-16.)

And as we ask ourselves what might increase our own happiness, some of the answers will come from inside ourselves. As we spend time in prayer, or meditation, or reflection, as we experience being in relationship with the Spirit of Love and Life, our higher power, that which is greater than ourselves, we may grow in self-acceptance. We may gain the insight that "happiness is an inside job." We may come to recognize that in order to find happiness, we must learn to

keep our problems in their proper perspective. And you may discover other truths about happiness.

Gretchen Rubin spent a year of her life on her own personal “Happiness Project.” She looked at herself and her life and came up with several things every month that she would do to increase her happiness. And then she wrote a book about it. She points out that everyone is different, so each person’s own “Happiness Project” will be unique to them.

Even though some of the goals she pursued every month will be different from the ones we would choose, I think many of them are broad enough to be potentially inspiring to others. So what I’ve done this morning is to take the items that she incorporated into her life, and I put each one on a slip of paper. I’m going to pass them around in this basket and I invite you to take one or two slips. And then I’d like to open up the conversation, and ask you to either reflect on the item on your slip of paper, or to name something that you believe could contribute toward making your life happier.