

"The Mirror of Erised and the Quest for Happiness" or "Being Happy in an Unhappy World"

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Meditation:

Although many Unitarian Universalists would say that our movement is characterized by individual uniqueness, difference in perspective and diversity of background, there are many things we have in common. One of the things, however, that we would probably agree that we share is a common quest to be happy. Happiness is something that all human beings, from time to time has wondered about and, in some way, pursued. In moments we could swear we have it in our sights, even in our grasp, only to find that we are back on the search. Certainly, true happiness is swift and fleeting commodity. Here for a moment, gone in the next. It can sometimes help to keep a good picture of happiness in our minds. And to constantly upgrade that picture. So, this morning, I ask you, what might happiness look like. How can we learn to recognize it in its natural habitat?

Professor Jonathan Freedman conducted happiness surveys a few years ago. He wanted to know what people believed happiness is and whether or not they believed themselves to be happy. Freedman's survey indicated that happiness is more in the nature of a quest than a permanent state; but he did come up with some interesting -- or at least entertaining -- indicators.

Freedman profiled a composite happy person - from all the data collected, he was able to describe the person most likely to be happy. He says, and I quote,

"It's a forty-year old woman who lives somewhere in Canada and works full time as an entertainer, earning \$50,000 a year. Married for the first time, she loves her husband and leads a fairly active sex life, but she sometimes dreams of being Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. She is a Unitarian, but is not especially religious and does not believe in ESP. But she is an optimist by nature and she does believe that life has meaning and direction."

So there you have it. According to Dr. Freedman's research, happiness is love, marriage, a job you like, \$50,000 a year -- adjusted for inflation -- and Unitarianism.

Which explains why so many of us end up feeling unhappy. Except for the Unitarian part, it's too hard to fit the profile. At the beginning of this year, as we look out to the future, how is it that we plan to find happiness. How will we share it with others. How will we make it ours?

Sermon:

An emperor was coming out of his palace for his morning walk when he met a beggar. Feeling either particularly generous, or like he wanted to show off for his attendants, the king asked the beggar, "What do you want? I will give you whatever you desire."

"You think you can fulfill my desire?" the beggar laughed.

The king was offended. He said, "Of course I can fulfill your desire. I am a king! What is it that you want? I will grant it for you and you will be happy."

"You know not what you are saying," the beggar replied.

Now, most people would never return such an offer with contempt. But this was no ordinary beggar. He was an enlightened monk who had spent many lifetimes wrestling with the truths of the world.

This king didn't and he was on the edge of frustration. Not wanting to be upstaged in front of his entourage, he continued to insist: "Are you going to pass up this opportunity? I am a very powerful emperor. What can you possibly desire that I can not give to you?"

"Very well," said the beggar. "I would ask only a simple request. I have this begging bowl. Can you fill it with something?"

"Of course!" the emperor cried and he called to one of his attendants. He told him to fill the man's bowl with money and attendant did so immediately. but everyone soon noticed that no sooner did the money touch the bowl than it disappeared. The attendant kept pouring money in. But the bowl never filled.

Diamonds, pearls and emeralds went into the bowl. Gold, the family silver, furniture, pictures of grandma - Everything the king had disappeared into the bowl. Finally, with nothing left the king dropped to his knees at the foot of the beggar and admitted he had lost everything. "I am humbled and ashamed that I could not fill your bowl. And I lost everything trying to. Please, before you leave me, fill my mind that I should have at least one treasure left - the wisdom of knowing what is your begging bowl made of?"

The beggar laughed and said simply, "It is no miracle, and scarcely a secret. This begging bowl is made up of the one thing that has no limit. That stretches forever with no end. The bowl is made out of human desire."

Here it is, the beginning of a new year. And here we are, wanting this to be the year. The year we're going to focus, do the important things, let go of the small stuff. Embark on noble ideals. Further great causes. Make a difference. More than any other wish from those thinking about the new year is the wish to be happy. The desire to be happy.

The story of the begging bowl is interesting as I look ahead to the New Year. A part of me feels like I'm looking out at 2002, bowl in hand, hoping to come across a better job, a bigger home, an entire life-transplant. When some kind king comes along and drops

these things into my bowl, then I'll be happy. I wonder how many things each of us has on our personal lists: things we need before we can be happy.

I think about the begging bowl clearly remembering the events of Christmas. The incredible pageantry of the tree and the seemingly endless supply of presents and hoopla and promises. And I think of my nephews and niece, moving closer and closer to the holiday - all doe eyed, with their bowls politely in front of them. And every year, a sense of naiveté falls over my parents and my sister and I insisting we are more than equipped to fill anyone's bowl. And after the fury of flying bows and shrieks, tearing paper, the dust settles... and there are three children with doe eyes and empty bowls in front of them. And every year, like humbled kings, we all look upon this unbelieving. Startled. Unnerved. Also a bit familiar, like we're seeing our own life in a mirror.

Like our doe eyed progeny we can remember times when we've gotten ourselves psyched up about the holidays and ended up feeling a little let down. Maybe something was missing. We just want to be happy, which is a reasonable expectation to have in life. In fact, it is the Dalai Lama who says that the entire meaning of life is simply "to be happy and to make others happy." Yet how common it is for us to feel unfulfilled. Sometimes it may seem like we'll never get what we need to be happy.

Being happy amidst an unhappy world can prove to be a monumental chase. One psychologist reports that "One-third of all Americans wake up depressed every day. Professionals estimate that only 10-15% of Americans think of themselves as truly happy." The story is told of a French priest who had heard the intimate disclosures of thousands of people spread over decades. Asked if there was a certain theme that dominated his work in the confessional booth, he responded sadly, "Yes, I'm afraid there is. Too many people are unhappy."¹

Often times, there are people all around us who are terribly unhappy and we don't even know it. There is a story of a certain man who made an appointment to see a psychologist. He said to the psychologist, "Doctor, I always feel depressed. No matter what I do I still feel depressed. I just don't know how to get over it."

The psychologist looked at him and said, "Come with me to the window." The man followed and then the psychologist pointed outside and said, "Do you see that tent over there in the distance? Well, there is a circus in town and it is really good. There are lots of acts to watch, especially the clown acts. And there is one clown in particular who is extremely funny. He will make you rock with laughter over and over again. Go and see that clown and I guarantee that you will not have reason to be depressed again!"

The man turned to the psychologist with sad eyes and said, "Doctor, I am that clown!"

Alas, a sad story. But a story some of us might see ourselves in. Could it be that we're having trouble being happy is because we are so busy making other people happy? Our children, our spouse, our boss, our neighbors... Do we sometimes think we are left grasping for any happiness that might be left over after it gets dished out?

It is not uncommon to depend on others to fill our needs for happiness. Often with good reason. According to the report in the January issue of Psychological Science, researchers conclude that strong social relationships seemed to be a strong precondition for happiness: Of the nearly 250 people studied, the happiest among them all reported having strong social networks. But this is not, by any means, a guarantee.

There is a favorite story of mine, about Charlie Brown, where he is telling Lucy, "All it would take to make me happy is to have somebody say they like me." "Are you sure," replied Lucy. "Of course, I'm sure," he returned. "Do you mean," she continued, "you'd be happy if someone merely said he or she likes you. Do you mean to tell me that someone has it within their power to make you happy merely by doing such a simple thing?" "YES!! That's exactly what I mean," Charlie Brown said excitedly. "Well, I don't think that's asking too much. I really don't. But you're sure now? All you want is to have some say, "I like you, Charlie Brown," and then you'll be happy?" "And then I'll be happy!" cried Charlie Brown. So Lucy turned to face him, looked straight in his eyes and said, "I just can't do it."

Quite often the simplest solutions are the hardest to come by. Few of us would deny that most of the problems in this world could be addressed, at least initially, by a little more time and consideration on people's part. A little more love. Often times we must admit that some people's hopes for happiness fail to be met by those who could, at least, make a measurable contribution. If not provide happiness, at least set the stage. Sadly, there are those who withhold love and care and attention. Sadder still, we've all done it. We've all feared from time to time, the scenario of the self emptying bowl. Sometimes we may just be filling other people's sense of desire for more of our time, attention, money....

We must admit that happiness cannot be given like cargo. A good deal of happiness is found in self-affirmation, recreation, mutual affection, comfort, a sense of community, a healthy sexual understanding, a sense of purpose, reasonable security, hope, meaningful work, some claim to wisdom and spiritual sustenance.

Indeed, happiness is something that only we can, ultimately, find for ourselves. Others may help, may even be necessary, but ultimately, the task is ours. And to be able to find it, we must, first, be able to see it clearly.

I recently got a chance to see the Harry Potter movie which prompted me to go back and reread the first book. What intrigued me so much was the Mirror of Erised. Harry, a fledgling magician, stumbled upon this strange mirror while looking for something else.

"It was a magnificent mirror, as high as the ceiling, with an ornate gold frame, standing on two clawed feet. There was an inscription carved round the top which read: "Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi."

The thing about the mirror is that when Harry looked into it, he saw himself standing with his parents. But Harry had never known his parents. They had died only shortly after he was born. He wondered if they were somehow standing behind him, in spirit,

perhaps. They were not. He wondered, also, if this was a premonition of the future. But how could that be. When he brought his friend, Ron, to look at the mirror, Ron saw himself standing alone, adorned with great accolades and honors. These things captivated Harry and he continued to return, night after night, to stare into the mirror.

Later, when kindly professor Dumbledore stumbled upon his tracks, he asked Harry if he'd figured out what the mirror does.

"It - well - it shows me my family -"

"And it showed your friend Ron himself as head boy."

Harry nodded.

"Now," asked Dumbledore, "can you think what the Mirror of Erised shows us all?"

Harry shook his head.

"Let me explain. The happiest man on hearth would be able to use the Mirror of Erised like a normal mirror, that is, he would look into it and see himself exactly as he is. Does that help?"

Harry thought. "It shows us what we want... whatever we want..."

"Yes and no," said Dumbledore quietly. "It shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts. You, who have never known your family, see them standing around you. Ron, who has always been overshadowed by his brothers, sees himself standing alone, best of them all. However, this mirror will give us neither knowledge or truth. [Nor will it gives us happiness]. Men have wasted away before it, entranced by what they have seen, or been driven mad, not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible."²

The inscription on the mirror of Erised, spelled backwards, are the words "I show not your face but your heart's desire." Here we have another example of the begging bowl, but a more personal one. A mirror we gaze into and are transfixed, waste away, become absorbed by desire. And never do we see ourselves as happy. Instead, as Dumbledore explained, we see everything that stands in the way of our happiness.

So many of us look at the world that way. More clearly than happiness, we see instead the things keeping us from it. We hold out our bowl, hoping, this year will be it. This year someone will give us the last few things we need to be happy. A mirror is just a convenient device to make it obvious what we're doing.

So many of us become so sidetracked by our desires or attachments, it is no wonder we're unhappy.

"We convince ourselves that life will be better after we get married, have a baby, then another. Then we are frustrated that the kids aren't old enough and we'll be more

content when they are. After that we're frustrated that we have teenagers to deal with. We will certainly be happy when they are out of that stage. We tell ourselves that our life will be complete when our spouse gets his or her act together, when we get a nicer car, are able to go on a nice vacation, when we retire."³

The truth is, our lives will always be filled with challenges. It's best to admit this to ourselves and decide to be happy anyway. Alfred D Souza wrote, "For a long time it had seemed to me that life was about to begin - real life. But there was always some obstacle in the way, something to be gotten through first, some unfinished business, time still to be served, a debt to be paid. Then life would begin. At last it dawned on me that these obstacles were my life."

These obstacles are the desires we confuse for happiness. Those desires send us on a seemingly endless search. Certainly motivation, initiative and perseverance are good qualities. But when we desire something so much that we cannot enjoy the rest of life as well without it, we become more consumed by desire than motivated.

The Buddhists have four noble truths. The first of which is a little daunting: Suffering is inevitable. The second, that all suffering is brought about by desire and attachment. The third is a little more hopeful: that suffering will end when we find a way to let go of our desire. And the fourth is as we continue to let go of attachment and desire we work toward enlightenment.

It is said that the Buddha, in the forty years he spent under the Bodi Tree finally was able to let go of all his desire. It was then that he was truly happy.

The Greek gods had another way of describing it. There is a story of them as they created the universe. After they'd formed the stars, the sun, the planets and the moons. They created the seas, the mountains, the flowers, the animals, human beings. And the last thing they created was happiness. At this point, however, a problem arose. Where should they place happiness so that human beings would not find it right away. They wanted to prolong the drama of the search, for the Greek gods loved to give human beings problems and watch them work out of them, sort of like most 10 year old boys and an ant pile.

"Well, let's put happiness on top of the highest mountain," said one god. "Certainly, it will be hard to find up there." A goddess countered, "Let's put it on the farthest star." Another asked, "Why don't we hide it in the deepest darkest of abysses." On and on ran the list of locations for hiding happiness. At the end, with every god and goddess near mental exhaustion, the wisest of them declared, "I believe we must hide happiness in the heart of every human being. In this way, they will look for it all over the Universe without being aware of having it within themselves all the while."

Indeed, perhaps the best I've ever heard it expressed I read on a public billboard outside downtown Los Angeles as I was going to work. The sign read, "Happiness is not getting what you want, it's wanting what you have." Which I think is pretty good advice, likely to help any of us find happiness, at least a little more often. So, it is this I recommend to you today. I hope that it will help each of us spend a little more time

desiring that which we already have, already love and help us see that we are ready to be happy. But... if that doesn't work... and you still find that you are back on the search, trying to find happiness in its natural habitat... AND you happen to find yourself wandering along one day, and you see a married 40 year old female Canadian entertainer walking out of a Unitarian Church... follow her.
To the Glory of Life.

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