

“A Moment of Happiness”

Given the fact that as a people Americans work more than they sleep and have less vacation than any other Western country, I was surprised by a recent special report in *Time Magazine* that claims nine out of ten of us are either very satisfied or moderately satisfied with our jobs. The report is based on a survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Center of the University of Chicago ranking the happiest to least happy people according to their jobs. It probably comes as no surprise that the only thing that the few at the top can't buy is happiness.

Of course skepticism is warranted about this kind of statistical study. How honest are people's responses? According to the survey, clergy and firefighters are the most joyful. This might confirm your skepticism. After firefighters come reservation and ticket agents. I've always thought I'd be happy working in an airport.

Every time I visit the Burlington International Airport I take special note of the seniors checking passports and IDs. The process looks relatively simple and at the same time, relational. I can only imagine if my mother had the job she would be reminding passengers to say a prayer to their guardian angel like she invariably did whenever we traveled by air, sea, or back and forth to the grocery store.

During this time of the year, whether you're in the grocery store, supermarket, mall or shopping in any store you get the message that you should be happy. After all, it's the most wonderful time of the year. And the commercial world is working hard to inflate expectations as to just how happy you ought to be.

I'm reminded of the words of a natural philosopher type who said in the context of his wedding remarks for a bride and groom that “expectations block energy.” Whatever he meant, I found his words very meaningful. Whether it be expectations of ourselves, our children or our friends, expectations I find do have a way of blocking relational energy. Like when you come home late and you're expecting dinner to be on the table and your roommate or partner hasn't even begun to prepare.

This could be why I so appreciate the wisdom of the author, May Sarton. Her words were quoted in a book entitled *100 Ways to Keep Your Soul Alive* by Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat. Sarton suggests that it is wrong to expect that there will be a time of happiness in our lives. Rather there are moments of happiness and almost every day contains at least one moment of happiness.

So what is happiness and how do we know if and when we are happy? I've thought at times what a shame it would be, what a waste, if in fact you were the happiest person in the world and didn't know it.

If you feel puzzled or surprised by the findings of the National Opinion Research Center of the University of Chicago that claims nine out of ten of us are either very satisfied or moderately satisfied by our jobs, you're not alone. It becomes even more confusing

when you learn that comparative studies have been done of multiple happiness surveys over the past ten years. These studies indicate that there are more people who describe themselves in recent years as less happy than they were before. Some researchers even say we have arrived at what they term “the stagnation of happiness” stage.

An interesting report came out in Britain’s *New Scientist* Magazine that offers a more in-depth perspective than what we read in *Time*’s special report. The *New Scientist* reported on the World Values Survey according to which levels of happiness have hardly changed since the end of WWII.

The significant difference is that now people are acknowledging that their degree of happiness is not determined by the size of their salary. It’s more a matter of how much they are making in comparison to others. The fear is that they are not winning in the achievement game. Inflated expectations make people less happy because they never seem to win or achieve as much as they expect.

If our sense of well-being is dependent on comparing ourselves to others we are sunk says spiritual author Joan Chittister. She likens comparing ourselves to others to “quicksand” into which our sense of well-being all too easily sinks.

There is a dramatic difference between our country and almost every other country in the world when it comes to happiness scores. According to the World Values Survey, which is conducted about every four years, Nigeria is the happiest country in the world, followed by Mexico, Venezuela, El Salvador and Puerto Rico. Clearly economic success does not figure prominently as far as happiness goes in these countries. Money in fact ranked eighth out of the 10 factors considered necessary to be happy.

You might think that money isn’t important simply because people in these countries don’t have that much. And yet more affluent countries like the U.S., Canada, Japan, Britain, Australia, Switzerland and the Netherlands all rank behind poor countries. It’s clear that even the rich don’t see their financial security as a safeguard from unhappiness.

One of the poorest countries in the world, India, ranks sixth in happiness out of the 65 countries surveyed. The U.S. ranks 16th behind Ghana, Latvia, Croatia and Estonia.

Needless to say, the margin of error is sizable in these surveys. So many factors can skew the results—everything from the mood of the moment to the state of the nation at any given time. Still, in general, when people are asked what makes for happiness, their answers may surprise some and at the same time annoy others. Personally, I find them enlightening.

The response that took first place may not surprise you: Either you’re happy by nature or you’re not. You know the person who just seems genetically happy. They really don’t deserve any credit for their good disposition if it is merely a function of their genes.

Emotional security came in second, knowing ones self to be loved and cared for. Among the poorest of peoples, this factor ranked high. A circle of supportive friends, wider than simply family, ranked third. Making and cherishing friends has much to do with being happy.

The fourth factor I believe speaks volumes to our consumer culture that promotes false needs and desires. It's called "desiring less to begin with." The saying goes, "What the eye cannot see, the heart cannot grieve." How often has a glossy catalog that arrives strategically in December opened your eyes to "needs" you didn't know you had until you opened that Land's End, Eddie Bauer, or LL Bean catalog?

This community is not at a loss for what took fifth place in the happiness survey, "doing someone else a good turn." I'm in a good position to witness this happening day after day among members working at JUMP, in the Care Network Ministry, Meals on Wheels, Food Salvage, witnessing for peace outside our church every day from 5:00 – 5:30 p.m., working for affordable housing and accessible health care in Vermont Interfaith Action and making prayer shawls that are an immense source of comfort to our members either hospitalized or at home.

A prominent educator, author and mentor of mine, Nel Noddings, writes in her book *Happiness and Education* that "True happiness requires a capacity to share unhappiness. That is, to be truly happy, we must be moved to alleviate the misery around us. We must ask whether there are times when an otherwise happy person should be unhappy."

The theologian Reinhold Niebuhr speaks with similar insight of living with an "uneasy conscience" to the extent that we are part of a world, part of an interdependent web of being, in which there is so much misery and injustice.

Having religious faith holds sixth place as a factor in the happiness survey. The belief that we are cared for even as we care for others, that there is some good, some benevolent Spirit, Force, Energy, God at work in our lives despite the bad times—this kind of faith constitutes a lifeline when life is threatened or tenuous This faith allows us to hope even when we feel helpless. It gives us hope that help will come.

And finally, what counted more than money and ranked in seventh place, is the strength to stop comparing ourselves. That's one element in which I know I am weak. That's probably why I appreciate the image of quicksand that can so easily devour one's sense of well-being. As the youngest of a relatively large family, I was much given to comparing myself to my older siblings. Either one was more eloquent, more humorous or more attractive. How well I remember my mother's favorite sayings: "Competition kills the finest things in a person" and "Comparisons are odious." My mother's wisdom continues to challenge and instruct me.

But let's say a person did have the strength to stop comparing themselves plus all the other elements from being happy by nature to having financial security. Would it be

enough? Would a person necessarily have arrived or, if not, why not?

Spiritual leaders tell us that what constitutes happiness is the eternal question, the universal issue. The Dalai Lama is reported to have said, "Whether one believes in religion or not, we are all seeking something better in life: the very motion of our life is toward happiness." And William James in his work *The Varieties of Religious Experience* says: "If we were to ask the question, 'What is human life's chief concern?' One of the answers we should receive would be, 'It is happiness.'"

So what does spirituality have to say to a consumer culture hungering for more than money can buy? In her book *Welcome to the Wisdom of the World* Joan Chittister gleans spiritual insights from five religious traditions. This author relates a story told by the Sufis, the Islamic mystics. It rings true in every spiritual tradition:

"Once upon a time, a powerful king, ruler of many domains, was in a position of such magnificence that wise men were his mere employees. And yet one day he felt himself confused and called the sages for a consultation. He said to them: 'I do not know the cause, but something impels me to seek a certain ring, one that will enable me to stabilize my state. I must have such a ring. And this ring must be one which, when I am unhappy, will make me joyful. At the same time, if I am happy and look upon it, I must be made sad.' The wise men consulted one another. They threw themselves into deep contemplation. Finally, they came to a decision as to the character of the ring that would suit their king. The ring they devised was one upon which was inscribed the words 'This, Too, Will Pass.'

The ring served as a constant reminder that what the king had, someday he would not have. What concerned him at present would end and in the future it would not bother him. The Sufis tell us in this story that "the only way to be happy is to understand that whatever is our state at the present moment, this moment is already over. There is no amount of pain, no disturbance or joy or irritant or exhilaration...that can possibly last forever. To be happy we must come to understand that "This, too, will pass."

It is seeking to control, to hold on to, to cling that makes us unhappy. "Happiness is the ability to live every day, every phase, every stage of life in the awareness that it will not be ours forever."

The lighting of the tree at the top of Church Street is a moment of exhilaration for those who have enough forethought to be present. I never seem to make it. But the lights on the tree do give me moments of joy all season long. It's hard for me to think of the tree eventually coming down. I cling to the beauty and spirit of the holiday. The lights remind me of the words of the poet G.M. Hopkins: "The world is charged with the grandeur of God. It will flame out, like shining from shook foil." The lights signify for me the divine mystery burning at the heart of being. Just like our flaming chalice is a symbol of the divine spark within each of us.

Last month, thanks to the art display of Karin Robinson on our second floor gallery, an inspired piece caught my eye. Karin had entitled it "Chapel of the Fireflies." I kept being

drawn back to it. It spoke to me of what I believe happens every time we gather in our sanctuary. Like so many fireflies, the divine spark within each of us lights up this sacred space. When we come together as a community, we are a source of courage and enlightenment to one another.

Just as there are more than 2,000 different species of fireflies, we UUs are a diverse group, whether we identify as fireflies, lightning bugs or glow worms. We're all in the same family of beetles. We may not always feel luminous or happy and yet enlightened by Sufi wisdom, we know that this, too, will pass, and we are reminded by May Sarton to be alert and look forward almost every day to at least one moment of happiness.

May we be aware and tend the divine spark within ourselves and each other, that spark that generates light, warmth, and relational energy not just in this season, but throughout the year.