

Approach to Happiness

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Happiness is a very elusive state. C. P. Snow said "The pursuit of happiness" is patently the most ridiculous phrase ever penned. Why? Because "if you pursuit it, you will never find it." True. Even the word itself is elusive. There are 100's of synonyms for "happy" but nobody knows where the word came from. Possibly from O. E. "hap" as in "happenstance" or by "chance" or "fate" – as in "who knows?" And maybe that's the only true answer: As to the source of happiness "who knows?" Are you happy this morning? If so, why so? Is it because you are sooo healthy, or sooo wealthy, or sooo well fed? Not necc. = some people I know are all 3 of these yet are remarkably free of happiness. And quite contrary to all reason – Pres. reason, that is. It is altogether possible to be sick + poor + hungry and still be an unbelievable cheerful soul. So maybe – it is after all a matter of "hap" – of happenstance, of chance, of fate, of who knows?

So if we can't define it – we describe it – or try to: i.e. young Charlie Brown said, "Happiness is a warm puppy." But Socrates undoubtedly in a moment of peak said, "whatever it is, it's knowing I don't need it." (But old Samuel Johnson said, "It's a fine tavern + a tankard of ale." + Al. Schweitzer in the jungle said "it's a good digestion + a poor memory for aches + pains.") And (of course) G. B. Shaw topped it all (as usual) by saying, "I don't know what in heaven it is, but a whole life of nothing but happiness – would be hell on earth." One long laugh? Who could stand it?! + (one more) Solon said – it's something many women have – but a man doesn't find until he's dead –!

So I offer you this morning – men – or women – rich or poor – well or sick – full or empty – not a definition of happiness – it really is indefinable – but I offer you – instead – an approach to it – a N.T., a Christian approach to it ... I do believe – + here goes ...

How to be happy? As a Christian – The N. T. approach is: Be a mystic – a mystic in one way or another, all happy people are. That is to say: they are aware of a life beyond their own soggy body-fluids. Yuck as children say – they are not trapped in their own blood sugars, their own nerve endings. There is for them somehow a reality beyond, an Other, so they are not – to quote G. B. one more time – "A feverish elfish little clod of ailment + grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making them happy." No, they have a sense of the Holy, of another side of reality – and they "lift up their hearts unto the Lord" as the ancient liturgy says and they become poets, artists, prophets, happy carpenters, tent makers, lawyers, sellers of purple, or whatnot. "Inspired – by the presence of God. You see – nothing in the world is happy + felicitous until something from beyond shines through it, until it becomes sacramental. Jesus' phrase, "Be of good cheer," and St. Paul's "Rejoice always," are firmly rooted in this sense of the Holy. For it is "Rejoice in the Lord." So you cannot be dour, soured on life, bitter and bad tempered – and be a mystic. If you are cynical and snide, you have, as the fundamentalists say, "lost the Lord" – and if you still remain in the church, as may well do – you are left only with the clap-trap of religion. Sitting glumly in the pew – for the reality has fled you. No, the true Christian happiness is always "Cheered by the presence of God."

But a mystic is also an activist. True mystics always are. The religious life is not meant for sitting, contemplating a candle. God is for going somewhere with. So Paul's "I can do all things through Christ who strengthen me." You haven't truly worshipped, + you'll never be happy – if you don't get out of here and get busy – busy being the man the woman God intends for you to be at this age + stage. The

inactive life is flat, stale + utterly miserable. But remember too you cannot “do” your life all at once. You will only give yourself trouble and your family misery if you do not take life as it comes, hour by hour. Some people are past oriented and try to live only in a gone day. There are the “used to” people. In the same way – contentment cannot be kept if you are only a future person either. Postpone life “until” – until you are 16, until you finish college, (John – 3 – nursery sch. “but I wish I were going to high sch.”) until you are married, or retired – and you will wake up some fine morning and discover you waited too late, and you are about to be buried. (Trust me – I know!) Life is to be lived each moment. Now is indeed your happiest hour. For all practical purposes, it is your only hour. Why do you keep spoiling it?

Of course for any happiness – each hour must be lived without anxiety ... + “there’s the rub.” Jesus oft repeated, “Be not afraid” and St. Paul’s “I have learned to be satisfied with what I have” is predicated upon a faith that is able to “live each moment” without fear because it sees both past and future as in God’s hand. What do I have to fear if I know I am part of a sacred history of which I am but a moment? Therefore I can do the moment at my best because I have been distracted from the anxious self that would spoil all and for any contentment & I must live it – “according to the strength which God shall give me.” That’s important too. You can only do so much, stretch so far. You can never come to the end of any day knowing you’ve done it all. Never. Some days you do more. Some days less. But never all or as much as you’d planned or as much as the world expects of you. One simply hasn’t the strength to do it all. So only “according to the strength God gives me, to do the work that he assigns me.” St. Paul knows God assigns us different rules to play in the Christian Community. You have your part. I have mine. They are truly assigned by Providence. Why spoil life by crying for a gift you weren’t given? Yearning to be something you cannot be? Erasmus: in the 15th c. – “happiness is being willing to be what you are.”

I have often thought how I cannot be all I wish I were or all you wish me to be. I cannot be your great scholar, + your exciting preacher, + your able councilor, + your successful fund raiser, + your bedside priest, + your visiting shepherd, + your clever organizer and + your meticulous administrator, + your civic servant, + your social worker and your constant saint – God no – not and stay either alive or sane. God in “His Providence” obviously did not assign all that work to me, for he did not provide the genius to do it. Sometime ago, I rather pathetically went out and bought a bottle of vitamins “A to Zimer” hoping that would help! But God has truly set limits for all of us and we must do our work well within those limits. Even St. Paul, who could do almost anything, a sort of God’s one-man band – even he knew he was limited. He knew perfection escaped him. But the knowledge didn’t freeze him. Far from it. It freed him.

I have known mentally retarded, who by plain kindness added more to the world than frozen geniuses too brittle to love, to give, to care.

Maybe St. Paul was the happiest man – for – he was the mystic, at work in the world, God’s free man, without fear. Doing what he could do – with the strength God gave him – one day at a time.