

REFLECTIONS ON HAPPINESS

The following thoughts, originally posted to an electronic mailing list, are now part of the introduction to Dr. Branden's recent book, *Taking Responsibility: Self-Reliance and the Accountable Life*.

During the past three years, I have found myself thinking a good deal about the subject of happiness, and about the idea of not merely desiring happiness but making it a conscious purpose. This was an idea that first hit me as I approached my sixty-first birthday, and I would like to share some of the important things I've learned. My most important teacher in this area has been my wife of fifteen years, Devers, who is the most consistently happy human being I have ever known. What I identified about how she achieves this is part of the story I wish to tell.

There is a tendency for most people to explain feelings of happiness or unhappiness in terms of the external events of their lives. They explain happiness by pointing to the positives; they explain unhappiness by pointing to the negatives. The implication is that events determine whether or not they are happy. I have always suspected that our own attitudes have far more to do with how happy we are than any external circumstances. Today, research supports this view.

Take a person who is basically disposed to be happy, meaning that he is happy a significantly greater amount of the time than he is unhappy, and let some misfortune befall him—the loss of a job, or a marriage, or being hit by some physical disability—and for some period of time he will suffer. But check with him a few weeks or months or a year later (depending on the severity of the problem) and he will be happy again.

In contrast, take a person who is basically disposed to be unhappy, who is unhappy a significantly greater amount of the time than he is happy, and let something wonderful happen to him—getting a promotion, inheriting a lot of money, falling in love—and for a while he will be happy. But check with him a little later down the line and very likely he will be unhappy again.

Research also tells us that the best predictors of a person's disposition to be happy are (1) self-esteem and (2) the belief that we ourselves, rather than external forces, are the most significant shapers of our destiny.

I have always thought of myself as essentially a happy person and have managed to be happy under some fairly difficult circumstances. However, I have known periods of struggle and suffering, as we all have, and at times I felt there was some error I was making and that not all of the pain was necessary.

I began to think more about Devers' psychology. When I met her I thought that I had never met anyone for whom joy was a more natural state. Yet her life had not been easy. Widowed at twenty-four, she was left to raise two small children with very little money and no one to help her. When we met, she had been single for almost sixteen years, had achieved success in a number of jobs, and never spoke of past struggles with any hint of self-pity. I saw her hit by disappointing experiences from time to time, saw her sad or muted for a few hours (rarely longer than a day), then saw her bounce back to her natural state of joy without any evidence of denial or repression. Her happiness was real—and larger than any adversity.

When I would ask her about her resilience, she would say, "I'm

committed to being happy." And she added, "That takes self-discipline." She almost never went to sleep at night without taking time to review everything good in her life; those were typically her last thoughts of the day. I thought that this was important.

Then I thought of something I had noticed about myself. And that was, as I sometimes joked, that with every decade my childhood kept getting happier. If you asked me at twenty or at sixty to describe my early years, the report would not have been different about the key facts, but the emphasis would have been different. At twenty, the negatives in my childhood were foreground in my mind the the positives were background; at sixty, the reverse was true. As I grew older, my perspective and sense of what was important about those early years changed.

The more I studied and thought about other happy people I encountered, the more clear it became that happy people process their experiences so that, as quickly as possible, positives are held in the foreground of consciousness and negatives are consigned to the background. This is essential to understanding them.

But then I was stopped by this thought: None of these ideas are entirely new to me; at some level they are familiar; why have I not implemented them better throughout my life? Once asked, I knew the answer: Somehow long ago, I had decided that if I did not spend a significant amount of time focused on the negatives in my life, the disappointments and setbacks, I was being evasive, irresponsible toward reality, not serious enough about my life. Expressing this thought in words for the first time, I saw how absurd it was. It would be reasonable only if there were corrective actions I could be taking that I was avoiding taking. But if I was taking every action possible, then a further focus on negatives had no merit whatsoever.

If something is wrong, the question to ask is: Is there an action I can take to improve or correct the situation? If there is, take it. If there isn't, I do my best not to torment myself about what is beyond my control. Admittedly this last is not always easy.

The past two-and-half years of my life have been the most consistently happy I have ever known, even though it has been a time of considerable external stress. I find that I deal with problems more quickly than in the past and I recover more quickly from disappointments.

I can summarize the key idea here as follows: Begin each day with two questions: What's good in my life?—and What needs to be done? The first question keeps us focused on the positives. The second reminds us that our life and well-being are our own responsibility.

The world has rarely treated happiness as a state worthy of serious respect. And yet, if we see someone who, in spite of life's adversities, is happy a good deal of the time, we should recognize that we are looking at a spiritual achievement—and one worth aspiring to.