

Is the Pursuit of 'Happiness' Stealing Your Joy?

I'm an inquisitive person. Some in my relational sphere find this annoying, others endearing. Being inquisitive means I take advantage of the time I have with interesting people. I'm always armed with a list of questions that I pose to men and women of diverse ages, faith commitments, ethnicities and social statures.

One question I frequently ask is, "If you had one wish for my life, based on your experience and knowledge, what would that wish be?"

Universally, I get the same response: "I wish you happiness." I always smile to hide my confusion.

"Happiness? Why happiness?" I push.

I'm not opposed to happiness, but I often wonder why it is that, in our day, happiness has become our highest aspiration. Could it be because happiness oddly avoids definition? We have tasted it and touched it, but always seem to be a few feet away from fully knowing it. We want it and wish it for others, but have personalized it to such a degree that we are unable to articulate what it is our souls long for. We are jealous for the mystery of happiness. Hearing of others who dance with happiness, we wait patiently in the corner for our turn to take it for a spin.

For some, happiness means doing whatever makes you feel warm and alive in the moment, regardless of the cost. For others, happiness is experienced through hobbies and habits. The time between, say, surfing the perfect wave or drinking the most pristine wine is just so much litter on the ground. Many of us find happiness in the presence of those we love. Our spouses, children, friends and family supply emergency rations of

happiness when all other ventures let us down.

And for still others, happiness is a ghost that is always on the move, driving our ambitions and activities while our search for the elusive feeling continues. In midlife, many of us have a happiness checkup. Faced with our own mortality, we begin to evaluate commitments largely based on one question: "Does he or she or this make me happy?" If the answer is no, divorce papers are printed and signed, motorcycles are bought and plastic surgeries are scheduled, all in an attempt to grab hold of happiness.

Happiness is uniquely personal and hard to define, and yet it is the goal of millions. It appears that in wanting happiness, we yearn for something that we don't fully understand yet believe we can't live without. All too often, if given the opportunity to achieve happiness at the expense of others, the end justifies the means and we leave a wake of sorrow behind us as we grasp a momentary surge of happiness.

Happiness is like a breeze on a blistering summer day. As we sit under the scorching sun, happiness momentarily blows a gust of relief upon us, hushing the heat for a moment. But after the invisible cool is gone, the sun, which never stopped burning, sets to sizzling our skin once again. We are often left with, in the words of Ecclesiastes 1:14, the useless habit of "chasing after the wind."

When others wish happiness into my life, I wonder whether or not they have resolved to be happy at any cost. To do so would mean violence upon violence in their relational spheres, so I doubt that is what is meant. I have, over time, come to understand their wish is not a wish at all, but a prayer. Even atheists pray for happiness. A prayer that hopes I discover fully what many have felt only partially. A prayer that my life may clasp hands with the fleeting figure of happiness.

I appreciate the thought but am still left uneasy by the

notion that happiness will make me happy.

I want more than happiness, and I believe you want more than happiness. I am convinced that what you and I long for is not fleeting happiness, but a life of meaning, and meaning may come in the absence of happiness.

Some of the greatest acts of love ever to emerge from the human spirit were performed in the absence of what we would describe as happiness.

Jesus suffered and died to achieve joy, not happiness, and there is a massive difference between the two. Mother Teresa undertook poverty for mercy's sake, not happiness. Martin Luther King Jr. was martyred because he surrendered his life for a much greater purpose than happiness.

Countless numbers of people choose meaning over happiness because the cost of self-satisfaction is too high for those they love. Happiness can be meaningless, which is why I no longer trust it as some kind of end-goal. I refuse to surrender to a life that is devoid of meaning yet peppered with moments of happiness.

How about you? Has your search for happiness made you happy? Or has happiness tricked you time and time again? Have you been suckered by happiness?

I do not want to denigrate happiness, nor venerate depression. I simply wish to draw us out of our search for a momentary "feeling" and into a deeper question about the very purpose of our lives. My assumption is that you were meant for more than happiness. You were designed for purpose, joy and meaning. My fear is that our true self and its divine purpose has been taken off course by the pursuit of happiness. This false pursuit of happiness has derailed the true north of the human spirit. God desires wholeness more than happiness.

I pray that through both famine and festivities you will come

to discover that your thirst for happiness is in reality a silent prayer offered to God that petitions him to make meaning out of your life.

I pray you will be able to see through the many fancy idols of our time so you may live meaningfully in God as the true self you were created to be, even if it means reevaluating what you think makes you happy.

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