

On Happiness

Caryn Hacker-Buechel reflects on finding happiness, creating happiness and sustaining happiness.

The elusive form and specifics of the journey toward happiness often appear as a shape-shifting changling altered by moments passing and memories held strong within one's heart and spirit. What creates that feeling is dynamic, personal and specific, changing with gender, age, generation, biological chemistry and wisdom. Therefore, the picture and intensity of youthful happiness and adult, inspired happiness are very different, indeed.

Happiness was once a white "blankie" nestled between small fingers that felt the blanket's soft warmth, slick satin edge, its transferred feelings of love, merely from scent and touch, and its gentle reminder of "mother." Happiness was once the feeling from the movement of a backyard swing and the resulting childhood laughter.

Happiness was once a flirtatious, quick look at that month's heartthrob,


amid the aromas of pencil erasers and sixth period physical education class.

Happiness was once the intensity of being 'in love' and the exciting and mysterious belief in the promise of tomorrow. Happiness was beginning a new job or quitting a boring one and finding joy in both.

In the desire to conquer the road to happiness and a more positive psyche, scientists began to study this emotional state. Think the young are happier than you? Think again. University of Illinois psychologist Edward Diener, found that older people are more consistently satisfied with their lives and less prone to depressive moods. Additionally, not only do married people typically see themselves as being happier than their single counterparts; they also live longer. Studies also found that high IQ and higher education did not necessarily equate to a greater sense of happiness.

And what about wealth? Research by Diener and many others found that once your basic needs were met, money did little to increase your sense of satisfaction with life. George Carlin once said, "Trying to be happy by accumulating possessions is like trying to satisfy hunger by taping sandwiches all over your body."

So, how do we increase our time spent on happiness' road? Psychologists and strategists, like James Montier, now assert that 50 percent of happiness comes from a genetic set point and that some of us are just predisposed to being more joyful than others. Be gently honest with yourself and reflect on your genetics. Babies who smile easily become adults with the same ability. Ten percent of happiness is due to circumstances like age, gender, history and wealth and, most importantly, Montier found that 40 percent of an

A photograph of two women sitting on a dark-colored couch, facing each other and smiling. The woman on the left has dark hair and is wearing a light-colored short-sleeved shirt and light-colored pants. The woman on the right has blonde hair and is wearing a light blue long-sleeved shirt and light-colored pants. They appear to be in a relaxed, conversational setting. A green plant is visible in the background on the left.

Happiness is having friends who "see" who you are and love you as you are.

individual's happiness is derived from intentional activities and practices designed to increase a sense of well-being. Obtaining adequate sleep, exercising and meditating regularly, fostering close relationships, helping others, expressing gratitude and, yes, engaging in sex with someone you love, all top the lists of important steps to happiness.

Harvard professor Daniel Gilbert wrote in his book, "Stumbling on Happiness," that although we plan for a happy future, we are surprisingly poor at predicting what will bring us joy. We often believe that the next job, the next spouse or even the next piece of chocolate will be the one that brings us happiness. Gilbert asserts that future goals are not really as important, when related to happiness, as the present moment, but our minds typically do not focus on this reality.

So, what is happiness now in this middle-aged journey? Happiness is the beauty of wisdom, created by the

passing of years uncounted but understood, and encased in less intensity and softened by contentment. Happiness is knowing who you are and finding peace within that. Happiness is experiencing joy through your loved ones and the quiet personal satisfaction of watching them seek more intensity. Happiness is having friends who "see" who you are and love you as you are. Happiness is giving your gifts to those who are open to them. Happiness is seeing a sunset that will never occur in the same way again and letting the beauty of that moment permeate both your cells and spirit with the belief that you just might see a green flash.

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