

Happiness

“Knowledge, grounded on accuracy, aided by labour and promoted by perseverance shall finally overcome all difficulties, raise ignorance from despair and establish happiness, in the paths of science.” Why happiness? That part almost seems to not fit here.

Brethren, this evening, I'd like to speak you about a simple subject. Happiness. It is a common thread that runs through our ritual, showing itself only briefly, intertwined into a piece of work here and there, almost elusive, but what is it? What is it as a concept, historically, spiritually, politically, in society, and most important of all Masonically? Tonight I'd like to take you through an examination of happiness. There are several ways to approach this question. Let's start with a dictionary definition:

Happiness (also called **felicity**) is defined as “an emotion in which one experiences feelings ranging from contentment and satisfaction to bliss and intense joy. (This definition is, however, a synonymous one rather than one based on analytic evaluation, because of the varied and elusive nature of happiness.)”

Let's begin with historically:

People have been discussing the question of human happiness for thousands of years, notably Aristotle, who we'll return to later, but first here's a whirlwind tour through history on the concept. The ancient Greeks had many schools of thought. Socrates advocated self-knowledge as the path to happiness. Plato's “allegory of the cave” influenced western thinkers who believe that happiness is found by finding deeper meaning. The Epicureans believed in reaching happiness through the enjoyment of simple pleasures. The Stoics believed they could remain happy by being objective and reasonable. Christianity continued to follow the “divine command theory” of happiness. In the Middle Ages, Christianity taught that true happiness would not be found until the afterlife. The seven deadly sins are about earthly self-indulgence and narcissism. On the other hand, the 4 Cardinal Virtues and the 3 theological ones were supposed to keep one from sin. During the Renaissance and Age of Enlightenment, individualism came to be valued. Simultaneously, creative individuals gained prestige, as they were now considered to be artists, not just craftsmen. Utilitarian philosophers such as John Stuart Mill believed that moral actions are those actions that maximize happiness for the most number of people. Mill also coined one of my favourite quotes: “Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.” And therein lies Mill's path to happiness, really political self-determination. Thomas Jefferson and other proponents of democracy, many freemasons among them, believed that “Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” are inalienable rights, and that it justifies

the overthrow of the government of the day, and led to the birth of the US. The Romantics valued individual emotional expression and sought their emotional "true selves," which were unhindered by social norms. At the same time, love and intimacy became the main motivations for people to get married. In the twentieth century, psychologists began studying happiness. Freud's suggested that one's unconscious motivations could help make one happy or unhappy.

Which takes us to today within Society; the concept is viewed unfortunately almost as a weakness, especially corporately. Smiling people are somehow perceived as less enlightened, less mature, more naïve, they just don't get it and why shouldn't they share everyone's sense of ironic detachment and deep sarcasm. I believe that we are seeing a change though as more forward thinking institutions start to focus on work / life balance principles, recognizing that work is not life! As well, we have deep divisions between ideologies and religious extremisms that are driving our economy and foreign policy today, so how does that equate to happiness? The field of Psychology may bring more light:

The "broaden-and-build" theory of positive emotions suggests that positive emotions broaden one's awareness and encourage novel, varied, and exploratory thoughts and actions. This is in contrast to negative emotions, which prompt narrow survival-oriented behaviors. For example, the negative emotion of anxiety leads to the specific fight-or-flight response for immediate survival.

- "A systematic study of 22 people who won major lotteries found that they reverted to their baseline level of happiness over time, winding up no happier than 22 matched controls"
- "Within a few years, paraplegics wind up only slightly less happy on average than individuals who are not paralyzed"
- "[83 percent] of Americans report positive life satisfaction"
- "In wealthier nations ... increases in wealth have negligible effects on personal happiness"
- "Unlike money, which has at most a small effect, marriage is robustly related to happiness"

Positive psychology is a recent branch of psychology that "studies the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive." Positive psychologists seek "to find and nurture genius and talent," and "to make normal life more fulfilling," and to encourage wellness, not to cure mental illness, as has been the focus of the last fifty years or so of psychology. Martin Seligman is considered to be "the father of positive psychology." Practical applications of positive psychology include helping individuals and organizations correctly identify their strengths and use them to increase and sustain their respective levels of well-being. Therapists, counselors, coaches,

and various other psychological professionals can use the new methods and techniques to build and broaden the lives of individuals who are not necessarily suffering from mental illness or disorder.

Comments above on the role of governments and ideologies can lead us to a Political examination:

Research in the US has found that citizens who identify themselves as "conservative" are more likely to report being "happy" or "very happy" than those who consider themselves to be "liberal." On both sides of the political spectrum, extremists report being happier than moderates. Parents are more likely to report being happy than non-parents, and religious belief also appears to be positively correlated with happiness. Happiness is also correlated with the ability to rationalize or explain social and economic inequalities.

Interesting enough, given a recent MacLean's Canada Day study on key parameters of Canadian happiness, and comparing and contrasting that with the US. "While they've been pursuing happiness, we've been achieving it." Parameters include:

- Family net worth (24% higher in Canada,) and
- Median household income (4% lower in Canada),
- Personal debt (42% higher in the US ouch!).

And to earn slightly larger homes on average, and higher median incomes, what's the cost? Specifically the cost in time, again, our most precious non-renewable personal commodity?

- Average number of hours worked per week, Canada 35, US, 38.
- Percent who work 45 hours or more, Canada 30%, US 38%.
- Number of vacation days taken, Canada 17, US 14.
- Percent who have dinner at home with the family every night, Canada 40%, US 28%.
- Percent who consume alcohol at least a few times a week, Canada 27%, US 19%.

Where's the joy? Other societal parameters, health, travel, relationships, crime rate, you get the picture! Rather than define our society as Canadians but what we are not, I point to the usefulness of the parameters as our own personal yardsticks. Our relationships, our work week, our % of time home with the family every night for dinner. In short, our time for happiness.

So back to Aristotle:

Aristotle believed that happiness, is constituted by rational activity in accordance with virtue over a complete life.

Aristotle contended that happiness could not be found only in pleasure, as "it would be absurd if the end were amusement and if trouble and hardship throughout life would all be for the sake of amusing oneself." He also surmised that it was not in only fame and honor, as "it seems to be more superficial than what we are looking for, since it rests in the man who gives the honor rather than in him who receives it." He concludes that happiness is found "by ascertaining the specific function of man. In the case of flute players, sculptors, and all craftsmen - indeed all who have some function and activity - 'good' and 'excellent' reside in their function. Now the same will be true of man, if he has a peculiar function to himself." So in other words, happiness is where you find it!

A person that does this is the happiest because they are fulfilling their purpose or nature as found in the rational soul. In other words, the thinker is not only the 'best' person, but is also most like God.

Which leads us to a Spiritual evaluation of Happiness:

Judaism promotes a divine command theory of happiness: happiness and rewards follow from following the commands of the divine.

In Catholicism, the ultimate end of human existence consists in felicity, or "blessed happiness", described by the 13th-C. philosopher-theologian Thomas Aquinas as a Beatific Vision of God's essence in the next life.

As an example, according to Augustine's Confessions, he lived much of his life without God. After a youth of indulgence he experienced some personal tragedies and he turned to God for answers. He turned to God to find true happiness, and was converted to Christianity. He found that true happiness can only come from a relationship with God, and appreciating God's creation for His sake, and not its own.

Happiness forms a central theme of Buddhist teachings. For ultimate freedom from suffering, the Eightfold Path leads its practitioner to Nirvana, a state of everlasting peace. In this teaching, ultimate happiness is only achieved by overcoming craving in all forms. More mundane forms of happiness, such as acquiring wealth and maintaining good friendships, are also recognized as worthy goals for lay people. Buddhism also encourages the generation of lovingkindness and compassion, the desire for the happiness and welfare of all beings.

One of the core concepts in Buddhism is that of Dharma, also a central concept in Hinduism. Dharma is about expressing and acting according to your core nature. This eliminates potential causes of 'disharmony' in the mind and leads to happiness.

Which leads us inevitably to Masonically:

Masons: the stuff of happiness? I suspect we've all been asked the perennial question about the Craft, the one we all struggle with answering, "What's it all about?" In my short years as a Mason, my answer is getting more refined, more distilled, and more impactful. I answer that at the core, it's about our personal happiness.

We've seen in the above that the threads of simplicity, beauty and harmonious behaviour are historic keys to happiness. We also find that democracy and self determination are viewed similarly, and that a personal relationship with a supreme being, however he is perceived and a spiritual awareness is a common thread of unlocking happiness. As well, a pursuit of excellence in whatever we do is a recurring theme, as is a balanced life, which manifests itself for us into doing what is within the length of our cable tows.

What drives us to come to Lodge, and be committed, as our most precious resource is time? The joy and bliss and wellness of being accepted and found worthy within a like-minded group of our peers, who we respect is surely the ultimate expression of that pursuit of Masonic happiness. One can only imagine the joy that our ancient brethren felt in coming together within their operative lodges for a shared purpose. We have examples of Masonic happiness throughout the ritual, but here is my favourite along with the one from the working tools that I used to open the speech: From The General Charge:

"I therefore shall trust that we have but one aim, to please each other and unite in the Grand Design of being happy, and communicating happiness."