

April 2011

Happiness

By John Zerzan

Is happiness really possible in a time of ruin? Can we somehow flourish, have complete lives? Is joy any longer compatible with the life of today?

A deep sense of well-being has become an endangered species. How often does one hear "It is good to be here"? (Matthew 17:4, Luke 9:5, Luke 9:33) or Wordsworth's reference to "the pleasure which there is in life itself"? Much of the prevailing condition and the dilemma it poses is expressed by Adorno's observation: "A wrong life cannot be lived rightly."

Very often, to be sure, happiness is approached in terms of what it *isn't*. Walter Kerr's *The Decline of Pleasure* opens with this: "I am going to start out by assuming that you are approximately as unhappy as I am." "We are a society of notoriously unhappy people," according to Erich Fromm. But we are not supposed to go around admitting this bottom-line truth about ourselves and society. Various contemporary theorists, by the way, have steadily chipped away at the very notion of the self, redefining it as nothing more than an intersection of shifting discourses. When the self is all but erased, "happiness" can no longer even be a valid topic.

Mass society restricts "happiness" to the spheres of consumption and distraction to a great degree. Yet happiness remains an experience of fullness, rather than seriously misguided efforts to fill emptiness. Many studies show that happiness levels fall with increasing accumulation of wealth. In removing ourselves from nature, we become insensible to its wholeness and approach it as another passive object to be consumed.

The sources of happiness lie in various spheres of our lives, but characteristically these are not so separate. Human life has never been lived in isolation, so we seek experiences that are more than just meaningful for ourselves alone. Vivasvan Soni's insight says a lot: "No part of life can be bracketed as irrelevant to happiness. All of life counts infinitely. There is no greater tragedy than unhappiness, and no greater responsibility for us than happiness."

In my experience, the cornerstone of happiness is love. Here is the dimension where we find the greatest fulfillment. Frantz Fanon, better known for his work on other subjects, subscribed to a standard of "authentic love--wishing for others what one postulates for oneself." There are other satisfactions, but do they match the satisfying and enriching quality of love relations? If a child has love and protection, there is the basis for happiness throughout life. If neither is provided, his or her prospects are very limited. If only one of them is to be given, I think that love outranks even protection or security in terms of the odds for happiness.

The new century exhibited the Romantic emphasis on joy rather than happiness (Blake, Wordsworth, et al.), with joy's strong connotation of that which is fleeting. Transient indeed was the hymn to a hopeful future expressed in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, in particular its final movement based on Schiller's "Ode to Joy." The work has justly been termed the last serious music expressing happiness/joy. As industrial life began to spread, it can be no coincidence that Hegel saw human history as the record of irredeemable misfortune.

Modern wage labor and political social contract theorizing (Rousseau, the U.S. Constitution, etc.) legitimated the pursuit of *private* happiness. In the public sphere, the question of general happiness was downplayed. Reward became the name of the game. For Hegel, property and personality were almost synonymous; Marx associated happiness with the satisfaction of interests alone.

Jean-François Lyotard placed "the withdrawal of the real" at the center of the experience of modernity. We are losing the referents, the real things, felt contact with what is non-simulated. How could

happiness not decline in the bargain? It has declined; the technoculture's ascent is the descent of happiness. Today's dreary, isolating technological frenzy keeps sinking it further, with various pathological effects. But our quest remains what it was for Spinoza: the search for happiness, with the reality of our bodies in a real, bodily world.

In the 1890s Anton Chekhov visited Sakhalin Island, with its Gilyak hunter-gatherers. He observed that they had not yet come to grips with roads. "Often," he noted, "you will see them...making their way in single file through the marshes beside the road." They were always somewhere, and were uninterested in being nowhere, on industrialism's roadway. They had not yet lost the singularity of the present, which technology exactly takes away. With our dwindling attention spans, foreshortening shallowness of thought, and thirst for diversions, how much are we actually in the world? The disembodied self becomes increasingly disengaged from reality, including emotional reality.

But what is abstract about happiness? Its states are complete at each moment—each embodied moment. "Each happiness comes for the first time," as Levinas realized. Czeslaw Milosz described his happy childhood: "I lived without yesterday or tomorrow, in the eternal present. That is, precisely, the definition of happiness." Postmodern irony and detachment, with their bedrock of embracing the technosphere, constitute one more means of wresting us from the present moment.

A most basic human longing is to belong, to experience union with something other than oneself. Bruno Bettelheim described a feeling, engendered in his case by great art, "of being in tune with the universe... [of] all needs satisfied. I felt as though I were in touch—in communication with man's past and connected with his future." He associated this with Freud's "oceanic feeling," the sensation of "an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole."

I think it plausible to see this as vestigial—as a visceral, surviving link to a previous condition. There is a great deal of anthropological/ethnological literature describing indigenous peoples who live in oneness with the natural world and one another. Survival itself necessitated a borderlessness between inner and outer worlds. Our ultimate survival requires that we recover that oneness. At times we still feel a return to that unified state. Fairly often in psychological counseling, there is a search for a time in childhood when one was healthy and happy.

Freud counterposed civilization and happiness because civilization [domestication, more precisely] is "based on compulsory labor and instinctual renunciation." "Having to fight against the instincts is the formula for decadence; so long as life is ascending, happiness and instinct are one thing," observed Nietzsche.

The internalization and universalization of this renunciation of freedom is what Freud called sublimation. As Norman O. Brown saw it, sublimation "presupposes and perpetuates the loss of life and cannot be the mode in which life itself is lived." The very progress of civilization requires an even greater measure of renunciation, an even greater setting ourselves apart from our environment. And yet the "oceanic feeling" can still be powerfully felt, recalling that earlier state of being. How much fresher, more vivid and more valued life can feel after a serious illness; this may be the case upon our recovery from the sickness we call civilization.

**John Zerzan is an American philosopher and author. His books include "Running on Emptiness" (2002) and "Against Civilisation: Readings and Reflections" (2005).*