



HAPPINESS IS AN INSIDE JOB

Happiness is elusive for many people and we often search for it in all the wrong places! We seek happiness in the instant gratification of our desires, in the accumulation of possessions, accolades or relationships, in our accomplishments or in the delights of our physical senses. The pursuit of happiness motivates many of our actions and efforts in life. We spend a great deal of time, effort and money in the acquisition of 'things' believing that once we have the right partner, house, car, bank balance, physical attributes, possessions, holidays or children we will be satisfied and fulfilled, that happiness will descend upon us and remain our constant companion. We all want to be happy and avoid suffering as much as possible. Yet many of us have found that it is suffering that breaks us open to compassion, wisdom and understanding. It is often our suffering that enables us to realise that happiness is not derived from the outer circumstances of our lives – that indeed, happiness is an inside job.

Perhaps it is a quirk of human nature that we don't actively seek the ingredients for real happiness until the unexpected, the unasked for and sometimes, the unthinkable happens in our life. Life is full of uncertainties. Our struggle for understanding and acceptance can cause us to find and honour the great spirit within ourselves and in so doing we find self-understanding, resolution, humour, courage, wisdom and more. In human form we can discover the peace that passes all understanding, where we are no longer defined by our physical limitations or attributes or our mental and emotional turbulence. Real happiness is not disturbed by the outer circumstances of our life. Indeed real happiness is not disturbed by trauma, tragedy, illness or death of our physical body. I have witnessed many people who, at the time of their death, were able to let go lightly of their physicality and dissolve into the great mystery from whence we come.

From the moment of our birth, our consciousness begins to enmesh itself into our physical body according to the feelings we experience. Before birth we rely on 'womb service', after birth, time will tell. The feelings we experience have as much a biological impact as an emotional one. Whether we feel safe, secure, loved, cared for, valued and joyful or deprived, fearful, neglected, abandoned, abused or rejected, the chemicals of our feelings flood from our brain and body and provide biological information to the cells of our body.

In the first few days and weeks of life a baby doesn't really understand that it is physically embodied. If their limbs are left to jerk about uncontrollably he or she doesn't yet understand what these new sensations mean. At about six or seven weeks a baby catches sight of its own hands, studies them and gradually learns that they have a direct relationship with him or herself. The baby's focus is then on getting their physical body to respond to their desires to roll over, crawl, sit up, stand and accomplish a myriad of physical possibilities. In the best of all possible worlds, everyone in the family cheers and claps whenever the baby accomplishes any of



these feats and the baby feels fabulous and rewarded for their efforts. We *feel* that we are absolutely gorgeous, capable, amazing, lovable, loved and loving. This becomes our biology as well as forming a platform on which more complex experiences follow.

Babies radiate love and happiness effortlessly regardless of the colour, intellect, disability, religion or wealth of the people they encounter. However, in our early weeks, months and years we are immersed in the soup of our family's prejudices. We don't understand the intellectual concepts that our parents articulate but there is a *sound* around resentment and bitterness, a *sound* around anger and frustration, a *sound* around judgement, a *sound* around 'the others'. This is where we learn that there are people who belong to 'us or our group' and 'the others'. If you were born into a wealthy household then poor people may have been considered less. If you were born into a poor family, then wealthy people may have been considered as different because they have 'more'. If you were born into a Christian household then the Muslims may have been 'the others' and vice versa. Young children don't understand the 'why' but they do pick up the *feeling* that we must close our hearts to other people who are different from us. Depending on our family and what they value, we begin to see people who are richer or poorer, fatter or thinner, more or less educated, fitter or less so, happier or not, religious or atheist, intelligent or not so, as belonging to our culture or not as being different from ourselves – the 'others'.

As young children we also marinate in our family's, 'I'll be happy when...' story. We hear our parents and others proclaim that they'll be happy when they get a pay rise, a bigger car, lose a few pounds, start exercising, stop smoking, move to a better neighbourhood, when they go on holidays, when the washer in the bathroom tap is changed or the kitchen is renovated. Before long we believe that we will be happy when Christmas comes, when we go to school, when the exams are over, when we leave school, when we find the perfect partner, get qualified, have children, when they leave, when the divorce comes through or when we retire. In this way, we are deeply programmed to postpone our sense of happiness and contentment to a future time when things look different from how they are right now.

And, all this time, we are beginning to unconsciously adapt our behaviour to fit in with the environment into which we have been born. Perhaps if we have a loud and needy older sibling, we become the quiet one or the child that trades off her looks, or of being a brave boy, or the bright one, the funny one, the athletic one, the peacemaker or the responsible one. From listening to well over 60,000 stories from people who have sought counselling with me or attended our residential programs at the Quest for Life Centre, it seems that most of us adopt a particular persona that will work within the dynamics of our own family.

So, we arrive upon the planet as a fairly clean slate. We then feel our way into existence by mastering our bodily functions and receiving feedback, by absorbing the family's values and judgments, by adapting to the family environment into which we are born, by learning to postpone our sense of happiness to a future time, by feeling our way into an identity which will (hopefully) meet our needs for love, attention and care. Much of this biology is established through our feeling experience by the time we are aged three, before we even have a language in which to articulate our experience. We then build beliefs that explain to ourselves why we 'feel' that way.



Such beliefs could be, 'I'm better than (or, not as good as) everybody else', 'life's a struggle', 'I have to earn my right to exist', 'no one understands or loves me', 'I'm a disappointment', 'my value lies in my 'doing', not in my 'being', 'I'm unlovable' and so on. Our beliefs then dictate our behaviours, our choices.

Gradually, it becomes second nature for us to feel a particular way, to think a particular way, to react in a particular way. We all seem to understand what we mean by second nature. The issue is what is your first nature?

The search for happiness generally continues until life brings us some obstacles that cause us to question our existence and ponder how we might embrace the challenge that faces us. This challenge to our happiness might be a disappointment, a diagnosis, a disaster, a drama. Suddenly we are stopped in our tracks and we question ourselves and how we might proceed. This is a marvellous moment in time when we say to ourselves, 'something's got to change, and it's me!' We realise that it's not about changing the outer circumstances of our life, but how we perceive and respond to these outer circumstances.

I well remember the day when this happened to me, when I realised that there was nothing to blame for my own misery. I was sitting in a small cave within a monastery in Assisi (OK), Italy (OK). I had secluded myself from the world to find some peace as I was grappling with illness and my imminent death from leukaemia. I could still be sitting there, a dusty little pile of bones now, muttering to myself, "it's not fair! I shouldn't have had a weird brother who told me, before he was ten years old, that he had to kill himself by the time he was thirty; I shouldn't have had years in hospital and multiple surgeries to my legs in my teen years; I shouldn't have been raped; I shouldn't have got into drugs; I shouldn't have been crippled with arthritis; I shouldn't have had domestic violence and emotional abuse in my relationships; my brother shouldn't have committed suicide; I shouldn't have leukaemia, it's not fair!" But I realised that those things *had* happened and the challenge became, 'am I willing to be defined by what has happened to me or can I be more than that?' I knew I could trade of the wounds of the past as an excuse for my behaviour in the present or I could choose to see them as opportunities for healing and release.

Life provides us with endless opportunities to relinquish everything that has become second nature to us so that we consciously experience our first nature, which is love. Indeed, the sole/soul purpose of human existence is to release everything that has become second nature to us so that we can reveal our first nature. Once we understand this, life becomes an opportunity to embrace every moment with an open heart, free of judgement and a clear and quiet mind. Then, happiness is ours.