

Florian Langenscheidt:  
About Happiness

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Why do we spend so much time worrying? What is the point of politics, ethics, law, or medicine? What is the point of living - if it isn't to achieve happiness? Whether for the short term or the long term, whether seen from the point of view of the individual or from that of society, what principle should guide our actions, thoughts and judgments if not that of the *summum optimum*, "the greatest happiness of all"?

This goal should organize all of our striving as a measure of whether we are using the time allotted to us here as we should. We might ask: Will this war truly make the people happier over the long term? Will a particular advance in genetic technology with its inherent possibilities and risks increase humankind's chances for happiness or does it portend danger? This is the kind of questioning required if we are to address life's difficult ethical dilemmas. Can there be any other goal of our decisions and actions?

Nonetheless, the quest for *summum optimum* or "the greatest happiness of all" receives scant attention in our world. We seem to be on the wrong path. Why is this so?

Constant stress and the flood of details keep us distracted from our inner voice, and we go through our day like a hamster on a wheel.

The ever-present images of advertising immerse us in visions promising happiness that is exaggerated to such a degree that serious people shudder and turn away for relief. What kind of happiness is that, if it can be conjured up by clean laundry, the latest model car, or a healthy margarine on the breakfast table - all guaranteed, of course, to instantly put a smile on our face?

It is easy to see that any discussion of happiness leaves me open to the reproach of being thought superficial or naive. In view of the state the world is in, how could a serious person bother with such a lightweight subject? Isn't it obvious that we human beings are not cut out for happiness? And even if happiness should come our way, isn't it likely to be by accident and fleeting?

Such have been the arguments of intellectuals. And we all seem to have been convinced. So, it is clear why they may frown when they even hear the word "happiness". Psychologists would be out of work if the vision of universal happiness were to be realized – happy people are not the ones who call for appointments. Journalists, no doubt, find happiness dull because "only bad news is good news". Writers, too, much prefer to write about failed or impossible love than a fulfilling one. Great cultural achievements in general – as Freud attempted to show - arise only from delayed gratification, sublimation and repression of the pleasure principle. Happiness is simply not available ready to wear and, given the state the world is in, it is only the naïve who can experience it. Moreover, happiness cannot be forecast, explained or systematized; it cannot be categorized - it remains something almost magical. This is the conclusion of most intellectuals from the most varied disciplines.

And what do the philosophers tell us? After all, they profess to seek the purpose of life and to search for the meaning of our existence. Cicero proclaimed that "examining the happy life is philosophy's sole objective."

In fact, the number of essays and pamphlets is truly impressive: Epicurus, Plato and Aristotle, John Locke and Diderot, Lao' tse' and Confucius, Kant, Feuerbach, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, Marcuse, Adorno, Russell, Bloch and Watzlawick – all have studied happiness. Thomas Aquinas meditated on the subject and Hegel found that periods of happiness are only blank pages in the world's history. Nonetheless, after having closely reviewed the thinking on this subject, one is left with the uneasy feeling of remaining unenlightened. Some thinkers approach the goal of happiness from the purely ideal, others from a purely materialistic viewpoint. One takes a mechanical-mathematical approach, another a mystical approach. Some isolate the individual and believe that happiness can only be achieved in pursuit of self-interest; others see "the conquest of happiness" as a mass movement that can be planned. It is remarkable that each of these great thinkers tests a particular worldview on a subject, the complexity of which condemns them to failure and lays bare their ideological narrowness. It is hard to know whether such fateful tunnel vision is due to a lack of experience on the part of the philosophers or whether the right side of the brain, intuition and gut feelings have simply been ignored.

The important thing, however, is that we must not let the prejudices and biases of influential thinkers distract us from the significance of happiness in our thoughts, decisions and actions. These thinkers have achieved a great deal in other areas but they have contributed little to our understanding of human happiness. It is an immense and extremely important field for research that approaches happiness unconstrained by ideology. Let us work this field with diligence and imagination and hope for a harvest that is both productive and inspiring to humanity.

After taking a first turn around this appealing terrain we can already say:

Happiness transcends the question of meaning. People who are happy do not ask themselves why this is so.

Happiness defies any objective concept of time. According to the German proverb "Dem Glücklichen schlägt keine Stunde" [When we are happy, time stands still.] – and in view of the beauty of the moment, Goethe's Faust desires only one thing: that it should linger. Happiness may only last a matter of seconds but can, in perceived time, seem like a small eternity; or it can last for months and seem like an instant of heaven. What is more, pleasurable anticipation of an event is often more beautiful than the happy experience itself.

Happiness magically eludes any systematization or any specific purpose. It comes and goes and can be controlled only to a limited degree. Expert advice, self-realization seminars or entreaties, such as "Don't worry, be happy!", are all to no avail. Happiness simply happens to us when we least expect it and is glaringly absent where we might most expect it – perhaps at a Christmas celebration, on a honeymoon or during a graduation ceremony.

We have all had the experience of being in an excellent mood without really knowing why. It often is the case, too, that we realize only after the fact how happy a situation has made us.

We may try to control happiness and unhappiness: lottery tickets and insurance policies are striking examples. But, it doesn't work.

In fact, happiness derives from unhappiness. It thrives on the contrast. And, happiness alone is not enough - any more so than is eating only chocolate or always kissing as the sun sets.

These are just a few observations from the edge of the field where happiness blooms.

But what can be said about the substance of happiness? What is growing on this field? What does a person need to be happy?

The German writer Theodor Fontane told us succinctly: "Ein gutes Buch, ein paar Freunde, eine Schlafstelle und keine Zahnschmerzen." [A good book, friends, a place to sleep and no toothache.] While that is charmingly put and would find general agreement, it isn't enough. Every life experience across all personal, historical and national boundaries shows that efforts to define the substance of happiness are doomed. Happiness is as individual as our eyes and our smile. One person's happiness is another's ennui. Someone may adore listening to opera; someone else may be transported by the gleam of their newly washed automobile. Some fans are happy when the New England Patriots win the Super Bowl, others if the South Carolina Panthers are victorious. And even fanatical, religiously motivated suicide bombers are probably happy in some perverse way at the moment of their act.

Nonetheless, there are conditions under which the plants on our research tract will thrive and, the absence of which usually leads to a field barren of happiness. These conditions are deeply rooted in the makeup of the human species and are essential ingredients to the recipe for a happy life. In terms of logic, they are neither necessary nor sufficient but are extremely important for happiness. Although happiness is possible for a short while without one or the other, for the long term, human happiness requires at least a majority of them to blossom.

Ten such climatic and soil conditions favor the seeds of happiness and are very likely anthropological constants. They are as follows:

#### 1. You cannot lean on your own shoulder

What makes you happier – to love or to be loved? To give or to receive?

We don't have to belabor the obvious: Of course, happiness and a prosperity are the result of a certain amount of competitiveness, ambition and a healthy dose of egoism. Certainly, the capitalist system is the only one that results in material advancement. And, of course, it bears within it the seeds of the predatory struggle for survival of the fittest –which is the motor of progress.

However, capitalism must be imbued with a sense of humanity and compassion. The "every-man-for-himself" ethic of an indifferent society is inconsistent with human nature. You cannot lean on your own shoulder. And kissing yourself on a cold mirror is no substitute for the real thing.

We know from business experience that team results are superior to individual effort and that teamwork often entails considerable effort in adapting to others and keeping them involved in the process.

We know from sports and the media that, over time, team sports are more entertaining and successful than individual sports.

We know from evolutionary research that the nature of the individual is insignificant and that only the maintenance of the species matters.

We know from psychology that the path to personal happiness always follows a detour involving the happiness of others – in other words, our engagement with family, friends or others paradoxically makes us happier than always just looking after our own interests.

We need one another in a fundamental, existential sense – and not only in friendships, in school classes, on teams, in love and passion, or for reproduction. We need the pact between parents and children, whom they launch into life through the teaching and love they give them, so that the children in their turn will look after their aging parents. For social security, we need the pact between the generations of those who are working and those who are retired. For peace and stability in an ever-shrinking and interdependent world, we must attempt to meet the basic needs of the poorest of the poor; otherwise, we will experience more kamikaze attacks on skyscrapers and suicide bombings. On this planet, human beings are angels with only one wing; when we come together through love, we gain a second wing and can fly.

Paradoxically, all of this goes back to self-interest, the main spring of capitalism and market economics. My life cannot be happy and successful unless, along with satisfying my interests, it is also dedicated to the happiness and success of others. Preaching about rewards need not be restricted to the rewards in heaven. We get rewards here and now in the form of tremendous satisfaction by stepping out of our own narrow sphere and feeling ourselves as part of something greater. To use the language of golf, the perfect swing, that magic moment when everything comes together, leads away from me.

## 2. Laughter brings relief

If you ask couples that have been happily married for over fifty years what their secret is, they invariably mention a sense of humor. If we can't laugh at ourselves and others, it definitely makes life harder. If we can't see the humorous side of our failings, then we are more likely to truly fail. Even incurable illness can be endured more easily with a sense of humor.

## 3. Friendship is indispensable...

Look at children, for example. Friendship in kindergarten is absolute! Out of an entire gaggle of four-year olds, our children always manage to pick three who become "their" friends. There are no excuses and no alternatives. It is clear how deeply rooted friendships are in human beings and how unimaginable life is without friends. Where does such a feeling come from? Why this particular person and not some other one? Each of us meets a countless number of people in life but, suddenly, someone is there into whose eyes we gaze a bit longer. We sense that we have something in common and experience a feeling of liking. This feeling of comfort can make touching the other person's arm seem natural. We laugh together and a delightful feeling of closeness grows; we simply enjoy and look forward to each other's company. Aristotle sums it up wonderfully with: "A friend is one soul in two bodies".

That is the matrix in which this existential bond develops. Friends can talk about anything, they can be critical of each other without injuring and still accept each other as they are. No need to play a role or put on a show. There is nothing to prove, no

danger of seeming ridiculous or being dropped. Friendship challenges us to truly be ourselves.

That is one element.

The other is that friends are there for each other. They are ready to help any place and any time, to make sacrifices. They can count on each other during good times or bad.

During good times, friendship is cozy and cushions us. And during bad times, it holds us back from precipitous behavior - whether during puberty or a midlife crisis; it provides a safety net and a sense of belonging and becomes an alter ego that protects us – sometimes even from ourselves. Without friendship, happiness is hard to imagine.

#### 4. ... A life without love? No thanks!

What might a wise father respond to his young son's questions about his love for a certain Rebecca?

"Dear Son, what you are feeling is the most beautiful thing that can happen to us. It's a gift from heaven that lets us forget all the hurt and trouble in life. It is like a golden halo around our life.

If you were God and wanted to create the ideal woman, you would create Rebecca.

All other women are nothing in your eyes compared to her. You can't imagine life without her. You would like to carry her away, intoxicated by sunshine and love. Your only wish is to be with her and you may wonder if it is possible to die of joy.

Sometimes your love makes you feel terrible. Rebecca is the air you need to breathe; she is the star in your heaven, your heart and your other half. She is your all. Your soul follows hers – and hers yours. Every fiber of your being yearns for her.

You want to be with Rebecca – for hours, days, nights, forever. You will experience feelings and desire in their elemental form without compromise or questioning. Your thoughts will turn somersaults and your emotions will run away with you. And your resolve will weaken time and again.

You will want to strew pink marshmallows on her bed and plant garden hedges in a heart shape and throw her valuable watch overboard because time no longer matters to the two of you. Raindrops will be your tears during every second you cannot spend together. One thing alone will be on your wish list: You, You, forever You.

Without Rebecca, your life would seem worthless, dull, empty. Let me tell you, Son, that someone who has never been in love has not lived yet. We are creatures whose fulfillment lies in love. Love like yours and Rebecca's has given us timeless sonnets and odes to life."

I believe there is little one could add to this.

#### 5. We cannot live from love alone, alas!

Of course we can go hungry when in love and we experience unforgettable moments of happiness when roughing it on a shoestring budget. But over the long haul, happiness without satisfaction of the basic needs of food, drink, sleep, heat, housing and light is hard to imagine. Here again, in what combination and proportions is as individual a matter as our fingerprints.

## 6. The most important things are health and freedom from pain

Even patients in hospital suffering from cancer experience moments of happiness. Doctors rightly refuse to provide suicide pills for "just in case" and instead point out our incredible capacity to come to terms with life situations that we previously thought intolerable.

But all the same, happiness does not stand up against illness and pain, torture and violence, war and repression, accidents and disability, dependency and decline - neither for the person affected nor for those close to him or her. It is a tribute to humankind when people are able, by creative or stubborn effort, to wrest moments of happiness from lives wracked by illness and pain– but this is still achieved "in spite of". Happiness emphatically does not thrive on physical disability. The spirit, soul and body are too much a unity for that to be.

## 7. Build me a launching pad!

Those who have not experienced love in their formative years, who did not feel wanted and liked, who didn't feel that their well-being mattered to those about them, are handicapped on their journey towards happiness – which is like struggling through the heat of Ethiopia or carrying a heavy load.

Through love and caring, parents provide the underpinnings for their children to develop the capacity to be happy. By their behavior and their example and the way they raise their children, parents have the greatest role in training children to be happy and self-confident.

But, here, as well as with the other nine conditions for happiness, the same thing applies: anything can be compensated for and transcended, we can always find a way out, some exception, some escape. We know that influential public figures have often achieved their special stature by compensating for a difficult childhood. Again, we have the case of "in spite of"...

## 8. Stay alert for the little moments of happiness

In the search for Happiness with a capital "H", many of us overlook the fact that happiness is a patchwork of little moments. Those are the instances when we smile, pause, rejoice, laugh out loud or look into someone's eyes with delight. These moments form the fabric of anticipation and the texture of memory. They crop up in love or friendship, in a flirtation or in the family, at the dinner table or on a trip, with children or with colleagues, outdoors or at the movies. Here are a just few examples:

- A child's laughter;
- The spontaneous declaration that "I would marry you again any day!"
- Noticing how happy your grandmother is when you visit for tea and cookies;
- Having someone lovingly spread lotion on your back;
- A cold beer on a hot day;
- The start of vacation – and that first glimpse of the sea;

- Conjuring up a truly tasty dinner out of refrigerator leftovers;
- Losing five pounds;
- A rerouting of airport approach patterns after having lived in the flight path for twelve years;
- Breakfast in bed;

...

If we overlook such moments and focus only on graduations, promotions, sports championships and the Nobel Prize, we will miss out on happiness. We could do worse than to follow the advice of a recent billboard seen at many New York bus stops that said "if happiness is just around the corner, turn often!"

## 9. Grab hold of life and create something

Few people achieve happiness by sitting passively in a corner or on a bench. We seek to shape, create, undertake and, perhaps, even leave something behind that survives us. One person may model figures in clay, another may paint still-lives. Another may play jazz or start up a company. Someone else may give speeches, someone else run a children's service organization. One person may found a library while another may raise eight children. But all of them want to help shape the world in which we live - and leave behind a trace.

The will – and the drive – to create is also vitally important to experiencing happiness in our lives. Just how "real" is our reality? How much of what we judge as either "happy" or "unhappy" in our environment and our life is objectively fixed and how much of it is created by us? Let's take an example – a traffic jam. As you sit in your car and look around, the driver to your right may be getting so upset that he seems to be generating ulcers on the spot and nearly bites his steering wheel out of frustration. To your left, you may see someone else in the same objective situation; no one can do anything to change it - except perhaps the traffic engineers involved in long term planning. This second person may have just announced by cell phone that he would be twenty minutes late and now is enjoying listening to Norah Jones and thinking of his girlfriend.

Here we have identical situations, but one person despairs while the other is happy. The question remains: how "real" is reality? While I don't know how animal perception functions, a distinctive feature of the human condition is that we fashion, for the most part, reality for ourselves and thus our happiness as well - hopefully using imagination, projection, association, optimism and mental toughness. Just think of tennis: It is a truism that who wins is decided in the head, and, also, who disappears into the catacombs of Flushing Meadows and who accepts a large check and standing ovations and celebrates that evening with the most attractive men or women.

## 10. Managing Expectations

A Playboy model recently reported how hard it was to make men who were interested in her realize that she really did not look like her centerfold photo. Hours were spent before the photo shoot with makeup and hairdressing and, for days thereafter, the images were tweaked to perfection on a PC.

A plastic surgeon related that most of the young girls who come to him want to look like Britney Spears. These he always sends away because he knows he cannot make them happy. First of all, he would not be able to fulfill their wish, and secondly, even if he were to succeed outwardly, their inner dissatisfaction would frustrate any chance of happiness; soon, they would be looking for something else that is unattainable.

Groucho Marx gave us that wonderful statement that he would never join any club that would accept him as a member.

A BBC poll found that of 45,000 women surveyed, 60% of them could not bear the way they looked in the mirror.

So, what is the common thread in these unhappy scenarios? It is entirely unrealistic expectations that can never be fulfilled and hence provide a classical recipe for unhappiness.

Happy are those who set attainable goals and rejoice over every success!

Unhappy are those who set the bar unrealistically high and will accept nothing short of that.

According to the Brockhaus Encyclopedia, "happiness" is a "complex experience of joy in the face of fulfillment of hopes, wishes, expectations, the occurrence of positive events; the oneness of the person with her- or himself and that which is experienced."

This gives us ten climatic and soil conditions for the seedbed of happiness. Without them, happiness cannot thrive over an extended period of time. If these conditions are elements of your life, you have every reason to be thankful. They can provide the frame within which you will paint your own individual portrait, which in its particularity will be unlike any other.

If there are factors missing from this list generally considered to be important for happiness, they have been omitted on purpose. Ask yourself carefully whether each of the following genuinely correlates with personal happiness: intelligence, education, wealth, power, religious belief, refinement, intoxication or beauty.

Taking the last factor, beauty, as an example, how many top fashion models do you think feel empty and despairing and how many rather plain looking people are essentially at peace with themselves? But be careful of clichés in dealing with significant life questions. Let's get one other thing out of the way: age and happiness have very little relationship to each other. Here again, it is mental stamina that counts, along with managing your expectations, being realistic, and holding your own course. If kept in balance, they facilitate happiness at any age – but with appropriate differences. Passing the milestone birthdays is certainly no cause for ironic sympathy.

It is truly surprising how little we reflect on the purpose of our lives in an interdisciplinary, non-ideological fashion that is tempered with life experience. The

results of such reflection would be of great practical value and could help us decide how to live our lives. Many prejudices would wither, many surprises would crop up. And time and again, we would come up against the "in spite of" case and respectfully acknowledge how varied, shimmering and exciting the nearly seven billion fellow inhabitants of this planet are, in spite of the many basic anthropological constants described here.

In conclusion, there are a few thoughts I would like to share with you as you search for happiness:

Seek your own center, your own path. Face your fears - of life, of death, of being alone, of failure. Respect yourself and others. Seek inner tranquility and passion, humility and self-confidence in equal measures. Be open to the surprises that lie to the right or left of your path and hold onto your dreams. Respect and appreciate your limitations and remember that you are part of a greater whole. Be bold and modest at the same time. And don't neglect your capacity for joy, in spite of a world full of suffering.