

The Fine Art and Science of Happiness.

Sermon for May 2, 2004.

By Lone Jensen

Did you know that today May 2nd is the proclaimed official *World Laughter Day*? No? I did not either but as I researched this sermon I discovered that there is indeed a thriving, growing *Laughter Club International* whose entire mission is to help people come together and laugh, for no particular reason. They have a website and clubs all over the world. There are pictures of Swedes laughing, Saudi women laughing behind their veil, US Executives in suits attending a motivating laughter workshop (it may be better than the last workshop you went to) and a photo of ten thousand Danes gathered in front of city hall in Copenhagen for the world's largest *Laugh In*. The founder Dr. Katari had read Norman Cousins's book *Anatomy of an Illness* about the curative powers of Laughter. So he gathered some of his friends and colleagues in a Bombay park and they would laugh together. For the first few months they would tell jokes. But then they ran out of jokes and the jokes became negative. So from then on they just laughed all together for about twenty minutes. Now if you want to start your own club here is how it is done. Gather as many people as possible because people are less afraid to laugh in a group. You must all begin together as if running a race. The leader counts 1,2, 3 and everyone take a deep breath and begin saying: he, ho, ho, ho, he, he he, while looking deeply into each others eyes, This soon turns into real

laughter and with practice the group can go on for twenty minutes or so. Well, this does give me some ideas. Imagine a Presidential Cabinet meeting or a meeting of the Senate that begins with twenty minutes of pure non- ideological laughter? With everyone wearing Groucho Marx glasses? I fantasize about our next church board meeting. Well, we did wear clown noses once last spring when we made a final decision and offer on this building. It was 11 Pm and we were tired, something had to be done. How would the world be different if we did not take ourselves so desperately seriously most of the time? Would we make better decisions? Once we got past the fear of being foolish, of appearing idiotic, of being called ridiculous then would we be free to make the right decisions with a clear ego free mind? Surely there is such a thing as cosmic laughter in this amazing and sometimes quite absurd universe. God, Goddess or the absence thereof, if you prefer, surely has a sense of humor! In many cultures the fool is an agent of the sacred. The trickster tells us both how little we can control in this world and yet with an appreciative laughter help us feel, deep in our guts how much there is to be grateful for.

And that may well be part of the secret of to how to find lasting happiness. As Americans we really should be experts. No other country has the pursuit of happiness written into its birth certificate: Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. I thought that so amazing when I first learned about that in my Danish elementary school. Yes, we did think America must be a marvelous but peculiar land. Because how can anyone

control happiness? I grew up with one of those pondering, dark souls, a low set point for happiness and with those long winters, well it seemed to me that happiness was a sudden gift, an unexpected grace but not anything one could control. Well maybe that is the trouble. We, as a culture, do a lot of heavy pursuing and chasing of this happiness we feel entitled to.

So how are you doing in that department? Are you happy? What does happiness mean to you? Do you believe one can find lasting happiness? And how would one do so? For me as the resident holy woman and preacher person, I have to ask: Is there a theology of happiness? That last question at least I can answer: Yes, there is. It is called gratitude! But in regard to the other questions I need a lot of help. So I followed my old seminary ways: when in doubt: seek salvation by bibliography! And thus yesterday I sat with 16 pages of quotes on happiness and felt well: despair! The irony is not lost on me. But I did learn a lot. In fact I have enough for several sermons on this topic. So take these nuggets of considered wisdom, other's wisdom mostly, and use what you can. For there is now a science of happiness evolving. Dan Baker writes in his book *What Happy People Know: This new science proves, with cold facts and hard figures, that the same basic principles about happiness apply to virtually everyone, across all age groups, nationalities, and cultures*. Well that is encouraging. Wisdom of the ages is right. But why does it seem so hard to achieve? Let me read this passage:

*Where did we go so wrong? We went wrong, paradoxically, simply by evolving. Over the millennia our intellectual and spiritual development accelerated; our neocortical abilities have become far richer and more sophisticated than they were in earlier epochs. However our essential neural anatomy, first created about a million years ago, has remained relatively un-changed. So, now we're running space-age intellectual software with Stone Age neurological hardware. Now that rings true. Every day I sit in freeway traffic and feel the urge to flight or fight. I know the fleeting satisfaction of a great hunt in the jungle of musty libraries for sermon quotes or the roaming of the aisles in a department store for a cheap but beautiful dress. But in my innermost heart I never feel quite satisfied after these pursuits. It is a relief to know that I am not alone in this. As E. O. Wilson, the father of Evolutionary Psychology, puts it: "Human nature is a hodgepodge of special genetic adaptations to an environment largely vanished, the world of the Ice Age hunter-gatherer." That makes sense to me. In that distant world there never was enough of anything, food, shelter, warmth, comfort all were won with great effort and those who were fearful, alert and anxious about not having enough, those who were in fact never satisfied, those were the ones who survived. Baker writes: *Archaic, fear-inspired urges strongly influence the way we feel about the most insidious of all the happiness traps. This trap has en-slaved the hearts and souls of people since the beginning of civilization. It's money.* He is right. Money has become trophies in a*

world where *"They say that he who dies with the most toys, wins"* People hunt diamonds, planes, houses, paintings, and boats-but beneath the surface of their conversation people are talking about hunting down the one big prize that will finally free them from the two basic, survivalist fears that have haunted people since the Stone Age: the fears of not having enough and of not being enough. Now that explains a lot. Not having enough or not being enough? Which one do you fear most? In my life my fears tend to be more around not being enough, a deeply religious issue. My gratitude toward our UU faith goes deep: it tells me that we humans are enough, that we have an inherent dignity and worth that no one can take away from us. We are in the eyes of the beloved community and in the eyes of the holy, by whatever name we call it, loved and welcome as we are. But we may not feel that way. The concept of scarcity is so powerful. *In the dark recesses of our brains, free-floating fear tells us that We need more, more, more.* No one feels rich. *In a Gallup Poll, the respondents said that 21 percent of all Americans were rich. But only one-half of 1 percent said that they themselves were rich. People making \$10,000 a year believed that those who made \$50,000 were rich, and those who made \$50,000 thought that people making \$200,000 were rich. Those making \$200,000 were still scared of their burgeoning bills and feeling the heat of perceived scarcity.*

So listen to Dan Baker's good advice: *You'll probably never feel as if you have enough money. It's time for you to rise above it.*

One of my definitions of addiction is that you are only addicted to what you really don't need. Television plays a large role in this myth of achieving happiness through buying. *Shortly after TV was introduced, in the 1950, because of government regulations, TV stations were first allowed to broadcast in just 34 cities in 1951, and then in 34 more cities in 1955. In 1951, the first 34 cities in which TV was allowed, the rate of petty theft and larceny increased dramatically. Then, in 1955, the same increase in property crime was experienced in the next 34 cities. Researchers concluded that TV hyped material status so flagrantly that people became willing to steal to achieve it*

Scary I think. But there is more. The thirties' depression was miserable. But most people had very little and so fewer felt they were worth less because of poverty. Today we know all too well what we are missing. The anger in other poorer nations is more intense because we North Americans seem to have so much. High and false expectations make us unhappy. We will never be as rich pretty, happy or whatever as those ads promise. Status does not give us happiness. Yet we frantically pursue what we think will make us happy but it never does. So move on, we want more of it and all this pursuit only feeds the same fears that made us unhappy. Here are some happiness myths: You can buy it. You can gain lasting happiness by more and more pleasure seeking. You would be happy if only you could resolve the past. If only I worked on my weakness

and overcame it I would be happy. And the really impossible one, force it: I will be happy! Right now! That is an order!

But what does produce real happiness? To feel we have a choice is very important, as is personal power. Not power over others but power from within. The psychologist David Seligman wrote about a series of experiments where some dogs would receive electric shocks in closed cages with no hope of escape. Over time some dogs just gave up and even when put in a cage with a door open to escape they would just lie down and take it. He writes: *The stress of learned helplessness can perpetuate a cycle of negative thoughts. When this cycle of helplessness takes over the mind, it contributes to three primary errors of perception. These are: Permanence-thinking that a problem will last forever. Personalization-thinking that every problem is your fault. Pervasiveness-thinking that one problem extends to every situation.* Though I cringe at the descriptions of the experiments he has a good point. How many of us, otherwise intelligent, capable, accomplished human beings still freeze in certain situations? We all revert to old patterns given enough stress. My reptilian brain is always waiting underneath my civilized cortex ready to raise its ugly scaly head. After a difficult meeting and a long day when I drive home on that dark road, this fear slithers up to me and whisper in my inner ear: You should have known better, see you really messed up, etc. That ancient fear of *not being enough* feeds on not enough sleep or fun. Yes, I have told myself things no good minister should ever say to anyone. How

easy it is to forget that we ourselves hold the key to our soul's prison! We are not helpless and never hopeless, any of us. But it is so tempting and can even be comforting to believe otherwise. For years I worked hard to overcome a difficult childhood. Spent many hours trying to make it all right. Until I realized that was an impossible quest. *Old pain is still pain, and the recollections of it will always hurt. There's no pathology in being troubled by a troublesome past. It's normal, a sign of health. It makes you human. As Dr. Martin Seligman said, "It's as if some idiot raised the ante on what it takes to be a normal human being." Life hurts. If it doesn't hurt some of the time, it's not life. But you can't allow yourself to get wrapped up in this hurt. Other people can hurt you, but only you can victimize yourself.* I agree. I am grown now, matured, proud of every single gray hair, of good vintage and no one's victim anymore. I can learn from my past but I live now.

There are two more points I want to make. A life in balance, which is one of my growing edges, is essential for human happiness. This is where we must be prophets in society. The work world today is demanding the opposite. Think of your life as a circle. *There are three primary components of life: relationships, health, and purpose (which is usually but not always work). Many people, though, put all their energy into just one area. The most common choice is work.* How is your pie chart? You might try a little adjustment geometry if one aspect takes over most of your time. Divide that pie more equitably.

I have saved the most important message for last. There are ways to feel happier, to be happy, that are not easy but can give you real peace. Our Universalists forebears were right: it is love. Love as compassion, love as appreciation. What some call agape: a universal love that encompasses all and asks nothing in return. David writes: *In the struggle for happiness, there is only one special quality of love that really matters. That element of love is appreciation. Appreciation is the highest, purest form of love. It is the type of love that can blossom even when it is not returned. Appreciation asks for nothing, and gives everything. When you enter into the active condition of appreciation-whether over something as common as a sunset or as profound as the love in your child's eyes-your normal world stops and a state of grace begins.*

This I also believe. Those who choose to make of their lives a creation of such compassion are more peaceful and relaxed. Once Mohandas Gandhi was asked, *"You have been working at least 15 hours a day, every day, for almost 50 years. Don't you think it's time for a vacation?"* Gandhi replied, *"I am always on vacation*

If appreciation is a form of grace then science now recognizes it. Our brainwaves are different when we see and experience love or beauty *our brain, heart, and endocrine system work in synchrony. During active appreciation the threatening messages from your amygdala and the anxious instincts of your brainstem are cut off from access to your brain's neo-cortex, where they can fester and turn your stream of thoughts into a*

cold river of dread. It is a fact of neurology that the brain cannot be in a state of appreciation and a state of fear at the same time. The two states are mutually exclusive.

Try that next time you speak badly to yourself. Driving home instead of listening to my reptile berates my performance, I will stop and instead look at the moon and the night sky and the vast desert and see what a beautiful place we live in. It is what we have been given, by fate or an unknown God or by the immense universe. This world of love and beauty is ours to see and to appreciate. Death does not take away that kind of grace either. Nothing really can. At Memorial Services I have seen again and again how out of despair can grow deep love. With a profound appreciation for the real person who is now gone, hope is resurrected and give strength to the living. We often laugh as we tell stories and remember. Yes, gratitude is indeed the theology of happiness. So if you want lasting happiness you might ask yourself: how do I want to be remembered? Once I am gone what do I want people to say? To ask the right questions is essential. One of them is: *what does your life stand for?*

Let me close with this definition of happiness by Dan Baker
This is happiness: bittersweet, often broken, a poem sometimes left unspoken-full of longing and opportunity missed, made wise by sorrows that never last, a promise to ourselves, from deep in the past. A future with fears that never arrive: This is happiness-this moment, this now- this being alive. Amen, Shalom, Namaste, Insh'Allah, Ahoh, Blessed Be!

