

“The Geography of Bliss”     Rev. Martha Hodges  
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“I am not a happy person, never have been... For most of human history, I would have been considered normal. Happiness, in this life, on this earth, was a prize reserved for the gods and the fortunate few. Today, though, not only is happiness considered possible for anyone to attain, it is expected. Thus I, and millions of others, suffer from the uniquely modern malady that historian Darrin McMahon calls ‘the unhappiness of not being happy.’ It is no fun at all...” (*Eric Weiner*)<sup>i</sup>

## Sermon

What about you? Do you believe that your state of mind, whether your basic emotional makeup is sunny or bleak, is something that you lug around with you from place to place – something you’re more or less stuck with, thanks to genetics or early experience, or some combination of these? Or are you among those who believe that moving to that Caribbean island, or winning the lottery, or building your dream house really would change your view of the world? That living the life of ease, or marrying the person of your dreams would inevitably change you from an essentially grumpy person into a lighthearted soul?

These have been questions for the philosophers, and sometimes theologians, until quite recently. Within the last ten year or so, we’ve seen the development of something called the Science of Happiness, or Positive Psychology. Neuroscientists, psychologists and sociologists have turned their attention to figuring out scientific answers to what used to be questions of opinion: what *is* happiness, exactly? Can it be measured? Can it be increased? And where is it found?

It turns out that genetics is about 50% responsible for your disposition, your tendency to see the glass half full or half empty, according to these scientists. It also turns out that happiness is more than pleasure. Pleasure is fleeting, as we all know. And it turns out that some of our common assumptions about happiness – that where we live doesn’t really make that much difference to our happiness, for example – are just wrong. As Eric Weiner confirmed in his search for happiness, culture has a huge amount to do with our happiness. His research, confirmed by his experiences in Switzerland, Iceland, Moldova, Thailand, Bhutan and the Netherlands, brought home to him the conclusion that our individual happiness has an awful lot to do with our collective happiness.

We are social creatures. Even introverts can’t be happy on an uninhabited island. We learn to be happy or unhappy from our surroundings. We learn what to expect from life from others around us. Can other people be trusted? How much money do we really need? Is the world basically benevolent or malevolent? How much happiness do we need, and deserve? Culture is all-important, it turns out, to our happiness. If our fellow-citizens are miserable, if they *expect* to be miserable, or dissatisfied, or just generally glum, chances are, we will be, too.

I’ve never been much of a believer in national character. Maybe that’s because I’m an American. In this country with its multitude of cultures, ethnic and national backgrounds, its great regional and socioeconomic variations, who would be foolish enough to try to generalize about us? By the way, on this Super Bowl Sunday, let me share with you the results of a study that was done several years ago. It seems that the one cultural experience that transcends

such American divisions is football. Apparently, football appeals to us regardless of race, class, color or creed. I'm highly suspicious of this conclusion. But there it is...

But as I was saying, national character seems like a suspect idea. It seems like just another kind of stereotyping. It seems patronizing and dehumanizing. Nevertheless, Weiner and something called the World Database of Happiness based at Erasmus University in Rotterdam, are convinced that countries, or more accurately, that people in those countries, can be ranked according to how happy they are.

These were the data that Weiner used to choose which countries to visit, but there are several other rankings of national happiness. They vary a bit depending on the questions asked. Happiness, being a subjective state, is measured by such organizations by asking respondents to rate themselves as very happy, quite happy, not very happy, etc. Other studies ask slightly different questions, like, "Are you treated with respect?" or "Did you do anything today that you are proud of?" Other systems factor in ecological damage, or wealth, depending on the bias of the researchers. *Forbes* magazine, for example, equates happiness with prosperity and measures that. But of those studies that measure self-reported happiness, there is impressive agreement among their findings.

Scandinavian countries do very well in these rankings, as do Latin American countries. Not surprisingly, African countries, plagued by famine and civil war, come in near the bottom, as do the former Soviet republics such as Ukraine and Moldova. The US? Somewhere in the middle.

So what did Eric Weiner discover by visiting supposedly happy countries (and a couple of unhappy countries) and talking to the residents about why they were happy or unhappy?

Is it really true that money can't buy happiness? Well, yes and no. Researchers have found that extreme poverty does tend to make us pretty unhappy. No surprise there. But once our basic needs for food and shelter are met, additional wealth doesn't make much difference to us. Rich people are a little bit happier, but not much. Humans are wired to adapt. To get used to things, whether that means misery or luxury. It's sort of like living somewhere with an ocean view. It's magnificent. But you get used to it and after a little while you just don't notice it anymore. Apparently, money works the same way. If you win the lottery, the initial euphoria will fade even if you don't blow it all on antique cars and cocaine. Even if you use your winnings wisely, you'll get used to being rich. It just isn't that exciting.

Weiner visited two countries known for their wealth, Switzerland and Qatar, officially the richest country in the world. The Swiss? Pretty happy... not joyful, not having much fun, but satisfied. Qatar? Pretty miserable, according to Weiner's observations. Switzerland is clean, efficient, busy, beautiful and highly democratic, as well as wealthy. It is also pretty straight-laced and intolerant of nonconformity. The Swiss tend to keep their wealth hidden, not because they disapprove of ostentation but because they want to avoid exciting envy in their neighbors.

Qatar, on the other hand, is a nation without a culture. An artificially constructed nation made up of imported workers at all levels, from domestic workers to doctors and engineers, who serve an idle elite of native residents of whom nothing is expected. These native Qataris, supported by the oil and gas that turned this country overnight into a playland for the rich, retain their tribal values of loyalty and conformity, excluding anyone outside the tribe, the family. Distrust of the outsiders who make up the other 90% of the population is rampant.

Trust, Weiner concludes, is vital to happiness. The ability to trust one's government, one's family, friends and neighbors is something that *is* determined by our environment at least as much as by our innate nature. This is one reason for the oppressive unhappiness of Moldova, the former Soviet republic that ranks at or near the bottom on most happiness lists. With the fall of the Soviet Union, Moldova, along with its peer nations, was plunged into poverty, unemployment, and purposelessness. Other poor countries are not necessarily miserable. But Moldova and its neighbors are poor countries surrounded by wealthy ones. Corruption comes with the poverty, as does a sense of powerlessness, resignation and cynicism.

The happiest country Weiner visited? Iceland. Iceland is cold. And dark most of the year. And cheerful. A land of cheerful, communal weekend binge drinkers, in contrast to Moldova, also a nation of heavy drinkers, who are more likely to drink steadily and alone. Because Iceland is small, with a population of about 300,000, and because conditions are harsh, people depend on one another. Cooperation is a given. People trust each other. And Iceland has a long and distinctive history and culture. To be Icelandic is to have an identity.

Along with the presence or absence of trust, the absence of envy and the practice of tolerance, this sense of identity is key to national happiness. Related to this is a finding about happiness that no one wants to hear. Cultural identity, such a strong indicator of happiness, is correlated to homogeneity. Diversity does not a happy country make. Put aside for a moment questions of mutual distrust and oppression, exploitation and inequalities. These can, ideally, be overcome. As a country, the US is working on it, though certainly slowly and fitfully. But the US will never have a single national identity.

Nor would we want it to have one. We're proud of our diversity. But will we ever have a sense of belonging such as the Icelanders have? There are moments of unity. One such moment was 9/11. Our political differences persisted. We didn't agree on what our response should be. But there was a fleeting sense of "American-ness." Assassinations bring us together. Moments of tragedy unite us, however briefly. But can we construct a sense of national identity big enough to include all of us, with all of our differences? A national identity that provides us with the feeling of belonging, the sense of community that the happiness researchers tell us is so important?

Frankly, I don't think so. And, shocking as this may sound, I hope not. A sense of belonging depends on others *not* belonging. Given a choice, I'd prefer us all to feel a little bit alien than for an artificial elite among us, the native-born, or the wealthy, or the white or the Christians or the heterosexuals, the married or the English speakers or the college-educated, to feel like they're the genuine article, the real American, at the expense of everyone else. If I got to choose between happy uniformity and unhappy authenticity and self-expression, I'd choose the latter, every time.

Which brings us to a big question: Should happiness be our national goal? Or even our personal one? Are there things more important than happiness? Like fairness, for example. Like creativity, the kind of creativity that grows out of tangled roots that pull us in different directions and results in novel solutions. That refuses the pat answer to complex problems.

We're never going to be the kind of cozy little country that Iceland is. But Iceland has some things to teach us. Icelanders tolerate and even embrace failure. They can afford to because they know they will be taken care of by their social safety net. They are cooperative rather than competitive. They share ideas. They expect good behavior, civility and tolerance

from each other and so they receive it. And, despite their homogeneity, they welcome the stranger.

Our ideas of happiness evolve over time. Maybe Americans are clinging to some outmoded ideas. More than most countries, we believe that happiness is a right. It's written right there in our constitution, isn't it? Well, actually, no. As Benjamin Franklin supposedly said, "The constitution doesn't guarantee happiness, only the pursuit of it. You have to catch up with it yourself." But we do seem to think an awful lot about happiness and whether someone else has more of it than we do. And, for many of us, this happiness that we covet with such enthusiasm is another name for money, and things.

The science of happiness tells us that materialists tend to be less happy than their less acquisitive neighbors. It tells us that friends and family, a strong social network, is a crucial indicator of happiness. Wealth tends to isolate us, and isolation is not good for our happiness.

Imagine what a sea change this would be if Americans begin to reevaluate the importance of wealth in light of the evidence that it does nothing to increase our happiness! We have a long history that tells us otherwise, a history of striving, of competition, of believing that "greed is good." Our current economic situation has caused many of us to take a second look at these assumptions. Look where they've gotten us.

Maybe it's time to explore some alternatives. Maybe it's time to chip away at the unquestioned assumption that bigger is better. That power and dominance guarantee security and that trust is for suckers. The happiness researchers find that a life that includes service to others is more rewarding than one devoted solely to the accumulation of wealth. They find that altruism lights up the pleasure centers of our brains. Hospitality, generosity, compassion... What if these values gradually came to shape our decisions and our dreams, as individuals and as a country? Imagine what this country could accomplish, with its resources, its people, and yes, its diversity, if our passionate pursuit of happiness included the happiness of others? If we saw other people and other nations as more than a means to the end of securing our own happiness? If we saw the planet earth as more than a means to the end of making us wealthy? If we saw that it is essential to the happiness of all the children of the earth, not just those within the manmade boundaries of our country, or any country?

Compassion... Fairness... generosity, cooperation, engagement with others, a life that derives meaning from service... a larger view of humanity than that contained by the boundaries drawn on a map... A view that encompasses the world. A respect for relationships, and for the earth... Do these sound familiar?

They should. Take a look at the principles on this wall.

Are there things more important than happiness? It depends on how you define happiness. Pleasure is good. Don't get me wrong. So is fun. So are laughter and play and financial security.

But I come back to a key conclusion of Weiner's travels and of the scientific study of happiness. It's hard to be happy if you're surrounded by misery. This tells us something important and heartening about human nature. We are so made that our connections to others are primary determinants of the quality of our lives. More important than wealth, or pleasure, or power or status, more important than expensive toys or education or achievement.

So what makes your heart sing? Is it something you can share with a loved one? With this congregation? With the world? Take a minute. Close your eyes and let your heart speak to you, silently naming one thing that brings you deep happiness. That lights up your spirit. Think of one thing. When you have named it to yourself, give thanks. Then think of how you can share this tremendous gift, this sacred gift... In our search for happiness, our travels to places both new and familiar, both actual and imagined, let us not forget to share our gifts of joy. Let us remember to give ourselves away.

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<sup>1</sup> Weiner, Eric. *The Geography of Bliss: One Grump's Search for the Happiest Places in the World*. NY: Hachette, 2008 (Unless otherwise noted, all references are to the Kindle edition of this above title.)