

Letter From the Desk of David Challinor  
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Years ago, Jimmy Durante, a popular entertainer with a strong New York City accent, opened his performance by heartily asking, “Is everybody happy?” The implication was that if you were not, you would be after listening to or watching his show. We all at various times have felt happy, although we probably would be hard put to express precisely that elusive feeling. Difficult or not to describe, happiness is very much a part of human nature—especially in America, where Mr. Jefferson declared our right to “...life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness...” This first letter of the New Year considers the quality of happiness, thereby emphasizing the bright side of life.

First, it is important to distinguish between happiness and pleasure. In our hedonistic culture, pleasure is often attributed to the acquisition of material goods and unfettered access to sex, drugs and gourmet food. Happiness, on the other hand, is a state of mind and thus ephemeral. To be happy entails a general mix of good mental health, comfortable social relations, reasonable physical health and sufficient assests to live, according to philosopher Sissela Bok (*Harvard Gazette*, December 2003, p.6). She is not so much concerned with the pursuit of happiness as with its nature; the way in which it affects our lives; how it has been considered and analyzed by scholars, poets and philosophers throughout history. Attention to happiness seems to grow in direct proportion to existing political and economic stress. Thus the Roman philosopher Seneca (4BC – 65AD) wrote of happiness during the empire’s tumultuous times, just as Jefferson emphasized his concern for happiness in the Declaration of Independence in the midst of our Revolution.

Today, virtually all parts of the world are under varying degrees of stress, but compared to the past century, more people are literate, more children survive, and both the general quality of life and political freedom are slowly improving for many on our planet. Increasing numbers of people no longer blindly accept the poverty and discrimination they once so stoically endured. Thus, quite naturally, the question of the nature of happiness arises. New survey techniques enable us to compare how different cultures perceive happiness, and we can begin to isolate those qualities that are present in all humans. Because of the complexity of human brains, however, and because we are trying to study ourselves, it is unlikely that we will ever be able to identify all the basic elements necessary for human happiness.

We are making progress, however, in our ability to measure happiness. Global surveys have shown that the most “satisfied” people live in Western Europe, the United States and Latin America. It is worth noting that although the interest in happiness used to be the province of philosophers and even neuroscientists, it has now attracted the attention of politicians and policy makers. *New Scientist* (4 October 2003) reports that it has become a discipline with its own publication—the *Journal of Happiness Studies*.

Why this rapid growth of interest? In Britain, relevant government officials look for policies that could increase national happiness. Indeed, were it ever possible to measure happiness accurately, it might become a political goal similar to the economic goal of achieving a specific gross national product (GNP). If indeed GNP can be used to determine a nation's economic health, then an agreement on an equivalent measure of gross national happiness (GNH) might be possible. What happens, however, when achieving a high level of GNH conflicts with attaining a desired GNP goal? The odds are that for the globe's major national powers, GNP would win out.

The possibility of measuring GNH is becoming a reality because of the huge volume of surveys that have been conducted across a range of different cultures, religions and economic groups. The surveys seek insight into how individuals describe themselves as happy and how often they feel happy and then confirm such states of mind by asking family and friends whether they consider the subject a happy person. Although surveys garner vast data on prosperity's role in happiness or on what behaviors are risky for happiness, interpretation of survey questionnaires is difficult. An initial conundrum is defining happiness. Not only does the word have no precise equivalent in some languages, but even among English speakers, individuals tend to have their own definition or meaning.

The unexpected result of happiness studies was the discovery that yearning for material goods, an attitude that has exploded with western prosperity, works against happiness. Studies show that young adults who buy bigger cars or more expensive wrist watches to flaunt their social/economic status suffer more depression and physical ills than those who are at ease with their current condition. If this is so, then perhaps national policy should shift towards making people happier and away from economic growth, whose goal focuses on increased consumerism. Should we not, instead, concentrate on bolstering job security, improving mental health care, encouraging direct participation in government (such as the town meeting system in New England) and even—God forbid—discouraging the endless search for status? The latter seems so engrained in American culture now that any attempt to reverse the trend would be perceived as un-American (*sensu McCarthian*). For example, the economic and social pressure to be “number one” in college football has caused tie games to be decided in overtime, thereby assuming that the unhappiness of the losing team and its fans is less important or more than offset by the happiness of the victors. This approach may be generational for in my competitive football and ice hockey days, both sides shared the good feeling that followed a well-fought tied game.

Paradoxically, America's current policy of seeking to maintain global dominance, regardless of economic cost, creates a status-envy throughout much of the rest of the world. This condition, in turn, seems to lead to a broader unhappiness among citizens of other countries. Happy citizens make for political stability. The happiness of a nation's

vast middle class, at least to the degree they can be categorized, is where national GNH policy should be focused. This segment will never reach the status of our small megarich population, but middle status is not so unattainable that the hard working (and lucky) poor can't achieve that goal themselves.

Envy and jealousy lead to unhappiness, so that the competitive pursuit of the trappings of perceived high social, political or economic status works against Mr. Jefferson's exhortation. The drive for pleasure is strong and inherent in humans just as it is in many other animals, e.g. grooming in primates, the intoxicating effect on elephants gorging on fermenting tropical fruits, and the appeal among domestic dogs and cats of being brushed and stroked. Neuroscientists have even worked out the process in our brains. From what was once in the 1980's called "the dopamine system" to describe the brain's reward center, scientists now believe that although dopamine is the fuel that powers the brain's pleasure circuit, it actually stimulates desire or motivation rather than pleasure. The brain's pleasure chemicals are now thought to be the endorphins and encephalins, members of a chemical group called opioids. Opioid receptors are scattered throughout the brain. These various chemically controlled circuits probably evolved to guide our decision-making process. For example, do we forego an instant pleasure to gain a greater, more enduring one later? Time often seems too short for us to reach important decisions so that many or most of the ones we make are based on our gut feelings. What may cause us the least harm or hassle at one extreme, to what may actually result in the most good or pleasure, is often the basis of our choice. Pleasure is an important factor in the process and, therefore, has a strong influence on what we do. Ironically, we are unable to gain real happiness by a willful unstinting pursuit of pleasure alone.

Happiness is worth seeking even though we are not always completely conscious of being in such a state. When immersed in a happy occasion, we tend to lose track of time, which indeed may be part of its appeal. All of us who have been happy need no description of its quality; the feeling is truly real though often fleeting. We should all consider making whatever adjustments to our lifestyle might help us to enjoy happiness more frequently. The rewards are easily worth the effort.

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