How to Be Happy at College... and for the Rest of Your Life

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When are you the happiest in your life?

- Are there qualities that your happy moments all have in common?
- Are there qualities that the happy moments of most people in the world have in common?

Psychologists around the world have researched this question and identified marks of happy experience.

- Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi uses the word “flow” to talk about “optimal experience.”

Being happy excludes:

- Guilt or sense of wrongdoing
- Resentment or bitterness
- Self-consciousness
- Self-centeredness

Being happy includes:

- Balance between skills and challenge:
  - The skills you have are fit for the challenges you face, so you have a good chance of meeting the challenge.
  - The challenge is something in which you can lose your self, becoming fully engaged.
Sense of order, meaning, harmony

- As opposed to chaos (anomie) or a lack of all rules; instead there are clear goals and immediate feedback.
- As opposed to alienation or the imposition of inflexible rules at odds with one’s own goals; instead there is a sense of personal control over one’s own actions.
- In his 1962 book *The Decline of Pleasure*, Walter Kerr says:

“[Pleasure] is an interior experience of the rectitude of things, a seen certainty of the consonance of things. When I become aware that I am in harmony with my own being, I am pleased. When I become aware that I am in harmony with all other, or any other being, I am pleased. One often thinks of pleasure as the satisfaction of an appetite, which it is. But what is the appetite, traced to its ultimate source, and what does “satisfaction” mean? The appetite is for fulfillment, completion.” (p. 299, 300)

Engagement with something or someone other than ourselves

- Acknowledgement of the independent reality and worth of the world and other people, as opposed to seeing the world as something neutral on which we’ve imposed meaning and value.
- Attitude of reception rather than (or in addition to) construction.
- Sense of expansion of the self

“To acknowledge the presence, the independence, the energy, and in some way the reality of The Other is to begin to put down the burden that makes us most lonely, most isolated, most exhausted – and to begin to take pleasure in the comfort, the mutual support, the “oh, there you are!” of friends” Kerr, p. 307

“We live in a world of unreality and dreams. To give up our imaginary position as the center, to renounce it, not only intellectually but in the imaginative part of our soul, that means to awaken to what is real and eternal, to see the true light and hear the true silence. A transformation then takes place at the very roots of our sensibility, in our immediate reception of sense impressions and psychological impressions. It is a transformation analogous to that which takes place in the dusk of evening on a road, where we suddenly discern as a tree what we had at first seen as a stooping man; or where we suddenly recognize as a rustling of leaves what we thought at first was whispering voices. We see the same colors; we hear the same sounds, but not in the same way.” (Simone Weil)
Focus on the present

- Fully engaged with the present moment, not worrying about past or future
- Time seems to move at a different pace; often unaware of time altogether and not susceptible to distraction
- Happiness is also informed by the past and moving toward the future, but conscious focus is present.

Experience is autotelic

- “Autotelic” = for its own sake
- Experiences of happiness are self-justifying. They don’t require a product.

Wonder

- Wonder is a “disturbance.” It is “suddenly losing, in a flash, the compact, comfortable sense of obviousness…” (Josef Pieper)
- Includes both an acknowledgement that one doesn’t yet know and an openness to receiving more knowledge.
- Wonder presupposes that there is meaning in what is observed, even though not understood.
- “The hunger for the sensational . . . is an unmistakable sign of the loss of the true power of wonder…” (Pieper)

Being happy results in:

Mental Refreshment

“The kink we are trying to get rid of is not the one in our shoulders but the one in our hopes. Where we feel a keen dismay, and a grasping need of refreshment, is in our heads – in the minds that shape our convictions and in the convictions that move our wills. It is our powers of belief that are grinding to a halt. The refreshment we need most sorely is not physical but intellectual.”

Kerr, 139

Capacity for more happiness, at a deeper, more complex level

- Most people can be happy watching a sunset, which requires receiving a gift, but not doing anything.
- Desire for happiness can also lead to development of inner resources, skills, that allow for happiness at a higher level of complexity.
- Sense of expansion of self and experience
Sense of freedom

- As opposed to fatalism
- As opposed to the burden of self-determination
- Not in the sense of autonomous, but as authenticity

Shouldn’t Christians be indifferent to happiness?

(This doesn’t sound very Reformed.)

It’s true that:

- The universe is not designed around us.
- We’ve been made to be restless rather than satisfied in this life, which is why “following your bliss” is not a Christian concept.
- Ultimate happiness (i.e. full union with Christ) is for the next life.

But it’s also true that:

- God graciously desires our flourishing.
- Our world really is wonderful, meaningful, and ordered.
- Knowing God accurately increases our ability to know the world accurately.
- We are meant to be making progress in sanctification and union with Christ throughout this lifetime, so we should expect to see fruits of that progress.
- Happiness is a natural by-product of a wise and virtuous Christian life.

How can college (specifically Calvin college) be a training for life-long happiness?

Calvin offers structured* training in:

*involving clear goals and feedback
**Prudence**

- Def: Seeing the world rightly and acting on what you see.
- The virtue most clearly related to learning, wisdom; to seeing meaning, purpose, order
- Central to the traditional 7 Christian virtues (faith, hope, love, prudence, courage, justice, temperance); E.g.: prudential love vs. non-prudential love – all virtue depends on this virtue
- Since happiness excludes guilt, bitterness, resentment, being virtuous furthers happiness.

**Wonder**

- Happiness is often accompanied by an experience of wonder, and wonder is a skill that is cultivated by a liberal arts education.
- “Philosophy begins in wonder,” but so do all disciplines that engage in receptive knowing.
- Capacity for wonder should be growing throughout your college career.
- Related to a recognition of God’s grace

**Inner Resources**

- Happiness requires having skills to meet challenges, and also having the ability to generate new challenges in boring situations; i.e., inner resources.
- Anxiety can motivate learning new skills that allow for higher level of happiness and flow.
- Develop a wide range of skills – physical (ability to play on a team, knit a sweater), sensory (ability to see art, hear music), intellectual (ability to analyze an argument, or read poetry, or understand a new idea)
- The connection between the skill and happiness may not be immediately obvious.

**Engagement beyond Self**

- Happiness requires being taken beyond myself, beyond self-consciousness and self-centeredness.
- Knowledge of other time periods, other cultures, other viewpoints expands engagement.

**Your college education offers training that can lead you to life-long learning, a life-long growth in prudence and wonder, in the skills needed for a rich inner life, and in your engagement with the world beyond your own direct experience.**

**You need to choose to:**

- Make study autotelic.
- Worship.
- Keep Sabbath.
- Give focused attention.
The Bright Field

I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone my way
and forgotten it. But that was the pearl
of great price, the one field that had
the treasure in it. I realize now
that I must give all that I have
to possess it. Life is not hurrying
on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

R. S. Thomas