

“I Can’t Get No Satisfaction”
January 13, 2008

The Reading

The reading is by Jean Chatzky, editor-at-large for *Money Magazine*. It is titled “Shopping for Happiness?” and came from the CNNMoney website. Chatzky is the author of books dealing with the false seeking of happiness through the acquisition of material goods. She appears regularly on the NBC *Today* show.

Here begins the reading.

The pursuit of money and the pursuit of happiness often get equated, especially in our success-addled culture. But over the past decade or so, science has set us straight on two points: First, once you have escaped poverty, more money won’t buy you more happiness. There’s little difference in the overall happiness of millionaires and the middle class. And second, if you’re going to spend your money in search of greater happiness, you’re better off buying experience rather than things

Most of us don’t pay a lot of attention to the smaller, day-to-day occurrences that make us happy. We focus on the negative. The driver who cut you off on the parkway on the way to work is likely to be the dinner table conversation. The nice walk you took in the park at lunchtime? Probably not

Do something selfless. Giving money away is one way to feed your financial soul, but you also get a happiness jolt by getting more actively involved in social causes, says Knox College psychology professor Tim Kasser, author of [the book titled] *The High Price of Materialism*. People who are focused on fame, money and success are not as happy as those who put their energies into challenges that are less me-centered. Why? in part because there’s always more fame and money to chase

Here ends the reading.

“I Can’t Get No Satisfaction”
by
The Reverend William Haney
January 13, 2008

The Unitarian Universalist Church
Columbia, Missouri

Well, it’s finally over! All of that rush and anxiety to make Christmas meaningful and rewarding is finally over. And aren’t we all just so happy, now that we have achieved what we wanted. Or, did we? Are we happy? I certainly hope so. A lot of pressure is put on us to make Christmas a happy time. So much of that pressure is generated by the need to get everything everyone wants. Perhaps that is part of the issue: getting what one wants rather than what one really needs. The Christmas glut sets a tone for obtaining happiness through things. Yet, there is a growing awareness that with all of our material and technological advances, happiness is still beyond reach. Perhaps the aim is to find happiness in something other than things, something more like encounter, engagement: in a word, experience.

Concerning things that are supposed to make us happy, just this last week in Las Vegas, there was a major product show of the latest in electronic technology. It appears our genius is aimed at becoming more and more into the virtual realm and away from the real. With things like ipods and cell phones, miniature TV and other devices, our experiences are more toward the individual rather than the communal. Even those experiences are virtual or remote, and not connected to one’s immediate place in the social or natural environment. For this reason, for me it is becoming more of a hassle to travel by air. This is not so much because of the inefficiency of the airlines. Once I’ve entered the airport, I’m reconciled that I’ve lost all control over outcomes, be it the weather or flight delays. There is no point in fighting that reality. No, my hassle isn’t that simple. It’s because of the inevitable deluge of cell phone conversations occurring simultaneously in my immediate vicinity while waiting for the plane. There is a cacophonous chorus of business and personal information intruding into my personal space. I’m over-hearing stuff I don’t give a rats you-know-what about. If one is not on a cell phone, one is not part of the self-absorbed and disconnected crowd. My daughter in Oklahoma City is often offended when someone with a cell phone conversation intrudes into her relation with someone else. There is one person in her workplace with the type that doesn’t require a hand-held unit, you know, the type clipped to the ear. Once that person got on the elevator still talking to what appeared to be to himself. My daughter turned to the person standing next to her and said, “He keeps on talking even when his battery is dead.”

There is lurking in my mind an element of the need for instant gratification. Even having a cell phone hanging off of one’s ear all the time is symptomatic of how we crave instant gratification. It seems some cannot wait to tell someone else what is happening instantly, no matter how important or how trivial. We are driven for immediate expression without reflection. Maybe our electronic media, with its ability to instantly inform whatever is happening in the world, is responsible for some in society in wanting to know everything right away. There is the urge by the electronic media to *make* the news rather than *report* it. Rather than wait until a collection of information is authenticated, each media outlet is competing with the others for the instant newsmaker. With that capability, we are often deluged with imprecise, unreflective and partial information. This is certainly the case with blogs. This is what

happened with some anxious concerns about the up coming General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations.

It seems that the Unitarian Universalist minister's blog got caught up into something of a frenzy recently. As each piece of uninformed information was added, anxieties were elevated. This caused one of my colleagues to issue an Association-wide announcement, imploring congregations not to send delegates to the General Assembly. The site of that meeting is in Fort Lauderdale, within a Florida port district. Since that is the geographical location, the convention center is in the port security area. This means photo ID is required in order to enter the convention center. The irate claim is that our First Amendment Rights are being violated. The initiator of the alert uses the vague reference to curtailing free speech and assembly. There is even the paranoid assertion that convention staff will report "un-American sentiments expressed" during the course of the meetings. As the blog's accumulation of misinformation mounts, what would stimulate such a response? I think it is the anger toward the overall national security policy. Granted that the policy is fear-based and reactive only, but attacking the Planning Committee of the General Assembly is not the way to alleviate that issue. Perhaps there is an element of instant gratification here: "I cannot do anything about the issue at its source, so I'll stimulate an immediate response with the GA." As onerous as it is, we have to show our identification documents not just at the airport, but also if a police officer needs identity verification or a shopkeeper is to charge our credit card. At the bars in Chicago's O'Hare airport, everyone, regardless of age, has to show an ID in order to get a beer, wine or something more potent.

Those are not exactly pleasant experiences, to be sure. I know I get a bit irritated when I'm required to show my drivers license. We do live in a different world than decades ago. Yet, some people's attachments to things have not changed all that much over the decades. Certainly the way of commanding instant gratification instincts for things has escalated. We've always seen a marketing connection between one's self image and an automobile. Now marketing techniques extend to younger ages through the electronic devices. Somehow, one is given the image of being much happier if this device or that ipod is purchased. The triadic fundamentals of the Declaration of Independence included the pursuit of happiness. At the time, that pursuit was through a liberating science. Unitarians such as Thomas Jefferson and the British minister, Joseph Priestly transplanted to American soil, firmly believed science will liberate the human mind and body. Happiness for them was a state of being for society offered by an unfettered science. Now happiness is more a matter personal salvation. Things are the secular equivalent to some forms of evangelical salvation.

There is evidence that the new evangelism of personal salvation is on the wane. Some are saying the Bush administration years are the pinnacle of the religious right. Clearly the younger generation, by substantial percentages, is turned off by the self-righteous fundamentalists. This is something some evangelicals are noticing. In an article by Bill McKibben, he notes;

So much of the modern evangelical phenomenon lacks real content – to judge by many of its books and star preachers, the faith is mostly about bringing people to Christ and then, when they've arrived, making them feel good about the decision, with a consumerist faith that bears little resemblance to the gospels . . . It's not clear what you're supposed to do once you've heeded the altar call, other than tithe and evangelize (and attend the fitness classes, financial success courses, and the like which are standard at any self-respecting megachurch). What substance there is has often come in the form of opposition to "immorality" – and it's ceaseless

judgmentalism that young people in particular are noticing and disliking. This is a brand of religion that, for all its market share, seems at the beginnings of a crisis (“Taking the Gospels Seriously,” *The New York Review*, January 17, 2008, pg. 44).

One can surmise that the instant gratification of being saved is no longer enough. If the person carries a broader social perspective, there must be more to religion. For some of the younger generation that “more” is contained in the radical and revolutionary message in the gospels and the Hebrew Bible: “Love your neighbor as you love yourself” and “The least shall be first.” There is more to salvation than happiness, and there is more to happiness than just having things.

The pursuit of things has its limits. The German scholar Stefan Klein, in his book titled *The Science of Happiness*, argues;

Things per se cannot bring you happiness at all. It is only the “experience” of possessing something that can trigger an emotion. So possessions can trigger happiness, but only as long as that experience of having a bigger car is new (quoted in Chatzky, pg. I).

The luster of things will fade in time. There is an additional dimension to the issue of happiness. Evidence is clear that once a family reaches an annual gross income of \$40,000 to \$50,000, more income does not mean more happiness. As Jean Chatzky points out in the reading;

The pursuit of money and the pursuit of happiness often get equated, especially in our success-addled culture. But over the past decade or so, science has set us straight on two points: First, once you have escaped poverty, more money won’t buy you more happiness. There’s little difference in the overall happiness of millionaires and the middle class. And second, if you’re going to spend your money in search of greater happiness, you’re better off buying experience rather than things

Things are important as far as each one addresses a need. The best of all possible worlds is that things make life simpler. However, the reality is the more things we have, the more time we must take to keep each one operating or usable. Technology is not in our favor. My old shaver gave out recently. I had to search for a new one. I could not find one that simply plugs into the convenience outlet in the bathroom. Now there is the so-called convenience of battery operation. However, recharging the battery is just one more thing with which I have to take the time to include, along with the cell phone and God knows what else that will “conveniently” come along.

Just as we are slaves to our technology, we are led to believe that very slavery is the basis of happiness. That just isn’t so. While Jefferson and Priestly misjudged how science would finally reveal itself to society as the final salvation, the pursuit of happiness is still an admirable aspiration. Experience can be achieved through things, which can be alright if kept in perspective, being that the experience is primary. Yet, how do we do that? That, it seems to me, is up to each individual. I’m certain there are many experiences desired that are put on hold because of time and money constraints. Chatzky makes this suggestion;

What types of experiences will give you the biggest bang for your buck? Assuming money is a limited resource (and unless your surname is Gates or Trump, it probably is), where should you put your hard-earned cash in order to bring the biggest, longest-lasting smile to your face?

Here, she offers the idea we heard in the reading;

Do something selfless. Giving money away is one way to feed your financial soul, but you also get a happiness jolt by getting more actively involved in social causes People who are focused on fame, money and success are not as happy as those who put their energies into challenges that are less me-centered. Why? in part because there's always more fame and money to chase

I would even add that there are experiences we can have that do not take any money at all. After all, Chatzky does say in the reading, "Most of us don't pay a lot of attention to the smaller, day-to-day occurrences that make us happy." For me, that is the key to happiness: our attention to the mundane and ordinary. I've suggested before that in our process of doing, we can focus more on our being. This to me is a spiritual discipline. There are so many things we do automatically, without a thought. I would suggest taking the time to reflect upon those ordinary things. Who knows, each one may turn out to be very extraordinary. Reflect upon the simple things that occur during the day. Try to be in touch with those who mean so much to you. Don't take one's friendship for granted. Cull away those things and those doings that can cause so much stress and unhappiness. Try to simplify life so there is time and space to be engaged with the social and natural environment. Even – if you dare – turn off the cell phone. Reflect upon the day's events and experiences, journal if that is your desire. Through this process of naming your thankfulness for the day and all those who appeared in it and the experiences you had in it, maybe a glimmer of happiness in its truest sense will show. Who knows, maybe even Christmas can be an enjoyable and happy time.

Amen.