

“Unconditional Happiness”

March 14, 2010

The Reading

The reading is by Eisho Nasu, assistant professor at the Institute of Buddhist Studies and is titled “The Pursuit of (Sustainable) Happiness.” The Institute is part of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, a consortium of nine independent denominational seminaries, of which the Unitarian Universalist Starr King School for the Ministry is a part. The reading is from the Spring 2009 issue of the *GTU Currents*, a quarterly newsletter.

Here begins the reading.

As a Buddhist, I understand that happiness means to let go of all unsustainable or excessive desires If you give up the never-ending pursuit of unsustainable happiness, you will eventually become happy. To describe happiness, Buddhists use expressions like “no desires, no blind passions, or non-attachment.” But non-attachment does not mean aloofness – it can mean being very engaged, without being attached to outcomes

Instead of chasing after our own happiness, Buddhism teaches us that we might cultivate a mind of compassion, lovingkindness, joyfulness, and letting go of our ego-attachment – this can work for ourselves and for the sake of others (pg. 4).

Here ends the reading.

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by
The Reverend William Haney
March 14, 2010

The Unitarian Universalist Church

The original draft of the Declaration of Independence by Thomas Jefferson was presented to the Congress, which modified some portions of it. The opening sentence of the second paragraph in the draft originally read: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with *inherent and* inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness . . . etc.” The Congress changed the words “inherent and” to that of “certain” inalienable rights. I’m not here to explicate the document nor its historical importance. However, it has always struck me as significant that Jefferson altered John Locke’s originating phrase, “Life, Liberty and Property” with the substitution of “the pursuit of happiness.” How did that come about, and why? Well, it seems a young college graduate in England was enthralled by Locke’s work. Building off of Locke’s proclamation, in later years this scientist and clergyperson elaborated, to the effect that “. . . all people live in a society for their mutual advantage; so that the good and happiness of the members . . . is the great standard by which every thing relating to that state must finally be determined” (*Joseph Priestley: A Comet in the System*, John Ruskin Clark, pg. 135). This is a radical leap from merely a civic proclamation by Locke. It is a religious statement of faith in “the good and happiness” of people. That statement was by the Reverend Joseph Priestley: that young student who later is credited for the discovery of the gas, oxygen and a prominent Unitarian minister in England and in this country. It is clear that Jefferson in his own words, was profoundly influenced by Priestley. So our founding document has a Unitarian grounding. And folks, we are also empowered and legally responsible as our national and patriotic duty to pursue happiness! So, let’s go for it!

The question raised in my mind is whether the “happiness” that Priestley and Jefferson envisioned is the same we pursue today. For these two, the faith was in the inevitable progress of science. It would be the vehicle of happiness for all of humanity. Over 200 years later, many no longer see science as the Messianic process for ultimate enlightenment, let alone happiness. Science has been a great aid in understanding many things about our selves, our planet and the universe. It has not solved all of our human problems, nor altered the human condition. In fact, through the technologies spinning off of science, in some cases we carry burdens never dreamed of before. Our lives are susceptible to greater complications. With more things and stuff to possess, we can be overwhelmed with an unhappy clutter. What our two Unitarian forebears saw as an uplifting of the spirit has become a crushing materialism for many.

The crush of materialism has replaced the ideal of science as our salvation. Happiness is the secular medium of achieving salvation. In our consumerist society, happiness is connected to what we have and what we have not. We are measured by our achievements and acquisitions, or the lack thereof. The size and location of our living quarters, the make and number of cars we drive, the kind of vocation we have; all are the sum of the parts that are supposed to add up to happiness. The logic is that the more we add or the better we upgrade, the happier we will be. That logic soon reaches diminishing returns. Instead of being masters of our destiny we become slaves to our technology. However we may resist, even fight against these pressures, we are still compelled to be a part of it all. It requires a deliberate and

intentional act of will to disconnect from the morass of materialism. One is required to establish a new and different set of values that would embrace happiness as an integral part of one's life and not an adjunct to it.

There are numerous self-help gurus and books to which one may turn. Not having any experience with either, I have no notion how effective these directives may be. From my own experience, I know that the less I possess, the less I'm accountable to the demands of protection and upkeep. It is not for me a question of what or how much I may have. It is essentially a question of what constitutes happiness. For Jefferson and Priestley, it was the pursuit of science. That proved not to be enough. Although each believed science would improve the quality of life, I doubt that either could have known how much quantity was added to our lives through science and its offspring, technology. So, for me, and I assume for many, happiness is not a matter of quantity, but rather quality. No matter how much material objects one may possess, it remains the quality of one's life that counts for happiness. To the extent that is true, there will still remain some realities that we all face in our lives – and in our deaths.

One aspect of happiness is a long and fruitful life with mental and physical able-ness. Today we have the prospects of that ideal – and at great cost. Our health care system has without a doubt made a better quality of life for many. Yet, with the high level of technology and professional training required for implementation, we pay a high tax on our economy and personal incomes. The current health care debates don't seem to me to adequately address the presenting issues. Some blame the insurance companies. No doubt, there is responsibility for egregious decisions made by the insurers. Others will blame frivolous mal-practice suits. Still more will point out the excessive use of tests. There are yet inefficiencies in the systems that take the blame. Any and all of these are the whipping dogs of health care. I know many years ago when I was in my architectural apprenticeship, I had the opportunity to work in an architect's office designing a new hospital. At that time, the hospital consultant was claiming that too often there is competitive replication of staff, services and installations that only drive up the overhead costs of each facility unnecessarily. Over the past 40 years, it's apparent none of that has changed. I wonder if in many ways the so-called "free market" doesn't contribute to our dilemma. It seems that as long as we rely upon economics and financial systems for the sake of happiness, we may well be ultimately doomed. This could possibly relate to the theme of the reading.

As Eisho Nasu says in the reading, ". . . happiness means to let go of all unsustainable or excessive desires . . ." This he suggests does not mean aloofness, but rather an engagement "without being attached to outcomes . . ." This sounds to me as though one is to be engaged in process and not task – I can go for that. Our founding event as a nation was based upon the triad: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. However, we have emphasized the pursuit, therefore happiness has become an individual effort and achievement to satisfy the self – even a thing in itself and not a result. What Nasu suggests in the Buddhist tradition is that such a pursuit is unsustainable. In the end, self-satisfaction as the basis of happiness is excessive and unsustainable. When the focus is on the self, what are the limits of self-induced wants and desires? Isn't the current cliché, "You can have it all!" If "all" is supposedly there for you, when would "all" be enough? It can't since "all" is endless and is excessive and unsustainable. The unsustainable-ness of our excesses offers little wonder that we find our selves unhappy in our meaningless pursuit.

When the Buddha obtained his enlightened insights, that founding event was in the midst of nearly universal abject poverty and suffering. Such suffering surrounded him. Yet with the current

technologies in many parts of the world, some may believe that founding event is deemed irrelevant. With our technological world, poverty and suffering is limited to certain sectors of our society. One member of the church found a statistic of some questionable significance for me. Surveys found that once an income of \$50,000 is reached, “happiness” is achieved. Furthermore, there seems to be no increase in the happiness benefits with an increase in income beyond \$50,000. What this probably means is that the \$50,000 income is the threshold for less, or the disappearance of, struggle for what is considered the essentials of life. For me, the question is what would constitute the standards of the essentials of life.

In the article by Nasu he points out the policy of King Khesar in Bhutan. In 1972, King Khesar established the chief indicator for the well being of his 2 million subjects to be the Gross National Happiness. In his words, “As the king of a Buddhist nation, my duty is not only to ensure your happiness today but to create the fertile ground from which you may gain the fruits of spiritual pursuit and attain good Karma” (pg. 5). How this “national satisfaction” is done is “through sustainable economic development, preservation of cultural values, environmental conservation, and good governance” (pgs. 5 & 7). This may be more easily done in Bhutan since it is a homogenous population. However, Nasu believes “it’s a smart idea for governments to get interested in how people feel rather than gather numbers about what they buy” (pg. 7). I find this of great interest, since there appears a correlation between the king’s ideal and that of Priestley: “. . . all people live in a society for their mutual advantage; so that the good and happiness of the members . . . is the great standard by which every thing relating to that state must finally be determined.” So, perhaps there is an element of sustainability of happiness built into our Declaration of Independence.

Not to in any way diminish the importance and significance of the Buddhist tradition, there is some doubt that creeps into my mind. You must remember; doubt is an essential part of faith. There is an aspect of chance that must be a part of one’s pursuit of happiness. That for me is revealed in the responsive reading from the third chapter of Ecclesiastes: there is a season for everything. On the surface it appears that the aspect of “no desires, no blind passions, or non-attachment” may be at odds with the taking up the call and response to that which is presented to one. As I ponder the Ecclesiastes text, it becomes apparent that the message is to willingly to let go of that which one thought was of primary importance – that was desirous, passionate and firmly attached. There is a season for everything, even if we are not able to recognize it immediately. One must be open to possibilities.

In my conversation with Worship Associate Ken Wiley concerning the content of this sermon, it was noted that often happiness is a measure of the expectations of the self as one sets a course. That course may be difficult to let go of in order to let events happen so new opportunities may be obtained. In setting a course, we may expect happiness from things in our society, with considerable expectation. For some there is a struggle between obtaining what is deemed the fruits of happiness and just letting go, something our culture does not basically support. In fact, it seems our culture expects us to be happy at all costs. There are different perceptions of what a struggle in life may be, which may lead to a façade of happiness, when beneath there is deep pain and despair. Our culture of happiness prevents one to really show how one feels and what is going on in one’s life. This doesn’t mean one must always be transparent: it only means that we operate within a set of boundaries. It seems to me those boundaries are arbitrary and not conducive to happiness.

There isn't just one definition of happiness. We all have our own paths in life. Happiness is not an absolute, but rather a process of improving the odds toward a fulfilling and fruitful life. As Nasu says in the reading, "Instead of chasing after our own happiness, Buddhism teaches us that we might cultivate a mind of compassion, lovingkindness, joyfulness, and letting go of our ego-attachment – this can work for ourselves and for the sake of others." This means for me that happiness is borne out of relationship, not expectation. It is the unfolding of the relationship that gives meaning and happiness to our lives. This is the unconditional aspect of happiness: to be open to the possibilities of a life well lived in relationship with others. One must realize that one is not alone in what we have come to believe are the struggles or achievements toward happiness. Once we discover we cannot control happiness, it just might happen that happiness will surround us, and may that ever be so.

Amen.