

“The Promise of Happiness”
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
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One day while riding the crosstown bus in Manhattan, Gretchen Rubin noticed a mother in the crosswalk balancing a stroller, an umbrella, and a cell phone in her palm. In that distracted, struggling woman, Rubin recognized herself. She too was mother to two young girls trying to balance work and family in the city. Rubin thought, “Right now, I’m riding the same crosstown bus that I take across the park, back and forth. This is my life—but I never give any thought to it.”ⁱ

From this moment of self-awareness emerged what Rubin came to call her *Happiness Project*—as well as a blog and book of the same title. Rubin’s goal was not simply to “be happy.” She wasn’t embracing a trite aphorism, “Don’t Worry, Be Happy.” Instead, she explored happiness from the ancient philosophers to the modern scientific research of positive affect. She then identified both the sources of her happiness and elements that interfered with her happiness. From this place of self-analysis, she made a twelve-month plan with a rather long list of resolutions to change her life in ways she thought would make her happier. From singing to her daughters in the morning, to curbing her sweet tooth, to restraining her penchant for making critical remarks, she strove to bring more happiness to her own life and to those around her.

Perhaps like me you tend to be somewhat skeptical at such happiness seekers. Sometimes I feel suspicious of happiness—is it authentic? Are they *really* happy or just putting on a happy face because they believe that is what we are *supposed* to do. I suspect that we’ve all had the experience of feigning great joy over a not so great present from a well-meaning family member. Knowing that some kinds of happiness are performances, how do we know when another’s or our own happiness is *real*?

And yet, even as happiness can sometimes kindle suspicion, the pleasant affect of happy people can also be contagious and a pleasure to be around. Someone smiles warmly at us and we brighten a bit. The belly laughter of another causes us to laugh as well. The bright eyes and giggle of a happy baby can melt the heart of virtually anyone. Experiencing happiness can be a wonderful feeling.

But does the great feeling merit making happiness a key goal in life...perhaps even “the very purpose of life” as the Dalai Lama has said? Do we just want our kids, our spouse, our

family, our friend, ourselves to be happy? Should happiness be *the* goal to which we orient our lives?

Something I like about Rubin is that she doesn't assume happiness is simply a choice—a kind of light switch you can turn on or off. She's also very careful to say that the opposite of happiness is unhappiness, *not* depression. Rubin describes depression as its own beast—a sentiment that I would affirm. Depression is not simply being unhappy, it is a tangle of emotions, ideas, and chemistry that often needs professional support to navigate. A person suffering with depression cannot just decide to be ok. Nor can we simply decide to be happy.

What then *is* happiness? It is difficult to define. It seems to be a ubiquitous word that we all are supposed to just 'know' what it means. A quick Internet search defines happiness as "the state of being happy." That's not so helpful. What is *happy*? The Internet dictionary suggests happy is "feeling or showing pleasure or contentment." That seems about right. However, where it gets really interesting is the list of synonyms:

cheerful, cheery, merry, joyful, jovial, jolly, jocular, gleeful, carefree, untroubled, delighted, smiling, beaming, grinning, in good spirits, in a good mood, lighthearted, pleased, contented, content, satisfied, gratified, buoyant, radiant, sunny, blithe, joyous, beatific; thrilled, elated, exhilarated, ecstatic, blissful, euphoric, overjoyed, exultant, rapturous, in seventh heaven, on cloud nine, walking on air, jumping for joy, jubilant...*and more....*

That's quite a list of positive emotions. Yet, given all the ways to describe a positive emotional experience, such terms do not answer the question of *how* to feel such things or of *how* to be happy.

Rubin's happiness project was her effort to define this *how* for herself. *How* could *she* be happy? What would she need to *do*? Could she identify what makes her happy or unhappy and resolve to live in accordance with that knowledge? I'd say she discovered that *for her* the answer was "mostly." In significant ways her efforts to notice what made her happy led her to make helpful changes. For example, she decluttered her house because the disorder made her unhappy. And, she started a children's literature reading group because she loved these books *and* because according to the research creating social bonds contributes to happiness.

Even as she describes her own choices and process in detail, she repeatedly emphasizes that just because something makes someone else happy, it doesn't mean it will make us

happy. She describes this as the “Be Gretchen” rule. She can only be herself. We can only be ourselves. And, as she further suggests, “We can choose what to do; we cannot choose what we *like* to do.”

Despite my cynical tendencies towards lists of resolutions, rules, and aphorisms, I found Rubin’s project compelling. She wasn’t simply trying to “be happy”; she was trying to understand who she was, what she valued, what impact she was having on others, and what she could do to better align her behaviors with her values. She was, in short, trying to be a better person.

But, what does it mean to be a better person or to make a better world? *Does* better mean happier? Or, does better mean just or loving or equitable? Or, does better mean healthier or peaceful or more wealthy or balanced? What is the ultimate goal? The highest end? Is there just one word, one concept that conveys this?

In ancient Greek, there is a word *telos*, which means end or purpose. *Telos* is used in the Christian Testament as well as by ancient philosophers such as Aristotle. For Aristotle, everything has a *telos*. For example, an acorn holds within itself the *telos* to become an oak tree. In this framework, happiness could be understood as the *telos* coming into full expression. As such, happiness is the living out of our nature, of who we are.

This is how I understand Rubin’s project—a kind of Aristotelian project to know oneself and to seek to align one’s life with one’s nature—one’s preferences and dislikes, talents and passions. To me, such a project is a call to allow a life to flourish by living more fully into its potential and possibilities.

Except that it’s never quite that simple. We are not always able to pursue our passions or align our lives in ways that optimize our talents and preferences. We lack the resources of money, time, energy, or health. Or, our projected path conflicts with the interests or choices of others. Someone else gets the job we wanted. We cannot relocate because of a commitment to a spouse or parent or child. Or, we are actively blocked from a certain direction. Our gender, race, sexuality, nationality, or disability is deemed wrong or “not the right fit” for a certain club or committee, job or neighborhood.

Such limits to the pursuit of happiness arise again and again impacting both individuals as well as whole classes of people. With these limits in mind, advocating for the pursuit of happiness can feel naïve or even callously indifferent to the struggles of others. Perhaps sometimes happiness is not the goal to be trumpeting. Perhaps sometimes goals of food on

the table or healthcare or avoiding deportation or walking safely through one's neighborhood feel far more salient than the idea of happiness.

Happiness is certainly an element of life. Cultivating happiness in our own lives or for others may even be the motivating goals that inspires us to fight to keep families facing deportation together or to insure everyone has access to adequate food, shelter, clean water, and healthcare. And yet, I worry that focusing on happiness as *the* goal risks distorting the experience of life with its panoply of emotions, relationships, and values. Perhaps sometimes unhappiness is the response that fits a situation or a season. Perhaps sometimes we need to listen to, learn from, or experience unhappiness without simply trying to find the quickest route towards being happy. As one of our 8th grade Coming of Age young women shared with us in her Credo a couple weeks ago, perhaps sometimes we need to feel all the feelings because they are all a part of life.

Since becoming a Unitarian Universalist, I have become increasingly enamored with the practice of joys and sorrows for its willingness to embrace the full range of life experiences and emotions. I believe that this ritual of sharing both joys and sorrows has the capacity to honor the very core of human life. By opening ourselves to an unpredictable stream of births and illness, anniversaries and grief, we mirror the variegated experience of life as it comes to us. We cannot predict nor fully control all that our life will bring us. We cannot determine whether we are born to wealthy or poor parents, kind or cruel siblings, challenging or ill-equipped schools. Nor can we fully determine what illnesses, accidents, or opportunities emerge in our lives or in the lives of those we love. Rather, we find ourselves seeking to navigate life with all of its unexpected gifts that can deliver joy or sorrow, anticipation or grief.

I believe that we all face a stream of experiences some of which we receive and others that we have helped to create. These variable and varying experiences bring to us moments of great joy and times of profound heartbreak. This is what it means to be human. This is the experience we bring to this sacred place, to these moments of community, to the flickering flame of the chalice and the candles upon this table. We show up here with our memories and experiences, our longings and our skepticism as we search for a meaningful life, a sense of community, and a path towards becoming a better person and making the world a better place.

There are times in this variable experience of life when we will not feel so happy and when life's fullness feels thwarted. We can certainly strive for happiness. We can seek to know ourselves and who we are in order to set a course towards better aligning our values and our living. You've heard me say this often enough! And when our aspirations and our

actions align, we often feel a sense of happiness, of wellbeing, of peace and satisfaction. But there are also moments when happiness feels like a struggle. And that's ok. Sometimes unhappiness is what's real. We've lost someone we love. We've been disappointed by a lost opportunity. We've faced unjust assumptions or structures that simply don't allow us to live into the fullness of who we are, of our *telos*. Such experiences and more are also a part of what life means.

I think my skepticism of making happiness *the* goal in life arises from a fear that a committed pursuit of happiness would compel denial of the unhappy experiences of life. Such denial feels ingenuous, even destructive in its jettison of difficult, though sincere emotions and experiences. But, it also feels incomplete and problematic to suggest life is *only* struggle and unhappiness. Are there not many ways life is a gift for many folks? We can know simple pleasures like a deep breath, a bouquet of flowers, or a pet's affection. And we can know great happiness and joy—such as falling in love or being part of team that attains a challenging goal. Happiness *is* a positive and pleasant emotion. This should be embraced for the good that it is!

As we leave the sanctuary in a few moments, we will again resume the lives waiting for us. And there is much in life that will bring us heartache and make us angry. But there is also much that can bring us joy and make us happy. As we navigate the fullness of our lives, may we notice our lives. Whether through meditation or conversation, a walk with a friend or a ride on a crosstown bus, may we all be alert to the gifts of life: what we value, what we love, what makes us happy or unhappy, and what will make us a better person and help us to make a better world.

So may it be.
Amen.

ⁱ Gretchen Rubin, *The Happiness Project: Or, Why I Spent a Year Trying to Sing in the Morning, Clean my Closets, Fight Right, Read Aristotle, and Generally Have More Fun*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 2.