

Food for Thought

Real ways in how to make a difference by bringing more joy and happiness into your life and to those around you – PART THREE IN A THREE PART SERIES ON WHAT'S NEXT?

By Colleen Dunn Smith

Happiness – We aspire to its attainment as an inalienable right, an integral part of what we hold most dear – Life, Liberty and the *pursuit of Happiness*. It is a testament to the significance of the individual's right to choose his own path, whatever that may be. Of course, doing no harm to others or their property is the moral failsafe attached, but that's a story for another day.

Ancient Greeks used the word Eudemonia to convey the idea of flourishing, or living the good life, while more contemporary sources define Happiness as "a state of mind or feeling characterized by contentment, satisfaction, pleasure, or joy."

Cartoonist and modern day philosopher, Charles Schultz, succinctly summed up his ideas on happiness with his book titled "Happiness is a Warm Puppy." My *Hot Buttons to Happiness* are just as heartfelt, if less succinct.

1. Be responsible for your life and your choices. Here's a thought that you may or may not appreciate (it's going to depend on how much you currently play to your inner victim): **you are completely responsible for your own happiness.** Yep, I said it. Because even though one's socioeconomic background or educational level or financial wherewithal matters, it is only part of the recipe, not the entire pot. Happy people come from all walks of life, from all religions, in all countries, including impoverished, third world countries where people make in a year what some Americans make in a day. We are responsible for our life and our reality, and our happiness is part of that daily reality.

It, like everything else in our life, is about choices. Free will ensures us choices: what we will do, where we will go, what we will say, and yes, even what we will THINK, which is where it all begins. The cradle of life to our destiny is in the womb of our mind; it is there thoughts are born. I quote Plato, "Watch your thoughts for they become your actions. Watch your actions for they become your habits. Watch your habits for they become your character. Watch your character for it will become your destiny." The power of a thought is far more reaching than you think.

Or as Emerson put it, "The ancestor of every action is a thought." Ralph Waldo sure could call 'em as he saw 'em. Besides, all of the great thinkers of the ages simply stated what science has now "discovered" to be true. Read up on Quantum Physics for more on what science says about how our thoughts create our reality.

2. Choose happy. Did you know that you can be a happy person and still have sad or angry thoughts? Equally, you can be an angry person and still have happy thoughts – Yin and Yang at its best. Even Carl Jung stated, "There are as many nights as days, and the one is just as long as the other in the year's course. Even a happy life cannot be without a measure of darkness, and the word 'happy' would lose its meaning if it were not balanced by sadness."

Who we are, however, is not to be confused with any one momentary thought. And yet, if any one momentary thought is repeated over and over again, it can ultimately create who we are (see Plato's quote from above.) I know; it's a conundrum, but true nonetheless.

Also, with regard to choosing 'happy,' knowing the things or activities that bring you joy goes a long way to making the right choices for yourself. The Socratic aphorism "Know Thyself" is the springboard to understand our own habits, morals, temperament, ability to control anger, and other aspects of human behavior that we struggle with on a daily basis...like diving into what makes us happy and how to get more of it.

3. Be fully present in every moment. Have you ever been caught off guard by a butterfly? You know what I mean. You're walking along, minding your own business, enjoying the day...or not. Whatever you are doing, you are engrossed in your own thoughts of just how great or terrible the day is going, and how you are going to fix that problem you are obsessing about – blah, blah, blah – you know, self talk. And then you see this flit and flutter in your peripheral vision and you turn to see what it is...and there, floating, fluttering, flying in this erratic aerodynamic pattern that seems to defy what optimal flight should be, the butterfly effortlessly commands your attention. For a moment, you forget whatever it was that you were fretting about and watch. You are entranced. You feel joy, happiness, and maybe even awe; partly because of the natural beauty, but also because you are totally and completely "in the moment." This sudden shift in consciousness, allows us to enter into an alternate reality, indicating we can change our "reality" or how we perceive our world, anytime we choose. As the Buddhists advise, live life in the present as that is all that is real. Anything else crowds out the beauty of now.

Todd Kashdan, the director of the Laboratory for the Study of Social Anxiety, Character Strengths, and Related Phenomena at Mason, says if he had to name three elements that are essential for creating happiness and meaning in life it would be *meaningful relationships, gratitude, and living in the present moment with an attitude of openness and curiosity*. Butterflies bring out the best in all of us. And they're free!

4. Be grateful for everything. "When we see every situation as being perfect just the way it is, happiness grows and grows." *Daniel Levin, The Zen Book*

This one is all about Focus. What you focus on expands. What you focus on, you will get. So if you spend your time thinking about and dwelling on all that is "bad" in your life...guess what? You're going to get more of the same. But, if you instead focus on all that is "good" in your life and what you are grateful for, you will reap twice the rewards. First, you will feel better and be happier in the here-and-now because research shows us that we cannot be unhappy while we are in a state of appreciation. Second, like attracts like, and what you focus on you get. Look for the good in all things and you will find them lurking all around you. They are like those amazing paintings or drawings where the artist has hidden objects within the original. They require you to squint your eyes, stand back, or soften your gaze – in other words make some adjustment in how you perceive the piece – before you can see the hidden items. But once you do, you can always see them. Choosing to see the good in things and finding what makes you happy in any situation is much like that. With a little practice, you'll wonder what life was like before you could see the Tiger in the Trees.¹

5. Reinforce and nurture close relationships. While you are being grateful for all your relationships...really *relate!* Study after study has found that people in steady relationships live longer, are happier and feel more secure about themselves. I've said it for years: what really matter in this life is what we do with and for other people. How we progress in our relationships is a pretty accurate gage for how we are growing in relationship to God and the Universe. Sow the seeds, nurture them and grow your relationships – it's how we grow our souls.

6. Contribute to someone or something other than yourself. And I don't mean the coffers at the local casino. Part of why relationships make us happy is because we are thinking of others before ourselves. When we put others first, we are contributing, and selfless service is another one of those hot buttons for happiness. You remember the movie, *Pay It Forward*? How did you feel when you saw that movie – warm and fuzzy all over and inspired to do good? Well, that's because deep down inside it makes us happy and we feel fulfilled when we see someone in need and do something to help relieve their suffering. I'm no Mother Teresa, but I promise you, it works.

However, I don't want you to just take my word for it. Look it up for yourself. There are HUNDREDS of articles and research papers on the subject of Happiness. If you distill down the information to certain key ingredients, these six essentials will rise to the top again and again.

Now, if you are still hungry to know more about Happiness, and how it can help your bottom line, stay tuned...there really is more to come, film at 11.

¹ American wildlife artist Rusty Rust shows a huge Bengal Tiger standing in a bamboo forest. Look for “**The Hidden Tiger**” in the image, where is the hidden tiger? <http://www.moillusions.com/2007/06/hidden-tiger-illusion.html>
