

HAPPINESS IN 3-D

Guest Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

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[Opening comments about the new building.]

Do any of you watch the TV program “Dancing with the Stars”? I of course do not watch it regularly, but I have a close acquaintance (who shall remain anonymous) who watches it occasionally and lures me into watching brief segments. For those of you who are not familiar with this show, I will tell you that it features celebrities and celebrity-wannabe’s from a variety of fields—acting, sports, music, politics, TV news and entertainment—who are each paired up with a professional dancer over a period of several weeks. The dancers are rated by a panel of professional dance judges, but they are also voted on by the public viewing audience. Based on these combined ratings, one dance couple is eliminated from the competition each week, culminating in a melodramatic final announcement of the overall winner.

In the fall of 2011, “Dancing with the Stars” did indeed produce a dramatic final winner—a veteran of the Iraq War named J. R. Martinez, whose severe facial scars are a visible reminder of the land mine that nearly killed him in 2003. He was burned over 40 percent of his body, and his recovery from his burn wounds was excruciatingly slow and painful. “After five weeks in the hospital, he insisted on seeing himself in a mirror. The nurse hesitated, but Martinez reasoned, ‘I’m going to have to live with this for the rest of my life. I might as well start learning how to live with it now.’ He was not prepared for his reflection. ‘All my life I was told, “You are handsome.” I slowly looked up and what I saw was Freddy Krueger [the disfigured villain of the movie *Nightmare on Elm Street*]. His stunned reaction? ‘That’s a freak. That’s not me,’ he says. ‘I went into this anger and depression. I never did anything in my life that deserved this punishment.’” With the support of his mother and the dedicated staff of the military hospital in San Antonio, J. R. not only recovered from his physical injuries, but also converted his story into a source of inspiration for other wounded war veterans. He says, “I think I was kept in this world to use my experience to help others.” Had it not been for this

horrible experience, he says, “my life would not be what it is today: full of joy, happiness, and positivity.” [Monica Rizzo, “*Dancing’s True Hero*,” *People* magazine, 11/7/11]

How is it that people such as J. R. Martinez are somehow able to transform tragedy into triumph and happiness? What contributes to genuine and lasting happiness? Some significant answers to that question can be found in a book by Jonathan Haight titled *The Happiness Hypothesis*, which is quite simply one of the best books I have read in years. What I like most about his book is the graceful way Jonathan Haight combines insights from ancient wisdom traditions, modern psychological research, and his own personal experiences. His background as an undergraduate major in philosophy provided a solid foundation in both Western and Eastern thought, and his graduate training at the University of Pennsylvania in what has come to be known as **positive psychology** provided exposure to the insights of contemporary psychology.

The pursuit of happiness is hard-wired into our history and our brains. And yet for so many of us, happiness remains elusive. When I refer to happiness, I do not mean simply a passing mood, but rather **life satisfaction**. What I want to suggest this morning is that genuine happiness is multidimensional. It involves **pleasure** (or self-gratification), **achievement** (or success in meeting challenging goals), and **self-transcendence** (or contributing to a higher purpose). We find enduring life satisfaction by striking a **balance** among these three levels of happiness. If we neglect **or overload** any one of them, we will be thwarted in our lifelong pursuit of happiness.

The positive psychologists even go so far as to offer a **formula for happiness**—a formula that defies much of the conventional wisdom about what makes people happy. By their estimate, about **50 percent** of happiness can be attributed to genetically determined factors. Each of us has a kind of built-in happiness thermostat—a **setpoint**, which is determined largely by your brain chemistry—the delicate yet surprisingly stable balance of neuron activity that makes you feel happy or unhappy over time, which is sometimes called your **temperament**. This factor seems to be determined largely by your genes and physiology—perhaps influenced as well by prenatal development. Parents of two or more children can attest to the fact that children within the same family often display dramatically different temperaments from birth—

or even before birth. As applied to happiness, Haight uses the analogy of a thermostat that has been preset to 58 degrees (for pessimists prone to depression) or 75 degrees (for optimists). The setpoint affects a person's basic level of happiness **independent** of their environment. As Jonathan Haight puts it, "Good fortune or bad, you will always return to your happiness setpoint—your brain's default level of happiness—which was largely determined by your genes." [p. 86] Even after experiencing significant joy or sorrow, most of us eventually return to our biological setpoint.

Pursuing happiness in the form of **pleasure** can bring about short-term changes in our setpoint. Thanks to advances in neuroscience, we now have a much better understanding of how different substances and activities alter brain chemistry. We also understand much more about the biochemistry of **addiction**. The brain adapts quickly to pleasure-producing chemicals, and it requires greater amounts of them in order to produce the same pleasurable effect. That is why people can become addicted not only to drugs and alcohol, but also to certain forms of pleasure-producing activity such as sports, sex, and music. Ultimately, the pursuit of happiness as pleasure can become self-defeating and often self-destructive.

The most startling and controversial assertion in the happiness formula is that **life circumstances** account for only about **ten percent** of overall life satisfaction. How often do we hear: "I would be happy IF _____" or "I will be happy WHEN _____." I recall a cartoon in which a little boy on a tricycle says to a playmate holding a kite, "**I can't wait to grow up and be happy.**" [Sonja Lyubomirsky, *The How of Happiness*, p. 39] So many of the things that are advertised to bring happiness—material possessions, physical appearance, even better weather conditions—have little lasting impact on overall life satisfaction. A considerable amount of attention has been devoted to studying the relationship between income and happiness. Does increased wealth lead to personal happiness? One recent study concluded that, up to a certain point, increased household income does indeed lead to greater happiness, but once that threshold has been reached, increased wealth does not guarantee increased happiness. This particular study estimated the threshold figure to be around \$75,000 per household per year, depending on several other factors. Just as importantly, the farther below this critical threshold, the greater amount of unhappiness, sadness, and stress. In other words, poverty can lead to depression, but

wealth does not lead to happiness. As it turns out, the Great American Dream of rising from poverty to riches is only half true. [Jenifer Goodwin, “After \$75,000, Money Can’t Buy Day-to-Day Happiness, *Bloomberg Businessweek*, 9/7/10]

What about the remaining **40 percent** in the happiness equation? Now we turn to the most intriguing factor in happiness: **intentional** behavior that leads to a sense of **achievement**. One of the pioneers in this field is Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi [pronounced “cheeks sent me high”] who studied the experience of what he called **flow**. Flow is the mental state of “total immersion in a task that is challenging yet closely matched to one’s abilities. . . . Flow often occurs during physical movement—skiing, driving fast on a curvy country road, or playing team sports. Flow is aided by music or by the action of other people (for example, singing in a choir, dancing, just having an intense conversation with a friend). And flow can happen during solitary creative activities, such as painting, writing, or photography. The keys to flow: There is a clear challenge that fully engages your attention; you have the skills to meet the challenge; and you get immediate feedback about how you are doing at each step.” [Haight, p. 95] These are the ingredients of happiness in the form of **achievement**.

One of the keys to discovering your potential for flow experiences is to identify your **strengths**. This is one of the lasting contributions of positive psychology. For example, Jonathan Haight suggests that in making New Year’s resolutions, we should focus on applying our **strengths** rather than fixing our flaws. In his book titled *Authentic Happiness*, Martin Seligman offers a self-assessment tool for identifying your personal strengths [which can also be found on the website listed at the end of today’s order of service]. The goal of this exercise is to identify what Seligman calls your **signature strengths**—the unique combination of personal qualities and skills that are both intrinsically rewarding to you **and** which can be harnessed in pursuing a higher purpose that transcends you.

To me, a satisfying life engages a person in activities and goals that extend **beyond** oneself. As I mentioned earlier, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi used the word **flow** to describe experiences that are intrinsically satisfying because they are challenging yet closely matched to one’s skills and interests. Since then, he has added a new concept, **vital engagement**, to describe

the web of relationships and commitments that develop when we share our deep interests and commitments with others. **Personal happiness is most meaningful when it contributes to the happiness of others.** Presbyterian writer Frederick Buechner [“BEEK-ner”] puts it this way: “When you are doing something you are happiest doing, it must also be something that the world needs to have done.” [in Bob Abernethy & William Bole (eds.), *The Life of Meaning*, p. 419] I will close with a quote from Robert Ingersoll, the great 19th century orator, humanist, and close personal friend of Walt Whitman: “Justice is the only worship. Love is the only priest. Ignorance is the only slavery. Happiness is the only good. The time to be happy is now. The place to be happy is here. **The way to be happy is to make others so.**” [Bartlett’s *Familiar Quotations* (16th ed.), p. 520]

SERMON RESOURCES

Mihalyi Csikszentmihaly, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*

Dalai Lama, *The Art of Living*

Jonathan Haight, *The Happiness Hypothesis*

Mark Leary, *The Curse of the Self: Self-Awareness, Egotism, and the Quality of Life*

Sonja Lyubomirsky, *The How of Happiness*

Frederick Muir, “From iChurch to Beloved Community: Ecclesiology and Justice,” *Berry Street Essay*, Phoenix, AZ 6/20/2012

Andrew Newberg et al., *Why God Won’t Go Away*

Martin Seligman, *Authentic Happiness*, www.authentichappiness.org

Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*