

Pursuit of Happiness: An “Inside Job”

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WHEN WE THINK about “the pursuit of happiness” as the central coveted American dream, the idea can take on a flavor of seeking something outside ourselves. It may imply a quality in our culture that accommodates—even promotes—unrestricted efforts to acquire all the conditions needed for us to “live the good life.” These are typically material possessions secured through economic achievement, such as secure, well-paying employment, a nice home in a clean, safe, desirable community, and all the other things that go with a comfortable standard of living—nice cars, nice clothes, pleasant travel and entertainment.

In general, despite some occasional glitches in our economy and some political push-and-pull in Washington, our society does provide a fairly solid platform for most of us to at least pursue “happiness”. Why is it, then, that we are constantly bombarded in the media coverage, by evidence of so much **un**happiness in our society?

SOMEWHERE THERE’S A DISCONNECT. How come, once we acquire all these goodies, we’re not all what we can describe as “happy?” One psychologist has been successfully exploring the answer. Assisted by a large group of his colleagues, he has been researching this issue for several years. He is Dr. Martin E.P Seligman, Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. Many years ago Dr. Seligman became well known among his colleagues for his work with depression engendered by what he called “learned helplessness.” More recently however, he decided he had tired of working with the “downside” of psychology, with mental illness and ineffective functioning. He became intrigued with focusing exclusively on the “upside” of psychology, that is, how people can be fulfilled, satisfied, more complete as persons. Yes, how they can become, if you will, “happy.”

According to Dr. Seligman, “happy” is tough to define precisely because it is subject to so many misinterpretations. In fact, he considers it a handy, short-hand name, a “code word” for the condition which exemplifies the highest state of human functioning and fulfillment.

INTRIGUED, HOWEVER, by getting to the heart of the matter, Dr. Seligman recruited a group of his research-oriented colleagues to dig into the subject. They began by scouring all the classical literature on “happiness” and internal states of mind, heart, and soul in all of the great religious, spiritual, philosophical and psychological in recorded history. Yes, that was a big task. But the team accomplished its work. Name any of the world’s greatest thinkers and teachers from any part of the world, and their work was studied.

The team's findings were remarkable. They discovered that there are a limited number of common themes which run through all of the greatest thinking and teaching on the matter of human beings' never-ending search for peace and fulfillment.

WHAT DID THEY FIND? CHARACTER. The research team discovered that a person's character, cultivated through one's life, is basically made up of specific strengths which are widely recognized throughout the world's many cultures—like judgment, kindness and humor. They also found that the 24 strengths they identified naturally grouped themselves into six general categories best described as “virtues”, or positive traits greatly valued and admired by people every: characteristics like courage, wisdom and humanity. So, what do they all have to do with happiness? The research showed that, because character is what directs our actions, by cultivating and practicing character strengths we act in ways that give us satisfaction and a sense of well-being—in other words, make us happy.

In other words, happiness is not a condition we pursue and acquire directly. Rather, it is a **condition that results from positive action.** It's like, in the corporate world, making a profit. A company doesn't just “make a profit.” It provides a product or service perceived as valuable to the consumer and gets paid, managing itself well in the meantime. Then, when the company does its bookkeeping, it discovers that it has, in fact, made a profit.

Similarly, in the domain of human behavior, if we function in a manner that enhances ourselves, other people, our community, our society, or planet, we feel a sense of satisfaction that we are doing something worthwhile, something with a positive meaning. Something of value and benefit. How do we feel when we behave in such a manner? We feel good!

In summary, strengths constitute our inner core. When we act in ways that draw upon them, we are happy ... It's an inside job.

IF YOU'D LIKE TO EXPLORE your own internal “state of happiness,” I suggest you explore Dr. Seligman's work further. You have options. One is to acquire his classic book entitled “Authentic Happiness.” It's published by Simon and Schuster's Free Press, and is available in paperback. Another option is to go to his web page of the same name (<http://www.authentichappiness.com>).

In either case, you will find in these resources a series of exercises to complete which will afford you some dramatic insights into your own current level of happiness and, more importantly, suggestions as to how to increase your level of satisfaction with life by using and further cultivating your “signature strengths”. So have a look inside.

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