

THE FACES AND DEPTHS OF HAPPINESS ADPTD, 2011

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My advanced age manifests itself, in part, in my faulty memory. My wife bought me a dog-tag like necklace that has my name, address and home phone number on it. If I should have a heart attack on one of my walks in my Hamilton neighborhood of Baltimore, or if I have a particularly severe senior moment, people will know who to call, where to send the body, or help me get home. I have not had to use it yet, but I never go for a walk without it.

Anyhow, I can't remember if it was before our last meeting, or after we had already chosen "Happiness" as our theme, that I read a review in *Christian Century* of two books on Happiness, one by Derek Bok, former President of Harvard University, and the other by his wife Sissela Bok, of Harvard University. If it was after our meeting and my having an assignment to write a paper, it was a happy find to run across these two books and read them

As Sissela Bok notes in her Acknowledgments at the end of *Exploring Happiness*, she and her husband were working on the same subject, but from very different perspectives. They were each obviously aware of what the other was doing.

I want to open this paper with a brief summary of Derek Bok's book titled *The Politics of Happiness*. Bok first takes note of the growing research on Happiness, its results and implications. He reports the results of the research in tables that show the ratings on happiness in nations of the world. While we may not have seen the tables, it was widely reported that Sweden seems have the happiest population.

In this book Bok reports on the ways in which happiness is studied. For the most part the data is gathered by surveys which asks people contacted about their satisfaction with their lives, asking if they were Very Happy, Pretty Happy, Not too happy. This research provided information that allowed there to be portraits of the well being of Western Countries and compare them.

The research also took it in the direction of the factors that contributed to well being. Among those found to be important were economic well being, marriage, social relations, employment, perceived health, religion and the quality of government.

The larger question that Bok looks at is whether, given the results of ongoing research, the well being of citizens should be one of the aims or goals of government policy and should the policy be based on the research. There are ideological arguments against this; conservative ideology and libertarian ideology makes the case that a person's well being is that person's business and that the government should provide protection of the liberties of the citizen to pursue personal satisfaction. Liberal ideology has tied well being to political equality, to equality in wealth or at least, efforts to redistribute income so that those who are the poorest gain in income. And the left believes it is the business of the government to see to this improvement of the state of the poor. Inherent in this interest and ideology is an emphasis on the role of economic well being in

happiness of the poorer. Bok questions both of these ideologies.

Bok also raises questions about what the government can do if well being is affected and improved by marriage. It is doubtful that the government should go any further than it has in the benefits that come to married couples. He also makes the point that the government should not and will not, mandate participation in religion even though the research seems to indicate that religion does improve well being. It does seem that government should seek to provide a quality services and work efficiently for the citizens and make it possible to have some health security.

The book is a useful and interesting picture of the growing research and study that is being done on the happiness of people, especially from the perspective of their being citizens. One of the keys to well being is meaningful engagement in community life and that can only be a benefit to the nation as a whole and the government in particular.

I recommend the book to everyone.

THE DEEPER ISSUES OF HAPPINESS

Sissela Bok's book Exploring Happiness is a rich, rewarding and thoughtful book that I think any of us could benefit from. She says about her task "The same is true for anyone embarking, as I do in this book, (the issue is) not so much a quest to find happiness, still less to prescribe steps for others to take to achieve it, as to explore what we can learn about its nature and its role in human lives." (p. 2) In the course of this book Bok takes us through the history of philosophy, theology into the age of science. She asks for us and for others whether, in a time such as our own with "anguish and insecurity and many who live in dire poverty, it is appropriate to set off on a study of human happiness." She answers that it is indeed in such a time as this that a study of happiness is most needed. She sites Thomas Jefferson and his words about life, liberty and "the pursuit of happiness". These words were forged in a difficult time and upon reading this book, I was reminded how provocative the statement is.

The book suggests that to examine happiness it is useful to look at the observations of people about their own lives and their own experiences of happiness as found in journals, diaries and literature. I remember in Anne Tyler's early novel Dinner at the Home Sick Restaurant, the matriarch of the family at the center of the novel is discovered at one point in a reverie of sorts. She remembers when she was younger, working in her garden beside the house in which they lived. As she worked, one of her children was practicing piano and the sound was coming out the window and flowing over her as she worked. She remembers that she thought that day, that in that moment, in those very circumstances, she discovered that she was happy. The importance of Bok's point is that we can learn from the recollections and disclosures of others and from literature, something about the nature of happiness. This paper and these moments with you are not the first instances of my remembering and embracing this episode from a novel I read a good long while ago.

Bok also examines, as does Charry in her book, some of the ancient schools of philosophy and their views of happiness. She observes that for many in the ancient world, happiness was the end

of life, the “summum bonum”. Some suggested that it was the pursuit of virtue that yielded happiness; Plato, Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas; some argued that it was the choosing of a simple life; the Stoics; others that it was oneness with nature; others that it was life lived through the direction of reason, and in others it was the absence of pain and the adding of pleasure, the Epicureans.

Bok and Charry agree on the important place of Augustine, first in Christian thinking about happiness, but also as making a contribution to thinking about happiness in general.

Augustine’s thinking is influenced by some explorations of philosophers and pagan thinkers and what they investigated and the claims that many made find. In some instances they find a place in his thought. With others he is not hesitant to disagree.

It was accepted by Augustine that the desire for happiness was a given in human life and experience, and he takes up the challenge of exploring the path of reason and life that would lead to the experience of happiness in life. But it was a given also to Augustine that happiness can not be fully realized in the context of human life on earth.

Augustine’s contribution to the study understanding of happiness is the way in which he enveloped the theme completely in Christian terms. He makes the case that happiness is the human experience of God. The experience of God comes, in his early thinking, with knowledge of God or the wisdom of God. He later explores the relationship of happiness to love; love of God and love for the neighbor, and in which case we are into the realm of ethics, which moves back to the ancient notion that happiness has to do with virtue. What is unique in Augustine was that happiness is subsumed by Christian tradition and doctrine. Augustine argues that happiness comes from a relationship with God. And, Augustine argues that if happiness is experience of God, and the experience of God was realized by knowledge of God and knowledge of God is manifest in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and knowledge of the Son of God is mediated through the doctrine of the Church. Even though happiness, or the quest for happiness is a given with human existence, it is Augustine’s claim that only through the embrace of Christian doctrine can happiness be truly experienced. And for happiness to be a full, life filling reality to the person, it must be in the after life in which direct experience of God is available.

(I don’t know if this is the place to raise this issue, but it is in the front of my mind. Given that the yearning for happiness comes with human life, can it really be claimed by Christianity that the only way for the yearning for happiness to be filled is through Christianity? That seems indeed the claim of Augustine. And I think there is a long tradition in the church to claim exclusivity. In some cases that has been one of the least attractive aspects of our tradition and the history of the church. The other option for theology is to make the claim that Christian symbols, ideas and practices might be a useful way to interpret given human yearnings and experience. If we do theology about happiness, do we need to make the claim that Christian ideas and claims are the exclusive pathway to the experience of happiness? Or can we use the examination of happiness as a human experience as a content that can give some Christian ideas and claims substance and depth?)

Bok discusses the contribution which Kant has made to the discussion. She observes that Kant

made the case that it was the pursuit of living a life worthy of happiness was the goal of human life. Kant also argued that it was dubious that happiness could be achieved in life. Kant made the case that yearning for happiness in life was a given. But the only option for human life was not the experience of the fullness of happiness itself, but only the choice to live a life worthy of the happiness that is yearned for. But the persistence of the yearning for happiness and the yearning being also inaccessible in the human condition, suggests that there must be a circumstance in which the yearning is satisfied. It did not make sense to Kant that such a persistent yearning should be a given and that this state of affairs indicates that there must be a condition in which the yearning be realized. For Kant, that meant this situation made the case for an after life in which happiness could be realized.

Another question for discussion is the state in human life of the yearning for happiness and the paradox of the fact that life as given is filled with obstructions to the realization of happiness. What does it mean that this is the case and what are the conclusions that can be drawn about life itself, not after life.

Bok also offers the interesting contrast between the contemporaries Sigmund Freud and Bertrand Russell, both of whom were atheist. Freud argued that the realization of happiness was not included in the plans of the creation. And he claimed that the hopes or yearnings for happiness were an illusion. Then there is Russell, the great mathematician and philosopher. It was Russell and Whitehead who wrote the Principia Mathematica.

Russell seemed to think that some aspect of happiness was available to human beings. He observed that pleasure contributed to happiness. Russell also argued that happiness was rooted in the sense and experience of being at one with the universe, with the stream of life, along with love and meaningful work.

She notes what Teilhard de Chardin said, "To be happy we must seek to add one stitch, no matter how small it be, to the magnificent tapestry of life." p.118. The similarity between what Russell thought and what Chardin suggested is evident and offers an important path to explore.

I was interested as well in the few paragraphs Bok devotes to the theme of Melancholy. She quotes from Aristotle, "Why is it that all men of genius, like Empedocles, Plato, Socrates, who have become outstanding in philosophy, poetry, or the arts, are melancholy....." p 109. She notes that in a certain period of time in the West, it was believed that artistic talent derives from Melancholy. Schopenhauer makes this case, and believed or expressed the idea that happiness on earth is doomed. She quotes from Keats' Ode to Melancholy; "Ay, in the very temple of Delight/ Veiled Melancholy has her Sovran shrine,/ Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue/ Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine.... p 109

This theme and preoccupation, and melancholy itself had a hold on Robert Burton and it ended up inspiring his life's work, The Anatomy of Melancholy a work of astounding size and density.

As promised in the opening of her book, Bok does give some attention to what is called in a chapter heading A Science of Happiness. There were some suggestions for this approach as early

as the 18th century. One Abby Pluquet, the chair of Moral Philosophy at College de France, called for a science of happiness which included a union between philosophy, literature, and the methods of the exact sciences. p.104. But as the decades passed and as science grew and deepened, new preoccupations took hold of the thinking about happiness. Bok notes that earlier students of happiness would be shocked to find that the investigations of the modern age leave aside literature, the arts, history, philosophy and any link between happiness and virtue is severed. Instead, the study of happiness now looks at what people themselves have to say about happiness through surveys. These survey results are supplemented by psychological studies which look at different aspects of the experience of happiness. Among some of the findings of psychological studies are; human beings respond only briefly to experiences of pleasure and then return quickly to a neutral state. Some studies found that people who suffered great or damaging losses do not return quickly to the status quo.

Then some psychologist speculated that happiness is genetically determined. She writes about this, “Just as believers in predestination or astrology have long considered outside influences on human fortunes all powerful, so many people confronted with assertions about the role played by heredity, found themselves asking just how much they can realistically expect to do to increase to increase their own chance for happiness.” p.148

Then there is the research being done on the brain and the experience of happiness. It is an interesting question as to whether all these new areas of study will do anything about our search for and experience of happiness and whether both have anything to say about the fundamental nature of the reality.

Kierkegaard and Rahner

I remember reading a good many years ago in a class for The Academy of the Ecumenical Institute, a sermon by John Wesley. In the sermon Wesley explores the journey in Christian life from the life of sin, through being addressed and repentance, and then the life of faith in Jesus Christ. He makes the observation that our initial state is one of ignorant bliss which is enlightened by the address of the gospel so that the human being sees the misery and hopelessness of his condition. And then through the word and faith, one is restored to bliss, the bliss of faith and salvation. There is a persistent and strange link between the misery and hopelessness of life revealed by the light and the state of bliss in the life of grace. We could certainly say that finding ourselves in the life of grace and faith as one of the faces or dimensions of happiness, or joy. And that this state is bound to the awareness of sin and hopelessness in which we can and do find ourselves.

Soren Kierkegaard has a similar dynamic in his understanding of human existence. In Sickness Unto Death, Kierkegaard argues that the sickness unto death is despair. And, he suggests, where we understand that physical illness which is fatal can be escaped at death. But despair cannot be escaped by death. It is the given state of consciousness of human beings. But the gift of despair is that its end is not death; its end is instead “faith” faith in God who can do all things, even give us life freed from despair. And in that case, the despair itself is a gift and it is intimately linked to the joy of faith by means of which the state of despair is overcome and left behind. This argument, this insight, suggests another facet to “happiness” a facet in which we are called to

awareness of the darkness and hopelessness that seems a prelude to happiness and which might very well give a new dimension to our understanding and experience of happiness.

Karl Rahner's little book provides an analysis that is similar. In the opening pages he writes "The life of men (and women) is made up of many and varied activities. Deep in the heart of men is a longing, fitfully glimpsed, and but half realized, to gather up all those strivings into one intense pursuit of one all-embracing objective, worthy of the toil and tears and devotion of the human heart." p 7

And as he continues, he points out that we live with heaped up activities, cross purposes, jostling purposes all with no design. And in the midst of this case, we may find ourselves in despair and confusion and on occasion we turn and speak to God in prayer. "With one swift upward longing of his soul, he has got as near as his finite nature will allow him, to that sublime fusion of all his activities into one glowing moment of heat and light." p 7

Prior to that experience he says that we might have not compulsion to pray. We have, in our time, been hardened and made spiritually insensitive, we are weighted with activities and ideas and only when that which is within us from the beginning, the great yearning is embodied in us and we turn to God in prayer is that one, great moment of life open to us; we stand in relation to God, as we were meant to and there is something sublime in that moment. Rahner does not use the term, but I see no reason to hesitate calling it "happiness". Something yearned for from the dawning of consciousness; something the world and life in the world seems to transpire to keep us deprived of it, and in the same way, the way we have lived and the interests and distractions we allow to deprive us, we never the less can move toward it, in Rahner's book, we can move toward the presence of God and the flowering of happiness in our lives.

CHURCH, MINISTER AND HAPPINESS

Just a couple of observations on this. In some respects I think it might be the case that the minister is responsible for directing and manipulating the structure and life of the congregation so as to provide the general satisfaction of the people with their life in the congregation. Of course as we all very well know, this is not always possible. It might be more our task to assist the congregation in analyzing the well being of the congregation and if there are difficulties or "unhappiness" assist them in finding ways to address these concerns.

The issue of the minister and the great, transporting experiences of happiness in his or her own life and how that carries over into the life of the congregation; and then the far more difficult issue of whether or not we are to play a role in assisting or leading the members of the congregations we serve to those moments in their lives, or assist those who have had such experience in analyzing and communicating what they have experienced..

Perhaps a couple of theological observations and/or questions.

In Rahner's book it is clear that the yearning for the moment of transport is a given in life, but its fulfillment for Rahner, takes place in the life of prayer, in intimacy with God.

In my own experience, I have known some transporting moments of happiness some of which

took place in the context of religious practice and life, and some of which did not. I offer a couple of my own experiences. On day in early Spring when she was a very little girl, I was carrying Madelyn to the car to strap her in to her car seat. When I was just about to open the car door, I heard the familiar crank of Canada geese. I looked up and around and in only a minute I saw the source of the noise. A moderate flock of geese was flying North West, leaving their Winter grounds in Maryland and heading toward the where they Summer. I told her to look up, to listen and we stood there, her in my arms as the geese, a couple hundred of them, cranking all, all the way. That I saw them and that I was able to share it with Madelyn was a transporting moments of happiness. That moment and what I felt has been used in sermons and I believe it was an experience of God even if not in a religious context.

Another “witness” to happiness. Bordy Vineyard in Baltimore County, Maryland used to host concerts on their grounds on the Saturday evenings of Summer. You could take a picnic or buy food from vendors and you could buy bottles of Bordy wine through the evening and they had bands to play,. One Saturday evening there were several of us who went including my daughters and their husbands. There was a Cajun band that night and a lot of folks were dancing, and on one piece, my daughters were dancing together. I watched these two beautiful girls dancing, and then got up and joined them. I am no real dancer, but there was something that transpired in me dancing with them. They seemed to enjoy it; the music, dancing with their sister, but also dancing with their Dad. That this was the case was a revelatory experience about the gift of being a parent. I have used that as a sign of happiness, of joy.

I also had something of the same experience when I served Austin Boulevard Christian Church and we set forth on the task to assist our immediate community to organize itself. The folks at ABC planned and organized a Saturday afternoon workshop for the community. They recruited volunteers to do child care. We gathered and trained leaders of workshops, and we cooked and provided a meal for all who came. There were far more who came than we ever expected. The word that went round from the kitchen was that ABC’ers were to hold back; don’t eat! Each of the task groups reported their work on the issues the community faced and suggestions on what the community could do. That Saturday yielded the Beye Whittier Council which stayed in existence for a good many years and which worked to organize a business association on Chicago Ave, to gather volunteers to paint the schools over one summer. And more. When I think about those days and those events and the church and how they owned it and the work we did, I know something about happiness. In all the above instances the words of Russell and Tielhard come to mind; being a part of the universe, te stream of life, making a seam, no matter how small, in the great tapestry of life.

Perhaps a part of the contribution of the clergy to the life of a congregation is to help people recognize such experiences and assist in their articulation of them in a search for the nature of happiness, and an exploration of the relation of categories and or the depth of our faith relates to them.

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