

LIVING
WITH
BORROWED
DUST

Reflections on Life, Love,
and Other Grievances

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1

Happiness

Find What You Love and Let It Kill You

In Jack Gilbert's poem "A Brief for the Defense," the speaker surveys a world of sorrow, violence, starvation, and isolation, where even in the darkest of hours, there are moments of reprieve, moments of laughter, moments of improbable freedom of the human spirit.¹ The speaker says that amid the plethora of miseries, we also have to risk the gladness, even the joy, that may rise from living amid "the ruthless furnace of the world." Gilbert ends the poem with a plea that we remember the pleasures of certain moments here and there amid the suffering, which are just as real, just as compelling, just as defining in our journey as the suffering. Sometimes, there really is a moment of gladness in "the ruthless furnace of the world."

Those lines of poetry were written by someone who understands that if we don't grab this moment of respite, refuge, and regeneration, it will not come again. This fungible flesh that serves, as Shakespeare's Richard II noted, as "paste and cover to our bones," is truly borrowed, and the longer we live, the more the source of our borrowing seems to reclaim its loan to us.

During this brief loan transaction we call our life, we are told to be happy. I, for one, have tried earnestly and have occasionally

been flush with happiness, and yet happiness as the goal or purpose of life does not speak to me of anything authentic. So I am pleased to be here in this imaginal space with you and reflect on this elusive and evanescent thing we call “happiness.”

So how can these two points be true at the same time? We live in “the ruthless furnace of the world,” *and* we are told to be happy. As a hospital nurse said to me before a recent painful procedure, “Go to your Happy Place now.” I told her, respectfully, “This *is* my Happy Place.” I was trying to be mindful of her good intentions and my battered but realistic view of the world at the same time. In that sentence, “This *is* my Happy Place,” I experience pain, but I also do not forget the lighter hours life sometimes brings us. So, concomitantly, in those lighter hours, I also do not forget that somewhere, someone is suffering.

One of Samuel Beckett’s characters, while waiting for a chap who never shows up, notes that the quantity of tears is a constant in the world. In order for someone to be laughing over here, someone has to be weeping over there. This line of reasoning may depress you, but it is a very Jungian challenge—to hold the tensions of opposites and honor the claims of both sides. Any view, any practice that sides with one value at the cost of the other leads to bad ends of one sort or another.

So, what is this thing called “happiness”? Is happiness ontological? That is, does it exist in and for itself in some recognizable form? If it has some ontic form, is it a noun? If a noun, what does it look like? Is it hiding somewhere, like South Dakota, and if we are clever enough, can we all figure that out and move there? We certainly spend a lot of time imagining that “happiness” will be found in a new car, a new home, a new partner. Can we ever figure out a surefire path to happiness? Or should we even try? The novelist Gustav Flaubert once concluded, “To be stupid, and selfish, and to

have good health are three requirements for happiness, though if stupidity is lacking, the others are useless.”²

The last thing I want to be known as is the guy who is against happiness, so I'd better explain myself a bit further. I devoutly wish for your happiness, for mine, for that of my children and all of everybody's children who walk the planet, but I have learned not to hold my breath that I, they, we will ever arrive at a steady state called “happiness” and abide there till the curtain falls on the last scene of this tawdry melodrama we have mounted on history's stage for all these turbulent centuries.

Some folks are unhappy that they are not permanently happy. Often, those who use social networks like Facebook see how happy other people seem to be, and they end up feeling miserable in comparison—being therein the witness to how happy their friends are with their fabulous children and their glorious times together. Not too many put the other side of their stories online, and so we tend to assume *they* are successful at this Happiness Game and we are not.

Let me describe a photo of a fellow who seems rather happy.³ This baby is smiling and looking completely content. Isn't he blissful? Isn't he at the top of his game? He is so content that he cannot imagine he has a train of trouble, a train having left Newark at 6:45 and traveling at 86.4 miles per hour, headed right toward him. Since he is yet to take the math class to help him figure out when the train arrives at his door, we can allow him to remain happy as a clam. But, as far as we know, clams are not very conscious. It is consciousness and our imaginative capacity to summon up competing portraits of reality that combine to bring difficult hours to our vexed sleep. In Fleur Adcock's poem “Things,” the speaker is awakened and surrounded by all the “things” that cause her distress. But for all her efforts to assuage the troubling visitations of guilt, anxiety, and dread, everything

she fears gathers about her bed and collectively grows worse and worse and worse.⁴ Who does not recognize those assaults by worry that have a habit of arriving in the ghostly hours of predawn?

But how often do we ask the question: Are we meant to be happy? If I am so meant, and am not happy, is there something wrong with me? Being happy does not seem to be a large consideration for most of the animal kingdom. A place to sleep, protection from predators, and food to forage seems to be enough to still their instinctual needs. But this human animal remains bewitched, bothered, and bewildered by the messiness of it all.

While studying in Switzerland, I was able to rent a lawyer's apartment to use as a consulting room while he was at work. He came home early once to find someone weeping and later asked me why I would ever want to spend my time with crying people. I didn't tell him about the time I was invited to an autopsy during my internship at the psychiatric hospital. That didn't make me happy, but I was happy to learn more about how the body fits together and how autopsies work. I think I did tell him it made me happy, and humbled, to be invited to be present with the suffering of others, but I don't think he got that, and so our conversation changed thereafter to deliberate and trivial banter.

My point here is that perhaps life is meaningless, but we are meaning-seeking creatures who are driven to understand it. Failing that, we attempt to form some meaningful relationship to life. We learn from archetypal psychology, from the core of primal religious experiences, from quantum physics, and from the artist's eye that all is energy. Matter itself is a dynamic, temporary arrangement of energy. (As Pierre Teilhard de Chardin observed, matter is spirit slowed enough to be

visible.) Apparently, a religious symbol or prayer, a work of art, or an expressive practice can act on our psyche and channel that energy when it has been blocked, deadened, or split off. Meaning makes life bearable and is the gift of being here in “the ruthless furnace of the world.” As that effervescent philologist of Basel Friedrich Nietzsche once observed, the person who has a “why” can live with any “how.”

Apparently, though, the concept of happiness has a lot of sales value. One never sees a glum family driving off with a new Toyota. During the commercials for *Jeopardy!*, one can view all the new dread diseases that await the elderly and all the wonderfully named meds that are titrated to cure them while providing tons of new side effects by way of a speed reader. And we have Positive Psychology, designed to emphasize right thinking and right conduct. The emergence of this fashionable approach to life is especially American in its mentality. The American “Can Do” attitude, allied with muscular efforts to achieve one’s goals, will reportedly bring about happiness and a sense of well-being. Brother Job, from over two and a half millennia ago, is not welcome in the precincts of the privileged, but he was the original positive psychologist who thought right thinking and right practice would lead to abundance and well-being. (I won’t tell you what happened to him.)

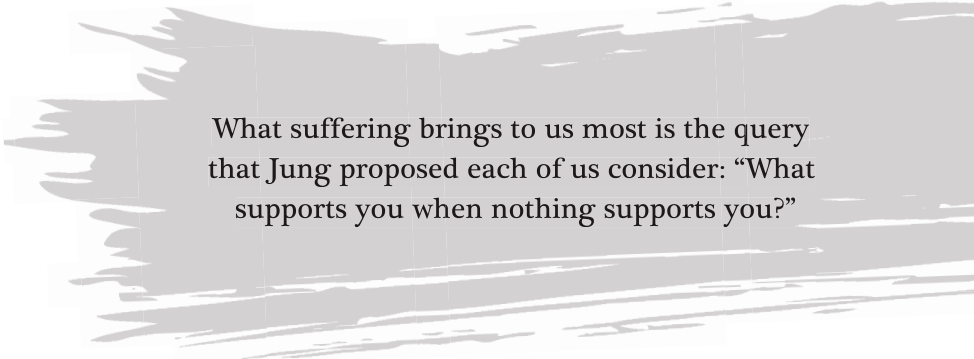
One of the most popular classes at Yale, The Science of Well-Being, taught by Dr. Laurie Santos, is described as “reveal[ing] misconceptions about happiness, annoying features of the mind that lead us to think the way we do, and the research that can help us change.”⁵ The student is enjoined to incorporate new behaviors and expect new outcomes. No wonder this is such a popular course for unhappy undergraduates who are convinced they can fix not only this problem but also the rest of society’s problems.

Perhaps the utopian vision of building a life of happiness would be not only possible but desirable for all of us if the universe would only cooperate. If right attitudes and practices could keep that cell from metastatic incursion, or find that bolt on the roller coaster before the car slips off the rail, or prevent that child from walking in front of a car . . . But suffering comes to all of us. Perhaps in her phrase “annoying features of the mind,” Professor Santos is intuiting the presence of those noisome complexes we all acquire along the way. And yes, they can and must be challenged lest we be locked into misery. Every complex is a defense of a perception, a fractal worldview, generated by the demands of the hour when they were formed. Different forces produce different message centers in all of us, but we all have our appointments with disappointment, betrayal, grief, and loss.

So much of what we call “happiness” is contextual. Did those who attended the clashes of the gladiators have thoughts about the lives sacrificed before them, or did they open a box of popcorn and enjoy the spectacle? (Do we so remember, watching the NFL, that their young bodies are being destroyed for our diversion? I do.) For a thirsty person, a drink of water is momentary happiness. Consider this story. A man is crawling across the desert. He finally comes across a stand in the desert selling ties. “What would I want with a tie?” he jeers the peddler. Finally, on his last legs, he climbs a hillock and sees a rich, lush green oasis with fountains of water gushing everywhere. Summoning his last strength, he rushes to the entrance, whereupon a guard stops him and says, “I am sorry, sir, but you have to have a tie to enter here.”

Do we define the absence of suffering as “happiness”? Are the various avenues of narcosis—drugs, alcohol, materialism—a way of dealing with this problem through numbing and

distraction? Is the question of “happiness” to be put aside and sorted out in an afterlife, which, at best, would be *another* life and not this miserable one? What forms of denial or wish fulfillment or moral vacuity are necessary to achieve a happy hour in the midst of such a world as ours? In fact, during Happy Hour, do we get happy or just numbed to the intensity of it all? For a person to live in a semipermanent state of happiness, it seems necessary to have a capacity for denial, repression, and the ready impulse to look the other direction. Such a life would tend to be fugitive rather than engaged, with the superficial crowding out the depths where authenticity lies. Such a life is a constant wish to have the anabasis without the catabasis, the mountain-top peak experience without the prerequisite initiatory descent into the depths.



What suffering brings to us most is the query that Jung proposed each of us consider: “What supports you when nothing supports you?”

As mentioned in the preface, I spent about as much time in hospitals and rehabilitation clinics over the past two years as I did outside. I had many opportunities to reflect on Jung’s late-life definition of “God.” When he was asked to clarify and expand his offhand comment in his famous 1959 BBC interview that he did not “believe” in God because he “knew” God, Jung elaborated, and I paraphrase, “I call God that which flings itself violently across my path and alters my conscious

intentions for good or for ill.” In being treated for two cancers in a very aggressive protocol, and then finding the bones of my spine fracturing and leading to risky surgeries, I had and have many an hour with pain, and with many continuing questions. I considered Jung’s heretical definition provocative and helpful because it requires the ego to reframe its pictures of the world, its agenda, and its expectations. Instead of asking, as I did at first, how quickly do I regain my life as I knew it—full of travel and thoughtful folks to meet around the world—I was brought to ask: What can I do with these greatly reduced capacities to serve the values I most treasure, sustain an equitable presence in marriage, and live with an uncertain prognosis that may kick in with crippling or lethal blows at any moment? Balance that with the Buddhist reminder that suffering rises from our resistance to reality, which is compounded by our attachment to our desires and phantasies about how the world *should* be rather than how it is. The more we cling to these phantasies, the more happiness will elude us.

I am blessed that I have a caring and constant spouse, my wife, Jill, and she played a large role in my resilience and recovery. But it was a struggle, which I depict in this poem I wrote after the last surgery.

The Lady with the Lamp

I once was so afraid of doctors that I decided to be one,
thinking I would learn secrets to stand up to the fear.
Without knowing it, I did my best to distance myself
from the odious kingdom of pain,
the ravening body that leeches the soul.

At midlife I left academia and retrained as a psychoanalyst.
While working in a psychiatric hospital, my mentor, grizzled
sergeant of wars past, said, “Come with me, Hollis, I have
a patient you would work well with.”

We entered a room filled with observers. On the table below
was Guernica, or so I thought. I assembled the splayed organs
until the form of a woman took its place. The old sergeant’s joke
apparent now. What I had run from was staring through me.

As Jung put it, what is denied inwardly
comes to us in outer form, and we call it fate.

Now, these decades later, I have returned from hospital again.
Covered with scars from operations, burned from radiation,
clanking with prostheses made in factories somewhere,
I ache for reprieve. I didn’t want to leave Jill alone,
so I came home again, until the next time. Through it all,
her face summoned me across the fog-ridden, shroud-laden sea
to this stupefying ignorant world
where bludgeons and scalpels perform their daily office.

What suffering brings to us most is the query that Jung proposed each of us consider: “What supports you when nothing supports you?” What a wonderful, heuristic question! It will be with us the rest of our lives, for sooner or later we will be flung back upon ourselves. While I am most grateful to modern medical science and the loving support of friends and family, there are many dark hours where we are wholly alone and must consider the radical question life brings to us: How now will you live your life when it is not yours to control?

The chief side effect of our social conditioning, and the thousand necessary adaptations of childhood to a world it cannot manage, is the progressive erosion of our instinctual guidance, that within which tells us what is right for us and gives us the strength to persevere in the presence of suffering and defeat.

A couple of years ago, while doing a Zoom-cast with a London host, I was asked whom in history I would most like to interview. Having been raised in Springfield, Illinois, my first thought was Abraham Lincoln. My second was Lou Gehrig, whom I had idolized in my childhood, little knowing then what Lou Gehrig’s disease was. But then I thought, most of us would leap at the chance to go back and talk to ourselves as a ten-year-old. We now know what that child most needed: modeling, mentoring, instruction, affirmation, and most of all permission to feel what he really feels and to risk what is rising from within and asking for expression. He needs to be told that he is already equipped by nature for the trials of life, and if he trusts himself, hangs in there, he will come out the other side of those conflicts. He needs to be told that his fears are normal and natural, but that he is still summoned by life to live as fully as possible in the face of that fear. He needs to know that Other within is his real self and that honoring that dear soul, and risking its imperative in the ruthless furnace of this world, will be his lifelong task.