

What's So Great About Happiness?

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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Once again it's the third Sunday of January; here we are—giving ourselves due warning that, according to some very unscientific research, tomorrow, the Third Monday of January, is the most depressing day of the year. Our holiday binge is a memory; bills are coming due; the mid-point between winter and spring still weeks away; tomorrow begins another week of labour and resolutions that *this year I will be a different, better person....*ah, the resolutions (!) Add up the damage—and we have formula for what could be a very depressing day ahead.

So—again, this year, watch out!—tomorrow is Blue Monday: pull out a good book; give a friend or relative a call or write them a kind letter; sit down in company with companions and family: eat some good food, listen to some favourite music. Let's hold on tight to each other and banish misfortune as best we can today and tomorrow by conjuring forth the glow of friendship, art, food and love—we can kindle some pleasure if we just try!....

This is our fifth consecutive Blue Sunday, and over the years, we've talked about the blues through the medium of blues music—the blues of depression, the blues of feeling overwhelmed and helpless before the immensities of life, the blues of raw and nagging guilt; last year we even talked about the sweet blues of forgiveness. The blues traverses a wide range of emotions and musical styles. Feeling the blues is expressed in songs that lament injustice, that keen with longing for a better life, lost loves, jobs and money. It can also be a raucous celebration of pleasure and success. The point being that whether through lament or shoutin' out

glee, performance—singing it, dancing it can help overcome or just deal with the blues in our lives.

In the year of my birth, 1954, John Turner and Geoffrey parson co-wrote lyrics and set them to music written by Charlie Chaplain that closed out his wonderful 1936 movie “Modern Times.” Entitled “Smile,” it became a big hit for Nat King Cole. It’s a song whose sweet melody and gentleness seem very far away indeed from the gritty words and sounds of the blues—but it opens up what I want to say today; hopefully you won’t leave this service thinking I’m a dour Scrooge, but I want us to consider what may actually be the downside of a particular kind of happiness—the kind that insists, that promises, that demands or insinuates that success, fulfillment, health, self-actualization, opportunity, wealth, and longevity are the greatest goods in life, and that achieving them depends upon our own efforts to reduce negative thinking, to displace melancholy, pessimism, realism even, with the power of positive thinking—“Smile” the song says:

Smile though your heart is aching
Smile even though it's breaking
When there are clouds in the sky, you'll get by
If you smile through your fear and sorrow
Smile and maybe tomorrow
You'll see the sun come shining through for you

Light up your face with gladness
Hide every trace of sadness
Although a tear may be ever so near
That's the time you must keep on *trying*
Smile, what's the use of crying?
You'll find that life is still worthwhile
If you just smile.

I've got these pictures in my head, and I'm having a hard time holding them together—it's the 50s: time when the message of popular culture is "smile...hide every trace of sadness," time when, in the 1958 musical "Bye, Bye Birdie," we were being told: "Gray skies are gonna clear up,/Put on a happy face!/Brush off the clouds and cheer up,/Put on a happy face!" Grey skies and clouds...is it a coincidence that at precisely the same time, the skies in North America, the Pacific, and Asia were blooming with mushroom clouds? As though all we needed was a positive attitude and happy, magical thinking to deal with our gnawing, apocalyptic anxiety...? And not just here in the "West"...

In the Communist Bloc, the official aesthetic dogma of the time was something called socialist realism—an oppressive theory backed up by murderous force that mandated flawless heroes, cut-out villains and positive endings. As well, Mao launched the Great Leap Forward (in the same year as Bye Bye Birdie)—that desperate plan to bootstrap China into the industrial age. It cost the Chinese untold misery and tens of millions of lives, but you never would have known it from their official propaganda and popular culture—ranks of square jawed workers, dazzling white teeth and smiles all around—do you remember the posters? We can go to Chinatown today and buy them by the armful.

No wonder, looking back, the blues singer Chris Smither could write the following lyrics: "I don't care what you say/Maybe I was happier blue.... I believe in heavy thinking/I believe in heavy sound/I believe in heavy images/To hold it all down.... I don't know why this should shame me./But it does, somehow...[Still] I don't care what you say/Maybe I was happier [being] blue." At the high water mark in the States of "Smile," "Put on a Happy Face," and "Make 'Em Laugh," the time of relentlessly upbeat agitprop in China and the dead hand of Soviet socialist realism and its meretricious moral uplift, you have the artist Mark Rothko saying

“the highest achievements in art were to show the isolated figure of the individual, alone in his moment of greatest helplessness...I’m interested only in expressing basic human emotions—tragedy, ecstasy, and doom...And the fact that a lot of people break down and cry...the people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them.” (from Jacob Baal-Teshuva, *Mark Rothko: 1903-1970*, pp 41-2, 50, 57)

Do you remember me telling you about Coretta Scott and Martin Luther King Jr. and their fateful decision during their graduate school days in Boston in the 50s? Coretta said that they both gave “a lot of thought to becoming Unitarian at [the] time, but Martin and I realized we could never build a mass movement of black people if we were Unitarian.” The reason? In Martin Luther King’s words: “The more I observed the tragedies of human history, and man’s shameful inclination to choose the low road, the more I came to see the depths and strength of sin, [and] I came to feel that” liberal theology “had been all too sentimental concerning human nature and that it leaned to false optimism.” That statement pierces my heart, troubles my mind, and I wonder what our religious movement would be like if they had chosen differently. (see

Rosemary Bray McNatt, “Why Martin Luther King Jr. Wasn’t a Unitarian Universalist,” *UUWorld*, Nov/Dec. 2002)

Grey skies are going to clear up...I’m happier being blue...
Hide every trace of sadness... I’m interested in human emotions—tragedy, ecstasy, and doom...

Several years ago, in an essay for the *Guardian* newspaper, the religious historian Karen Armstrong asserted that:

“Increasingly, it is becoming unacceptable to voice legitimate distress. If you lose your job, become chronically ill, or fall prey to loneliness or depression, you are likely to be told—often abrasively—to look on the bright side. With unseemly haste, people rush to put an optimistic gloss on a disaster or to suggest a patently unworkable solution. We seem to be cultivating an intolerance of pain—even our own. An acquaintance once told me that quite the most difficult aspect of her cancer was her friends’ strident insistence that she develop a positive attitude, and her guilt at being unable to do so.” (Armstrong, “Look on the dark side of life, *Guardian*, February 21, 2004)

Not long after Armstrong's essay, the journalist Barbara Ehrenreich, who was born here in BC, published an article about her experience with breast cancer in which, instead of describing her medical treatment, she wrote scathingly about the infantilizing breast-cancer-survivor industry that bombarded her with "its pink ribbons, teddy bears and relentless cheerfulness." Throughout the article, she noted the hectoring orthodoxy with which he had to contend—and that turned her experience into a nightmare: "you may not call yourself a victim or patient; you must see yourself as a survivor. You must not be angry or raise political questions about the dismal state of health care...or the possible environmental causes of cancer. You must not whine or cry, because negative emotions and attitudes are not only a sign of psychological defeat, but also a sure way to make the cancer return or grow faster"—though this contention can't be backed up with a shred of solid empirical evidence. And yet, she was told over and over again, that if the cancer did return, it was, in effect, her "fault for not being positive enough and thinking the right thoughts." She was understandably furious at the burdens that erroneous beliefs place on patients, and quoted one woman saying: "I know that if I get sad, scared or upset, I am making my tumor grow faster and I will have shortened my life." It's as though the message is: Smile or die! (on Ehrenreich's 2007 *Harper's* article, see Carol Tavris, "Let's go negative," *Times Literary Supplement*, May 14, 2010)

Ehrenreich followed up this article two years ago with a book length examination of the excesses, delusions and unsupported promises of the positive thinking movement, tracking both its naïve and its corrupt manifestations in the worlds of health, business, religion and psychology. (see Ehrenreich, *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking has Undermined America*) The specific and cumulative exhortations of the happiness industry in all these fields and experience is summed up in Rhonda Byrne's astronomically popular 2006 book *The Secret*, where the message, the secret, is that if you're poor, unhappy or jobless, the fault lies not in your stars or

your circumstances—it's not the economy, the environment, or dysfunctional family systems, it's not politics, it's not the disparity of income and wealth—none of these can be blamed, none culpable for your misery or madness; rather, the fault lies with your own thinking—so upgrade your attitude and all will be well! Smile, though your heart is aching, indeed.

What a welcome message for companies busily laying off employees! Between 1981 and 2003, some 30 million full-time American workers lost their jobs as corporations downsized and moved production off shore. Is it a coincidence that positive thinking became a big business during these decades, and big business was its principal client? Think about it. Corporations, having no safety nets to offer laid off workers, began to offer psychological cheerleading instead: how better to manage workers' despair—both for those laid off and those who remained and found themselves buried under an unprecedented amount and time of work? Companies turned to and help feed the burgeoning business of motivational speakers with their pep talks, inspirational DVDs and *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. Don't be angry at your boss or blame the system was the theme—look at all the new opportunities life has just handed you! One Christian motivational speaker rallied dispirited workers with exhortations of “work harder and pray more!”

Though Ehrenreich is sophisticated enough to know that the economic collapse of 2008 had many complex causes, she argues, and with telling evidence, that positive thinking paved the road to disaster as corporate culture replaced the rationality of professional management and corporate responsibility to the greater good with the cheery Cool Aid expectations of ever greater growth and success. “Why bother worrying,” she asks rhetorically, “about dizzying levels of debt and exposure to potential defaults when all good things come to those who are optimistic enough to expect them?”

She's right on target in locating the rise of the happiness complex in nineteenth century North America, and as a reaction against the grim orthodoxy of Calvinism and its doctrine of hard work and eternal damnation. Nearly 85 % of North Americans in the first half of the 1800s were gripped by Calvinist beliefs; and it literally made them sick with its insistence on perpetual effort and self-examination to the point of self-loathing. The New England judge Samuel Sewell reported this incident: "A little after dinner," our fifteen-year-old Betty "burst out in an amazing cry, which caused all the family to cry as well. Her mother asked the reason. She gave none; but at last said she was afraid she was going to hell, her sins were not pardoned." George Beecher, the brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, tormented himself over his spiritual status until he shattered his nervous system and committed suicide in 1843. And the historian Charles Beard, the son of a Calvinist preacher, later condemned the religion of his youth for teaching children that "to be happy is to be doing wrong." (Ehrenreich, pp . 77-82)

This epidemic of grimness gave rise to a religious revolution on this Continent: Unitarianism, Universalism, Mormonism, the liberal wing of Protestantism. Each in their own way—though realistic in their assessment of human limitations, and the power of structural evil calls forth liberating work of social justice—each rejected the terrors and torments, the intolerable burdens of the sin-soaked, relentlessly punitive ideology of Calvinism. It also eventually gave rise to Mary Baker Eddy's creation of Christian Science, Phineas Quimby's New Thought Movement, Norman Vincent Peale's *Power of Positive Thinking*, and to all their "Prosperity Gospel" and New Age descendants today, that together would tell us that illness, that the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune in life, are all in the mind; and that if we would but tune into the so-called benevolent Cosmic Mind, dump negative thinking, turn off the news, walk away from the skeptics and nay sayers in our lives, and embrace "quantum flapdoodle" that

asserts that “we are at all times creating the universe with our minds”—then success, fulfillment, health, self-actualization, opportunity, wealth, and longevity will inexorably be ours. (see Ehrenreich, 65-71)

This kind of magical thinking, Karen Armstrong writes, is not only “politically dangerous,” it is “lazy, inadequate religion”—the kind that denies “the reality of suffering” and ignores “the distress of others.” “At its best,” she writes, “religion requires the faithful to see things as they really are....[And] as long as we immure ourselves from the pain that surrounds us on all sides, we remain trapped in an undeveloped version of ourselves.”

In her classic science fiction novel *The Dispossessed*, and after many trials, Ursula LeGuin’s main character says: “It is our suffering that brings us together...the bond that binds us is beyond choice...We are brothers in what we share. In pain...in hunger, in poverty, in hope, we know our brotherhood. We know it, because we have had to learn it. We know that there is no help for us but from one another, that no hand will save us if we do not reach out our hand. And that hand that you reach out is empty, as mine is. You have nothing. You possess nothing...All you have is what you are, and what you give.”

“Joy and woe are woven fine,” said William Blake, we were made for both; and thus clothed, we wear our human raiment; and “when this we rightly know,” he writes, then “Through the world we safely go” for then it may be that each of us will see that “under every grief and pine/Runs a joy with silken twine.

May we so see and live for our own sake, and for the world. Amen.

A Special Appendix — About the Pursuit of Happiness

Many of us are familiar with this phrase from the 1776 Declaration of Independence, Jefferson listed it as one of the inalienable rights—that is, a right we possess by virtue of being human. Now, I know that we like to give our neighbours to the South a bit of flak for this assertion, and contrast our sober, upright commitment to good government with their hedonistic ways. However, our critique is based on a misunderstanding of what was meant by the pursuit of happiness. (Most of our American neighbours don't get it right either, so let's not beat ourselves up.) The endeavor Jefferson and his contemporaries had in mind was not mindless, materialistic pleasure.

Rather, it expressed a classical understanding from political philosophy and ethics, going way back to Aristotle, about the goal and attributes of human virtue. As they understood it, human well being, or happiness, is best expressed and achieved in society; or as Frances Hutcheson, the great 18th century Scottish moral philosopher put it, “The surest way to promote private happiness is to do publicly useful actions.” The pursuit of happiness will lead us “to desire the greatest happiness and perfection of the largest system.” Jefferson and many the great 18th century Enlightenment thinkers were convinced that acts of public benevolence will issue in further acts of benevolence for the public good—and these social virtues will spread by a kind of benevolent contagion or kindling to the benefit of all. (For more on the pursuit of happiness, see Garry Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence*, chapters 16-18.)