

AUTHENTIC FLOURISHING

Richard B. Gunderman

I thought, "I am perishing of cold and hunger, and here is a man thinking only of how to clothe himself and his family, and how to get bread for them. He cannot help me." When he saw me he frowned and became still more irritable and passed me by on the other side. I despaired. But suddenly I heard him coming back. I looked up, and did not recognize the same man. Before, I had seen death in his face. But now he was alive, and I recognized in him the presence of God.

—Tolstoy, *What Men Live By* (1881)

Is happiness an elevated mood? Can any amount of neural, hormonal, or pharmacological stimulation ever make us truly happy? In cases of depression, such stimuli may indeed open the door to happiness. Yet perhaps there is more to happiness than just chemicals; perhaps it includes something that cannot be imposed from outside. Perhaps the gateway to happiness is one through which we must walk on our own power. I would suggest that the happy person is a thriving person, someone who is firing on all cylinders and genuinely blossoming as a human being. In this case, someone else can no more make us happy than make us free or wise.

The idea that happiness is a simple good on a single axis implies a false symmetry between happiness and unhappiness. If the water coming out of a faucet is too cold, we can warm it in one of two ways: turn down the cold water or turn up the hot water. Can we find happiness by merely taking away some of the things that bring us down? Eradicating poverty, hunger, and disease would certainly give us fewer reasons to be unhappy. So would reducing humiliation, frustration, and despair. Yet their removal might not make us happy.

It seems that happiness is more than the absence of unhappiness, just as health is more than the absence of disease. To suppose that happiness is something we can install by correcting the factors that make us unhappy is to

promote a “restorative” approach to happiness, with potentially unfortunate ethical and political consequences. Without doubt, relieving human misery is a noble calling. Yet the effort to promote human flourishing must look beyond mere restoration. There are situations in which we need to focus less on restoration and more on enhancement.

Happiness

Just as drawing a proper map powerfully shapes the outcome of a journey, so framing the discourse of happiness powerfully influences the degree to which our lives truly amount to something and make a difference in the lives of others. An inadequate conception of human good will promote stunted philanthropic discourse, policy, and practice. We need to expand our philanthropic horizons to encompass a more expansive, far reaching, and deeper vision of human happiness, on behalf of which we can fully engage our highest aspirations for compassion and generosity.

Is happiness directly attainable? Madison Avenue misleads us in this regard. Happiness is not a commodity we can buy off the shelf. We cannot acquire it by attending the right seminar, reading the right book, or talking with the right person. To be sure, some books and conversations do more than others to point us in the right direction. Yet happiness remains elusive. Like water, if we attempt to clutch it too tightly, it slips through our fingers. It is difficult to do good when our principal motive is our own happiness, and we would do well to avoid treating the good as a mere means to our own satisfaction.

Is happiness an idle state where nothing changes? Not likely, since the circumstances of our lives are constantly changing. We grow, develop, learn, enter into new relationships, take on new responsibilities, and find new opportunities to contribute to the lives of others. Doing well under such circumstances will require that we regularly reexamine and sometimes reformulate our approach to life. Such reexamination can be painful. It can involve questioning cherished assumptions and trying out new ideas with no guarantee of success. If things do not work out well, to keep going will require a measure of resilience.

Resilience involves bouncing back. Yet it is not merely a return to a baseline. It also means responding creatively. We are capable of achieving new equilibrium states that prepare us to do even more than we could before. The

loss of a job, for example, can be psychologically devastating, yet it might also open up new opportunities. It might enable us to move beyond a position that represents nothing more than a means of paying the bills. It might present new possibilities for growth and professional fulfillment. The same might be said of defeat in athletic competition. It is unpleasant, but it might help us see more clearly what we are really striving for, and why it matters so much to us.

Change offers an opportunity to learn to do things better, and to learn to do new and better things. In 1950, we used typewriters to communicate in print. By 2000, we were processing words in a quite different way. A firm that clung obstinately to the typewriter business would have expired. This principle also applies on the societal level. What if no society had been able to contemplate the possibility of life without slavery? Do we want communities that are brittle, or ones that are dynamic and capable of experimentation and learning? No less than human beings, organizations must be prepared to change if they are to become truly generative.

Saying that change is necessary, however, does not imply that everything is up for grabs. Certain aspirations can and should remain at our moral center of gravity. Consider, for example, the desire to know. No matter what we may discover, inquiry itself remains a definitive human activity. This is why Socrates named *misology*, the hatred of inquiry, the worst fate that could befall a human being. Ironically, Socrates himself was placed on trial precisely because his fellow Athenians had grown reluctant to examine their own lives.

Suffering

Suffering, too, has an important role to play in the pursuit of happiness. What would happen if we never suffered losses or made mistakes? Our depth of moral insight would remain stunted. Losing something we hold dear, or at least contemplating its loss, provides a vital opportunity to appreciate its true preciousness. This applies not only to our property but also to our health, our family and friends, and even our faculties. Only when we have known suffering do we fully understand and value our lives.

In fact, many of our greatest works of art and poetry are born of suffering. In his *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, for example, John Donne reflects on his encounter with mortal illness, arriving at an extraordinary conclusion: "Affliction is a treasure, and scarce any man has enough." Donne is suggesting

that a life completely shielded from suffering would be impoverished. To Donne, the foggy pharmacological satisfactions offered up in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* would appear abhorrent. They dull our perception of the very reality to which we must attend if we are to lead fully human lives.

A slavish fear of pain and suffering does not befit a mature human being. Siddhartha, in Herman Hesse's novel of the same name, needed to get outside his hermetically sealed pleasure palace and directly witness poverty, aging, disease, and death, before he could even begin his quest for enlightenment. There is something seriously mistaken about the idea that a perfect life is characterized by a perpetual smile. Pursuing such idols actually spawns fragility and superficiality. Relying on psychoactive substances to avoid all unpleasantness and challenge bespeaks neither courage nor wisdom. In the end, what would we be filling ourselves with but emptiness?

Similarly, a stubborn devotion to positive thinking blinds us to human situations where sadness is a perfectly appropriate response. Who could feel merry at the death of a spouse or child, for example? If such losses do not cut us to the bone, we have failed to accord our loved ones their due and have failed to recognize their true importance. Being human means accepting the vulnerability that such devotion implies. Suggesting that people experiencing such losses should keep a stiff upper lip or seek pharmacologic sanctuary demeans them as human beings.

Misguided notions of generosity that arise from such an insufficiently rich and complete vision of those we are intending to help do more harm than good. They create whole groups of people whose sense of responsibility, capacity for self-support, and devotion to others remain stunted. They foster an attitude that psychologists call "learned helplessness," in which we recognize the toxicity of our situation but feel absolutely powerless to do anything about it. In the end, we simply hang our heads in resignation and despair.

Of all the human resources that philanthropic organizations can protect and promote, the greatest is hope. Hope makes doubtful and difficult times bearable. It also opens up new possibilities for flourishing. It is not self-delusion but active imagination, the creative human spirit striving to realize richer ways of being and doing. Life is not a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing. Even in the most difficult circumstances, hope reveals opportunities to know and to love, and to help others do the same.

Flourishing

As hope reveals opportunities for action, so happiness is a matter of doing, not a passive state of being. Like hope, happiness is not diffused but focused, stemming from a clear sense that we belong, that we have something worth doing and contributing. It is less a noun than a verb. It is something we *do*, something in which we participate, instead of something we are. A life is called happy not because it is locked in a single mood state. A life is called happy because we have been able to realize our nature, what we are meant to be, giving it full expression in our daily life. Satisfaction pertains to what merely suffices, but fulfillment implies excellence, doing our best.

Flourishing is less a matter of satisfying our appetites than expressing our nature. Both Plato and Aristotle stressed that, in order to lead good lives, we must educate desire. This is necessary because our desires are, to a large extent, the products of our own habits of choosing. No one is born aspiring to be a pianist or an astronaut, though for some people these become overarching life objectives. For human beings, as distinct from other creatures, understanding must take precedence over desire.

Our mission is to train our desires to seek the good. The good, moreover, is not what we happen to desire, but what is most worthy of desire. Hence cultivating goodness means learning to desire whatever is best and most important. Vices such as greed, lust, and pride are failures of understanding, in which we mistake the lower for the higher. After all, what is greed, but valuing what someone has over who they are? What is lust but valuing the superficial over the deep? What is pride if not mistaking the part for the whole?

Economists have coined the term “free riders” to describe people who reap the benefits of others’ efforts without paying the price themselves. Perhaps there are some spheres of life in which we can play the role of free rider, tagging along on someone else’s coattails. In the moral sphere, however, there are no free riders. We cannot reap the benefits of apparent goodness without actually striving to be good ourselves. It is no good merely mouthing prayers or just pretending to take our vitamins.

Flourishing requires a sense of purpose in life. Pretending to have a purpose can be worse than having no purpose at all, because the pretense can lull us into a sense of complacency. In addition, all possible purposes in life are not equally fitting. If our overarching purpose is to pay as little as possible

for commodities, then our prospects for leading a full life appear dim. There is too little at stake in such a life. The best prospects for happiness involve adventure, because adventurous people see each day in light of a larger purpose, around which they organize their lives.

In fact, we feel more alive, more real, when we know what we are about. This sense of purposefulness can prove energizing, even extraordinarily so. When we focus on something larger than ourselves, something really worth living for, we tap into a well-spring of energy and vitality that permeates all the domains of our lives, integrating them into a larger sense of calling. Let's call this sense of purpose vitamin P. Even if we eat right, get plenty of exercise, and follow all our doctors' recommendations, we may still suffer a deficiency of vitamin P. If so, happiness will elude us.

Fulfillment

We are not simple beings who need only focus on a single activity to be at our best. We are complex creatures, for whom a full life requires multiple domains of activity. Some essential functions we share in common with plants, such as metabolism. Other powers, such as desire, including the desire to join with other members of our species to form families and communities, we share with other animals. Still others seem unique to human beings, such as the power to reflect on and discuss the patterns by which we organize our lives.

A life in which our need for physical nourishment remains unmet would not constitute a full human life. Nor would a life in which we lack the companionship and love for which we so deeply and naturally long. Nor would what Socrates called "the unexamined life," a life in which we have not reflected long and well on what life is about. A complete human life requires fulfillment in each of these domains, ordering them appropriately. In this light, the life of the gourmand or consumer must appear incomplete, because it mistakes the lower for the higher and realizes only part of our potential.

As for health, so for happiness—a balanced and integrated symphony of multiple elements is required. Work, worship, family, friendship, play, citizenship—perhaps no single axis of human activity encompasses happiness. No matter how high we rise on any single axis, we cannot engage our whole being through any single aspect of life. And if our whole being is not engaged, we cannot be fully alive. Who conducts this symphony? Each part may have its own proper place in the orchestra, but the thinking and talking part must

stand at the podium, organizing the others.

Plato and Aristotle suggest that philosophers tend to manifest a melancholic disposition, because anyone who was completely content with the spontaneous course of life would not pause to reflect on why things are as they are or how they could be improved. Philosophers are not content merely to watch the spectacle of life unfold; they want to know what it is all about, why events emerge as they do in space and time. Philosophers want to know what purposes life might serve, and to discern which among these purposes is the most fitting for human life. This is all true, except that philosophy is not for the few. Philosophy is for every one of us. Every one of us is called to philosophize in this way.

If we want to flourish, it is not sufficient to immerse ourselves in idle amusements or fantasy. Flourishing requires curiosity, honesty, and even courage. Whether we are talking about a single person or a large organization, it is difficult to act wisely unless we understand what we are doing. Thus our organizations should invest a little less time and energy in facilities and equipment and a bit more in people, in how we understand ourselves and the work we are doing. Before we can do good, we must know what good is.

To excel at generosity requires that we invest the very best we have to offer. It is not easy to give the appropriate thing to the appropriate person at the appropriate time in the appropriate way and above all for the appropriate reason. Unless we get all of this right, would it really matter how much we give? As people who aspire to generosity, knowing the purpose of our giving may be our highest calling.

Our calling is not to distract ourselves from life—it is to immerse ourselves fully in it. At our best, we plumb the depths of life, knowing and experiencing it as fully as we can. Far from indulging ourselves in every pleasurable sensation, this approach asks of us something much more akin to sacrifice—not sacrifice in the sense of foregoing something, but sacrifice in the sense of pursuing something.

What is most worthy of pursuit? What is the highest and best reality in the unfolding of our lives? If we understand the value of sacrifice, the happiest life is the sacramental life, one that acknowledges the higher purposes around which our lives can be organized, a life devoted to what is truly sacred. If this is so, the key to flourishing will lie less in mood-altering stimulants than in the answer to a question: What is most real, most authentic in our lives, and what can we do to bring it more fully into being?

