

**THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS: MAKING LIFE A WORK  
OF ART**

**BY**

**STEPHEN S. PEARCE, Ph.D.**

**PRESENTED TO THE CHIT CHAT CLUB**

**SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA**

**DECEMBER 13, 2010**

Monday, December 13, 2010

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS: MAKING LIFE A WORK OF ART

An essay presented at the Chit Chat Club of San Francisco

Stephen S. Pearce, PhD

Confronted by a diagnosis of terminal acute leukemia, a 30-year-old man's affirmation of life and courage in the face of death captured the imagination of people many years ago. His howling lament (also a documentary film) framed the end of his life:

I have not forsaken you, but I cannot be among you all.  
 I stand before you all aching with truth  
 Trembling with desire to make you know. . .  
 O, I am weeping, but it's stage center for all of us. . .  
 Step lightly, we're walking home now. . .  
 The plain stretches out ahead,  
 then the hills, the valleys, the meadows.  
 Keep moving people. How could I not be among you? (Rosenthal,  
 1973)

Every now and then, a terminally ill individual provides a reminder that one day you and I will not be here. *Tuesday's with Morey* (Albom, 1997), for example, records discussions between beloved Brandeis University professor Morrie Schwartz, dying from Lou Gherig's Disease, and his student Mitch Albom. The resulting bestseller reflects Schwartz' rich philosophical musing:

- Once you know how to die, you know how to live.
- Dying is one thing to be sad about, living unhappily is another.

Recent years have provided additional examples of articulate people confronting mortality. Some of you may recall Randolph Frederick (Randy) Pausch (pronounced: powsh) who died on July 25, 2008 at age 47—11 months after his diagnosis of terminal cancer. Knowing that he had only a short time to live and move his wife and three children, ages 6, 3, and 2 closer to family and create lasting memories for them, he embarked on a high-speed race against the clock to, as he put it, "get 30 years of parenting into three months ... trying to put myself in a bottle that would one day wash up on the beach for my children." As his life was coming to a close in September 2008, he tied up loose ends, said his good-byes, and agreed to give a lecture as part of Carnegie-Mellon's retiring professors' tradition of delivering "last lectures." His 90 minutes of humor-filled, life-experience examples of how to make the most of life and make dreams come true was heard by about 400 students and colleagues, and subsequently was viewed by millions of others on the Internet. An abbreviated version appeared on Oprah, and *The Last Lecture* (Pausch, R. & Zaslow, J. 2008) was expanded into a best-selling book. Pausch, a cross between showman Jerry Seinfeld and earnest Jimmy Stewart, commented that after he got his PhD, his mother relished introducing him by saying, "This is my son. He's a doctor, but not the kind that helps people." Of course, his mother was wrong.

Thousands of strangers found his upbeat lecture laced with inspiring life-changing humor and pithy aphorisms including:

- If you don't get your dream—you still learn a lot in the process.
- Experience is what you get when you don't get what you want.
- People who care will push you. It's only when they no longer care that you will not be pushed.
- Brick walls are in your life for a reason—they let us prove how badly we want our dream.
- You can spend your time in life complaining or playing the game hard.

Pressed for time, Schwartz and Pausch each struggled to teach others about living well and dying well. The public's voyeuristic interest is the very human response of wanting to observe another's struggle with death and the wish to leave a lasting legacy because we all want to know what words will someday be spoken about our life, death, and legacy.

How would you like to be remembered? Which of your cherished values would you like your family and friends to treasure? When your name is recalled, what remembrances would you like your memory to conjure up? What character traits would you want your progeny and friends to embody? These questions are not implausible; we will all have to answer them—sooner or later. While the angel of death is not staring down at us, we have the luxury of time to consider what adds depth to our years and made life worth living.

When I was a young student, people searched for “meaning” in life. I never found out if anyone actually found it because before I had the answer myself, people were searching for something else—“spirituality,” what Carl Jung termed *synchronicity*, “meaningful coincidence,” events so timely and moving that they are considered to be beyond mere chance, or what theologian Rudolph Otto termed numinosity, the irresistible, undeniable, unforgettable feeling of being in the presence of the Divine.

Now the Happiness Movement offers people a new opportunity to search for personal satisfaction, but the unintended consequence is that it also has given birth to irrational exuberance that has tanked the economy and ruined the lives of so many who were carried away by delusional optimism being advocated by motivational speakers, mega-church pastors, televangelists, TV gurus, and best-selling self-help authors who preached that visualizing something you really want makes it real—that buying a house on speculation and believing you can afford it will insure mega-profits. In the go-go days of recent years, I heard this pervasive attitude championed in a news station radio ad for a get-rich-quick scheme that counseled: “deciding to be wealthy is the first step to being wealthy.”

In our time of malignant narcissism, happiness is seen not as a privilege but as a birthright. But that pursuit is not working well because although statistics estimate that about one-third of American adults report that they are “very happy” and fifteen percent are not happy, the other fifty-five percent is somewhere in between bliss and misery. And these data were collected before the current financial implosion. Nevertheless, the

economic growth of the last few decades has not translated into happiness because if happiness were so rampant, why are millions of Prozac prescriptions being written annually for those who are overprogrammed?

Henrik Ibsen's incisive comment, "Money can buy the husk of things but not the kernel" made many wonder if the maxim that "money can't buy happiness" is accurate. Too many people set out to prove that adage wrong and the converse, "happiness can't buy money" to be false, as many tried to turn fervor, enthusiasm, and visualization into the quest for wealth.

Rhonda Byrne's wildly successful 2006 book *The Secret* became a cultural phenomenon. It posited that you can imagine your way to total fulfillment. Other books in the popular press have titles like *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before* (Twegne, 2006); *Happiness Lessons From a New Science* (Layard, 2005); *The Geography of Bliss: One Grump's Search for the Happiest Places in the World* (Weiner, 2007); and *Gross National Happiness* (Brooks, 2008).

Many people have tried everything to become happy but few nostrums have worked, and if you have any doubt about the ascendancy of the self-indulgent Happiness Movement, you may remember the November 24-25, 2008 San Francisco program at the Westin Hotel entitled the "Happiness and its Causes Conference." It advertised "tools and techniques for a happier life from 40 of the best minds in psychology, philosophy, science, education, business, politics, the arts, medicine and sports." I could not be there, so I do not know whether or not participants exited with saccharin inoculations that left broad grins on their faces and a deep feeling of euphoria—I rather doubt that that was the case, especially since the world was unraveling in 2008.

Happiness is illusive even though so many see it as a prime task in life. I suggest that the harder one seeks happiness, the more elusive it becomes, because it is an outgrowth of what we cherish and accomplish and not an end in of itself. This recognition is summed up by Charlotte Brontë, English novelist and poet, best remembered for *Jane Eyre*. In 1853 she wrote:

No mockery in this world ever sounds to me so hollow as that of being told to cultivate happiness. What does such advice mean? Happiness is not a potato, to be planted in mould and tilled with manure.

Of course, Brontë was not the only one to challenge the wisdom of making the pursuit of happiness the cornerstone of life. Professor of English, Eric G. Wilson (2008) published *Against Happiness: In Praise of Melancholy*. Wilson is not actually against happiness. Rather, he is against obtuse, simple-minded complacency that he believes some people confuse with happiness.

Most of you will recognize the author of these lines:

Happiness is finding a pencil . . . learning to whistle, tying you shoe for the very first time. Happiness is two kinds of ice cream, knowing a secret, climbing a tree, five dif'rent crayons,

catching a firefly, setting him free. . . For happiness is anyone and anything at all that's loved by you.

What most people do not know is that brilliant cartoonist Charles Schultz spent most of his life being unhappy. His personal miseries and demons fueled his work and provided everything anyone could want to become happy, but instead he chose professional success over personal happiness (Michaelis, 2007). His personal grief made "Peanuts" good because he enabled us to see the poignant sweetness of our frailties in bossy Lucy, talent in musical but oblivious Schroeder, innocence in unsophisticated Sally, and contentment in good ole' wishy-washy Charley Brown. But if the king of happiness cartoon characters who had it all could not find happiness, what hope is there for the rest of us? If self-help pundits who urge unquestioning believers to imagine happiness that will enable them to achieve anything, no matter how unrealistic or risky, cannot help us be happy, then what hope is there for any of us? To what do we look to build lives that are at the very least satisfying?

Actor Paul Newman fought a protracted battle with terminal cancer, but he did not write a book about dying or his legacy; he certainly could have done so with grace. Instead, his lifetime of accomplishment speaks louder than any lecture or any string of aphorisms could. In 1982, Newman stuck his image on a bottle of salad dressing and started a business that was dedicated to giving all of its profits to charity, including 11 Hole in the Wall Camps around the world where children with life-threatening illnesses attend free of charge. He personally supervised the distribution of \$250 million of profits to many causes, and once quipped that "the embarrassing thing is that my salad dressing is outgrossing my films." His entrepreneurial skills have so outpaced his acting career that to the younger generation, Newman isn't Butch Cassidy or Cool Hand Luke or Fast Eddie Felson but the king of popcorn, salsa and spaghetti sauce. When pressed to talk about his acting career, he responded, "We don't need to talk about the acting, let's talk about the good stuff that I'm doing for kids." Had Newman published a book that reflected on the legacy he hoped to leave, it would have included these two comments:

- I'm not a professional philanthropist, and I'm not running for sainthood. I just happen to think that in life we need to be a little like the farmer who puts back into the soil what he takes out.
- The concept that a person who has a lot holds his hand out to someone who has less, or someone who isn't hurting holds his hand out to someone who is, is simply a human trait that has nothing to do with celebrity.

I believe that a child is born with a purpose but he is not magically and automatically granted happiness. Instead he should be ushered into a world filled with opportunities to repair our brokenness, to live a life that gives back more than is received; anything else is ancillary to that primary task. Nevertheless, the drive to achieve happiness propels many parents to help their children acquire all of the extrinsic signs of success that they believe will lead to happiness. In so doing, they transform puberty from a rite of passage into an arms race of achievement. After all, the best grades move children into the most prestigious schools. Prestigious schools propel children into significant careers and significant careers provide security and status that supposedly result in happiness. Making it, being shrewd, smarter, more successful and accumulating

more possessions, these pursuits are what animate the lives of so many people. Ultimately the push for success and by extension happiness haunts many who wind up on the psychoanalytic couch because they cannot enjoy the prizes they have attained. Today's decline of happiness, altruism, and idealism in the face of rising narcissism, selfishness, and cynicism is emblematic of that paradox.

I look to a biblical model. When King David died, his young inexperienced son King Solomon dreamt that God offered him one wish. Instead of wealth or happiness, he chose wisdom. What would we who dream of happiness seek—bigger, better, faster, richer, or would we, like Solomon, seek wisdom? W. Beran Wolfe (1931) in his 1931 book *How to Be Happy Though Human* offers a clue to finding happiness that Paul Newman and King Solomon intuitively understood:

If you observe a really happy man, you will find him building a boat, writing a symphony, educating his son, growing double dahlias in his garden or looking for dinosaur eggs in the Gobi Desert. He will not be searching for happiness as if it were a collar button that has rolled under the radiator. He will not be striving for it as a goal itself.

Happiness is not found by being in hot pursuit of it; it is a by-product, an often unintended consequence of having our lives spill over into the lives of others. That is why the book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Putnam, 2000) is so troubling. It points out that we are pulling inward, away from neighborhoods, friendships, family, and faith communities at the same time that technology is increasingly leading to social isolation and uncivil behavior. Author Robert Putman says that we have lost our “social capital”, that essential part of community that helps people find jobs, solve problems, control crime, and foster a sense of community well-being.

The Bible has no word for happiness. It speaks instead of being fortunate, joyful, and content. What we need to find satisfaction in life is to be immersed in community that offers something bigger than we, because connecting to others enriches life—giving leads to receiving. Doing a righteous deed is not necessarily fun; often its greatest reward is the opportunity to do yet another good deed. Such an unintended consequence was expressed by Abraham Joshua Heschel who once called kind and charitable acts the “ineffable delight of sacred deeds,” which he defined in this way:

. . . be sure that every deed counts, that every word has power, and that we can all do our share to redeem the world in spite of all absurdities and all frustrations and all disappointments. . . And above all, remember. . . to build life as if it were a work of art.

The remarkable Grant study followed 268 men who entered college in 1937 through war, career, marriage and divorce, parenthood and grandparenthood, and old age. The most comprehensive longitudinal study in history followed these men for over 70 years. For 42 of those years, chief investigator, psychiatrist George Vaillant (1977), tracked these men, roughly half still living, into their late 80s. Asked what he learned

from following these men for so many decades, Vaillant responded: “That the only thing that matters in life are your relationships to other people.”

Most of us are fortunate that we do not have to cram the rest of our lives into just a few short months and that our time left here with loved ones is not so limited that it sets us on a mad dash to finish our “bucket list” while we rush to leave a lasting legacy.

It is no longer possible to investigate the personalities featured on the now defunct Web site happier.com—now the demise of this site is an interesting phenomenon in and of itself. But Amy Bloom (2010) reported her observations from that website in her essay, “The Rap on Happiness” and suggests that happiness can all be broken down into what she calls the Fundamentally Sound, Sure-Fire Top Five Components of Happiness: (1) Be in possession of the basics — food, shelter, good health, safety. (2) Get enough sleep. (3) Have relationships that matter to you. (4) Take compassionate care of others and of yourself. (5) Have work or an interest that engages you. But Bloom admits that it is just is not that simple. Instead, she focuses on the evanescent quality of life and concludes:

The real problem with happiness is neither its pursuers nor their books; it’s happiness itself. Happiness is like beauty: part of its glory lies in its transience. It is deep but often brief (as Frost would have it), and much great prose and poetry make note of this. Frank Kermode wrote, “It seems there is a sort of calamity built into the texture of life.” To hold happiness is to hold the understanding that the world passes away from us, that the petals fall and the beloved dies. No amount of mockery, no amount of fashionable scowling will keep any of us from knowing and savoring the pleasure of the sun on our faces or save us from the adult understanding that it cannot last forever.

With the knowledge that nothing, even happiness lasts forever, we can either lament that truth or live our lives in a purposeful and meaningful way that might as a consequence grant us the very thing that we are searching for. Beyond the importance strong relationships as previously noted, there is also attitude or state on mind that may influence just how happy we are determined to be.

The wisdom of setting our own bench mark for happiness is embodied in the anonymous life of an 92-year-old, petite, well-poised, proud man, who was fully dressed with his hair fashionably combed and shaved perfectly each morning by eight o'clock, even though legally blind. His move to a nursing home was necessitated by the death of his wife of 70 years. After many hours of waiting patiently in the lobby of the nursing home, he smiled sweetly when told his room was ready. As he maneuvered his walker to the elevator, he was provided a visual description of his tiny room, including the eyelet sheets that had been hung on his window.

“I love it,” he stated with the enthusiasm of an eight-year-old having just been presented with a new puppy.

“Mr. Jones, you haven’t seen the room; just wait.”

“That doesn't have anything to do with it,” he replied. “Happiness is something you decide on ahead of time. Whether I like my room or not doesn't depend on how the furniture is arranged; it's how I arrange my mind. I already decided to love it. It's a decision I make every morning when I wake up. I have a choice; I can spend the day in bed recounting the difficulty I have with the parts of my body that no longer work, or get out of bed and be thankful for the ones that do. Each day is a gift, and as long as my eyes open, I'll focus on the new day and all the happy memories I've stored away. Just for this time in my life. Old age is like a bank account. You withdraw from what you've put in. So, my advice to you would be to deposit a lot of happiness in the bank account of memories!

No matter what the formula, whether building strong relationships, a state of mind, or something that gently knocks on the door and says, “Here I am,” rather than frantically pursuing happiness, we all would do well to spend more time living our lives with purpose and not lamenting why we are unhappy, because in so doing, we may just find that we have found what we were not looking for! Thank you.

Albom, M. (1997). *Tuesdays with Morrie*. New York: Doubleday.

Arthur C. Brooks (2008), *Gross National Happiness*. New York: Basic Books.

Bloom, Amy. (2010). “The Rap on Happiness.” In *The New York Times Book Review*, January 31, 2010.

Byrne Rhonda. (2006). *The Secret*. New York: Atria Books.

Church, Frank. (2008). *Love and Death: My Journey Through the Valley of the Shadow*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Gilbert, Elizabeth (2006). *Eat, Pray, Love. One Woman's Search For Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia*. New York: Penguin

Horwitz, Allan & Wakefield, Jerome. (2007). *The Loss of Sadness: How Psychiatry Transformed Normal Sorrow into Depressive Disorder*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Jager-Hyman, Jolie. (2008). *Fat Envelope Frenzy*. New York: Harper.

Kay, Jamison. (2004). *Exuberance: The Passion for Life*. New York: Random House.

Layard, Richard, (2005). *Happiness Lessons From a New Science*.

Lisick, Beth, (2008). *Helping Me Help Myself: One Skeptic, Ten Self-Help Gurus, and a Year on the Brink of the Comfort Zone*. New York: William Morrow.

Lyubomirsky, Sonja (2008). *The How of Happiness*. New York: Penguin.

Michaelis, David. (2007). *Schultz and Peanuts: A Biography*. New York: Harper.

Putnam, Robert D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Pausch, R. & Zaslow, J. (2008). *The Last Lecture*, New York: Hyperion Books

Rosenthal, T. (1973). *How Could I Not Be Among You?* New York: Persa Books.



Twegne, Jean (2006). *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before*. New York: Basic Books.

Vaillant, George (1977). *Adaptation to Life*. Boston: Little, Brown.

Weiner, Eric (2007). *The Geography of Bliss: One Grump's Search for the Happiest Places in the World*. New York: Twelve.

Eric G. Wilson. (2008). *Against Happiness: In Praise of Melancholy*. New York: Sarah Crichton/Farrar, Straus, Giroux. .

Wolfe, W. Beran. (1931/1999). *How to Be Happy Though Human*. New York: Farrar & Rinehart. Republished by Penguin/Routledge.

Stephen S. Pearce, PhD is senior rabbi of Congregation Emanu-El of San Francisco. He is author of Flash of Insight: Metaphor and Narrative in Therapy, and co-author with Bishop William E. Swing, retired Episcopal Bishop of California and Father John P. Schlegel, past president of the University of San Francisco, of Building Wisdom's House: A Book of Values for our Time.