

REDEFINING HAPPINESS IN AN AGE OF SCARCE RESOURCES

Message delivered by Lyn Pearson, Service Associate Haney Pearson

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OPENING WORDS

His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, said, "We begin from the recognition that all beings cherish happiness and do not want suffering. It then becomes both morally wrong and pragmatically unwise to pursue only one's own happiness oblivious to the feelings and aspirations of all others who surround us as members of the same human family. The wiser course is to think of others when pursuing our own happiness. "

STORY

King Midas did a great favor for the god Dionysis and in return was granted one wish, that all he touched would turn to gold. Dionysis was dismayed by this foolish wish because Midas could have asked for an end to disease or abundant food for his subjects. Nevertheless, Dionysis granted the wish.

Midas returned to his palace and called for food and drink for he was very hungry. When he picked up bread from the platter, it turned to solid gold. Although this pleased him, he felt a little uneasy. Then he picked up his knife, now miraculously made of solid gold, and began to slice the roasted quail on his plate. His knife clanged off a solid gold quail in what used to be a delightful fig sauce.

He reached for his wine goblet and began to drink, but what sloshed out of the goblet into his mouth were millions of tiny gold flakes. As he gagged and choked, Midas at last realized his great mistake.

He knew that his wish would make him the wealthiest man in the world but that he would starve to death among his riches.

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My talk today is entitled Redefining Happiness in an Age of Scarce Resources.

Happiness is an abstract word that means something different to everyone. However, a simplified description that almost everyone agrees on is that happiness is a general state of well-being. Happiness certainly touches on the spiritual nature of humankind and all great religious writings address happiness in one way or another. Buddha said, "Neither my life of luxury in the palace nor my life as an ascetic in the forest is the way to freedom. Overdoing things cannot lead to happiness." He also said, "No one can escape death and unhappiness. If people expect only happiness in life, they will be disappointed." Both the Jewish and Christian bibles address happiness at great length and always take pains to explain that happiness does not own great wealth but rather is to be found in loving others and serving God.

Happiness is indeed an elusive thing but increasingly, people everywhere, particularly Americans, are being taught that happiness equates to buying and owning things. This isn't explicit in school curricula but it is both explicit and implied in the advertising directed toward us every waking

hour of the day. We no longer name our sports arenas after important people; we name them after corporations. My own school, the University of Maryland wasn't quite prepared to give up its entire stadium, which is called Byrd stadium, but they did sell off naming rights to the field inside the stadium. Now its official title is Chevy Chase Bank Field At Byrd Stadium. Many of our streets also carry corporate names and we advertise corporate products on our t-shirts, jackets, jeans and other apparel – and pay for the dubious privilege of doing so. How's that for genius in advertising.

In 1942, Archbishop Fulton Sheen said, "Advertising tries to stimulate our sensuous desires, converting luxuries into necessities, but it only intensifies man's inner misery. The business world is bent on creating hungers which its wares never satisfy, and thus it adds to the frustrations and broken minds of our times.

The entire reason for this overload of advertising is to get us to buy, buy, buy.

Paul Brown at the University of Auckland, NZ, School of Population Health says, "... over consumption is defined as the excessive use of goods and services arising from a mistaken belief that ... the possession and use of an increasing number and variety of goods and services is the principal cultural aspiration and the surest perceived route to personal happiness, social status and national success."

In his book, *Material World, A Global Family Portrait*, Peter Menzel a California photojournalist, provides us with a picture review of the material possessions of families across the world and asks whether having so many more things produces more happiness. In the same book is a chapter written by Charles C. Mann called "Betting the planet." Mann wonders about survival and says, "In effect, the human race has entered into a great wager. We are, so to speak, betting the planet..."

The official doctrine of all first world countries is one of supply and demand, production and consumption. This country has several economic indicators: the Consumer Price Index, the Producer Price Index, the International Price Index, the Index of Consumer confidence and its premier economic indicator, the GDP, or Gross Domestic Product. GDP is a raw dollar figure that reflects the total market value of all final goods and services produced by this country every year. If I may bore you with a little more detail, GDP is the sum dollar value of everything we consume plus all the money we invest plus everything the government spends plus the value of what we export to other countries MINUS what we import from other countries. In other words, GDP is the premier measure of what we make and what we consume. The government says this is a figure that tells you whether you should have a positive sense of well-being – that is whether you're happy.

My point in this economic digression is that, officially at least, in the highest reaches of our government, our collective well-being is measured only by how much we produce and consume. The president's famous answer to the question of how Americans can help win the war in Iraq was "go out and spend money." Wall Street's answer to a plummeting stock market – SPEND MORE MONEY (buy stock). The real estate industry's answer to a housing down turn – SPEND MORE MONEY (buy a house). The government's answer to the recent economic downturn is??? Come on folks ---- SPEND MORE MONEY."

There are many problems associated with this world-view, but I'm sticking to the issue of happiness. Our government says we will be better off, and presumably have a better sense of well-

being and happiness if our economy continuously expands and that the only way this can happen is if we keep the money moving and buy, buy, buy.

This brings me to the economy of ancient Rome, which happens to be a favorite subject of mine. The Roman emperors kept their citizens happy, which, to them, meant that most people weren't starving, dying of plague or rioting in the streets. The emperors achieved this by continually expanding their economy. First, they conquered all of their immediate neighbors and when that didn't provide sufficient wealth, they conquered virtually every culture bordering the Mediterranean. Each time, Roman armies brought home huge amounts of wealth in the form of slaves (free labor), gold, copper, tin, precious gems, exotic woods, silks – you name it – unimaginable wealth. Romans were monstrous consumers.

All of this wealth trickled down to the average, laboring men and women in the form of Bread and Circuses – free grain doles and in some cases, as many as 200 days a year worth of free access to racing meets, spectacles in the coliseums, plays in the theaters, and huge, free public feasts. The Roman economy grew like poison ivy for almost 500 years, but we can hardly say that Roman citizens, or citizens in her conquered lands, were happy people, because Rome constantly crushed internal revolts all over the known world. Arguably, Rome fell as a result of cultural rot and collective unhappiness. Rome epitomizes a culture with an overload of wealth and a dearth of happiness.

Does this sound familiar? Are there parallels to our own society? We Americans, living in the wealthiest culture the world has known since the age of the Roman emperors – do we measure our well-being correctly? Does producing and consuming “stuff” make us happy people? Does it increase our sense of well-being? Are we happier because we own two cars and three TVs? Is our sense of well-being greater knowing that we have the heaviest per-capita carbon footprint of any country in the world? Are we truly happier because our rate of consumption increases every year and we're literally drowning in our own trash? Just how long can the U.S. economy expand -- and can we afford its continuous expansion? And if it does continue to expand, will this increase your sense of well-being? When is enough, enough?

In his speech, Ethics for the New Millennium, His Holiness the Dalai Lama says, “It is worth reminding ourselves that what brings us the greatest joy and satisfaction in life are those actions we undertake out of concern for others. Indeed we can go further. For whereas the fundamental questions of human existence, such as why we are here, where we are going, and whether the universe had a beginning, have each elicited different responses in different philosophical traditions, it is self-evident that a generous heart and wholesome actions lead to greater peace.”

There may be a better way and a tiny, insignificant country in Himalayas north of India, may have the answer. The King of Bhutan recently developed a Gross National Happiness index that puts the well-being of individuals on top of the national development agenda. Rooted in Buddhist philosophy and values, GIH presents a radically different development paradigm, but one that holds a promise for achieving real sustainability. This simple little country proposes a massive redefinition of what constitutes national well-being. I know it won't have escaped your notice that our own Gross Domestic Product, which includes huge amounts of important economic data, fails to include factors such as the number of American children who go to bed hungry, the number of infants that die before

that age of 1, how many of our people are in prison, or how many retirees live on dog food and can't afford health care. Bhutan's Happiness Index does.

We must, collectively as a country, as members of the world community, and personally, redefine what well-being, that is happiness, means.

Helen Keller said, "When one door of happiness closes, another opens, but often we look so long at the closed door that we do not see the one that has been opened for us."

One of the best of a bad lot, the **Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius said**, "Very little is needed to make a happy life; it is all within yourself, in your way of thinking."

We must adjust our thinking and insofar as possible, help our neighbors and legislators adjust their thinking as well. We must have better national measures of well-being than how much we produce and consume because those measures are leading us down a disastrous path. We need national measures of true well-being and like Bhutan, these measures should drive, among other things, sustainable production and consumption. Who knows, if we concentrate our efforts on human and environmental needs rather than strictly on production and consumption we might find that continuous economic expansion is not necessary at all.

We need to redefine what makes us happy. There is a saying that "Less is More." Fooey. Less is Less and it's time we begin to think, deep within ourselves, that Less is Good, Less is Desirable, Less is Achievable. As consumers, we have the ultimate control over what happens to the world. If we, as consumers, rethink what makes us happy, if we purchase what we need and reduce what we want, world economies WILL adjust. If we search for happiness outside of the market place, and actively resist what advertisers throw at us every waking moment, we may indeed find reserves of happiness within ourselves that we didn't know we had.

There is a Tibetan saying, "Seeking happiness outside ourselves is like waiting for sunshine in a cave facing north."

Do I know what will make you happy? Absolutely not, and I'm not going to make value judgments if you choose to own three TVs either. But I am suggesting that our national measures of happiness are skewed toward ever increasing consumption and this is not the way to achieve true well-being and happiness. One more pair of shoes, one more trip to the store each week, strawberries out of season, or the latest SUV won't improve the quality of our lives, the air we breathe, the water we drink or the food we eat.

We need to redefine our personal and national goals. Simply by being MINDFUL of what and why we purchase things can have a profound impact on the market place and that affects our government. How many times have you heard government gurus gnashing their teeth over national Christmas receipts? As consumers, we're not sending our government a clear enough message. When we DON'T buy stuff, we need to make it clear to our legislators WHY we're not buying it.

I hope that we will work as friends, church members and citizens to help each other achieve two goals. First, to be mindful consumers, and second, to let our government know that measures of national well-being must include more than how much we produce and spend. The data are sitting in Washington as I speak; improving our national measures of well-being does not need to be a 10-year project costing billions of dollars. These aren't huge goals although they could have a profound effect

on the future of our country and the planet we leave to our children. Nor does this have to be a PAINFUL process, we're not going to starve or walk barefoot. We're not going to wear tattered clothing—well, not unless it's a fashion statement. All we need to do is be MINDFUL of what we consume and whether we need to consume it at all.

Develop your personal mantra of planetary stewardship by being a mindful consumer. Be creative, look on this task with joy and religious fervor. Every time you even ask yourself whether you need to buy this thing or take this trip – give yourself a mental pat on the back. Every time you think about what happens to that outdated cell phone you're throwing away, pat yourself on the back, and if you actually forego buying the latest phone with all the bells and whistles just because you can afford it and want it, go eat a big bowl of ice cream with a lot of whipped cream on the top and know within your heart that you're helping to save the planet! Get your children and grandchildren involved. Above all, let's share what we're doing with each other.

In order to facilitate exchanging our ideas for reducing personal consumption, we've established a special church mailing address – GREEN@UUCHURCHLC.ORG. If we get enough ideas, we will publish them in church newsletters. Send us your goals and tell us how you plan to meet them. Tell us if you're successful, or if you're not, what barriers got in the way. While you're at it, tell us what makes you happy but doesn't require too many resources.

Here are a few of my personal goals and then I'm going to share the microphone with you:

I'm going to write letters to our New Mexico legislators suggesting that we need better national measures of the country's well-being, then I'm going to write to the person I hope will be our next President.

On a more personal note, within the next 12 months, I want to reduce our weekly trash output by 1/2. and I want to really press the city and county to make curbside recycling available to as many people as possible. I also want to carpool to church on Sundays with neighbors who live a block away from our house, and if we can carpool to the market – so much the better.

Finally, I'm going to be mindful of every thing I buy, whether for myself or others, and ask, "DO I REALLY NEED THIS ITEM?" I will try to practice what Epicurus said, "If thou wilt make a man happy, add not unto his riches but take away from his desires." I am going to adjust my desires.

CLOSING WORDS delivered by Lyn Pearson

In closing, I will read:

The Parable of the Pen

A tongue-in-cheek story by a former, now out of work, economist

Somewhere in China a woman earns 1 penny for every 10 ballpoint pens she assembles. The pen case, shipped to China from the U.S., is made from phenolic resin plastic developed in the United States and molded into pen cases in a U.S. factory. A Chinese plant fabricated the pen cartridge using Chilean copper and Chinese zinc. The same plant fabricated the roller ball using Brazilian tungsten.

The owner of the assembly plant earns 2 pennies for every pen each of his workers assembles. Those 2 pennies, along with some other pennies supplied by the Chinese government, pay for the zinc, copper, and tungsten, and a variety of manufacturing overheads and shipping costs.

Eventually, the ballpoint is packaged and shipped back to the United States on a large container ship. The ballpoint's container is loaded on a freight train and shipped to a central depot: after a number of additional transports, it ends up in a local Office Max where your dentist buys the pen for \$1.50. He doesn't blink at the price.

Your dentist places the pen on his office counter where you use it to write a check for his services. Without thinking, you slip the pen into your breast pocket and head for home. Another pen appears on the counter within minutes of your inadvertent theft.

You are puzzled by the mystery pen that shows up in your breast pocket because you have no recollection of how it came to be there, but you use the pen until it runs out of ink and then toss it in the wastebasket. It goes out with your weekly trash and is hauled to the local landfill.

Meanwhile, your dentist takes the 50-cent depreciated value of the pen as a business tax write-off. On Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, The Ways and Means committee, after noting the year's unexpectedly low tax revenues, decides to clip 2 percent of all agency budgets. Those cuts might come out of Head Start, veterans' benefits, or vaccine subsidies – only someone willing to plow through each agency's line item budget will ever know the true impact of the little pen with a Chinese, Chilean, Brazilian and United States heritage that you threw away without a thought.

REFLECT ON THESE WORDS BY Tagore

The greed of gain has no time or limit to its capaciousness. Its one object is to produce and consume. It has pity neither for beautiful nature nor for living human beings. It is ruthlessly ready without a moment's hesitation to crush beauty and life out of them, molding them into money.

So be it, leave here and be happy