

John Zerzan

Happiness

2011

Is happiness really possible in a time of ruin? Can we somehow flourish, have complete lives? Is joy any longer compatible with the life of today?

A deep sense of well-being has become an endangered species. How often does one hear “It is good to be here”? (Matthew 17:4, Luke 9:5, Luke 9:33) or Wordsworth’s reference to “the pleasure which there is in life itself”?¹ Much of the prevailing condition and the dilemma it poses is expressed by Adorno’s observation: “A wrong life cannot be lived rightly.”²

In this age happiness, if not obsolete, is a test, an opportunity. “To be happy is to be able to become aware of oneself without being frightened.”³ We seem to be desperate for happiness, as bookshelves, counseling rooms, and talk shows promote endless recipes for contentment. But the well-worn, feel-good bromides from the likes of Oprah, Eckhart Tolle, and the Dalai Lama seem to work about as well as a Happy Meal, happy hour, or Coke’s invitation to “Pour Happiness!”

Gone is the shallow optimism of yesteryear, such as it was. The mandatory gospel of happiness is in tatters. As Hélène Cixous put it, we are “born to the difficulty in taking pleasure from absence.”⁴ We sense only “a little light/in great darkness,” to quote Pound, who borrowed from Dante.⁵

How do we explore this? What is *expected* re: happiness? In light of all that stands in its way or erodes it, is happiness mainly a fortuitous accident?⁶

Very often, to be sure, happiness is approached in terms of what it *isn’t*. Walter Kerr’s *The Decline of Pleasure* opens with this: “I am going to start out by assuming that you are approximately as unhappy as I am.”⁷ “We are a society of notoriously unhappy people,” according to Erich Fromm.⁸ But we are not supposed to go around admitting this bottom-line truth about ourselves and society. Various contemporary theorists, by the way, have steadily chipped away at the very notion of the self, redefining it as nothing more than an intersection of shifting discourses. When the self is all but erased, “happiness” can no longer even be a valid topic.

But our yearning for well-being is not so easily written off. Elisabeth Roudinesco provides a plausible judgment: “The more individuals are promised happiness and the ideal of security, the more their unhappiness persists, the steeper

¹ Quoted in John Cowper Powys, *The Art of Happiness* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1935), p. 49.

² Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (London: MLB, 1974), #18, p. 39.

³ Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings* (London: NLB, 1979), p. 71.

⁴ Hélène Cixous, *First Days of the Year* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 142.

⁵ Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1972), #CXVI, p. 795.

⁶ Its etymology is of interest in this regard. From *hap* (Greek): chance, fortune, as in happen. Our English word luck comes, in fact, from the German for happiness, *Glück*.

⁷ Walter Kerr, *The Decline of Pleasure* (New York: Touchstone, 1962), p. 1.

⁸ Erich Fromm, *To Have or to Be?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), p. 5.

the risk profile grows, and the more the victims of unkept promises revolt against those who have betrayed them.”⁹

In this precarious world happiness and fear are oddly joined. People are afraid. “They are afraid,” Adorno claimed, that “they would lose everything, because the only happiness they know even in thought, is to be able to hold on to something.”¹⁰ This condition contrasts qualitatively with what is known of so many non-domesticated people: their lack of fear, their trust in the world they inhabit.

The Himalayan nation of Bhutan attracted much notice in the middle of the first decade of this century for its Gross National Happiness concept: the decision to measure the quality of its society not by industrial output (Gross National Product), but in terms of its citizens’ happiness. Apparently, however, Bhutan quickly lost the somewhat isolated character of its culture, which had spurred the GNH idea in the first place. Inundated by pop culture, celebrity consciousness, consumer fads, and the rest of a globalized modernity, the emphasis on happiness as a national value has faded.

Mass society restricts “happiness” to the spheres of consumption and distraction to a great degree. Yet happiness remains an experience of fullness, rather than seriously misguided efforts to fill emptiness. Many studies show that happiness levels fall with increasing accumulation of wealth.¹¹ In removing ourselves from nature, we become insensible to its wholeness and approach it as another passive object to be consumed.

Is there a truth of happiness, on whose basis happiness can be judged? Happiness is as encompassing as it is immediate. It has many facets and manifestations. It is elemental, potent; like health, happiness is contagious and breeds hope in others. Happiness has to do with one’s whole reaction to life, and for that reason alone, it is personal as well as mysterious. The philosopher Wittgenstein had a harsh and pessimistic temperament and experienced his share of intense anguish. His seems the portrait of an unhappy man, and yet his biographer Norman Malcolm reports that his last words were, “Tell them I’ve had a wonderful life.”¹² John Keats’ brief life was overshadowed by illness, but he often claimed that things are gorgeous *because* they die. The sources of happiness lie in various spheres of our lives, but characteristically these are not so separate. Human life has never been lived in isolation, so we seek experiences that are more than just meaningful for

⁹ Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Philosophy in Turbulent Times: Canquihem, Sartre, Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. xii.

¹⁰ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1973), p. 33.

¹¹ Jeremy Rifkin, *The Empathic Civilization* (New York: Penguin, 2009), p. 498.

¹² Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 106.

ourselves alone. Vivasvan Soni's insight says a lot: "No part of life can be bracketed as irrelevant to happiness. All of life counts infinitely. There is no greater tragedy than unhappiness, and no greater responsibility for us than happiness."¹³

In my experience, the cornerstone of happiness is love. Here is the dimension where we find the greatest fulfillment. Frantz Fanon, better known for his work on other subjects, subscribed to a standard of "authentic love — wishing for others what one postulates for oneself."¹⁴ There are other satisfactions, but do they match the satisfying and enriching quality of love relations? If a child has love and protection, there is the basis for happiness throughout life. If neither is provided, his or her prospects are very limited. If only one of them is to be given, I think that love outranks even protection or security in terms of the odds for happiness.

Some have dissented as to the centrality of love. Nietzsche and Sartre seem to have seen love as confining, closing off prerogatives. That bloodless master of cheap irony, E.M. Cioran, provides this little meditation: "I think of that emperor dear to my heart, Tiberius, of his acrimony and his ferocity . . . I love him because his *neighbor* seemed to him inconceivable. I love him because he loved no one."¹⁵

What would a history of happiness look like? Once happiness was a central focus of thought in the West. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, for example, is a major discourse on the subject. Epicurus spent his life facing the question of how to attain happiness, arousing the ire of our modern friend Cioran. The latter referred to Epicurus' writings as a "compost heap," citing him as indicative of the false path that occurs "when the problem of happiness supplants that of knowledge."¹⁶

Much later, the Cartesian account of emotions as so many sensations enters the picture, and Voltaire (1694–1778) was the last happy writer, according to Roland Barthes. The 18th century saw a deluge of writing about happiness, mainly focused on private well-being. A thorough de-politicizing of what was meant by happiness was taking place, on the eve of mass society. Kant typified this trend, by bonding — even equating — duty-oriented morality with happiness.

The new century exhibited the Romantic emphasis on joy rather than happiness (Blake, Wordsworth, et al.), with joy's strong connotation of that which is fleeting. Transient indeed was the hymn to a hopeful future expressed in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, in particular its final movement based on Schiller's "Ode to Joy." The work has justly been termed the last serious music expressing happiness/joy.

¹³ Vivasvan Soni, *Mourning Happiness: Narrative and the Politics of Modernity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), p. 494.

¹⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, translated by Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 41.

¹⁵ E.M. Cioran, *The Temptation to Exist* (New York: Quadrangle, 1968), p. 200.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp 168–169.

As industrial life began to spread, it can be no coincidence that Hegel saw human history as the record of irredeemable misfortune.

Modern wage labor and political social contract theorizing (Rousseau, the U.S. Constitution, etc.) legitimated the pursuit of *private* happiness. In the public sphere, the question of general happiness was downplayed. Reward became the name of the game. For Hegel, property and personality were almost synonymous; Marx associated happiness with the satisfaction of interests alone.

Sentimentalism was an important facet of the 19th century cultural ethos: the underlying emotional tableau of lost community. A fragmented, anonymous society had all but abandoned the goal of widespread happiness. The early Victorian utilitarianism of John Stuart Mill, less crude than that of its founder Bentham at least, failed to recognize the impoverishment of the age. Mill was the last philosopher of social happiness.

Jean-François Lyotard placed “the withdrawal of the real” at the center of the experience of modernity.¹⁷ We are losing the referents, the real things, felt contact with what is non-simulated. How could happiness not decline in the bargain? It has declined; the technoculture’s ascent is the descent of happiness.¹⁸ Today’s dreary, isolating technological frenzy keeps sinking it further, with various pathological effects. But our quest remains what it was for Spinoza: the search for happiness, with the reality of our bodies in a real, bodily world.

In the 1890s Anton Chekhov visited Sakhalin Island, with its Gilyak hunter-gatherers. He observed that they had not yet come to grips with roads. “Often,” he noted, “you will see them . . . making their way in single file through the marshes beside the road.”¹⁹ They were always somewhere, and were uninterested in being nowhere, on industrialism’s roadway. They had not yet lost the singularity of the present, which technology exactly takes away. With our dwindling attention spans, foreshortening shallowness of thought, and thirst for diversions, how much are we actually in the world? The disembodied self becomes increasingly disengaged from reality, including emotional reality.

Anxiety has replaced happiness as the hallmark sensation, now that community is absent.²⁰ We no longer trust our instincts. Maintaining a vast distance from

¹⁷ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 79.

¹⁸ Albert Borgmann, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp 124, 130.

¹⁹ Quoted and discussed in Timothy Taylor, *The Artificial Age* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), p. 192.

²⁰ Peter LaFrenière, *Adaptive Origins: Evolution and Human Development* (New York: Psychology Press, 2010), pp 288, 296–297. Also Patricia Pearson, *A Brief History of Anxiety . . . Yours and Mine* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008).

the rhythms of nature and primary experiences of the senses in their intimate concreteness, the leading “thinkers” so often consecrate or uphold this unhappy, disembodied state. Alain Badiou, for example, concurs with Kant that truth and overall health are “independent of animality and the whole world of sense.”²¹

But what is abstract about happiness? Its states are complete at each moment — each embodied moment. “Each happiness comes for the first time,” as Levinas realized.²² Czeslaw Milosz described his happy childhood: “I lived without yesterday or tomorrow, in the eternal present. That is, precisely, the definition of happiness.”²³ Postmodern irony and detachment, with their bedrock of embracing the techno-sphere, constitute one more means of wresting us from the present moment.

A most basic human longing is to belong, to experience union with something other than oneself. Bruno Bettelheim described a feeling, engendered in his case by great art, “of being in tune with the universe . . . [of] all needs satisfied. I felt as though I were in touch — in communication with man’s past and connected with his future.”²⁴ He associated this with Freud’s “oceanic feeling,” the sensation of “an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole.”²⁵

I think it plausible to see this as vestigial — as a visceral, surviving link to a previous condition. There is a great deal of anthropological/ethnological literature describing indigenous peoples who live in oneness with the natural world and one another. Survival itself necessitated a borderlessness between inner and outer worlds. Our ultimate survival requires that we recover that oneness. At times we still feel a return to that unified state. Fairly often in psychological counseling, there is a search for a time in childhood when one was healthy and happy. Arguably, to apply the “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny” thesis, each of us re-enacts the larger history of humanness. T.S. Eliot’s designation of our return is “through the unknown remembered gate.”²⁶

²¹ Quoted in Peter Hallward, translator’s introduction to Alain Badiou, *Ethics: an essay on the understanding of evil* (New York: Verso, 2001), p. xxi.

²² Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), p. 114.

²³ Czeslaw Milosz, *Proud to be a Mammal: Essays on War, Faith and Memory* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2010), p. 80.

²⁴ Bruno Bettelheim, *Freud’s Vienna and Other Essays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), p. 115.

²⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, translated by James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1962), p. 12.

²⁶ T.S. Eliot, “Little Gidding,” in *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1963), p. 208.

Freud counterposed civilization and happiness because civilization [domestication, more precisely] is “based on compulsory labor and instinctual renunciation.”²⁷ “Having to fight against the instincts is the formula for decadence; so long as life is ascending, happiness and instinct are one thing,” observed Nietzsche.²⁸

The internalization and universalization of this renunciation of freedom is what Freud called sublimation. As Norman O. Brown saw it, sublimation “presupposes and perpetuates the loss of life and cannot be the mode in which life itself is lived.”²⁹ The very progress of civilization requires an even greater measure of renunciation, an even greater setting ourselves apart from our environment. And yet the “oceanic feeling” can still be powerfully felt, recalling that earlier state of being. How much fresher, more vivid and more valued life can feel after a serious illness; this may be the case upon our recovery from the sickness we call civilization.

But here we are now, so very far from any original wholeness or fullness. And “the horror,” in Adorno’s judgment, “is that for the first time we live in a world in which we can no longer imagine a better one.”³⁰ At present the only happy context is the imagined one, or at least, the happiness achieved in expressing the truth about unhappiness. In Milosz’ heartfelt words: “It would seem that all human beings should fall into each other’s arms, crying out that they cannot live . . .”³¹

The aim of life is to live it strongly, to be fully awake. This aim collides with a new malaise of civilization, an End Times sense of everything, a “post”-you-name-it cultural landscape. A sense of helplessness promoted in no small part by the postmodern doctrine of ambiguity and ambivalence.

Happiness entails refusal of Foucault’s “docile bodies” condition, insistence on being vivid rather than domesticated, determination to live as “barbarians” resisting the unfreedom and numbness of civilization. An instinct tells us that there is something different, however distant it may seem; we know we were born for something better. The reality of deep unhappiness is the reminder of that instinct, which lives and struggles to be heard. The story of happiness did not have to unfold as it did.

In our own lives we are so lucky to have a sense of being blessed, to have some gladness, a sense of worth. To have a certain astonishment at being here at all. For

²⁷ Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, translated by James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961), p. 12.

²⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Unmodern Observations*, William Arrowsmith, ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p. xv.

²⁹ Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytic Meaning of History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), p. 171.

³⁰ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, “Dialogue,” *NLR* September/October 2010, p. 61.

³¹ Czesław Miłosz, *op.cit.*, p. 296.

ourselves, meaning and happiness are always interwoven. Happiness is grounded in meaningfulness; a life of meaning is the meaning of life. “To happiness, the same applies as to truth: one does not have it, but is in it,” in Adorno’s pithy formulation.³²

He also said, “Philosophy exists in order to redeem what you see in the look of an animal.”³³ “To meet myself face to face,” in Thoreau’s words.³⁴ To realize ourselves in our distinctly human capacities within what is possible (i.e. not to blame ourselves for the limits imposed on us). And to find the strength to speak the unsaid. Unhappiness is not the result of understanding the real depth of our predicament; in fact, this understanding can be liberating, strengthening. It may lead to something that could hardly be more momentous: the quest for directness and immediacy in the real world. The project of confronting the very nature of our domesticated, civilized, technology-ridden unhappiness.

³² Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, op.cit., #72, p. 112.

³³ Adorno and Horkheimer, “Dialogue,” op.cit., p. 51.

³⁴ Henry David Thoreau, *Journal* (Toronto: Dover Publications, 1962), p. 51.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright
May 21, 2012



John Zerzan
Happiness
2011

Retrieved on April 22, 2011 from johnzerzan.net