

The Graduation Speech: Reflections on Happiness

Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries*

* Raoul de Vitry d'Avaucourt Professor of Human Resource Management, INSEAD. All rights reserved.

Abstract

This essay addresses the question of what makes for happiness. An attempt is made to deconstruct this elusive concept. It is suggested that essential aspects of happiness are someone to love, something to do, and something to hope for. In this essay, each of these three dimensions is reviewed. The need to achieve balance in life is explored. The dichotomy between outward success and inner success is looked at. The importance of play in people's lives is examined. The role of stress—another important topic in the happiness equation—is investigated. It is argued that in the search for happiness, humankind's exploratory needs have to be taken into consideration; people have to strive for authenticity; and an effort needs to be made to know oneself.

*And what is Life?—an hour glass on the run
A mist retreating from the morning sun
A busy bustling still repeated dream
Its length?—A moment's pause, a moment's thought
And happiness? A bubble on the stream
That in the act of seizing shrinks to nought.*

-- John Clare (*The Englishman's Fire-side*, "What Is Life?")

Introduction

First of all, I'd like to congratulate all of you on a job well done. You overcame all the hurdles, hanging in there when times were tough. You fulfilled all the requirements, no matter how unreasonable your professors may have seemed at times. You're graduating. It feels good, doesn't it, to have made it? You must be on top of the world! Not completely, you say? You also feel a little bit sad? The French have a saying, "Partir est mourir une peu." Leaving is a little bit like dying. How true that is. You're bound to be suffering from a certain amount of separation anxiety at this time, as we all would. After all, you're going to leave a place in which you made a major emotional investment. Most likely, you're going to part company with a number of cherished friends. You're going to say farewell to a place filled with memories. But you'll have future get-togethers; this particular gathering won't be the last.

Let me get on with what I have to say. After all, on this particular happy day, the last thing you want to do is listen to an interminable speech by a stranger. This is a time for celebration; this is a time to be with the people you love. You have every right to be impatient. And yet before you go, I'd like to share a few observations about life—

observations based on my personal experiences and those of hundreds of senior executives who've participated in my leadership seminar at INSEAD (which has as its main theme helping leaders to resolve critical issues in their lives).

I realize that advice can be like cod liver oil: easy enough to give, but quite hard to take. I suspect that nothing is more liberally given in life than advice. In sharing my thoughts, however, I'm very mindful of the fact that what we don't use ourselves, we shouldn't give to others. Perhaps you'll find some of my comments useful. Maybe a few of my observations will have meaning for you. My hope is that you'll react somewhat differently to my observations than Oscar Wilde would have; he once said that "the only thing to do with good advice is to pass it on; it is never of any use to oneself."

The Elusive Concept of Happiness

My presentation today centers on the role of happiness in life. As you've most likely found out by now, happiness is no laughing matter. On the contrary, it's serious business. For most of us today, it's the ultimate goal. And it's been a recurrent theme throughout the ages. Even in America's Declaration of Independence—a formal political document—we find a reference to the pursuit of happiness. In spite of that reference, Thomas Jefferson (the document's primary author) didn't know what the pursuit of happiness was all about. I don't pretend to have that knowledge either. Nevertheless, by looking at this topic from various angles, I hope to shed some light on it. I think it's better to try to come to grips with this elusive subject than to abandon it altogether.

The French philosopher Jean de la Bruyère once said, "For man there are only three important events: birth, life, and death; but he is unaware of being born, he suffers when he dies, and he forgets to live." Obviously, de la Bruyère held a rather tragic view of humanity. He wasn't exactly an optimist. He didn't enjoy the intermission, shall we say. My objective, however, is to *concentrate* on the interval in an effort to better understand what happiness is all about.

Though hard-nosed businesspeople find it unfortunate, happiness isn't quoted on the stock exchange. It's not something to which a specific value can be attached. It's far too intangible for that, and too elusive; it quickly slips out of our hands. Slippery though happiness may be, its pursuit remains one of the major preoccupations of humankind.

So why, despite that almost universal focus, does happiness remain a mysterious concept? Is it because we haven't yet found the answer or because there *is* no answer? Some scholars who have written on happiness believe that it's one of those subjects that shouldn't even be explored. For example, the British writer Gilbert Chesterton noted that "happiness is a mystery like religion, and should never be rationalized." He preferred not to probe further, because he felt that the inquiry wouldn't lead anywhere.

But mystery or no mystery, sporadic efforts at deconstruction have been made. Some people have argued that happiness isn't a place or a condition but a state of mind, something that comes from within us—a figment of the imagination, if you will. (That widely accepted view of happiness as a product of our inner world may have contributed to its cloaking in mystery.) Psychotherapists, on the other hand, have been known to compare happiness to the "paradise lost" of early childhood—a vaguely remembered oceanic feeling of total togetherness with mother. They note that many of their patients have spoken of trying to recapture a fleeting memory of a mystical union they once knew—a memory that can be captured for a brief moment only.

Some psychiatrists and neurologists, however, argue that happiness is nothing more than a physiological reaction, a product of body chemistry or the result of neurotransmitters set into motion. That viewpoint forces a debate over whether the happiness induced by drugs such as Prozac is real. If it feels the same, derives from the same chemical source, is it *really* the same? Is that all there is to it? Should we leave it at that?

In his work *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle said, "One swallow does not make a summer, neither does one fine day; similarly one day or brief time of happiness does not make a person entirely happy." My observations support this view. Happiness isn't a long-term

visitor; only occasionally does it make its home with us. And yet quite a few people would say that they're basically happy, differing only in degree—sometimes more, sometimes less. Perhaps, then, we should compare happiness to the sun breaking through on a cloudy day. The rays are seen only sporadically, though we know that the sun is always there. And if we try to chase the sun, we discover that it's moving away from us. Frustrating as this may be, it gives us something to strive for.

Ironically, the fact that happiness is never complete or constant is one of its virtues. Try to imagine a state of unbroken happiness. How monotonous that would be—or worse, what a nightmare, like being in a state of perpetual orgasm. In fact, people who profess a constant state of happiness are likely to be diagnosed by psychiatrists as being hypomanic or in denial. In other words, there's such a thing as being *too* happy. Ups and downs are required to give our experiences color. Comparisons are needed. As Dante Alighieri said in *The Divine Comedy (The Inferno)*, “No sorrow is deeper than the remembrance of happiness when in misery.” Many of us have discovered that there's no pleasure without pain, just as there's no joy without sorrow. Paradise without hell would be unimaginable. We need polarities. There's a good reason Dante dwelled so long in the Inferno but moved relatively quickly through Heaven.

Elusive or not, happiness is something most of us never give up longing and searching for as long as we live. It's a theme that continues to preoccupy us. Indeed, it's so central that we might say that desiring happiness gives us a reason for living.

Deconstructing Happiness

Whenever people comment on happiness, I'm reminded that it means different things to different people. It's a very subjective experience. We all have our own fantasies about what happiness is (or should be). Some people use the label *happiness* to describe a state in which they're no longer plagued by desire even though not every past wish has yet been fulfilled. Others refer to happiness as the feelings attached to special moments retained in memory—a smile from a loving parent, a successful moment at school, a first love affair, the birth of a child, a reunion of the family, or a get-together with friends.

In a Chinese saying, happiness is defined as consisting of three things: someone to love, something to do, and something to hope for. There's a lot of truth in this observation. We need love and hope in our lives, and we need activity. Sigmund Freud took a parallel tack, pointing out that the pillars of mental health are the ability to love and the ability to work. Unfortunately, workaholic that he was, Freud forgot to mention the play element that's an essential part of human nature. We all have an exploratory, motivational side—one that we see in small children as they experiment and try new things. Thus people who do work that feels like play are fortunate indeed.

Let's take a closer look at the three elements of that Chinese proverb: someone to love, something to do, and something to hope for.

Someone to Love

All of us need someone to love, someone we can feel close to and confide in. The first "love relationship" we experience (if we're among the lucky ones) is with our parents. Later, other family members come into the picture: grandparents, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, cousins. When we grow older, there are friends and perhaps a spouse and children. Sharing experiences with these people is part and parcel of the happiness equation.

Happiness cries out to be shared. In fact, happiness that's shared is double happiness, while happiness hoarded is empty. An essential element of the pursuit of happiness is making other people happy. This means that to experience true happiness, we have to learn to forget ourselves. Many of us have seen this phenomenon in action: when we bring sunshine into the lives of others, we often get some of it in return. Even the littlest things can produce moments of happiness—a smile, a hug, a heartfelt thank-you. These little gestures can turn into glorious feelings for both giver and recipient.

The reason true happiness comes only through sharing is that the human need for connectedness runs deep. It's hard to make our way through life alone. From birth

onward, there are many fibers that connect us to the human community. As many researchers of child development have pointed out, attachment is a basic motivational need of humankind. Being a member a community of people is an essential part of becoming a person; as a result, it's critical not only to mental health but also to happiness.

One of the most intense love experiences people have comes through close partnership. A relationship such as marriage brings out extremely intense feelings—happiness being one of them. For many, the intimacy of a true love affair results in many happy memories—memories that can reinvigorate us. When a partnership works, this love between two people transcends sexuality, incorporating mutual attachment and true friendship. As Friedrich Nietzsche once said, “The best friend is likely to acquire the best wife, because a good marriage is based on the talent of friendship.” When we experience genuine physical *and* psychological intimacy, we go from strength to strength. This intense relationship helps us to develop and grow; it serves as a base for both greater self-understanding and greater understanding of others. Bearing and raising children is often part of this learning process. Children are important as engineers of happiness because they're catalysts, helping their parents transform from a self-centered view to a more mature, exocentric perspective on life; in other words, they “teach” that happiness is often greater when it comes through giving rather than receiving.

Although the good memories that grow out of an enduring partnership serve as a buffer against the stress of life, spouses can also play an important containment function, helping each other overcome conflict and anxiety. If there's mutual affection and trust in a marriage, the spouse takes on the role of “container,” or confidant. This role can also be taken by good friends. We often draw great comfort from our friends when times are tough. Because they help us work our way through the obstructions of life, they're instrumental in creating happy moments. They also serve as a kind of supplemental memory bank, helping us recall things about ourselves, including happy memories, that we've forgotten. They affect our physical well-being as well: research has shown that having someone to confide in reduces stress, strengthens the immune system, and boosts longevity.

Making friends isn't easy for most of us, unfortunately. Friendship isn't something we can buy in a store or create with a wish or a snap of the fingers. Building a friendship—and that includes a relationship with a partner—requires hard work and determination. We have to make an effort to understand and help others, giving a part of ourselves away in the process. If we think only of ourselves, it's very difficult to establish real friendships.

The groundwork for most friendships is laid early in life, during childhood, high school, and university. Friendships develop so easily in our youth that we take the whole process for granted. But *keeping* friends—that's another story; it doesn't occur the least bit automatically. Keeping a friendship going, helping it to grow and mature rather than allowing it to stagnate, is a delicate process. Friendships are fragile entities that require care, nurturance, and even sacrifice. Maintaining friendships involves being loyal, affectionate, sympathetic, and ready to help when the need arises. But we're amply repaid for our efforts: *having* a friend means ready access to a willing ear, an understanding heart, and a helping hand. A person's character can often be assessed in the selection of his or her friends.

What happens to our friendships as we grow older? Are the crucial links we made early in life still intact, or have we lost sight of the people who once were our friends? For many people the answer to this question is affirmative. And yet despite the fact that friendships are often very transitional, they become increasingly important as we age. In middle age and onward, they're needed more than ever before. Unfortunately, for many of us the opportunity to make new friendships seems to diminish after these early stages in life. As a result, the friends we lose aren't replaced.

And lose them we do. Sometimes distance separates us; sometimes our interests diverge; sometimes one of us outgrows the other; sometimes we drift apart for lack of effort. Even marriage can be a factor in the dissolution of other friendships. If the marriage bond is particularly intense, all others may pale in comparison. Furthermore, the exclusivity of a

partnership may bring out so-called negative feelings—jealousy, for example. A spouse may look at the friend as a bad influence or find certain behaviors in the friend disturbing. When the chemistry isn't right between a partnered couple and a particular friend, a difficult choice has to be made. But not all friendships end deliberately. As we get older, death becomes a more frequent visitor, diminishing our circle of friendship against our will. All these various transformations point out the need to be active in maintaining friendships. Since life doesn't stand still, we need to look forward, not just back. We need to be proactive in searching out people who have similar interests, showing an interest in them rather than waiting for them to show an interest in us. If we don't make an effort to establish new friendships, we may find ourselves all alone in old age—a situation that unbalances the happiness equation.

In dealing with people we're close to—partners, friends, neighbors, or colleagues—it's important to treat them as we'd like to be treated ourselves. The sage Confucius once said, "Behave toward everyone as if receiving a great guest." That's excellent advice. Being fair to others is important as we pass through life, partly because we inspire fairness in return. If we treat people well, it's likely that we'll be treated well by them; if we have a sense of entitlement and demand special treatment, it's likely that we'll alienate those around us.

Giving fair treatment—that is, ensuring reciprocity in our relationships—requires the ability to place ourselves in the other person's shoes. That's why true narcissists, with their unempathic outlook, have a hard time establishing real friendships. They simply can't imagine how it feels to be in someone else's situation. The reason empathy is such a critical element in interpersonal relationships is that life is a process of social exchange. People make calculations—not necessarily consciously—about what they get out of every relationship. Given the principle of distributive justice and equity that's at work in every human interaction, what we put into a relationship and what we get out of it have to be in equilibrium.

Something to Do

Work, the second pillar of happiness, ties the person to the human community. That's why work is essential for our mental health. The people who are most unhappy tend to be those who have nothing meaningful to do. Paradoxically, perhaps the hardest work of all is doing nothing. Doing work that brings no satisfaction is likewise very draining. As the writer Maxim Gorky once said, "When work is pleasure, life is a joy. When work is duty, life is slavery."

One of the best prizes in life is the opportunity to work at something we like. Unfortunately, far too often, for far too many of us, work is drudgery. While economic necessity forces some people into work that they find meaningless, most of us can afford to be selective. Unless we find ourselves unable to climb out of that first category, we need to stick with the good stuff and trim off the useless branches, focusing on work that we can do well and that makes us feel really alive.

If happiness is a goal, we should also look for work that gives us a sense of purpose. When we feel that what we do makes a difference, our life has more meaning. Work that allows us to feel that we're making a contribution, work that really absorbs us, work that demands our total concentration—this is the kind of work that makes for happy moments (and thus creates happy memories that sustain us in difficult times). If we completely lose our sense of time when we're working, and don't find ourselves fatigued at the end of the day, that's a good indicator that we're doing this kind of work. As a German proverb says, "When a man is happy, he doesn't hear the clock strike."

As important as meaningful work is, it's not as crucial as close relationships. Even the person who spends every day waiting for the five o'clock whistle to blow may consider himself happy if he has a loving family and good friends to spend his free time with.

Something to Hope for

Finally, we all need hope in our lives; we need something to strive for. Hope is part of the human condition, spurring us on and encouraging us to explore. As we go through the

process of discovery that each life is, the makeup of our desires—the profile of our hope—is the only real boundary we face. Thus the way we play with hope is an important part of our “inner theatre,” a key element in the script of life.

Though we tend to think of hope as something ephemeral, it can also be tangible. It can take on many forms—a new love affair, an exciting job opportunity, the building of a dream house, a special trip. There’s something for everybody. The images attached to hope are registered with the other “good” memories that sustain us when times are tough.

Because hope is linked to meaningful goals and objectives, it points us toward a (gradually evolving) destination. Hope gives us a sense of direction in our journey through life—a sense where we want to go. In fact, without hope, why undertake the journey at all? With despair at the helm, we might end up somewhere we don’t want to be. Hope takes the edge off melancholy and despondency and helps us to remember that the sun is always there above the clouds, even if we can’t see it.

We can reframe the concept of hope by referring to *dreams*. Because dreams give life meaning, emptiness and despair flourish in their absence. A life without dreams is little more than death. And yet our dreams often seem distant; they hover in the sunshine, tempting but elusive. Often they truly *are* beyond our grasp. But even if we’re never able to touch our dreams, we can look up to them and believe in them, and try to live our life accordingly. Thus our dreams can spur us on to higher and better things. Without dreams, we might just as well operate on automatic pilot, leading a life without poetry or joy.

The most impressive feats in the world have been accomplished by people who’ve had dreams—*big* dreams. But to be able to dream, we have to believe in ourselves. We have to have faith that what we aspire to be, we *can* be. When we look at individuals who’ve made a difference in the world, we see dreams that gradually crystallized over time, enduring regardless of obstacles. The example of those individuals tells us that we should hold on to the dreams of our youth, or at least retain our willingness to dream the way we

did then—to aim for the stars, transcending what others think is possible. After all, when we aim for the stars, we have a chance at hitting the moon!

But dreams are delicate flowers, easily crushed. That's the reason many of us find it difficult to talk about our dreams, to share them with others. We wonder whether people will laugh, make fun of us, consider us fools. And yet that's a risk we need to take. If we dare to share our dreams with a selected few people we trust, those loved ones can help us hold on to our dreams. Even if our worst fears come true and our dreams are dismissed as foolish, we need to pursue them relentlessly, for in that pursuit lies our chance for happy moments. We're the architects of our own ambitions. Dreams are our possibilities. We need to use all our talent and energy and courage to fulfill those dreams.

Psychologists sometimes distinguish between two ways of looking at the world. They categorize people as either *internals* or *externals*, depending on their action orientation. An extreme internal is someone who thinks that he or she can do anything; nothing is impossible. An extreme external is a person who sees him- or herself as being victimized by the environment; what happens is a question of chance or fate. Externals give up before they start; they don't think that they can accomplish anything. And yet giving up is the ultimate tragedy, because a defeatist *Weltanschauung* results in total passivity—a road that bypasses happiness. If we want a shot at happiness, we need to emulate internals. Sitting down and waiting for miracles won't get us very far, while articulating and doing what we want out of life brings meaning and fulfillment. We need to follow our convictions. We need to tell ourselves that we're not merely creatures of circumstances; we're free agents.

Even if we firmly believe in our own efficacy, pursuing our dreams can be daunting. Our dreams can seem so formidable, and our powers so slight. But life is made up of little things. When we tackle our dreams step by step, they're achievable. As the sage Lao-Tzu said, "The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step." The greatest things ever done in life have been done little by little. Our initial efforts, paltry though they may

seem, can turn into big things later! Those tentative first steps point us in the right direction and color the rest of the journey.

Achieving Equilibrium

Even when we have people we love, work that's meaningful, and hope to sustain us, happiness can be elusive if we fail to keep our private and public lives in balance. Achieving balance sounds like a simple recipe, but it's easier said than done. The pressures of employers can be tremendous. Because the corporate culture of many organizations negates family values, those pressures affect not only the employee but also the family. And if workplace pressures aren't enough, we're apt to throw in a few self-inflicted ones. We may be trapped in a career maze, for example, obsessed with beating out our office competitors for the next step in the career trajectory. And yet when we confuse happiness with success—at least the outward version of success, as represented by wealth, position, power, or fame—we all but guarantee that the various components in our life be thrown out of joint (though the unbalancing process can be so insidious that we don't realize what's happening).

The fact that many of us are masters of self-delusion, having a great capacity for rationalization and intellectualization, adds to the disequilibrium between private and public life. We try to fool ourselves into believing that we're well balanced. For example, most people, when asked how much time they spend at home, give an answer that's far from reality (though they don't necessarily distort the facts consciously). And even those who are aware of the disproportionate time they spend at the office may console themselves by referring to their nonwork time as "quality" time. They may try to convince themselves that it's not the length of time they spend at home with the family that counts, but rather the intensity, the quality of that time. But do they really believe what they say? And would the other members of their family agree with their conclusions?

I often hear businessmen comment that they're working very hard now so that their wife and children will have a better life later. (My apologies for using the male gender, but

most often it's men who make such a comment.) All too frequently, however, when this infamous later date arrives, there's no longer a wife. She's moved in with someone else, and the children have become strangers. They call another man Daddy and don't really know their father anymore. All that the dedicated worker gets for following the build-for-the-future strategy is isolation and loneliness. It seems to be so much easier to make a success of oneself than to make a success of one's life.

We need to remind ourselves, as we strive for that first kind of success, that certain important moments won't be coming back. We need to cherish those passing moments; we need to seize the day. Life isn't a rehearsal; it's the real thing. If we want to enjoy life, we have to do it *today*, not tomorrow or some faraway time in the future. A fulfilling life is meaningless unless it's coined in the present. Far too many of us fail to live for today. And yet if we put all our energy into reaching out for the future, that which is in our grasp will be lost! Nothing matches the pain of realizing the full importance of time only when there's very little of it left.

Sometimes we want to live for today but feel that we don't have the luxury of that choice. Perhaps there's an overseas trip that just can't be missed if we want to be promoted—though it means missing a son's birthday. Or a presentation that has to be made (and made well) if we hope to boost our sagging sales figures—though it conflicts with a daughter's tennis competition. These are difficult choices, to be sure, especially with a job or career on the line. But the family is on the line as well. Kids grow up and leave home quickly enough. Before we know it, we no longer have any influence in their lives; they're making their own decisions without even consulting us. And if we were seldom with them in their early years, what will our legacy be? How will they remember us? The most important influence on the life of any child is the parents, who shape character and values through personal guidance and unconscious suggestion. How can we help our children grow up as well-rounded adults if we're not there? How do we plan to instill values if we're always at the office? How can we give our children meaningful memories if we're too busy to spend time with them? The bottom line: despite all the fantasies about quality time, meaningful relationships imply *sustained* relationships.

With organizations as demanding as today's typically are, we have to be firm in setting boundaries in order to preserve those aspects of life that are truly important. Perhaps if enough people speak up, in this age of the knowledge worker, employers will have no choice but to make the proper adjustments. And even if we have to take a solitary stand on this issue, our efforts at balancing life are an investment in the future. As a wit once said, no one on his or her deathbed has ever been overheard to say, I should have spent more time at the office. Having special moments with family members is critical to the attainment of happiness. Furthermore, being able to look back at these moments with happiness is to live twice.

Outward Success Versus Inner Success

Albert Einstein had a formula for success that says a lot about balance— $A = X + Y + Z$ —where A stands for success, X stands for work, Y stands for play, and Z stands for keeping one's mouth shut. Like Freud with his formula of love and work, Einstein pointed out some of the essentials that affect happiness.

No person will ever know true happiness without having a few successes to his or her credit. However, successful accomplishment of a dream doesn't *guarantee* happiness. The destination we reach after months or years of striving may turn out to be a disappointment, either plunging us into despair or encouraging us to embark on a new journey. Real success is measured not by what one has achieved but by the obstacles that were overcome. We need to celebrate the small victories along the way.

Most of us tend to focus on outward success—the kind equated with wealth, position, power, and fame. What makes for happiness, however, is *inner* success—the kind that results from living life to the fullest. Einstein's play and active listening to others (a corollary of his holding the tongue) are essential to inner success, because they help us to acquire precious possessions such as friendship, love, goodness, concern, kindness, and wisdom. The success that really satisfies—that contributes to moments of happiness—

often comes to people who aren't looking for success. That's because the road to true success is off the beaten path.

The unrelenting pursuit of outward success is one of the chief sources of unhappiness. It can have serious dysfunctional consequences, because it snowballs: many people driven by success are never satisfied, no matter how high they climb; *no* accomplishment gives lasting satisfaction. Such people are like Sisyphus, pushing a rock up an interminable hill. This inner restlessness—this state of discontent—has ruined many a person. Paradoxically, happiness consists of being satisfied both with what we have and what we don't have. The happiest people are often those who don't want things they can't get.

Happiness very much depends on our approach to life. In other words, our *Weltanschauung* matters. Most people are as happy as they choose to be. Thus internals, who tend to have a more positive outlook on life, are more likely to experience moments of happiness than are externals. Given this linkage between happiness and personality, we all need to evaluate our outlook on life. Is the glass half full or is it half empty? Are we an optimist or a pessimist? Are we plagued by negative thoughts? Do we experience a great sense of helplessness when faced with setbacks? Can we accept positive feedback, or do we focus exclusively on things that go wrong? Do we experience a sense of helplessness when faced with a difficult situation? If we answer these questions in the affirmative, revealing a tendency to hand over control to others or to fate—we probably talk ourselves into unnecessary defeat. Depression, gloom, despair, and discouragement have taken more victims than many diseases.

Cognitive psychologists suggest that a constant state of unhappiness often indicates a susceptibility to cognitive distortion. They try to get people troubled in this way to reframe the way they look at life and at specific situations, to take small steps to bring about change even when events seem out of control. They encourage people to look at setbacks as challenges and to try harder. Having a more positive outlook helps people cope with life's vicissitudes. Optimism is the antidote to helplessness. Many psychologists have written about its prophylactic value, its positive effects on our health.

Success isn't a matter of having received a set of good cards. It's a matter of making the best out of a poor hand. The satisfaction that comes from doing so is a solid foundation for happiness.

Homo Ludens

Einstein was correct in pointing out the importance of play in our lives. We gather happy life experiences (and therefore memories) by having a variety of interests. Leisure activities serve a revitalizing function. They help us to look at old situations in a new way. Real recreation (that's re-creation) stimulates aspiration and makes us more innovative and effective at work and in our relationships.

Many people don't know how to manage leisure. Some don't know how to play at all, dedicating all their energy to work, while others play too hard too much. But does life have to be either/or? We increase the probability of attaining happiness when we learn to combine both—that is, when we learn to find play at work and to work at play. Well-balanced personalities don't work all the time. They know how to laugh; they know how to play; they know how to do fun things with others.

Given the importance of play, we have to evaluate our own happiness equation. Do we have any passions outside work? Are there things that really fire us up? Whether we opt for the little things, such as fly-fishing, bird-watching, or the cultivation of roses, or venture into the likes of helicopter skiing, passions are important. And the more, the better. If diversity of leisure is absent, we may be in for a bad surprise when retirement comes and our options are limited by physical and situational changes. I've known quite a few single-minded people, whose only interests were career-related, who were at a complete loss upon retirement. They experienced a sense of total abandonment and isolation when they left the workplace. They became disoriented and depressed, and they died prematurely. As many people have discovered, if we have no time for leisure, we may have to make time for illness.

Coping with Stress

Albert Schweitzer once said that happiness is nothing more than good health and a poor memory. While his comment about poor memory may meet with objections, monitoring health is undeniably important. If we don't protect our health, the attainment of happiness is an empty pursuit. When all is said and done, our physical condition strongly influences (and in some cases even determines) our mental state. The ego is first and foremost a *bodily* ego. It's hard to think clearly when we're in poor physical condition; when ill health assails us, our thoughts and conversations tend to be limited to a discussion about our various physical ailments.

Being healthy can be compared to burning a candle wisely. If we take excellent care of our candle, it burns for a long time. If we start to mess with it, it can go up in smoke in a very short period. Unfortunately, I've met quite a few people with the habit of burning the candle at both ends. Physical health can also be compared to a bank account. This is an unusual account, however—one from which we can only withdraw; the bank doesn't allow deposits. Some people tend to be spendthrifts: unable to save, they squander their money. Committing suicide slowly, which is what we do when we squander our good health, isn't the route to happiness. Often, however, we realize the importance of our health only when there's very little of it left.

Stress researchers sometimes make a distinction between physiological and chronological age. For some—the candle burners and bank account raiders—physiological age overtakes chronological age. Since physiological age is to some extent within our control, we need to monitor our health vigilantly, exercising regularly, eating sensibly, drinking with moderation, and recognizing what smoking and drugs can do to us. Of course, there's more to physical health than taking a number of practical steps toward fitness. Some of us have had bad luck with genetic inheritance, for example; others have had the misfortune to be tapped by a disease that vigilance couldn't have prevented. Still, far too many people mortgage their future, only to regret having done so later in life.

Laughter is an essential component of both mental and physical health. We can laugh to forget, but we shouldn't forget to laugh. People who can't laugh are psychologically incomplete. Furthermore, people who laugh may actually live longer. Stress researchers have found that the ability to laugh has a healing quality. Humor makes the body young and lively. Because it's an antidote to anxiety and depression, it makes tough times more tolerable. It may even signify that transient moment of happiness. The ability to laugh at ourselves is of special significance. In fact, it's a good test of mental health. Not taking ourselves too seriously is an antidote to arrogance and pomposity.

Addressing Exploratory Needs

Exploring and learning is a way of striving for happiness. Learning shouldn't be seen as something we do only as preparation for adult life. On the contrary, the learning process should never stop. As we look around us, we see a world that's in constant flux; new things are happening all the time. With all these changes, there are myriad discoveries waiting to be made. Ongoing learning means being passionately involved in life—attending to life's movements, sounds, and colors; using our senses of smell, taste, touch, hearing, and sight; cultivating our aesthetic side; and being adventurous (after all, if we're not living on the edge, why bother taking up any space)?

What we learn in formal educational environments is important. Frequently, though, it's the studying done *after* school that has the biggest impact. In fact, many things that need to be learned simply can't be taught. Those things we learn by doing. And they stick with us too. The recall factor of experiential learning is much greater than that of classroom learning, because the memories of critical incidents in life's course remain prominent.

The paradox of wisdom is that the more we learn, the more we discover how ignorant we are. That's not a bad thing: it's important to know how little we know. In fact, we should cherish our ignorance, because it's what pushes us to further exploration. One of the secrets of a fulfilling life and the attainment of happiness is maintaining intellectual curiosity. But to be curious and learn, we also have to *unlearn*; in other words, we have to be prepared to take risks, to go out on a limb. As the economist John Maynard Keynes

once said, “The greatest difficulty in the world is not for people to accept new ideas but to make them forget about their old ideas.” All life throughout the universe is a process of growth and motion. We’re no exception: we need to make a continuous effort to reshape ourselves. We also need to experiment. The more we do so, probing our limits and our surroundings, the more we develop. At times we’ll fail at our endeavors; that’s a guarantee. But temporary setbacks lead to learning experiences that are retained. Going out on a limb is well worth the risks. After all, the reason we go out on a limb is to harvest the fruits that are there.

Nothing is interesting if we’re not interested; the interest inheres not in our environment but in ourselves. The more things we’re interested in, the more alive we are. It’s a lonely person who thinks that he or she can no longer learn from others. That presumptuous stance is an invitation to disaster. Just as continuing to learn keeps us young, ceasing to learn hastens aging. In fact, nothing ages a person faster than not thinking, not exercising the brain. Few minds wear out; most rust away. For our very survival, we need to remain intellectually curious, striving for personal growth.

Our efforts to remain receptive to learning are made easier if we can retain certain qualities of childhood. Being playful, for example, helps us to see new circumstances as adventures. Being imaginative allows us to explore the vast, unmapped country within, that secret reservoir of promise and potential that few adults tap. Being creative permits us to use our imagination constructively, making use of childhood experiences recalled at will. Finally, being inquisitive brings us moments of happiness that stem from discovering new things. More often than not, the challenge isn’t to arrive at new answers but to pose new questions. What we don’t ask, we’ll never know. The words “why” and “how” can’t be used too often.

The joy of learning also helps us to become more effective teachers (and in that teaching process we learn ourselves). It’s important, however, that we teach others *how* to think, not *what* to think. Generativity—the preparedness to be a mentor and teacher to others—is an important factor as we grow older. Seeing young people who’ve been under our

wings do well can bring moments of happiness, while envying the next generation stifles happiness.

The French author François de la Rochefoucauld once wisely said, “The only thing constant in life is change.” If we’re open to learning, that ubiquitous change can be our teacher. In fact, since being mired in the rut of old habits leads to inflexibility and stagnation, we should not only *accept* change, but seek it out, breaking routines and surprising ourselves and others. We need to let go of the past, realizing that today isn’t yesterday. We need to keep trying new things and congratulate ourselves when we find ways to break the threatened monotony—in other words, when we’re players, not spectators, in the game of life. It’s better to be eighty years young than thirty years old. We grow old not by living but by losing interest in living.

The Search for Authenticity

In pursuing happiness (as well as in dealing with all of life’s vicissitudes), it’s important to be authentic. It pays to be genuine, to be true to ourselves. If we’re not honest with ourselves, how can we possibly be honest with others? Authenticity implies a willingness to accept what we are and not attempt to pass for something or someone else. Authenticity means not only trusting our strengths but also facing our weaknesses and being patient with our imperfections.

While authenticity is grounded within, it affects our every interaction; it’s like a diamond that scratches all other stones. If we’re authentic, we inspire confidence in others. We heighten the spirits of those around us. We’re empathic friends and good listeners. By paying attention to others—showing genuine concern—we provide “containment” and thereby create a “holding environment,” that safe place that helps people to cope with conflict and anxiety. We’re kind to others, nurturing the spirit of generosity, though we’re humble about our efforts. We’re at peace with ourselves and can therefore help others to feel better about themselves. (If we’re *not* at peace with ourselves, how can we find or share peace elsewhere? If we lack confidence in ourselves, how can we inspire others?)

At the heart of authenticity is sincerity. If we're authentic, we abhor hypocrisy in self and others, and we're credible and trustworthy. In fact, it's authenticity that makes trust possible: the trust we put in ourselves permits us to have trust in others and to establish meaningful relationships. That trust also gives us the courage of our convictions in difficult situations, helping us to remain faithful to our values and beliefs. If we're authentic, we're the very embodiment of endurance and perseverance; we're not flags in the wind, changing with any pressure that comes along. Anyone can steer a boat when the sea is calm. It's in rough seas that the real person—the authentic individual—emerges. Because adversity is a great teacher, peril is the scaffold on which self-reliance is built.

As we search for authenticity within ourselves, it's important to realize that if we're on a path without obstacles, it's probably a dead-end. The best lessons are learned not through successes but through failures. Surmounting difficulties hardens us for future struggles. The real test of courage comes when we're in the minority. As the playwright Henrik Ibsen said, "The strongest man in the world is he who stands most alone." Certainly we're all called to stand alone at times: when we're at our most authentic, following the dictates of our heart and mind and doing what we believe is right, we sometimes displease others whom we'd prefer to accommodate. And when what we believe so strongly turns out to be wrong, we're called to summon up the courage to acknowledge our error.

Know Thyself

Authenticity isn't a gift; it's something that's acquired. It's the culmination of learning from many hardships. As the saying goes, no mistakes, no experience; no experience, no wisdom. Failure and anguish pave the royal road to insight. Defeat becomes the cornerstone to wisdom, the complement of authenticity. Wisdom is usually found among those people who've suffered greatly and surmounted the setbacks that life has brought to them. The resulting memories are great catalysts for self-reflection.

Being authentic and possessing wisdom are close twins. They reinforce and build on each other. The willingness to look into the self is a necessary condition of acquiring wisdom.

To be more precise, wisdom comes not only from experience but also from meditating on experience. On the gate of the temple of Apollo in Delphi were written the words “Know thyself”—words that still reverberate today.

Self-reflection can be hard work indeed. It’s not easy to find out what we’re all about. We have a great capacity to delude ourselves. Each of us has a unique defensive structure composed of many resistances that need to be overcome in a personal discovery process. Until we break down those resistances and understand ourselves, we’re not really free, not really alive. Understanding our inner world is the key to conquering our outer world. If we conquer ourselves, we conquer all.

So how do we gain self-knowledge? In more religious periods, people spent much of their time in church. Prayer gave them an opportunity to reflect on life and take stock. Nowadays, however, such structured activities are less common, though quiet moments with ourselves are just as important today as they were in the past. We all need time for self-renewal and self-reflection. For reasons of personal development, we all need time alone with ourselves to examine what we’re doing and think about what’s right and good for us. We need time to contemplate our strengths and weaknesses. We need time to play with our imagination. We need time to dream.

However, instead of seeking self-reflection, many people today are engaged in what some psychologists describe as “the manic defense”; they can’t stop running. Suffering from “hurry sickness,” they delude themselves into thinking that activity equals happiness. They’re afraid that if they stop running, they’ll see the emptiness of their lives. So short as time is, these people waste what years they have in pointless activity. What are they running for? What are they running to? As Mahatma Gandhi once said, “There is more to life than increasing its speed.” For people who rely on the manic defense, most of life is already spent before they know what it is.

Unless we’re willing to forego happiness, we need to avoid becoming victims of hurry sickness. We don’t want to become one of the unfortunate people who discover that life

is what happens while they're busy making other plans. We need to reflect on what's important to us and make an effort to set our priorities accordingly. If we choose to do that which we really enjoy and live life to the fullest, we've got a serious shot at attaining happiness.

Finding happiness isn't like arriving at a station. We don't one day get to a certain place where we're flooded with happiness. No miracles happen when we arrive at a final destination. There *is* no final destination. There will always be a next stop. Happiness is the way in which we travel. It's important, then, that we focus more on the route, the scenery, and our fellow travelers than on the destination. We need to try to grasp happiness on the way, enjoying the journey (and finding happiness in wanting what we get) rather than impatiently counting the kilometers.

It's been said that an unexamined life isn't worth living. We could equally well say that an unlived life isn't worth examining. If we're serious about the pursuit of happiness, we have to make the journey worthwhile, cherishing each moment. As the emperor Marcus Aurelius noted, "It is not death that a man should fear, but he should fear never beginning to live." It's later than we think!