

Finding a Happy, Satisfying Life

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...and you say, "A happy, satisfying life? Come on, who can promise that?" Yes, it's a big claim, but I think I can prove my case. I don't promise health, success, or long life. Nobody can promise you those. What I have to offer is only a compass that reliably steers you toward happiness and satisfaction. I made the compass from all I've done and seen, plus the best of advice I've read and heard. My own life would have been happier and more satisfying if I'd had it from the start.

Take the compass and test it. If it doesn't work, toss it; you'll have lost nothing. Folded for carrying, my compass comes as just these two sentences:

*When you act based on pain you create more pain.
When you act based on health you create more health.*

Memorize these. Let these rest in your memory as lightly as a key chain rests in your pocket. When you need direction, you can open them up into surprising and useful shapes.

Acting on pain

Take the first sentence: *When you act based on pain, you create more pain.* The word "pain" here stands for a list of bad emotions. Open the sentence up:

When you act based on $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{fear} \\ \text{anger} \\ \text{jealousy} \\ \text{greed} \\ \text{cruelty} \\ \text{hatred} \\ \text{loneliness} \end{array} \right\}$ *You create more* $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{fear} \\ \text{anger} \\ \text{jealousy} \\ \text{greed} \\ \text{cruelty} \\ \text{hatred} \\ \text{loneliness} \end{array} \right\}$

Take any path through the sentence; it should remain true: *When you act based on fear you create more hatred.* Or, *when you act based on greed, you create more jealousy.* Etc.

Test it. Think of a time when you did something because you were angry. What came of it? What effects did that act have?

One likely effect was that other people, too, became angry or fearful. That's one of the meanings of the sentence. When you act from anger or cruelty, you can't help making other people angry (or afraid, or cruel).

It is easier to recall things other people have done to you. Call to mind the last time someone did something to make *you* feel fearful, lonely, hateful, or angry.

Now, in a very cool way, try to work out that person's motives. Why did they do what they did? (I'm not telling you to forgive them. Just be an alien from Mars for a

minute, and say why the one human creature did or said something to another.)

Most likely you will work out that they acted based on one of these kinds of pain. They did what they did because they were angry, or jealous, or greedy, or lonely, or full of hatred. One result of their act was to make you angry or fearful—whether or not they meant it to.

(This isn't 100% certain. It is possible to cause pain by accident. If somebody steps on your toe, it may be because they are clumsy, not because they hate you. But most of the time, when an act creates pain, you will find some kind of pain as the motive, also.)

So far I have spoken of direct results: person A, acting from pain, does something that causes pain in person B. But every act has indirect results too. Think of a time when you saw one person attack another person. Didn't you feel frightened or angry? An act based on pain creates new pain—among the bystanders.

Also, acts have results that are unseen and unexpected. Someone provokes you and you strike back. Besides creating pain (anger, fear) in the person you attacked and in the witnesses, it has an effect on the people who hear about it afterward — whether they hear about it from you, or from the other party, or from a witness. Just hearing about an act based on pain can make people feel pain.

The result of an act can be delayed. Someone younger than you sees you acting based on pain. Long after, they copy you. Your old act is still causing pain, unknown to you and long after you forgot it.

Getting away with it

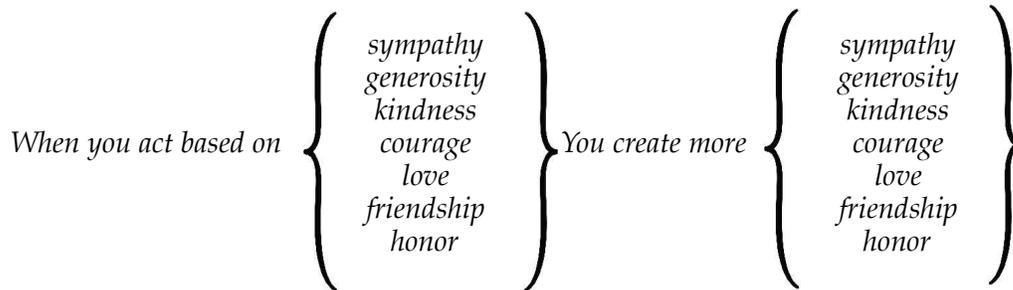
Most people are aware, at least in a fuzzy way, that things we do out of pain—to name a few: hitting, insulting, stealing, lying, bullying, and gossiping—usually have bad results. Acts that reflect fear, anger, jealousy, greed, or hatred are the kinds of acts that most people disapprove of. They do them anyway. Why?

Sometimes they feel they can get away with it. And they can! People get away with such things all the time. They cause pain and it does not come back onto them directly. Often, there's no clear, direct payback for a painful act, and it's a waste of time to look for one.

So the pain sentence promises nothing about justice or fairness or punishment. It simply states that nobody can ever act based on pain without creating more pain, somewhere, sometime, for someone.

Acting on health

Look at the other sentence: When you act based on health you create more health. The word “health” also stands for a list of emotions. Open the sentence up:



As before, any path through the sentence should remain true: *When you act based on generosity, you create more love; when you act based on honor, you create more kindness; and so on.* Test it the same way you tested the pain sentence. Think of a time someone did something that made you feel sympathetic, or generous, or courageous, or honorable. (You may have to think harder than before. Acts like these are not as common as acts based on pain.)

Now try to work out the motives behind that act. Very likely you will see that that the person did what they did because they felt brave, or sympathetic, or generous, or kindly, or they loved someone, or they acted from a sense of honor. What they did ended up making you feel some of the same healthy things — whether or not they meant it to.

This is almost certain. It is possible to cause pain by accident, but it is pretty rare to cause health by accident. Almost always, when an act produces these feelings, you will find one of these feelings was its motive.

Just like acts based on pain, acts based on health have an effect on the witnesses. When you see someone behaving in an honorable way, a courageous way, a loving way, it makes an echo of the same kind in you, even when that was not their aim.

Acts based on health also have unseen, unexpected, and delayed effects. Another person, because they saw you do something of this kind, does likewise, months or years later. Your act based on health creates health, long after you’ve forgotten it.

Being rewarded

Most people are aware, at least in a fuzzy way, that the things we do out of health — to name a few: forgiving, calming, helping, speaking kindly, standing fast, doing a good job — usually have good results. Acts that reflect generosity, courage, love, friendship, or honor are the kinds of acts that most people approve of. Yet they don’t often do them. Why?

Sometimes, it’s because they think there’s no reward. And often there is no clear, direct payment or praise for a healthy act, and it’s a waste of time to expect one.

Why the compass works

You could collapse both sentences into just one: every act creates more of its own sources. That is a dry, academic way of putting it, but it is the heart of the matter.

There is nothing mystical or magical about this. Study psychology. Study philosophy. Read the great stories, the great teachings. Above all, watch what other people really do. All of these will confirm a basic fact about humans: people's emotions echo the emotions they read in other people's acts; and later, they act based on what they've seen and felt.

Because this is how people work, it is also how society (which is only a word for the sum of everyone's acts) works. And that is why our two sentences are a dependable compass for steering through the world.

If you could be a totally solitary hermit you could forget the sentences and act any way you felt. But what you would feel is lonely. Satisfaction and happiness are found among other people—that's another basic thing about humans. You can't lead a happy satisfying life in isolation; you must interact with other people. The two sentences guide you through those interactions. They promise that every act you do makes echoes that fade slowly down time. You can be confident those echoes affect someone, for better or worse.

And that means that you can think of your every act as *seeding your world*. When you act based on pain, you seed your world with pain. When you act based on health, you seed your world with health. If you spread enough of either kind of seed, sooner or later some of the crop will come back to you.

One of the early fruits of seeding your world is to select the kind of people you live among. People who feel a lot pain and act on it tend to hang out with others who also feel pain. It makes them feel justified in their resentment. And vice versa: people who prefer to act out of health tend to hang with healthy people and avoid the pain-heads. So: where will you find happiness: among generous, friendly, honorable, kindly people? Or among fearful, angry, lonely, or cruel people? (Well, *duh*.)

Another early result of seeding your world with health or pain is in how people regard you. Acts based on health are approved of; acts based on pain are usually not. Is it more satisfying to have people generally approve of what you do? Or to have to keep making excuses, justifying yourself, and apologizing? (*Duh*, again.)

OK; if you can reduce the times you act based on pain, and increase the times you act based on health, you will seed your world increasingly with health, and that is satisfying in itself. You will find yourself spending more time among people who also prefer to act based on sympathy, generosity, kindness, courage, love, friendship, and honor. Those are nice people to spend time with, and you will be happier. And they will like and approve of you, which is even more satisfying.

Ergo, the more you can bend your life toward acting based on health, the more happiness and satisfaction you will have. And that is what I promised at the outset.

How it is done

Simple to say; harder to do. There's a good reason that acts based on pain are common while acts based on health are scarce. Acting on health demands restraint, patience, forethought—tedious adult work. The act based on pain often seems to be the easy, natural, satisfying thing to do. The effort comes later, when you have to think up an excuse, justify yourself, smooth the hurt feelings, apologize, pick up the pieces.

In fact, this is an easy way to distinguish between the two kinds of acts. All the effort in acts based on health is, in the jargon of business, *front-loaded*. You think before acting; maybe you hold back from acting or delay to act at a better time. But once the act is done, there's nothing more to be said, except possibly "You're welcome." You can get on with life.

All the effort in acts based on pain is, in business jargon, *end-loaded*. You can do the act with little planning, but afterwards you spend a lot of time justifying, repairing, excusing, or just regretting. The after-effects of a painful act can tangle the rest of your life.

How do you learn to act more often from health than from pain? For most people, it's a slow process of acting on pain and seeing the bad results, over and over. With time it begins to sink in on most of us that it's a good idea to hold back those emotions and find other ways to respond. Some of us learn slower than others.

You can speed the process. It helps to learn to see your own emotions and how they drive you, a skill called *mindfulness*. This can be taught and learned. For a start on it, memorize the two sentences of my compass:

*When you act based on pain you create more pain.
When you act based on health you create more health.*

Then, watch other people. Notice when people act based on pain or on health, and trace the results. Do the sentences hold true?

If so, then when you are about to act in any way more serious than saying "Good morning," think: is this an act based on health—sympathy, generosity, kindness, courage, love, friendship, honor—or not? If not, consider not acting, not speaking; letting the moment pass or acting in a different way.

With practice it does become easier. And the reward is a life of greater happiness and satisfaction.