

11. *Being Content*

While reading the papers and books on happiness that went into the preceding chapter, I kept thinking that something important was being left out; some important consideration was being missed.

Finally I realized what it was. All the happiness researchers had no choice but to assume that life would permit happiness. They had to set aside any recognition that, in the pungent modern phrase, *shit happens*. Death happens; bereavement happens; accidents and fires and tornadoes and strokes and landslides and cancers and car wrecks and muggings and wars happen. The happiness personality traits affect how you recover from disaster over the long run, but they can't prevent disaster, and they can't make your immediate response any more resilient or efficacious.

One of the documented benefits of prayer and other "religious coping behaviors" is resilience in the face of disaster¹. Are there secular techniques with the same effect? What habits of life make us more steadfast in the face of the inevitable disaster? What practices help us adjust quickly to loss and respond more constructively?

I can think of four answers. All four are ancient recipes, and it is not easy to write of them without sounding preachy or pompous. Still, I know from experience that they work.

Freedom from debt

Debt is mental slavery. Worry about debt is a wonderfully effective source of unhappy feelings. Owing money restricts your choices of occupation. When you owe, you can't freely change jobs or take a

sabbatical. Debt also restricts your choices of what to buy, where to live, even how many children to have.

Sooner or later, you will experience an economic crisis. It might be a general one like a national recession. Or it might be a personal one, resulting from losing your job, or from a huge expense such as an unexpected illness or a legal judgment. At some point, the financial boom will be lowered. What makes such a catastrophe worse? Debt.

None of my readings on happiness mentioned this simple formula: *get out of debt*. Yet the state of being debt-free is a steady source of small pleasures, similar to the state of being healthy. Being debt-free does wonders for your self-esteem. And, when you are debt-free and want to remain so, you are much less likely to fall prey to advertisements. "Oh, that looks lovely, but not lovely enough to go into debt for."

It is possible for anyone to become debt-free. Consult a financial advisor; work out a step-by-step plan; then carry it out. The successful execution of each incremental step of your plan will leave you feeling better; and the final result will be well worth the effort.

Having nothing to hide

A couple of years ago we spent several weeks touring Tuscany. The Italian national police, the *carabinieri*, have a program of random stops along the highway. You are driving along admiring the beautiful countryside when you notice in the road ahead a police car and a couple of *carabinieri* in trim uniforms. The underling has a grim expression and an Uzi. The officer steps out in the road with a little red wand and flags you down.

As I pulled over, I first felt a wave of nerves at being stopped by the police, but it was followed by a wave of happiness when I realized that I literally had nothing to fear. There was no contraband of any kind in the car. All the papers were in order. No legal authorities wanted me for anything. I had been driving at a legal speed. I actually thought "My conscience is clear," and it felt good.

After the officer had filled out his paperwork (with much difficulty because he had little English and we were not about to try out our halting Italian) and we were again on our way, I thought about that reaction. It feels very good, I realized, to have nothing to hide. And it simplifies your response to both good things and disasters.

Part of a resilient, contented life, then, is owning a clear conscience. Of course this does not mean being without regret or guilt. Everyone can think of things in their past that they wish had never happened, and acts they wish they had never done. I am no different. Believe me, I can ruin an hour anytime, by recalling some of the stupid, cruel, or disgraceful things I've done.

No life is without error or regret, but an operational definition of a clear conscience addresses the three tenses of future, present, and past as follows. First, you have the intention of living ethically in the future. You have formed a clear ethical code, you are living by it, and you aren't planning to violate it. Second, there's nothing in your life right now that couldn't be posted on your web site to be read by the world and the FBI. And third, you have considered the major wrongs from your past and you have either done something to atone for them, or at least you have formed a clear understanding of why they were wrong and are determined not to repeat them.

Using detachment

One of my late father's characteristic expressions was "Well? What'r ya gonna do?" After discussing anything inevitable — politics, rain on the hay crop, the follies of his neighbors — he'd look at you, spread open his palms before him, and with a wry smile say, "Well? What'r ya gonna do?" Years after his death, I realized this was his expression of the principle of detachment.

My phrase to express detachment is "This is what is." It can be stressed in several ways, but I say it: *this* is what *is*. *This*, happening in front of me, is all that I can know; *is* what actually exists, as opposed to what I might prefer to be.

The futility of judgment

As I understand detachment², it applies to all things you cannot personally influence. To judge such things on any subjective scale — good/bad, right/wrong, skillful/stupid, ugly/beautiful — is, first, futile, and second, harmful to yourself.

Judging is futile because, given that this is a thing you cannot personally influence — the weather, the outcome of an election, a stranger's behavior — your judgment does not and cannot alter the thing in any way. That you think it wrong, or stupid, or ugly does

nothing to improve it or make it cease. Your thinking it right, moral, skillful, or beautiful cannot preserve it or multiply it. Your judgment is simply irrelevant to what is.

Judging is harmful because even to form a value-opinion creates an emotional pull or push you cannot resolve. Suppose the weather is not what you hoped it would be today. If you feel emotion about that (anger, distress, frustration) this emotion cannot be discharged. You have no choice but to eat your liver until the emotion subsides; or worse, until you vent your spleen on another person or thing.

Recognition, the Third Stance

The only productive attitude (and the only attitude supportable by logic) is the attitude of detachment: "this is what is." Now, this attitude of detachment is quite different from liking or disliking. It is not the absence of an attitude; it is a third attitude, a positive stance that is neither approval or disapproval.

The value of detachment has been known for millennia. Epictetus (50-125AD) put it this way:

... he who desires or avoids the things which are not in his power can neither be faithful nor free, but of necessity he must change with them and be tossed about with them as in a tempest, and of necessity must subject himself to others who have the power to procure or prevent what he desires or would avoid.³

Some might name the third attitude "acceptance," as in, "I must accept things as they are," but that word carries a sense of approval, or at least of acquiescence — as if you agreed to the event and would permit it to be, supposing you had any say in it at all. And that's not necessarily the case.

Recognition is the proper name for the attitude of "this is what is." You *recognize* what is; you see it, you comprehend it, and as far as possible you understand its causes and likely results. Recognition does not imply acceptance. Does the pathologist who looks at a biopsy and recognizes cancer approve of it?

Our society likes binary choices, and popular wisdom does not allow for a third attitude. People prefer slogans like, "If you aren't part of the solution, you're part of the problem," and "Silence is consent." If you only acknowledge that something exists, people

may infer that you approve of it. "It looks as if it will rain on our school picnic tomorrow." "Well, you don't sound very unhappy about it! Aren't you sorry that the kids will be disappointed?"

One reason our culture prefers not to acknowledge the detached stance is that so many cliques and causes draw their power from your emotions. Advocates for any cause work to create strong value judgments in people's minds. When they have fomented a state of emotional distress, they promise to release that distress in group action. Political activists will never agree that it is possible to recognize an issue without also judging that issue. All their membership, contributions, and influence depend on getting people to make value judgments about issues that those people can't personally influence⁴.

This third stance of recognition may also be called "denial." If we do not form an emotional judgment, especially of a wrong or a tragedy, we may be accused of denying that it has happened. In psychology, the mechanism of denial is seen as having a practical purpose, of sheltering the mind from overwhelming emotion. That also is the use of recognition! However, recognition does not deny; it investigates. It does not withhold vision — it is willing to see microscopically — it only withholds judgment and emotion because they are useless.

Recognition may also be mislabelled resignation, passivity, or apathy. If we do not react with conventional elation or dismay to some event we cannot influence, other people may say we are incapable of feeling or reacting. But feelings and reactions, when they cannot possibly lead to change, are pointless and damaging. It is much more helpful in the long run to seek a cool understanding of the situation, than to judge it.

It is definitely possible to recognize and comprehend events while not judging them on an emotional scale. You do it often. Look at your thumbnail; is this a virtuous thumbnail, or a pretty one? Think about the public transit system in your city. Is that a moral transit system, or an ugly one? Nobody asks these questions. You understand these ordinary things intimately; you could become expert on them if you needed to; but you don't judge them on any subjective scale of values.

The secret of detachment is to be able to have the same kind of clinical, intelligent, detailed knowledge about something that tugs

at your emotions, that you have about your thumbnail. When you succeed in this, someone may accuse you of being “cold.” Before you feel guilty for your coldness, ask yourself why the accusation was made. That person may want to influence you. Your quiet recognition calls into question the value of the person’s own emotions. He or she needs you to join in the distress in order to validate it.

Benefits of Detachment

There are two reasons for developing detached recognition. The first is to reduce emotional distress and to achieve a measure of tranquility when catastrophe strikes. The second is to improve your own ability to understand and to influence events.⁵

If we say of an event in progress, “that’s bad, that’s evil, that’s stupid, that’s wrong” we harm ourselves by increased stress; but also, we tend to stop with these judgments, as if pronouncing judgment ended the matter. Worse, it could be that we judged hastily or superficially. But now we have to maintain our indignation, because we are emotionally invested in a belief that the event was bad. Our need to defend our indignation gives us a strong motive to select the details that will sustain and justify our emotions. In contrast, quiet recognition gives time to form a clear understanding, and leaves room for ideas to change as we learn⁶.

Everything, when examined closely, turns out to be more complicated than we knew at first. If we can dispense with the pain of negative emotion and the distraction of futile judgment, we can look deeper into the why of a thing, and further forward in time at its consequences. We might very well discover that, if we are tranquil and prepared, there is an opportunity, after all, to influence this event or its sequels. And even if that does not turn out to be so, we will at least be wiser in how things like this come about, and be able to see them forming sooner in the future. Such penetrative wisdom is harder to come by if we are wrapped up in the stress of judging the quality of the thing or supporting a judgment.

Learning Forgiveness

There is one immense class of things that are definitely not in our control: the class of all the things that happened in the past! What’s done’s done. How you feel about what was done cannot possibly

make the thing be undone, or differently done. In that case, isn't it obvious on the face of it, that to harbor strong feelings about errors and insults of the past is automatically pointless and probably harmful?

This is simply to extend the principle of detachment into the time dimension. If the best way to handle "what is" is with clinical examination, quiet understanding, and thoughtful appreciation, shouldn't that also be the best way to handle "what was"?

Epictetus noted two millenia ago that when you feel strongly about things not in your control, you have made yourself a slave of the person who does control those things. It should be clear that if you have an emotional investment in being hurt and angry about some past event, you make yourself a slave, not to a current person who might be influenced, but to the past, which is uncaring, implacable, and changeless.

The way to be released from this slavery to the past is to learn to forgive. Forgiveness is not easy to learn, but it is possible. Dr. Frederic Luskin at Stanford studies the process of forgiveness, trying to turn it from an art into a trainable skill. A large group of adults who undertook a six-week course in forgiveness showed significant reductions in stress and anger.⁷

Even the unforgivable can be forgiven. Dr. Luskin studied five women from Northern Ireland who had lost sons or close relatives to political violence. They underwent forgiveness training and showed significant improvements in feelings of hurt, depression, and optimism about the future.

Summary

Genuine disaster strikes every person's life sooner or later. Our resilience and strength to recover and cope can be improved by four ancient common-sense methods: being debt-free; having a clear conscience; learning to replace emotional reactions to events with detached recognition and clinical scrutiny; and practicing forgiveness to escape slavery to past damages.

