

# The Plague of Happiness

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Happiness is one of those things which preachers are likely to wring their hands over, mostly over what it is. Happiness is not quite the same thing as joy, but it is a kissing cousin, as we say in the South, and that allows me to begin these ruminations with a good story about joy. In two weeks you will have the privilege of hearing from my colleague Bill Clark of Provincetown. Bill was so highly thought of among my class at Harvard Divinity School that we selected him as class speaker, and he spoke on the subject of joy. He opened his speech with this story.

In the eighties and early nineties, Bill was engaged in an AIDS ministry in Provincetown, and as you might imagine there were some low moments, since a lot of people were dying of the epidemic at that time. On one particularly low moment, Bill had to get away and he went for a long walk on the beach in P-town. As he was walking, he was wondering to himself how he was going to have the strength to go on. At some point, Bill realized he wasn't alone. There was a woman on the beach, and she was shouting something. As Bill moved closer to her, he could hear that she was shouting "Joy!" At first he thought she was just nuts, shouting "Joy!" into thin air, but then he realized that the fates were giving him the answer to his despair. He would counter these feelings of hopelessness by finding joy. So Bill began walking towards the woman, and he began shouting "Joy!" too. And just saying it brought this incredible feeling of elation. So here is Bill walking towards this woman shouting "Joy!" and she was moving towards him shouting "Joy!" He came close enough to speak, and was just about to tell her how her shouting had given him inspiration, had changed his whole outlook on life, when a big Golden Retriever came barreling out of the dunes, and the woman said "Joy, where have you been? I've been looking all over for you!"

This sermon, however, is not about dogs, as important as they may be in human happiness. This sermon is about other people. Jean Paul Sartre famously said "Hell is other people," but the study I'm going to talk about says other people aren't hell but to the contrary, they are the path to heaven. Specifically, social networks are an important factor in happiness. When the study was reported in the British Medical Journal in early December, headlines in the papers summarized its findings as "happiness is contagious."

The authors of the study, Professor James Fowler of the University of California San Diego and Prof Nicholas Christakis of Harvard, used a group of people who had already been studied for many other things, a group known as the Framingham Heart Study. When this group was first studied in 1948, it consisted of about 5,000 people around Framingham, MA. In 1971, a second cohort of five thousand was added, consisting of the children of the first group. It was this second cohort that the authors studied for this happiness study. Since these people willingly submit all kinds of information about themselves for the purposes of science, it was an ideal laboratory in which to study social networks<sup>1</sup>.

The authors say that happiness is a fundamental object of human existence, and it is being widely studied now as part of health studies. The factors that determine happiness are complex, both voluntary and involuntary. Previous studies have focused on happiness as affected by such variables as lottery wins, elections, income, job loss, socioeconomic inequality, divorce, illness, bereavement, and genes. But to this point none had focused on the effect on your happiness of the happiness of other people.

The study assumes happiness is contagious. We know that our brain has the capacity to catch the emotional states of others. There is a phenomenon called mirror neurons, where a certain part of

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<sup>1</sup>Fowler, James H. and Christakis, Nicholas A., "Dynamic spread of happiness in a large social network: longitudinal analysis over 20 years in the Framingham Heart Study" BMJ 2008;337:a2338

the brain lights up when you feel hurt, and that same part of the brain lights up when you watch someone else being hurt. Sympathy and social awareness have been hard-wired into us by mother evolution. So it stands to reason that happiness might be contagious.

Previous studies have found that students randomly assigned to a mildly depressed room-mate became increasingly depressed over a three month period, and the possibility of emotional contagion between strangers, even those in ephemeral contact, has been documented by the effects of "service with a smile" on customer satisfaction and tipping.

Fowler and Christakis were particularly interested in whether the spread of happiness pertains not just to direct relationships (such as friends) but also to indirect relationships (such as friends of friends) and whether there are geographical or temporal constraints on the spread of happiness through a social network.

What they found was a significant contagion effect, which is summarized in a news story as follows: "knowing someone who is happy makes you 15.5% more likely to be happy yourself. A happy friend of a friend increases your odds of happiness by 9.6% and even your neighbor's sister's friend can give you a 5.6% boost."<sup>2</sup>

They also found that geographical distance is a very important factor in this effect. "A happy friend who lives within a half-mile makes you 42% more likely to be happy yourself. If that same friend lives two miles away, his impact drops to 22% Happy friends who are more distant have no discernible impact, according to the study."

Now you may be wondering about family connections. Here's what they found: "...happy siblings make you 14% more likely to be happy yourself, but only if they live within one mile. Happy spouses provide an 8% boost – if they live under the same roof. Next-door neighbors who are happy make you 34% more likely to be happy too, but no other neighbors have an effect, even if they live on the same block.

"We suspect emotions spread through frequency of contact," Fowler said. As a result, he said, people who live too far away to be seen on a regular basis don't have much effect."

Now that's a pretty remarkable conclusion. We have an effect on the happiness of others but only within a limited geography or limited by frequency of contact.

What can we say about that? Well, at a minimum, we can say George Burns is wrong. George Burns defined happiness as "having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family in another city." I know, he was just trying for a laugh, but according to this study it's not going to do you any good if they live in another city.

This doesn't seem intuitively right to me, does it to you? Most of the people in this room have family in another city. Most of us moved here from elsewhere leaving our children, parents, or siblings or our children, parents or siblings have migrated elsewhere or both. Are these family members irrelevant in producing our own happiness? Do we have no effect on theirs?

Yet I suppose that the study is right that the effect is greatly attenuated by geographical differences, which is why we expend money and effort to go see family, as I am going to do this week if the weather will let me.

But what caught my imagination about this study was the implication it had for churches. To the extent that a church is a place where people interact a lot, it can be a happiness incubator. It seems that the time we spend together on projects is time which our happiness is wearing off on each other; I thought about the crew that put in long hours yesterday decorating this place – haven't they done a great job? They probably infected each other with happiness germs several times over – when I looked in on them about six, they were breaking out the wine and pizza. If happiness is contagious, let's make our church the center of the plague.

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<sup>2</sup>All quotes in this section from Los Angeles Times "Happiness is Contagious, Study Finds" December 5, 2008.

Of course, you will point out astutely that we haven't yet defined happiness; there is more than a little suggestion in my psyche and maybe in yours that happiness is not the be-all and end-all that it is cracked up to be. Is happiness the goal of life? And if not, what is? Should we be ashamed to be happy or to want to be?

Though I want to philosophize on what happiness is, I also have a fear that to do so is to destroy it. Albert Camus said, "You will never be happy if you continue to search for what happiness consists of. You will never live if you are looking for the meaning of life." And to much the same effect, a century earlier, Nathaniel Hawthorne said "Happiness is as a butterfly which, when pursued, is always beyond our grasp, but which if you will sit down quietly, may alight upon you."

Here is a clue: it is not happiness itself which is suspect, but the pursuit of it. Of course, the pursuit of happiness is enshrined in our Declaration of Independence as an inalienable right, but calling it an inalienable right does not make it a good idea.

If we identify happiness with pleasure and spend all our time and energy pursuing pleasure, we become hedonists. This is not the path to a lasting happiness, because we know that we never catch that elusive butterfly. As the Buddha points out, the more we pursue, the more we crave and cling to what we don't have, the more we create unhappiness for ourselves.

Happiness is like that Golden retriever in the dunes. You might call for her and call for her, but she's going to come when she's good and ready. Just as you are giving in to despair, and reconciling yourself never to find Joy, she comes barreling out of the dunes and you shout, "Joy, where have you been, I've been looking for you!"

Classically, the religious answer is to pursue not things of earth but God or the holy, and happiness consists in the journey, not in its attainment.

Now I'm not trying to put down the scientists who conducted this study for being philosophically shallow. They are scientists, and they are trying to measure things objectively. They decided to take a subject's self-report of happiness at face value. But the results might be skewed. They were working with Yankees, and thus with a network of people who are culturally conditioned: when anyone asks them how they are doing, they say, "fine." The effect they found may be no more than people just trying to be polite. Though I think maybe they controlled for this.

What is clear though is that scientists can't look deep within the soul. In cognitive science, there is the problem of *qualia*, which means the internal experience of something. If I say that I see that flower as red, and you say that you see it as red, we are both giving the same objective report on the color of the flower. But we can't prove that what you see and what I see in our internal brain wiring is the same.

So it is with happiness. I can't say objectively that you are telling the truth when you say "I am happy", or that you are lying. I can't say that I am less or more happy than you. I can't really even say that I'm happier today than I was yesterday. Happiness is a will-o-the-wisp; it's here today and maybe gone tomorrow. How can something so ethereal be so important to us?

Last year, I read of other research on happiness that says it is not dependent on fortune. Some people who are very blessed in life seem permanently unhappy, and some who have all the troubles of Job maintain a perpetual smile. One of you was talking recently about a former member of this church who had to give up her car and she was just ecstatic about all the people who would stop and talk to her when she was walking. Other people would go into a tizzy if their car was in the shop for a day.

In our responsive reading today, Mary Oliver used the words, "if it is in your nature to be happy." That implies that some of us are happy by nature and others are not, and this research I read about last year would support that.

Mary Oliver's poem as a whole also feeds an idea that is very powerfully planted in our liberal minds, the idea that happiness is best achieved in solitude, or in the solitary contemplation of nature. Mary Oliver stands in a long line of solitary nature mystics: Emerson, Thoreau, and John Muir. Many of us move to places like Chatham in order to get away from society and commune with nature. Does this make us happy?

This contagion study points just the opposite way. Whatever happiness may be internally, the place you are most likely to get it is not in the marsh or the seashore or the mountaintop, but in the marketplace, the neighborhood, the church pew. Yes, even our churches can be incubators of happiness.

But so can any social group. The Chatham Walkers, for instance, seem to achieve both an interaction with nature and a social interaction on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday morning, and when I've been able to roust myself to go, the glow of that experience often has carried me through much of the rest of the day.

Our Universalist heritage elevates happiness to one of the supreme virtues. The purpose of the all-loving, all-powerful God, according to our first theologian Hosea Ballou, is to "happify" humanity. Don't you love that word? Happify.

But the happiness which comes from God is not ordinary creature comfort, it is not just having a belly full of wine or a warm rug or a roaring fire. In his great book, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James described a religious kind of happiness which he distinguished from the ordinary kind:

*"There is a state of mind, known to religious men, but to no others, in which the will to assert ourselves and hold our own has been displaced by a willingness to close our mouths and be as nothing in the floods and waterspouts of God. In this state of mind, what we most dreaded has become the habitation of our safety, and the hour of our moral death has turned into our spiritual birthday. The time for tension in our soul is over, and that of happy relaxation, of calm deep breathing, of an eternal present, with no discordant future to be anxious about, has arrived. Fear is not held in abeyance as it is by mere morality; it is positively expunged and washed away."<sup>3</sup>*

Religious happiness must be understood as a distinct species of happiness. Religious happiness is not achieved through relentless pursuit of self-gratification; that is almost its opposite. Religious happiness does not insist on denial of misfortune, pain, suffering, death. It does not allow us to retreat into a bubble, to disconnect from all that is going on in the world. To be religiously happy is to embrace life in all its misery; not to file it, not to carve out the bad parts, but to swallow it whole.

And the realization that happiness is contagious is wonderful, but it needs to come with certain caveats. My experience from pastoral counseling tell me that while I may be able to affect the happiness of my spouse, my child, my friend, my parent, I am not responsible for it. It is in fact the path to unhappiness to saddle oneself with the responsibility for another's happiness. Each of us has to make our own peace with happiness or unhappiness.

We have but scratched the surface of this subject. We leave untouched the vast questions of the relationship of happiness to good or bad fortune, to sin, to suffering, to death.

But I think the idea that happiness is contagious is fascinating, for it places on each of us an incentive, though not a duty, to be happy not only for ourselves, but for the others around us. I suggest if we do church right, we can generate a veritable plague of happiness. Each committee, each small group can be a Petri dish in which we cultivate bonhomie. Let's create an epidemic of contagious happiness that will spread throughout this community!

And let us write a new verse to our song:

We have our networks, our social networks,

They make us happy the livelong day,

Happify each other, sister and brother,

Please don't take our networks away.

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup>James, William, *Varieties of Religious Experience* New York: Random House Chpt. 2, p. 54