

Keep Your Eye on the Doughnut

By Rev. Art Lester, Sunday, October 20, 2019 - Paris

How are you?

That's the oddest question you can ask anybody, you know that? On the surface, it's easy. If you're halfway through a slice of key lime pie, you might say one thing, but if you're halfway through a root canal, you might say another.

I'm told that in Germany, that question is never used, as we use it, as a greeting. I'll have to check this out with Henry later, but I hear that if you say "How are you?" in Dresden or Dusseldorf, they might just tell you. Apparently they won't say, "Fine, thank you," as we do, unless they happen to be just that. They might tell you about their sciatica or complain about their mother-in-law. That's because the question, "How are you?" is a very big one indeed. You might even say it's the question of the age.

Maybe it's the question of our times because we live in an age where happiness seems possible, or even obligatory. You can see how in earlier times, when two out of every five children would die before they reached school age, when getting enough to eat was a daily struggle, when bad government didn't mean inconvenience, but beheadings, that happiness was almost too much to wish for. Survival would do.

Nowadays, being happy seems to be a requirement. And if you're not happy, you might well go to a therapist, a divorce lawyer or on one of those "swimming with the dolphins" holidays. You'd probably feel guilty about not being happy, as if you were letting yourself down.

And yet, how many people do you know who you think are happy? Maybe the guy with the sailboat or the summer house in the Dordogne or the six-figure salary? Dig into his head and find out about exorbitant dockage fees, leaking roofs and tax problems. Is it the beautiful young girl with the perfect figure? Find out how she puts her finger in her throat in the ladies' room of the posh restaurant. It's hard to find anyone who really is able to say, when they're all alone in a room, that they're happy.

When we're unhappy, we try to compensate with little obsessions and addictions. We gorge on sweets and worry about diabetes and big clothing sizes. We empty the off licence

shelves and anaesthetise ourselves with wine a little bit every night. We obsess about things we really know don't matter, like football teams and television shows. We might get hung up in unwise sexual liaisons or bamboozle the GP into prescribing painkillers and sedatives. We might sink so far into the Internet that we hardly know reality from cyberspace.

The question is: why do we do it? Even if we abstain from the worst forms of compensation behaviour, what is it that we feel the lack of?

Once, a long time ago, I was in an all-night diner in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, during my hitch-hiking, Jack Kerouac days as a youth. Being all adolescent and existential at the same time. Broke and road weary and a long way from home, I wolfed down my cheeseburger and looked at a sign hanging on the wall behind the counter and saw some very wise words which I've never forgotten:

*“Wherever you may roam, my child,
Whatever be your goal,
Keep your eye upon the doughnut
And not upon the hole.”*

It doesn't take much insight to work that one out. As they say, it's a “no brainer.” I was from a pretty good middle-class home in sunny Florida. I had the opportunity for higher education. I was healthy. I had friends. I felt that girls liked me. I was in a country with—give or take a few delinquent southern states—freedom and justice and loads of opportunity, at least for white people. That was the great big doughy doughnut.

So why was all my attention focussed on what I did not have—the missing bit in the middle, the hole? Why was I hitchhiking along roads peopled by moonshiners and fat sheriffs and redneck truck drivers with Dixie flags and shotguns in the cab? What was it that I felt I was missing?

This would make such a great story if that sign had brought about a major change of direction. If I had gone home to my parents, finished my degree, married a local girl and become something reasonable—like a lawyer. But I wasn't done. And, God help me, I'm not done yet. What I took away from the diner was the knowledge that I was being stupid, or at least ill-informed. It's the reason I can talk to you about it now. So take it from an expert: life would be a lot simpler if we learned how to appreciate what we have already, and just decided to be happy.

Not too long after that, I came across the work of the Indian spiritual teacher, Meher Baba. I use the word “teacher”, even though Baba himself denied that he was a teacher. He said his role was not to teach, but to awaken- to help wake people up.

Meher Baba was an interesting man. I could tell you lots of things about him, but I want to make sure we finish before lunchtime, so I’ll cut to the chase. When people came to live with him or otherwise accepted his influence, they all wanted him to give them some kind of spiritual direction. They asked for orders. He just smiled. There was no technique, no holy books, no rigorous rules—not even an organisation to sign up to. When pressed, he said that he had only one order to those who admired him: “Don’t worry; be happy.”

If you’ve heard that phrase before, it was probably in that little calypso-cum-reggae song of the 1980s by Bobby McFerrin. It’s such a jolly, anodyne little phrase that it’s hard to take it seriously. But Meher Baba said something to the effect that to understand that phrase was to begin to grasp spirituality. It was very important; more important than we know.

The first thing we have to learn is that happiness isn’t about having pleasure. It’s easy to mistake pleasurable experiences for happiness. In fact, it seems logical. More toffee, less toothache.

That argument was presented to Socrates a couple of thousand years ago by a hedonist. He invoked something called the “argument of the leaky jug”. Life is a jug, he maintained, but it’s got a hole in it. What leaks out is called pain. What’s poured in is pleasure. So the key to happiness is to make sure more fun goes in than suffering comes out. “Eat, drink and be merry.”

Socrates replied that trying to fill the vessel all the time was arduous and ultimately impossible, like trying to carry water in a sieve. You run to get the water there before it all leaks out. The only real way to counteract the leak, he said, was to add something that only filled and never leaked—wisdom.

He might have gone further, and said that it’s even possible to be happy whilst suffering. That was the experience of Victor Frankl, the psychiatrist and philosopher, when he was in a Nazi concentration camp. In a place whose conditions could hardly have been more unpleasant, Frankl found that he could access a form of happiness that existed alongside the pain of his imprisonment, starvation and terror.

If happiness has nothing to do—or at least, very little to do with the amount of pleasure available, we need to ask where it does come from. The answer given by Socrates comes very close to answering that question. Wisdom is another way of saying “understanding”. That makes awareness, or understanding, the real key to being happy. Nietzsche said, “What does not kill me makes me stronger.” You might add, “What contributes to my understanding of life, the universe and all that is the source of real happiness.”

That gives me a clue about what Meher Baba meant when he put such emphasis on trying to be happy. We’ve all got leaky jugs. Some of our jugs are leakier than others. That is, we all have problems in our lives that could make us yield to unhappiness and its by-products of indulgence, repression, addiction and depression. But, it seems, there is an alternative: we can learn to be happy anyway.

I believe that the purpose of being alive is learning. I mean by that the building of awareness. I also believe that people like Jesus and Buddha are who they are because of their awareness. Awareness, consciousness—that’s the name of the game.

The other part of the little mantra “Don’t worry, be happy” follows easily from one’s agreement with the universe not to yield to unhappiness. Worry is the greatest single thief of happiness. That few hours lying awake just before dawn is more than an inconvenience—it’s a destructive act. You might even equate it with sin. The fact that we all do it—toss and turn and imagine the worst—doesn’t change that. It happens, according to the great ones of consciousness, as a choice.

And who isn’t worried just now? When the populists are coming for our liberal tradition, the corporations are electing our leaders, and we are slowly burning alive? The call to activism is stronger, and we are, at last, paying attention. But yielding to impotent anxiety harms that as well.

If you’re afflicted by worry—and I believe that all of us are—there’s a thing I like to try to remember. It’s the worry itself that robs you of the possibility of happiness, peacefulness and acceptance. And that’s worrying, isn’t it?

You might say, OK Art, that’s all very well. It seems naïve and rather cavalier. Psychologists have made a science of anxiety and its treatment. It’s a very complex matter. What right have you to say that you can simply decide not to worry? What about the brain

chemicals that bring about clinical depression? What about the whole history of philosophy that elevates mankind's existential fears to pride of place in the books?

I think I might reply, as so many have, that worry changes nothing. I might invoke those moments when, in the most depressing circumstances, you can hear something like a bird call and know that things aren't as bad as you think. I might say, when you're in torment at 5 o'clock that 8 o'clock will find you with the papers and a nice hot cup of tea.

But what I really want to reply is that the fears and worry and the steps you learn to take to overcome them are the whole point of being around at all. Seeing a rough patch as a difficult exam in a subject you dislike—like trigonometry or geography—makes things clearer. Like it or not, we are all learning, all growing, all headed in the same direction.

There's one last thing that Meher Baba told his friends about trying to remain happy. He said that being cheerful is the greatest gift you can give your companions. And trying to deliver that gift—especially when you feel you cannot and anyway don't want to—is the best way to leave behind the self-preoccupation of the worrier.

If that sounds a bit too pat, I apologise. But you know what? I'm not worried about it. Not at all.

AMEN

