

**The Pursuit of Happiness**  
by Ann Foard  
Delivered to the Blue Ridge Torch Club  
October 9, 2007

To Americans, the phrase "Pursuit of Happiness" has iconic status. Many believe it's in the constitution, probably part of the Bill of Rights. It's not. Rather, it is one of the "inalienable rights," along with life and liberty, which appear in that treasonous document, "The Declaration of Independence." The choice of the phrase "pursuit of happiness" was a curious one. Jefferson and a number of the founding fathers were profoundly influenced by John Locke's "Two Treatises on Government," which used the phrase "life, liberty, and property" as being among those things a government is bound to protect. Scholars have been debating for over 200 years about why Jefferson chose to change the phrase to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," but we can make some good guesses.

Shortly before the drafting of the Declaration, Jefferson had been deeply involved in the efforts of the Virginia legislature to write a state constitution, an effort which he and his fellow Virginians felt was much more significant than activities at the Continental Congress to justify a war that had, in fact, been going on for more than a year. George Mason had written a preamble to the Virginia constitution containing the words:

*All men are created equally free and independent and have certain inherent and natural rights . . . among which are the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety.*

Mason's words were published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* on June 12, 1776, the same day they were unanimously approved by the Virginia Legislature. Jefferson scholar Joseph Ellis points out that it strains credulity to deny the influence of Mason's words on Jefferson, but the ideals expressed were not original with Mason either.

Jefferson, Mason, and their colleagues in Virginia and Philadelphia were Enlightenment thinkers, influenced by Greek and Roman ideals about government, personal liberty, and happiness. These ideas were, in fact, intertwined. Briefly, they believed the "greatest good," to be promoted by individuals and protected by government, was happiness. "Happiness," to philosophers and Enlightenment thinkers, did not mean "how I feel right now," or "being able to do anything I want," or "having lots of stuff," as one might conclude from observations of contemporary society. Happiness was, rather, the result of living a balanced and virtuous life. Happiness, or *eudaimonia*, was not a static experience, but a constant effort, the sum total of a life well-lived. To be happy required an individual to cultivate his faculties and talents, be educated, employ reason, accept responsibility, temper passions, govern himself, appreciate beauty, and live in communion with man and God. The best form of government to promote this "greatest good" was thought to be democracy, because the pursuit of happiness requires individual liberty. This was the intellectual climate in which Jefferson and Mason, as well as John Locke and other Enlightenment thinkers, developed their philosophies of government.

Joseph Ellis surmises that another more practical reason for substituting "the pursuit of happiness" for "property" as an inalienable right, may have been to separate property ownership from the franchise, and to minimize uncomfortable discussions about the institution of slavery.

Whatever the origins of the phrase and the high ideals that engendered it, Americans today seem to feel that they have not only a right to *pursue* happiness, but indeed the right to happiness itself, a notion that Jefferson and the other founding fathers would have thought ridiculous. We could spend the rest of the evening simply cataloging the social pathologies that have resulted from some of the individual and self-serving notions of "happiness" in our culture, but I'd rather take another path and explore what the new field of **positive psychology** has to say about what contributes to happiness, what doesn't, and whether it's possible to make yourself more "happy" than you think you are.

"Positive Psychology," according to Martin Seligman, is "a science that seeks to understand positive emotion, build strength and virtue, and provide guideposts for what Aristotle called 'the good life.'" Seligman, generally considered to be the "father" of positive psychology, notes in his new book *Authentic Happiness* that traditionally psychology has focused on mental illness, those things that make humans unhappy and dysfunctional. Even today, for every 100



journal articles on sadness, there is only one on happiness. Seligman, by the way, is not one of the pop psychologists whose works line the self-help aisles at Barnes & Noble. He is the Fox Leadership Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, director of the Positive Psychology Network, and former president of the American Psychological Association. Seligman and others in the field are attempting to bring scientific rigor to the study of happiness.

How do they do that? Social science research is notoriously “fuzzy” anyway. How do you study emotions? How do you measure feelings? What lab tests exist to quantify a sense of well-being? Yet by using the standard instruments of psychological and sociological research—questionnaires, surveys, interviews, lab experiments, statistical analysis, and even occasionally electrodes measuring what areas of the brain are firing—and using these measures on large numbers of people and over long periods of time, researchers such as Seligman are beginning to put together a body of research that compels respect and attention.

One area of positive psychology research focuses on factors that seem NOT to contribute to happiness. Most Americans, when asked what would improve their quality of life, say “more money.” Yet research shows little correlation between wealth and happiness. If people have enough to meet basic needs—food, clothing, shelter, safety—having more money does not seem to produce more happiness. While there is a slight difference in the happiness of people in rich countries and poor countries, it cannot be shown that wealth is the significant variable, since there are also usually important differences in health, safety, education, democracy, etc. In this country, very wealthy people—those on the Fortune 500 list, for example—are only slightly happier than the regular population. What about sudden wealth? Within a few months, people who receive a significant windfall—winning the lottery for example—show no overall increase in happiness and in some cases show a decrease, reporting that after awhile, buying new things loses its appeal and that the losses in human relationships exceed their monetary gains.

What about health? We all want good health and a long life, and there is some correlation between ill health and unhappiness or depression, yet apparently being healthy doesn’t guarantee happiness either. You can be physically fit but miserable. Nor does ill health or disability necessarily mean you will be unhappy. After an initial period of adjustment, most people who have suddenly become ill or disabled, tend to return to the normal level of happiness that they experienced before. A story on the Science page of the *Washington Post* last Monday (1 October 2007) illustrates the point. An article titled “Is Great Happiness Too Much of a Good Thing?” tells the story of Harry Lewenstein, a 70 year old retired electronics executive, who, ten years ago, was riding a bicycle too fast down a hill in Portugal. He hit a bump and was propelled over the handlebars, landing flat on his back in the road. The injury permanently deprived Lewenstein of all use of his legs and limited the use of his hands. Now 80, Lewenstein is not only still alive, but reports that he has spent no time in the past decade feeling sorry for himself. He acknowledges that he was riding the bike faster than he should have been but doesn’t regret the accident. Instead, each day he discovers new ways to be resourceful and to use the capacities he does have, and finds new reasons to be grateful. The *Post* article quotes him as saying, “Some people feel sorry for themselves or mad at the world, I did not . . . after I was injured, I was so totally incapacitated and so much out of everything that every day turned out to be a positive day. Each day I recovered a little more of my memory, of my ability to comprehend things.” We might dismiss such a story if we read it in one of the saccharine self-help books that claim to transform people’s lives by teaching them to will themselves to success and happiness, but when it appears on the Science page of the *Post* and is buttressed by a major new study reported in the *Journal of Personality and Social Disorder*, we need to take it more seriously.

Positive psychologists have discovered that knowing something about a person’s objective life circumstances, including income, state of health, gender, ethnicity, nationality, education level, or even age, tells us little or nothing about that person’s state of happiness. We might have guessed that that happiest people in our society are the rich, healthy, highly-educated, white males—the ones with most of the power and toys. Yet those factors seem not to correlate strongly with happiness.

So if the obvious external factors don’t bring happiness, what does? Aggregations of hundreds of studies on happiness have found some commonalities that extend across demographic categories in defining the characteristics of happy people.



1. **Control:** Happy people have some sense of control over their lives. They feel they have choices and can influence what happens to them. This factor has been observed in studies even with very young infants, and may explain why people living under repressive regimes report less happiness than those living in freer societies.
2. **Optimism:** Happy people tend to feel optimistic about themselves and their worlds, tend to expect that things will work out, are confident that they will be successful, and are less likely to blame themselves when things go wrong.
3. **Self-Esteem:** Happy people like themselves. They tend to focus on their positive qualities and attribute their successes to their own efforts. They report general satisfaction with their lives and circumstances.
4. **Spirituality:** Happy people also tend to have a strong sense of purpose in life and affiliation with ideas and institutions larger than themselves. They are active in pursuing those goals. Members of religious groups on average score higher on happiness surveys than non-religious people.
5. **Relationships:** Not surprisingly, people who have close ties with other people—families, friendships, communities and organizations—report significantly higher levels of happiness than those who lack those strong bonds. While some among us seem self-sufficient and enjoy being alone, most humans need close contact with others to feel happy and satisfied.
6. **Flow:** Another quality that distinguishes happy people is engagement in meaningful work, something Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls “flow”—the ability to lose oneself in what one is doing. What the work is doesn’t matter as much as the ability to completely engage in it to the point that time and even self cease to matter. Whether the activity is saving the world or weeding the flowerbed, if you become totally caught up in it, you are experiencing flow.

Given these characteristics of happy people, noted time after time in hundreds of studies, it is not surprising that the people in the United States who consistently report the highest levels of happiness are the Old Order Amish. How can that be? True, the Amish eschew much of what many of us “pursue” in our “pursuit of happiness,” but that “eschewal” is a conscious and deliberate decision based on the conviction that a happy life and an easy life are not the same thing, and that too much ease and too much stuff distract us from what is truly important in life—God, family, and community.

A few years ago I read an article by a journalist whose assignment was to spend six or eight weeks with an Amish family in Ohio and to write about what it was that characterizes the Amish culture. In other words, how and why have they survived in what was then 20<sup>th</sup> century America? The journalist wrote of the difficulties of trying to manage with wood stoves, kerosene lamps, washboards and horse-drawn plows, and without buttons, automobiles or telephones, and also to figure out **WHY** the Amish choose to do that. After about four weeks of working alongside the Amish women in that community she experienced an epiphany—one of those road-to-Damascus blinding insights—while she was folding dish-towels. Suddenly, she said, she realized that to the Amish, every activity, regardless of how mundane, is an act of worship. Even folding a dish-towel, and folding it well, is a way to affirm belief in God and to celebrate the Amish way of life. It is a manifestation of happiness.

So—we have seen what doesn’t make people happy and what are the characteristics happy people share. Is it possible for people to make themselves happier? Well . . . up to a point, according to Martin Seligman and other positive psychologists. You have heard of the “happy gene”? While scientists have not yet identified a particular gene associated with happiness, nevertheless researchers agree that about 50% of an individual’s ability to experience happiness is probably genetic, that is, like high cholesterol, you inherit your general disposition from your parents. Using studies of identical twins raised separately, positive psychologists say that some people tend to respond more positively to life experiences and others respond more negatively, and that we all have a “range” of emotional response within which we operate. My mother, for example, has the happy gene, if there is such a thing. There’s a family joke that no matter how terrible the weather is, my mom is likely to say, “I think it looks a little lighter over there.” My dad, on the other hand, always seemed to have gray cloud over his head, and while



he sometimes was able to enjoy himself, he was likelier to see the cloud than the silver lining. Fortunately I take after my mother.

Within our genetically determined range, however, there are things we can do to make ourselves happier. One lab-tested strategy suggests that acting as if you are happy actually makes you feel happier. Using college students as volunteers, researchers determined that even something as basic as holding a pencil sideways in your mouth to widen your facial muscles into the semblance of a smile can lighten your mood. Other volunteers were asked to view funny movies or look at pleasant pictures and they too demonstrated a more positive mood than those who did nothing or who looked at negative images. Personally I find those strategies, while interesting, unsatisfying and certainly transitory. What about more long-term strategies?

Remember that old song "Accentuate the Positive"? How about "On The Sunny Side of the Street"? They contain some wisdom that positive psychologists would confirm. Cultivating a positive outlook on life, focusing on strengths instead of weaknesses, looking for things to praise rather than complain about, even "Counting Your Blessings" can be helpful strategies in increasing your happiness quotient. Happiness researchers have concluded that much of the dissatisfaction they have measured in people comes from comparing ourselves with those we perceive to be better off than ourselves. Our house, our car, our kids, our accomplishments, may seem fine until we realize that the guy across the street or the former high school classmate has something bigger, shinier, smarter, or more impressive than we do. In other words, our satisfaction is relative to those around us. The self-help gurus may actually be on to something when they recommend keeping a "gratitude journal" to remind us of the positive things in our lives.

Do you meditate or pray? Taking some time to sit quietly, breathe deeply, and let the stresses of the day drain away not only has been shown to increase happiness, it also reduces blood pressure and improves overall health.

While good health in and of itself doesn't guarantee happiness, eating sensibly and getting some exercise can also affect your mood positively by triggering some of those feel-good chemicals we all have in our bodies.

We all know these things, but they too, while probably true, may seem superficial to those seeking a major transformation, rather than a quick attitude adjustment. Where does long-term happiness come from? Not from pursuing it, apparently. Happiness, according to Viktor Frankl in *Man's Search for Meaning*, cannot be pursued; like success, it comes as an unintended by-product of one's dedication to something greater than oneself. Frankl, who was interned at Auschwitz and other concentration camps during World War II, writes about what it was that enabled some to survive the Nazi death camps, despite unspeakable miseries. Those who lived did so because they had found meaning in their lives and in their suffering. Frankl identified three possible sources for that meaning: in work—that is doing something significant; in love—caring for another person; and in courage during difficult times—maintaining human dignity despite suffering. Frankl went on to say that even when forces beyond your control take away everything you possess, you still have the freedom to choose how you will respond to your situation. Many people report that Frankl's book changed their lives because it addresses the fundamental question we all need to answer: What is the meaning of my life? As Frankl shows, we give our lives meaning by believing in and acting on something larger than ourselves. And that is true regardless of our circumstances in life.

Viktor Frankl provides an extreme example of a fundamental principle: deep, long-lasting happiness comes from within. When we know what our lives mean, what it is that we would both die and live for; when there is harmony between our values and our actions; when we can lose ourselves in our work, even if that work is folding dish-towels, then happiness will come to us, not because we have pursued it, but because, like Harry Lewenstein, we choose to make the most of what we have been given.

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