

## **Happiness Is Wanting What You Have**

by Rev. Dr. Arvid Straube

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I know that this is a very sophisticated group of people, but maybe some of you are willing to admit that you have watched the “Beverly Hillbillies” at some time in your life. On that very first episode “Jed Clampett” who lives in the remote mountains of Aappalachia discovers oil on his property and he is suddenly rich and he wonders if he should follow the advice of some to move to Beverly Hills because that is where the rich people live. He asks his cousin Pear, “Pearl, what da ya think? You think I outta move?” “Jed how can you even ask that? Look around you. You are eight miles from your nearest neighbor. You are over-run with skunks, possums, bobcats, coyotes. You use kerosene lamps for light. And you cook on a wood stove, summer and winter. You’re drinking moonshine and washing with home-made lye soap. And your bathroom is fifty-feet from the house. And you ask should I move?” “I reckon you’re right. A man would be a dang fool to leave all this.”

Some people just have the gift of gratitude. It just wells up and come naturally. People appreciate their lives and what they have and what they experience. Some people, but not most of us. Most of us are just too wrapped up in tomorrow, either fears or hope for tomorrow; or wrapped up in the past; or we’re wrapped up in what we don’t have that we want; or we are wrapped up in what we do have that we don’t want. I think Thanksgiving was invented for people like us. Even people who are very secular and hardly ever pray before they gorge themselves, they might go around the table and name something that they are thankful for. Well in ancient tradition, keeping the Sabbath means you are not working, you are enjoying your life and therefore being thankful for what you have to enjoy. Most of us are like the British Prime Minster, Disraeli, who was over-heard to remark, “I have a very unusual sensation. If it is not indigestions, it must be gratitude.” I love Unitarian Universalists, but one of the least endearing things that sometimes happens is I get into discussions with people about who or what we ought to be grateful to before we can be grateful. Even less becoming is the idea that people who have a lot of education who have a good profession, who have ample financial resources, position in society. Like a lot of Unitarian Universalists, are ungrateful because they think, well I did this. Look at me I’m so clever and I’m so talented, and all of this is mine, and I deserve it, and I deserve more than that, and it’s me, I’ve got this. What about all the nameless and faceless tax payers that paid for those schools and all the benevolent philanthropists who endowed those schools. What about the parents and relatives and teachers and other adults who encouraged us through our childhood. What about the vast network, in fact all of humanity, that has holding us up that has made our privilege and our good-fortune, possible. It isn’t just Unitarian Universalists who aren’t grateful enough. Gratitude just isn’t natural, even those people who mouth platitudes about it all the time. Because in our country, our declaration of independence say that we have the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. We don’t really believe in happiness we believe in the pursuit of happiness. If we believed in happiness and not the pursuit of happiness we would not postpone happiness all the time. But we do. We’ll be happy when . . . some other time, not now. We’ll be happy when . . . I’ll be happy when I get a better job. I’ll be happy when I get a job. I will be happy when I meet the right life partner. Not like all the other one’s I’ve met. I’ll be happy when my spouse shapes up, changes, does what I want. I’ll be happy when I get a new car. I’ll be happy when I lose weight. Meanwhile, the ingredients of our happiness are right in front of us.

Enough food, clothing, and shelter and then some. Friends, family, loved ones, a blue sky in the daytime, a pale moon and the shining stars at night; autumn breezes. You know gratitude, Thanksgiving, it is all about our ability to enjoy what is before us. Happiness and gratitude, they are two sides of the same coin. They are different aspects of the same thing. We have the ability to choose them and to do them. To be grateful is to be happy.

When she was first lady, Hillary Clinton was interviewed and asked about her religious life; she is a very religious woman. In that interview she said her main spiritual practice, what kept her balanced despite all the pressures of public life, was that every day she counted her blessings. She counted everything in her life that was good, for which she was fortunate. The punditocracy just tore her apart for that. What a childish thing. They kind of sneered at her. I'm telling you. If you are too sophisticated to count your blessings, then you are in trouble. Because getting in touch with all the wonderful things in our lives, creates space for happiness. And a place for abundance, spiritual abundance and personal abundance, and I think, even material abundance. I have a thought, if you would rather give to people who are generally grateful more than you would to ingrates, how much more would the universe rather give to people who are grateful more than you would to ingrates?

In their wonderful book, "Your Money or Your Life," Joe Dominguez and Vicky Robin talk about the fulfillment curve. Try to imagine this, human fulfillment they say goes up as things increase in our lives. Many people just don't have enough food, clothing and shelter, so our fulfillment goes up if we have food, clothing and shelter. If we have security in these areas it goes up. It goes up even more if we have more than enough food clothing and shelter, high quality food, clothing and shelter it goes up, and if we have some comfort in this it goes up even more. And even some of the luxuries in life and the freedom to choose some avocations and pleasures it goes up. But there is a point, it doesn't keep going up. There is a point where the more things that are accumulated, actually cause less fulfillment. Because they clutter the garage for one thing, and then you are going to have to worry about that, and then you are going to have to rent a storage space for it and you know they take psychic space, that stuff that keeps accumulating, and it takes time to gather and to make the money for. The fulfillment curve just goes down at a certain point. Robin and Dominguez have a word for the sweet-spot . . . enough.

Letting go until you only have what you really enjoy, creates happiness. More creates dissatisfaction and unhappiness. The great Medieval Theologian, and popular preacher, Johannes Eckhart, said if the only prayer you ever say is "thank you" that is sufficient. But things aren't always so happy. Every human being on this planet has to deal with tribulation. Deep tribulation. None of us escapes it. We lose many things in our lives including the people we love most. And all of us know that one day we will lose our life altogether, we don't know when and we don't know how. So there is pain, there is tribulation. What about gratitude? How are we going to be grateful in those circumstances? Well actually, it can be practiced even now. Gratitude can make all of that easier to bare. When you are leaden down with troubles, try finding one thing that makes you feel good. Concentrate on that. What is it that makes your heart sing? Concentrate on that. Gratitude could save you from this situation. Last month I lost a great colleague, Forrest Church. He had esophageal cancer. He knew he was going to die. He was for many years the senior Minister of the All Souls Church in Manhattan. He had written dozens of books in his long career. He started another book, that he was able to finish it when he got his fatal diagnosis,

and he called it “Love and Death.” In it he reflected that this test in his life was the test of his whole ministry. Would the things that he said from the pulpit for more than 30 years, stand up in this situation? And he was happy that it did. In that book he writes, “The glass we look through unto the world is like a lightly stained glass window. Each pane looks out into some aspect of our life. Our vocation and avocation, our spouse, our companion if we have one, our parents, our children, our health. At any given time, some of these panes are likely to be rosy and translucent. They are going well. Imagine, however that one pane in the window that looks over our life suddenly grows cloudy. What was translucent becomes opaque and almost impenetrable. Our tendency is to press our nose up against that one pane, desperately trying to see through it. When we do this we lose all sense of proportion. Our entire world goes black.” He talks about in the book how when he received that diagnosis, he was just pressing his nose up against that pane of his health and impending death. Until he realized the error of that and was able to look out onto vast parts of his life that were rosy and translucent. Good friends, good work. The ability to still do many things even though there were many things he could no longer do. His children, his wife.

And so he distilled a long ministry into three sentences; three pieces of advice. “Want what you have. Do what you can. Be who you are.” And he warns, “It is tempting to seek meaning not in what we have but in what we desire. When we do this we practice wishful thinking. Of the enemies that frustrate our search for meaning, this is perhaps the most traitorous. It places fulfillment for ever beyond our reach. In what we do not have, in what we cannot do, and what we shall never be. “Want what you have. Do what you can. Be who you are.” We should count our blessings. We should make a practice of gratitude. Because along with generosity and compassion, it is the key to a happy life despite our outer circumstances. With grateful hearts we will find that we do have life and we have it abundantly. So my prayer for all of us is that we take time this holiday season to savor and enjoy all that we have. And in whatever words come most genuinely from your heart, say a prayer of thanks. It will help us get in the right frame of mind. But you know the real prayer isn’t in words, it is despite time and death which will one day snatch it away. Knowing that now we can claim the feeling of wonder and thanks that wells up in us when we put our attention on how marvelous it is to be alive in this moment in this world. Amen.