

'A full moon on a dark night'

By Norbert Hirschhorn

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'Happy, darling?' 'Oh yes, very.' Doubtless you've seen this romantic exchange on Turner Classic Movies or HBO, but you never see what happens after the closing credits end. The 'darlings' get bored or cruel, look for other mates to be happy with, for the moment, anyhow. It's the same with things we think we must have to have to make us happy — the newest video game, the Maserati, the bigger house, the raise at work (especially if it's larger than our fellow employees got). But after the glow is dimmed, we're back to where we started. What are a boat owner's two happiest days? The day he buys the boat and the day he sells the boat. Peggy Lee put it best: 'Is that all there is?'

Then what does it mean to be "happy"? What is happiness? There's a new industry out there trying to find out, and advising us how to find whatever it is. Check Amazon.com, which has 720 titles with the word "happiness" in them, books and tapes you'll find in the self-help section of bookstores. Many, however, are the result of serious psychological and neurological research.

For instance, when psychologists ask people from different cultures and all walks of life whether they are "happy," on a scale of one to 10 (using various questions to describe that state), all groups average "seven." Except for those who are very poor, physically abused or deeply depressed, human beings are generally cut out for happiness.

One year after an accident, many paraplegics return to their own level of happiness, to give one striking example. The tendency to happiness seems programmed into our genetic makeup, with some persons starting life happier — we can identify them in infancy — and genetics contributing more than half the propensity to being happy. Happy people are optimists; they never worry whether the glass is half full or half empty, they're just glad to have a glass.

Some say happiness begins where unhappiness ends. One sure way to be miserable is to compare oneself to others or to some fantasy life seen on "American Idol" or in People magazine. In the Olympics, bronze medalists feel better than silver medalists: They're standing up there but not disappointed.

It's often said, "Money can't buy happiness." It can: a lot for poor people who are struggling to meet mortgage payments, pay the rent, put meals on the table; and just a little extra pleasure for the well-to-do. Jazz singer Pearl Bailey once said, "I've been poor and I've been rich. Rich is better."

People all over the world who describe themselves as "happy" have a number of attributes in common: loving relationships with family and spouses, pride in work, membership in community groups, giving to charity, being a citizen under a fair

government, belief in a higher power, taking pleasure in food and in physical affection, and not desiring too much. Sigmund Freud said mental health comes from "love and work."

Our own Charles Schultz proclaimed the virtues of love and touch: "Happiness is a warm puppy." But which comes first? Perhaps the genetic tendency to a happy personality elicits those very behaviors we associate with happiness. What seems clear to me is that enjoying those attributes should be called contentment.

A group of therapists practicing positive psychology say even sad sacks can be happier by learning some of the behaviors and attitudes of happy persons. As "one acquainted with the night," that is, with my own inborn tendency to sadness, I am skeptical. It can feel oppressive to be constantly reminded to be happy or to be surrounded by happy people; it makes one want to creep further into that shell.

Happiness may be good for the body "but it is grief that develops the power of the mind," wrote Marcel Proust. We need adversity, and restlessness; we grow from coming through hard times.

Great works of art, inventions and exploration come from people who are often neurotic, driven; some are not even "nice." Even our economy depends on dissatisfaction, ambition and a touch of greed. Worse: Being "happy" can sometimes blind us to the real misery that exists in the world.

I'm reminded of the young man announcing to his parents that he was getting a divorce after just two years of marriage. Why? "Because we're unhappy."

His traditional father roars at him, "Unhappy! What's happiness have to do with anything?"

But happy or not, my favorite Irish greeting can console you: "May you have warm words on a cold evening, a full moon on a dark night, and a smooth road all the way to your door." Consolation, the true happiness.

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