

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario

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## A FLEXIBLE PATH TO HAPPINESS: MAKING HAPPY JUDGMENTS!

Texts; “If the prophet had asked you to do something difficult would you not have done it?”  
“All things work together for good to those who love God”- St Paul

Have you ever wondered why it is that our culture has taught us systematically to use discomfort at every opportunity as the best way to take care of ourselves?

The stock market goes down and we get unhappy. The stock market goes up and we start to worry about how to hold onto our profits or when it would be best to sell. We get all excited about getting a new job. We get the job and then we worry about keeping it. We complain about not having enough money. Then we get it and we start complaining about losing it or start to feel guilty about having too much. We have it seems, as human beings, an amazing ability to turn any set of circumstances into an opportunity to be uncomfortable and therefore unhappy!

As Barry Neil Kaufman says in his delightful little book Happiness is a choice: “We might celebrate success when we reach a goal, but then we turn promptly and cautiously to the next unfolding problem. Frequently we view ourselves as responders to or victims of situations rather than *authors* of our experiences.”

It seems that we have bought wholesale into the belief that in order to be realistic, in order to be safe, it is necessary for us to be uncomfortable as a way of protecting ourselves. We can't let ourselves be really happy- that is not realistic. It is naïve, its Pollyanna and does not deal with reality well. So, we have been taught to think. But is this helpful to us really? Is it better to be uncomfortable as an attitude or is it better to be happy?

Maxwell Maltz in his book Psycho-Cybernetics says that even in tragic situations we can usually manage to be happier by not adding to the misfortune our own feelings of self pity and resentment or our own adverse opinions.

“How can I be happy?” says the spouse of an alcoholic. Maltz would say “I don't know, but you can be happier by not adding resentment and self pity to your misfortune.”

As to the guy who lost \$200,000 on the stock market who came into Maltz 's office and said that the loss “had ruined and disgraced him”, Maltz had this answer: “You can be happier by not adding your own *opinion* to the facts. It is a fact that you lost \$200,000. It is your opinion that you are ruined and disgraced.”

I have argued that science tells us that every stimulus that comes into our brain is stored one of two ways. We either stamp things positively or we stamp them as negative. Someone gives us

some ice cream. We stamp that as a positive. We get a traffic fine. We stamp that as negative. Everything goes into storage in one of those two ways.

One day I received a parking ticket. I was about to stamp that as negative but instead I decided to stop that process and examine it. It was a fact that I got a parking ticket. It would be my opinion that it was bad. But could I change my opinion? I decided that I could and that I could seek the good in this ticket.

(1) It could make me pay more close attention- that would be good.

(2) Two it would help the city out because we all know it always needs money.

So I looked at the ticket as a donation to the welfare of the city, the paycheck of the ticket person, I thanked the city for correcting me, smiled, wrote out the check and thanked God that I had the money to pay it and mailed the envelope quite happily.

But what was I fighting against when I began this kind of thinking? I was dealing with a negative habit. Because of the way we have been socialized most of us develop a habit of programming our mind *mainly* in one of two ways. We either stamp **most** things as positive or most things as negative. And I had stamped all tickets as negative and that was habitual now.

Naaman was a very proud and rigid Syrian. When he was asked to bathe in the Jordan seven times he revolted. “Surely the rivers in Damascus are better than any rivers in Israel?” he said. And he went off in a rage. His servants realized that Naaman’s rigidity could prevent his cure. Knowing that flexibility was needed they became flexible enough themselves to see how to get the great man to do the right thing. **Appeal to his ego!** “My father if the prophet had asked you to do something difficult would you not have done it?”

Naaman agrees with them that he would and then he does the right thing and gets flexible enough to change his wrong judgment and gets healed. Naaman changed his opinion. The facts remained the same.

Behind every decision is a judgment call. Some folks suggest that we should stop judging events and instead move into nonjudgment and for some this means to stop thinking.

But if it is true that we have thought our way into unhappiness with our judgments, what about using that same faculty *to think ourselves back out of them?* This is what I was doing with the parking ticket exercise. I was making judgments alright, but I was making positive judgments about the same fact.

Barry Neil Kaufman says that a quick decision to challenge and be flexible about the judgments we make will yield awesome results. “Rather than deny or dismiss what we do best,” he says, “why not harness our mental apparatus to serve us by dismantling judgments or beliefs which lead to unhappiness or conflict?”

This is what Naaman had to do in order to be healed.

Kaufman says: "I cannot envision any action more deeply exciting and romantic than taking conscious charge of this uniquely human ability. *The secret to happiness lies not in events but in our responses to them.*"

How far do we take this?

The first step it seems to me is to accept what is happening as a *neutral fact*. Acceptance without judgment clears the decks so to speak. Let's say I total my car. That is the fact. I have only minor injuries, that too is a fact. I accept both of those facts. Now what? The mind retraining says: *Change the attitude to the facts and start to seek the good in them.*

So here goes. "Boy am I glad to be alive! And now I get to get another car. That will be a lot of fun test-driving cars. Now I won't have to worry about that cracked windshield I have been putting up with! And I know a really great friend I can trust in the car business. I will call my wife and tell her how fortunate I am to be alive! We can celebrate tonight with champagne!"

Well you look at me and say, "David has lost it!"

There is a true story of a woman who was awakened by the smoke detector in her home. She quickly got her family out and called 911. But when the trucks got there it was too late. She stood there watching everything she owned disappear in smoke. All those precious photo albums with years of happy memories in them- gone!

All her family heirlooms gone! As she watched the blaze, she decided to use her judgment faculty positively and she turned to her distraught husband and said, "Isn't it good that we are all alive?"

And she drew her family about her, and they hugged each other. Then she began to watch the blaze itself. It was very interesting. "Almost like fireworks" she thought, and a smile slowly crept over her face.

Then she said, "We can start again and create everything new!"

What a woman!

The great Thomas Edison lost everything worth millions in a fire with no insurance. "What in the world will you do?" they asked Edison? "I will start rebuilding tomorrow!" he said.

Another important way of handling tragedy is to turn one's attitude away from *flight to fight*. William James in his book The Varieties of Religious Experience says: "Much of what we call evil is due entirely to the way we take the phenomenon. It can so often be converted into a bracing tonic... by a simple change of the sufferer's inner attitude from one of fear to one of fight."

One of the ways to do this is to develop a habit of reacting positively and *aggressively* to problems. Instead of folding our hands in despair as a victim of the circumstance we instead become actors on our own stage. We get up, dust ourselves off and get on with the rest of our lives. We set new goals. We develop new purpose. We say: "We will get through this".

If we will but decide, we can come through to the other side and we can rebuild. We can get that new job, that new home. We can find that person who will love us. We can begin again.

I was watching TV on the space mission to repair the Hubble telescope in space. The repairs were rehearsed for months ahead in a huge swimming pool to simulate weightlessness. Preparations were very, very thorough. Tools were made to ensure that screws loosed in space did not drift into the telescope. On the first repair everything hinged on one bolt that refused to come out. This should have been viewed as extremely negative but instead the crew chose *flexibility and creativity*. They eventually took the torque limiter off the power screwdriver and took the risk of increasing the pressure on the bolt. The bolt could have done one of two things. Turn or break off. The bolt turned out and there was this huge cheer from Houston!

On the second space-walk a handgrip that was blocking the removal of a panel refused to move because the screw fastening it had stripped.

Flexibility! They decided to do something very dangerous in space. Break it off (which would have the possibility of creating sharp edges and piercing the space suit of the astronaut.) They rehearsed it on the ground. They discovered how it would break and then gave the order to break it off in space. They did so and the panel was eventually removed.

They could have given up, but they did not. They refocused on the mission and the task at hand. They used flexibility and creativity and got the result they wanted. They were so happy and so pleased with themselves it was a joy to watch!

One last major point. We are people of faith. We believe in God. What does that have to do with our choices as to whether we interpret something as good or bad?

Perhaps we didn't get the position we were looking for. We didn't get the breaks. We don't have to go on automatic and stamp it negative.

We can say "all things work together to those who love God." We can say by faith "I know that God has something better in store for me. I know when one door closes God can open another door."

Suppose we lose the love of our life. As people of faith we can choose to believe that they are in a better place and although the pain may be great for us to bear, we can by faith believe that all things work together for good to those who love God.

What is the alternative to interpreting things positively? Is it better? In terms of death would not our loved ones want us to be happy in our lives rather than being sad all the time? For the alternative of thinking that life is lost is dismal.

We need to pay attention to what we let our minds do. We can train our minds to think in a different way, by faith. We can believe that we are in the right place at the right time. And when

tragedy strikes, we can simply deal with the facts without loading the negative interpretation upon them and simply accept the facts and deal with them, in a *loving positive action plan*.

One Jewish woman, who Barry Neil Kaufman met, came to him for help. She had committed herself, as the child of holocaust survivors, to keep the memories alive of the holocaust, so that she would ensure that no such atrocities ever happened again. But these memories were making her sad all the time. She never felt safe in her community. She could not enjoy her family because she was always worried about them. She couldn't release all these fears because to her *it would dishonor her parents. Thus, she lived her life in the horror of yesterday and the fear of tomorrow.*

She had only rare moments of delight, but in therapy she noticed that these moments all came **when she lived in the present**. So, she decided that instead of honoring her parents by her fears of the past and the future she would try to live in the present with her family. She writes this beautiful statement: 'I thought God wanted me always to think about the past, but I know now that was only my game. Only when I stay present do I truly experience God. I can remember the past when it is useful. I will never forget and that is all I need to know. Being present is not forgetting; it is just being present!'

I think that the things I have talked about are in fact not crazy at all but if we implement these truths, we are instead making a decision to be *sane!*

Emily was a breast cancer survivor who had had difficulty accepting her diagnosis at first. On top of what else had gone wrong with her life she was in shock to discover that she also had cancer! After she had come through this challenge with resilience and rethinking her attitudes, her therapist asked her, almost jokingly "So have you learned the meaning of life?"

"The meaning of Life?" She looked dead serious. "Of course, I have learned the meaning of life." She smiled. "The meaning of life is to live."

The therapist said I have never forgotten that, and I have never forgotten what she said next: "I think I even know the secret of happiness." You do? "It's this: "Every moment that's ever been, or ever will be, is gone the instant its begun. So, life *is* loss. And the secret of life and happiness is to love the moment more than you mourn the loss." Then she smiled and the therapist said, "My God, that was a beautiful smile!"

So live, not in the past or the future, but in the present, flexibly by faith: Jesus said: "Take no anxious thought for the morrow, tomorrow will take care of itself."

"So Naaman went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan as Elisha had told him to do. And his flesh became clean once more like the flesh of a little child."

So, take off the torque limiter. Break off the handrail that is holding you back!

For: Happiness is found in the present moment, this NOW- this being alive!

W.N.P. Barbellion, who fought Multiple sclerosis to the end of his short life, refused to be undone in spirit by this dread disease. Instead he made this happy judgement about being alive. I end this sermon with the way he began each day: He said, "I awake to a stark amazement at everything...to be alive is so incredible that all I can do is to lie still and merely breathe."