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In Search of a Happy Life

EVERY young man and young woman leaving high school and university is looking forward to a happy life, but there is wide room for individual choice of the things that will make life happy.

Long, long ago, men and women moved from birth to death as it were on a stream, obeying unquestionable laws, taboos and totems. Today, we are more subject to the burden of choice. No warm-blooded youths want to go to sleep in the bottom of the boat, letting the elements carry them wherever chance leads. Instead, they wish to sit up and learn to sail into the wind and against the thrust of the tide, with stars to steer by. They wish to be, if not masters of their fate, at least pilots of their craft.

To a seaworthy vessel, all the oceans are open, all the rivers explorable, all the ports beckon. Only choice and sailing skill are needed.

Life is an endless succession of choices. When you go to a ball game you reject an infinite number of other things you might have done with your time. When you sit up to enjoy a late movie you reject sleep in its favour. When you spend a quarter on a soda you reject all else you might have bought with the quarter. Every choice involves your sense of values.

Life is also a set of skills. Your education and your preparations need to be suitable to your hopes and the greatness of the enterprise upon which you are embarking.

What is the happy life?

This was the greatest question of antiquity, as it is of the modern world. Men and women have gone by many ways to seek a happy life. Some have failed because they set themselves no definite goal, but drifted here and there hoping always to come upon the land of their vague dreams. Along the way they found moments of pleasure and they appeased some desires. But the good life should lead us steadily toward happiness, and happiness is a satisfied self, not merely a succession of gratified impulses and desires.

A writer of the nineteenth century put it bluntly when he said: "Half the evil in this world comes from people not knowing what they like, not deliberately setting themselves to find out what they really enjoy."

Let us say, tentatively, that there are five components of the happy life: health, work, interests, friendships, and the pursuit of an ideal. And note that for a happy life we must realize ourselves as a whole, not in just one or other of the parts.

The sort of life we are discussing is not necessarily that which makes money, causes talk or gets printed in the newspapers. It doesn't consist in winning alone, but in playing the game right. It is not made up exclusively of great events.

It involves an ideal, which is a picture of the place you may never quite reach, but always strive to reach. The wonderful thing is that, though we may not touch our rainbow's end, we attain our ideal in little pieces of trying.

Contemplation of our ideal is never useless; at least it produces improvement. On the other hand, to spurn ideals is to invoke unhappiness, because spurned ideals have a way of avenging themselves cruelly.

Happiness should not be looked upon as a reward for a good life, but as the natural effect of it. You will be happy if you are exercising your vital powers along the lines of excellence in a life which affords full scope for their development.

Nor is happiness a negative or passive thing. It is the outcome of things you do, the product of positive thinking and active living. It may be made up of little, everyday incidents; of having something to do, something to love and something to hope for. A man who was Roman emperor for twenty stirring years wrote after his retirement: "Could you but see the five cabbages in my garden, which I have planted and raised with my own hands, you would not ask me to relinquish such happiness for the pursuit of power."

Happiness is not the means to something else, but is the end in itself. Every person chooses the stepping stones toward it which will suit his stride, his temperament and his ideals. You do not need to take the word of the philosophers for this: search your memory and you will find that your happy hours were those following an achievement in some area of life where you had made yourself proficient.

Raise your aim

The seeker after the happy life will never be satisfied with things as they are. Having reached a plateau, he will not be content to fixate there. He knows that no limitations are more galling than those which are self-imposed.

Nor will he treat an accomplishment like a jewel, to be enshrined in a casket for admiring contemplation. Some people strive toward perfection in something because they conceive it to be a place of ease. But such a life would be one of mindless living, a treadmill, a marching in one place. Every achievement is a means toward some greater achievement.

Some of the impulse toward the happy life will arise from your natural desire to be favourably known and well remembered. You are not satisfied, at this moment, to look forward to an epitaph reading: "He lived a harmless life, satisfied with things as they were, making no ripple on his environment."

While it would be folly to concentrate upon living harmlessly, huddled up within oneself, it is equally wrong to build one's life around external things like rank, wealth, honours and social glitter. We need new experiences, and they can be enjoyed only in contact with the world around us. We need, equally, a feeling of stability, and that comes from something within us.

The four externals are, indeed, fragile things. To be chattered about in the newspapers, to be fêted and dined, to be sought after because of wealth: these are not vital ingredients in the good life. A disillusioned comment was given us by Collingwood, who succeeded to command of the fleet upon Nelson's death at Trafalgar: "Fame's trumpet makes a great noise, but the notes do not dwell long on the ear."

The truly important man is one who is conscious of his powers and is bent upon developing them, and thus becomes great by design. You cannot be great in anything unless you have a vision of the greatness possible in it. *Your success is the ratio of your accomplishment to your capacities.*

There have been ages in which intelligent improvisation could do the work of a clearly conceived purpose, but ours is not one of them. Unless we have a plan and

direction we become confused and side-tracked, and we are forced to make momentous adaptations without preparation or consideration.

What incentives are there to reach objectives and pursue ideals? First, there is the zest of life which raises a flame, sometimes flickering, sometimes a conflagration, in all of us. Then, there is the spur of some interest — of competition, of love, of need, or of a dozen other forces. Some have thought that Aesop's moral of the race between the hare and the tortoise might have turned out differently. What if the hare, instead of sitting down on a soft bank to rest had sat, instead, upon a thistle? Some sting is needed by many sorts of people to get them going.

Others are carried along by enthusiasm for whatever they turn their hands to. While their minds hope for success, their hands are contributing to it. They know that whole-heartedness can make up, in surprisingly many cases, for lack of training and natural ability.

Time and place

The seeker after the happy life is interested in everything that goes on around him, not tempestuously but actively. He seeks the beauty and excitement in living which fill the world, and he is sensitive to them.

The happy life is not measured by the calendar but by the events that occupy it. Consequently, a man goes out every day as a child does, with his mind on what there is to see and do rather than on himself. He lives with a sense of expectancy, knowing that it is better to look forward with pleasure and suffer occasional let-downs, than to approach the days with the prospect of being bored.

Progress is always the result of someone's stepping forward, being willing to break with the pattern of the past. Flexibility and adaptability are most important attributes of the happy life. One does not have to be a Vicar of Bray, changing coat and badge with every shifting wind, but we must accommodate ourselves to fickle surroundings, adjust our internal harmony to the impact of external conditions.

Even if your environment seems ungenerous, you need not despair of leading the good life you seek within it. Consider the Eskimo, how he has over the centuries built a culture in surroundings which appear to us to be most bleak, barren and inhospitable.

To do well where there is no opposition is commonplace. True greatness raises itself above the crowd by doing great things with little means, by coping with the unexpected through originality and ingenuity, and by not wasting time and effort on trivial matters.

Hindrances

There are some factors which seem to hinder us in our pursuit of the happy life. High among them we

must place love of security. As soon as preoccupation with security begins to dominate our thinking the scope of our life begins to be diminished.

We can go to history for confirmation. The Greeks prevailed magnificently in a barbaric world, then slackness and softness came over them and they sank to their ruin wanting security and comfort more than they wanted the good life of freedom. The Athenians finally sought not to contribute but to get; the freedom they wished was freedom from responsibility. Athens ceased to be free, and was never free again, and sank into mediocrity.

Poor economic conditions may make more difficult, but should not thwart, our search for the happy life. Webster, the cartoonist, drew a sketch of Abraham Lincoln's log cabin, and under it he wrote this caption: "Ill-housed, ill-fed, ill-clothed."

To measure the goodness of life by its delights and pleasures and safety is to apply a false standard. The happy life does not consist of a glut of luxury. It does not make itself content with commercially produced pleasure, the night club idea of what is a good time, mistaking it for happiness. The happy life is made up of substantial things and attributes and purposes.

On having principles

All achievement is perilously fragile unless it is based on fundamental truth; the quiet strength of the happy life rests upon principles.

Because we live in a welter of conflicting interests we need standards to which we can hold fast. Only so have we any scale by which to measure the goodness or the badness of the interests. Otherwise, we are driven to the use of stop-gap expediency, which is a slippery tool.

A principle is not like a rule. The rule asks nothing more of you than that you obey; a principle requires you to do your own thinking. A rule gives you credit only for being a creature; a principle gives you stature as a man.

Principles are mingled with a sense of values. Each enhances the other. Together, they provide the ultimate motive power appropriate to human beings. There can be no purpose in striving toward the good life, nor any way to keep score of our progress, unless we have a scale of values.

This sense of values does not appear suddenly from some volcano-like eruption, but has been built gradually, like a coral reef, during all the years of our lives, and it is still being built.

What matters in the history of any race, as in that of individuals, is progress to higher values. The strength of our Canadian way of life grows out of our western tradition of devotion to the principle of human worth.

We detest cruelty and vulgarity and those who reach the heights of their conception of success by climbing over their fellow men.

Character

Those who seek the happy life must have character. This is a word which is given many interpretations in various settings, but there are two basic needs of the man of character: he must have unity, a well-integrated life; and he must live positively, not negatively. He must be and do things really, as part of himself, and not by way of public show.

It may be that accident of birth will assign a man's duties and his sphere of activity, but his character is built by himself.

A person of character is one who likes and dislikes what he ought. He is honest by habit and as a matter of course. He has been taught this way of living by parents who did not ask him "What will people think?" but "What will you think of yourself?"

To answer such a question involves making a judgment. Part of the continuing happy life is increasing ability to make independent critical judgments concerning the events and trends of life. It is not the events which influence us, but our thoughts about them.

Herein we see one of the trouble spots of our age. People who are incapable of judging causes and consequences become swept by muddled hysteria. After procrastinating in the hope that things will come out all right in the wash, some crisis compels them to make snap decisions. Then they have to cope with adverse situations, and end up in distressing confusion.

To reach a decision, to make a judgment, implies courage. There are some vigorous blows to be exchanged in pursuit of the happy life. You cannot enjoy enterprise without counting upon opposition.

If you pursue a strategy of "least risk" you will not go very far. You need, indeed, courage beyond that required to bear adversity: you need the courage of initiative. When the Thebans were retreating from a city they had failed to capture they were met by the Spartans and someone told the Theban leader: "We are fallen into our enemies' hands." He replied: "And why not they into ours?" He attacked, and won a great victory.

No man or woman pursuing the happy life will turn away from an opportunity or spurn a responsibility. The categorical imperative about which we hear the philosophers talk is the imperative of duty. Only very selfish people and people with very thick skins and people who are satisfied with lower forms of life can do what they like always. Intelligent people who are seeking the happy life use all their knowledge to do

the best they can in every situation, and they accept responsibility for the consequences.

They make allowances, however, for other people. It is a step toward the good life when we learn to make room for one another's minds. Without an interchange and clash of views the human mind would still be sitting in primitive darkness.

Like whatever is excellent

We may develop to the state wherein we like whatever is excellent, no matter whose it is. The Athenians gave us the first surviving instance of the importance of respect for opinions and beliefs. We recall that Paul was mobbed and imprisoned and beaten for his preaching up and down the coast of Asia Minor, but when he came to Athens they invited him to the Areopagus and asked: "What is this new teaching?"

Prejudice is a sign of immaturity. A person is scarcely civilized, let alone cultured, who cannot listen to both sides of an argument. You may not excuse an error, but you are too genial to condemn the man who voices it. He may not be wicked, but only mistaken. It is your part to propose something better to be substituted. Think of this: every business action, every political measure, and every moral judgment, is in the nature of an alternative. It is not to be pronounced good or bad except as it is better or worse than some other equally definite course which might be adopted instead of it.

We who seek the happy life need to be something more than tolerant. It is not enough to go through life keeping our elbows in and being careful not to step on people's toes. Life demands something more from us than acquiescence. We participate in the process of living only through action.

Pursuit of the happy life requires that we keep on learning. You can increase your enjoyment by learning to learn. You will thereby build a sustained intellectual curiosity about a wide range of significant human problems. You will avoid absorbing rubbish, and you will cultivate a thirst for understanding instead of an appetite for sensation. You will enjoy adventures of the mind.

Most of the bumbling waste of time and the inept decisions that blot the pages of men's efforts toward the happy life can be laid to their naively believing that they could negotiate complex problems by following some book of rules.

One must, having learned to learn, then go on learning. What the public takes for brilliance is really the result of thorough, painstaking investigation and downright hard work. We may well rejoice that work is not reserved for slaves. If that were the case we should

be robbed of our greatest field of enjoyment and we should be forever condemned to mediocrity.

After study of the situation, the action, and the consequences, then step out confidently. When you are clear about the need, and what action to take, you will walk sure-footedly.

Not for youth alone

If yours is not a satisfactory way of life, and if you wish to reach a better way of life, now is the time to start. But do not expect sudden transitions, and do not set your mind on absolutes in an all-or-nothing mood. The principle of relativity applies in a high degree to human affairs. Even in the technical fields it is clear that the truth of today is subject to change by the developments and decisions of tomorrow.

Encourage your mind to produce for you a certain set of views as to your place in life, the contributions you can make to life, and the happiness you may attain from life.

There will come to you, perhaps at once, perhaps after a period, a knowledge of the part you are to play, an assurance that you are doing the work for which you are best endowed, satisfaction because you are filling a vital need and joy in meeting your obligations. Then you will have self-assurance and validity.

The happy life does not beckon alone to youth. It is for people of all ages. Too many of us are given, in later years, to a sort of fantasy in which we look back upon our youth as a Lost Atlantis, the while we indulge in pity for our present drab and practical lives. But the happy life is not ushered in at any age to the sound of drums and trumpets. It grows upon us year by year, little by little, until at last we realize that we have it. It is achieved in individuals, not by flights to the Moon or Mars but by a body of work done so well that we can lift our heads with assurance and look the universe in the eye.

Of this be sure: you do not *find* the happy life; you *make* it. In the course of applying capability, resolution and concentration, you will run into emergencies which test your courage and your determination. Store up, for such occasions, a stack of principles expressed in maxims. They may sound like truisms, at which some people sneer, but if they are so commonplace it is because they have been found of wide usefulness over many years. You will find many in this *Letter*.

If you could ascend to some great height giving a view of all the future landscape of your life, then you could recognize the best things afar off, and strike out for them. But since you cannot see very far ahead, you need to take each step with all the wisdom you can muster. While sensing what lies dimly ahead, you must do competently what lies clearly at hand.