

The Search for



Happiness

What does it mean to be happy – and where do we find it? The Weekly's **David Leser** goes in search of glee at an international conference on happiness, to discover there's no single path to a life of contentment.

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"UP THE ESCALATORS for Happiness," said the man with the beatific smile. "Then turn right." It sounded so simple. An escalator ride and a quick stroll past the gongs and chanting monks, and I'd be there. In Happy Land.

Yet, of course, it was never going to be that painless. One could find the door to a Happiness Conference easily enough; it was quite another matter finding the tools and techniques for a happier life. For Happiness itself.

That, I figured, was going to take a few lifetimes, or at the very least, a two-day conference in Sydney, where I could fast-track myself to a state of unalloyed delight merely by listening to experts expounding on the subject.

What did it mean to be happy and how did one find it? Did we discover it by looking, or by, paradoxically enough, ceasing to look? Did we come into the world with a sunny disposition, a felicitous gene, and if not, could we train ourselves to be happy?

Was it an individual quest or did one's community and government contribute to happiness? And why was it that some people dealt with crisis or misadventure better than others?

These were just some of the questions I'd begun asking myself in the lead-up to the Second International Conference on Happiness and its Causes in Sydney recently. And, yes, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, "What a monumental act of self-indulgence is this! Three thousand narcissists gathered for a convention at *Darling* (where else?) Harbour to explore happiness and its twin sisters, joy and exuberance. What a doddle. What a tilt at New Age windmills. What about writing on *real* issues, the drought, for example, or the war in Iraq?"

It's true. I could have done either of those things, but I doubt whether they would have added to your happiness quotient or mine, or indeed, to the sum total of human happiness. Quite the contrary. Reading a depressing story would actually have weakened your immune system and prevented you from fighting illness. And I didn't want to do that, certainly not after listening to Howard Cutler, co-author (with the Dalai Lama) of the international best-selling book, *The Art of Happiness*.

Howard told the conference about a study that had shown how people watching acts of kindness, in this case a film of Mother Teresa performing good deeds, experienced increased levels of disease-fighting antibodies in their saliva compared to those who hadn't watched the film.

He also talked about an experiment in which subjects were chosen one day a week to perform five random acts of kindness – anything from opening a door for a stranger to anonymously putting money in an expired parking metre.

"After five weeks, people who were doing this were found to have a marked increase in their personal happiness," he said.

Yet even if that weren't the case, surely an investigation of the individual and collective causes of happiness was a worthwhile pursuit, given the extent to which depression and mental illness afflicted the people of the western world.

Why was it, for example, that a country like Australia could be in the midst of such a prosperity boom, such material comfort, and yet be experiencing a pandemic of sickness and unhappiness – 20 per cent of Australian teenagers suffering from mental health problems; suicide rates quadrupling among 15- to 19-year-olds since the 1970s; homeless youth on the rise...

Little wonder, then, that several of the people attending the conference were counsellors, therapists, social workers, doctors, mental health experts – people regularly in touch with the misery and heartache of people's lives.

And so the answer to these and many other questions depended, of course, on who you talked to, or, in this case, listened to. No one could be happy all the time, said Professor Graham Burrows, chairman of the Mental Health Foundation of Australia. "And if they (were), they might be bipolar."

"Or at great risk of being up themselves," agreed Professor Gordon Parker, executive director of Black Dog Institute, an educational, research, clinical and community-oriented facility offering specialist expertise in mood disorders, based in New South Wales.

Happiness was a complex, intriguing phenomenon. You could seek it desperately, but never find it, or you could stumble upon it and then come to see later that, yes, this was a moment of serendipity, of sheer bliss, a family meal perhaps, or the touch of a loved one, or a moment of rhapsody in nature.

For Magda Szubanski, a surprise replacement at the conference for the surprise inclusion of Federal Environment Minister Malcolm Turnbull, happiness came from the simple things in life, but also, surprisingly enough, from performance. "I feel performing is a very communal act," she said, "and as someone who doesn't have a faith, it sometimes feels that there is only the communal space."

Mind you, after sitting next to the Dalai Lama for a panel discussion chaired by the ABC's Geraldine Doogue, it seemed that Magda Szubanski had, by conference end, become totally open to the idea of altruism and faith. >>>

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"I want to try to be nicer," she said when asked by Geraldine Doogue how she might, over the coming years, try to enhance her own happiness. "I know that sounds really sucky, but I want to feel like I err on the side of doing good things rather than selfish things. I might even look at engaging more in Buddhist activities."

"Now that's sucking up," quipped Geraldine, to widespread hilarity from an audience already enchanted by the presence of the Nobel Peace Prize winner sharing the stage with one of Australia's most beloved comedians. When asked how he might enhance his own happiness, the Tibetan spiritual and political leader responded with a boyish shrug and a typically enlightened, if not cryptic, response: "I will carry on continuously. That's all."

What else might one expect from a man who has regularly expressed love and forgiveness for the Chinese conquerors of his country. "Genuine compassion can also reach your enemy," he reminded us all. "They have the same rights, the same desire for happiness."

That was a far cry from Clive Hamilton's response. When the executive director of The Australia Institute and author of *Affluenza* was asked what lever he would pull to secure his own happiness, he replied, "Quite frankly, quite bluntly, there is one event which could make me extremely happy and that would be a crushing defeat for the Howard Government [at the coming election]."

And who said happiness wasn't a political matter?

THREE DAYS BEFORE going in search of glee, I received an unsolicited email about a 92-year-old man, whose wife of 70 years had recently passed away. Because of her death, the man had been forced to move into a nursing home, where he was bound to see out his days.

On the day of his departure, his caregiver began describing to him the room that he was about to move into. "It's tiny," she said, "and it has these eyelet sheets hanging over the windows ..."

"I love it," he said with relish.

"But Mr Jones," the caregiver said, "you haven't even seen the room. Just wait."

"That doesn't have anything to do with it," the old man replied. "Happiness is something you decide on ahead of time. Whether I like my room or not doesn't depend on how the furniture is arranged. It's how I arrange my mind and I've already decided to love it."

The subject of the mind and how we might train it was a recurring theme throughout the two-day Happiness conference. When the Venerable Robina

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Courtin, the Tibetan Buddhist nun and director of Liberation Prison Project, in San Francisco, told the audience it was possible to train the mind to be "happier, braver, wiser, kinder, less fearful and less depressed", she was doing so not just as someone caring for the spiritual needs of thousands of prisoners in America – many of them on death row – but also as someone making a distinction between the mind and the brain.

"Mind is consciousness," she said, "and it encompasses the entire spectrum of our inner experiences: thoughts, feelings, emotions, unconscious, subconscious, intuition, instinct."

Robina cited the case of an innocent woman who had spent 17 years on death row before being released. During that time, she had learnt, despite her circumstances, to be happy. "The only thing she could change was her mind," Robina said. "She said to herself, 'I am not in a cell, I am in a cave. I am not a prisoner, I am a monk'."

Petrea King, founding director of the Quest for Life Centre and a nominee for Australian of the Year since 2003, knows something of this power of the mind, after being diagnosed nearly 25 years ago with myeloid leukaemia. Although she didn't get an opportunity to tell the conference the details of her extraordinary story, it would have been salutary to hear it. (And a note of disclosure here. I was once secretary of Petrea's Quest for Life Foundation.)

After being told she had three months to live, Petrea took herself off to a cave outside Assisi in Italy, where she meditated for 18 hours a day. Her cancer went into remission. Since the late 1980s, Petrea has counselled more than 60,000 Australians diagnosed with life-threatening illnesses, presenting to them myriad benefits of meditation, good nutrition and positive thinking.

"A daily practice of meditation, reflection or contemplation greatly enhances our ability to make appropriate responses rather than helplessly reacting to experiences," she said. "When we know ourselves, we understand how to care for ourselves ... and that's the greatest gift we can give our children, our families, our communities and the planet – the gift of our own physical, mental, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. Then we bring a calm and serene presence to the chaos, the disaster, the trauma, the tragedy."

This was a different, but not >>>

unrelated, slant to the one taken by Amanda Gordon, president of the Australian Psychological Society, who told the conference that the happiest people were those with a life of meaning and a sense of purpose. These people were in loving relationships, they acted altruistically and they gave up the more immediate pleasures for something deeper, less transient.

Also, they looked for the best in people, listened well, gave kind feedback. What they didn't do was spend their lives comparing themselves to others or "noticing the bits that were missing".

Ian Gawler, founder of the first lifestyle-based cancer self-help group in Australia, as well as a long-term cancer survivor himself, didn't disagree with this position, but wondered whether there wasn't sometimes too much emphasis placed on relationships. "Many people are looking for happiness outside themselves, whereas the real answer is inside ourselves," he said.

"If you are looking to gain a sense of enduring, ongoing happiness from other people, it will always be tenuous."

"I think relationships are everything," countered Julian Short, a psychiatrist and expert on low self-esteem and relationship problems. "I am not sure how to find happiness inside myself, because I find my happiness from outside, from relationships. Treating another person with kindness and dignity will help you love yourself and help you love another person. You become twice blessed."

Not to be deterred, Ian Gawler replied, "The important principle that comes from spiritual practice is if you have a really strong connection with your inner self, then there is a sense that that is inviolate, that there's a part of you that can't be hurt. Then life generally becomes easier – easier to become more open and more intimate."

They are both right, of course, and, once again, we could have heard much more on this subject, particularly from Ian Gawler, whose recovery from cancer 30 years ago was to become – like Petrea King – the stuff of medical legend and, indeed, a source of inspiration to this writer.

Like Petrea, Ian has helped alleviate the suffering of thousands of people with cancer, AIDS and leukaemia at his Gawler Foundation in Victoria. His view of his own and other people's cancer is that – tumultuous though the diagnosis and sickness is – it can also give a person the opportunity to change his or her lifestyle and, most crucially, to confront major unresolved issues in their lives.

"To me, the point is to reach the end of your life with inner peace, and to do that, you need to look back on your life and feel you were satisfied," he once told me. "It is quite possible to do that at an early age and

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For me, that meant – as Amanda Gordon and others stressed – the search for meaning, as opposed to some glib quest for happiness. Meaning at work, meaningful relationships, a meaningful contribution to society and to the life of others.

When I returned home, I found my wife in the garden, my daughters at their desks and a book left open in the kitchen that my wife happened to be reading.

The book, *The Interpretation of Murder* by the American writer, Jed Rubenfeld, began, curiously enough, with these words: "There is no mystery to happiness. Unhappy men (and women) are all alike. Some wound they suffered long ago, some wish denied, some blow to pride, some kindling spark of love put out by scorn – or worse, indifference – cleaves to them, or they to it, and so they live each day within a shroud of yesterdays. The happy man (and woman) does not look back. He doesn't look ahead. He lives in the present."

Yet therein lay the rub, according to the writer. The present could never deliver meaning, because the ways of happiness and meaning were never the same. To find happiness, Rubenfeld said, a man needed to only live in the moment; he needed to only live *for* the moment.

"But if he wants meaning – the meaning of his dreams, his secrets, his life – a man must reinhabit his past, however dark, and live for the future, however uncertain. Thus nature dangles happiness and meaning before us all, insisting only that we choose between them."

I closed the book and imbibed the safe, salty harbour of this family and home of mine – the soup bubbling on the stove, the shoes left on the landing, the music coming from my younger daughter's bedroom.

For one brief, exquisite moment, I felt that no such choice needed to be made. I felt that in this very moment I was experiencing both happiness *and* meaning and that the former derived, however mysteriously, from the latter.

But then, just as quickly, the moment passed and I was back on those escalators wondering whether to turn right or left for Happy Land. ■