

## How Do I Know If I Am Truly Happy?

by Henry C. Scuoteguazza

One of the most important questions we can ask ourselves is “Am I truly happy?” This might seem like a silly question. After all, isn’t it obvious to tell if we’re happy? It isn’t quite that simple. It is too easy to fool ourselves into thinking we are happy. We can convince ourselves into thinking we are happy when, objectively, we don’t have valid reasons to do so. And, how do we know if we are as happy as we could be? Are we limiting ourselves to a too narrow perspective and depriving ourselves of values that could lead us to greater happiness? To overcome these possible limitations on our happiness we need to answer four questions, two that look inward at the how we feel and nature of our values and what kinds of actions we have taken and two questions that look outward for how we project ourselves and values into the world.

Question 1. Are the values I have chosen consonant with my nature and are they in balance? We first need to determine if the values we

choose properly reflect our nature as humans and as individuals.

Then, we need to balance our various projects to ensure we are addressing the various components of our nature. Because we are driven by needs and humans come equipped with a variety of needs we can find our selves fulfilling some needs while others languish.

John Riker in his book Human Excellence and the Ecological Conception of the Psyche identifies ten basic needs: survival, reproductive fitness, order, adventure, intimate love, social recognition, autonomy, knowledge, sacredness and beauty.

Because we differ in terms of inherent temperament and interests, each of us can find different things to value in these ten categories.

No one pre-set mix of values will satisfy everyone. We are challenged in our goal to find happiness to choose values that agree with our nature and integrate within the constellation of our other values. For instance, should someone who is naturally reserved and studious pursue a career in sales which requires someone who is more extroverted?

Question 2. What values have I achieved, created, honored or expressed? There are values we seek to obtain and enjoy like movies, hobbies and possessions. In the process of obtaining and using them we enjoy them as consumers. We also create values based on our vision of the way we would like the world to be. We produce values which we can do for a variety of motives: the desire to concretize our most important values, to leave a mark on the world, to share something important with others. It's the same motive artists have for

painting or sculpting: they have a vision they want to create objectively in the world.

Almost anything qualifies: creating a garden, achieving our goals in our career, building or improving our house, raising our children or nurturing a long term, loving relationship with our spouse. In fact, I use this approach to remove or reduce the potential drudgery of household chores such as mowing the lawn, washing the dishes, etc. I remind myself of the value I am creating, improving or preserving for me and my family. This doesn't necessarily and miraculously erase the negative aspects of the activity but this perspective certainly can lighten the load.

Creating values means we have acted on our principles in order to express our worldview and to put back into the world our way of looking at things.

We honor values by acting true to them as examples of our vision. As I mentioned in my review of David Kelley's Unrugged Individualism, "We honor values by acting true to them, as examples of a vision of how we think humans should live and should live together. By honoring our values and principles, such as objectivity, living rationally, living sociably, etc. We commemorate their importance, we put our values where our mouth is. It is awfully easy to espouse how

much we value the world, reason, and our life but these are just empty words unless we act on these values. In doing so, we also express the importance of the values. Like a lighthouse which casts its light into the darkness, our actions can speak louder than words.”

Question 3. What values will I leave as a legacy to the future? This is a natural extension to the previous question on what values have I created. The difference here switches the focus from my enjoyment of values to what I have embodied or honored? How do I want to touch the future? *Why we concerned about the future? Does it contribute to self-interest?]* *Why? Repaying the legacy we inherit. Net producers.*

By embodying principles and values we have deemed important and life sustaining we go on record so to speak and declare their importance. We become a beacon for what we think is beneficial for all humans. *[Keep in mind that our purpose is still to be happy.]*

Let me say that we should not make the mistake of living for our principles rather than living by them. We also don't live for our values, we live to be fulfilled. Being an exemplar shows people that these ideas work, that they can help everyone live better lives. However, regardless of whether we will ever reap benefits we have the motivation to live this way because it is true.

Question 4. Am I valued? (Or, will I be missed when I'm gone?) One of the basic needs driving us is the desire to be connected emotionally with others who share our values. These people, whether they are friends, relatives or immediate family, are important to us. Part of relating to others consists of responding to their needs. When we establish a relationship we have declared that person's importance to us. This means we ask ourselves if we are meeting their needs, are we fulfilling our side of the bargain? What values have I brought to the relationship?

To ensure they are providing a value to their customers many businesses employ a quality philosophy to guide their actions and to declare to potential customers the values that guide them. Although these quality methods vary they share a common denominator: learn the customer's needs then try to measure whether the business is meeting these needs. Making a profit is the goal of business; satisfying customer needs is the means. Likewise, being happy is our goal; part of being happy depends on developing and nurturing fulfilling relationships. We accomplish this by being sensitive to the needs of our "customers" (as appropriate, of course) as well as striving to fulfill our own needs.

This question then asks us to get feedback from people close to us as to how we are meeting their needs, to be aware of their needs. When we establish a relationship we have declared the other person is important to us. What they need from us is also important. For instance, with our spouse we would ask, "Am I spending too much time at work? Am I showing my appreciation for things she does for me? Do I communicate well enough?" With our kids we could ask, "Do I spend time with them? Do I attend school functions? Do I listen to them? What could I do better?"

In The Bell Curve Charles Murray talks about finding a valued place in our society. "You occupy a valued place if other people would miss you if you were gone. ... If a single person would miss you and no one else, you have a fragile hold on your place in society, no matter how much that one person cares for you. To have many different people who would miss you, in many different parts of your life and at many levels of intensity, is a hallmark of a person whose place is well and thoroughly valued." *Natural outcome of creating and expressing values, of bonding with others, participating in our communities.]*

I'm not recommending we run around like an eager puppy trying to please people just so we can be valued or that we gauge our success by tallying the number of people we please. We strive to satisfy our

own needs while being cognizant of the needs of those who are important to us. We don't keep a mental ledger to make sure the values we give versus the ones we receive match one-for-one. When we are missed it shows that we have touched other people in a positive way. We have brought joy and encouragement to their lives. People gravitate towards others who inspire, entertain or otherwise have an optimistic viewpoint. We can do all this without being motivated altruistically but as a form of payment and as a measure of how effectively we project our values.

### Conclusion

I hope I have shown how assessing if we are happy amounts to far more than checking off our "shopping" list of values obtained. We can deceive ourselves into thinking we are happy when we could in fact be living a one-dimensional, barren life with few or no friends and isolated from the rest of the world by a blanket of pessimism (and surrender). We could be surrounded by every book we desire from the Laissez Faire catalog and own every classical CD but have no one to share them with and no physical outlets like sports that force us to interact with others (and get some much needed exercise).

Periodically we should stop to assess our life's direction. Do we have a mission and a vision? Have I been acting true to them? What major

goals have I accomplished in my career, in my social life, in my athletic life? Are the people closest to me happy with me? Will I be missed when I'm gone? These questions pull together how well we think we are doing with how others close to us perceive us. Often, other people can give us more objective feedback than we can alone.