



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Where Is Now, and How Do I Get There?

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Being in the moment . . . being in the now. I am not normally a touchy feely kind of person. I don't chant. I seldom burn incense. I had to take myself out of the meditation class here at Neighborhood when I discovered to my horror that I was snoring during our meditations, and that the other members of the group were too polite to tell me.

I find that I am a little bewildered by people who aspire to understand the universe . . . as Woody Allen says, "It's hard enough to find your way around Chinatown."

And so I do not come here to share with you my great spiritual awakening or timeless wisdom gathered at the feet of many gurus . . . ahhhh, make that, *any gurus* that I have followed. But, like many of you I suspect, I like to think of myself as a thoughtful person. I have always been drawn to the collision of thoughts and ideas in my head and in my conversations with other people. And yes, over time I have begun to realize that it may be the very cacophony of thoughts and ideas vying for attention in my brain that too often leads me astray; away from the kind of inspiring moments of quiet contemplation and serenity that I yearn for, but too often cannot seem to find.

Through a Buddhist friend of mine I have finally managed to learn how to meditate. But although I cannot claim to be adept at the art of "being in the now" or know any of the secrets of the universe, I am fascinated by the notion that some of these skills can be acquired, even by someone like me, at my advanced age, and with only the modest spiritual gifts I seem to have at hand.

Since I decided I wanted to talk to you about this today, I have done a bit of research into this topic . . . and now . . . I'm not sure where to begin.

We all want different things out of life. I think the wonderful Senior High Schoolers who led our services here back in March pretty much nailed it when they all agreed that more than anything else their greatest ambition in life was simply to be happy. Perhaps that is what we are really talking about here – happiness. So let's start there.

Aristotle called happiness "the chief good. The end toward which all other things aim." According to this view the reason that we want a big house and a nice car in the garage and 2.1 children is because we think they will bring us happiness. To be more accurate, we have been "told" by our elders and our society that we can expect those things to bring us happiness, and most of us have accepted that world view, or that "mental model." I'll talk more about "mental models" in a minute.

Here in America for the past 50 years a surprising number of us have gotten a lot of the things that we want. Many of us have become wealthier. We live longer. We have access to tools and technology and toys that make our lives considerably easier and more enjoyable than those in previous generations. But the paradox of happiness is that in spite of all these things I don't

get the feeling that we as a nation have become much happier. Do you?

In fact there are times when I think that perhaps *my* personal happiness is *inversely* proportional to the number of things that I acquire or the amount of money I seem to be able to spend to acquire them. I am well aware that I am not the only one to be puzzled by this paradox.

Look around. In the last few years there's been an explosion in scientific research and in philosophy and psychology on the nature of happiness. Maybe you missed that, but would it surprise you to know that in one three month period last year more than a thousand books were released on Amazon on the subject of happiness? Wow! Maybe someone is listening to our teenagers.

So what have we learned from this explosion of study and science? Well, for one thing we have learned how to measure people's happiness. Through surveys mostly – lots and lots of surveys.

And by the way, can anyone tell me? What's happened in this country? What is the story with all these surveys? Every time I turn around, someone wants me to take a survey. I feel like my favorite cantankerous comic George Carlin. A few years before he died he looked around the audience and said, "What the hell happened in America? How did everyone get so thirsty all of a sudden? What's with all the water bottles? Everybody's got to have a water bottle! Every car has to have 6 cup holders for all those water bottles. What happened to just going to find a coke machine when you wanna get a drink?" Well, of course the answer is, we're not just "getting a drink" . . . we're hydrating!

So, I'm sorry, but . . . I STILL want to know what is with all the surveys? I mean it's creepy, don't you think? Like the NSA – what are they doing with all that info? OK. Sorry, I'll stop now. Pet peeve – we've all got one.

Well, I have discovered that one of the things surveys are good for is measuring people's levels of happiness. We've learned a lot about the demographics of happiness – factors like income, education, gender, jobs, ethnicity, marriage and families. They all play a part. But surprisingly the results of this research show that these factors don't seem to make a big difference in anyone's level of happiness.

I stumbled across an interesting revelation that comes from Harvard professor Dan Gilbert, author of one of the many happiness books I referred to earlier called *Stumbling On Happiness*.

Here are two different futures that I offer you to contemplate. Tell me which one you think would make you happier.

1. Winning the Lottery . . . let's just say \$342,000,000 or
2. Becoming a paraplegic confined to a wheel chair.

OK, I understand, you may need a moment to think about this one. Which scenario do you think is more likely to lead to greater happiness?

Needless to say, this guy did a survey on this – lottery winners/paraplegics; and it might surprise you to know that a year after losing the use of their legs and a year after winning the lottery both groups of people claimed to be equally happy with their lives.

And there is another study out there that goes even further. It says that whatever may have happened to you good or bad, with the exception of only a few major traumas in life, if it happened more than four months ago it is unlikely to have any measurable impact at all on your level of happiness.

So what is this telling us about life's outcomes? What is it telling us about how our external circumstances or conditions affect our internal sense of well-being or happiness? Granted – it's better to have more money rather than less. It's better to get a degree in college than drop out of school. But these differences seem to make the happiness needle jump only a little bit.

And so the question remains. What are the BIG causes of BIG happiness?

No one has really answered this question to my satisfaction, which leads me to believe that maybe happiness has much more to do with the content and the quality of our moment-to-moment experiences than any exterior conditions in our immediate world.

Matt Killingsworth, a psychology Ph.D. from Harvard, is the creator of "trackyourhappiness.org," a project that has communicated with over 650,000 people on their smartphones to track their happiness levels at different moments in their everyday life. Collectively they represent all of 86 occupational categories in over 80 countries. Matt explains, "Basically I send people signals at random points throughout their day and I ask them a few questions about the moment by moment experiences they were having the instant before they received my signal."

He typically asks his subjects three questions:

1. A happiness question – How do you feel on a scale ranging from very bad to very good?
2. An activity question – What are you doing? From a list of 22 daily activities like eating, working, stuck in traffic, watching TV.
And then . . .
3. A little bit of a curve ball – Are you thinking about something OTHER than what you are doing?

People could say "No, I am focused on my task" or "Yes, I am thinking of something else, and those thoughts are: 1. Pleasant; 2. Neutral; or 3. Unpleasant."

Any of those “Yes” responses are what Matt calls “Mind-wandering.”

You see, as human beings we have the unique ability to have our minds stray away from any activity we are presently engaged in. According to Matt, this allows us to learn and to plan and to reason in new and unusual ways that no other species of animal can. It’s a special gift that can allow us to increase our happiness by freeing our minds to wander from boring or unpleasant pursuits to a better place. Since we know that people want to be happy, it stands to reason that their minds are going to wander to something happier. Yes?

Well, not quite . . . and here is where things get interesting.

Matt found that people focused on their present activity (the NO answers) proved to be about 66% happy. But people whose minds were wandering (the YES answers) were barely over 50%. So on average people are substantially less happy when their minds are wandering than when they are not.

“Ah!” you may say. “But the mind-wanderers started out unhappy to begin with. That’s why their minds were wandering in the first place. They were stuck in traffic and they were going bonkers – thus, their minds wander to a better place!”

NOPE.

Killingsworth’s research shows that people are less happy when they are mind-wandering no matter *what* they are doing. He even learned that people stuck in traffic who let their minds wander were substantially less happy than those who were focused only on their commute.

So where do minds tend to go when they wander? Well, I know for me a lot of it is anxiety driven – anxiety about something coming up, worries or guilt about something that just happened. Anger stored in some secret place bubbling out of nowhere. So, yeah, that makes sense. A lot of my mind wandering is just . . . bad stuff.

And yet even when we are thinking about something neutral, like planning our day tomorrow or coming up with ideas for a new project, Matt discovered that we are still much less happy than people who are not mind-wandering at all. In fact, even when people’s minds wandered to something *pleasant* they ended up still slightly less happy than those whose minds didn’t wander at all. “If mind-wandering were a slot machine,” says Killingsworth, it would be a chance to lose either \$100, \$50, or \$20. No one would ever want to play.”

So how often do our minds tend to wander? They wander a lot. Matt measured the rate of mind wandering in his subjects from the list of 22 daily activities. Mind wandering ranges from a high of 65% when people are brushing their teeth and taking a shower to 50% when they are working, to 40% when exercising, to an all-time low of only 10% when – you guessed it – they are having sex. OK that did it for me! People are willing to take surveys while they are doing that????!! “Honey, are you texting someone?”

So no matter what we are doing our minds are wandering about 47% of the time. No wonder our happiness is stuck at around the mid-way point. Our glasses are either half empty or half full, depending on how we choose to look at it. But only half?

I believe we are all just spending too much time listening to our minds. It's as if as we go through life we all become more discerning, right? We like to say we become "wiser", but what we are actually doing is developing greater and greater powers of observation and criticism. We get better at distinguishing what's good from what's bad – until finally we become critics of our own life.

"I think I'm in love, but it's more likely just infatuation. I really want to see her again, but I mustn't be too eager." Opportunity missed.

An interesting scholar from Mumbai India named Srikumar Rao, now an author and speaker, puts it more bluntly. He says, "Most of us spend our lives learning to be unhappy. From the beginning," Srikumar says, "we have bought into 'mental models' about happiness that are false. Principal among these is the 'If/Then' model." IF I can get something; THEN I can do something; and THEN I will be something; and THEN this will happen. Here's an example:

IF I can make \$200,000; THEN I can buy a car and put a down payment on a house;
THEN I will be desirable to women; and THEN life will be a blast.

We think this is the way the world works. But it isn't. It's just a "mental model" that we have been given that we have accepted. The problem isn't that we *have* mental models. It's the fact that we don't *know* they are just mental models. We all have a different "IF." A goal we set for ourselves that will fix everything and open all the doors. The example above is probably a guy. On the other hand a woman that guy knows may be thinking "IF I make \$10,000; THEN I can have plastic surgery and get my face and my breasts done; THEN I will look great in a bathing suit and THEN I will meet the man of my dreams ...and THEN life will be a blast."

In a TED lecture Srikumar asked his students, "Ten years ago each one of you probably had your own 'if.' Something you wanted to get or achieve that was going to make everything work. Raise your hands if that's true for you." 80% raise their hands. "Now 10 years later how many of you have realized that goal?" Almost all raise their hands. "And how many are in basically the same place they were 10 years ago?" Same hands go up.

"But rather than saying that the mental model is wrong" he continued, "I'll bet you are all thinking that the problem was that you chose the wrong 'IF.' You are thinking to yourself, 'Aha! I learned something that time. So, IF I make a better choice *this* time; THEN that will fix everything; and THEN I will feel the magic.'" And the "If / Then" cycle continues.

So what magic is Srikumar talking about? I think we all know.

Have you ever stood out in nature and beheld a scene of such beauty or grandeur that it took your breath away and put you in a state of bliss and serenity? Perhaps you were on a mountaintop or looking at a sunset or a rainbow. How many have had that experience? Practically all of us. And I'll bet that moment of bliss and serenity has stayed with you for years as a place or a feeling that you have always wanted to return to . . . to spend more time in that moment.

What was that moment all about? Have you ever wondered that?

Srikumar would say that for one magical and memorable moment you were able to accept the universe for exactly what it is. You didn't say to yourself "What a beautiful rainbow! *But* it's a little over to the left, and if someone could just move it over to where those clouds are then it would be a significant improvement."

No, in the beauty of the moment, you accepted the universe the way it was, and all the voices, all your critical, comparative "IF/THEN" self dropped away; no more mind-wandering; no thoughts of past; no worries about the future. You were truly *in the moment*, and in that moment rays of happiness burst through to your inner self.

There are some experiences in life that lead more naturally to such moments. Travelling to somewhere new and very different is one of them. Listening to music works for some. I imagine jumping out of airplanes and other types of extreme sports can be another. Filling your mind and your heart with only what is happening right now. For me it happens every time I put on a mask and a snorkel and dive below the surface of the ocean in a place like Hawaii or Tahiti.

We know that this happens to us, because even to this day we can still remember the feeling – a peak experience. And we ask ourselves, "How can we create more of these moments?"

And the answer is deceptively simple. We simply need to stop. To stop everything we are doing, everything we are thinking. Try this with me.

Just breathe
Breathe in
and slowly breathe out
And as you breathe out, picture yourself riding on that breathe as it travels away
Follow the breath

Breathe in
and slowly breathe out...
And when you catch yourself thinking
Just say to yourself "thinking," and then learn to let it go.
Open your eyes
Open your ears

And all your senses
To feel the colors all around you
To bathe in the sounds and in the air that surrounds us
To enjoy the warmth of gratitude for this day
And for the community of those near to us
And for all the love that has blessed our lives
And finally for the silence
of a perfect moment in time.

(HOLD THE SILENCE FOR 30 SECONDS)

A perfect moment in time.

What if I were to tell you that your present life with all its problems, or more precisely with all the problems that you *think you have* right now at this very moment, is equally perfect.