

Elements of Happiness

DONALD N. WRIGHT

It seems most appropriate that we should not pass this day without recognizing the remarkable gift given to us some 56 years ago today. It was on that day that Allied forces, some 175,000 strong, fought their way ashore in Normandy to begin the final phase of the worst worldwide conflict in recorded history. That generation of young men, living and born during the Great Depression, gave of themselves in a way we almost seem to have forgotten. These soldiers portrayed a selflessness so dramatic and powerful that journalist and author Tom Brokaw has represented them as “the greatest generation” in his biographical account of their lives. He wrote:

*They left their ranches in Sully County, South Dakota, their jobs on the main street of Americus, Georgia, they gave up their place on the assembly lines in Detroit and in the ranks of Wall Street, they quit school or went from cap and gown directly into uniform. [Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (New York: Random House, 1998), xix]*

Indeed, as the noted biographer/historian Stephen Ambrose wrote concerning these men who offered so much:

None of them wanted to be part of another war. They wanted to be throwing baseballs, not hand grenades,

*shooting .22s at rabbits, not M-1s at other young men. But when the test came, when freedom had to be fought for or abandoned, they fought. They were soldiers of democracy. They were the men of D-Day, and to them we owe our freedom. [Stephen E. Ambrose, *D-Day, June 6, 1944: The Climactic Battle of World War II* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 26]*

And so we pause today to honor those of another generation, those who gave their service and even their lives so that we might have our generation and be privileged to worship God in deed as well as in our hearts.

That great war, as have others, broke upon the world as a result of man’s propensity for greed, lust for power, and absolute disregard for the lives and happiness of others.

Elder W. Eugene Hansen of the Presidency of the Seventy noted:

From the beginning of recorded history, mankind has been constantly searching for happiness. I believe it’s fair to say that most of us are influenced

Donald N. Wright was a BYU professor of microbiology and associate dean of the College of Biology and Agriculture when this devotional address was given on 6 June 2000 .

greatly in our daily lives by what we perceive will result in happiness or joy for ourselves, as well as for others. [W. Eugene Hansen, “The Search for Happiness,” *Ensign*, November 1993, 81]

And the Prophet Joseph Smith stated:

Happiness is the object and design of our existence; and will be the end thereof, if we pursue the path that leads to it; and this path is virtue, uprightness, faithfulness, holiness, and keeping all the commandments of God. [*Teachings*, 255–56]

This seems to be such a simple recipe, yet men and women, young and old, in and out of the gospel kingdom, appear to devote much of their time and energy toward obtaining this goal—seeking, always seeking, and seemingly never finding that grail of their quest.

As I have considered the paths leading so many to what was thought to bring happiness, I have come to realize that many, if not most, have simply been pursuing the wrong thing. Often the quest has been a relentless search, not for happiness, as they intend, but for a lesser state, even that of pleasure. For happiness is near unto joy and often far from pleasure. Though elements of pleasure may be and often are included as important components, these two experiences, pleasure and happiness, are neither synonyms nor even essential components of the other.

I am reminded of the experience of a young friend. He played a major role on his high school basketball team, a team that after a long season won the state basketball championship. After the celebrating, after the congratulations, he lay talking in the quiet of the night in his parents’ room.

He said, “You know, it just doesn’t get any better than this.”

To which his wise father replied, “That is not true. Just wait until you have the opportunity to serve a mission.”

Now, recently returned from two years of service in the mission field, he understands what his father meant. He has been able to separate the pleasure of winning an important athletic event from the happiness that attends significant service in the Lord’s kingdom. Both events were worthwhile and justified the use of his time and energy. Both required diligence, commitment, skill, and personal sacrifice, but the final result of one was mostly pleasure and the result of the other was happiness.

Unfortunately, even knowing that these two are not equivalent outcomes of our time or effort, we sometimes—if not consciously, at least subconsciously—assume that happiness can be the result of increasing pleasures. Or we may assume and therefore act as if there is some form of progression that leads from pleasure to more pleasure to even greater pleasure with the final outcome ultimately being happiness. This is not the path described by the Prophet Joseph.

In a small book entitled *Tuesdays with Morrie*, the author, Mitch Albom, recounts his experience as he visited with a former college professor, Morrie Schwartz, who was dying from ALS, or Lou Gehrig’s disease. The book recounts a series of Tuesday visits as Morrie learns to deal with a disease that slowly but surely leads from increasing incapacitation to the death of the patient. Morrie reminded his friend:

“So many people walk around with a meaningless life. They seem half-asleep, even when they’re busy doing things they think are important. This is because they’re chasing the wrong things. The way you get meaning into your life is to devote yourself to loving others, devote yourself to your community around you, and devote yourself to creating something that gives you purpose and meaning.” [Mitch Albom, *Tuesdays with Morrie* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 43]

Surely the enjoyment of pleasure may be the result of many worthwhile activities or events

in our lives, such as a good or even great movie. For example, perhaps you have been privileged to see the current presentation at the Legacy Theater entitled *The Testaments of One Fold and One Shepherd*, or perhaps you have derived pleasure from a kindly remark given by a respected acquaintance. Pleasure may be found in a particularly enjoyable food, from an unexpected good grade on an examination, a swim in the ocean, or a carefully sought-for possession. Such things, and hundreds more, are the source of seemingly endless pleasures. But these exciting experiences, pleasures, and possessions are not the basis of true happiness.

An interesting philosophy regarding the things we possess was given to Mitch Albom by his friend Morrie:

"We've got a form of brainwashing going on in our country," Morrie sighed. "Do you know how they brainwash people? They repeat something over and over. And that's what we do in this country. Owning things is good. More money is good. More property is good. More commercialism is good. More is good. More is good. We repeat it—and have it repeated to us—over and over until nobody bothers to even think otherwise. The average person is so fogged up by all this, he has no perspective on what's really important anymore." [Albom, *Tuesdays*, 124–25; emphasis in original]

The reality of this loss of perspective was illustrated in the statement of the former baseball great Dale Murphy, who is currently president of the Massachusetts Boston Mission. President Murphy made a similar observation regarding highly paid athletes who have difficulty dealing with life off the playing field: "It makes you sad. I see people looking for something. I saw people who weren't happy. Money isn't a determining factor" (Dale Murphy in *Who's News, USA Weekend*, 30 April 2000, 2).

There seems to be the illusion and even a great anticipation that if we could somehow fill our lives with sufficient pleasure, we would be

happy—not that pleasure is either wrong or undesirable, but the risk, of course, is that as we seek pleasure it may be found in a hundred enticing forms, always ready to titillate the senses, and pleasures often seem so anxious to please that we may even discontinue the quest for happiness and simply settle for its self-indulgent imitation.

The poet William George Jordan was frequently quoted by President David O. McKay:

Happiness does not always require success, prosperity or attainment. It is often the joy of hopeful struggle, consecration of purpose and energy to some good end. Real happiness ever has its root in unselfishness—its blossom in love of some kind. [William George Jordan, *The Crown of Individuality* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1909), 78–79]

One of the seeming paradoxes of life is that it is possible to be happy, truly happy, in the midst of significant trial. You may not be happy because of the circumstance of trial—because of such things as financial loss, injury, the low score in a game, rejection (such as when you were sure that she would say yes, only to discover that her hand was given to another), a grade curve lower than you expected, disappointment in a hundred ways, or just anytime that you have a flat tire on the road to success. But such trials need not—indeed, should not—take away from happiness.

It is as much a mistake to assume that difficulties destroy happiness as it is to assume that pleasures bring happiness. This is one of the great messages repeatedly taught in the scriptures. It is in this context that I would like to share several illustrations.

Consider, if you will, the experience of Helaman and his 2,000 stripling warriors. Thrown into the apex of the battle, each of them suffered many wounds—such that 200 of them fainted because of the loss of blood (surely not a situation conducive to pleasure). But Helaman recorded, "And to our great astonishment, and

also the joy of our whole army, there was not one soul of them who did perish” (Alma 57:25). “And they had fought as if with the strength of God; yea, never were men known to have fought with such miraculous strength; and with such mighty power” (Alma 56:56).

We are also taught this lesson by Job, who, having lost his wealth, his children, his health, and his friends, said, “Behold, happy is the man whom God correcteth: therefore despise not thou the chastening of the Almighty” (Job 5:17). And Job concluded with one of the great testimonies of all time when, in the midst of his affliction, he added, “And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God” (Job 19:26).

A latter-day evidence of this principle is provided from several well-known experiences. President John Taylor stated that the Prophet Joseph, knowing full well the implications of his journey to Carthage, wrote the following: “I am going like a lamb to the slaughter; but I am calm as a summer’s morning; I have a conscience void of offense towards God, and towards all men” (D&C 135:4). Such peace of soul is true happiness. It is an expression of the inner assurance that our actions and desires are acceptable to the Lord. This peace is an expression of the promise given by the Lord to the Prophet Joseph at a time he was in most difficult circumstances during an earlier imprisonment at Liberty, Missouri. In section 121 of the Doctrine and Covenants we read, “Let thy bowels also be full of charity towards all men, and to the household of faith, and let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly; then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God” (D&C 121:45). Not only in times of ultimate trial, but in our day-to-day activities, of what value is the peace of good conscience toward God? It would seem that the value of this happiness is truly more precious than rubies.

The idea that both peace and happiness can be found in times of significant trial is wonderfully illustrated by the experience of Francis

Webster, who journeyed west with the Martin Handcart Company. Most of you know the story, how having departed from Winter Quarters late in the season, and because of delays, the company was caught in early winter snows on the high plains of Wyoming. Some years later, members of a Sunday School class were openly critical of the Church and its leaders for agreeing to allow both the Martin and the Willie Companies to travel under such circumstances. William R. Palmer, who was in that Sunday School class, recorded the event as follows:

“An old man in the corner [Francis Webster] sat silent and listened as long as he could stand it, then he arose and said things that no person who heard him will ever forget. His face was white with emotion, yet he spoke calmly, deliberately, but with great earnestness and sincerity.

“In substance [he] said, ‘I ask you to stop this criticism. You are discussing a matter you know nothing about. Cold historic facts mean nothing here, for they give no proper interpretation of the questions involved. Mistake to send the Handcart Company out so late in the season? Yes. But I was in that company and my wife was in it. . . . We suffered beyond anything you can imagine and many died of exposure and starvation. . . . [Yet] every one of us came through with the absolute knowledge that God lives, for we became acquainted with him in our extremities. . . .

*“Was I sorry that I chose to come by handcart? No. Neither then nor any minute of my life since. The price we paid to become acquainted with God was a privilege to pay, and I am thankful that I was privileged to come in the Martin Handcart Company.’” [In David O. McKay, “Pioneer Women,” *Relief Society Magazine*, January 1948, 8; emphasis in original]*

Some understanding of this seeming paradox—that tribulation can bring happiness—is given through the writings of Jacob and in the words of Nephi in 2 Nephi. Some 30 years after leaving Jerusalem, Nephi recorded, “And it came

to pass that we lived after the manner of happiness" (2 Nephi 5:27). And we read his brother Jacob's account written but a few years later:

The time passed away with us, and also our lives passed away like as it were unto us a dream, we being a lonesome and a solemn people, wanderers, cast out from Jerusalem, born in tribulation, in a wilderness, and hated of our brethren. [Jacob 7:26]

Does this sound as if they had found happiness? It is important to note that in the midst of these trials noted by Jacob, they were living as Nephi recorded: "after the manner of happiness." It appears that Jacob recounts the conditions of the people (there surely weren't many pleasures), whereas his prophet brother simply recorded the quality of their lives. Further understanding of these seeming contradictions is given by Alma in his instruction to his son Corianton when he said, "Behold, I say unto you, wickedness never was happiness" (Alma 41:10). Thus we see that even though the way was hard and lonely, difficult and trying, the people of Nephi were happy because they lived according to the principles of righteousness.

It is of interest that one of the terms used to describe our Father's plan for the exaltation of his children is "the plan of happiness" (Alma 42:16). This process leading to happiness was recorded by a much younger Nephi writing the history of his people following the visit of the Savior among them:

And there were no envyings, nor strifes, nor tumults, nor whoredoms, nor lyings, nor murders, nor any manner of lasciviousness; and surely there could not be a happier people among all the people who had been created by the hand of God.
[4 Nephi 1:16]

No happier people, he wrote, yet interestingly, none of them had seen an airplane, used a computer, been to a movie, owned a sports car, played professional ball, tasted chocolate,

had a mobile phone, or done a thousand other things we so often confuse for the sources of happiness in our lives. In spite of such obvious limitations to their pleasures, Nephi rejoices with his people as being so happy that no people ever to live were happier.

It is clear from the examples given that the vicissitudes of mortality, the limitations, sorrows, frustrations, and trials of our lives are often given so that we can actually find happiness. Even though the circumstances were very different for the early Saints in the Missouri days, the principle is true for us wherein the Lord said:

Therefore, they [meaning the Saints] must needs be chastened and tried, even as Abraham, who was commanded to offer up his only son.

For all those who will not endure chastening, but deny me, cannot be sanctified. [D&C 101:4–5]

"For after much tribulation . . . cometh the blessing" (D&C 103:12). It is also apparent that happiness does not necessarily result from personal independence; that is, the ability to not only choose one's path but to do one's thing, a means whereby we are able to always satisfy personal preference, interest, and desire. Heaven, which is a place of continual happiness, is such because personal obedience to eternal laws and principles leads to this end. This is also true in mortality, where obedience to eternal laws and acceptance of true principles are the basis for all blessings. By wisely using our independence, bridling our desires, and channeling our interests, we will assure that they become a continual source of righteousness and blessing in our lives.

Speaking of the necessity for the control of our desires and independence, C. S. Lewis wrote:

The terrible thing, the almost impossible thing, is to hand over your whole self—all your wishes and precautions—to Christ. But it is far easier than

*what we are all trying to do instead. For what we are trying to do is to remain what we call “ourselves,” to keep personal happiness as our great aim in life, and yet at the same time be “good.” We are all trying to let our mind and heart go their own way—centred on money or pleasure or ambition—and hoping, in spite of this, to behave honestly and chastely and humbly. And that is exactly what Christ warned us you could not do. [C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 168; book 4, chapter 8, paragraph 7]*

When considering the importance of our willingness to modify our independence to create happiness in our lives, Lewis used the George MacDonald imagery of remodeling a house:

*Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself. [C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 174; book 4, chapter 9, paragraph 10]*

Yes, the Savior is willing to make of each of us a mansion, but this He will not do without our permission.

Given that Joseph Smith considered happiness to be both the object and design, or purpose, of our existence, how is it that we so frequently fail to recognize the elements of true happiness in our lives? Lehi, that great patriarch of the Nephite people, provided for us an understanding of the nature of happiness, its

source, and its cause. While teaching his son Jacob the necessity for opposition in our lives, Lehi said, “If ye shall say there is no sin, ye shall also say there is no righteousness. And if there be no righteousness there be no happiness” (2 Nephi 2:13). It is clear then that happiness comes into our lives not through pleasure but through righteousness. It is obvious why it was possible for Alma to clearly teach that “wickedness never was happiness” (Alma 41:10). Happiness exists in being freed from wickedness. Indeed, if we accept the concept that there is no wrong, we deny ourselves and perhaps others an opportunity for the opposite—that is, righteousness and, therefore, happiness.

Because we live in a world limited in both perspective and opportunity by the Fall, all except the Savior Himself have been partakers of wickedness (which in its broadest sense is simply a violation of the law of righteousness), and, as such, we have removed ourselves from a state of true happiness. Such removal is a just outcome because of the demands of eternal law. That is, if we violate an eternal principle, or law, we become unworthy to live in a state of pure happiness. It is therefore apparent that without the Atonement of the Savior, all mortal beings would find themselves both in a state of unrighteousness and unhappiness.

The work of Jesus Christ, to answer the demand of justice in our behalf, is the great message of Amulek in the Book of Mormon:

And behold, this is the whole meaning of the law, every whit pointing to that great and last sacrifice; and that great and last sacrifice will be the Son of God, yea, infinite and eternal.

And thus he shall bring salvation to all those who shall believe on his name; this being the intent of this last sacrifice, to bring about the bowels of mercy, which overpowereth justice, and bringeth about means unto men that they may have faith unto repentance.

And thus mercy can satisfy the demands of justice, and encircles them in the arms of safety, while he that exercises no faith unto repentance is exposed to the whole law of the demands of justice; therefore only unto him that has faith unto repentance is brought about the great and eternal plan of redemption [or happiness]. [Alma 34:14–16]

Payment for a broken law demands sacrifice. The sacrifice made by God was the Atonement, and it is broad enough to cover all of our sins but also requires a sacrifice on the part of the recipient. This sacrifice is beautifully illustrated by the words of Lamoni's father when he prayed, "I will give away all my sins to know thee" (Alma 22:18). This is indeed the cost of happiness, and the sacrifice that must be made by all humankind—to give away all of our sins. The Atonement of Christ does not satisfy justice in our behalf on a piecemeal (sin-by-sin) basis, but requires that we become new creatures, born again, that we "lay aside every sin . . . which doth bind you down to destruction" (Alma 7:15).

It is apparent that to the repentant, the law of justice is a positive aspect of the gospel. It is because of this arrangement that we can have hope for happiness and for freedom from our own sins and acts against the law. It is only the wicked and unrepentant who fear justice and look for mercy without price. The law of justice brings opportunity for obedience to God's laws and, ultimately, joy. The corollary is that disobedience brings unhappiness. We learn from the scriptures that the law of justice is not optional and must be accounted for in our lives.

There seem to be only two ways to satisfy justice: either we must keep the law perfectly (do no sin) or we must pay the penalty for the broken law. Significantly, the Savior did both—in Him there was no sin, and yet though Him the price demanded by justice for the sins of all mankind was paid. The prophet Alma taught, "The Son of God suffereth according to the flesh that he might take upon him the sins of his peo-

ple, that he might blot out their transgressions according to the power of his deliverance" (Alma 7:13). This divine act, the Atonement, is available to any and all of those who are absolutely submissive to the will of God.

Through the Atonement of Christ we come to know happiness because we become free from worldliness and are therefore able to enter into a state of happiness where the vicissitudes of life are not only endured but are endured well.

This demands not just *some* sacrifice but a *total* sacrifice on our part. The sacrifice of Christ was complete, ultimate, and infinite. Our sacrifice must likewise be complete. We must "offer a sacrifice unto the Lord . . . in righteousness, even that of a broken heart and a contrite spirit" (D&C 59:8).

Elder James E. Talmage wrote:

*Happiness leaves no bad after-taste, it is followed by no depressing reaction; it calls for no repentance, brings no regret, entails no remorse; pleasure too often makes necessary repentance, contrition, and suffering; and, if indulged to the extreme, it brings degradation and destruction. [James E. Talmage, "A Greeting to the Missionaries," *Improvement Era* 17, no. 2 (December 1913): 173]*

In reflecting on the meaning of happiness in my own life, I have come to equate that feeling with peace—not just calmness or freedom from conflict or quiet but true peace, the kind that the Savior promised when He told his disciples, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you" (John 14:27).

Of all the people in the world, we have reason to be the most happy and to have the greatest measure of peace in our lives because of the hope within us. We know the Lord and understand His example—an example of happiness. He was not steeped in pleasure for, as noted by Isaiah, He was "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3). True happiness is born of our understanding that in

the midst of joy or trial He is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). It is possible, because of Him, to have peace deep within our souls when all about there is confusion, tumult, and temptation. It is possible because of Him to be truly happy.

I close with these words of the Savior from the Doctrine and Covenants: “Learn of me, and listen to my words; walk in the meekness of my Spirit, and you shall have peace in me” (D&C 19:23). Of this I testify in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.