



Service, Happiness & Joy

by David E. McClean

The pursuit of happiness. That is what people seem to do with most of their lives, i.e. pursue happiness, whether they are aware of it in each moment or not. (The demands of life often make us *forget* why we are doing what we are doing.) Often, this pursuit entails a very mundane and narrow notion of ‘happiness,’ a notion wrapped-up in self – personal fame, money, property, power, health, sex, career, *even family*, or some combination of all of these or, perhaps, other things.

But one can also think of happiness as a life well lived in pursuit of higher goals – goals that entail service to others, community, and God, and which subsume all of the second-order goods from the above list, which have their place. Such a pursuit does not deliver happiness in the ordinary sense of the word used today – the sense that all is fine with *my* world; that *I* have everything that *I* want. As I have discovered for myself, this later notion of happiness puts one in a precarious position in life. Why?

Rudyard Kipling, in his famous poem *If*, reminds us that “triumphs and disasters” are twin “imposters.” Both will visit us, for sure, but neither is as it seems. We do well not to invest too much energy bringing the former about while keeping the later at bay. That leads to a life of fear and selfishness. If our happiness depends on a more or less crass utilitarian calculus – upon making sure *my* mundane pleasures outweigh *my* mundane pains – we will be on sandy ground and likely doomed to a life of *unhappiness*, as we have defined it.

But pursuit of spiritual things and the needs of others, which entail *service* to God and to community, it is these things that bring *joy* to life, joy that transcends what passes for happiness among those lost in the mundane. It is through such service that we are introduced to our true

A Message to Members

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The field of service is our proper domain, and that field is *inexhaustible*. It is the place of joy and happiness, both.

(March 2005 - Vol. 1, No. 4. Welcome to a very special ministry, and a very special effort to, through faith and love, help to heal the wounds and divisions in our world in concert with other like-minded people of faith. The Interfaith Union’s project is healing our divisions - divisions of nationalism, divisions of race, divisions of sex and sexual orientation, divisions of class, divisions of culture, divisions of faith, divisions between secular and sacred, divisions between market and family, divisions that chop-up our souls, cloud our eyes and bid us to live lives of inner deformity and social distance. *Note on the image: The tree is a ubiquitous image, found in many faith traditions. It suggests life, power, spiritual growth, and insight.* WWW.IUNION.ORG (a New York not-for-profit religious corporation). Copyright 2005, The Interfaith Union for Progressive Religion. All Rights Reserved.

selves. It is through such service that we find the divinity within – the Jove, the Brahma, the Kingdom of God. And finding them, we cannot be shaken easily.

Service need not be limited to volunteering at soup kitchens or sitting on school boards, but encompasses virtually every field of human need. It is seeing another's need and responding to it with commitment and dedication, whether the need requires a simple and one-off task, or a lifetime of action.

Happiness comes from such joy because it cannot be shaken by the triumphs or disasters of life, because the focus is removed from self (“ego”) and redirected toward neighbor and community and world. We care less if we are faced with personal misfortune, and at the same time we are not diverted from our path by the personal achievement of the moment.

Depression and anxiety fade; fear of loss fades; fear of death fades. This is what happens when we are lost in service. This is because *the field of service is our proper domain, and that field is inexhaustible*. In it, there is no occasion for prolonged rest. In it, we “work out our salvation with diligence” in both the Buddhist and Christian senses of that formulation. In it, we form our souls.

Pursuit of spiritual things and the needs of others, which entails service to God and to community, it is these things that bring a joy to life.

When we are focused exclusively on our selves, we worry about our own existence, our own needs, our own pleasures. Living such a life is to waste the gift that one is given.

Survey the world about you. In what way might *you* serve? Where will you find *your* joy?

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