

This morning, I would like to talk about one of the most powerful forces known to humankind. This force has the power to transform relationships. It has been known to take a hopeless, desperate situation and dramatically alter it for the good. It has enabled individuals to attain heights they only imagined, and accomplish deeds others thought impossible. It has fueled innovation, and is responsible for every scientific advancement known to humanity. This power is the source of every moral, ethical, and spiritual revolution. I have seen it topple dictators, transform nations, and empower great movements. It has brought light to dark corners, emboldened the weak, and multiplied a modest, but noble effort into a mighty force for good. It has made the unthinkable thinkable, the unlikely likely, it has birthed dreams, then helped them grow up to reality.

Though this force is often downplayed, underutilized, and ignored, it remains, when properly used and directed, the most influential factor in every human endeavor. Without it, we can accomplish nothing. With it, our possibilities are nearly infinite. I am talking, of course, about the power of the human mind and its ability, when properly cultivated and directed, to form and transform ourselves, our community, our world, and one day, our universe.

These past few weeks we have been talking about happiness. We began by noting that religions have been unable to agree upon what makes God happy. If one religion believes a certain trait or virtue will make God happy, you can be assured another religion believes that trait or virtue's exact opposite will make God happy. It therefore seems reasonable to suggest the goal of religion should be human happiness, for that is measurable.

If God is our loving parent, then that God will desire our happiness, just as we desire happiness for our children. Happiness is therefore a laudable goal worthy of our effort and attention.

If God is not our loving parent, then we are under no obligation to honor or please that God. So no matter what God is like, human happiness—our personal happiness and the happiness of others—is a worthy and virtuous goal.

Last week, we thought about the importance of goals, and I said that every happy person I've ever met had a goal toward which they aimed their lives, some good and constructive purpose that gave meaning and structure to their lives.

Today, I want us to think about the relationship between our mind, or our wills, and our happiness. I have been thinking about this connection for several years, after reading a quote by Abraham Lincoln, who said, "Most folks are as happy as they make up their minds to be."

When I first read that quote, I dismissed it as simplistic and untrue, believing human happiness was a complex matter, dependent upon a variety of factors, not just one's state of mind. But over time, I have come to believe you can possess every ingredient necessary for human happiness, but if you lack the will to be happy, if you have decided to be unhappy, all the other attributes will have little effect. I have observed that if you are determined to be happy, you can lack several of the ingredients for happiness and still be content. You can be happy despite your lack, if you have made up your mind to be happy.

I know two people, both of whom are about my age. Both have sufficient resources, appear to have many friends, do not suffer from a debilitating illness, have meaningful employment, and are equally talented. But one is happy, and the other is not. When I see the first person, she says, "Isn't today a beautiful day!" It can be rainy and cloudy and cold and she could have just been told she is being transferred to the slums of Bangladesh, and she will say, "How exciting!"

When I see the second person, he says, "This is a rotten day. My life stinks." That very morning he could have won 587.5 million dollars in the Powerball lottery, but he will complain that now he will need to hire an accountant, and it will confirm his conviction that life is rotten and his life is especially and uniquely cursed.

There's a curious little story in the fifth chapter of John's gospel. A man has been ill for 38 years. Jesus approaches him and asks, "Do you want to be well?" I always thought that was a silly question. Of course, the man wanted to be well. Who wouldn't want to be well? Who wants to lie around like a slug? Well, slugs. Think for a moment how much energy it takes to heal someone, to help bring wholeness to someone's life. Now imagine how difficult it would be if they did not want that wholeness, did not want that happiness, did not believe wholeness and happiness and well-being were possible for them. It isn't enough for us to want someone to be happy and whole. They must want it for themselves. They must believe it is a real possibility for them, and every morning of every day they must wake up and sign their name on that line. Do you want to be well? Well, most folks are as happy as they make up their minds to be. As we think, so we are.

In 1987, Joan and I were invited to serve as chaperones to a group of Plainfield high schoolers traveling to the Soviet Union. One of the students was in our meeting, so we agreed to go, got passports, applied for a visa, and were accepted. Joan was very excited, and couldn't stop talking about it. She would say, "This is going to be wonderful. We're going to see some fantastic things and meet the most interesting people. I can't believe we get to do this. We'll never forget this."

I would say, “I bet the food is weird and I end up sick and perhaps even dead.”

We flew to Helsinki, Finland and took a train some 700 miles through the night to Moscow. We arrived at our hotel and were escorted to a banquet hall and fed this cream of eyeball soup. Joan said it was seafood chowder. That might have been what she had, but there were eyeballs in my soup. I looked at them, and they looked right back at me. It immediately made me sick, and I spent the next three days in our hotel room. Joan would return every evening and regale me with stories of the things she’d seen that day. “You wouldn’t believe it. We saw Red Square, Lenin’s Tomb, the Kremlin, St. Basil’s Cathedral. This is fantastic. And the people are so interesting.” As for me, I learned the ins and outs of Moscow plumbing.

As we think, so we are.

We were at the Unitarian-Universalist church in Danville last night, at their chili supper. Down in the basement eating chili and saw a poster on the wall. Lovely poster of two Buddhist monks walking along a trail, arm in arm, laughing. The caption read, “There is no way to happiness. Happiness is the way.”

Do you want to be well? Have you made up your mind to be happy?