

Chapel Talk  
October 14, 2009  
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Good evening!

In front of you is what I have called “Mr. G’s happiness napkin.” Last year Mr. Goldsberry and I got into a conversation about the psychological roots of happiness. I know it is hard to believe Mr. Goldsberry and I were having an abstract, philosophical conversation, but it is true! Anyway, I ended up writing down on a napkin what I felt I had come to see as central practices to my happiness. Tonight I want to tell you the story of how I came to identify these practices. Over the next ten minutes I’d like to share with you a bit about a difficult time in my life, the people who helped me through it, and what I believe I’ve learned for myself. I’ll begin on a drive I took in January of 2007.

My pulse raced again. I tried to relax the grip of my clammy hands on the steering wheel as I drove to the doctor for the third time in as many weeks, catastrophic images repeating themselves in my head. I had trouble getting full lungfuls of air; my fearful, shallow breathing exacerbated my bronchitis. I was terrified. In the words of the psalm, “my courage melted away in my calamity; I was at my wits’ end.”

For much of my life, I have been blessed to be happy. When people told me stories about being miserable for extended periods, I just could not relate. If I can provide Hannah and Margaret with as supportive and loving a childhood as I experienced, I would consider it a true victory. No school I had attended had been perfect, but at each I felt comfortable, curious and upbeat most days. My work life has had its ups and downs, but I would always have described it as rewarding and compelling at its core.

Walking with a friend in Greenwich Village over Christmas break in 2006, however, that happiness began to desert me. I coughed a deep, extended cough, and mentioned that I had been fighting this cold for weeks. She introduced me to the concept of walking pneumonia, and I started to get concerned. A certain level of concern was not irrational; I

have a health condition that means I should definitely work actively against respiratory illnesses. By January, however, reasonable concern had mutated into obsessive anxiety.

I will be forever grateful to my wife Hilary. After days of trying gently to question the sanity of my level of apprehension, she finally said, "I am sick and tired of hearing how you are sick and tired. You need to talk to someone else about this." That someone else was Mrs. Hutchinson. She did not beat around the bush – she immediately ordered me to stop working, to see a psychiatrist and to get medication. Over what was for me a very long weekend between my first seeing her and my seeing the psychiatrist, she was available to me whenever I needed to talk. Her caring directness and her availability was phenomenal.

For years I have been thankful to have Mr. Roach and St. Andrew's in my life, and never more so than in those dark days. At the time I was Director of College Counseling. To be the Head of School and have your Director of College Counseling suddenly drop throws a major wrench into your works. He immediately worked with Mrs. Schuller, Ms. Ross and Mr. Everhart to help my college counselees. Mr. Brown took on my teaching, and Mr. Speers and Mr. Caldwell helped on dorm and with other parts of my work. I will never fully know all that these people did for me in picking up for me right in the middle of the year - It's not like we're not busy enough around here! They were amazing.

Mrs. Hutchinson then helped me think about things I could do to regain my happiness.

First, I slept. Between being the father of a young child, my SAS work and my cough keeping me awake, I had not been getting enough rest. I'd tried to be careful, but now I became very strict with myself about resting. We've all heard about how much sleep helps your learning, but it helps your happiness even more. Professor Schwartz from University of Michigan discovered in a recent happiness study that "Making sixty thousand dollars more in annual income has less of an effect on your daily happiness than getting one extra hour of sleep a night." By switching from about 6 hours of sleep a night

to eight, I gave myself a significant raise! With rest I began to feel my pulse rate slow, and my ability to rebound from small stressors increase.

I exercised. I used to let the afternoon come and go, always finding a reason to keep working rather than going to the gym. Now, Al Wood worked with me every day, giving of his scant time and his extensive expertise. Many recent studies have shown the psychologically beneficial results of exercise – one even seems to indicate that exercise is more effective than medication in relieving depressive symptoms. During and after my workouts I found my spirits higher than they had been in weeks. When I went back to work, I discovered that because I had more energy during the work day, I could afford the time at the gym – a virtuous cycle!

I began eating better. During the past year, my appetite had declined, and I had lost weight. As I slept and worked out, I was hungrier, and for better foods. Like all humans I am wired, when tired and stressed, to seek out sugar and carbohydrates. When calm and when hungry from physical exercise, I find vegetables, grains and fruits more appealing. I put on good weight, and Ms. Ross introduced me to a farm from which we get local and fresh veggies every week. Dishes that I would have made jokes about – kale and barley soup, turnip greens – became delicious meals to which I looked forward.

Mrs. Hutchinson and my psychiatrist introduced me to the idea of challenging my own thoughts when they became irrationally dark. I've always been a critical thinker, and the idea that I could feel better just by repeating, "I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and gosh-darn it, people like me" had always struck me as silly and unrealistic. Mrs. Hutchinson helped me see the difference between ungrounded repeating of words, and rationally challenging your crazy catastrophic thoughts. When I found myself obsessing, I would ask myself, "What are the odds that I am truly sick? What are some other explanations? How else could I view this situation?" I was excited to learn to use my analytical habits to make myself feel better rather than worse. More generally, I made a habit of occasionally pulling myself up during each day and noting the pleasant aspects of

my situation. “Stop and smell the roses” and “be thankful” turn out to be excellent psychological practices, trite catchphrases though they may be!

I continued to spend time with other people, and to seek to improve the quality of that time. The studies on connecting with others are remarkable – people who report having meaningful relationships even have lower mortality rates! I’m incredibly lucky to have a job and a life that demands I am with people all the time, and while I could not instantly turn all of those interactions into positive moments, I began working in that direction.

Most fascinatingly to me, I learned that people who work toward an altruistic, transcendent goal find themselves in high spirits more of the time. After one has sufficient food, shelter and access to quality health care, happiness correlates with the generosity of one’s mission, rather than with one’s wealth. While news to the scientific community, this would come as no surprise to ethically committed people everywhere. Here again, I found myself to be incredibly lucky. My family and I had all that we materially needed. I was already doing a job that served others, and of course as a father I was helping my daughter. I was in a great position to dedicate myself even more clearly to important goals beyond myself.

Focusing on a mission larger than myself also helped me think usefully about stress. Among ambitious Americans, stress can be a badge of honor. We celebrate our fatigue, our multiple commitments, our lack of free time. In the context of my talk, all this seems obviously negative. Yet to be fair, most of us would not want to stop challenging ourselves, or to take a path on which we could always be guaranteed success. We want to work hard for important outcomes. I began to think of work in the context of my long-term goals. My long-term goal at work is to contribute meaningfully to a school where all students, regardless of means, can receive a life-changing education, and prepare them to improve the state of our world. When something specific in my work life makes me stressed, I now try to connect it to my overall goal, and thus put it in context.

As the happiness napkin says, I've been striving to sleep, eat well and exercise, and optimistically to work with others toward a long-term, transcendent goal. Clearly my case is an extreme example – I stopped working and focused full time on self-care. In this room there are people who have had serious brain misfires like mine; most, thankfully, have not. These happiness napkin tricks, however, are not only for those experiencing the “stormy winds” described in the psalm. They can also help those who feel happy and wish to be happier. At this point in my life I count myself again in this category. I look forward to learning more, and adding to or modifying my happiness napkin as I discover more about how I as an individual and we as humans create rewarding, satisfying lives for ourselves.

I wish each of you the freedom from worry described in the reading from Matthew, and that you will be brought to your “desired haven” as the Psalmist says. I wish you the peace that comes from and imbues your body, your mind and your soul. Finally I offer you this prayer for peace from the Buddhist tradition. “May all beings everywhere plagued with sufferings of body and mind quickly be freed from their illnesses. May those frightened cease to be afraid, and may those bound be free. May the powerless find power, and may people befriend one another. May those who find themselves in trackless, fearful wilderness - the children, the aged, the unprotected - be safeguarded, and may they swiftly attain the peace of enlightenment.” Amen.

Mr. G's “happiness napkin”:

1. Sleep
2. Eat
3. Exercise
4. Challenge irrationally negative thoughts; regularly briefly reflect on positive aspects of immediate situation
5. Spend positive time with others
6. Work for a large, altruistic goal

Books that help me:

*Happier* by Tal Ben-Shahar  
*Authentic Happiness* by Martin Seligman  
*Stumbling on Happiness* by Daniel Gilbert  
*Flow* by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi  
*Mindset* by Carol Dweck