

Having a 'Voice' Makes People Happy

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It seems happiness is related to power

"What is happiness? The feeling that power is growing, that resistance is overcome." So wrote Friedrich Nietzsche in 1895.

I'm guessing that many of you would feel uncomfortable embracing this definition of happiness, especially coming from one of history's most famous curmudgeons. If so, maybe in part it's because too often we've nodded in agreement with Lord Acton's catchy caveat, "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely." And who would want to risk corruption?

But what if we were to dig to the root, Latin meaning of power, "to be able"? Suddenly the word's hard edge dissolves; power simply means efficacy—our capacity, as philosopher Erich Fromm put it, to "make a dent."

Over the last decade the happiness quest has spawned bestselling books, college courses, retreats, and even a "happiness conference." Most seem to offer similar advice: Once our basic physical needs are covered, more stuff does little to boost our happiness. Friendships, family, self-acceptance, and meaning in our lives are the core determinants of our happiness.

I'm happy we're talking about happiness, but disturbed, too, because I've noticed that most happiness gurus fail to mention power. And why is that a big mistake? Because most human beings are not couch potatoes and whiners. We are doers and creators. In fact, the human need to "make a dent" is so great that Fromm argued we should toss out René Descartes' "I think therefore I am" and replace it with "I am, because I effect."

Even much of what we call "materialism" is, I think, not about "things" at all. It is a distorted, ultimately unsatisfying attempt to feel powerful, with status through possessions forced to stand in for power. If true, then addressing powerlessness is a direct way both to foster happiness and to overcome planet-destroying materialism.

There's just one pathway to happiness in which this deep, human need for power is given pride of place: democracy. By this I mean democracy as a living practice that enables us to have a real say in every dimension of our public lives, from school to workplace and beyond.

Such power is expanding in part through a growing number of largely unseen citizen organizations. Among them is Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC), whose 5,000-plus members address concerns ranging from toxic dumping to open government.

Jean True, a leader in KFTC in the 1990s, told me, "I was home raising kids for 10 years. I didn't know anything about politics. I thought my only job was to vote."

When I asked Jean to tell me why she joined KFTC, she responded, "It's just the fun! That you can get together some regular people, go to the capitol, and make changes in state policy. ... We have a

great time doing what we do, going toe to toe and head to head with state legislators. We sometimes know more than they do! It's the fun of power—the ant knocking over the buffalo.”

On the other side of the world in the year 2000, I danced with women in a Kenyan village, feeling their exuberant happiness in their newfound power as village tree planters and organizers of women's groups tackling problems from alcoholism to hunger.

That same year, I stood on a railroad platform in rural India with desperately poor people lying only a few steps away on grimy concrete. I turned to Jafri, the young Indian researcher traveling with us—he was helping some of his country's poorest farmers escape the debt-and-toxins trap of chemical agriculture—and I asked: “How do you keep going?”

“I have to feel I am doing something to address the roots of suffering,” he replied, “or I couldn't be happy.”

Including power in our definition of happiness changes everything.

If happiness lies in covering basic needs plus satisfying personal ties and finding meaning, society's role is limited. It need only ensure that essential needs are met and provide opportunities to pursue personal relationships and meaning. Even a largely totalitarian government could do that.

But, if we add power to the happiness equation, our agenda shifts. Maximizing happiness then requires engaging citizens in changing the rules and norms so that more and more of us are empowered participants. And, of course, joining with others in this exhilarating pursuit we achieve a double whammy: Such activity furthers the widely appreciated relational and meaning aspects of the happiness puzzle.

If, from our nation's founding onward, we Americans have treated freedom and happiness as virtually synonymous, my point is a really old one. We might do well to replace the maxims of Acton and even Nietzsche with one uttered by Roman statesman Marcus Tullius Cicero 2000 years ago: “Freedom is participation in power.”

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*[I have this nagging feeling the 'American' author has missed the point; exercising power does not lead to real happiness, although Americans would like the world to believe it does! **Peace and happiness, however, are inextricably entwined -- no doubt.** You can now resist the temptation to abuse your partner and kick the dog -- bloody linear-thinking, violent yanks! Ed.]*

Peace.

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