

Don't Worry, Be Happy!

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

The United Nations declared March 20th the first International Day of Happiness. Action for Happiness even has a website at <http://www.DayofHappiness.net> The UN believes that celebrating a day of happiness is important in getting nations to better understand why the pursuit of happiness is crucial in reaching their public policy goals. People all over the world have embraced the celebration of happiness in numerous ways.

According to USA TODAY, “The International Day of Happiness was originally suggested by Bhutan, a country that uses the Gross National Happiness Index to evaluate their progress, rather than a gross domestic product (GDP) model” (March 21, 2013, p. 1A).

This raises the question: What is the best way to measure happiness? Happiness means different things to different people. However, it is certainly important that human beings have their basic needs met in order to be happy: food, clean water, shelter, etc. After that, love, romance, family, good entertainment, art, productive and interesting labor, etc. can be major sources of happiness.

Does everyone have the capacity to be happy? The winter 2012, Vol. 2, No. 3 issue of *The Human Prospect* is a special issue dedicated to the topic of happiness. I interviewed Sonja Lyubomirsky, a leading expert on the science of happiness, for the issue. She and most other experts on the science of happiness, or positive psychology, have determined that 50% of what makes us happy comes from our genes. However, our attitude also greatly determines how happy we will be.

The individual pursuit of happiness is certainly important. What about societal happiness? Do societies or governments have any responsibility in aiding individuals in their pursuit of happiness? What is the relationship between the individual and society?

Sadly, societies and cultures often bring about much *unhappiness* to countless millions. Governments and cultures have oppressed, enslaved and killed countless millions of human beings. Cultures have condoned Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) or genital cutting, the persecution of alleged witches and warlocks, the killing of albinos, etc.

Many people promote religion as a major source of happiness. However, some of the same religions that bring peace, generosity, freedom, etc., paradoxically also bring war, oppression, slavery, genocide, authoritarianism, fascism, etc.

Societies should be set up in such a way that the possibility of attaining happiness is great for the masses. The challenge is determining how that should be done. Which socio-economic system is most conducive to bringing about widespread happiness?

Many humanists have argued bitterly among themselves about this question. Some go so far as argue that any true humanist has to reject capitalism. Others maintain that any true humanist has to *accept* capitalism. However, both sides are wrong. Some humanists embrace capitalism, others reject it.

One humanist, Barry Seidman, defines humanism in such a way that only libertarian socialists, or anarcho-socialists, can be considered to be true humanists. Not only does this sound opportunistic and disingenuous, it raises the question: is libertarian socialism realistic?

Anarcho-socialists advocate a society without hierarchies (in other words, a classless society). Such a state might be achieved in hunter/gatherer societies. However, how likely is such a situation in a nation/state today? The attempts at classless societies in Cuba, China, the former Soviet Bloc and elsewhere have been utter failures. Yet libertarian socialists go even farther and argue against hierarchies of any kind. This, of course, is completely unrealistic. Even if capitalism is the scourge its critics believe it to be, they have to come up with an acceptable alternative. Many people that embrace capitalism are not necessarily “worshipping Mammon.” They might simply see it as the best available system.

It seems that the societies most conducive to happiness are the social democracies like those of Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Canada and Australia. The people of those nations routinely score high on happiness indexes and quality of life indexes. The masses have food, clothing, good health care, decent jobs, child care, etc. Many of the people are atheists and the nations are secular.

One does not find the kind of sexual repression in those nations that one finds in theocracies, which are not conducive to widespread happiness. Sex can be a major source of happiness. Indeed, as Paul Kurtz wrote in his famous essay, “What is Happiness?”:

Among the finest pleasures of life are the joys of sexual passion and eroticism. Celibates have committed a sin against themselves, for they have repressed the most exquisite pleasure of all: the full and varied sexual life that is so essential to happiness. We must, therefore, be open to the multiplicities of sexuality. We ought to act out and fulfill our fantasies, as long as they are not self-destructive or destructive of others.... (p. 10, *The Human Prospect*, winter 2012, Vol. 2, No. 3).

Societies must see to it that their citizens have the opportunity to pursue happiness. Conversely, citizens must hold their societies accountable in this regard. While social experimentation might be necessary for the advancement of civilization and the attainment of widespread happiness, recklessness is not the answer. Reason and clear thinking must always lead the way. After all, the road to hell is often paved with good intentions.