



2010

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Recommended Citation

Chapman, Wes, "Happiness and the Liberal Arts: Three Movements" (2010). *Honorees for Teaching Excellence*. 1.
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Happiness and the Liberal Arts: Three Movements

Wes Chapman

Illinois Wesleyan University Honors Convocation

14 April 2010

Movement 1.

May I be well; may I be happy; may I be free from suffering.

May you be well; may you be happy; may you be free from suffering.

May all be well; may all be happy; may all be free from suffering.

Movement 2.

It is a curious fact that the word "happiness" does not appear in Illinois Wesleyan's mission statement. Seemingly, we want you to be creative, critical, and inquisitive, but not necessarily to be happy. We want you to be citizens in a democracy and a global society, but not necessarily on top of the world. We want you to have specialized knowledge and a comprehensive worldview, but not necessarily a cheerful outlook. Now as someone who played a part in the process by which our current mission statement was put together, I know as well as anyone that it is unfair to use the phrase "we want," suggesting that there was some single conscious intelligence with coherent and discernible motives for including things or leaving them out. As is no doubt true for most mission statements, our mission was the result of a long communal process full of arguments over ideals, special interest pleading, compromises, and writing by committee. Still, no one pled for happiness as a special interest, and so far as I can remember happiness was not among the ideals anyone argued for. It simply didn't come up.

We are not alone in this omission (if omission it is). None of the small liberal arts colleges to which we ordinarily compare ourselves,

either our peer group or our aspirant group, mention happiness in their mission statements. In my unsystematic survey of the other schools I could think of where the liberal arts have a central place, only two use the words "happy" or "happiness" in their mission statements. Colby College aspires to graduate students who are "happy with themselves," which hardly seems to count given the narrowness of the word's application. Only Duke University mentions happiness as an ideal in itself: Duke's mission calls upon the university to "[pursue] those areas of teaching and scholarship that would...promote human happiness." Even here it's ambiguous whether this means that its graduates should be happy themselves, or that they should simply provide happiness to others.

The lesson to be learned from the omission of happiness from our mission statement, then—aside from the fact that mission statements are by nature porous and reductive documents that do not by any means capture the totality of our ideals—(heed who must)—the lesson is that happiness is not a concept that has prominence or currency in our nation's ongoing discussion of what the liberal arts should be or should do. If there is a "we" who does not consider happiness our mission, it is liberal arts colleges and universities in general. And that, as I say, is a curious thing. We all strive for happiness; many have said that it is the central motivating principle behind all human action. Is it really no part of a liberal education? And if not, why not?

To pursue these questions, let me continue using this unjustifiable "we" for a moment. If there were a "we" that consciously chose not to include happiness in our mission, what might "our" reasons be? As I see it, there are a number of evident possibilities.

The first is that while the goal of happiness might be worthy, it is not achievable. Perhaps it's too insubstantial, too ideal, too abstract. But this objection would surely apply to "creativity" and "strength of character," both of them a part of our mission, and anyway it would surely be a very sad thing if a university, of all places, didn't recognize the value of ideals and abstractions. Perhaps happiness is unachievable in another sense: as something that one is simply born with, or born

without, and therefore unalterable. At one time, this was the predominant view of psychologists. Research by Brickman, Coates and Janoff-Bulman, for example, showed that lottery winners, after a year or so, go right back to being just about as happy as they were before they won the lottery. Even more strikingly, the same is true of people who are paralyzed in accidents; within a few years they are only slightly less happy than the general population. Studies like these seemed to suggest to psychologists that happiness has a set point. If you are born happy, you'll stay happy regardless of what happens, and if you are born unhappy, you're just out of luck. Recent research has modified the set point theory considerably, however. It now appears that our genetic disposition for happiness only accounts for about half of the happiness we feel: 10% is accounted for by circumstances--it does matter a little bit whether you win the lottery or become paralyzed--and about 40% is determined by intentional activity. You're born with a set point for happiness, in other words, but what you do in life can raise or lower that set point significantly. So if "our" reason for excluding happiness from our mission is that achieving it is impossible, we're wrong.

Another possibility is that happiness is simply not important. It's all very well if you're happy, this line of reasoning goes, but what really matters is--and then you can fill in the blank however you like. What matters is truth. What matters is morality. Having some kind of higher purpose. Scientia and/or sapientia. And so on. A better scholar than I could probably trace this view deep into the church roots of the liberal arts university, not just to the Wesleyan traditions maintained in our name but much further back to the medieval university, closely tied to the church and foundational for the liberal arts in the modern era. In the church-affiliated model of the university, learning is always in the service of something higher, and happiness a reward, more likely after death than before, and paid for with a life of devotion and self-sacrifice. Today, however, schools whose missions are centrally and explicitly religious are more likely to mention happiness in their mission statements than are liberal arts colleges. And it seems to me that this devaluation of happiness persists now mainly in a secular form such

that happiness is considered suspect without actually being secondary to a positive ideal. As Ursula LeGuin says, "we have a bad habit, encouraged by pedants and sophisticates, of considering happiness as something rather stupid. Only pain is intellectual, only evil interesting."

There are a number of ways to refute the view that happiness is unimportant. One can dispute the premise outright, for example by following Aristotle, who in *Nicomachean Ethics* claims that only happiness is something we choose "always for itself and never for the sake of anything else," whereas other goods—among them virtue and reason—we choose for themselves but also for the sake of happiness. Alternatively, one can argue that even if happiness is secondary to a higher end such as, say, morality, happiness is still important as a means to the higher end. One could infer this, for example, from a study by Fowler and Christakis that showed that happiness is contagious: if I am happy, a close friend or family member living within a half mile of me is 42% more likely to be happy than if I am not. This effect holds over several degrees of separation: a friend of a friend is 15% more likely to be happy if I am, and a friend of a friend of a friend is 9% more likely. Having a friend of a friend of a friend who is happy increases your chances of happiness more than gaining \$5000. One might infer from this that trying to be happy is a moral act, or even that we have a moral obligation to try to be happy.

But the reasoning that I find most salient to the question of whether happiness is important is simply this. Our mission statement, like most, isn't focused on a single ideal, it's a grab bag of several: critical thinking, a spirit of inquiry, social justice, and so on. So even if one wanted to say that happiness is less important to the liberal arts than, say, truth--which also doesn't appear in our mission statement--it's quite another to suggest that it doesn't make the top dozen or so. I suspect that if you walked up to a random group of students, alumni or faculty and asked them to rank in importance happiness and every key phrase in our mission statement, happiness would come out near the top for just about everyone.

This brings us to the third possibility why our fictional "we" might have chosen to exclude happiness from the liberal arts mission: that happiness is actually antithetical to liberal education in one way or another. It could be, for example, that happiness suggests a condition of stasis or complacency that would decrease our desire to strive for a better life. This version is relatively easy to refute, because it presumes that happiness itself does not require striving, a premise disputed by thinkers both ancient and modern. The ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus, though he defines happiness in terms of pleasure, insists that pursuing happiness requires "sober reasoning, searching out the grounds of every choice and avoidance, and banishing those beliefs through which the greatest tumults take possession of the soul." Buddhist doctrine goes further, teaching that happiness requires an intensive life discipline of right beliefs, right intentions, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. My own admittedly sketchy survey of modern positive psychology suggests that the best scientific evidence confirms that increasing happiness is a complex, multi-faceted task requiring a great deal of effort in a number of different domains: strengthening relationships, finding activities in which one can find that state of immersion called "flow," fostering positive emotions like optimism and gratitude, contributing to something larger than oneself, savoring pleasant moments rather than just rushing through them, exercising, eating well, committing to goals, and so on. By any account, becoming and staying happy is hard work, and in no way inimical to striving.

A stronger version of the premise that happiness is antithetical to the liberal arts is that happiness in itself is not the problem; rather, the apparent means to the end of happiness is the problem. If ignorance is bliss, for example, then logically at least some forms of happiness must entail ignorance, something that no university would include in its mission statement as a positive value. This version of the third possibility is difficult to assess. There is some evidence to suggest that pessimists, or even more tellingly people who are depressed, are more accurate in their assessments than optimistic or non-depressed people.

The phenomenon is called "depressive realism." In general, the theory goes, happy people are more susceptible to effects like optimism bias and the illusion of control than unhappy ones are. But from what I can tell, the jury is still out on depressive realism. Some positive psychologists accept the theory, and counter it with the claim that positive illusions are adaptive nonetheless. But other psychologists argue that the effect only applies to trivial situations, or that depressed people actually overlook more contextual information than non-depressed people do and are no more accurate in their assessments overall. At the very least, the relationship between happiness and truth is best expressed as a question, not as an assumption. Indeed, I would make the same point about all the possible objections to happiness as a goal for the liberal arts university: whether happiness is achievable, whether it is important, whether it furthers striving or hinders it, whether it is in league with truth or opposed to it--these are all *questions*, important intellectual and life questions, and as such precisely fitted, in my view, to the mission of a liberal arts university.

So--am I making the case to include happiness in our mission statement? Well, if I were the philosopher king in charge of rewriting mission statements, a post I do not by any means aspire to, then, yes, I would probably work happiness in there somewhere. But I would also want to include truth, history, and beauty--none of which appear in our mission statement either. I have my own views of what our mission should be, but I said at the beginning that it is *curious* that happiness does not appear in our mission statement, not that it is particularly reprehensible.

What I really want to figure out, in asking whether the liberal arts ought to aspire to foster happiness, is what to expect of myself. I am acutely aware of and grateful for the honor done to me today. That awareness and gratitude makes me think about what I have to give back. And for whatever reason--maybe because in a time of war and economic hardship happiness seems especially valuable, or more personally because I know too well I have often been unable to bring happiness to those I have most wanted to make happy--for whatever

reason, it matters to me now, in this time and place, whether one of the things I have to give back is happiness. Have I helped my students become happy? Is it possible? Is it even something I want to do?

Movement 3.

Dear fictional student writing back to Illinois Wesleyan after some years out in the world,

Hey--good to hear from you! I'm glad you're doing so well, and even glad that you've had to work so hard at it. I'm not surprised. I always knew you had it in you--and much more still to come.

Something you wrote has stuck with me. It was just an offhand remark, a joke, really: "I don't know if making us happy was exactly what you were trying to do in that class." That made me think. Was I trying to make you happy? Have I ever tried to make my students happy?

I have said to you many times, as I have said to hundreds of students over the years, "I'm happy if you're happy." It was always at the end of a conference about one of your papers, and as often as not our discussion had led to the point where you had to scrap pretty much everything in your draft but the kernel of some idea. So sometimes you said, or wanted to say, "I'm not that happy." But sometimes we had worked through all that, to some new version of the idea that was more ambitious, better argued, and it was clear to both of us that, hey, this could be good. And all you had to do was go write another paper, pretty much from scratch, that was harder and longer than the first one, knowing full well that this one might not work out either...so when I said, "I'm happy if you're happy," you said, "I'm happy." And even if what I really meant was, "you've made progress, now please stop making my brain hurt," and even if what you really meant was "I've made progress, but my brain hurts too much to continue," I

nevertheless believe that you were happy, and I was happy. I want to believe you were happy because you saw a way to make something good, and because the something good was something that you yourself made. I was happy...for the same reason. We both suffered immensely in pursuit of that small moment of happiness, and I suppose that what has made the cost bearable to me was the belief that such moments would be self-replicating throughout the rest of your life.

So in that sense I wanted to make you happy. But I wanted more than that, and some of what I wanted for you was surely happiness. I am a teacher of English, of literature, one of the liberal arts. Literature is in essence play: The essence of poetry is play with words and images, flying along with "morning's minion, king-/dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon" and other fabulous linguistic birds. The essence of fiction is play with pretend worlds, an infinite dress-up party in which we can learn from wise talking horses, argue with monsters about natural rights, wake up as a giant cockroach, or shrink to ten inches high with a sip from a bottle that says, "drink me." In truth, the whole of the liberal arts is play, by definition that which is undertaken for its own sake and not in the service of a practical goal. Play is fun, but one need only watch a child playing on the lawn, or for that matter a scientist engaged in pure research, to realize that there is more in play than just fun, or that fun is deeper than we think: play is the joy of using oneself fully, stretching the limits of one's mind and muscles, losing oneself in the flow of the moment. And since play always involves a superimposition of the imagined on the real, play is the joy of freedom, of being able to move around in infinite space. I wanted you to have that happiness as well.

But I think that much of what else I wanted for you wasn't happiness itself--it was something that surrounds happiness, curls around it, anchors it and deepens it. I wanted you, first of all, to be rooted in time. When we struggled to understand the historical context of some lines in Dryden or Pope, or followed the evolution of women's poetry in America from Anne Bradstreet to Adrienne Rich, I wanted you to feel what literature has always made me feel, the depth and

weight of the history and culture that runs through us and makes us who we are. And when I paused after reading some lyrical passage in Zora Neale Hurston or William Faulkner, it wasn't just to let you think about whatever question I was asking, it was to give you a moment with the beauty and sublimity of the language. There is pleasure in the appreciation of beauty, whether the beauty of a Remedios Varo painting or of a mathematical proof, but there is also awe, a sense of some rightness that is as deep and as old as living creatures' sentience on earth. And for the higher gradients of happiness, where contentment and pleasure shade into joy, depth and weight are necessary; awe is necessary.

It is true that I have asked you to read many books that have been depressing: books in which the main character is reduced to madness, books in which everyone dies, books in which banal oppression triumphs over freedom and creativity. I can scarcely think of a narrative I have ever taught which didn't have some tragedy in it. But I have offered you this gift not to make you sad yourself, not primarily to serve as warning, not only for the sake of the ideas. I have offered it to make happiness, when it comes to you, *mean* something. This is the human condition: you can lose everything--love, pride, health, sanity, life. But if you know that, if you feel your kinship with all human beings vulnerable to suffering just like you, then you can also feel your connection to the joy that sounds in a song or a symphony, that reaches skywards in the Gothic arch and the Doric column. "For each ecstatic moment," writes Emily Dickinson,

We must an anguish pay □
In keen and quivering ratio □
To the ecstasy.

But I would add that we can get what we pay for, if we are open to it.

It is true as well, true most of all, that I have tried to pull the rug out from under you: that I like modernism and postmodernism and poems with six levels of irony and science fiction that calls into question what it means to be human and literary theory that demolishes the very tools it has used in the demolishing, that I am partial to Wallace Stevens

and Doris Lessing and Djuna Barnes and Thomas Pynchon and other masters of turning the world upside down, all to get you to one or another version of that place where

Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

But this mayhem and chaos I have inflicted upon you, that I have inflicted upon myself for as long as I can remember reading, has always been partly in the service of happiness. The lesson of winter is spring; the lesson of the drowned king is that

Nothing of him that doth fade

But doth suffer a sea-change

Into something rich and strange.

When things fall apart, humans build; when you are over the abyss, you learn to fly. That's human nature too. I wanted that for you, without ever saying as much.

Without ever saying as much. These are not the kinds of things one says about teaching. It may be, fictional student, that these are things one is not supposed to say. It seems to me sometimes that we are OK with the search for happiness just so long as we never admit that's what we're doing. Acknowledging that search openly makes us feel uncomfortable, vulnerable. It is a terrible responsibility, the responsibility to be happy, even more terrifying than the responsibility to make others happy. During those times in life when we cannot find happiness, or give it, we feel culpable. In the moments when we do find joy, it feels as if we're leaving others behind in some way, as if we just have to admit that we can't explain this, and even though we know that others too have felt happiness, we can never fully share it; we're afraid to let it show; we can only point and hint and hope that's enough, or maybe just hide it altogether. It may be that after all it is only polite not to speak of happiness. In which case, fictional student, take this closing as mere ceremony: be well, be happy.

