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Rotary Speech

Count it All Joy

Nelson Mandela once said, “After climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb.” Many people fail to recognize this on their pursuit for happiness. Their mindset is that only after they are accepted into their dream college, obtain enough money, or marry then they will find happiness. Is it possible to find happiness during a climb? Is happiness truly a choice? When applying this question to the Rotary Four-Way Test, I found the truth to be that happiness is a choice, it is fair to all concerned, it builds goodwill and better friendships, and it is beneficial to all concerned.

It is undeniably true that happiness is a choice. When facing a grueling situation, everyone has the option to attack it with optimism or negativity. Whichever they choose will eventually become a default for their mindset. However, many may doubt the verity in this by saying depression can be a result of a chemical imbalance in the brain, which prevents them from choosing happiness. Jamie Flexman, a writer for the *Huffington Post*, claims feeling depressed is like you are “trapped inside your own prison and...access to your brain lies behind that locked door. Sometimes...you are allowed outside to stretch your legs but you know this is temporary.” (“Depression”). Flexman’s metaphor conveys how helpless victims of depression feel. It is easy to develop the mindset that depression is normal and any bursts of happiness are fleeting. If one tends to handle depressing thoughts with a submissive attitude, they will carry this outlook with them in every situation. This blinds them to the possibility of happiness. If the mental

sluggishness of depression is truly a result of a chemical imbalance in the brain, antidepressants are always available to balance them. There is a common misconception that these drugs bring an artificial happiness to the one taking them, but their function is to restore equilibrium in the brain. The stigma placed on mental illnesses serves as a barrier that prevents many from seeking medical help. Dr. Kay Redfield Jamison's book, *Night Falls Fast*, states, "depression leading to suicide kills more teenagers...than cancer, heart disease, AIDS, pneumonia, influenza, birth defects and stroke combined" (Fried). These are among the most lethal illnesses, yet a preventable death triumphs over them all in frequency. Depression may not always be a choice, but seeking medical help to combat it usually is. If society would cease placing stigmas on antidepressants, teens may have more success in discovering they can always choose happiness.

It is fair to say happiness is a choice. Last summer while I was a part of a traveling ministry team, we resided in a rough area of inner city Philadelphia. A never-ending soundtrack of ambulance sirens played as the vehicles raced up and down the streets in a blur of red and white. We were informed by a leader of the local church that every five minutes someone in Philadelphia overdoses on heroin. I did not expect to find happiness thriving in areas of this city, but the atmosphere around the local church, Urban Hope, was overflowing with joy. All of my teammates wore shirts with the church's name on it, and every local we passed knew we were safe to approach. We were told that the locals would actually be offended if we ignored them on the streets. They expected a friendly smile or quick greeting, and most of them would return it. While it is nearly impossible to have a deep conversation with a stranger here in Dublin, in Philadelphia, sometimes when I sat down with a stranger, they shared their burdens before sharing their name. Most of them were the outcasts of society and desperate for soul-satisfying

joy. Some turned to drugs; others turned to the church. While drugs may not be as prevalent here as they are in Philadelphia, we face similar choices every day when it comes to how we deal with hopelessness. However, many may argue it is impossible to choose happiness when drowning in hardships. Whether a family member passed away, you are battling a lethal disease, or the world just seems to be against you, choosing happiness is never out of the picture. Olga Gillburd, author of the book *Happiness the Jewish Way*, acknowledges that she and other Jews are still traumatized by the horrors of the Holocaust, yet they are able to find joy because “Judaism encourages [them] to appreciate and find joy in every...routine aspect of [their] lives, starting with the waking moment” (“Community”). Gillburd’s religion encourages her and millions of other Jews to move forward from the past. This does not mean they overlook the severity of the Holocaust; it emphasizes the choice they still have for happiness. They could choose to harbor hostility for the murder of millions of Jews during World War II, yet most of them do not. There is something to be joyful about every moment, even in the “routine aspects” of life. Sometimes we just have to dig around for it a bit more. If those living in poverty and those suffering trauma from catastrophic events can still find happiness, surely the rest of us can.

Choosing happiness will create goodwill and build better friendships. I returned to inner city Philadelphia last fall. While underneath the elevated train, my friends and I crossed paths with a man huddled on the street’s curb. We stopped to talk to him, but he did not seem to notice us. Before trudging on, I bent down to ask how we could pray for him. He refused to meet our gazes, but explained how he had broken a few of his knuckles in a recent fight and had no money to go to the hospital. His hand had swelled three times its normal size. I am not sure if he believed in the same God I believe in, but his despair made him receptive to prayer. His

situation was bleak, so he was desperate for any sliver of joy he could find to paint his world. Although we could not help him to the hospital, our compassion lifted his spirits. His honesty sparked a deeper connection between us than would have come about if he had been closed off. Still, some argue community is not vital for living a happy life. All one needs is to be dripping money and they will have achieved happiness, right? Studies show this is far from the truth. An article “published by Open Democracy [says]...[although] poverty breeds misery, people's happiness level peaks at an annual income of...\$75,000” (“Community”). A surplus of money does not equal a surplus of happiness; it only spurs an unquenchable thirst for material possessions. Wasting money on expensive cars and luxurious clothes may sound nice, but how long will it be until the desire for a more costly vehicle or more brand-name clothes comes about? Clothes will deteriorate and cars will break down, but choosing to surround oneself with good people will bring a longer-lasting joy to the soul. Therefore, choosing to pursue a level of happiness that is not fleeting will create goodwill and better friendships.

It is beneficial to all concerned in saying happiness is a choice. Two years ago, I traveled to Guatemala with a group from my church. When we arrived at the village learning center, the children showered us with warm smiles and soft flower petals thrown from the second floor of the building. I felt like I had stepped onto a red carpet instead of a dirt floor. Every Guatemalan radiated joy. It was contagious. However, I discovered many children there were forced to grow up sooner than what should have been expected of them. A staff member informed us on how one of the children at the school, who happened to be the sponsor child of one of my team members, had recently been abandoned by his mother and forced into male prostitution. As a result, he was suffering depression and ran away from home. He was not even ten years old. I

never met him, but I remember hearing stories of how his smile always lit up the room, how contagious his laugh was, and how deep his compassion was for others. No one would suspect such a joyful person to be trapped in a nightmarish lifestyle. I have never met a group of people more generous or joyful than these Guatemalans. In spite of their heartbreaking situations, they continually sought small reasons to smile. It is proven that smiling, whether through pain or joy, improves health. Dr. Isha Gupta, a neurologist from IGEA, says, “a smile spurs a chemical reaction in the brain, releasing certain hormones including dopamine...[which] increases our feelings of happiness” (“Smiling”). This hormone is released regardless of whether or not the smile was genuine. Therefore, one can choose to smile, and dopamine will flood their brain and heightened their happiness. The Guatemalan children I met two years ago proved to me no situation is too dire that happiness is unattainable, and choosing happiness is beneficial to all.

I have found that choosing of happiness is entirely true, fair, the basis for building goodwill and better friendships, and is beneficial to all concerned. I am not saying we should be a society that disregards suffering. Emotions are what make us human. We should mourn with those who mourn, but we should not allow ourselves to dwell in these desolate situations. Residing there can lead to pessimistic attitudes becoming defaults when facing grueling tasks. To become a society that recognizes happiness as a constant choice, we must slaughter the stigmas we place on antidepressants so people will not feel ashamed to seek medical help. We must lay down our pride and forgive those who have wronged us. We must be willing to step out of our comfort zones and open up about what is weighing down our hearts. It is easy to find happiness in the midst of prosperity, but our goal should not be to achieve happiness only on the hilltop, but rather to seek joy in the most fatiguing parts of the climb.

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