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The Pursuit Of Happiness:



*Feminists don't see
the "three count" here.
His look is professional
but biblical, smart
but submissive!
R. B.*

*Professional but
biblical???
Call me quickly
Dexter*

We Ain't Got No Satisfaction

DOOR: What is happiness?

MYERS: For those of us who do research on the subject, happiness is defined as “a sense of well-being.”

DOOR: Which means?

MYERS: Which means a sense that life as a whole is going well. That sense of well-being comes from two sources—how happy a person *feels*, and to what extent they find their life satisfying.

DOOR: What makes people happy?

MYERS: First, let's clear the decks of some things that *don't* predict happiness. Say you want me to guess whether or not a particular person you have in mind feels happy and views life with a deep sense of satisfaction and well-being. You *won't* give me any important clues by telling me whether the person is male or female; age 15, 50, or 75; black or white; living in a city or a rural area; high-school educated or with a graduate degree. Believe it or not, you also give me no vital clue by telling me whether your person was questioned 30 years ago or today, whether the person 30 years ago won a state lottery or was paralyzed in an accident, whether the person lives on an estate and drives a BMW or has an apartment and drives an Escort.

David Myers is a professor. He's been one at Hope College in Holland, Michigan, for 23 years. He majored in chemistry at Whitworth College, but he teaches psychology. (He did get his PhD in Social Psychology at the University of Iowa). And now, his formal title at Hope College is . . . uh . . . the John Dirk Werkman Professor of Psychology.

Hey, it's Holland, Michigan, OK?

Dr. Myers teaches and writes (well, and some other things like going to church and being with his wife and three kids). He writes textbooks on social psychology (*Psychology*, and *Social Psychology*), and he writes popular books that relate psychological research to Christian belief (*Psychology Through The Eyes of Faith*, co-authored with Malcom Jeeves, published by Harper and Row, 1987 and *The Inflated Self*, IVP). Dr. Myers is currently working on a new book on happiness.

We thought it might be unique for *The Door* to interview someone before their book becomes a best seller instead of years later. We think you'll find his thoughts on happiness rather surprising.

DOOR: Obviously you are anti-American.

MYERS: What?

DOOR: You are actually saying that money doesn't make you happy?

MYERS: People *think* that more money will make them happier, but we have double the buying power of the 1950s. Our 1957 per person income, expressed in 1990 dollars, was \$7,100; by 1988 it had doubled to over \$14,000. Thus we have twice as many cars per capita, and color TVs, VCRs, home computers, and microwave ovens to boot. We have lots more money today, and lots more of what money buys. We're not happier. If anything—to judge from the tenfold increase in depression over the last two generations—we're more likely to be miserable.

DOOR: We find it difficult to believe that a person with no money can be just as happy as a person with lots of money.

MYERS: I am not trying to romanticize poverty. Being hungry, oppressed, or ravaged by war certainly doesn't make for happiness. But given basic human rights and secure food and housing, happiness seems unaffected by whether we

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drive a BMW or an Escort. If little Athine Roussel were destined to inherit only \$1 million of Onassis' fortune, rather than \$1 billion, she'd likely live no less happily. There is some evidence that does link well-being with being well-off. There is some tendency for people making \$45,000+ to feel less stressed out, and happier, than those who struggle to make ends meet on low incomes. Still, what matters is not absolute wealth, but perceived wealth relative to others' poverty. People's contentment with their income predicts their happiness much better than does their actual income. And strangely, there is only a modest tendency for people who make more money to be more contented with what they make. Happiness isn't getting what you want, it's wanting what you have. To understand that well-being is *not* being well-off is tremendously liberating. It liberates us from pointless spending. It liberates us from envy of the lifestyles of the rich and famous (whose memoirs often confirm that fame and fortune do not buy happiness).

DOOR: We're confused. First you seem to say that money doesn't make you happy, then you say that some money does make you happy.

MYERS: If our income, grades, professional success, or social prestige increases, we feel an initial surge of pleasure. But if this new level continues, we adapt to it. This "adaptation-level" principle implies that no static pleasure lasts forever. *Every* desirable experience—passionate love, a spiritual high, the joy of achievement, the pleasure of a new possession—is transitory. Life could be an eternal pleasure cruise only if happiness were continually

re-juiced by new upward surges—highs followed by higher highs.

The most incredible findings come from comparisons of those who've experienced the extremes of triumph (winning a state lottery) or tragedy (a paralyzing accident). Bad events have temporary effects; in fact, our day's mood is more affected by an argument with one's spouse, a lost sale at work, and other such hassles than by whether, say, we have for some time been paralyzed or mobile, blind or sighted. Every researcher of well-being I know of has been struck by how little people's objective circumstances relate to their inner sense of well-being. As John Milton wrote in *Paradise Lost*, "The mind . . . can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven."

DOOR: Obviously, if *objective* circumstances have little to do with our happiness, *subjective* circumstances must play a part. In other words, it sounds like what you are saying is that it's not that we want more, rather it's that we would at least like as much as our neighbor has.

MYERS: We humans are always comparing ourselves to others, and feeling good or bad depending on who we compare to. When the Dallas Cowboys signed running back Herschel Walker to a contract worth more than \$1 million per year, their other star running back, Tony Dorsett, immediately felt "relative deprivation" over his paltry six-figure salary. Advertisers magnify our sense of relative deprivation by bombarding us with images of people whose elegant possessions awaken our envy.

DOOR: Hmhmhmhm. Are you suggesting that happiness will come when we learn to compare ourselves



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with those who have *less* than we have?

MYERS: I am not suggesting a formula. All I am saying is that the evidence indicates that happiness and contentment are present more in those who compare themselves with those less fortunate than themselves. That is exactly what people do naturally when confronted with tragedy. Women who've had lumpectomies for breast cancer tend to compare with those who've had mastectomies, who tend to compare with those who've lost limbs to cancer. Likely, many folks who suffered broken dishes and windows in the San Francisco earthquake felt blessed—blessed not to have lived in the devastated Marina district. Research subjects, when asked to study vivid depictions of poverty or disfigurement, emerge feeling more satisfied with their own lives. If upward com-

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parison breeds envy, downward comparison breeds contentment. There is an ironic happiness in contemplating another's misery.

DOOR: The implication seems to be that people can do things to make themselves happy. What does your research indicate makes people happy?

MYERS: Fake it.

DOOR: What?

MYERS: Fake it.

DOOR: You're kidding, right?

MYERS: I'm not kidding. Seekers of happiness can, directly, boost their mood by *acting as they wish to be*. Fake it. Whistle a happy tune. Put on a happy face. There's a proven principle at work here: it's as easy to act ourselves into a new way of thinking as to think ourselves into a new way of acting. People who act as if they are happy and confident—by grinning, walking vigorously with head high, asserting themselves, talking positive—find themselves feeling happier.

DOOR: That seems a little far-fetched.

MYERS: Ironically, happiness is not that elusive or difficult. It's very simple, really. For example, happiness comes from pausing to savor the desirable moments. Sipping tea while reading a letter, rejoicing over a problem solved, delighting in a child's excitement, feeling affirmed by the smile or the touch of a loved one—these are the elements of happiness for those not too busy to catch them as they fly by. “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things,” said Jesus. Learn from Mary to relax and savor the moment. Be conscious that the gift of life is nothing apart from its successive moments. Pascal grasped the point: “The present is never our end.

The past and the present are our means—the future alone is our end. So we never live, but we hope to live—and as we are always preparing to be happy, it is inevitable we should never be so.”

DOOR: What else can we do?

MYERS: Get regular exercise.

DOOR: Tell us you don't mean that aerobics makes us happy.

MYERS: People who exercise frequently and vigorously are generally upbeat. Fit bodies and sound minds correlate. There's a chicken-and-egg problem here: we could also say that upbeat people are more energetic. But experiments reveal that, compared to anxious or depressed people who remain sedentary, those put on an aerobic exercise routine typically enjoy improved well-being.

DOOR: Uh . . . gosh, that's great news.

MYERS: Here's some even better news. A good sleep predisposes a good mood the next day. Experiments reveal that a day of REST (Restricted Environmental Stimulation Therapy) can heal and renew.

DOOR: All right, we've signed up for aerobics and we're getting 12 hours of sleep a day, then what?

MYERS: Invest in close relationships. The happiest of people typically enjoy loving relationships. They are

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married to their best friend. They feel affirmed, encouraged, and care about by their comrades.

DOOR: Are you suggesting that married people are happier than those who are not married?

MYERS: What I am suggesting is the married people report greater feelings of well being. The happiness gap between married and non-married Americans has been shrinking because married women aren't as happy as they once were and unmarried men aren't as miserable. Still, the marital gap remains: about 25% of unmarried adults, and 40% of married adults, report being “very happy.” TV images of the “devil-may-care-swinging bachelor” and the “gay divorcee” portray more of the exception than the rule.

DOOR: Why?

MYERS: Married people are more likely to enjoy a supportive, intimate relationship. (Increasing opportunities for intimacy among single people may help explain the lessened advantage of marriage.) Marriage provides the roles of spouse and parent, which gives additional sources of self-esteem. If I'm being criticized at work, well, I can tell myself I'm still a good husband and father, and these are what really matter. Interestingly, married people tend to report the most satisfaction with their marriages shortly after they're married and then again after their children have left the home.

DOOR: There goes the birth rate. In other words, married people are most happy before and *after* the kids?

MYERS: But that doesn't mean that married couples with children are not happy. It just means that children

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put stress on a marriage.

DOOR: Are married people more happy than single people?

MYERS: It’s not a matter of marriage, it’s a matter of relationships. Any situation where people feel affirmed, liked, and encouraged by friends and family, promotes health. In six massive studies, each of which followed thousands of people across several years, people who enjoyed close relationships were less likely to die prematurely. Living, working, and worshipping amidst friends rather than strangers also promotes happiness. Close, supportive relationships allow us to confide painful feelings,

to deal creatively with stress, to bolster our self-esteem. When one is bereaved, rejected, or injured, caring relationships help buffer the stress.

DOOR: What about work? Almost everyone works, but are they happier than those who don’t work?

MYERS: There are times when having nothing to do sounds like bliss. Oh, to be able to escape the rat race and spend one’s days curled up on the couch watching TV, or in quiet solitude. And it’s true: a day now and then of quiet retreat and REST can help people conquer problems ranging from smoking to paralyzing anx-

ety. But it’s also true that people generally are happiest *not* when self-absorbed (as depressed people are), but when active, when engaged, when their minds are absorbed in something that captures their attention. Whether it occurs at work or at play, this unself-conscious absorption in an activity is called “flow.” Dancers, painters, chess players, surgeons, writers, and athletes all report getting caught up in the flow of their activity, as they lose consciousness of self and time.

Madeleine L’Engle likens this flow state to a child’s experience at play:

“In real play, which is real concentration, the child is not only outside time, he is outside *himself*. He has thrown himself completely into whatever it is that he is doing. A child playing a game, building a sand castle, painting a picture, is completely in what he is doing. His self-consciousness is wholly focused outside himself.”

It works with ordinary activities, too. When people are beeped at random intervals and asked to report what they are doing and how much they are enjoying themselves, those who are interrupted while vegetating or watching the boob tube usually report little sense of flow and little satisfaction. Despite ads glamorizing scenes of lying around at a resort, doing nothing, people generally don’t derive great enjoyment from inactive leisure. They report more positive feelings when interrupted while doing something that engages their skills — while engaged in challenging work, or even while driving a car.

“ . . . the evidence indicates that happiness and contentment are present more in those who compare themselves with those less fortunate than themselves.”





DOOR: OK, you knew we'd ask. We often hear ministers and evangelists promise happiness and freedom from problems if people become Christians, wh—

MYERS: —I don't see Jesus promising that. Good adjustment is not what Jesus promised. Christianity does not claim to be a hedonistic religion. All I can tell you is what our studies have shown.

DOOR: And what do they show? Are people who believe in God more happy than those who don't believe in God?

MYERS: There is a small but consistently observed tendency for religious people to report greater happiness and satisfaction with life. Many of these studies were done with older people. But even Gallup, quizzing a cross-section of Americans, finds that people are more likely to say they are "very happy" if they agree that "God loves me even though I may not always please Him," that "my religious faith is the most important influence in my life," and so forth. Moreover, people who actively participate in a supportive religious community tend to live with greater well-being. A prominent clinical researcher, Martin Seligman, speculates that today's high rates of depression partly reflect a diminished confidence in a relationship in God as a source of identity and hope. Without faith, a loss or failure may become a catastrophe.

These data aren't an especially good basis for believing. (If Christianity is untrue, though comforting, what honest person would want to believe it? And if true, though dis-

comforting, what honest person would want to disbelieve?) But the findings are consistent with the idea that faith offers meaning and purpose for living—a sense of who we are, a sense that our lives matter as something more than chance, momentary blips in the history of the universe. Pascal thought it was "a monstrous thing" to see people raging or despairing over mere affronts and inconveniences, while being indifferent to "things of gravest import." Maybe faith calms the deeper waters by giving us a hope—an eternal perspective that makes the wounds of the day seem more like what they are: just surface waves on an ocean of experience. **f**