

Along the track

Happiness

Am I happy? Is my life a happy one? Happiness is very elusive. It is even very difficult to define. Some define it as a feeling, others define it as an absence of feelings like anger or tension or conflict. Money can't buy happiness. It can buy pleasure, but pleasure is not necessarily happiness.

That doesn't stop us from dreaming about what might make us happy, when and how – perfect health perhaps, perfect relationships, a perfect job, no anxiety or tension in life, no disappointments, the time and money to enjoy the good life. We imagine being free of all the tensions and pressures, financial worry and disappointments. But is that happiness?

Some years ago, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* by Sogyal Rinpoche was a best seller. He wrote that you have to imagine your death every day. That might seem rather morbid, the opposite of happiness but it is a very ancient tradition, not just in Buddhism but also in Christianity. In the Genesis story, for example, God says to Adam and Eve as they leave the Garden of Eden: “Remember, you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19). In the Book of Sirach we read: *You can keep from sinning by always reminding yourself that you will someday die.* (7:36). The psalmist prays, *Teach us to realize the brevity of life, so that we may gain in wisdom of heart.* (Psalm 90:12).

Imagining our death or perhaps more accurately, reminding ourselves that one day we will die isn't meant to be something that prevents us living well but rather, quite the opposite. Wisdom of heart is about being grateful for being alive, for how precious life is and the opportunities it offers and being aware of what we have, how precious the people who surround us are, how grateful we might be for the gifts that embrace us daily and for the gift that we are, being aware of finding happiness in passing moments, the small mercies and pleasures of life.

Joyce Rupp 's Prayer of Gratitude *May I Have This Dance* offers this wisdom (quoted in part):

We are grateful for eyes that can see and ponder, for taste buds that know the sensuous pleasures of eating and drinking, for hands that hold and touch and feel, for ears that can delight in music and the voice of a friend, for a nose that can smell the aroma of newly mown grass or delicious food, and can also breathe the air that gives us life.

We are grateful for the treasure of loved ones whose hearts of openness and acceptance have encouraged us to be who we are. We are grateful for their faithfulness, for standing by us when our weaknesses stood out glaringly, for being there when we were most in need and for delighting with us in our good days and our joyful seasons.

We are grateful for the eyes of faith, for believing in the presence of God, giving us hope in our darkest days.....

We are grateful for the messengers of God – people, events, written or spoken words – that came to us at just the right time and helped us to grow.

We are grateful for the miracle of life, for the green of our earth, for the amazing grace of our history; we are grateful that we still have time to decide the fate of the world by our choices and our actions, grateful that we have it within our power to bring a divided world to peace. Amen

We find happiness where we are. We don't have to wait or go searching too far but just look and see and be open by “listening with the ear of the heart” (opening words of the Rule of St Benedict). That doesn't come easily. We let our own agendas get in the way. Perhaps that is why we need the reality check, the challenge of imagining our death every day.

I know people who have planned their funeral in great detail, even though death is not necessarily on the immediate horizon. While that is not my preoccupation, I think I would rather be planning on living today like no other, responding to the people and the events that God has put in my path today. That is where real happiness is to be found.

Regards
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