



HAPPINESS has traditionally been considered an elusive and evanescent thing. To some, even trying to achieve it is an exercise in futility. It has been said that “happiness is as a butterfly which, when pursued, is always beyond our grasp, but which if you will sit down quietly, may alight upon you.”

Social scientists have caught the butterfly. After 40 years of research, they attribute happiness to three major sources: genes, events and values. Armed with this knowledge and [a few simple rules](#), we can improve our lives and the lives of those around us. We can even construct a system that fulfills our founders’ promises and empowers all Americans to pursue happiness.

Psychologists and economists have studied happiness for decades. They begin simply enough — by asking people how happy they are.

The richest data available to social scientists is the University of Chicago’s General Social Survey, a survey of Americans conducted since 1972. This widely used resource is considered the scholarly gold standard for understanding social phenomena. The numbers on happiness from the survey are surprisingly consistent. Every other year for four decades, roughly a third of Americans have said they’re “very happy,” and about half report being “pretty happy.” Only about 10 to 15 percent typically say they’re “not too happy.” Psychologists have used sophisticated techniques to verify these responses, and such survey results [have proved accurate](#).

Beneath these averages are some demographic differences. For many years, researchers found that women were happier than men, although recent studies contend that the gap has narrowed or may even have been reversed. Political junkies might be interested to learn that conservative women are particularly blissful: about 40 percent say they are very happy. That makes them slightly happier than conservative men and significantly happier than liberal women. The unhappiest of all are liberal men; only about a fifth consider themselves very happy.

But even demographically identical people vary in their happiness. What explains this?

The first answer involves our genes. [Researchers at the University of Minnesota](#) have tracked identical twins who were separated as infants and raised by separate families. As genetic carbon copies brought up in different environments, these twins are a social scientist’s dream, helping us disentangle nature from nurture. These researchers found that we inherit a surprising proportion of our happiness at any given moment — around 48 percent. (Since I discovered this, I’ve been blaming my parents for my bad moods.)

If about half of our happiness is hard-wired in our genes, what about the other half? It’s tempting to assume that one-time events — like getting a dream job or an Ivy League acceptance letter — will permanently bring the happiness we seek. And studies suggest that isolated events do control a big fraction of our happiness — up to 40 percent at any given time.

But while one-off events do govern a fair amount of our happiness, each event’s impact proves remarkably short-lived. People assume that major changes like moving to California or getting a big raise will make them permanently better off. They won’t. Huge goals may take years of hard work to meet, and the striving itself may be worthwhile, but the happiness they create dissipates after just a few months.

So don’t bet your well-being on big one-off events. The big brass ring is not the secret to lasting happiness.

To review: About half of happiness is genetically determined. Up to an additional 40 percent comes from the things that have occurred in our recent past — but that won’t last very long.

That leaves just about 12 percent. That might not sound like much, but the good news is that we can bring that 12 percent under our control. It turns out that choosing to pursue [four basic values](#) of faith, family, community and work is the surest path to happiness, given that a certain percentage is genetic and not under our control in any way.

The first three are fairly uncontroversial. Empirical evidence that faith, family and friendships increase happiness and meaning is hardly shocking. Few dying patients regret overinvesting in rich family lives, community ties and spiritual journeys.

Work, though, seems less intuitive. Popular culture insists our jobs are drudgery, and one survey recently made headlines by reporting that fewer than a third of American workers felt engaged; that is praised, encouraged, cared for and several other gauges seemingly aimed at measuring how transcendently fulfilled one is at work.

Those criteria are too high for most marriages, let alone jobs. What if we ask something simpler: “All things considered, how satisfied are you with your job?” This simpler approach is more revealing because respondents apply their own standards. This is what the General Social Survey asks, and the results may surprise. More than 50 percent of Americans say they are “completely satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their work. This rises to over 80 percent when we include “fairly satisfied.” This finding generally holds across income and education levels.

This shouldn’t shock us. Vocation is central to the American ideal, the root of the aphorism that we “live to work” while others “work to live.” Throughout our history, America’s flexible labor markets and dynamic society have given its citizens a unique say over our work — and made our work uniquely relevant to our happiness. When Frederick Douglass rhapsodized about “patient, enduring, honest, unremitting and indefatigable work, into which the whole heart is put,” he struck the bedrock of our culture and character.

I’m a living example of the happiness vocation can bring in a flexible labor market. I was a musician from the time I was a young child. That I would do it for a living was a foregone conclusion. When I was 19, I skipped college and went on the road playing the French horn. I played classical music across the world and landed in the Barcelona Symphony Orchestra.

I was probably “somewhat satisfied” with my work. But in my late 20s the novelty wore off, and I began plotting a different future. I called my father back in Seattle: “Dad, I’ve got big news. I’m quitting music to go back to school!”

“You can’t just drop everything,” he objected. “It’s very irresponsible.”

“But I’m not happy,” I told him.

There was a long pause, and finally he asked, “What makes you so special?!”

But I’m really not special. I was lucky — lucky to be able to change roads to one that made me truly happy. After going back to school, I spent a blissful decade as a university professor and wound up running a Washington think tank.

Along the way, I learned that rewarding work is unbelievably important, and this is emphatically not about money. That’s what research suggests as well. Economists find that money makes truly poor people happier insofar as it relieves pressure from everyday life — getting enough to eat, having a place to live, taking your kid to the doctor. But scholars like the Nobel Prize winner [Daniel Kahneman](#) have found that once people reach a little beyond the average middle-class income level, even big financial gains don’t yield much, if any, increases in happiness.

So relieving poverty brings big happiness, but income, per se, does not. Even after accounting for government transfers that support personal finances, [unemployment proves catastrophic for happiness](#). Abstracted from money, joblessness seems to increase the rates of [divorce](#) and [suicide](#), and the severity of [disease](#).

And according to the General Social Survey, nearly three-quarters of Americans wouldn't quit their jobs even if a financial windfall enabled them to live in luxury for the rest of their lives. Those with the least education, the lowest incomes and the least prestigious jobs were actually most likely to say they would keep working, while elites were more likely to say they would take the money and run. We would do well to remember this before scoffing at "dead-end jobs."

Assemble these clues and your brain will conclude what your heart already knew: Work can bring happiness by marrying our passions to our skills, empowering us to create value in our lives and in the lives of others. Franklin D. Roosevelt had it right: "Happiness lies not in the mere possession of money; it lies in the joy of achievement, in the thrill of creative effort."

In other words, the secret to happiness through work is earned success.

This is not conjecture; it is driven by the data. Americans who feel they are successful at work are twice as likely to say they are very happy overall as people who don't feel that way. And these differences persist after controlling for income and other demographics.

You can measure your earned success in any currency you choose. You can count it in dollars, sure — or in kids taught to read, habitats protected or souls saved. When I taught graduate students, I noticed that social entrepreneurs who pursued nonprofit careers were some of my happiest graduates. They made less money than many of their classmates, but were no less certain that they were earning their success. They defined that success in nonmonetary terms and delighted in it.

If you can discern your own project and discover the true currency you value, you'll be earning your success. You will have found the secret to happiness through your work.

There's nothing new about earned success. It's simply another way of explaining what America's founders meant when they proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence that humans' inalienable rights include life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

This moral covenant links the founders to each of us today. The right to define our happiness, work to attain it and support ourselves in the process — to earn our success — is our birthright. And it is our duty to pass this opportunity on to our children and grandchildren.

But today that opportunity is in peril. Evidence is mounting that people at the bottom are increasingly stuck without skills or pathways to rise. Research from the [Federal Reserve Bank of Boston](#) shows that in the 1980s, 21 percent of Americans in the bottom income quintile would rise to the middle quintile or higher over a 10-year period. By 2005, that percentage had fallen by nearly a third, to 15 percent. And [a 2007 Pew analysis](#) showed that mobility is more than twice as high in Canada and most of Scandinavia than it is in the United States.

This is a major problem, and advocates of free enterprise have been too slow to recognize it. It is not enough to assume that our system blesses each of us with equal opportunities. We need to fight for the policies and culture that will reverse troubling mobility trends. We need schools that serve children's civil rights instead of adults' job security. We need to encourage job creation for the most marginalized and declare war on barriers to entrepreneurship at all levels, from hedge funds to hedge trimming. And we need to revive our moral appreciation for the cultural elements of success.

We must also clear up misconceptions. Free enterprise does not mean shredding the social safety net, but championing policies that truly help vulnerable people and build an economy that can sustain these commitments. It doesn't mean reflexively cheering big business, but leveling the playing field so competition

trumps cronyism. It doesn't entail "anything goes" libertinism, but self-government and self-control. And it certainly doesn't imply that unfettered greed is laudable or even acceptable.

Free enterprise gives the most people the best shot at earning their success and finding enduring happiness in their work. It creates more paths than any other system to use one's abilities in creative and meaningful ways, from entrepreneurship to teaching to ministry to playing the French horn. This is hardly mere materialism, and it is much more than an economic alternative. Free enterprise is a moral imperative.

To pursue the happiness within our reach, we do best to pour ourselves into faith, family, community and meaningful work. To share happiness, we need to fight for free enterprise and strive to make its blessings accessible to all.

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