

On Life, Liberty and the Non-Pursuit of Happiness
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*“There is that in me – I do not know what it is – but I know it is in me . . .
I do not know it – it is without name – it is a word unsaid,
It is not in any dictionary, utterance, symbol . . .
Do you see O my brothers and sisters?
It is not chaos or death – it is form, union, plan – it is eternal life – it is Happiness.”*
--from “*Song of Myself*” by Walt Whitman

A CALL TO WORSHIP

Welcome, seekers of love faith and inspiration,

Welcome, believers in a new way of being, followers of freedom,

Welcome, willing converts and cynical insiders,

The tent of Unitarianism stretches wide and fair, beckoning each to all, and all to each

Thus is the condition of our covenant, that we are also Universalists,

Understanding that any doctrine of eternal benevolence, any promise of reward or justice, may not be conditional, but is extended to everyone. The nineteenth century preacher Hosea Ballou, himself a fervid convert to Universalism, summarized the concept in what he called a doctrine of HAPPIFICATION. Ballou contended that happiness is the motivating factor of both persons and God. A benevolent God seeks to “happify” humankind; and happiness in turn motivates the actions and decisions of people. He wrote: “The objector will say: to admit that our happiness is the grand object of all we do, destroys the purity of religion, and reduces the whole to nothing but selfishness. To which I reply, if we seek our own happiness in the narrow circle of partiality and covetousness, our selfishness is indeed irreligious and wicked. But [if we seek our own happiness through] universal benevolence, knowing that our happiness is connected with the happiness of all others, which induces us to do justly and to deal mercifully with one another, we are no more selfish than we ought to be.”¹

IN the words of another kind of Universalist, “Don’t Worry, Be Happy.”

Come, let us worship together. . . .

SERMON TEXT

¹ Hosea Ballou. *A Treatise on Atonement*. Accessed online.

The first week of July was profoundly disorienting to me. As a recent immigrant to Canada from the United States, I had to constantly be reminded that Tuesday, July 1st was a holiday, which meant that most shops and many businesses would be closed Monday as well. Meanwhile, July 4th, which for most of my life has been synonymous with the United States' "Independence Day" . . . well, here, it was just known as . . . Friday. That short week began with yards full of maple-leaf motif, and ended with no star-spangled banners or rockets' red glare; so much familiar flag waving, but all of it red and white with the only blue within me – *O Canada, my home, but not-so native land* . . . *who stands on guard for me?* Mine is a biblical lament: How shall I sing the old songs in a new land? At its heart I am really asking how I might find happiness. And in its very asking, I am recalled to my very foreignness --

For twenty-five years I've lived in the United States, a nation founded on the promise of its Declaration of Independence:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness."

Thomas Jefferson, who believed that by the end of a century, the entire population of the new land would be converted to "Unitarianism," thus declared the priorities of the Thirteen American Colonies as "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" The first two "unalienable Rights" seem self-evident indeed, but what of that elusive "pursuit of happiness" which has become the United States' chief export?

The direct historical link to the Western love affair with the pursuit of happiness is to John Locke, the influential theorist of the human mind during the 17th century Enlightenment. Locke wrote, "This is the hinge on which turns the *liberty* of intellectual Beings, [whose] highest perfection [lay in] a careful and constant pursuit of true and solid happiness." He warns: "mistake not imaginary for real happiness."² One historian summarizes the entire English Enlightenment's roadmap to happiness as that era which translated the ultimate religious question 'How can I be saved' into the seemingly pragmatic 'How can I be happy?'" and which is answered by "human

² Darrin M. McMahon. *Happiness: A History*. (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006) 182, citing Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

effort and understanding alone.”³ That summary hints that one’s happiness is related to a certain amount of individual liberty, the political expression of which is a legislative and cultural attitude of *toleration*.

Life, liberty, and happiness are complementary pursuits, and stand as a testament to the optimism and individuation of consciousness leading the charge toward the American attitude of independence. Contrast that promise with that of Canada’s constitution, which promises legislation in the service of “peace, order, and good government.” The telling differences in these tripartite statements is in ironic evidence in our differing social histories of war and peace, public welfare and *laissez-faire*, protection of property or protest.

Yet, for all its originality in purposing, the idea of happiness as a human right has roots in a tradition much older than the English “Enlightenment.” The pursuit of happiness is ultimately a religious quest. Not from Christianity, which holds the hope of an other-worldly happiness; nor Buddhism, in which the First Noble Truth acknowledges that life is characterized by suffering – the pursuit of happiness, or rather, *felicity* is an Islamic ideal. Perhaps nowhere is it better portrayed than in the work of Ibn al’Arabī.

Al’Arabī was a thirteenth century Islamic mystic whose vast canon of work builds a portrait of happiness in the form of the Perfect Human.⁴ In Islam, it is not “salvation” but “felicity” that is the goal of religion in the form of an earthly striving toward realizing the example set by the prophets.⁵ Its achievement is through perfecting oneself to best reflect the innate qualities of the divine from *within*. In a sentiment recalling our own Unitarian seventh principle, al’Arabī believed “the whole creation in all its perfection is manifested in humankind;”⁶ humans are thus the “microcosm of the macrocosm.”⁷ Our efforts in life aim toward unity⁸ with that transcendent vastness of the universe, a reconciliation of our own aspect of and with the Divine, in what we Unitarian Universalists might think of as psychic integration. We can never become perfect, we simply learn to perfect our expression of our innate potential. Echoing his inspiration from

³ McMahan, citing Roy Porter, 209.

⁴ The genesis of this paper was formed from my reading of William C. Chittick. *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al’Arabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity*. (Albany: Statue University of New York Press, 1994.)

⁵ William C. Chittick. “Presence with God.” *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society*, Vol. XX, 1996. Accessed at <http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/articles/presence.html>

⁶ Ibn al’Arabī. *Divine Governance of the Human Kingdom*. Shaykh Tosun Bayrak al-Jerrahi al-Halveti, trans. (Louisville: *Fons Vitae* 1997), 9.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

Aristotle, Al'Arabi considers the very purpose of life to be our individual completion by actualizing one's potential.⁹

That idea is not just extended toward the individual, but towards society at large. Al'Arabī writes, “No reward that a human being can receive for his achievements can compare with the felicity awarded to whoever shows compassion to humanity.”¹⁰ The way toward felicity is not through our bodily senses, or solely through reason, but through the senses of the heart, which recognizes that our surroundings permeate our very being, and are not separate from us, but are part of who we are.¹¹ Because of our human limitations, we must employ imagination, guided but not dominated by reason.¹² It is this submission to interconnectedness that allows to reclaim our unity with the universe, with transcendence, and therefore with felicity.

Such a realization of felicity, through unity, thus requires acceptance of the diversity of humankind. A vital part of our ‘felicity’ resides in acknowledgment that it is *not* “one size fits all.” Al'Arabī calls us to worship “according to the path which connects us to our own particular felicity” which is “attaining that which is in agreement with the constitution” of the seeker.¹³ Toleration of other paths is a component of felicity, related to the Universalizing of our Unitarian understanding of religion.

In this sense, the realization of happiness is not an individual quest, but a communal necessity,¹⁴ requiring toleration of other religious paths. Al'Arabī defines “generosity” as the “result and sign of care and love for others. And care and love are signs of one's closeness to others. And unity is the result of closeness between people in the realm of a human being.”¹⁵

Fast forward 400 years, to our Enlightenment-era hero John Locke . . . when Locke wrote his “Letter on Toleration,” he knew about and referenced the religious tolerance practiced in the Islamic world.¹⁶ As in all histories of tolerance, both Locke and al'Arabī limited their concepts of toleration to variations on the familiar, according to their understanding of Scripture.¹⁷ For al'Arabī, the Qur'an denies heavenly “felicity” to anyone other than “The Party of Allah”¹⁸ and as a

⁹ Ibn al'Arabī. *The Bezels of Wisdom*. R.W. J. Austin, trans. (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1980), 209. I found it interesting that he uses Jonah as the prophet expressing this hope of potential.

¹⁰ Ibn al'Arabī. *Divine Governance*, 264.

¹¹ Ibid., 14; also see the idea of “true communication” 91.

¹² Chittick. *Imaginal Worlds*, 169.

¹³ Ibn al'Arabī. *The Bezels of Wisdom*.

¹⁴ Ibn al'Arabī. *Divine Governance*, 96.

¹⁵ Ibid., 80. See also “It is also the goal of all men of wisdom and knowledge and of their people: an attempt at unity and oneness to be created from the apparent multiplicity in man” 155.

¹⁶ Nabil Matar. “The Toleration of Muslims in Renaissance England: Practice and Theory.” <http://www.nuuc.org/StarrKing/Matar.pdf>.

¹⁷ Ibn al'Arabī. *Divine Governance*, 113 and “*What the Seeker Needs*” 209.

¹⁸ Qu'ran. *Al-Mujadila*, 58:22.

Protestant Christian, Locke denies tolerance to atheists and Catholics. Still, their ideas put them at the forefront of waves of change. How shocking a thought it would be to many self-styled American patriot zealots to discover, in this post 9/11 frenzy characterized by a myopic view of history, that that nation's founding documents have more in common with Islamic practice than with the Christian policies in England at that time. *Why, by my country's own PATRIOT ACT rules, I may be guilty of treason and require sanctuary by the end of the hour. . . I may need a petition during coffee hour. . . we'll see. . .* How ironic that Canada's promise of "good government" manages by example to yield more tolerance than the U.S. promise of happiness.

Still, the marketing of the promising pursuit of happiness prevails still as the chief export of the United States. While study after study shows that affluent societies breed more discontent than satisfaction,¹⁹ the marketing industry advertises products designed to enhance happiness through personal hygiene, techno gadgets, entertainment, alcohol, and pharmaceuticals. A survey of local bookstores shows shelves replete with titles promising happiness; the best-selling book in Canada last year was Rhonda Bynes' The Secret, which promotes a life strategy in pursuit of happiness, edging out shop sales for the latest Harry Potter book. But if happiness is an unalienable "right" of humankind, why is it necessary to market it? Wherein lies our confusion, if the truth of "happiness" is self-evident? Hosea Ballou's doctrine of happification included a spiritual prescription that reminds us that we are easily mistaken in what will reap happiness.

Modern studies reveal what Ibn al'Arabī already systematized. According to al'Arabī, our mistake stems from an inner war between the ego and the soul, both battling for the attention of the Intellect. The ego, intent on immediate gratification, seeks Intellect to justify its "want" into a "need".²⁰ The soul, somehow blinded by divine radiance, fails to understand the temptation and thus is powerless to fend off the attack.²¹ The answer, however, does not lie in the denial of one for the other. For al'Arabī, it is in balance of heart, mind and body that one activates the "will" sparingly in the service of moderating balance, and in that balance lies the closest humankind can approximate to heavenly felicity and unity with All or Allah.²² While Knowledge sustains the spiritual life,²³ "real joy is not in the knowledge of things, but in the truth of things,"²⁴ and truth

¹⁹ McMahan. 468ff

²⁰ Ibn al'Arabī says that the personality of Intellect is "justice" which could yield fodder for an entirely different Unitarian Universalist sermon! *Divine Governance* 93.

²¹ Ibid., 58-59. The explanation, however, is mine.

²² Ibid., 68; see also the definition of Generosity and Avarice 78-79, and his advocacy of the "middle course" 85, and the mind-heart balance 122.

²³ Ibid., 163

²⁴ Ibn al'Arabī . *Divine Governance* 167.

must be sensed and mirrored with the heart as well as the mind, as in all things, tempered with “resolution and moderation.”²⁵

The confusion stems from any attempt to realize happiness as a material good to be attained by pursuit rather than as a process of unveiling and realization.²⁶ A modern spiritual teacher, Eckhart Tolle, has written a very popular book called *A New Earth*, a recent staple of book clubs, support groups, and Unitarian congregations. Like Ibn al’ Arabī, Tolle explains that we are mistaken in our attempts to *pursue* our purpose. He explains that we already *are* the “totality” of the universe, a “microcosmic reflection of the macrocosm”²⁷ As a pastor, I often hear people express a wish for “more spirituality” in their lives. My reply is that they already *are* spiritual; they simply need some help in recognizing their own potential and tapping into that natural well of creativity. Happiness, like “spirituality,” is found in participation; it is found in engagement itself.²⁸ Happiness, in this sense, is not just an earthly right, but an earthly duty, for in its unveiling we create structures congruent with creating beloved community. True happiness then is a way of *being* not a reward for *becoming*²⁹

Al’Arabī warns that we must learn from our own experiences,³⁰ warning-- “If somebody else chewed and ate your food, what possible good could ever come to you from it? Therefore, you have to do it yourself.”³¹ Our Unitarian Universalist faith calls us to account, asks us to extend ourselves, demands that we feed our souls by feeding the very world itself. Our seven principles affirm and promote “life, liberty, and the *realization* of happiness.” May such felicity serve as a banquet to your soul.

²⁵ Ibid., 173.

²⁶ While Ibn al’Arabī meant something quite different, one can’t help but smile at his comment that “the difference between the human being and the rest of creation is that the human is the ultimate consumer.” Ibn al’Arabī. *Divine Governance* 157.

²⁷ Eckhart Tolle. *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life’s Purpose* (New York: Plume, 2006), 280. Tolle does not cite al’Arabī; although this passage reads like a quote that provided the directional impulse of this sermon.

²⁸ Tom Morris. *If Aristotle Ran General Motors: The New Soul of Business*. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997), 17. The full idea deserves notation here. Morris writes: “[Seeking . . . to be happy] is the universal human quest, underlying every other activity. If we can come to understand most deeply what that happiness is which we all seek, we can touch the innermost heart of human motivation and unlock the deepest secret of sustainable success in all our efforts together.” He suggests that fulfillment (a.k.a. happiness) lies in “four universal spiritual needs felt by human beings: Uniqueness as individuals; union with something greater than the self; usefulness to others; understanding about our lives and work.” Finally, he defines happiness as “a dynamic phenomenon of participation in something that brings fulfillment” and though connected with peace and pleasure (those other common definitions of ‘happiness’), it is ultimately “to be found in the activity. It is in the work.”

²⁹ Tolle, 270.

³⁰ Ibn al’Arabī. *Divine Governance* 179

³¹ Ibid., 165