

# “Contentment”

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As I scroll through social media, there is a video that seems to make the rounds a few times a year. Each time it shows up in my feed, I watch it again, all the way through. It follows a Korean man through his day, a man who appears to not have much in terms of material possessions, as he encounters creatures who could use help. Sometimes it is a plant that is baking in the sun, which he moves under a water coming from a rooftop, another time it is a young girl and her mother, sitting on the sidewalk and grateful for donations which would go towards her schooling, and in another scene, it is a stray dog to whom he gives part of his lunch. There are also dissenters in the video, who shake their heads and roll their eyes as this man gives generously in any way he can. The video then shifts and takes us through another one of his days, sometime in the future. Here we see that the plant is flourishing, the dog comes back to eat with him and provides company at lunch time, a woman waits at the corner for him to help push her vending cart across the street, and the little girl who was hoping to go to school appears in her school uniform beaming with a mix of gratitude and pride. He is teary-eyed and at this point, so am I. There is no justifying his circumstances in the video. He is present with life, just as it is. In this way of being in the world, life invites him into relationship and he responds. He appears content; content with life which encompasses all of its joys and all of its sorrows. This inextricable mingling of the two.

I am moved by this video every time because it contrasts what I experience in my daily life. I'll be happy when... you can fill in the blank. Whether it is having more money, when the kids get a long, when I can go on a big vacation, when the season changes... That happiness isn't there now. It is a future, often unattainable dream. And we pursue this refrain at all costs. I can't help but notice how this pursuit of happiness is spilling dominating every aspect of the market. I enjoy reading and I have noticed in recent years how the titles of the books also point to this - how to find happiness now, books about joy. Out of curiosity, I searched the number of books with “happiness” in their title on Amazon and it came up with 60,000 results! Everything is telling us that the meaning of our lives is to strive for happiness and there is always a new and emerging strategy to attain this blissful state.

Is happiness what we should be striving for? This is the message we receive! Exploring Unitarian Universalist resources, I was able to find many about happiness and joy. Contrasted with contentment, I found very little. I began to wonder if I was using the right formula in my search. Why is that?

I remembered the words of a Unitarian minister, Kinga-Reka Szekley from Transylvania who attended Starr King School for the Ministry for a year, one of our UU seminaries in the United States as part of the Balazs (BALASH) Scholars Program. Brief aside, our two faiths, Unitarianism as it is practised in Europe and Unitarian Universalism in North America are different. From her perspective, she witnessed the needs of the individual lifted higher than those in the collective. Is it

possible that this is related to our cultural focus on individualism and how this has been paired with happiness?

In 2014, a research team from the Greater Good Science Centre at Berkley travelled through the Himalayas of Eastern Bhutan. They wanted to meet the people who lived in a remote village where they had not been touched by colonial influence. They hiked mountains, went through the jungle, and came to a small settlement of 200 families.

This was the last piece they required for a five-year cross-cultural study on human emotions. There was no electricity in this settlement and so they had to get every piece before the charge of the battery on the laptop reached zero. Talk about pressure!

In their methodology, they created a list of human emotions to see if these were experienced universally or if they were culturally specific. They showed people facial expressions and asked them to identify the emotion and they also shared audio clips of vocal expressions of emotion. The team of researchers was surprised by the results which revealed a high level of accuracy on this recognition piece. Around the world, there are some similarities in our emotions and we are tuned into recognizing them in one another.

This wasn't the case for all emotions and one differed significantly from the others when it came to their study: that emotion was contentment.

In their culture, contentment was the highest achievement a human being could reach in terms of their well-being, likened to the place of enlightenment. The closest word in their language holds a spiritual meaning: the knowledge of enough. Their translator and guide explained: "it basically means that right here, right now, everything is perfect as it is, regardless of what you are experiencing outside."

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Those words hit home in a way that tells me I have heard a truth. In a world where we are always seeking more, the possibility that life can hold moments where things are enough. When I feel happy, although it can be wonderful in the moment, that isn't the emotion I feel when I feel whole and when I feel at home in my heart. That emotional state for me is contentment. In those rare moments when I am content, I recognize the world as it is, broken and fragmented, beautiful and surprising, and I recognize all of those things within myself. I can examine areas that still need work, explore perspectives that aren't my own, and commit myself to the work of change. It was in seminary that I remember exploring this idea of contentment and separating it from the idea of perfection. The word contentment comes from the Latin root, *contentus*, which means "held together." It is not a state of perfection or bliss, simply an acknowledgement of things are exactly as they are.

A fellow classmate and now colleague said that he was affiliated with the United Church because you have to "dance with the one who brought ya." He went on to explain that he has his gripes with his church. It isn't perfect. He shared his concerns about the theology, how it is interpreted and the lack of truly living out the core teaching of his faith in the world. However, it is his home and he is committing his life and his ministry to making it a better place. He is witness to the imperfections and he can see areas that are thriving - both coexist. Through it all, he learned to be content

with his church because he acknowledged the truth of the moment - the situation just as it was and his place within it.

I see this same commitment in us as well. We are a faith tradition that is constantly changing. This living tradition is changed by our whole hearted participation and our presence, and it changes us. We acknowledge that we do not have it all figured out, we are not perfect - not any one of us, and not our congregations and communities. Instead, we can be at home at the heart of our faith when we move into this space of recognizing our strengths and our areas for growth. We become witness to the beauty and the promise. Even there, in the messy middle, we can be nourished by the seeds of contentment, in recognition of the travel it has taken to get to this place and where we are in the present moment. This can become our source of hope for all the work that is yet to come.

The researchers share with us three ways to help us shift our focus from happiness to contentment. It doesn't mean we won't still feel happiness, it will still come alongside while we are rooted in contentment.

The first is to practice mindfulness. This comes as no surprise as the benefits of mindfulness have been well-researched in the last 10 years. This practice involves bringing our attention into the present moment and noting what comes up, without judgement. As mindfulness moves into mainstream discourse, we are building a better understanding of what it means, at least theoretically, to be in the present moment.

The second suggestion is to take note of the contingencies we have set up in our minds which tell us we will be happy when... is it when you have a specific number in the bank account, when you get the promotion at work, when you get the compliment from a friend?

It is okay to have goals in our lives and we want to explore our relationship to them. Are these goals we must achieve no matter what? Are they goals we would feel comfortable changing as more information emerges? Depending on how we are holding these contingencies, we may believe that it is not possible to be content right now. How would you know you are moving towards unconditional wholeness?

Lastly, they share an encouragement to come to know our emotions as waves which come and go. Rumi speaks of this in his poem, "The Guest House" where he invites us to welcome them all in, even the ones that will inevitably break things and be poor company. These guests do move on in their travels. Perhaps we have put up a "no trespassing sign" keeping some emotions away at all costs. We can help one another in this exploration by normalizing our wide variety of emotions, naming them, and becoming comfortable with expressing them and witnessing their expression.

Contentment awaits us, just as it always has. It is quiet and unassuming, like a gentle breeze or a first snowfall. Contentment is what can hold us together individually and collectively through both the joys and sorrows of life as we come into the present unconditional wholeness of it all. May we learn and practice being faithful witnesses to all that is our lives.