

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“Psychology of Happiness”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore February 7, 2010

Meditation

Happiness Prayer

Mysterious Other

both a Presence within me and a Wholeness beyond me,

May I be happy, peaceful and free of distress.

May my mind and heart be opened
 like a window on a fresh spring morning.

May mindfulness and loving kindness
 teach me the great truths of
 oneness, interdependence and impermanence.

May kindness be my daily habit
 soothing distress and inspiring appreciation.

May gratitude be my daily practice
 giving thanks even for this next breath.

May positive emotions be my friends
 who gather around me for mutual support.

May hope guide my vision of the future
 full of possibility and abundant with satisfaction.

And when troubles inevitably come into my life
 may I be strong to dispute negative thoughts
 and willfully to turn my attention away
 from negative obsessions.

May the natural world be my sanctuary
 where I worship before the abundance of the Spirit of Life.

And may this congregation be my refuge
 where I find welcome, comfort, inspiration, guidance
 challenge, encouragement, support
 and opportunities to give, to love and to serve life.

As I wish to be happy, peaceful and free of distress,
 So may all beings be happy, peaceful and free of distress.
 Now and forever more ... Amen

Sermon

One evening, an old Cherokee told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people. He said, "My son, the battle is between two wolves inside us all. One is Evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority and ego."

"The other is Good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith."

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf wins?"

The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one you feed."

We need only meet someone like to Dalai Lama, someone who exudes love, joy and happiness, to know which wolf he feeds and to wonder what he's got that the rest of us don't. You may not realize Buddhism is a refined system of cultivating happiness hidden behind a lot of talk about emptiness, non-attachment and suffering. It is well known in Asia that Buddhist monks are some of the happiest people in their communities. Why is that? Do you have to be a monk to be that happy? And, by the way, what do our western scientists have to say about cultivating happiness?

Until recently, not a lot. Psychiatry and psychology both mostly rely on a medical model that "finds what's wrong, then fixes it". The Positive Psychology movement supplements this with a newer model for positive health that "finds what's right, then encourages it". Most of us "normal" people don't go to a clinician because we are sort-of happy and want to be more happy. Without the economic incentive, it isn't surprising that there hasn't been a lot of scientific research into what makes people's lives flourish. In the absence of this research, clergy, eastern gurus and self promoters like Norman Vincent Peale with his *Power of Positive Thinking* have staked claims to the happiness territory.

That has changed, particularly in the last ten years, with the growth of research in Positive Psychology. One of the leaders in this field is Dr. Barbara Fredrickson who published a book last year about her research titled, "Positivity: Groundbreaking Research Reveals How to Embrace the Hidden Strength of Positive Emotions, Overcome Negativity, and Thrive." I can't recommend this book highly enough. I hope her research, some of which I'll be sharing

with you this morning, will inspire a change in your life toward intentionally cultivating greater happiness for yourself and those around you.

The first step we'll need to make this morning is change our word focus from happiness to a more scientifically measurable factor called "positivity." Like the amorphous words, love, god, and prayer, happiness is one of those, "I know it when I see it" terms. Positive emotions however can be directly correlated with a physiological response in the body that can then be subjected to experimental testing and measurement.

Positive emotions are associated with ten mental qualities that will generate the experience of happiness. These qualities are, joy, gratitude, serenity, interest, hope, pride or self-respect, amusement, inspiration, awe and love. To stimulate positive emotions, any one of these qualities can be intentionally practiced. And when one arises, the others are likely to tag along and be found hanging out together. This is what Fredrickson means when she talks about positivity.

She presents four foundational facts about positivity that she has verified again and again through her research. The first will come as no surprise: positivity feels good. The second, third and fourth however may need some evidence to persuade you: positivity broadens minds, builds resources and fuels resilience. I'll turn now to some the persuasive evidence Fredrickson presents to substantiate these facts of positivity.

In a very simple experiment, Fredrickson tested her subjects' ability to step back, broaden their viewpoint, and see a group of objects, in this case circles and triangles, as a whole, rather than as individual objects. Literally seeing the big picture was facilitated by induced positivity and hindered by induced negativity.

The movements of the eyes are windows revealing brain activity. Elaborate monitoring of these movements along with monitoring skin conductance, heart rate and blood pressure can show the differences in cognitive response to positive, negative and neutral emotional stimulation. Scientists at Brandeis University, using sophisticated eye-tracking technology, have shown positive emotions broaden peoples interest and attention whereas attention narrows and decreases under negative and even neutral stimulation.

What about other perceptual activities like facial recognition? How does one's emotional climate affect this ability? As you might expect, recognition goes up with positive emotions and down with negative emotions. But one of Fredrickson's graduate students, Kareem Johnson, stumbled upon a fascinating discovery. Previous research had established facial recognition ability declines when people look at faces of racial groupings different from their intimate surroundings. For example, I'd have a harder time recognizing and remembering the individual faces of Pacific islanders than Albany Irish Catholics. It's the "they all look alike" problem. Fredrickson and Johnson were astonished to discover that deficit disappears under positive emotional conditions. Creating positivity bodes well for encouraging a sense

of human oneness!

Another moment of serendipity opened the door for a major positivity discovery. In 2003, Fredrickson and Dr. Marcial Losada started working together studying the ratio of positivity to negativity in people's lives. Losada's research had been focused on tracking emotions in high and low performing work groups. Being a mathematician, he wanted to find where the emotional tipping point was between low performing teams and high performing teams. In non-linear systems theory, small changes can have a big results. You may have heard of this as the butterfly effect, the butterfly flapping its wings in China causes it to rain in Cleveland, or so the theory goes. At what ratio of positivity to negativity, Losada wondered, did low performing teams all of a sudden jump into being high performers?

What he noticed, and Fredrickson confirmed in her research, was the magical ratio of three to one. At one positive to one negative or below, negativity swamps positivity. People and teams start spiraling down to collapse and depression. Cross the three-to-one threshold and people and teams start to thrive and perform.

The great reason to buy Fredrickson's book is to read the inspiring story of one of her research subjects she describes in detail named Nina who is able to cross that three to one line and raise her positivity ratio significantly.

Married for fifteen years with a seven year old daughter, working full-time as a technical analyst for a large company, Nina had many sources of stress in her life, not so different from many us here today. She and her husband were having problems conceiving another child. Her mother had been diagnosed with a brain tumor. Nina had no self-confidence. She was depressed and lonely. All these problems caused her to jump at the chance to sign up for seven-week meditation program Nina's employer offered to cope with stress. Fredrickson was scientifically analyzing the broaden and build effects of the class. Nina was pleased to be a research subject for Fredrickson's study and not one of the control group.

The meditation program was a 20 minute version of what I've just returned from spending ten days intensively doing at the Insight Meditation Society Forest Refuge in Barre, Massachusetts. Nina took to meditation quickly and channeled her energy into using the practice to help her deal with her stress. The positive effects started with greater relaxation. Nina found she could put her troubles aside and let go into the stillness. She described the meditation experience as "finding herself again." As Nina meditated daily, her positivity ratio shot up to six to one. After a few months, her headaches and stomach aches had vanished. She hardly ever felt depressed anymore.

But the effects didn't stop there. She had developed a more optimistic outlook on life. Her productivity at work increased. She bounced back more quickly when troubles came her way. She had a renewed sense of confidence, purpose and direction. Her interactions with family and friends were more enjoyable and meaningful. She started feeling like she was

making a positive difference in the world. In three short months, Nina had gone from languishing to flourishing.

This resonates very strongly with my own life experience doing daily meditation practice. The change even in ten days of intensive meditation is remarkable. I'll start out a meditation retreat feeling good to be there but with flashes of negativity and irritation. By the end of the retreat, I'm full to overflowing with kindness and generosity. The static of critical and judgmental thoughts gets smaller and smaller in the cooling and calming silence of the meditation hall. Over my years of meditation, I've seen the broadening and building effects of my practice that have strengthened my resilience.

The real test of the effects of increasing positivity happens during encounters with negativity. Does increasing positivity actually increase resilience in times of trouble?

Fredrickson put this to the test after 9/11. Before that horrible day, she had surveyed a group of students to measure their positivity ratio. Using that ratio as a predictor of resiliency, she went back to these same students to see how they were coping with the aftermath of 9/11. As she expected, those with high positivity ratios above 3 to 1 were much more successfully coping with the stress, even reaching out to help others.

Another predictor of resiliency, Fredrickson noted from personal experience of a family medical crisis, was community support. As anyone who has been the beneficiary of our Caring Network knows well, a little help from your friends can make all the difference. Nothing builds a high positivity ratio like that kind of support.

I hope all this positive talk is getting you inspired to increase your positivity ratio. Think of it this way: for every negative in your life, you need at least three positives to build you up so you can thrive. How do you do this? Simply put, decrease the negative emotional influences and increase the positive emotional influences in your life. And a high percentage of the negative emotional influences actually start inside your head. How we perceive the world makes a huge difference toward increasing our positivity ratio.

This is why a combination of mindfulness and loving-kindness meditation practices can be so helpful. They help increase one's positivity ratio because they teach habits of perception that reduce negativity in response to unpleasant sense, emotional and mental stimulation. As I said earlier, the Buddha was a master of teaching people how to cultivate happiness. That's because he deeply understood the nature of unhappiness and the causes and conditions that lead to it and away from it. His insight, understanding and wisdom are embedded in the methods of mindfulness meditation.

Loving-kindness meditation cultivates positivity more directly by intentionally directing kind and loving thoughts to ourselves and others, wishing for all freedom from stress and trouble, wishing for all freedom from mental and physical suffering, wishing for all

happiness and peace. This meditation can generate very high positivity ratios that spill over into daily living.

Fredrickson's book has a veritable tool box of wise suggestions for decreasing our negativity and increasing positivity. If you go to your library and pull several self help books off the shelf, you'll see many of the same ideas. Suggestions like, dispute negative thinking, don't overgeneralize, interrupt obsessive thoughts with *healthy* distractions, watch less TV news and eliminate gratuitous negativity. On the positive ledger, always a favorite is count your blessings, be present time oriented, practice kindness daily, connect with others, build warm and trusting relationships, find solace in nature, follow that which brings you to life, and open your mind and heart.

Learning about this positivity ratio concept and rummaging around in Fredrickson's tool box has me very inspired. I'm envisioning our congregation as a place where we can help each other thrive by intentionally cultivating high positivity ratios. Fredrickson's great appreciation for how people can use mindfulness and loving-kindness meditation in their daily lives to thrive, speaks powerfully to my quarter century investment in learning and practicing these same methods. She has even studied with the same meditation teachers I have!

What if our congregation could become a center for developing high positivity ratios using Fredrickson's tool box and my meditation skills? What if we then harnessed the resilience developed in increasing our positivity ratios, to energize our willingness to engage morally and ethically with the troubles in our community and in the larger world? Could our higher positivity ratio increase our effectiveness without sacrificing our mental health? My imagination is cooking now. Are you with me?

The best part for me about all this is the lack of any theological controversy. Humanists and theists can both work together to cultivate higher positivity ratios without stepping on each other's toes. You see, how we develop positivity is unique to each person. With God or without God, there are many, many ways to cultivate more positivity and reduce our negativity. We can all agree, I think, that encouraging each other to flourish is a good thing, no matter what we believe.

The only caveat is that making an enduring change in your positivity ratio will not happen all by itself. You have to decide to do it and intentionally practice it. I am ready, willing and trembling with excitement to be your partner in this work. But you need to take the first step.

I'll end now, the same way I end many email messages: Please let me know. So be it.

Benediction

There is no doubt that we have lots of negativity ahead of us.

If we are fortunate to have a long life,
the scourge of sickness,
and the challenges of aging await us.
And every one of us must yield
all that we love,
to death.

The quality of our life today *depends*
on the positivity we intentionally generate
and the negativity we intentionally avoid.

We have a choice in what kind of
positivity ratio we want to have.

No matter what our circumstances may be,
we can choose to increase that ratio.

Let us choose wisely.

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