

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Modern society and finding true happiness



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“But are we happier?”

This is the question asked in one of the last chapters of the best-selling book, “Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind.” Author and historian Yuval Noah Harari reviews in his not-so-brief story (more than 400 pages) the development of early human forms, going back over 2 million years, to the first homo sapiens some 200,000 years ago and their eventual domination of the planet today. Harari, an Oxford Ph.D., organizes his sweeping story around three major revolutions: the cognitive, agricultural and scientific revolutions.

Since the scientific revolution, he describes the result of the past 500 years as follows:

“The Earth has been united into a single ecological and historical sphere. The economy has grown exponentially, and humankind today enjoys the kind of wealth that used to be the stuff of fairy tales. Science and the Industrial Revolution have given humankind super human powers and practically limitless energy. The social order has been completely transformed, as have politics, daily life and human psychology.

“But are we happier?” He suggests that most ideologies and political promises are “based on rather flimsy ideas concerning the real source of human happiness.” Historians research everything from politics and economics to diseases and sexuality, but rarely ask how any of this affects human happiness.

There have been impressive medical gains in terms of child mortality and extension of life span, as well as in the reduction of famines and poverty. Studies have shown, however, that “family and community have more impact on happiness than money and health.” Have our material advances combined with more mobility and individual independence been at the cost of community and family?

Only recently have scientists attempted to measure and study human happiness, and Harari notes the most important finding is that “happiness does not really depend on objective conditions of either wealth, health or even community. Rather, it depends on the correlation between objective conditions and subjective expectations.”

He adds, “Prophets, poets and philosophers realized thousands of years ago that being satisfied with what you already have is far more important than getting more of what you want. Still, it’s nice when mod-

ern research — bolstered by lots of numbers and charts — reaches the same conclusions the ancients did.”

Expectations also are important to our perceived happiness, but thanks to the media and advertising, we are continually exposed to idealized images of what we should want and how we should look. We are even presented with both legal and illegal chemical means to improve happiness, but likely providing just temporary pleasure.

Daniel Kahneman, a Nobel laureate in economics, points out a paradox in temporary experiences of pleasure or displeasure versus long-term sense of happiness. For example, the day-to-day experiences of raising children provide many opportunities for drudgery or discouragement. From changing diapers and dealing with tantrums, to the many disappointments in the growing-up years, these are not particularly inspiring. But most parents will reflect back and affirm that their children are their greatest source of happiness. Again, the important distinction between pleasure and happiness points to what Harari concludes, “happiness consists in seeing one’s life in its entirety as meaningful and worthwhile.”

While historian Harari takes a secular and scientific perspective on these issues, he does point to the philosophers, prophets and religious leaders who have taken a different approach to happiness. We know from other authors that happiness is a much different concept than individual pleasure. For example, Mahatma Gandhi taught, “Happiness is when what you think, what you say, and what you do are in harmony.” It has more to do with one’s integrity and consistency than how one feels. There also is the issue of whether we can even seek happiness as a goal or if it is something that comes to us when we are seeking and working toward some-

thing bigger than oneself. As Eleanor Roosevelt said, “Happiness is not a goal; it is a byproduct.”

Buddhism teaches liberation from suffering by rising above the craving for particular feelings. The Psalms tell us to “worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful song.” (Psalms 100:2) Considered one of the greatest thinkers in Islam, al-Ghazali wrote the book, “The Alchemy of Happiness,” in which he taught that one achieves ultimate happiness by rejecting worldliness and finding complete devotion to God.

Christians often refer to the Sermon on the Mount, when the vision expressed in Jesus’ teaching of the Beatitudes offers the best way to happiness. Jesus calls “blessed” the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, etc. Some modern translations use the word “happy” to describe these blessings. The 19th century Scottish publisher Robert Young translated the Bible seeking to be faithful to the literal meaning of the original words. His rendering of Jesus’ teaching recorded in Matthew was as follows:

“Happy those hungering and thirsting for righteousness — because they shall be filled.

“Happy the kind — because they shall find kindness.

“Happy the clean in heart — because they shall see God.

“Happy the peacemakers — because they shall be called Sons of God.” (Matthew 5:6-9, YLT – Young’s Literal Translation)

So, does our modern society, with its prosperity, freedoms and opportunity for pleasure and entertainment provide us with more happiness? Perhaps the answer is not from the historians, economists or scientists. We must look deeper into the traditions from the poets, prophets and priests in our search.

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Sacred Music Concert
Grandville Bible Church
 4122 44th Street SW | Grandville, MI

**Sunday,
 July 21, 2019
 6 p.m.**

Pastor Tom Couch
 Sunday Services at
 9:30 am and 6:30 pm
 Solid Biblical Teaching
 with Traditional Music

Organist: Bill Church
 Pianist: Jan DeVries
 Director: Dave Schuh

Everyone Welcome!