

STYLUS

Scratching Beneath the Surface

stylus n. an instrument of metal, bone, or the like,
used by the ancients for writing

HAPPINESS VERSUS CONTENTMENT How Can We Have Both?

by Nina Durfee

In my workshop Planning for the 2nd Half of Life, students identify what they want for their future and design a plan to bring it about. To help clarify what elements they want to include, I ask participants to pair up and describe to each other a time when they felt good and a time when they felt bad. The point of the exercise is to recognize the *feelings* associated with good and bad.

Feelings are a reaction to thoughts or events. We can use them as a measure of how fully and authentically we are living our values. The extent to which we honor our values determines our degree of fulfillment. Here's an example of working the process:

A happy memory for me was in sixth grade when I gave an answer to a math problem and the teacher acknowledged it was right. Later, another student gave a different answer to the same problem and the teacher said that was correct. When I asked why he told me that my answer was right, when in fact it was wrong, he responded, for all the class to hear, that I was "the kind of person that you just take it for granted she knows what she's talking about." In that moment I felt confident, recognized, respected, honored, jubilant, self-assured, giddy, listened-to. I also felt humbled and slightly embarrassed. Physically, my face flushed and I felt buoyant.

My good feelings from that experience tell me that I value respect, confidence, honor, recognition, credibility and jubilation. I know I want more of that! I'd like less of the embarrassment, please, and may my humility come from within rather than be thrust upon me.

How does this relate to creating my future?

The *why* is my motivator and a tool for gauging my success. Let's say I want to be a best-selling author. That's my *what*. My *why* is because it will give me honor, respect, recognition, credibility, self-confidence and joy (coincidentally, much the same as the values that made me feel good in that sixth-grade moment). I also want increased

income. *Why* do I want increased income? Because it will allow me to travel, to see places I've never been, to visit my children and grandchildren, to help others, to live in my ideal home. These *whys* express my values of freedom, loving relationships, exploration and adventure, service and comfort. In short, these are things that make me happy. Get the idea?

In a recent workshop, one participant confided that she was hesitant to wish for happiness because happiness is fleeting. She suggested it might be better to hope for contentment, and not be faced with the post-elation deflation after moments of happiness. Contentment, it appears, has more staying power than happiness.

But is one more important or valuable than the other? Just because happiness is fleeting, is it something to shy away from? How are happiness and contentment connected?

Moments of happiness may dissipate quickly, but are you glad you had the experience anyway? Did the experience leave an impression, a memory? Did it change you in any way? Did it enrich you, free you, awaken you?

T. Harv Eker, author of *Secrets of the Millionaire Mind* who went from zero to millionaire in only two and a half years, says that one of the differences between rich people and poor people is that rich people think "both" and poor people think "either/or." In that context, Eker's reference is to the financially rich or poor. The same principle applies to those rich or poor in love or creativity, or in any aspect of physical, mental or spiritual well-being.

You've heard it said, "Be careful what you wish for, you may just get it." If you think, "I'd rather have contentment than happiness," you may be erecting a barrier between yourself and happiness. Happiness and contentment are different, but not mutually exclusive. You don't have to settle for one over the other.

Dare to desire and enjoy both!

AN AHA MOMENT

What if moments of happiness accumulate over time to define and enrich our overall level of contentment?

Thomas Edison invented the light bulb. He tried thousands of times before being successful. Imagine the moment the light bulb first worked. Edison must have felt a surge of complete happiness, joy, woo-hoo! So satisfying, in fact, that we use the light bulb image to denote the aha connection, the "I get it." Likely, Edison experienced a reduced degree of elation with each successive flip of the switch. But overall, I suspect that initial moment of supreme happiness and all the collective moments afterwards added together to give him a depth of inner contentment he would not otherwise have attained.

Compare contentment to the quiet, peaceful stream meandering through the valley. Happiness is more of a flurry, like Class V rapids or Niagra Falls. Just as the waterfall pools out and eventually contributes to the tranquility of the ocean, moments of happiness contribute to the depth of contentment. Without happiness, contentment is in danger of stagnation.

Graciously accept the gift of momentary happiness, knowing it deepens and strengthens your sense of contentment!