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### **Happiness through Humility**

America's strong heritage with regard to allowing its citizens the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" has brought about a mindset that each person should work for his own benefit and personal pleasure. While there is nothing wrong with happiness and enjoying oneself, this route to seeking out joy will usually leave people empty-handed. A recent experience with a homeless man strengthened my belief that true, satisfying happiness comes not from working for one's own benefit but from serving others.

About a week ago, I went to Milwaukee's Grand Avenue Mall with two friends to seek out a more enjoyable meal than I would find in MSOE's cafeteria. As we approached the entrance to the mall, I saw a presumably homeless man standing near the door. Though I heard his request for spare change, I passed him by without much thought. I had only a few pennies and, having grown up only an hour from Chicago, I had been downtown enough times to know it's often unwise to even make eye contact with those begging for spare change. Normally, that would have been the end of the story and I would have had nothing else about which to write. But, something inside was nagging at me...I couldn't get the man off my mind. As I ate my meal from Panda Express, I found that there was more food than I could eat. I determined that the homeless man could make more use of the leftovers than the garbage can would. As I exited the mall, I

approached the man and told him I couldn't give him any change, but I had some food for him. With shaky hands, possibly due to a handicap or the brisk, wintry air, he gratefully pulled out a Wal-Mart bag for me to put the food in. I slid my leftovers into the bag and said goodbye to the man, walking away with a smile and an overwhelming sense of joy.

Before encountering this homeless man, I had always been taught and had always believed that I should be concerned with the needs of others at least as much as with my own. Perhaps the strongest factor influencing this belief was the Biblical story of the Good Samaritan. As a Jewish man is traveling down the road, some thieves mug him and "leav[e] him half dead" (Luke 10:30). A few religious but arrogant men approach the man as they walk down the road but quickly pass on the other side of the road. Finally, a Samaritan man, a member of a race that hates Jews, stops to help the injured man, takes him to an inn and pays the innkeeper to care for the man until he heals. After telling this story, Jesus instructs, "You go, and do likewise" (Luke 10:37). Just as the Samaritan man assisted his social enemy, a Jewish man, when he needed care, I learned that I should act likewise and help and care for those who aren't necessarily liked by others. Whether these people are simply shy and lonely or homeless outcasts like the man I recently encountered, I knew I was to look for ways to serve them.

Looking back over the past several years of my life, those times I found myself to be happiest were instances in which I was following my firm conviction to put others before myself – to serve and assist them in something they could not accomplish on their own. The summer after my freshman year of high school, I went on a mission trip where a couple thousand students and I went to downtown Chicago and some of the suburbs and shared with people the teachings of the Bible. The first day I went out with my partner

and we met a homeless man in Chicago and bought him lunch. I was encouraged not only because I knew we were doing something to serve this man, but also because he responded with gratitude about such a small act of kindness. I realized that I had little need to constantly seek out what wealth I could accumulate for myself because I have significantly more than a good percentage of the population of the world. While I've had many joyous days in my life, this experience was possibly one of the better ones. It exemplified for me fairly early on in life the pleasure that comes through assisting others for their own benefit.

Despite the fact that I had believed for as long as I could remember that serving others was far better than constantly striving to follow my own desires for myself and had even seen instances in which this belief was reinforced, my convictions were not always real to me. I knew I was often happiest when helping other people, but the drone of class and homework often got to me and consumed the time I could have otherwise used to serve others. I knew, though, deep down inside that I'd be happier serving others more, but when we discussed the topic of happiness in class, I had little to say. Much discussion in class regarding happiness revolved around the amassing of wealth or the accomplishment of other tasks often deemed difficult or honorable. I knew that material goods and respect from my peers do not bring happiness, but I seemed to be forgetting what did.

Just when I needed a refresher, my recent experience with the homeless man reminded me once again of the beauty and joy that comes from serving others. I didn't even have to sacrifice any money or time to feed this man, yet, for all I know, the sustenance with which I provided him may have kept him alive for a day. At a minimum,

he was provided with important nourishment. The fact that I had helped this man, even if only in a seemingly small manner, brought about an immense happiness in me. I knew I had done something for someone other than myself and had brightened up someone else's day. Through assisting the homeless man I was once again reminded that happiness does, indeed, come from serving others.

The simplicity of my actions and the tremendous joy they brought me made me question whether Thoreau was correct in his suggestion that simplicity brings about an increased sense of happiness and contentment. In *Walden*, Thoreau demands, "Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity" and explains how, in attempt to follow this theory of delight, he moves to the woods for some time and leads a simple life (118). Rather than constantly keeping busy and living "with such hurry and waste of life" as many people do, Thoreau sets out to make his "affairs be as two or three" (118). Indeed, my actions towards the homeless man were simple, but not in the same way Thoreau describes. That morning, I did not tell myself that I would simplify my life to going to two classes, eating lunch, sitting around and relaxing, setting up a sound system, then going to the mall to eat dinner. Nor did I go find a remote location and study a little bit throughout the day in-between enjoying my surroundings. Rather, I went about my normal business, following my schedule of classes and, when the opportunity presented itself, I performed a simple action which brought about happiness. It was not the simplicity of the life I was leading that brought about joy, but the simple action of serving another human being amidst my normal, everyday activities that brought about happiness.

Interestingly, Thoreau does not live the rest of his life in simplicity, but moves on because he "had several more lives to live and could not possibly spare any more time for

that one” (125). Thus, it seems that even Thoreau doubts his connection between simplicity and happiness and leans more towards success and happiness resulting from one’s “advances confidently in the direction of his dreams” (125).

Thoreau is not the only philosopher to consider simplicity’s connection to happiness. In his book, *Pursuit of Happiness*, Mark Kingwell recognizes that many seek out this path. Kingwell responds to this behavior, commenting that such strivings are in vain, as the thought that happiness is simplicity is a myth. While he explains that happiness cannot be bought, with regard to material goods, Kingwell points out that people “don’t call them material ‘goods’ for nothing – they are, as we sometimes say in philosophy, *choiceworthy*, things worth wanting” (32). Kingwell seems to be stuck somewhere in the middle, claiming some importance of material goods in happiness, yet being careful not to exaggerate their importance. He finally comes to a similar conclusion as the one at which Thoreau arrives, writing, “The satisfaction that continues to be satisfactory is the clue to the elusive nature of happiness” (36). To tie the thoughts of the two philosophers together, as long as one is “advancing confidently” towards his dreams, his satisfaction continues to be satisfactory.

The explanations of both Thoreau and Kingwell err in their placement of their focus. Rather than looking to an external source of happiness, both emphasize the importance of following one’s dreams and continuing in personal satisfaction. While it is true that this reference to one’s goals and one’s satisfaction is arbitrary – one could set an honorable goal to serve others – the general idea behind this theory of happiness is not focused on helping others and bettering their lives, but on bettering one’s own life through whatever means possible. Our culture, indeed, follows a similar path, placing a

strong emphasis on money, houses, cars, families, and so forth as a means of acquiring satisfaction and happiness. In contrast, I have found and have been reminded through my experience with the homeless man that I do not need to obtain riches, make countless friends, get drunk every weekend, or have a “good” family to be satisfied. I find joy not in feeling trapped working hard to advance myself so that I can begin the vicious cycle once again, but in helping others and looking out for their needs before mine. Just as in the movie *Pay it Forward*, where a young middle-school boy affects countless people by carrying out simple acts of kindness for their benefit, I can make a difference in this world by helping out even just one person in need.

Though my beliefs did not change through my experience with the homeless man, the event provided me with a strong, down-to-earth reminder that I don’t need to accumulate millions of dollars to die a happy man. Rather, if I simply look for ways to attend to the needs of other people and do what I can to improve their lives, even in small ways, I can be satisfied with where I’m at and lead a happy life.