

By Revs. Robert and Casey Baggott

FINDING HAPPINESS IS NOT SO DIFFICULT

A few weeks ago we were writing a sermon on happiness and at the same time remembered a song from our childhoods. It goes something like this. *“If you’re happy and you know it, clap your hands. If you’re happy and you know it then your face will surely show it. If you’re happy and you know it, clap your hands!”* In the singing, as we recall, a lot of noisy clapping occurred. We were all happy, I guess! Still, we never thought much about it until the old tune and lyrics came back to us.

Happiness is something most of us would like to experience pretty regularly. Are you happy? Do you know it? Could you be happy and NOT know it? At first that seems unlikely, but then again, we could be happier than we ever realized.

Abraham Maslow was a psychologist whose theories about life satisfaction have become well-accepted. He envisioned life’s needs as arrayed in a pyramid. At the base were such basics as food, shelter, and clothing. Further up the pyramid were less concrete human needs like affection and constructive work. At the pinnacle of the pyramid was self-actualization (or personal fulfillment). Maslow’s theory goes something like this: Until the needs associated with the base of the pyramid are satisfied, those near the top cannot be achieved. In other words, hungry, ill-housed people are unlikely to be “self-actualized”. That certainly makes sense.

Surprisingly though, new life satisfaction studies are showing us some very different results. Especially as we age, the studies say, there is nearly no correlation between the commonly accepted signs of success such as wealth, power, and prestige, and reports of life satisfaction. Among many older Americans, even those who are ill or impoverished, reports of life satisfaction are high. This was highly unexpected. Researchers learned that life satisfaction as we age is increasingly dependent upon satisfying non-material needs, particularly spiritual needs. Those of us who continue to nurture our faith are much more likely to find contentment and satisfaction as life moves on, than those who do not, despite limiting circumstances.

Perhaps we should all reassess our goals. Though food, shelter, and clothing are essential for human health and dignity, and we can never deny their significance for ourselves and others, it’s easy to anxiously convince ourselves that we “need” far more of these goods than we really do. If we worry unduly about amassing more of them than we need, we may miss opportunities to grow and develop in other areas—especially those areas of lasting life satisfaction, like our faith lives.

Maybe many of our daily struggles to deal with the material aspects of life are distracting us even now from the richness of a trusting faith, which already lies within us. Such a rich faith, at any age, when recognized and nurtured, can certainly contribute mightily to life satisfaction-and happiness. Look within. Are you happy? Do you know it? Clap your hands!