

## ‘ on happiness ’

I read a good definition of happiness the other day: ‘subjective well-being’. If you can count yourself as happy, then you are.

The night before I gave birth to my first son I had a dream, in which I was given a choice. Either I would wish him happiness: nothing too bad would ever happen to him, he would have a secure job, marry and have children. None of his children would die before him, and his wife and he would spend many happy days playing sport, watching TV and seeing friends. Or I could wish for him a life of truth, in which our ultimately wretched human condition would be revealed to him. On the back of such an understanding, he would be a great writer and composer.

In the dream I wished my son every happiness, with a heavy heart.

Periodically, I go back to that dream. In fact, it has often seemed to me that the ‘happy’ life doesn’t seem much of a life at all, barely worth a human breath. A huge ‘So What?’ hangs over it. When I meet happy people I immediately feel claustrophobic. They are full to the brim of ‘subjective well-being’ and nothing seems to quite touch them. There

even seems to be an air of self-congratulation about their untouchability.

This might all seem rather gloomy; a life would be unbearable if we were made aware of others' sufferings every waking hour and could never know the simple delight of a beautiful morning and a crisp blue sky. Last Christmas a vicar suggested we should not wish each other 'Happy Christmas' until the world's wrongs had been righted, and we could *all* aspire to have a happy Christmas. Oh dear! To ban happiness on account of its inequality of distribution seems a fairly miserable way to carry on.

Yet happiness is interesting: to be worth having (in my view) it requires substance. Happiness is more than simply having a continuous outlet for hedonism. When I feel happy, I know that three conditions will have been met: I have to have a clear conscience, to be involved in a project or activity in which I feel I am making progress, and to be connected to those I love in an open and honest way. As I write this, numbers one and two need attention. I am good at the third.

What is curious about happiness is that it actually increases when you have known unhappiness. Soldiering on for ten years on your own, and then embarking on a true and intimate friendship, is more conducive to a deeper happiness than if you've had loads of friends all your life. Likewise if you're cured of some illness, saved from near death, or if you've just sighted land after months at sea: experiences such as these give a sense of gratitude that might last the rest of your life. I spent a fortnight in Albania a few years ago; I heard such stories of how people had

suffered under the communist dictator Hoxha that when I came home I couldn't believe how fortunate I was. Everything seemed so beautiful and clean, people so friendly and trustworthy. I was on a high for months. It crossed my mind that all holidays should be spent in grisly tower blocks in over-populated cities: we would have fifty weeks of gratitude for our lot.

I've always been suspicious of easy solutions and self-help books which teach you how to be happy: forgive yourself! Move on! Stop feeling guilty! Think positively! No – I don't think so. I am much more of the school of Alcoholics Anonymous, who remind you to feel guilty and then make you go round apologising to everyone you've hurt. And I was impressed by the headmaster of Wellington College who suggested that the key to happiness was resilience: holding firm when the going gets tough, as of course it's bound to from time to time. True happiness is only possible when the foundations are properly in place – and that doesn't just mean health, friends and enough money: a degree of ballast is needed – moral fibre, as it used to be called.

One final thought: when you're a child, happiness is so uncomplicated. Winning a challenging netball match is enough for positive joy. But as you get older layers and layers of all sorts of feelings attach themselves to the most innocent of activities. Naked enthusiasm gives way to poignancy, to loss. No wonder people turn to drink for a quick fix. My recipe: love, confide, trust. It's a risky business, the pain of rejection unbearable. But intimacy with others makes life worth living and, dare I say it – it can actually make you happy.

## food for thought

- Q *Were you happy as a child?*
- Q *Do you think happiness has more to do with circumstances or character?*
- Q *When you come across other people who seem light and joyous – a glimpse of a couple kissing on a beach, teenagers going through a dance routine in the park – do you find their happiness contagious or does it make you aware of your own lack of it?*
- Q *If someone asked you whether you considered your partner a 'happy' person, what would you say to them?*
- Q *You have 48 hours to do exactly as you choose. Devise your perfect break.*
- Q *Is a good conscience necessary to be truly happy?*
- Q *Is it a good idea for schoolchildren to be taught how to be happy, or is 'being happy' a state beyond your control?*

## ‘ on the soul ’ (according to plato)

When I was young I was ill for a week and was kept in isolation in the sanatorium at my boarding school. It was one of the most productive weeks of my entire education. This small building was set deep in the countryside, a mile away from the main school. In my bedroom was an old-fashioned stove, and the walls were lined with dark, polished wood. I spent my time writing poetry on crispy loo paper with the stub of an old pencil, and reading the only two books I could lay my hands on: a Greek textbook, and Plato’s *Republic*.

I was sixteen and hungry to know what being-in-the-world was about, and Plato was the most exciting writer I had ever come across. I didn’t read him critically, as an academic might, querying this and that, but as a ploughman might his Bible, on reading it for the first time. Every single word of it rang true, and it didn’t occur to me to question anything Plato taught me. As far as I was concerned, I now knew what a soul was, I now understood what it was to be an ‘I’.

Nowadays, of course, most of us (sadly) don’t believe in

souls. In our view we have minds which can reason and we have bodies; ultimately everything can be reduced to bodies, as neurologists are forever telling us. We value, as a society, intelligence: logic, mathematics, science, computers, organisations; and we value, as a society, bodies: every aspect of physical beauty – fitness, sport, sex, eating and drinking. All else is suspect: at best, a waste of time (e.g. an education in the humanities) and at worst, plain stupid (e.g. a belief in ‘intuition’ or ‘inappropriate’ emotion, such as the mass ‘hysteria’ over Princess Diana’s death. Yes, even mourning nowadays is considered in some way ‘pathological’).

But my beloved Plato, how wise he was! Rather than reducing everything to ultimately being about the body, he expanded everything to ultimately being about the soul. The ‘I’ who lusts, the ‘I’ who hungers, is the same ‘I’ who can write a computer program. But the third part of Plato’s tripartite soul – alongside reason and appetite – is for me the most important part of us, and one that we in the modern world have all but forgotten: the part he calls *thumos*, a wonderfully untranslatable word, but so recognisable in us that the study of it should be part of the primary school curriculum.

The *thumos* is the nuclear core of the human being, without which we are computers that eat and have sex. It’s the part of us which reacts before we’ve had the time to work out *why* we are reacting in a particular way. When I was a schoolgirl, we translated *thumos* as ‘moral outrage’, the part of you which knows immediately that something is awry even though you can’t put your finger on it. Another translation is ‘anger’ – but a deep, justifiable anger, from

one's very gut; or 'passion' – a quick and irrational understanding of something important. Plato simply describes it as that part in us which is neither rational nor appetitive: it is about 'everything else' – its function is to complete the picture of us as human beings. In his dialogue *Phaedrus* Plato gives *thumos* a more important role yet: it has glimpsed heaven and yearns to return there, recognising the beauty in this world as a reflection of something even more perfect. *Thumos* is, therefore, the feeling in us which gives rise to romantic love, or religious yearning, or a desire for justice. It is the feeling which yearns for more; that refuses to be satisfied with the mundane.

But Plato doesn't give *thumos* a free rein. He compares the harmonious soul to a charioteer (reason) achieving mastery over two horses (appetite and *thumos*): both the appetite and the *thumos* need to be kept in train; but reason can't act alone, it simply has no direction, no mojo, if you like. The rational and irrational parts in us have to work as a team. Now, where is the modern psychologist who's ever said anything wiser than that?

## food for thought

- Q *Think of a time when you were aware of the part of your soul which Plato calls thumos. Were your feelings positive or negative?*
- Q *Do you agree that modern society tries to downplay this part of ourselves?*
- Q *Recently a friend of mine had to read an academic paper called 'Lesbianism and the Fugue'. Do you see*

*any justification in reading sexual drives into human activities which are not explicitly sexual?*

- Q *Would you say the three parts of your soul were well balanced? If not, which is the dominant part?*
- Q *Would you say that your partner's soul was well balanced? If not, which would you say was the dominant part in him/her?*
- Q *Aristotle thought it was possible to change one's character by acquiring better habits. Do you think he's right?*
- Q *What practical action might you take to achieve a better balance in your tripartite soul?*