A HAPPY LIFE IS NOT PERFECT HAPPINESS

There is a great misunderstanding about what it means to live a happy life, and it can be summed up in the popular symbol of the smiley face.

Now, I like to smile. I love feeling that kind of glowing, delighted state of emotional bliss. It's wonderful to be full of joy and love and laughter. But feeling those things doesn't in and of itself make for a happy life; and just because you don't happen to feel them in the moment doesn't mean you are unhappy.

In fact, if simply feeling those emotions all the time was what constituted happiness, and if Aristotle was correct in saying that, "Happiness is the meaning and the purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence," then it would be a simple matter to find the right combination of drugs that would perpetually bathe our neurons with joyful chemicals, and we could all be perpetually happy and fulfill the aim and end of our existence.

But this smiley face view of happiness is not the whole story, at all. And we all know it.

A happy life is an engaged life, an active life, an ethical life, a life that you create; a life you can be proud of.

What a happy life is not is not a perfect life.

If you have a view of happiness that tells you that to feel sad or angry or afraid is a sign of failure, or a moral shortcoming of some kind, you're actually setting yourself up for a miserable bind. The "negative" emotions of life are just as important as the "positive" emotions, in their own way - and

when they are not overdone, either.

Nobody wants to walk around feeling afraid all the time... or angry, or sad. These feelings, in and of themselves, don't make you happy - obviously - either.

But they do provide you with important information about what is going on. Used well, they are responses to actual circumstances.

· *Anger* is a response to *trespass* - if somebody crosses a line where your territory or integrity or values are being violated or crossed, anger lets you know to check this out, and it gives you the emotional energy to push back and protect what matters to you.

· *Fear* is a response to perceived or imagined *danger*. The challenge becomes discerning whether a given feeling of fear is in response to something real or imagined.

· *Sadness* is a response to *loss*. The challenge with sadness can be to let it run its course, and allow other, more positive feelings to come back around.

This list is not exhaustive, of course, but it can give you an idea of the value of some of the emotions that are not as pleasant as the "happier" emotions.

A happy life includes the entire range of feelings, an expansive vision of possibilities, and a grounded and accurate relationship to reality. To navigate your emotional life is to integrate what you feel with a clear assessment of reality, and to choose what you want to do with the information and experience contained within your emotional life.

You don't want to dwell on and become overwhelmed by fear, or sadness, or anger, but neither do you want to avoid these feelings, or judge them as some kind of moral failing.

An absurd example of this was attempted in the latest version of the diagnostic manual of psychology, the *DSM 5*. In it, a person who has just experienced a major loss of a loved one is said to be diagnosed with a disorder of depression if they feel depressed at all - any time from the moment of loss.

It used to be that there was a reasonable time frame to this diagnosis that corresponded with natural human grief. But with today's emphasis on psychopharmacology, that normal human grieving is now seen by some as something to be avoided at all costs - and even that it is indicative of a psychological disorder!

How utterly, laughably ridiculous!

Grief is a natural response to loss. Depression is not pleasant, and it is not something to indulge or succumb to, but it is also very *human*. As a psychological problem, it is generally a symptom of

helplessness. But helpless is exactly what we are in the face of great loss. So depression can be a reasonable and natural response. For awhile: a few months, maybe a year or so.

That doesn't mean that you ever fully "get over" such a loss. I lost both of my parents about a dozen years ago, and I still miss them, and feel sad at times wishing I could see them. But I also don't walk around obsessed with their loss, or disabled by depression.

Our sadness honors those we have loved and lost. Indulging and ruminating on that loss for too long is a disabling choice, which does not honor those lost, but only serves to make us miserable and ineffective.

So you can see, there is complexity to such emotions, and to such states as depression. They are experiences to wrestle with, to make sense of, and to integrate into our good and happy lives. They are not to be avoided in the name of some perfect vision of bliss or mindless cheeriness; nor are they to be taken on as a perpetual atmosphere of one's life.

Happiness is a *way of life*. It is something that you *do*. And actively, purposefully integrating your entire range of emotions is one of the central actions that lead to a happy life.

This is not something that anybody does perfectly. Integrity is always a work in progress, and integrating our emotional experience is a central task of living with integrity. But it is something that you can practice, and improve on, and eventually achieve a degree of mastery with.

This is a major task of each of our lives. It is central to what it means to be human. There is not a simple answer to all of our emotional challenges. There is not a drug that will sort it all out for any of us. It takes work, it takes consciousness, and it takes understanding that sometimes *life hurts*, and then it's our job to assess the situation, bandage up our wounds and carry on with life as best as we can.

So if you want to live a happier life, but you have thought that doing so requires a permanent smiley face, I hope this gives you a little better sense of things. A diagram that my son showed me might put the perfectionist, smiley face fantasy in perspective:

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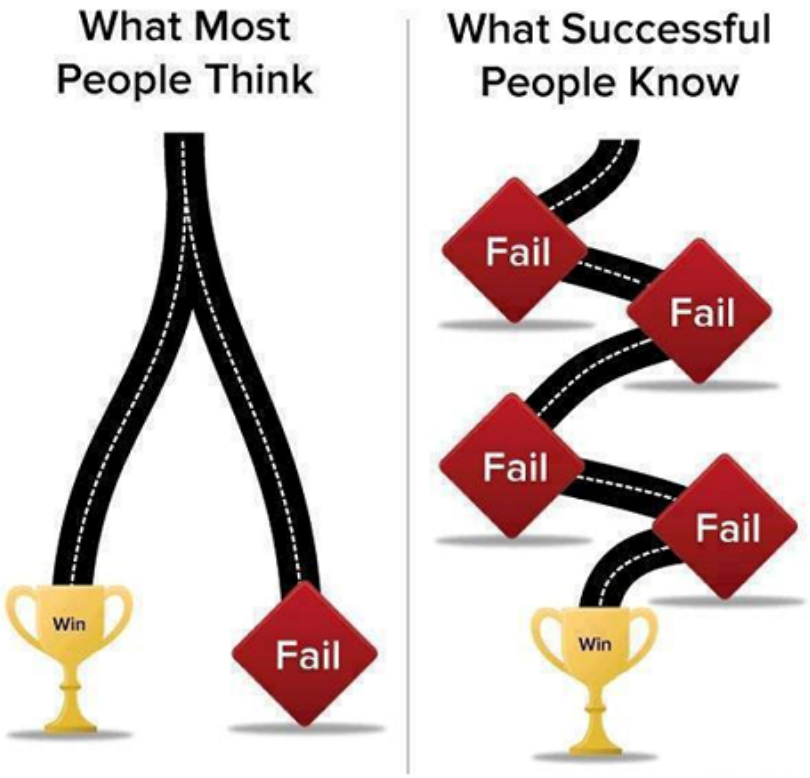
What Most People Think
Win
Fail
What Successful People Know
Fail
Fail
Fail
Fail
Win