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Brandi Litton
Collin College

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DON'T WORRY, BE HAPPY

Brandi Litton

D“DO WHATEVER MAKES YOU HAPPY” is an order that encompasses contemporary society with an almost plaguing consistency. Logic would typically dictate that with such an overzealous use of a statement, the answer to how one may achieve happiness should be easily obtained. Unfortunately, a concrete definition has eluded mankind for ages; after all, the wolf’s perception of happiness differs from that of the sheep. While it is true that happiness is subjective, the foundation remains consistent: happiness is a joyous emotion that results from one achieving any degree of personal fulfillment and overcoming obstacles.

Marcus Aurelius stated that “very little is needed to make a happy life” (774), and my experiences have enlightened me to the truth of this simple statement. I was brought up in an environment that excelled in instability; my mother was a lover of the convicted and would constantly introduce a new “wronged man” to her young children on a near bi-monthly basis, my biological father did nothing in his power to protect his offspring, and when my mother’s constant influx of men started abusing her and her family, she so often searched for a new home that we rarely unpacked our things from their boxes. Chaos became our reality, and my mother’s unwillingness to learn from her past transgressions made her its vassal.

As I blossomed into womanhood, I went to my mother in hopes of gaining an understanding. “Why do you do all this? Why do you think you need a man in your life?” I asked her. With a broken smile and blue eyes that once held a passion for life, she responded with: “Because it makes me happy.” Despite having been only a child, I knew even then that happiness was not forcing yourself to sacrifice all you had to offer, merely for the sake of retaining a partner. It was this epiphany that resulted in my

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Understanding of happiness in such a manner, that upon reading author Danielle Crittenden's thoughts on happiness in her work *About Love*, I viewed them as inconceivable. She wrote that:

The pull between the desire to love and be loved and the desire to be free is an old, fierce one. If the error our grandmothers made was to have surrendered too much of themselves for others, this was perhaps better than not being prepared to surrender anything at all. The fear of losing oneself can, in the end, simply become an excuse for not giving any of oneself away. (801)

Crittenden's ideas on contemporary feminism are flawed; had her thoughts been as true as she claimed, then sacrificial women such as my mother should have been ecstatic at the thought of having husbands at their sides, regardless of quality. However, these women are pushed to the point of desperation and cling to what miniscule hope they have left, all under the influence of a crooked view of how one establishes happiness.

As the young witnesses to the corrupt joy enshrouding our mother, my brother and I were required to discover our own methods of merriment; we quickly discovered that it wasn't material possessions that made an enjoyable life, but the satisfaction of having an escape where we were queen and king of our own fantasy domains. My brother inspired fulfillment within himself by throwing on his toy gun and cowboy hat and pretending as though he was a savior and defender of the weak, and I achieved such a feeling by sitting alone and drawing pictures of what my life would entail once I had left this chaotic hell behind and displaying my agony through the rough strokes of my pencil. My mother's children were happy





BOY POWERED CART Hector Reyes

when they were fulfilled, even if our successes were merely illusions of our own devising with the intent of survival plaguing the backs of our minds.

The Dalai Lama's comment on such an elusive joy was unknown to us at that time, but the spiritual leader concluded: "if you have a strong sense of contentment, it doesn't matter whether you obtain the object or not; either way, you are still content" (793). Despite being children, we had learned to discover joy without requiring possession of the newest toy or trend; our happiness was abundant once we set goals for ourselves and successfully executed them. It was a boost to our young egos, which had been crushed under the weight of our abysmal world; we experienced joy from the only thing that truly allowed us room to do so: ourselves. We knew that while our home was a bleak and occasionally fearful place, we didn't have to continue living in such standards once the time came for us to fly from our nest.

The key to our successful happiness was taking pride in ourselves for any minor achievement; if we trained ourselves to focus on what the future contained instead of wallowing in our present

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tragedy, we claimed a victory. As life continuously threw obstacles our way, we overcame them with thoughts of our hidden potential and what we would strive to accomplish upon growing older. As Henry David Thoreau claims in his work, *Walden*: "All men want, not something to *do with*, but something to *do*, or rather something to *be*" (779). My brother and I suffered in one of the worst scenarios of a home life, and our ecstasy derived from doing well in school, promising ourselves a better future, and managing to survive another week in Hell; refusing to surrender under the agony of our domestic life by striving

for our true potential was our method of achieving inner joy and peace with our surroundings. Once we learned how to sail both the calm and rough waters of the abusive typhoon, jaws dropped at how indifferent we became to the danger that dwelt within the closed doors of our three-bedroom house. My sibling and I ourselves are proof that Epictetus, in his work: *The Handbook*, spoke accurately that "when you behave in accordance with nature, you will take pride only in some good that is your own" (787).

Let us now shift our focus to a similar happiness under dramatically alternate circumstances; it does not take the worst situations to acquire such a joy. Upon entering the spring semester of my first year in college, I enrolled in Beginner's Karate; the purpose of this class was to learn the basic fundamentals of the Wado style and successfully execute them in stressful situations, not to achieve a higher belt status. I had always enjoyed learning and applying physical manners of self defense, so I was ecstatic upon entering this class. As the semester progressed, I found myself setting daily goals and exerting myself to reach them; I beamed with pride after each triumph, more than content to push my limits. However, contentment soon became a stranger as I realized that my peers were not all striving with the same foundations; they congratulated themselves for merely attending the class and surviving another day of sweat (and sometimes, tears).

I finally inquired my sensei (teacher) about furthering my lessons in the dojo (martial arts training hall) where he trained; I was enrolled within a matter of weeks. As with any new experience, I was consumed with anxiety and doubts; what if I looked foolish as a result of my being so new? What if everyone scorned me for holding back the class? Thoughts such as these were not foreign to me, so I commenced my usual plan: setting up a timeline of goals, no matter how small. Every small success,

whether it be finding my class, asking someone a question, completing paper work, or executing a correct technique, was an obstacle that I prided myself in overcoming.

Within a week's time I had adjusted to the practices of the dojo and began focusing on my forms. My daily ritual was discovering what needed improvement and what had already engraved itself upon my mind; each failure promised an eventual success. No critique or embarrassment kept my goals at bay; one glance of the black belt on the wall rekindled my motivation and I knew that my mistakes would eventually pay off. In his work, "In Pursuit of Unhappiness", author Darrin M. McMahon narrated such motivation as though he knew me personally: "Those are only happy... who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness; ...some art of pursuit, followed not as a means, but as itself an ideal end. Aiming thus at something else, they find happiness by the way" (785).

Happiness, regardless of a negative or positive influence, is acquired through the acts of overcoming obstacles, reaching goals, and obtaining personal fulfillment from such successes. Contemporary America is shrouded with the belief that true joy and achievement are results of how much money one earns, or one's marital status; such values result in a society consumed by a stigma that allows unions to transact too early in life and the majority to dirty its hands in order to obtain large doses of currency. If humans would pause their exhausting endeavors and attempt to better themselves instead of their possessions or marital status, our world would be a much more tolerable and enjoyable place to live. However, should we continue on our self-mutilating path of following the herd, we shall soon find ourselves trapped in a vicious circle, unable to escape the wolves at our door.

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QUILT PROGRESS Carol Cocking

“WHEN YOU BEHAVE IN ACCORDANCE
WITH NATURE, YOU WILL TAKE PRIDE ONLY
IN SOME GOOD THAT IS YOUR OWN”.