

Happy ever after

Some months ago, I read Eric Weiner's book, "The Geography of Bliss." In it, he travels to various countries to discover what makes a country happy. He finds himself in countries such as The Netherlands, Switzerland, Bhutan, India, Qatar, Moldova, Thailand, England, and back home to the United States. In his travels, he tries to discover, how people look on the idea of happiness, whether or not it has anything to do with the geography of the place or the attitude of the people who inhabit a particular country.

Research done in the Netherlands indicate that, "extroverts are happier than introverts; optimists are happier than pessimists; married persons are happier than singles, though people with children are no happier than childless couples; Republicans are happier than Democrats; people who attend religious services are happier than those who do not; people who college degrees are happier than those without, though people with advanced degrees are less happy than those with just a BA; people with an active mind are happier than those without; women and men are equally happy, though women have a wider emotional range; having an affair will make you happy but will not compensate for the massive loss of happiness that will occur when your spouse finds out and leaves you; people are least happy when they are commuting to work; busy people are happier than those with too little to do; wealthier people are happier than poorer people, but only slightly."

On his journey, he found the Swiss uptight and happy; the Thais laid-back and happy; Icelanders finding joy in binge drinking; Moldovians full of misery; the Indian mind full of contradictions; Americans restless and wearing happiness on their sleeves.

He finds that Miami is associated with happiness, if not even paradise. He says that evidences suggests that we are less happy today. "Since 1960, the divorce rate has doubled, the teen suicide rate had tripled, the violent crime rate quadrupled, and the prison population quintupled. Then there is the increased rates of depression, anxiety and other mental illness problems."

Americans, when asked what would improve their quality of life indicated that money was the number one answer. He suggests that the self-help industry does not help because it drives us to focus within rather than to relationships with people and community.

Increasingly, we are losing our sense of interconnectedness. We spend less time visiting family and friends. We belong to fewer community groups. We are lonely and we expect the Internet to take away that loneliness. We have our Facebook pages and blogs where we connect with people in a non-tactile way.

We are a restless people. Our nationhood was founded by pilgrims in the pursuit of happiness. Many came to this country searching for a better life in a place where "the streets were paved with gold."

It is estimated that every year some forty million Americans move. They move because of job or to be near other family members or because they might find some place else where they might be happier.

Maybe there is a lot of truth in what Irish playwright said, "A lifetime of happiness! No one could bear it. It would be hell on earth."

Throughout the book, we discover people's attitudes to life colors their perception of life. It would be interesting if the Beatitudes were used as a sounding board for people's real attitudes.

Some people leave their hearts in San Francisco. Others yearn to retire to the Sunshine State. More become nomads, following each rainbow in case there might be a pot of gold under it that will bring them happiness. Others, find peace of mind by accepting, enjoying and sharing the simpler things in life. Still others know that happiness can be as elusive as a butterfly, available for a fleeting moment in anticipation of a lifetime of enjoying it later.

Our restlessness is a God-given gift, not to be escaped from but to be embraced until we finally are at home. Maybe how we answer the question, "Where do I want to be buried?" will answer our real happiness quest.