

November 4, 2011

“Echoes of the Heart”

Reflections on Life and Community Living

Are you happy? When you think about your life—and lives of Americans around the country—are you happy? Generally speaking, as a nation, are we a happy people?

Because *happiness* is such a subjective state of being, it is seldom referred to in conversations on politics or economics. Yet, given our nation’s current economic challenges, coupled with an increasingly grating gridlock in Washington, international economist, Jeffrey D. Sachs, in a recent book, *The Price of Civilization*, mentions *happiness* as if it were a normal part of the discourse.

Sachs has been in the forefront of globalization and international economic problem solving in a career stretching over three decades. His brand of *clinical economics* is unique in that it combines scholarly and cutting-edge economics with the analytical and reflective problem-solving you’d expect to see from a trained therapist.

Internationally, he’s had great success in addressing a range of economic ills of a long list of countries around the planet. What is curious is how the category of *happiness* comes up again and again in the analytical process.

As we continue to problem solve the ills of our American economy, Sachs points out how the loss of confidence in our institutions is matched by a loss of confidence in one another. Going on, he notes how the general deterioration of living conditions is taking its toll on *life satisfaction* in our country.

In recent decades, studies suggest that the trend of self-reported *happiness* in America has either flattened out or declined (among women) even as per capita income has risen significantly. In a recent Gallup Poll, Americans are no higher than seventeenth internationally.

Again, think about your life! Are you living a satisfying life? Are you happy?

Happiness is a life choice. In an interview a few years back, when asked about *happiness*, the Dalai Lama said, *happiness is not about destiny or luck; it’s about making good choices.*

Well enough, but in what areas are we choosing? And if polls suggest that we Americans have fallen on the happiness scale in recent decades, why is this the case?

Assuming an acceptable level of income, surely, *happiness* starts with our relationships—relationships to spouse, children, parents, extended family and friends. However, to be truly *happy*, we also need our work—the mindful using of our talents and gifts towards some life purpose enabling us to provide for our families while, at the same time,

contributing to our community.

Beyond this, *happiness* asks something of our soul and spirit. It asks for some form of life-commitment to *ultimate meanings*. These *ultimate meanings* are not limited to religion, yet religion is probably where they are likely to be sorted out and incorporated into our daily lives.

Happiness, therefore, asks of us that we make good choices in our relationships, our work and in our personal working out of ultimate meanings.

Happiness as a life-style. However, *happiness* also has to do with life-style. We can have the best spouse in the world, the best kids, the best job and a healthy sense of ultimate meanings and still be miserable. Why? Because of the choices we make day after day.

Choices that lead to obesity (a national crisis) and that hinder our personal health and well-being. Choices that lead to spending too much leisure time in front of the TV or the computer or any number of the increasingly available *gadgets of technology*. Choices that keep us from being educated and informed about the world we live in. Choices that bend towards short-term awareness and immediate gratification. Choices that promote greed and self-centeredness and that keep us from seeing the inter-relatedness of all things.

Again, the Dalai Lama reminds us: *Happiness is not about destiny or luck; it's about making good choices.*

Every day, we get to choose. We get to make decisions about diet and exercise, decisions on where we go, what we do and with whom we interact. We get to choose an active or a sedentary life, an openness to the spirit or a closedness. We get to choose our attitude, our shades of kindness, compassion, forgiveness and generosity.

Every day, we get to choose among all these options; and somewhere, in the choosing, if it can, *happiness* breaks through.