
Fr Ronald Rolheiser
The Last Word



Meaning and happiness

Am I happy? Is my life a happy one? Am I happy in my marriage? Am I happy with my family? Am I happy in my job? Am I happy with my church? Am I happy in my own skin?

Are these good questions to ask ourselves? No. They're questions with which to torture ourselves. When we face our lives honestly this kind of question about happiness is more likely to bring tears to our eyes than solace to our souls because, no matter how well our lives are going, none of us live perfectly fulfilled lives. Always there are unfulfilled dreams. Always there are areas of frustration. Always there are tensions. Always there are deeper hungers that are being stifled. And always, as Karl Rahner so poignantly puts it, we are suffering the torment of the insufficiency of everything attainable as we are learning that here in this life there is no finished symphony. Our lives are always lived in quiet desperation. A lot of times it is not easy to feel happy.

But we are asking the wrong questions. The question should not be: am I happy? Rather the questions should be: is my life meaningful? Is there meaning in my life? Is there meaning in my marriage? Is there meaning in my family? Is there meaning in my job? Is there meaning inside my church? We need to ask the deep questions about our lives in terms of meaning rather than in terms of happiness because, for the most part, we have a false, over-idealised and unrealistic concept of happiness.

We tend to equate happiness with two things: pleasure and lack of tension. Hence, we fantasise that for us to be happy we would need to be in a situation within which we would be free of all the tensions that normally flood into our lives from: pressure, tiredness, interpersonal friction, physical pain, financial worry and every other headache and heartache that can appear. Happiness, as it is superficially conceived of, means perfect health, perfectly fulfilled relationships, a perfect job, no anxiety or tension in life, no disappointments, and the time and money to enjoy the good life.

But that isn't what constitutes happiness. Meaning is what constitutes happiness and meaning isn't contingent upon pain and tension being absent from our lives. Imagine if someone had come up to Jesus as he was dying on the cross and asked him the question: are you happy up there? His answer, I am sure, would have been unequivocal: "No! And today

in particular I am not happy!" However, the perspective is quite different if, while on the cross, Jesus would have been asked this question: "Is there meaning in what you are doing up there?" There can be deep meaning in something even if there isn't happiness in the way we superficially conceive of that.

We more easily grasp this when we reflect back on various periods of our lives. Looking back, from the perspective of where we are today, we see that sometimes certain periods of our lives that were fraught with all kinds of struggles and within which had to make do with very little were indeed very happy times. We look back on them now with fondness and warmth. They were meaningful times and our present perspective washes back through time and purges the pain and highlights the joy.

Conversely, we can also look back on certain periods of our lives when there may have been pleasure in our lives but that phase of our lives now appears clearly as an unhappy time. We look back at it with a certain heaviness and regret. What seemed like light then seems like a time of darkness now.

C S Lewis taught that happiness and unhappiness colour backwards: if our lives end up happy, we realise that we have always been happy even through the trying times, just as if our lives end up unhappy we realise that we have always been unhappy, even during the pleasurable periods of our lives. Where we end up ultimately in terms of meaning will determine whether our lives have been happy or unhappy. Many people, including Jesus, suffered great pain but lived happy lives. Sadly, the reverse is also true. Happiness has a lot more to do with meaning than with pleasure.

In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, C S Lewis tells his readers that his journey to Christianity was not an easy one. By his own admission, he was "the most reluctant convert in the history of Christendom". But one of the things that ultimately brought him around to the Christianity was precisely the realisation that meaning trumps our normal conception of happiness. He came to understand, he writes, that the harshness of God is kinder than the softness of man and God's compulsion is our liberation.

Money can't buy happiness. It can buy pleasure, but, as life itself eventually teaches us, pleasure is not necessarily happiness.