**The Happiness Myth**

STEVE SALERNO

One morning when I was 13, I elbowed my father as he got ready for work. "Dad," I said, "are you happy?"

For a long moment he stared at me. Then he replied, "Son, a man doesn't have time to think about that. A man just does what needs doing." He gave me one of his you'll-understand-someday smiles, and left.

I've been thinking about that exchange a lot, now that another kind of exchange — the giving kind — is upon us. If recent traditions hold, a fair percentage of these gifts will be "inspirational" materials that extol the pursuit of happiness and fulfillment. Certain to end up under the trees of at least some Americans who are obviously not even itself is that unparalleled trifle to wishful thinking, The Secret, by Rhonda Byrne. The year's blockbuster best-seller-cum-cultural phenomenon sold six million books and DVDs on the strength of the belief that you can imagine your way to total fulfillment.

Some of the season's hottest inspiration books, though not "how to" formats, sell a similar message. Notable is Elizabeth Gilbert's Eat, Pray, Love, the story of one woman's (literal) journey to happiness, in which she decided to forsake the comfort of her known life for regions uncharted. Eat, Pray, Love reached the top of the best-seller lists after being blessed by Oprah. Self-help guru Tony Robbins, too, has lately been spanning his online community with holiday offers. Various Robbins products, and even tickets to his entry-level seminars on personal reinvention, will likely end up as stocking-stuffers.

If the quest for joy doesn't take center stage at Christmas, it will surely pop up the following week. Typically, New Year's resolutions that don't involve weight loss have something to do with embracing change, choosing happiness, following your dreams, etc. We are consumed by the pursuit of happiness.

That's too bad. Because it's that very pursuit — as currently framed — that may prevent you from finding happiness, or at least a passable facsimile. Now, I'm not denying that Dad's stoic machismo is what life ought to be about — for either gender. But a lot of us seemed a lot happier, or at least less restless, before the Happiness Movement began bullying us. Myna Blyth, a longtime editor in chief of Ladies' Home Journal, made this point explicitly in her 2004 book, Spin Sisters: Ms. Blyth undertook an informal study of the themes in women's magazines as they evolved over recent decades, and concluded that what women have mostly gotten from their magazines is the message that they're never quite happy enough — never good enough, never fulfilled enough, never far enough along on the path to "having it all."

Of course, it's not just women's magazines that do this. With highly visible gurus of personal development turning the flannel of an entire generation has come age believing that perpetual happiness is a birthright. Over the past four decades, the concepts of Empowerment and Enitlement, first-cousins in the family of American psychobabble, have conspired to produce what New York Observer writer Alexandra Wolfe labels "the most codded generation in American history."

We know what some of us do, perhaps, when our plans don't work out. The years between 1960 and 1999, the period of the most intense "coddling," saw a tripling in suicides among people aged 15 to 24. (For every "successful" suicide, 100 to 200 young people attempt it.) Increasingly, those who don't kill themselves find alternative ways of escaping reality. Today, almost one-fifth of people under age 20 confess to binge drinking. Millions of others descend on doctors, seeking prescriptions for Prozac, Xanax and the like. Although it's reckless to draw straight-line links of cause and effect on the excesses of the "Me Generation," the malignant narcissism epitomized in the TV show Seinfeld, if we don't laugh quite as much these days, that's because it's not carcassure anymore. It's life as we live it.

Contrary to what you hear from Oprah, not "everything you want in life" is attainable (unless, maybe, you are Oprah). Consider the staple line from school administrators during self-esteem-boosting student-assemblies: "In this great country, you can even be president, if you want!" While technically it's true that anybody can be president, it is not true that everybody can be president. Yet that's the implication. In my own case, growing up in Brooklyn, I wanted desperately to patrol center field for the Dodgers. Alas, I had millions of young competitors, some of whom had actual major league skills. If that is your dream — the only dream that will make you happy — what do you do when the Dodgers fail to call?

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Recent courses in psychology and the human sciences have taught us that the idea that happiness can be achieved by "doing" gets things exactly backward. Happiness is not a thing to be captured or attained. It's a state of mind that must be cultivated and sustained. That's the implication. In my own case, growing up in Brooklyn, I wanted desperately to patrol center field for the Dodgers. Alas, I had millions of young competitors, some of whom had actual major league skills. If that is your dream — the only dream that will make you happy — what do you do when the Dodgers fail to call?

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Corrections & Stand-Ins


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