

When May We Be Happy?

2020 felt like a bad year. I was definitely less happy than normal. Yet every day, I *tried* to be happy.

You could question the realism of the goal. “Be happy during a pandemic? When over a million human beings are dying? When the global economy crashes? When billions lose their freedom? When immigration restrictions go from draconian to suffocating? When police murder innocents in broad daylight? When fanatics riot in the streets? When friends lose their minds? When they lose touch with friendship itself? *Not possible.*”

A totally different reaction, however, is to question the *propriety* of the goal. You’re not *supposed* to be happy when the world is in tatters. Only a vicious person could be happy when fellow citizens are dying of the plague, when whole populations live under house arrest, when their friends are acting like Martians. Just because you *can* be happy in 2020 doesn’t mean you *should*.

Emotionally speaking, this is a powerful point. Logically speaking, however, the implications are absurd. Fellow citizens die every day. Without fail! When you hear that total 2020 mortality is 15% above normal for the U.S., this means that last year death claimed about 7 times as many Americans as COVID took this year. The upshot: If you can’t be happy now because your fellow citizens are dying, you can’t be happy ever.

And even if your own country was doing great, what about the suffering masses in every other country on Earth? If your country is perfectly free, should you be sad because North Korea exists? Should Norwegians be gloomy because of American police brutality? As I’ve said before, any non-oblivious person has to choose between (a) daily misery, or (b) personal happiness in a world of woe.

When you put it that woe, (b) is the only rational choice. Social Desirability Bias notwithstanding, each of us has the right – nay, the duty – to *try* to be happy despite the shortcomings of society and the universe. The key question then becomes: How?

I ponder this key question regularly. Here are the main steps I’ve taken to pursue happiness in 2020.

1. Continue ignoring the news unless it affects you personally. Dry statistics are OK, but avoid any information source that tries to engage your emotions.
2. Break bad but weakly enforced rules that get in your way. Never be Lawful Neutral.
3. Refuse to be stampeded.

4. Don't give up on your friends, but lower your expectations to rock bottom.
5. Living Dale Carnegie I: Try extra hard to make new friends.
6. Living Dale Carnegie II: Help your kids make new friends.
7. If schools won't even provide daycare, cut the cord and homeschool.
8. Start new projects that you enjoy.
9. Move to Texas for a spell.
10. General rule: Ask "what options are left," not "what options are lost." And make your Bubble beautiful!

Confession: My hardest realization of 2020 is that even most seemingly reasonable people go crazy in the face of a rather minor crisis. Biologically speaking, this pandemic could have easily have killed ten times as many people - or people we'd miss ten times as much. Never mind World War III. Taking a far view, I expect a lifetime median of two additional global events worse than COVID.

But I'm not going to let that bother me on a typical day, any more than I'm going to fret about my own mortality. Instead, I'm going to remember how lucky I am to be alive at all. As I wrote long ago:

If you read Woody Allen very charitably, he seems have a perfectly reasonable desire to live longer. But his real complaint is that the time he has is meaningless because he only has a finite amount. And his conclusion resonates with a lot of people, and has for a long time.

*I've never understood the appeal of this argument. If a finite quantity of life is worthless, how can an infinite quantity be desirable? Sure, you could trot out mathematical structures with this property, but **come on**. If an infinite span of days is so great, what's stopping you from enjoying today?*

I suspect that many readers are telling themselves, "This is going to be a great year once the vaccine brings us to herd immunity." Wrong. This is going to be a great year starting today if you choose to make it great. And if you postpone happiness until society gets its act together, you'll be waiting for a lifetime.

Happy New Year now!