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Finding Happiness:

- making a difference**
- being present to the good in life**
- healthy attitudes in times of suffering**

“Happiness is the by-product of living a life of meaning.”

Dr. Victor Frankl

We all want to be happy. In a recent class I was teaching I asked, “What is real happiness for you?”. People responded with “being loved”, “loving someone”, “feeling that I make a difference”, “deep serenity”, “the courage to change”. Not one person in the class responded with “having a lot of money”, “a lot of jewelry”, “a big house or car”, “having everyone’s approval”.

We often make ourselves miserable trying so hard to make ourselves happy.

Just as we can “look for love in all the wrong places”, we can also “look for happiness in all the wrong places”. Dr. Victor Frankl, who survived many years of incarceration in World War II concentration camps, spent his post war years sharing with his patients and their families that happiness can be found by living a meaningful life. Dr. Frankl taught them the three basic ways meaning can be found:

1. **Creative Living:** what we give to life. Creative living involves a commitment to enhancing our family, our community and our world; it involves believing that we make a difference, that our life has a purpose; using our talents, gifts, time and energy to make the world a better place.

**“Don’t ask what you can expect from life,
Ask what life expects of you.”**

“...the job at which one works is not what counts, but rather the manner with which one does the work...”

Dr. Victor Frankl, *“The Doctor and the Soul”*

2. **Experiential Living:** accepting, relishing and appreciating the experiences life gives us. Allowing ourselves to experience important moments in life. Allowing ourselves to deeply experience the beauty, joy and inspiration of a nature walk, listening to music, sharing with a friend, photography, painting, drawing, bowling, knitting, biking, watching a good movie, holding a baby, a great belly laugh, a quiet moment watching the sun set, playing our favorite song on the piano, hugging a loved one.

“Spiritual Director Father Ed Dowling said “God gives us moments, and for these moments, we give our lives”. Many depressed, anxious, chronically ill, traumatized or over- worked people have forgotten how to allow themselves to have those moments of feeling good—they often deny themselves experiences that foster joy and aliveness. Sometimes, we need to encourage them to get out of the house and give life a chance.”

Tom Lavin, *“Healing and Wholeness Retreat”*

3. **Attitudinal Living:** is the attitude we adopt in dealing with unavoidable suffering. When something happens in life that causes unavoidable suffering, we give that situation and our lives meaning by the attitude we adopt in dealing with that suffering: a cancer survivor who daily counts his blessings and helps and supports others in the cancer survivors group; the widow who grieves the loss of her husband is thankful for the years they had together, and reaches out to support others in their time of grief.

“Attitudinal Living allows one who is suffering to still experience happiness—that happiness is called “the peace that surpasses understanding.”

Tom Lavin, *“Healing and Wholeness Retreat”*

Finding meaning requires we have the courage to be authentic, to be who we truly are (like the cow asking the therapist in Gary Larsen’s cartoon: “Is it me, or is it the rest of the herd?”).

Finding happiness requires that we have the courage and the trust to search for how we can make a difference, where we experience true joy, and how we find the strength to deal with suffering.

“What are you spending and being spent for?

What commands and receives your best time and energy?

What causes, dreams, goals or institutions are you pouring your life out for?

What are those most sacred hopes, those most compelling goals and purposes in your life?”

James Fowler, *“Stages of Faith”*