

Teaching Happiness Is No Joke

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Let's face it—we humanists are a dour lot. Temperamentally critical, often pessimistic, frequently cynical, we have a penchant for wearing black and thinking about death. We teach tragedy, and study mass murder. We write about hegemony and oppression and injustice, nodding in assent when Benjamin observes that “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (256). Were our health to permit it, many of us would still smoke (some still do), surrounding ourselves in the blue cloud that both buffers and broadcasts the state of our souls. Misery is our company.

OK, so I exaggerate. But is there not some truth to this admittedly crude caricature all the same? In her 2006 novel, *Tolstoy Lied*, the author Rachel Kadish tells the story of a young English professor Tracy Farber, who is denied tenure because she refuses to go to the dark side. “Talking about happiness is career suicide,” Tracy observes, pointing out how “hard it is to find a good nontragic American novel on Academia’s approved reading list” (5, 4). She exaggerates perhaps, but the character is believable, nonetheless, for in truth the humanities do suffer from something of a negative bias. We tend to associate pain with profundity—or at least intellectual interest—and the positive with pap.

Until relatively recently, this was true of the natural and social sciences as well. When so-called positive psychologists, for example, began to make a vocal case in the 1980s and 90s that their profession ought to study more than just pathology, they were greeted with considerable resistance. Psychology, after all, was founded on the model of medicine: Its charge was to cure people of disease, not to study what might make otherwise healthy people happy. Didn't Freud himself say that the goal of his therapy was simply to overcome *gratuitous* suffering, so as to secure *gemeines Unglück*, “ordinary unhappiness” (305), the natural human condition? It took many years and a lot of effort to successively challenge that negative bias.

The same is true in economics. Today some of the profession's leading practitioners work on subjects related to happiness, and in 2002 Daniel Kahneman, a psychologist, won the economics Noble Prize. But they too faced a good deal of resistance from

colleagues who continued to think of their discipline, proudly, as the “dismal science.” Happiness just didn’t seem serious enough to merit serious attention. The same prejudice long hampered work in sociology, social science, and a number of different fields.

Fortunately, that is changing, and slowly scholars in the humanities, like their colleagues in the sciences, are beginning to realize that happiness is a subject of perennial fascination and intellectual profundity. Philosophers have begun to return to what was, in fact, their point of departure in the Western tradition: the necessary conditions for human flourishing or happiness (*eudaimonia*). Historians have begun to think about the intellectual and cultural conditions for happiness in different contexts, and students of literature have recently taken up happiness and joy as prominent themes. The timing couldn’t be better, given that humanities departments around the country face a real crisis of relevance. And what could be more relevant than happiness? Students see this—they are, like all human beings, deeply concerned with the subject. Administrators see this. And parents and alumni see this. Besides, teaching happiness is (dare I say it?) fun.

With that in mind, you might consider offering a course on the subject in your department. Students of literature and culture will have no trouble introducing the theme, which despite Tracy Farber’s complaint, is everywhere in modern literature and popular culture alike. If you want to get some ideas about specific places to start, you can glance at a few of the texts I have listed in the brief bibliography below. A little research on the Web, moreover, will reveal countless resources. Check out the Positive Psychology Center website at the University of Pennsylvania, for example, with sample syllabi, readings, and diagnostic tests for you and your students. Finally, for what it is worth, I have included a sample syllabus below, based on seminars I have taught at NYU and Florida State. You’ll undoubtedly want to do things differently, but it might give you an idea or two. Enjoy yourself. That is why we got into this profession, remember?

Works Cited

- Benjamin, Walter. “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” *Illuminations*. Ed. and Intro. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1968. 253–264.
- Freud, Sigmund, and Josef Breuer. *Studies on Hysteria*. Trans. and Ed. James Strachey. New York: Basic Books, 2000.
- Kadish, Rachel. *Tolstoy Lied: A Love Story*. New York: Mariner Reprint Edition, 2007.

Appendix. Sample Syllabus on Happiness

Description: This course will consider the theme of happiness from an interdisciplinary perspective, using history, psychology, philosophy, literary analysis, and the consideration of current political, economic, scientific, and moral questions to illuminate a subject of immense personal and public importance in the contemporary world.

Course Texts:

- Darrin M. McMahon, *Happiness: A History* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007) ISBN 978-0-8021-4289-4
- Tal Ben-Shahar, *Happier* (McGraw Hill, 2007) ISBN 978-0077123246
- Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom* (Basic Books, 2006) ISBN 978-0465028023
- Samuel Johnson, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia* (Penguin Classics, 2007) ISBN 978-0141439709
- Buddha, *Dhammapada*, trans. Gil Fronsdal (Shambhala, 2006) ISBN 978-1590303801
- Martin Seligman, *Authentic Happiness* (Free Press, 2004) 978-0743222983
- Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (Harper Perennial, 2006) ISBN 978-0060850524
- Marcus Aurelius, *The Meditations* (Oxford World Classics) ISBN 978-0199540594

*Articles may be found on line or in standard university databases

Week 1: Introduction

I like to show students a Powerpoint presentation of images, taken from contemporary culture, dealing with happiness, and the longing for it, to impress on them how pervasive the theme is in our culture. We then talk about what happiness means to them today, before reading a short text—I like the Croesus story in Herodotus’s *History*—to get across how radically notions of happiness can change.

Week 2: Classical Definitions

Readings:

- Darrin M. McMahon, *Happiness*, Introduction and Ch. 1
- Robert Nozick, “Happiness,” in *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations*
- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 1

Assignment #1: Find an example of the use of happiness in contemporary advertising, political, or religious rhetoric; analyze its message using bullet points on a page, and be ready to present your findings to the class and turn in at the end of the session.

Week 3: Controlling the Self

Readings:

- Epicurus, “Letter to Menoeceus” and “Vatican Sayings”
- Marcus Aurelius, *The Meditations*, Pages TBA

Assignment #2: Using facing columns and bullet points, summarize and compare the views on happiness presented in these two texts.

Week 4: The Psychological Revolution

Readings:

- Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 10–21
- Martin Seligman, *Authentic Happiness*, 3–62, 125–161
- Tel Ben-Shahar, *Happier*, 3–83
- Sue Halpern, “Are You Happy?” *The New York Review of Books* 54, no. 5 (April 3, 2008)

Assignment #3: Go to Professor Martin Seligman’s web-site at the University of Pennsylvania: <http://www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu>. Browse, register, and then take the Authentic Happiness Inventory Questionnaire, the VIA Signature Strengths Questionnaire, and the General Happiness Questionnaire. Print out and be prepared to discuss in class.

Week 5: Religious Perspectives 1: Optimism, Gratitude, Hope, and Forgiveness

Readings:

- McMahon, *Happiness: A History*, Ch. 2-3
- Seligman, *Authentic Happiness*, 62-102
- Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, *Happiness in Premodern Judaism*, 55–101
- The Jewish Bible/Old Testament, the Book of Ecclesiastes
- The New Testament, Matthew 5 and Luke 6

Assignment #4: Spend at least an hour on-line or at the library researching ideas about and/or experiences of happiness in contemporary Islam. Write one page comparing what you find to ideas that surface in the weekly readings.

Week 6: Religious Perspectives 2: Calming the Mind

Readings:

- Buddha, *Dhammapada*

Assignment #5: Spend at least 40 minutes on websites about meditation, e.g.,: www.shinzen.com. Or www.mkzc.org/beginzen.html or www.how-to-meditate.org.

Read about meditation techniques. Meditate/Pray for at least 15 minutes, three days in a row, and then write a brief (1-page) description of your experiment to turn in.

Week 7: The Enlightenment Revolution

Readings:

- Samuel Johnson, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia*
- McMahan, *Happiness: A History*, Ch. 4 and “A Modern Right”
- McMahan, “A Right from the Start,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 1, 2005 at <http://www.opinionjournal.com/taste/?id=110006896>

Week 8: Pursuits

Readings:

- McMahan, Chapter 6–7
- Dan Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness*, xiii–xvi, ch. 1, ch. 11, and afterward
- Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, 36–41, 71–116*

Week 9: Old and New

Readings: Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis*

Assignment #6: Compose a letter, expressing your gratitude, to someone in your life whom you feel deserves to be thanked. Address the envelope and put a stamp on it, but do not seal it. Bring the letter to class and be prepared to discuss.

Week 10: Prozac Nation

Readings:

- McMahan, *Happiness: A History*, 406–424
- David Lykken, *Happiness: The Nature and Nurture of Joy and Contentment*, 3–60*
- Frederick C. Crews, “Talking Back to Prozac,” *The New York Review of Books* 54, no. 19 (December 6, 2007)
- Eric G. Wilson, *Against Happiness*, 3–37 and 147–151

Week 11: The Happiest Place in the World

Readings:

- Proust, *Swann’s Way*, the *petit madeleine* passage, 48–51
- Anna Wierzbicka, “Happiness in Cross-linguistic & Cross-cultural Perspectives,” *Daedalus*
- Eric Weiner, *The Geography of Bliss*, 1–25, 49–97

Assignment #7: Spend some time poking around the world database of happiness website at <http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/> and be sure to check out the scale of nations. Also, scan the Pew Global Attitudes Survey report on happiness at <http://pewglobal.org/commentary/display.php?AnalysisID=1020>

Week 12: Gross National Happiness

Readings:

- Jeremy Bentham, "Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation"
- Richard Layard, "Happiness is Back"
- Robert Frank, "How Not to Buy Happiness," *Daedalus*, Spring 2004
- Richard Easterlin, "The Economics of Happiness," *Daedalus*, Spring 2004
- Gregg Easterbrook, *The Progress Paradox*
- Read the exchange "Are We Happy Yet? Happiness in an Age of Abundance," at <http://www.cato-unbound.org/archives/april-2007>. Essays by Darrin M. McMahon, Barry Schwartz, Ruut Veenhoven, and Will Wilkinson

Assignment #8: Spend some time on-line researching alternative development indexes to GNP/GDP. Choose one, describe it briefly in a paragraph, and then list the features that would appear to have the greatest bearing on happiness from research we have discussed thus far.

Week 13: Brave New World?

Readings:

- Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*
- Selections from Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity* and Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*
- McMahon, *Happiness*, Conclusion

A Brief Bibliography:

Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford University Press, 1993)

Derek Bok, *The Politics of Happiness: What Government Can Learn from the New Research on Well-Being* (Princeton, 2010)

Sissela Bok, *Exploring Happiness: From Aristotle to Brain Science* (Yale, 2010)

Daniel Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness* (Vintage, 2007)

Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom* (Basic, 2010)

Daniel M. Haybron, *The Pursuit of Unhappiness: The Elusive Psychology of Well-Being* (Oxford, 2010)

Jennifer Michael Hecht, *The Happiness Myth: Why What We Think is Right is Wrong* (Harper, 2007)

Thomas M. Kavanagh, *Enlightened Pleasures: Eighteenth-Century France and the New Epicureanism* (Yale, 2010)

Mark Kingwell, *In Pursuit of Happiness: Better Living from Plato to Prozac* (Crown, 1998)

Stuart McCready, ed., *The Discovery of Happiness* (Sourcebooks, Inc. 2001)

Darrin M. McMahon, *Happiness: A History* (Atlantic Monthly, 2006)

- Adam Potkay, *The Passion for Happiness: Samuel Johnson and David Hume* (Cornell, 2000)
Adam Potkay, *The Story of Joy: From the Bible to Late Romanticism* (Cambridge, 2007)
Vivasvan Soni, *Mourning Happiness: Narrative and the Politics of Modernity* (Cornell, 2010)
Hava Tirosh-Samuels, *Happiness in Premodern Judaism: Virtue, Knowledge, and Well-Being*
(Hebrew Union, 2003)
Eric Weiner, *The Geography of Bliss* (Twelve, 2008)
Nicholas White, *A Brief History of Happiness* (Blackwell, 2010)
Eric G. Wilson, *Against Happiness: In Praise of Melancholy* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2008)

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