Happy pursuits: A Christian vision of the good life

by Ellen T. Charry in the July 24, 2007 issue

Americans are obsessed with happiness. We are bombarded daily with images of things that promise at least temporary happiness—whether it's a laundry detergent, a gourmet meal, an exotic vacation or a sexual triumph. Meanwhile, social scientists study whether we feel happy, and if not, why not.

Many Christians are suspicious of the pursuit of happiness. They know that self-denial and self-sacrifice are part of Christian life, and they worry that happiness is too often equated with a transient feeling. They may also believe that acting right does not involve doing what makes us happy. In fact, they may think that doing the right thing usually hurts—it's an act of duty, not pleasure. Maybe Christians should not be concerned about happiness.

But *happiness* is a term deeply rooted in Christian tradition. *Happy* is the very first word of the Psalter. Matthew uses the word *happy* to describe those who take on the yoke of Jesus. Augustine uses the word *happiness* to describe the goal of life. *Happiness* may need to be redefined by Christians, but abandoning the word altogether is not an option.

One reason Christians are suspicious of the pursuit of happiness is that today it is understood in hedonic terms. It is seen as the search for good feelings—often achieved in an impulsive manner. But there is another ancient understanding of happiness: happiness is the ability to live a virtuous life that promotes well-being and the judgment that one is indeed flourishing rather than languishing. This eudaemonic notion of happiness is embedded in the Christian tradition. What the tradition has not recognized is that these two understandings are not opposites and that virtue gives genuine pleasure. That is, eudaemonic flourishing produces hedonic happiness. So goodness and pleasure cannot be separated, for doing good is pleasing to us.

An important source for a Christian account of happiness is the 13th-century philosopher Thomas Aquinas. Thomas drew on Augustine, Boethius and Aristotle in fashioning a rich foundation for Christian happiness. To understand Thomas we must first discard the idea that happiness is a feeling of moderate euphoria. Second, we must be willing to consider that happiness is linked intrinsically to virtue (doing good well).

Thomas begins from the following premises: 1) God is good. 2) The cosmos is God's creation. As such, it is an expression of his goodness. 3) The creation is unified because each part belongs to and contributes to the whole and is in turn promoted, sustained and perfected by the rest. All things actualize the goodness of God and celebrate themselves as good creatures when they are at their best and helping all creation to flourish. As we become the very best creatures that we can become, we are not only obedient to God's destiny for us, but we are also celebrating our own goodness in God.

Let's take the example of a healthy sugar maple that is providing the very best sap that it can. We might call this tree happy because it is fulfilling its purpose in creation. Or take the example of a honeybee that is contributing to the flourishing of its hive, the production of honey and the pollination of plants. This bee, too, might be called happy, since it fulfills its function. Because this definition of happiness does not trap us in the realm of feeling, we can speak about the happiness of trees and bees as easily as about our own happiness.

Happiness is somewhat more complicated for humans, but many of the fundamental principles remain. We must, like trees and bees, fulfill our purpose. We become our best selves in the process of fulfilling that purpose. Humans are far more like God than bees because we have choices to make and the intellectual power and creativity to make them. At the same time, while bees and trees fulfill their purpose more or less automatically, humans do not. Because of the freedom we have to act or not act, we must work at directing our actions toward our proper flourishing.

According to this model, feeling good is the result of doing good in ordinary and common choices of daily life. We become happy not by pursuing fleeting moments of pleasure, but by being the self that God created us to be. While our capacity to honor God is perhaps greater than the capacity of trees and bees, so is our instability. We make choices constantly, and not all of them contribute to the flourishing and sustaining of creation—nor do they all honor God. In this realm of

choice, we find the moral life.

All our interactions with other creatures have a moral dimension because our actions affect them. By attending to the effects we have on things and on each other we can learn to use ourselves more lovingly for the well-being of the things and people we touch. We are always forming each other and ourselves, for good or for ill, through everyday choices and interactions. Learning to use ourselves well is the foundation not only of judging our life to be going well, but also of feeling happy.

In choosing what to do and what not, our motivations are frequently mixed. Vanity causes us to seek honor and power even when we are doing good things. And even when our projects are well chosen and well intentioned, we may carry them out poorly because of a lack of skill or the limits of circumstance. In other words, even when we try to do good, we don't always succeed, and our failures have many causes.

Yet the overall result of our trial and error brings us closer to God when we learn from it. As we learn to make better use of the powers and abilities that God gives us, we draw closer to God and experience pleasure. Pleasure in doing good well is an act of obedience to God's will. We are right to celebrate our growing and learning and the work that we do to better ourselves in the service of God's good world. The better we get at doing good, the more intense our pleasure becomes.

External positive reinforcement certainly helps in the training of virtue, but ultimately it isn't necessary. The internal pleasure and satisfaction that we get from baking good brownies or watching the garden flourish under our tending reinforce the sense we have that we are bearing good fruit.

Doing good well enables us to do even better next time. We can learn to transfer our skills of thought and action into other activities. Happiness comes as we find ourselves and those around us flourishing because we have enhanced their well-being. This is a proper form of Christian love. It is not necessarily romantic, and it is not free from self-interest. It is effective love in which we use our wisdom, creativity and energy to perfect God's world. This means that we must attend carefully to what those around us need to flourish effectively. When we do the good well, no matter on how small a scale, we love others and please ourselves. This makes us happy. When we do the bad, this also has resonant effects on those around us and makes us unhappy.

Slowly learning to love well requires being loved well. Good parents normally are the earliest teachers here. But what if parents can't do that? The Christian tradition says that God is able to teach us to love by loving us quite beautifully unto salvation. Being embraced by the beauty, wisdom and goodness of God forms us in these ways of living. As we come to live beautifully, using our freedom, intelligence, creativity and power lovingly, we become godly. We then properly celebrate God and ourselves. Unlike happiness based on feelings alone, this kind of happiness cannot be taken from us nor can it disappear. In the end, this happiness is us.

It is easy enough to talk about happiness when our lives progress smoothly. We practice doing the good, we reach out to those around us, and we become, we think, a little closer to the ideal that God has for us. But then calamity intervenes.

I lived a blessed and happy life until my husband was suddenly taken from me by a viciously silent cancer when he was 57. A colleague's teenage daughter was killed in a freak accident when she was only 15. The catalogue of human suffering is immense. What does a Christian account of happiness have to say about such suffering?

Tragedy and suffering are not central impediments in this vision of happiness because it is not dependent on feelings or external circumstances. The key to happiness from this point of view is the ability to love well. It is not about how well things are going for us; it is about how well we are going. Happiness of this sort is then quite compatible with sadness and is possible even in the midst of enormous grief. We can always ask ourselves how we can love well no matter what our circumstances.

The more difficult problem is that circumstances may not even allow a person the skills to love well. A person's capacity to think and act well—even well enough to serve her own safety and health—may be cut off before it can be formed.

In the 1940s, French philosopher Simone Weil went to work in a Renault factory. She found the circumstances around her miserable in every way. Employees were mistreated, and they suffered physically, mentally and socially. But the factory employees did not share Weil's vision of the situation. They had no interest in rising up, for example, to demand better treatment or to unionize and improve their conditions. What Weil understood as affliction, the factory workers knew only as normal life. The workers had no understanding of themselves prior to and apart from

their experience at the factory. Their deep sense of helplessness cut off their ability to use themselves salutarily. They had no nonafflicted identity that could judge their circumstances to be wrong or unjust. They could not act for their own benefit or for the benefit of others.

A happy life, then, requires a strong and healthy enough personality, formed by the love of God, preferably with the help of parents, to be the basis for sound judgment and action. Such an agile self is both a buffer and a resource in time of trouble. Because this self can make moral distinctions grounded in divine freedom and goodness, ill fortune cannot take over as easily as it would otherwise. The helpless Renault factory workers lacked a functionally loving character that could have identified and resisted affliction, and so they were unable to advance either their own well-being or that of others. Suffering, grief, rejection and evil met no resistance.

Contemporary culture offers us various versions of happiness. We are told that happiness is a feeling, or that happiness is a result of wealth or health, or that it can be attained by having the right product for the right moment or by perfecting one’s circumstances so as to build a buffer against ill fortune. None of these visions is the Christian vision of happiness. Instead, happiness is a life nourished by the love and goodness of God that contributes to the flourishing of creation. Even in the face of evil, rejection and suffering, a person who has learned to love well will experience pleasure and satisfaction from being herself—a person built from the loving use of God-given creativity, power and goodness. When that goodness takes up residence in us we realize that we are the living image of God, and that makes us happy.