

The Geography of Bliss - by Eric Weiner

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Cranky NPR reporter dives deep into Iceland, Bhutan, Qatar, Holland, Switzerland, Thailand, India and Moldova to find out why people are happy (or not) in each. So beautifully written with astounding insights into culture and happiness. Amazing. Been thinking about it for weeks afterwards.

my notes

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“If I draw a circle, most people, when asked what I have drawn, will say I have drawn a circle or a disc, or a ball. Very few people will say I’ve drawn a hole in the wall, because most people think of the inside first, rather than thinking of the outside. But actually these two sides go together - you cannot have what is ‘in here’ unless you have what is ‘out there.’” In other words, where we are is vital to who we are. By “where,” I’m speaking not only of our physical environment but also of our cultural environment. Culture is the sea we swim in - so pervasive, so all-consuming, that we fail to notice its existence until we step out of it. It matters more than we think.

Veenhoven: the World Database of Happiness.

“When Americans say it was great, I know it was good. When they say it was good, I know it was okay. When they say it was okay, I know it was bad.”

Every country has its cocktail-party question. A simple one-sentence query, the answer to which unlocks a motherlode of information about the person you’ve just met.

In the United States that question is, What do you do?

In Britain it is, What school did you attend?

In Switzerland it is, Where are you from?

That is all you need to know about someone.

John Helliwell, a Canadian economist, has spent many years studying the relationship between trust and happiness. He's found the two to be inseparable.

"You can't feel properly engaged if you don't trust the people you engage with on a regular basis. Engagement breeds trust; trust supports engagement. It's a two-way flow; both parts are critical."

Or consider this statement: "In general, people can be trusted."

Studies have found that people who agree with this are happier than those who do not.

Trusting your neighbors is especially important. Simply knowing them can make a real difference in your quality of life.

One study found that, of all the factors that affect the crime rate for a given area, the one that made the biggest difference was not the number of police patrols or anything like that but, rather, how many people you know within a fifteen-minute walk of your house.

Patience and boredom are closely related. Boredom, a certain kind of boredom, is really impatience. You don't like the way things are, they aren't interesting enough for you, so you decide - and boredom is a decision - that you are bored.

Affluence breeds impatience and impatience undermines well being. You don't see many impatient poor people.

It's not the crime per se that makes places unhappy. It's the creeping sense of fear that permeates everyone's lives, even those who have never been - and probably never will be - victims of crime.

E. F. Schumacher said, "There are poor societies which have too little. But where is the rich society that says 'Halt! We have enough!'"

The word "travel" stems from the same root as "travail" does.

For centuries, traveling was equated with suffering. Only pilgrims, nomads, soldiers, and fools traveled.

“It comes down to trustworthiness.” I’d heard the same thing in Switzerland. Trust is a prerequisite for happiness. Trust not only of your government, of institutions, but trust of your neighbors. Several studies, in fact, have found that trust - more than income or even health - is the biggest factor in determining our happiness.

Drukpa Kunley, the Divine Madman

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drukpa\\_Kunley](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drukpa_Kunley)

“Ask yourself if you are happy and you cease to be so.” - John Stuart Mill, the nineteenth-century British philosopher who believed that happiness should be approached sideways, “like a crab.”

We equate happiness with comfort, but is there really any connection? Is there a point where excess comfort actually dilutes our contentment?

Doha has no 7-Elevens because Qataris have no need for the convenience of a convenience store. The servants - every Qatari has at least one - do the shopping, and, being servants, their convenience isn’t anyone’s concern.

Travel, at its best, transforms us in ways that aren’t always apparent until we’re back home.

The entire nation of Qatar is like a good airport terminal: pleasantly air-conditioned, with lots of shopping, a wide selection of food, and people from around the world.

Jonas Salk, inventor of the polio vaccine, said when asked what the main aim of his life had been: “To be a good ancestor.”

Qataris have no culture. Frankly, I can’t blame them. If you spent a few thousand years scraping by in the desert, fending off the solid heat, not to mention various invading tribes, you wouldn’t have time for culture, either. Back then, life was too harsh for culture. Today, it is too comfortable for culture.

Cities, creative urban milieux, are places of great social and intellectual turbulence, not comfortable places at all.

Aristotle would clear up this moral confusion in an Athenian minute. Happiness, he believed, meant not only feeling good but doing good. Thus, the pedophile and the suicide bomber only thought they were happy. In fact, they were not happy at all.

It will drive you nuts, this infinite cycle of pleasure and adaptation. Interestingly, there are two notable exceptions to the hedonic treadmill. Noise and big breasts. Studies have found that we never really get used to loud noises, despite prolonged exposure. Another study found that women who get breast implants never tire of the enjoyment it brings them, and presumably their companions feel the same.

In every Indo-European language, the word for happiness is tied to the word for luck. The English word “happiness” comes from the old Norse word “hap,” or luck. When we have a mishap, we’ve had a spell of bad luck. In modern German, the word “glück” means both “happiness” and “luck.”

You can crave for something very much but take little or no pleasure in it once you had it. (Smoking, alcohol, etc.) Wanting things we don’t like. If true, it pretty much demolishes the entire field of economics.

So much of human misery can be explained by this crazy way we’re wired. We assume that our intense feelings of wanting something - a new car, winning the lottery - means that, once obtained, these things will make us happy. But that is a connection that, neurologically speaking, does not exist. We are disappointed but don’t learn from our disappointment because our software is flawed. It’s not faulty data but faulty programming that is holding us back, and that is much harder to rectify.

Comfort is the revolutionaries’ worst enemy.

Noël Coward got it right when he observed that interesting work is “more fun than fun.”

Reykjavík: Iceland’s capital is not so much a small city as a cosmopolitan village.

Most cities are bigger than necessary. Beyond a certain point, the liabilities of urban life start to outweigh the benefits.

Young Icelanders are deciding for themselves what is quintessentially Icelandic. It is a wonderful thing to watch. To be present at the moment of creation.

Every culture has many more words to describe negative emotional states than positive ones.

In Reykjavík, as in fourteenth-century Florence, there is no creative elite. Art is produced and enjoyed by everyone.

The Swiss suppress envy by hiding things. Icelanders suppress envy by sharing them. Icelandic musicians help one another out.

If you are free to fail, you are free to try.

Americans like to think that we, too, embrace failure, and it's true, up to a point. We love a good failure story as long as it ends with success. The entrepreneur who failed half a dozen times before hitting the jackpot with a brilliant idea. The bestselling author whose manuscript was rejected a dozen times. In these stories, failure serves merely to sweeten the taste of success. It's the appetizer. For Icelanders, though, failure is the main course.

It is not the skills we actually have that determine how we feel but the ones we think we have.

Martin Seligman, founder of the positive-psychology movement, discovered that happy people remembered more good events in their lives than actually occurred. Depressed people remembered the past accurately.

Icelanders: There's no one on the island telling them they're not good enough, so they just go ahead

and sing and paint and write. One result of this freewheeling attitude is that Icelandic artists produce a lot of crap. They're the first to admit it. But crap plays an important role in the art world. In fact, it plays exactly the same role as it does in the farming world. It's fertilizer. The crap allows the good stuff to grow.

What's wrong with being naïve? Wasn't Christopher Columbus naïve? Wasn't Gandhi naïve? Weren't the 1969 New York Jets naïve? The world, I now conclude, would be a far better place with a bit more naïveté. In Iceland, being naïve is okay because you can always start over.

You can determine how your life plays out by deciding where you live.

Iceland: the attitude that no matter what, no matter how bleak life seems, things will always work out. And they usually do.

Hotels are wonderful inventions, but they are not the ideal window to the soul of a nation. In fact, as my stay in Qatar demonstrated, they are designed to do exactly the opposite, to keep you and the country you're visiting at a comfortable distance.

In Moldova the relationship between host and guest is reversed. It is the guest's obligation to make the host feel at ease.

The glass being half full or half empty is dead wrong. What really matters is whether water is flowing into or out of the glass.

They didn't wake up every day and say, "Gee, I wish I had more freedom." Freedom to do what? At least back then, people had jobs and a place to live. That was a kind of freedom, and they don't have that now.

Simply by counting the acts of kindness for one week, people become happier and more grateful.

"Not my problem" is not a philosophy. It's a mental illness. Right up there with pessimism. Other

people's problems are our problems. If your neighbor is laid off, you may feel as if you've dodged the bullet, but you haven't. The bullet hit you as well. You just don't feel the pain yet. Or as Ruut Veenhoven told me: "The quality of a society is more important than your place in that society." In other words, better to be a small fish in a clean pond than a big fish in a polluted lake.

Just as the Inuit are said to have many words for snow, the Thais have many words for smile. There is yim cheun chom, the I-admire-you smile, and yim thak thaan, the I-disagree-with-you-but-go-ahead-propose-your-bad-idea smile. There is yim sao, the sad smile. And my favorite: yim mai awk, the I'm-trying-to-smile-but-can't smile.

Thais, I suspect, are too busy being happy to think about happiness.

People like to say that Bangkok isn't the "real Thailand," just as they say that New York is not the real America and Paris is not the real France. I think this is wrong. These cities did not materialize out of nothingness. They grew organically in the soil in which they were planted. They are not the exception to the rule but, rather, the rule on steroids. New York is America, only more so. The same is true of Bangkok.

American-style introspection.

When Brits and Americans get together, the conversation turns to the differences that bind us, differences not immediately apparent because of the common language that divides us. In America, every conversation is held as if it might be your last on Earth. Nothing is held back.

In the UK, we don't want to bother anyone. When someone dies, we don't call the relatives to offer our sympathies because we're afraid we might disturb them. We don't want to be too loud, too American. Being too American, or American at all, is pretty much the worst thing a Brit can be. "American" is synonymous with pushiness, tactlessness, and puppy-dog earnestness.

Watching Brits shed their inhibitions is like watching elephants mate. You know it happens, it must, but it's noisy, awkward as hell, and you can't help but wonder: Is this something I really need to see?

Let's say you're on a flight, and there is a problem, an engine has caught fire. Would you want an

optimistic pilot at the controls? Perhaps, but what you really want is a wise pilot. Wisdom born from years of experience.

Part of positive psychology is about being positive, but sometimes laughter and clowns are not appropriate. Some people don't want to be happy, and that's okay. They want meaningful lives, and those are not always the same as happy lives.

In Arab countries, it's crucial to graciously accept many, many cups of tea before asking anything that might be construed as a substantive question. In India, I found that flattery was the way to get people to talk. In America, microphobia is extremely rare, and no such foreplay is necessary. If anything, the challenge is getting people to stop talking.

British remain economical with their emotions. Personal information is doled out judiciously, like premium chocolate or fine wine. As any economist will tell you, scarcity creates value. So when a Brit opens up, exposes their wounds, where it hurts, this is more valuable, more meaningful, than when an American does it.

British culture hinders happiness. The most obvious manifestation is the lack of hugging. The British don't even hug their own mothers.

Nearly all creators of utopia have resembled the man who has a toothache and therefore thinks happiness consists in not having a toothache.

India does not disappoint. It captivates, infuriates, and, occasionally, contaminates. It never disappoints.

Yes, there are cellphones and ATMs and Internet cafés, but none has made a dent in the bedrock of Indian culture. These latest foreign intruders are no different from the Mughals or the British or any of the other interlopers who over the centuries tried to subdue the subcontinent. India always emerged victorious, not by repelling these invaders but by subsuming them.

They keep coming back to India. Why? Unpredictability.



Fawning over someone else is just as counterproductive, and annoying, as fawning over yourself. Narcissism turned inside out is still narcissism.

“The whole thing depends on a tiny little button,” he says, with a knowing gleam in his eyes. The audience laughs and applauds. When a guru says something like that, his words are imbued with deep significance, while if you or I said it people would just assume we’re talking about a tiny little button and nothing more. Thus, just as some people are famous for being famous, gurus are wise for being wise. They can’t go wrong.

“When will India be corruption free?”

“When you stand up and fight against corruption.”

I like that answer. It was real, and it required action of the asker.

There is nothing more deadly dull than the sound of prosperity. The dull hum of an air conditioner or the muffled clicks on a keyboard simply can’t compete with the melodic calls of hawkers at an open-air market or the rhythmic clickity-clack of a sweatshop’s sewing machines. Even Third World traffic, with its symphony of honking horns and tinkling bells, beats the monotonous whoosh of a modern freeway.

If you want to know India, just stand on a street corner, any street corner, and spin around 360 degrees. You will see it all. The best and worst of humanity. The ridiculous and the sublime. The profane and the profound.

India. This is the country where, as Mark Twain observed, every life is sacred, except human life. Indians may care deeply about their families and circle of friends, but they don’t even notice anyone outside that circle. That’s why Indian homes are spotless, while just a few feet outside the front door the trash is piled high. It’s outside the circle.

Sundar Sarukkai wrote an article about happiness that caught my eye. In one short paragraph he managed to capture a paradox that has been nagging me for some time:

“Desire is the root cause of sorrow but desire is also the root cause of action. How do we counter the paralysis of action when there is no desire to motivate us?”

We sit there at Khoshy's and talk for a good hour or two. There is no rush, no agenda. It's unpredictable, but in a good way. Time feels expansive. This, I realize, is what I love about India. The hidden little gems amid the grubbiness and the squalor and the greed. I am, dare I say, happy. One Shanti Road is the happiest place in India.

All talk of paradise only starts when something has been lost.

Staying in a place too long is like staying in a relationship too long. You grow bitter, and the chances of domestic violence increase. Reconciliation becomes impossible.

The problem with hedonic floaters and with many of us Americans and our perpetual pursuit of happiness. We may be fairly happy now, but there's always tomorrow and the prospect of a happier place, a happier life. So all options are left on the table. We never fully commit. That is, I think, a dangerous thing. We can't love a place, or a person, if we always have one foot out the door.

One simple question, he said, the answer to which identifies your true home. That question is: "Where do you want to die?"