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Four Paths to Happiness & the Good Life: Which One Is Right in This Season of Your Life?

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On the cusp on a new year, as a way of beginning to frame our reflections on happiness and living the good life, I invite you to hear a poem by Carrie Newcomer titled "Because There is Not Enough Time":

I used to think
That because life is short

I should do more be more
squeeze more
into each and every day.
I'd walk around with a stick ruler
with increasing numbers
as the measure of fullness.

But lately
I've sensed a different response
to a lack of time.
Felt in my bones
The singular worth
of each passing moment.
Perhaps the goal is not to spend this day

Power skiing atop an ocean of multi-tasking.
Maybe the idea is to swim slower
surfer
dive deeper
and really look around.

There is a difference between
A life of width
and a life of depth.

In 36 hours—ready or not—another year will be behind us, another circle ‘round the sun. What has 2018 been like for you? **Have there been times when you felt like you were “Power skiing atop an ocean of multi-tasking?”** (I will confess there have been for me.) **Have there also been moments when you have “felt in your bones the singular worth of each passing moment”**—when you have “dived deeper and really looked around?” Either way, what do you want to cultivate in 2019? And what are you willing to *let go of* to make space for a different way of being in the world?

To equip us for the journey, I would like to invite you on a brief tour through four (among many possible) perspectives on how to live a life of happiness. We will consider two sources of wisdom from the West (Aristotle and Positive Psychology) and two from the East (Confucianism and Daoism). As a resource, I’ll be drawing from Diana Lobel’s book [Philosophies of Happiness: A Comparative introduction to the Flourishing Life](#) (Columbia University Press, 2017).

As you may know, these sources of wisdom do not all agree. So let’s be honest here at the outset about the open secret of happiness: **don’t believe anyone trying to sell you “The One True Key to Eternal Happiness for All Times, All People, and All Places.” (It doesn’t exist!)** But there are time-tested tools for increasing happiness and crafting a good life that can serve us during different seasons of our lives. So as we continue, consider whether one or more of these tools might be particularly helpful for you in the coming year.

As we begin, it is also important to acknowledge that there are at least three different types of happiness:

1. The first, most basic, and most direct level of happiness is *feeling happy* in a given moment for whatever confluence of circumstances. It could be from receiving good news, hearing a favorite song, spending time with a friend, eating a great meal, etc.
2. A second level of happiness adds *thinking* to the emotion of happiness. The cognitive evaluation is whether or not we judge our life to be generally going in a positive direction: on balance, are there more good things than bad things in your life?
3. The third and final level of happiness is not only about moving in a positive direction, but also whether you are fulfilling your particular potential as a human being (1-2). This third level of happiness of fulfilling one's potential is where Aristotle can be a helpful guide.

Aristotle (384–322 BCE) was an ancient Greek philosopher. He was a student in Plato's Academy and later tutored Alexander the Great. One key concept in his philosophy is called eudaimonia (*εὐδαιμονία*), which is from the Greek prefix *eu-* (meaning "good") and "*daimōn*" (meaning "spirit"). So in a similar way that *eu*-thanasia mean "*good death*," **eudaimonia means following the lead of your *good* inner spirit (so to speak) to move in the direction of "well-being" and "flourishing" (2)**

For Aristotle, the good life, the life that puts *eudaimonia* into practice, is about much more than feeling a fleeting emotion (level 1 happiness) or even moving in a generally positive direction (level 2 happiness). He urges us to bring to fruition our unique gifts in order to truly flourish as human beings. A classic example of what flourishing looks like is from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he compares a human being fulfilling their potential to an acorn turning into an oak tree (15). A similar example would be a caterpillar transforming into a butterfly—or insert your metamorphosis of choice. **What does that acorn-to-oak tree or caterpillar-to-butterfly shift look like for you or for those you love?**

Keep that question in mind as we move from the West to the East and consider the wisdom of Daoism. As much as I appreciate Aristotle, he can also stress me out. It can feel both inspiring—as well as a lot of pressure—to work on becoming your version of an oak tree or butterfly. And **there are seasons in our life when the *Daodejing's* advice to practice *wuwei* (meaning "non-action" in the sense of "spontaneity**

without intentional striving”) can feel like a welcome corrective to goal-oriented striving (Lobel 88).

Religion scholars tells us that the text we know as the *Daodejing* was not written by Laozi or any one historical figure. Instead, it is “an anthology of wise sayings that were transmitted among the intellectual ‘elite’ of ancient China, and it comprises materials from different sources and from different times. The earliest strata of the text may well be 2,500 years old—or more” (Moeller, *Daodejing*, 5). These ancient oral traditions began to be collected and written down in what became a standard form around 300 B.C.E., which is almost contemporaneous with Aristotle.

The title of the most famous Daoist text, the *Daodejing*, is a combination of three Chinese words:

1. **Dao**, literally “Way” or more loosely “the best way of ‘proceeding’ or of ‘going on’”,
2. **De**, literally “power” or more loosely “the power or efficacy that a perfectly ordered or governed process displays,” and
3. **Jing**, meaning “Classical Scripture.”

When all three words are combined we get the *Daodejing*, an honorific title meaning, “The Classical Scripture of the Way and Its Efficacy” (5,8).

Let’s consider just one excerpt from Chapter 57 of the *Daodejing*:

The more prohibitions and rules
The poorer people become.
The sharper people’s weapons,
The more they riot.
The more skilled their techniques,
The more grotesque their works.
The more elaborate the laws
The more they commit crimes.
Therefore the Sage says
I do nothing
And people transform themselves.
I enjoy serenity
And people govern themselves.

I cultivate emptiness
And people become prosperous.
I have no desires
And people simplify themselves. (Lobel 86-87)

It's kind of like a spiritual libertarianism that warns us against the "Law of Unintended Consequences" if we actively try to intervene in other people's lives. It can work at certain times and in certain seasons of life, and it can be disastrous in other times and seasons.

However, because Aristotelianism and Daoism both sometimes stress the role of the individual, I wanted to be sure to bring in a worldview like Confucianism that highlights the importance of *community*, which can play a vital role in various seasons of your life as well. (In other seasons of your life, that same family, community, or network can be limiting or repressing.) Confucius (551–479 BCE) was a Chinese philosopher, who preceded both Aristotle and the Daodejing by around two centuries. And in contrast to an emphasis on an individual following their bliss, **Confucianism reminds us that an equally important support for human flourishing can come from being a part of a community**: the sustaining rhythm of traditions celebrated annually, the connection of being part of a family, community, or network—instead of going it alone (78).

At this point, with three diverse options on the table, I will hasten to reiterate that it is not a matter of debating which one is right—whether all 7.7 billion people on this planet should be striving toward the end of Aristotle's acorn flourishing into an oak tree, or all practicing Daoist spontaneity without intentional striving," or all conforming to Confucian communal traditions and rules. Rather, the question is: **which source of wisdom is the most skillful for you to adopt in this particular season of your life?**

With that caveat in mind, let's add one final perspective: the modern Positive Psychology movement, which shifts the focus of psychology from our *pathologies* (what holds us back) to our *strengths* (what causes us to thrive). Interestingly, when Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar began teaching Positive Psychology at Harvard, it quickly became the most popular course in the university's history.

One of the stories he always includes in this "Happiness" course is from Robert Pirsig's book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*:

Pirsig was climbing the Himalayas with a group of elderly Zen monks. He became exhausted and overwhelmed and had to drop out; concentrating on how steep the mountain was and how far they had to go, he was daunted and gave up.... The monks, in contrast, also kept their eye on the peak, but only to steady themselves upon their source, not because reaching the peak itself was their chief goal: “knowing that they were headed in the right direction allowed them to focus their attention and enjoy each step, rather than being overwhelmed by what was still ahead.” (249)

The takeaway is that if you are an acorn, spending all your time criticizing yourself for not being an oak tree is demoralizing and enervating. The trick is to enjoy each stage of the journey (to the extent possible), and one day looking back you may find that you have become an oak tree after all—but maybe an “oak tree” that looks different than what you originally envisioned.

It is also important to realize that achieving a goal tends to give us only a temporary boost of “level one” happiness. So if we could magically skip all the middle stages and move instantly from acorn to oak tree, or if we could instantly transport ourselves from the bottom of the mountain to the peak, the truth is that relatively quickly we would revert back to whatever our normal emotional state typically is. The same dynamic happens to lottery winners: the emotional high wears off surprisingly quickly. The psychologist Daniel Gilbert summarizes this insight as follows: “**Happiness is not about making it to the peak of the mountain, nor is it about climbing aimlessly around the mountain; *happiness is the experience of climbing toward the peak***” (250).

This advice, to select a path that allows us to enjoy, not only the destination but each stage of the journey, resonates with our opening poem from Carrie Newcomer about the difference between a “life of width” (multitasking) and a “life of depth” (savoring the singular worth of each passing moment). Along those lines, to bookend our reflection, I invite you to hear an excerpt from a New Year’s poem by my colleague The Rev. Gretchen Haley. Allow her words to awaken your imagination about what might be possible for you in 2019:

What songs would you sing to yourself,
or with others...?

What blessings would you name
and share,
with strangers, and friends?

If you could take now that first step
what journey would you begin
across deserts, or mountains —
or would you take to the sky,
which, despite the bitter cold
is still vast, and filled with light?

What work would you take,
what mischief would you make
with boldness, and bravery,
what failure would you embrace, and
what would you release,
and where
in the end,
would you return, and call home?

In this new day
on the brink of a new year
no magic wishing or wondering
is required
for such a chance
is always available

As with the in, and out of our breath
to begin now
to live like we mean it
to see with new eyes
the life that is already and always
available,

to respond to this gift
with wonder,
and gratitude
to join in this partnership
to tend this flame
even when it breaks our heart
to keep showing up
to go with courage
into this dawning day....

To further fuel your discernment of potential areas of change, I invite you consider a series of questions that I received a few years ago as part of a “Choose Health” program. As you receive these questions, notice if one of the following areas particularly resonates with you in this season of your life.

- **Physical Wellness:** When or how do you feel *physically alive*, your body skillfully engaged? What would you like to do to feel this way more often?
- **Emotional Wellness:** When or how do you feel emotionally engaged? Let yourself dream about something that would add more *joy* to your life.
- **Intellectual Wellness:** When or how does your *mind feel energized*, buzzing with electric vitality?
- **Financial Wellness:** What would help you feel more comfortable with your finances?
- **Social Wellness:** When or how do you feel *connected* to those you love and value?
- **Vocational Wellness:** When or how do you feel *fulfilled and optimistic* in your work?
- **Spiritual Wellness:** What individual or communal practice makes you feel more connected to something larger than yourself?

Looking back on 2018, is there something—a person, place, or habit—that has been a hindrance to your well-being? **Is there something that you feel called to *let go* or *say no to* in the new year?** In a few moments, once the music starts playing, I invite you to come forward silently, hold your paper and mentally set an intention for something you

feel called to *let go* in 2019. Then I invite you to light that slip of paper on fire. And while burning a slip of paper does not necessarily mean that the process of “letting go” is complete, I invite you to see this ritual as an important step in setting an intention to continue the process of letting go of a part of your life that has been life-negating for you. **You are also invited to light a votive candle to set an intention for something you want to do, affirm, or say yes to in the new year.**