

Lasting Happiness Sermon by Steve Quigley

(“Don’t Worry, Be Happy” plays for a minute.)

That’s how I started the first day of school each year. Many years before Pharrell’s song, “Happy,” came along, there was this song by Bobby McFerrin. I also met each student at the door as they entered. My goal was to ease their anxiety about a new school year and a new teacher. My class motto was, Learn a Lot and Have Fun! We worked very hard to learn, but I reminded the kids to take breaks, too. And throughout the school day, I tried to inject fun with stories, humor, and a variety of learning activities. You see, happiness is a choice that we can make each and every day, but we get preoccupied by our worries and duties and forget that. Finding a balance of work and play is something I feel strongly about, but it hasn’t always been easy for me to do.

I was the youngest of four children, born in Lynwood, CA, a suburb of Los Angeles. When I was five years old, my dad, who was a boiler operator for Standard Oil, quit his job. We ended up moving many times over the course of the next eight years. It seemed to me that every time I made a new friend, I had to move away. But my mom, who worked as a librarian and loved to read, got me hooked on books. Reading turned out to be one of the keys to happiness for me in my childhood, as it is for me today. It also led me to my career in teaching.

My dad died of a heart attack when I was fifteen. My older brothers and sister had long since moved out, and my mom and I soldiered on. That’s just what you did in those days. I still loved reading and learning, and I did well enough in school to get scholarships, so I could afford to go to college. One English teacher, Mr. Arnold, befriended me and encouraged me to apply to UC Irvine. I’m glad I did, because I met Ingrid there. College was great; I loved learning about art, psychology, physics, foreign languages, and much more. I graduated, then attended Cal State Fullerton and earned my teaching credentials because I

couldn't think of anything more fun than sharing my love of learning with kids.

Ingrid and I were married when I was 21 and she was only 20 years old. We moved to San Jose to be near her family; she went into business - first in a bank, then as an accountant, and later she was a business analyst. And I taught elementary school - special education, then fourth and fifth grades for a total of 34 years. Seeing kids' excitement as they mastered new skills remained a highlight of teaching for me every year. Plus, I got to continue to express a childlike sense of fun and wonder about learning. The kids loved my reading aloud in characters' voices, stories and jokes, hands-on science, art, and music. It was a demanding job, and I put in long hours of learning, planning and homework, but it was extremely rewarding. I had a job that made a difference in many children's lives, and I could continue to take classes in a variety of areas, such as music, science, and computers, and apply what I learned in my job. It also brought me out of my shell; I was a shy introvert growing up, but had to get over that in my career, and that helped me grow as a person, as well. As I told my students, learning happens when you go outside of your comfort zone! I still don't love getting up in front of a group to talk, but here I am, managing it with God's grace!

Ingrid and I also had two children of our own, Neal and Karen, and it has been a pleasure raising them and seeing them grown into happy, responsible adults. We enjoyed the usual stuff - parks and museums, ball games, sports for the kids, and camping. And reading, of course. We did (and still do) have books in every room of the house, and we read to both of our kids regularly. We also started attending church regularly when Neal was five years old. Although neither of us had attended church regularly growing up, we had kept trying different churches in our early marriage and really wanted our children to be part of a caring community of faith. We finally found it in Willow Glen UMC. I remember how Al and Dorothy Mauseth welcomed us. And here we are, nearly 30 years later!

We lived all this time in our starter home, a two-bedroom house in downtown San Jose. It was a squeeze raising two kids there, but we never had the desire for a bigger place. In fact, when we became interested in mission work and had the chance to see how the majority of people lived in Bolivia, Guatemala, and Mexico, we realized how lucky we were to have such a home. Ingrid and I also became interested in helping the poor here in San Jose, both through the church and through Sacred Heart Community Service. Doing so has brought us a lot of satisfaction and has become a bigger part of our lives in retirement.

What I learned about happiness in the first half of my life is this: Find what you love, and make that a part of your life. For me, that was teaching. But, there isn't enough time in the day to do everything. Nor should you try. You have to set priorities and try to strike a balance that puts your priorities at the top of the list. For me, that meant that though I loved my career, I had to make time for my family and for helping others. And, I took vacations and enjoyed hobbies and physical activities to keep myself energized.

I recently read *Master Class* by Peter Spiers. He co-founded Elderhostel, which is now called Road Scholar. It is an organization that provides educational vacations around the world that are designed for older people. Spiers' book shared the wisdom he has learned about a fulfilling life from interviews with thousands of people who participated in these vacations. Though their interests were varied, he identified five key categories of life activities that they all engaged in. The five areas are physical, mental, social, creative, and spiritual. Most activities we do cover two or more of those areas. For example, attending church engages us spiritually, mentally, and socially. Taking an art class is social and creative. Taking a bike ride with a friend is physical and social. The goal is to have a healthy, balanced lifestyle that meets all five areas. That means, you can't let your job or even taking care of your family prevent you from taking care of yourself, if you want to thrive. And that's true for all of us, at any age.

When I retired in June of 2013, we decided to take a road trip to celebrate and to learn about my ancestors. We drove across the US and Canada to Nova Scotia. That is where my earliest known ancestor, a German blacksmith named Johann Wendell Wüst, settled in the early 1800s. We had a wonderful time on our trip, which lasted over two months, and traveled 11,000 miles. I did find the homes where some of my ancestors lived and the churches they attended. In fact, we worshiped at the church where my great-grandfather, who brought the family to California in the 1880's, had been married. Ingrid and I met many wonderful, welcoming Canadians and Americans on our trip. They helped restore our faith in the goodness of humanity; of course, it also helped that we were mostly camping out and often lost touch with the daily news.

After returning home, we settled into our new normal lifestyle: finding a balance of hobbies, volunteering, travel, exercise, and learning. It is a real pleasure to have the time to explore hobbies old and new, and to read for pleasure and for learning. I am happy to enjoy a slower pace to life now. Before, I was an overachiever who could always be counted on to get things done. Now, I am careful what things I agree to take on. I focus on activities that I enjoy, that teach me things, and that help others.

One book that I read in my travels and reread recently was *Falling Upward, A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* by Richard Rohr. He has written many books on spirituality, and I have enjoyed them very much. But, this particular book was especially meaningful to me because it addresses the stage of life I am now beginning. Richard suggests that we spend our early life on outward achievements: family, career, home, and other possessions. We also learn to follow the rules of our society, family, and other groups we belong to. He calls this stage of life "building the container" for one's life. We are concerned with some essential questions: "What makes me significant?" "How can I support myself?" and "Who will accompany me on my journey?" People in the

first half of life keep our society going through their hard work and cooperation. Rohr also calls this the survival dance. If survival continues to be a struggle, or if people get too attached to their rules and boundaries, they never move on to the second stage of life.

As we age, we may look inward to learn more about ourselves, which Richard Rohr calls “filling the container” or the sacred dance. That is the primary task of the second half of life. You see, family and friends, cars and homes, hobbies, careers and other things bring us happiness, it’s true, but there may still be a “God-size hole” in our hearts. We were created as spiritual beings, but dealing with the distractions of surviving and, hopefully, thriving in the world make us forget that. If we are fortunate, we eventually find what was already there. But, it very often takes a catastrophic event to make us realize we are not complete and sufficient doing it all alone: a death, divorce, serious illness, or other loss may overwhelm us so much that we are forced to give up the illusion of control and mastery over our lives and seek God’s solace. And to really experience that love, we may need to withdraw from the world to pray and contemplate. Through God, we are then able to experience a different type of happiness that is transformative, that may lead us to live lives of love and service, rather than personal achievement; of acceptance and tolerance, rather than judgement and division. Those who have become transformed can help lead the rest of us in choosing the right path, the one of love. And that, is the path of lasting happiness.

Rohr has also given me new insights into the meaning of the Bible. There is much in the Bible to help us in the first half of life: the rules of the Old Testament, particularly the Ten Commandments, help us navigate our lives in the world. And, there are many stories of people who have faults and failures, but God has used them to do great things. But for those of us beginning the hard work of navigating our inner selves, he points to many of Jesus’ sayings that may seem impractical in everyday life, particularly the Beatitudes, which is my New Testament scripture reading for today. I want to point out that “blessed,” as in “Blessed are the poor,” actually means happy.

Here is the Common English Bible version, which uses the word happy instead of blessed: “Happy are people who are hopeless, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs. Happy are people who grieve, because they will be made glad. Happy are people who are humble, because they will inherit the earth. Happy are people who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, because they will be fed until they are full. Happy are people who show mercy, because they will receive mercy. Happy are people who have pure hearts, because they will see God. Happy are people who make peace, because they will be called God’s children. Happy are people whose lives are harassed because they are righteous, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.”

To me, this is a guidebook for second-half-of life individuals. They are ready to strive to be more humble, merciful, and peaceful. They work and fight for others who are grieving, poor, starving, or treated unfairly. They see the big picture, not just their own survival. By the way, Rohr, along with many progressive Christian leaders, sees heaven as beginning here and now, not solely as a future reward. That is, we make the kingdom of heaven on earth as we treat others as Jesus would have done, with love. Society doesn’t always understand or treat such saints well, unfortunately, but they don’t act to please society. God is their guide.

I am convinced this is how God designed us, to love and help each other. Though I am certainly no saint, I am working on moving my focus from solely on myself, my family and career, toward growing closer to God and discerning and serving His will in the second half of my life. I wish all of you success in your own pursuits of meaning and happiness. God is always with us; we need to remember that. As the Bible says, “Do not be afraid.” Or as Bobby McFerrin put it, “Don’t Worry, Be Happy!” Lasting happiness can be ours for the taking, through God’s grace. Amen.

Bibliography

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Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life, by Richard Rohr

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