# A blog post about happiness, by Emma Bingham - Reading for Life

Ahh happiness. It sounds so simple doesn’t it?

I don’t think I ever thought I would be writing something public about what I think happiness means to me. Because that’s the thing about being happy, it is really personal. What makes one person happy won’t make another person feel quite the same, and as a result I don’t want this post to become a guide, or even some sort of ‘Agony Aunt’ advice clinic. Rather, this is just me, having been inspired by a wonderful lecture on literature and happiness, trying to work out what I think being happy means to me.

So here goes…

Why do we want to be happy?

It seems like being happy is the new craze. From feel good playlists on Spotify, to bullet journaling accounts on Tumblr, to Humans of New York’s inspirational photo stories on Instagram, to videos of real-life heroes on Facebook, to my new Positively Pooh book I got for my birthday, it seems like society is saturated with ideas on how to be happy, the importance of being happy, and of other people’s happiness.

Yet, on the flip side, within this bombardment of happiness is the potential of putting pressure on people to be happy, even when they’re not. Sometimes, pretending that we are happy could result in things getting worse.

Late last year, I went to watch a musical called A Pacifist’s Guide to the War on Cancer.

Yup, it was a musical about cancer.

I was intrigued to say the least. However, confident in the abilities of The National Theatre, Complicité, and director Bryony Kimmings, I went with two friends to go and see it.

There are enough reviews online that will tell you how inspiring, sensitive, heart breaking, self-aware and honest this production was. Never in my life have I been moved by a piece of theatre. There was not one member of the audience who was not crying, and not just crying, I mean crying.

However, I would like to draw attention to one moment in the performance that responds to this idea of what it means to be happy. In one song, the cast (whose characters were in fact entirely representative of real people), sang about social media’s influence on how cancer patients think about cancer. The song made a poignant criticism of the many videos online that show cancer patients being brave, strong, resilient, and happy. The song acknowledged that cancer is not like this all the time, and sometimes you don’t want to be brave, you need to let yourself feel like shit.

And this applies not just to the issues being debated within the musical, but to everything.

The importance of being happy is being delivered to us in bucket load. Even the government have invested in the understanding of the impact of happiness through their Public Happiness and Wellbeing Agenda.

And I don’t want to criticise this. I think it is brilliant that we are becoming so much more aware of the importance of being happy, and finding your own happiness. It just makes me wonder to what extent does the world around me shape my desire to be happy, and whether, by extension, the desire to be happy has shaped who I am.

What does happiness mean to me?

I think I first started becoming hyper aware of my desire for happiness when I was doing my A Levels, I presume in response to my record levels of stress! Having gone through a stressful time in my life, I came out the other side with a desire, not necessarily to be happy, but to be the best and happiest version of me. And this is a thought process that has persisted ever since.

I recognised that ‘stressed Emma’ was not who I wanted to be. I would push away those closest to me and shut myself off from everything. And I’m not like that. And more importantly I don’t like being like that.

Over the years (that sounds like I am old and wise, I am neither old nor wise), I have worked out that I absolutely love making other people smile, and I think this has significantly shaped how I have grown up (though I like to think I am not yet fully grown). Anything that I can do to make others feel happy, results in me feeling happy too.

And this isn’t anything profound. It’s just little things like being bubbly and energetic when you can see that those around you are super tired, just to try and perk them up. Or it’s smiling at someone when you’re all in a really nervy situation, waiting outside an audition room for example, just to show them that you’re nervous too, but it’s going to be okay. None of the things I do on a daily basis are big gestures, but I think I get so much happiness out of trying to make others feel happy and at ease.

I’m not sure that makes any sense. I suppose a lot of my ‘positive thinking’ links to the people I am around, truly valuing those people, and wanting to make them happy.

I know someone who can explain this far better.

The problems of my version of happiness

I would argue that I am a happy person. And when it comes to other people, I am super duper positive. In fact, I believe in my closest friends and family more than I believe in myself.

And there’s the paradox.

Yes I would say that I am happy, but at the same time I am acutely aware that I have low self-esteem, and I often am rather pessimistic when it comes to my own endeavours.

So I suppose sometimes my positivity towards others can be mistaken for me having a positive and optimistic outlook on my own life.

Now I don’t want to dwell here. But this begs the question of how I can feel happy, but still struggle to feel proud of myself, or confident, or calm in stressful situations.

And I suppose, now I think about it, that’s because happiness and positivity are different. If happiness for me is mostly an external process, defined more so by the happiness of others, then positivity is a much more internal thing for me.

So when something gets me down, I don’t think that means I am unhappy necessarily. Instead, the feeling I have is more closely linked to self-esteem and positivity.

HOWEVER

(Let’s move on before this gets depressing)

I am totally aware of this aspect of my personality. As a result I consciously work towards trying to raise my self-esteem and feel more positive about myself. In fact, being happy in general really helps me with this, because happiness gives me the energy, determination, enthusiasm, and support to do so.

The Little Things

There are lots of little things that I do purposely, though now they feel more like habit, to make me feel more happy, and in turn more positive and confident. I have compiled them into a list, perfectly illustrating one of the things I do to make myself feel more self-confident: I write lists.

Tah-dah!

So that’s my big splurge about my own view of happiness. And do you know what?

I am feeling pretty happy now I have written it 🙂

Emma I really enjoyed this and think it is so important that our communities are talking more and more what makes us happy and placing more importance on achieving that. I want to look further into ways that literature promotes this, especially contemporary children’s literature that is starting to recognise that it is important to teach people how to be happy! The skills you have in being able to identify and write about what makes you happy are really important, but not something which we were necessarily taught at school or even by our parents. I can think of a few examples of films (e.g.. Inside Out) which address mental health, happiness and wellbeing, but I also want to look at book and poetry which do the same 🙂

This is a lovely post. When I am happy (most of the time), I take it for granted rather than think about it. Looking back on a period when I was very unhappy to contrast that experience with Emma’s, I can identify two features: smiling and music.  
Smile and sing  
I worked in a public facing job as a reference librarian then as a library manager in a public library. Many of the customers, and some of the staff, were unhappy, rude, overdemanding of the time available. Faking a smile doggedly for an hour or two disarmed some of them. By that time there had been enough nice customers to make me smile without pretence, and the smiling, fake or real made me happier anyway. And if the boss is happy, so are the other staff! I still sometimes fake a smile when I go to meet new people, lots of them since I’m new in Exeter. But almost everyone is friendly and makes me smile.  
I have been singing and performing forever, in a few bands and the last fifteen years in choirs. Music goes through my head all the time. When I had a period of depression a few years ago, the soundtrack disappeared leaving a terrible blank. I stopped going to the choir for a while because I was scared to go into town. But when I did the choir and its music set me on the up. Learning to play the ukulele and playing in public often with ukulele groups has made me really happy again. You can’t play a ukulele seriously, so you have to have a smile on your face!

This made me laugh out loud, John, and by effect, smile (and it’s no pretence). Thank you – and you’re quite right about the ukulele: a good reason to take it up!

My Dad plays the ukulele too, and while he’s playing does this kind of head bopping to the beat and it always makes me smile 🙂

Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts on happiness too, it’s been wonderful to read

You must be logged in to post a comment.