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The Art of Happiness in a Troubled World



HIS HOLINESS THE DALAI LAMA
and HOWARD C. CUTLER, M.D.

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His Holiness
the Dalai Lama

and

Howard C. Cutler, MD

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Chapter 1

ME VERSUS WE

I think this is the first time I am meeting most of you. But whether it is an old friend or a new friend, there's not much difference anyway, because I always believe we are the same: We are all just human beings. —H.H. THE DALAI LAMA, SPEAKING TO A CROWD OF MANY THOUSANDS

TIME PASSES. The world changes. But there is one constant I have grown used to over the years, while intermittently traveling on speaking tours with the Dalai Lama: When speaking to a general audience, he invariably opens his address, “We are all the same . . .”

Once establishing a bond with each member of the audience in that way, he then proceeds to that evening’s particular topic. But over the years I’ve witnessed a remarkable phenomenon: Whether he is speaking to a small formal meeting of leaders on Capitol Hill, addressing a gathering of a hundred thousand in Central Park, an interfaith dialogue in Australia, or a scientific conference in Switzerland, or teaching twenty thousand monks in India, one can sense an almost palpable effect. He

seems to create a feeling among his audience not only of connection to him, but of connection to one another, a fundamental human bond.

It was early on a Monday morning and I was back in Dharamsala, scheduled to meet shortly with the Dalai Lama for our first meeting in a fresh series of discussions. Home to a thriving Tibetan community, Dharamsala is a tranquil village built into a ridge of the Dauladar mountain range, the foothills of the Himalayas in northern India. I had arrived a few days earlier, around the same time as the Dalai Lama himself, who had just returned home from a three-week speaking tour in the United States.

I finished breakfast early, and as the Dalai Lama's residence was only a five-minute walk along a mountain path from the guesthouse where I was staying, I retired to the common room to finish my coffee and review my notes in preparation for our meeting. Though the room was deserted, someone had left on the TV tuned to the world news. Absorbed in my notes, I wasn't paying much attention to the news and for several minutes the suffering of the world was nothing but background noise.

It wasn't long, however, before I happened to look up and a story caught my attention. A Palestinian suicide bomber had detonated an explosive at a Tel Aviv disco, deliberately targeting Israeli boys and girls. Almost two dozen teenagers were killed. But killing alone apparently was not satisfying enough for the terrorist. He had filled his bomb with rusty nails and screws for good measure, in order to maim and disfigure those whom he couldn't kill.

Before the immense cruelty of such an act could fully sink in, other news reports quickly followed—a bleak mix of natural disasters and intentional acts of violence . . . the Crown Prince of Nepal slaughters his entire family . . . survivors of the Gujarat earthquake still struggle to recover.

Fresh from accompanying the Dalai Lama on his recent tour, I found that his words “We are all the same” rang in my head as I watched these horrifying stories of sudden suffering and misery. I then realized I had been listening to these reports as if the victims were vague, faceless abstract entities, not a group of individuals “the same as me.” It seemed that the greater the sense of distance between me and the vic-

tim, the less real they seemed to be, the less like living, breathing human beings. But now, for a moment, I tried to imagine what it would be like to be one of the earthquake victims, going about my usual daily chores one moment and seventy-five seconds later having no family, home, or possessions, suddenly becoming penniless and alone.

"We are all the same." It was a powerful principle, and one that I was convinced could change the world.



"Your Holiness," I began, "I'd like to talk with you this morning about this idea that we are all the same. You know, in today's world there is such a pervasive feeling of isolation and alienation among people, a feeling of separateness, even suspicion. It seems to me that if we could somehow cultivate this sense of connection to others, a real sense of connection on a deep level, a common bond, I think it could completely transform society. It could eliminate so many of the problems facing the world today. So this morning I'd like to talk about this principle that we are all the same, and—"

"We are all the same?" the Dalai Lama repeated.

"Yes, and—"

"Where did you get this idea?" he asked.

"Huh?"

"Who gave you this idea?"

"You . . . *you* did," I stammered, a bit confused.

"Howard," he said bluntly, "we are *not* all the same. We're different! Everybody is different."

"Yes, of course," I quickly amended myself, "we all have these superficial differences, but what I mean is—"

"Our differences are not necessarily superficial," he persisted. "For example, there is one senior Lama I know who is from Ladakh. Now, I am very close to this Lama, but at the same time, I know that he is a Ladakhee. No matter how close I may feel toward this person, it's never going to make him Tibetan. The fact remains that he is a Ladakhee."

I had heard the Dalai Lama open his public addresses with “We are all the same” so often over the years that this turn of conversation was starting to stagger me.

“Well, on your tours over the years, whenever you speak to big audiences, and even on this most recent, you always say, ‘We are all the same.’ That seems like a really strong theme in your public talks. For example, you say how people tend to focus on our differences, but we are all the same in terms of our desire to be happy and avoid suffering, and—”

“Oh yes. Yes,” he acknowledged. “And also we have the same human potential. Yes, I generally begin my talk with these things. This is because many different people come to see me. Now I am a Buddhist monk. I am Tibetan. Maybe others’ backgrounds are different. So if we had no common basis, if we had no characteristics that we share, then there is no point in my talk, no point in sharing my views. But the fact is that we are all human beings. That is the very basis upon which I’m sharing my personal experience with them.”

“That is the kind of idea I was getting at—this idea that we are all human beings,” I explained, relieved that we were finally on the same page. “I think if people really had a genuine feeling inside, that all human beings were the same and they were the same as other people, it would completely transform society . . . I mean in a genuine way. So, I’m hoping we can explore this issue a little bit.”

The Dalai Lama responded, “Then to really try to understand this, we need to investigate how we come to think of ourselves as independent, isolated or separate, and how we view others as different or separate, and see if we can come to a deeper understanding. But we cannot start from the standpoint of saying simply we are all the same and denying that there are differences.”

“Well, that is kind of my point. I think we can agree that if people related to each other as fellow human beings, if everyone related to other people like you do, on that basic human level, like brothers and sisters, as I’ve heard you refer to people, the world would be a far better place. We wouldn’t have all these problems that I want to talk to you

about later, and you and I could talk about football games or movies instead!

“So, I don’t know,” I continued, “but it seems that your approach to building the sense of connection between people is to remind them of the characteristics they share as human beings. The way you do whenever you have the opportunity to speak to a large audience.”

“Yes.” He nodded.

“I don’t know . . .” I repeated again. “It is such an important topic, so simple an idea yet so difficult in reality, that I’m just wondering if there are any other methods of facilitating that process, like speeding it up, or motivating people to view things from that perspective, given the many problems in the world today.”

“Other methods . . .” he said slowly, taking a moment to carefully consider the question while I eagerly anticipated his insights and wisdom. Suddenly he started to laugh. As if he had a sudden epiphany, he exclaimed, “Yes! Now if we could get beings from Mars to come down to the earth, and pose some kind of threat, then I think you would see all the people on Earth unite very quickly! They would join together, and say, ‘*We*, the people of the earth!’” He continued laughing.

Unable to resist his merry laugh, I also began to laugh. “Yes, I guess that would about do it,” I agreed. “And I’ll see what I can do to speak to the Interplanetary Council about it. But in the meantime, while we’re all waiting for the Mothership to arrive, any other suggestions?”



Thus we began a series of conversations that would continue intermittently for several years. The discussion began that morning with my casually tossing around the phrase “We are all the same” as if I was coming up with a slogan for a soft drink ad that was going to unite the world. The Dalai Lama responded with his characteristic refusal to reduce important questions to simplistic formulas. These were critical human questions: How can we establish a deep feeling of connection to others, a genuine human bond, including those who may be very

different? Is it possible to even view your enemy as a person essentially like yourself? Is it possible to really see all human beings as one's brothers and sisters, or is this a utopian dream?

Our discussions soon broadened to address other fundamental issues dealing with the relationship between the individual and society. Serious questions were at stake: Is it possible to be truly happy when social problems invariably impact our personal happiness? In seeking happiness do we choose the path of inner development or social change?

As our discussions progressed, the Dalai Lama addressed these questions not as abstract concepts or philosophical speculation but as realities within the context of our everyday lives, quickly revealing how these questions are directly related to very real problems and concerns.

In these first discussions in Dharamsala, we dealt with the challenge of how to shift one's orientation from Me to We. Less than a year later, I returned to Dharamsala for our second series of conversations—September 11 had occurred in the interim, initiating the worldwide War on Terror. It was clear that cultivating a We orientation was not enough. Acutely reminded that where there is a “we” there is also a “they,” we now had to face the potential problems raised by an “us against them” mind-set: prejudice, suspicion, indifference, racism, conflict, violence, cruelty, and a wide spectrum of ugly and terrible attitudes with which human beings can treat one another.

When we met in Tucson, Arizona, several years later, the Dalai Lama began to weave together the ideas from our many conversations on these topics, presenting a coherent approach to coping with our troubled world, explaining how to maintain a feeling of hope and even happiness despite the many problems of today's world.

But that Monday morning we began on the most fundamental level, exploring our customary notions about who we are and how we relate to the world around us, beginning with how we relate to those in our own communities and the role that plays in our personal and societal happiness.

“No Sense of Community, No Anchor”

On a recent Friday afternoon, an unemployed twenty-year-old posted a message on YouTube, simply offering to “be there” for anyone who needed to talk. “I never met you, but I do care,” he said.

By the end of the weekend, he had received more than five thousand calls and text messages from strangers taking him up on his offer.

Continuing our discussion, I reviewed. “You know, Your Holiness, our discussions over the years have revolved around the theme of human happiness. In the past we discussed happiness from the individual standpoint, from the standpoint of inner development. But now we are talking about human happiness at the level of society, exploring some of the societal factors that may affect human happiness. I know of course that you have had the opportunity to travel around the world many times, visiting many different countries, so many different cultures, as well as meeting with many different kinds of people and experts in so many fields.”

“Yes.”

“So, I was just wondering—in the course of your travels, is there any particular aspect of modern society that you have noticed that you feel acts as a major obstruction to the full expression of human happiness? Of course, there are many specific problems in today’s world, like violence, racism, terrorism, the gap between rich and poor, the environment, and so on. But here I’m wondering if there is more of a general feature of society that stands out in your mind as particularly significant?”

Seated upon a wide upholstered chair, the Dalai Lama bent down to unlace his plain brown shoes while he silently reflected on the question. Then, tucking his feet under him in a cross-legged position, settling in for a deeper discussion, he replied, “Yes. I was just thinking there is one thing I have noticed, something that is very important. I

think it could be best characterized as *a lack of sense of community*. Tibetans are always shocked to hear of situations where people are living in close proximity, have neighbors, and they may have been your neighbors for months or even years, but you have hardly any contact with them! So you might simply greet them when you meet, but otherwise you don't know them. There is no real connection. There is no sense of community. These situations we always find very surprising, because in the traditional Tibetan society, the sense of community is very strong."

The Dalai Lama's comment hit home with me—literally and figuratively. I thought, not without some embarrassment, that I myself didn't know the names of my neighbors. Nor had I known my neighbors' names for many years.

Of course, I was not about to admit that *now*. "Yes," I said, "you will certainly see those kinds of situations."

The Dalai Lama went on to explain, "In today's world you will sometimes find these communities or societies where there is no spirit of cooperation, no feeling of connection. Then you'll see widespread loneliness set in. I feel that a sense of community is so important. I mean even if you are very rich, if you don't have human companions or friends to share your love with, sometimes you end up simply sharing it with a pet, an animal, which is better than nothing. However, even if you are in a poor community, the poor will have each other. So there is a real sense that you have a kind of an anchor, an emotional anchor. Whereas, if this sense of community is lacking, then when you feel lonely, and when you have pain, there is no one to really share it with. I think this kind of loneliness is probably a major problem in today's world, and can certainly affect an individual's day-to-day happiness.

"Now when we speak of loneliness," he added, "I think we should be careful of what we mean. Here I don't necessarily mean loneliness only as the feeling of missing someone, or wanting a friend to talk to, or something like that. Because you can have a family who has a close bond, so they may not have a high level of individual loneliness, but they may feel alienated from the wider society. So here I was speaking

of loneliness more as a wider kind of isolation or sense of separation between people or groups.”

The decline of our sense of community has increasingly become the subject of popular discourse during the last decade, due in part to books such as *Bowling Alone*, by Robert D. Putnam, a political scientist at Harvard University. Putnam argues that our sense of community and civic engagement has dramatically deteriorated over the last thirty years—noting with dismay the marked decline of neighborhood friendships, dinner parties, group discussions, club memberships, church committees, political participation, and essentially all the involvements that make a democracy work.

According to sociologists Miller McPherson and Matthew E. Brashears from the University of Arizona and Lynn Smith-Lovin from Duke University, in the past two decades the number of people who report they have *no one* with whom they can talk about important matters has nearly tripled. Based on extensive data collected in the University of Chicago’s General Social Survey, the percentage of individuals with no close friends or confidants is a staggering 25 percent of the American population. This number is so surprising that it left the researchers themselves wondering if this could really be an accurate estimate. The same organization conducted a similar nationwide survey back in 1985, shocking Americans then by revealing that, on average, people in our society had only three close friends. By 2005, this figure had dropped by a third—most people had only two close friends or confidants.

The investigators not only found that people had fewer social connections over the past two decades but also discovered that the pattern of our social connections was also changing. More and more people were relying on family members as their primary source of social connection. The researchers, noting that people were relying less on friendships in the wider community, concluded, “The types of bridging ties that connect us to community and neighborhood have withered.”

While the study did not identify the reasons for this decline in social connectedness and community, other investigators have identified a number of factors contributing to this alarming trend. Historically, advances in modern transportation created an increasingly mobile

society, as more and more families pulled up roots and moved to new cities in search of better jobs or living conditions. As society became more prosperous, it also became a common practice among larger segments of the population for children to leave home to attend universities in other cities or states. Easier travel and communication have allowed young people to move farther from the parental home than ever before, in search of better career opportunities.

More recent studies show that working hours and commutes are both longer, resulting in less time for people to interact with their community. These changes in work hours and the geographical scattering of families may foster a broader, shallower network of ties, rather than the close bonds necessary for fulfillment of our human need for connection.

Solitary TV viewing and computer use, ever on the rise, also contribute to social isolation. The growth of the Internet as a communication tool may play a role as well. While the Internet can keep us connected to friends, family, and neighbors, it also may diminish the need for us to actually see each other to make those closer connections. Researchers point out that while communication through tools such as the Internet or text messaging does create bonds between people, these types of connections create weaker social ties than communication in person. Words are sometimes poor vehicles for expressing and communicating emotions; a great deal of human communication is conveyed through subtle visual cues that can be better perceived in face-to-face encounters.

Whatever the cause, it is clear that the decline in our sense of community and the increasing social isolation have far-reaching implications on every level—personal, communal, societal, and global. With his characteristic wisdom and insight, the Dalai Lama is quick to point out the importance of this issue, and its impact on human happiness both on the individual level as well as on a wider societal level. Here the views of both the Dalai Lama and Western science converge. In fact, echoing the Dalai Lama's view, and summarizing the latest scientific research from many disciplines, Robin Dunbar, professor of psychology at the University of Liverpool in the UK, asserts, "*The lack of*

social contact, the lack of sense of community, may be the most pressing social problem of the new millennium.”

Building the Spirit of Community: The First Steps

“Well, the medication is finally working!” said David, a well-groomed, nicely dressed young man sitting in my Phoenix office. “My depression has completely lifted, and I’m back to my normal state of unhappiness.” He was half joking—but only half. A bright, successful, single thirty-two-year-old structural engineer, David had presented to treatment about a month earlier with a familiar spectrum of symptoms: sudden loss of interest in his usual activities, fatigue, insomnia, weight loss, difficulty concentrating—in short, a pretty ordinary, garden-variety depression. It didn’t take long to discover that he had recently moved to Phoenix to accept a new job and the stresses related to the change had triggered his depression.

This was years ago, when I was in practice as a psychiatrist. I began him on a standard course of antidepressant medication, and his acute symptoms of severe depression resolved within a few weeks. Soon after resuming his normal routine, however, he reported a more long-standing problem, a many-year history of “a kind of mild chronic unhappiness,” an inexplicable pervasive sense of “dissatisfaction with life,” and general lack of enthusiasm or “zest” for life. Hoping to discover the source and rid himself of this ongoing state, he asked to continue with psychotherapy. I was happy to oblige. So, after diagnosing him with the mood disorder dysthymia, we set about in earnest, exploring the usual “family of origin” issues—his childhood, his overly controlling mother, his emotionally distant father—along with past relationship patterns and present interpersonal dynamics. Pretty standard stuff.

Week after week, David showed up regularly, until terminating therapy a few months later, due to another job-related move. Over the months his major depression had never returned, but we had made little to no headway with his chronic state of dissatisfaction.

Remembering this patient now, who was by no means unique, I recall one aspect of his personal history that seemed rather unremarkable at the time. His daily routine consisted of going to work five or six days a week, at least eight-hour days, then returning home. That about summed it up. At home, evenings and weekends, he would generally watch TV, play video games, maybe read a bit. Sometimes he would go to a bar or to a movie with a friend, generally someone from work. There was the occasional date, but mostly he remained at home. This daily routine had remained essentially unchanged for many years.

Looking back on my treatment of David, I can only wonder one thing: *What in the world was I thinking?!* For months I had been treating him for his complaints of a sense of dissatisfaction (“I dunno, there’s just something *missing* from my life. . . .”), exploring his childhood history, looking for patterns in past relationships, yet right in front of us his life had at least one significant gap, a gap that we failed to recognize. Not a small, obscure, or subtle gap, but rather a huge gaping cavern—he was a man with no community, no wider sense of connection.

During my years of psychiatric practice, I rarely looked beyond the level of the individual in treating patients. It *never even occurred to me* to look beyond the level of family and friends to a patient’s relationship to the wider community. This reminds me of British prime minister Margaret Thatcher at a time when she was at the pinnacle of her power and influence announcing, “Who is ‘society’? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families.” Looking back on it now, it almost seems as if I was practicing a brand of Margaret Thatcher School of Psychotherapy.

From my current perspective, I would have done my former patient David a greater service had I handed him a prescription reading: “Treatment: *One act of community involvement per week. Increase dosage as tolerated. Get plenty of rest, drink plenty of fluids, and follow up in one month.*”

In seeking an effective treatment to cure the ills of our society, as the Dalai Lama will reveal, forging a deeper sense of connection to

others, and building a greater sense of community, can be a good place to start.

Having identified this erosion of community bonds as a significant problem, we now turned to the question of what to do about it.

“Your Holiness, you have mentioned that this lack of sense of community is a big problem in modern society. Do you have any thoughts about how to increase the sense of community, strengthen those human bonds?”

“Yes,” the Dalai Lama answered. “I think the approach must begin with cultivating awareness. . . .”

“Awareness specifically of what?” I asked.

“Of course, in the first place, you need to have awareness of the seriousness of the problem itself, how destructive it can be. Then, you need greater awareness of the ways that we are connected with others, reflecting on the characteristics we share with others. And finally, you need to translate that awareness into action. I think that’s the main thing. This means making a deliberate effort to increase personal contact among the various members of the community. So, *that* is how to increase your feeling of connection, increase your bonds within the community!”

“So, if it is okay, I’m wondering if you could very briefly touch upon each of these steps or strategies in a bit more detail, just to delineate them clearly.”

“Yes, okay,” he said agreeably, as he began to outline his approach. “Now, regarding cultivating greater awareness. No matter what kind of problem you are dealing with, one needs to make an effort to change things—the problem will not fix itself. A person needs to have a strong determination to change the problem. This determination comes from your conviction that the problem is serious, and it has serious consequences. And the way to generate this conviction is by learning about the problem, investigating, and using your common sense and reasoning. This is what I mean by awareness here. I think we have discussed this kind of general approach in the past. But here, we are not only talking about becoming more aware of the destructive consequences of this lack of community and this widespread loneliness, but we are

also talking about the positive benefits of having a strong sense of community.”

“Benefits such as . . . ?”

“Like I mentioned—having an emotional anchor, having others with whom you can share your problems and so on.”

“Oh, I was thinking more in terms of things like less crime, or maybe health benefits of connecting to a wider community”

“Howard, those things I don’t know. Here you should consult an expert, see what kind of evidence there is, scientific evidence. I am not an expert in these things. But even without looking at the research, I think anyone can do their own investigation, keeping their eyes open and reflecting on these things.

“For example, even in the same city or community, you might find two different kinds of neighborhoods. Let’s say that in one neighborhood people don’t really get along with each other, neighbors don’t really communicate with each other, and nobody cares much about the general community. Then compare that with another neighborhood where people talk to each other, where there is a sense of friendship and community, so when some things happen, either good or bad, people get together and share it. Comparing the two, you’ll definitely find that the people living in the more community-oriented neighborhood will be much more happy and will have a greater sense of security, safety. That’s just common sense.”

Pausing momentarily, the Dalai Lama continued. “You know, Howard, I think that it’s during the hard times, like when a family suffers a tragedy, especially the death of a loved one, it is then that a community becomes so important. It’s during such times of grief that you can really see the value of community. . . . This reminds me. I heard, for example, that in some of the Tibetan settlements in South India, when there is a death in one family, all the other families of the camp pull together to support and comfort them, even bringing firewood to the cemetery for the cremation of the body.”

“What do you mean by a ‘camp’ here?” I asked.

“Oh, many of these settlements were originally organized into

campes of around one hundred and sixty people, when they were first established,” he replied.

“In these camps,” the Dalai Lama continued, “neighbors also look out for one another, especially after those elderly ones whose children or grandchildren may not be living in the vicinity. If they are sick or unable to care for themselves or by their own family, the community will also make sure that they are properly cared for. This is wonderful. Isn’t it?”

“So, Your Holiness, having recognized that there are clear-cut benefits from connecting with a community, can you explain the next strategy you mentioned, your suggestion to increase awareness of the ways that we are connected with others?”

The Dalai Lama considered the question for a moment. “Yes. Now, one thing. When we talk about sense of community, basically we are talking about a feeling of connection to others, a feeling of affinity to a wider group beyond oneself, where you feel a sense of belonging. So, Howard, if we are seeking to build a sense of community, strengthen community bonds, we need to find a way to connect with others, establish a feeling of connectedness. The point here is that you should become aware of, on what basis you relate to others, and investigate the various ways you can connect, or relate to them. Look carefully. Analyze. Ask yourself, what are the different characteristics that you share with others? What are the common bonds?”

“So here,” I clarified, “you’re talking about things like, for instance, how members of the Tibetan community relate on the basis of a shared culture and spirituality, and how that creates strong community bonds?”

“That’s right. But remember, a shared cultural or spiritual background or tradition is not the only basis for these strong community bonds, this sense of community. This is on one level. But one can also relate to others on other levels, such as belonging to the same family, or based on living in the same neighborhood, or local region, or you can find others who share your same personal interests or hobbies. Each of these can be considered a different kind of ‘community.’ It is a matter

of the underlying feeling of belonging to a wider group. That is what is important.”

“So, this brings us to the final step,” I said, “or maybe it’s actually the first step: taking action—making an effort to establish personal contact with others of your community, however you define or conceive of your ‘community.’”

“That’s right.”

“You know, Your Holiness, I was just thinking that there can be so many different causes of the deterioration of our sense of community, and a lot of these no doubt have to do with the basic characteristics of modern society. For example, one of the factors in Western societies which might affect this is mobility. People will often move from one city or state to another in order to improve themselves in some way, for a better job, to make more money, to try to improve their living conditions. This idea of uprooting oneself in search of better opportunities is actually promoted in our society.”

“Yes,” the Dalai Lama agreed, “this mobility may play some role. For example, there would be a real affinity for others and a greater sense of community if you are living among individuals who you have grown up with, gone to school with and so on. And in modern society, with people moving so often, we don’t always have such situations.”

“So, that’s one cause of the problem,” I concluded. “But I mean, how can we build a sense of community when people are always being encouraged to pick up and move, based on . . . ‘Oh, that job over there is better,’ and so on?”

“Howard, I don’t think that moving automatically has to make one lose a sense of community,” he replied confidently, “*because even if one is new to a community, one can make an effort to get to know the people in the neighborhood.* Even if you move to a new area, you can still create a community there. This sense of community is based on individuals and families making an effort to meet and get to know one another. You can always make an effort to get to know the people you’re living with locally, *join local organizations, participate in community activities,* and so on.

“So, it is often simply a matter of *willingness*. And how can we help increase this willingness? Again, through awareness, through the recognition of the real importance of a sense of community, of how that may have a direct impact on your own happiness, and the happiness of your family.

“The fact is that wherever you go, you can’t run away from community. Isn’t it? There it is. Unless you choose to isolate yourself. Choose to become indifferent. Choose to have no commitment. It is really up to you.”

By now the Dalai Lama’s attendants were hovering just outside the screen door on the veranda, signaling our time was up. “So, I think we will end for today,” he said cheerfully. “We will meet again tomorrow.” With that, he slipped on his shoes and quickly left the room.



So, we begin our investigation of human society and happiness with several basic premises. First, there is no doubt that societal factors can influence an individual’s happiness. Second, in looking for specific factors that can influence human happiness, there is no doubt that a sense of connection to others and a wider sense of community play a key role in human happiness. Third, in looking at the trends of modern society, as the Dalai Lama points out, there is no doubt that there has been a deterioration of our sense of community, growing social isolation, and a lack of a deep feeling of connection among people.

While I had never given much thought to this trend before, once the Dalai Lama highlighted the growing lack of community in modern society, I became profoundly aware of the pervasiveness and seriousness of this problem. The more I reflected on this critical issue, it seemed that the entire course of modern civilization was behind this problem, creating it, fueling it, pushing it onward—and leading us to greater and greater problems and potentially even disaster. Underlying

* When speaking English, the Dalai Lama often uses the expression “Isn’t it?” to mean “Don’t you agree?”

this erosion of community bonds were complex social forces, forces of such tremendous power and pervasiveness as modern technology and even the fundamental values of our society. In a society that was moving faster and faster, these social forces seemed to be creating a current that was sweeping us along involuntarily. How can we slow down the current of this mighty river that seemed to be carrying us toward greater misery and possibly even destruction?

Fortunately, the Dalai Lama offers us a well-defined approach to reestablishing community bonds, and as always, his approach is immensely practical. With his natural, spontaneous wisdom, he explained how to create the spirit of community in three basic steps. . . .

STEP ONE: AWARENESS OF THE BENEFITS

If a mysterious stranger sidled up to you and whispered, “I can offer you a secret method to cut in half your chances of dying within the next year—without giving up your cigarettes, Big Macs, or beer, without a single push-up, or a minute of exercise!” what would the information be worth? Well, for those suffering from the pervasive social isolation and alienation of modern society, such a method does exist. “Connect-*edness* really matters,” Robert Putnam explained at one White House conference. “Wonderful studies, controlling for your blood chemistry and how old you are and your gender and whether you jog and whether you smoke and so on, show that your chances of dying over the next year are cut in half by joining one group. Cut in a quarter by joining two groups,” reported Putnam.

In outlining his approach to building a stronger sense of community, the Dalai Lama advises us to begin by investigating the benefits of connecting to a wider group. Based on many studies, there is no question that the physical, mental, and emotional health benefits of intimate relationships and social ties are legion: Lower death rates, faster recovery from illness, better mental health, and better immune function are just a few. The scientific evidence comes from many sources, ranging from massive surveys of thousands, to small-scale laboratory experiments—such as the slightly unsettling study conducted at Carnegie Mellon in

which samples of cold virus were directly squirted into the nostrils of a few brave subjects, finding that those with rich social networks were four times less likely to get sick!

In addition to the personal health benefits of close relationships, evidence has been accumulating that a sense of belonging to a wider community, extending beyond one's intimate circle of friends or family, has equally compelling benefits that can manifest in many other ways. As Robert Putnam points out, "Communities that have tighter social networks have lower crime and lower mortality and less corruption and more effective government and less tax evasion."

The ultimate purpose of my discussions with the Dalai Lama was to discover an approach to finding happiness within the wider context of living in modern society. Thus, in assessing the benefits of having a sense of community, it is important to look at the role (if any) this plays in human happiness. In his wonderful book *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*, leading economist Lord Richard Layard outlines six key factors that can largely explain the differences in average levels of happiness between one country and another. One of them is the percentage of the population that belongs to a social organization.

STEP TWO: AWARENESS OF THE WAYS WE ARE CONNECTED

According to the Dalai Lama, the way to build a stronger sense of community is to develop a deep awareness of the ways we are connected to others. Such awareness can be developed by deliberately reflecting on the characteristics we share with others, our common interests, background, and shared experience. The Dalai Lama points out, for example, how the Tibetan people are bound tightly by a common cultural and spiritual heritage, whether living in exile in India or other countries throughout the world. These common bonds have deep roots: with the spiritual heritage dating back to the seventh century, when Buddhism began to spread in Tibet, and the cultural heritage extending back even further. It seems reasonable to suppose that the deeper the roots of the shared heritage, the stronger one's sense of identity or spirit of community will be. But the Dalai Lama also reminds us that there are many

other qualities through which we forge a sense of connection. If we investigate carefully, we can always find some characteristic or experience that we share with others, some common bond.

In thinking about this approach to cultivating a deeper sense of community, I couldn't help but wonder what characteristics the residents of my own hometown, Phoenix, might have in common—beyond living in the same city, which seemed unlikely to foster a deep connection all by itself. What might be the shared heritage or common bond for engendering a sense of unity among the diverse inhabitants of this city?

Like the mythical phoenix bird for which it was named, rising from its own ashes, this city grew out of the barren Sonoran desert on the ruins of an ancient unknown community. A city with more than two million inhabitants today, it didn't even exist a mere 150 years ago. The city has sprung up essentially overnight, with most of the inhabitants moving here only in the past few decades. In stark contrast to the strong community ties based on the deep roots of the Tibetans' rich heritage, it seems that only weak bonds could be formed by such shallow historical roots in this case. What else could provide the people of Phoenix common ground that would not be swept away at the first sign of community unrest?

Seeking an answer to this question, I conducted my own little survey polling long-time residents. What was the common cultural heritage I discovered? For thirty-five years, almost every schoolchild in Phoenix was sharing the exact same experience at the exact same time, five days a week—watching a local children's cartoon show on TV called *Wallace and Ladmo*, which featured a fat guy wearing a polka-dot shirt and a straw hat (later traded for a bowler hat and bow tie) and a tall skinny guy wearing a top hat and a giant necktie. As Phoenix-raised filmmaker Steven Spielberg explained, "When my mom saw me and my three sisters parked in front of the TV set watching *The Wallace and Ladmo Show*, she knew, except for bathroom breaks, we wouldn't be anywhere else." A similar statement could be uttered by a generation of Phoenix residents, cutting across ethnic, racial, gender, religious, or socioeconomic barriers—a generation that shared the exact

same words and same visual images being imprinted and stored in their brains at the exact same moment for hours every week.

Well, okay, maybe this isn't the strongest basis on which to forge common ground, but at least it shows that if you dig deep enough, you're bound to uncover some kind of shared experience, a basis for camaraderie. As my conversations with the Dalai Lama continued, he would reveal a way to form a common bond on a much more fundamental level, encompassing a much wider slice of humanity than a city of kids, who at the very same instant were all absorbing the wisdom of Popeye: "I am what I am and that's all that I am!"

STEP THREE: TAKE ACTION; INCREASE PERSONAL CONTACT

The final step: Take action. Clearly the first two steps of the Dalai Lama's method of building a sense of community, which involve developing greater awareness, mean nothing unless that awareness is translated into action. Years later as I reviewed the transcript of that conversation, I came to his comments about not knowing one's neighbors. While acutely aware that his words applied to me at the time, I had promptly forgotten about it. Now here it was, years later, in fact, and I realized I *still* had not bothered to find out my neighbors' names. Of course, I hadn't been ignoring them over the years, but whenever I saw a neighbor, the interaction had always been limited to a nod of the head, perhaps a smile, sometimes a friendly "How's it goin'?" or rarely a brief chat about the weather. Yet there was never an attempt to connect in any meaningful way.

As I read the Dalai Lama's words in the transcript "*it's simply a matter of willingness*" and recalled our conversation, I suddenly stood up from my computer. "Better late than never," I thought, and walked outside, determined to meet at least one of my neighbors. By chance I noticed one who was having car trouble. I walked over to offer help. We introduced ourselves and as it turns out, we had quite an interesting conversation. I walked back indoors, returned to my computer, and went back to work.

My professional colleagues might disparagingly label this a mere

“anecdotal report” and dismiss my observations as biased and of no value as proof of anything. Well, no matter. But I swear that just taking that one small step, that simple act of connecting with my neighbor, gave me a sudden and dramatic boost in mood, energy level, and even mental clarity, as I was able to return to my work with a renewed freshness and enthusiasm, as if returning from a weekend vacation instead of a brief conversation with a neighbor.

When contemplating the deterioration of our sense of community, the growing alienation in our society, and the destructive social forces causing them, these had initially seemed to be virtually unsolvable problems. But now, they seemed possible to resolve. In presenting these complex and seemingly overwhelming social problems to the Dalai Lama, he seemed to slice through them like Alexander the Great cutting the Gordian knot. His answers were so basic, they were disarming. What if you move to a new place? *Simply join a group.* What if you feel unmotivated? *Understand the benefits more.* What if you feel isolated, alienated, unconnected to any community? *Take stock of your own interests, and get involved with others with similar interests.*

Showing us the way to begin to build a renewed sense of community, a feeling of belonging, he pointed out the truth with utter clarity: It is up to us. He places the responsibility squarely in our own hands, rather than in the hands of the overwhelming forces of society. We don't need to turn back the clock to earlier days; we don't need to revert to agrarian societies. We don't need to change the course of modern society in order to create a greater sense of community. We only need to act, one person at a time, reaching out to connect with others with similar interests.

But while the principles the Dalai Lama expressed were simple, they are not simplistic, nor are they necessarily easy to achieve. As I was to discover, the ideas he presented were much more profound and nuanced, and his approach was not as straightforward as it seemed upon first glance. This was only the first step in exploring the relationship between the individual, society, and the pursuit of human happiness.



ABOUT THE ART OF HAPPINESS SERIES

The Art of Happiness book project is a series of books on the theme of human happiness, written by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Howard C. Cutler, MD. The books examine different facets of human happiness from both the Eastern and Western perspectives, with the Dalai Lama representing the Buddhist perspective and Dr. Cutler, an American psychiatrist, representing the Western scientific perspective. Since the original publication of *The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living* in 1998, there has been a rapidly growing interest in the subject of happiness worldwide, including a new field of psychology devoted to the scientific study of human happiness and flourishing. During these years, the Dalai Lama and Dr. Cutler have continued their collaboration. Additional volumes of the Art of Happiness series are currently planned.

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