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HOW TO BUILD A LIFE

Are We Trading Our Happiness for Modern Comforts?

As society gets richer, people chase the wrong things.

By Arthur C. Brooks

Jan Buchczik

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"How to Build a Life" is a biweekly column by Arthur Brooks, tackling questions of meaning and happiness.

One of the greatest paradoxes in American life is that while, on average, existence has gotten more comfortable over time, happiness has fallen.

According to the United States Census Bureau, average household income in the U.S., adjusted for inflation, was higher in 2019 than has ever been recorded for every income quintile. And although income inequality has risen, this has not been mirrored by inequality in the consumption of goods and services. For example, from 2008 to 2019, households in the lowest income quintile increased spending on eating out by an average of about 22 percent after correcting for inflation; the top quintile increased spending on eating out by an average of just under 8 percent. Meanwhile, domestic government services have increased significantly: For example, federal spending on education, training, employment, and social services increased from 2000 to 2019 by about 30 percent in inflation-adjusted terms.

New American homes in 2016 were 1,000 square feet larger than in 1973 and living space per person, on average, has nearly doubled. The number of Americans who use the internet increased from 52 to 90 percent from 2000 to 2019. The percentage who use social media grew from 5 to 72 percent from 2005 to 2019.

But amid these advances in quality of life across the income scale, average happiness is decreasing in the U.S. The General Social Survey, which has been measuring social trends among Americans every one or two years since 1972, shows a long-term, gradual decline in happiness—and rise in unhappiness—from 1988 to the present.

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There are several possible explanations for this paradox: It could be that people are uninformed about all of this amazing progress, that we can't perceive progress very well when it occurs over decades, or that we are measuring the wrong indicators of

"quality of life." I suspect the answer is all three. The last idea, however, is especially important to understand in order to improve our own happiness.

There's nothing new about the idea that consumption doesn't lead to happiness—that concept is a mainstay of just about every religion, and many philosophical traditions as well. Arguably, Karl Marx's greatest insight came from his theory of alienation, in part defined as a sense of estrangement from the self that comes from being part of a materialistic society in which we are cogs in an enormous market-based machine.

But you don't have to be religious (or a Marxist) to see how absurd some of the claims that come out of our hyper-consumerist society are. We are promised happiness with the next pay raise, the next new gadget—even the next sip of soda. The Swedish business professor Carl Cederström argues persuasively in his book *The Happiness Fantasy* that corporations and advertisers have promised satisfaction, but have led people instead into a rat race of joyless production and consumption. Though the material comforts of life in the U.S. have increased for many of its citizens, those things don't give life meaning.

The answer, as Marx and his modern followers today would have it, is to adopt a different system of economic governance, specifically scientific socialism, which leaves people less exposed to the power of markets. But it's not at all clear that this is the road to greater well-being. Indeed, many have observed that socialism's focus on who gets what is every bit as materialistic as a market-based society.

Though government intervention can certainly help meet basic needs—food on the table, money when people are unemployed, health care that doesn't break the bank—interacting with the government is not a joyful process. Even in our mixed economy, people get caught up in the net of bureaucracy. Writing in *The Atlantic*, the political theorist Bernardo Zacka describes the popular conception of bureaucracy's rules ("innumerable, entangled, often impenetrable"), physical attributes ("fluorescent-lit, with rows of identical chairs and gray partition panels"), and people ("distant, unconcerned"). Scientific socialism—or at least, scientific public administration

—reduces citizenship to a series of cold transactions with the government.

Empty consumerism and soulless government are the traditional two explanations for our modern alienation. These days, there is a brand-new one: tech. The tech revolution promised us our heart's desires: everything you want to know at the click of a mouse; the ability to become famous to strangers; anything you want to buy, delivered to your door in days without you having to leave home.

But our happiness has not increased as a result—on the contrary. Mounting evidence shows that media and technology use predict deleterious psychological and physiological outcomes, especially among young people. This is particularly true in the case of social-media use. The psychologist Jean M. Twenge has shown that social media increases depression, especially among girls and young women.

We don't get happier as our society gets richer, because we chase the wrong things.

Consumerocracy, bureaucracy, and technocracy promise us greater satisfaction, but don't deliver. Consumer purchases promise to make us more attractive and entertained; the government promises protection from life's vicissitudes; social media promises to keep us connected; but none of these provide the love and purpose that bring deep and enduring satisfaction to life.

This is not an indictment of capitalism, government, or technology. They never satisfy—not because they are malevolent, but rather because they cannot. This poses a real dilemma, not just for society, but for each of us as individuals. But properly informed, we are far from defenseless. Here are three principles to help us keep the forces of modern life from ruining our happiness.

1. Don't buy that thing.

A group of my colleagues at Harvard show in their research that to get happier as we prosper, we need to change the choices we make with our financial resources. In an extensive review of the literature, they analyze the happiness benefits of at least four

uses of income: buying consumer items, buying time to pay for help (by, say, hiring people to do tasks you don't enjoy), buying accompanied experiences (for example, going on vacation with a loved one), and donating charitably or giving to friends and family. The evidence is clear that, although people tend toward the first, much greater happiness comes from the other three.

Marketers know that if they can grab hold of your brain chemistry—get you in a state of "hedonic consumption" in which your decisions are driven by pleasure more than utility—they can probably sell you something, whether you "need" it or not. But we can resist advertising's pull on our emotions. Next time you are presented with the claim that this or that product will make you happy, channel your inner monk, and say five times, out loud: "This will not bring me satisfaction." Then imagine yourself in six months looking back on this decision, pleased that you made it correctly.

2. Don't put your faith in princes (or politicians).

If I complain that government is soulless or that a politician is making me unhappy —which I personally have done many times—I am saying that I think government *should* have a soul or that politicians can and should bring me happiness. This is naive at best.

Some of history's greatest tyrants have promised that a government or political leader could bring joy to life. In 1949, the Soviet government promoted the slogan "Beloved Stalin is the people's happiness." Few leaders have delivered more misery and death than Stalin—but looking at this slogan makes me think twice about my own expectations of governments and politicians.

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Governments and politicians do affect our lives. But they cannot bring happiness. This point was forcefully driven home to me a couple of years ago by Mogens Lykketoft, the former speaker of the Danish Parliament and a leading social-democratic politician in Denmark. We were filming a documentary about the pursuit

of happiness, and in response to a question about Denmark's famously happy population, he said, "Government cannot bring happiness, but it can eliminate the sources of unhappiness."

3. Don't trade love for anything.

I have referenced in this column before a famous study that followed hundreds of men who graduated from Harvard from 1939 to 1944 throughout their lives, into their 90s. The researchers wanted to know who flourished, who didn't, and the decisions they had made that contributed to that well-being. The lead scholar on the study for many years was the Harvard psychiatrist George Vaillant, who summarized the results in his book *Triumphs of Experience*. Here is his summary, in its entirety: "Happiness is love. Full stop."

The current director of the study, the psychiatrist Robert Waldinger, filled in the details. He told me in a recent interview that the subjects who reported having the happiest lives were those with strong family ties, close friendships, and rich romantic lives. The subjects who were most depressed and lonely late in life—not to mention more likely to be suffering from dementia, alcoholism, or other health problems—were the ones who had neglected their close relationships.

What this means is that *anything* that substitutes for close human relationships in your life is a bad trade. The study I mentioned above about uses of money makes this point. But the point goes much deeper. You will sacrifice happiness if you crowd out relationships with work, drugs, politics, or social media.

The world encourages us to *love things* and *use people*. But that's backwards. Put this on your fridge and try to live by it: Love people; use things.

I realize that one could easily read this column as a jeremiad against modern life. That isn't my intention. (Indeed, I am a very public proponent of democratic capitalism with a modern welfare state.) Rather, I mean to appeal to all of us to remember that material prosperity has both benefits and costs. The costs come when we allow our hunger for the fruits of prosperity to blind us to the timeless sources of

true human happiness: faith, family, friendship, and work in which we earn our success and serve others. Regardless of how the world might change, those have always been, and will always be, the things that deliver the satisfaction we crave.