

BEING HAPPY

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The following is a transcription of a talk given by the Headmaster to the young men of Northridge Prep on January 22, 2008.

A few months back my wife and I rented the movie *The Pursuit of Happyness*. The story revolves around a poor salesman, down on his luck, who tries to gain admittance to the Dean Witter stockbroker training program. Through sheer perseverance he succeeds in getting an interview. A series of unfortunate events unfold and he is forced to show up for the meeting – one with high-powered executives decked out in Armani suits and gold cuff links – dressed himself in paint-stained gym shoes, pants, t-shirt, and a vintage 1980's *Members Only* jacket. Upon entering the room, he was immediately challenged by the interviewer with the question, "What would you say if a man walked in here with no shirt and I hired him? What would you say?" His simple response was, "I'd say he must have had on a pretty nice pair of pants."

The point is that everything in this guy's life told him to give up, to blame the world and to scowl. In spite of this, he remained upbeat and optimistic. He chose to be happy.

Several years ago I was befriended by a Spanish priest. Whenever we would get together his first question to me, in his thick accent, was always, "Rich, are you happy?" I always found that interesting. He never used the more colloquial "How's it going?" or "How are you?" He cut right to the core, right to the essence of the question with "Are you happy?"

I would like you to reflect for a moment on how you would answer that question. While doing so, keep these few considerations in mind.

First, happiness is a choice that you make. It's a state of mind, not a response to fleeting externals such as looming final exams, a huge history paper due tomorrow, a great birthday present, going to the prom with the prettiest girl at The Willows, or yes, the Cubs winning the World Series.

Second, the choices you make have inescapable consequences. For example, the amount of time spend studying for an exam will result in a good or bad grade, staying after practice until you make 50 three-pointers can have game-altering effects, wearing white nerdy socks with dress pants might earn you the label "Geek of the Week." Those who choose to be happy attract goodness, attract success, and attract people who are difference-makers.

I recently was speaking to a student in my office who was considering going to another school. Thinking about my friend, the Spanish priest, I asked him specifically, "Are you happy?" His response was a caveman shrug of the shoulders and an inaudible grunt. For that student it doesn't matter where he goes – whether it's a school filled with girls, a school without uniforms, or a school with easy classes. It's his attitude, his choice, *not* his environment that will determine how he answers that question the next time someone asks.

Abraham Lincoln once said, "Most folks are about as happy as they make up their minds to be." And Martha Washington recognized that "the greatest part of our happiness depends on our dispositions, not on our circumstances."

Finally, happiness is also a matter of perspective – realizing that at every stage of life, difficult circumstances will *always* be present. I laughed out loud the other night when my 8-year-old daughter said to my 4-year-old son, "You're lucky, Matthew, every weekend is a four-day weekend for you because you only have to go to school on Tuesdays and Thursdays." As if my daughter's world of recess, coloring, gym class, and single digit math problems were so complicated.

So, the logical question is: *If happiness really is a choice, why doesn't everyone choose to be happy?*

Some have misaligned expectations – misaligned by media portrayals of happiness. These movies and television shows are littered with shallow characters whose ultimate state of contentedness rests solely in the possession of material things – popular friends, cool clothes, expensive gadgets, slick cars, etc. Every challenge that these characters (or rather caricatures) face can easily be resolved in 30 minutes (actually 22 when you consider commercial breaks.) And you can be assured that these solutions typically are provided with no unpleasant consequences.

Some feel they are entitled to be happy. Recall the line from the Matchbox 20 song 3 A.M. “She thinks that happiness is a mat that sits on her doorway.” This is a classical example of entitlement. This is the attitude that says that happiness, like a doormat, is something that should simply be laid at our feet; we don't have to work for it or actively seek it out.

Even the Declaration of Independence, one of the greatest documents ever written, is misunderstood.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Pay close attention to that last phrase. We do have a right – not a right to be happy, but rather a right to *pursue* being happy. Even Benjamin Franklin himself said that “the Constitution only guarantees the American people the right to pursue happiness. You have to catch it yourself”.

The great thing about you all, the men of Northridge Prep, is that many of you have made the choice to be happy. You're pleasant to talk to, you have firm handshakes, and you look people in the eyes during the course of a conversation. All of this reflects a state of happiness about you. When I tell people that I'm the headmaster of an all-boys school, some stand back with a shocked look of “Why would anyone want to spend their entire day with teenagers?” I've gotten that response more than once in the last several months, and I have begun to reflect on why that is the prevailing attitude among adults regarding teenagers. Let me share with you a few observations:

First, one of the most erroneous common expressions that you hear on almost a daily basis is that you can't judge a book by its cover. Indeed you can. Men, the way you look, the way you comport yourself, the way you talk – all of this speaks volumes about your interior disposition and, ultimately, attracts others to you or repels them from you.

Going back to that student in my office who communicated via a series of Neanderthal grunts, one of the great American philosophers of our times, Charlie Brown, had this to say: “This is my ‘depressed’ stance. When you're depressed, it makes a lot of difference how you stand. The worst thing you can do is straighten up and hold your head high because then you'll start to feel better. If you're going to get any joy out of being depressed, you've got to stand like ‘this.’” Guys, standing like ‘this’ says something to those around you – it says “leave me alone.”

Why is there an emphasis on the way that we dress here at Northridge? Why is it important to have your tie straight and your buttons buttoned or to wear socks of the non-white, non-ankle variety? It's not because Mr. Burns gets paid by the number of detentions he gives. It's because the way that you look, dress, speak, and act are some of the first and most lasting things that people, your future professors, girlfriends, wives, and bosses, will judge you on. This is how the world works.

Do you know one of the most common answers among teenagers to the question, “How are you?” “Tired.” Gentlemen, being tired is a part of life. Anyone worth his salt is going to rise early, work

hard, and give continually to others until the sun sets. He'll go to bed and get up to start the routine all over. This is a demanding cycle, but it's also a most fulfilling lifestyle.

Men, this is what sets us apart from the rest. This prevailing attitude of happiness in turn fosters and fuels our spirit of camaraderie or *esprit de corps*.

Earlier in the semester I was talking with a member of the senior class who had a copy of Dante's *Inferno* that he was reading for Dr. Shepherd's literature class. In this work, the author makes reference to the "inner circle of hell that is reserved for those 'lost people' who are enveloped in themselves, trapped in their own lives – unaware either of God or other human beings." This is what teenagers are accused of – being self-centered and not recognizing that their actions do have a deep and lasting affect on others.

Now, I know you're thinking, "C'mon Mr. Meyer, what does my answer to the question, 'How are you?' or the way I dress or the body language that I use really have to do with anything? My happiness doesn't depend on those things." To borrow a line from Billy Joel, "You may be right, I may be crazy." But what I do know is that in my experience with people those who carry their heads high, who respond to "How are you?" with a sincere "Great!" and who take pride in their appearance, more times than not, are the happiest people that I know. And since we all have only one shot at life, I suggest we take our chances at attempting to personify those traits that are embodied in the most attractive, virtuous people around us.

So, as we begin the second semester with clean slates and opportunities to fulfill new resolutions and goals that we have all set for ourselves, I encourage and challenge you to make a simple choice – choose to be happy. You may lose a nail-biter on the court, you may not receive the grade you were expecting on a paper into which you put hours of effort, your parents may not "understand" you, your friends may come and go – but, ultimately, you are the only one who can determine your reaction to these events and whether or not they cause you to lose your bearings. It is up to you and only you now to ensure that your internal compass stays pointed toward the only destination that will guarantee you eternal happiness – heaven.

Franklin Roosevelt said that "Happiness lies not in the mere possession of money, it lies in the joy of achievement, in the thrill of creative effort." Seek to achieve, men! Stretch your horizons! Set goals for yourselves so lofty that everyone including your parents would tell you that they are impossible to realize! Mark Twain was fond of saying that "Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did do." So, as you struggle in the coming years to find the path down which God is calling you, mark the journey by leaving behind you a wake of opportunities that were seized, chances that were taken, and lives that were enriched because of the choice that you made to pursue happiness.