

Howard Cutler

The art of happiness begins with developing an understanding of what are the truest sources of happiness, and setting our priorities in life based on the cultivation of those sources.

Romans 12:1-8

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are as one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

“Living Simply”

The sixth step in the 1,500 year old Benedictine spiritual way to inner freedom is to be content with the lowest and most menial treatment (be content with less than the best). “The sixth step to inner freedom,” wrote Joan Chittister, “is to live simply.” This step to freedom enables you to handle with single-minded unity of soul and serenity of heart whatever life brings. It is the ability to be content with who we are, with what we possess, and how others view us. Desiring little, there is nothing that can really be taken from us. You can never be frustrated again, never insulted again. You will never need to be ashamed of who you are and where you’ve come from. Simplicity is openness to the beauty of the present, whatever its shape, whatever its lack. It enables us to be conscious of where we are and to stop mourning where we are not. There are few things in life that can add to the joy—and the meaning—of the basics of life; food, shelter, health, love and the ability to sustain oneself. Everything else after that is bonus. To face society unfeigned and to walk through the world with hands and hearts unrestrained frees a person for the basics of life. We can begin to let go and live” (The Way to Inner Freedom, p. 37).

The best tune that we have in our hymnal about living simply is that old shaker tune, “Tis a Gift to be Simple.”

Tis a gift to be simple, tis a gift to be free,
Tis a gift to come down, where we ought to be,
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,
Twill be in the valley of love and delight.
When true simplicity is gained,
To bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed,
To turn, turn will be our delight,
Till by turning, turning we come round right.

Nice tune. Sounds wonderful. But how can we, who are neither Shakers nor Benedictine Sisters begin to get our heads around what it means to live simply? What is our challenge? In her book, 'Radical Spirit,' Joan Chittister wrote: 'I read an article recently entitled "Ten Most Expensive Useless Things to Buy.

“Among them were a million-dollar box of chocolates, a \$68,500 cricket ball, a \$225,000 bottle of liquor, and a \$130,000 TV. “What else is needed for total happiness?” the article asked.’ It makes us wonder: Is ours a society in which ‘we have shifted away from a universal desire for “enough” to a deep-down spiritual ache for everything in sight. To a sense of deprivation in affluence? But more than that, to the very inflation of the sense of self, the ballooning of grand expectations, and delusions of grandeur?” (adapted p, 105)

Once when she was on vacation at a beautiful island, Joan “overheard a tense American woman on the telephone trying to leave because it was raining. She was very angry. Her voice kept getting higher and higher, more and more angry. “I paid plenty to come down here,” she said, “and this is a mess. You people told me that it was a beautiful sunny spot and all we’ve had for three days is rain, pouring down rain. I want out of here. Today. What do you mean there are no planes until Thursday! This is a disgrace. I will never use your agency again! And I have no intention of paying you!” (p. 106)

‘The fundamental question the sixth step of humility raises is not so much about what one has, but why one expects, needs, and demands it. It’s the difference between humility and narcissism, between simplicity of life and overbearing self-importance. It’s not about whether we own the chair. It’s about not assuming that I should never have to wait in line to talk to the bank manager like the rest of the population. It’s about learning never to expect public attention, free tickets, and special mention. It’s a matter of learning to go through life like Jesus who was laid in a manger, lived as a carpenter, and died on a cross” (p. 108-9). It’s about heeding the advice in Romans 12:2: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God--- what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

‘In our busy world that tears our days, our lives, our psyches into tangled shreds, living simply is a search for the essence of life rather than a grasping after things that falsely puff us up. It is

the cultivation of a mindset of ‘enoughness’ helps us become generous of heart, and open to the beauty of what is, whatever its shape, whatever its lack. A story is told about Ryokan, a Zen master, who lived at the foot of the mountain. One evening a thief visited the hut, only to discover that there was nothing there to steal. Ryokan returned and discovered him in the act. “You have come a long way to visit me,” he told the prowler, “and you should not return empty-handed. Please take my clothes as a gift.” The thief was bewildered. He took the clothes and slunk away. “Poor fellow,” Ryokan mused, “I wish I could give him the beautiful moon” (Songs of the Heart, p. 75-76).

In the Christian tradition, renewal of our minds is the happiness we receive by centering ourselves in the things of God. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught his followers about these things, so that they could come down where they ought to be. He said: “Happy are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Happy are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Happy are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Happy are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Happy are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Happy are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. Happy are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs in the kingdom of heaven. Happy are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matt. 5:1-12).

Prayer. Lord, our world has much complexity. Gift us, our God with simplicity. There are too many needless distractions. Free our minds from useless attractions. Keep us upright in relationship until we are one in fellowship. Gift our hearts with faith, freedom, and love and fit us for your courts above. Make us simple, make us wise, make us pure in your eyes. Amen.