

In pursuit of happiness

We have it all... but still we yearn for more



Thomas Froese
ChristianWeek Columnist

The Lord is my shepherd, the Psalmist wrote, and I lack no good thing. The waters are still and I'm not afraid. How can I be? My cup overflows with goodness and mercy. Even when nothing goes my way and hell itself threatens, I'm at peace with myself and the world. I am, for lack of better words, happy.

Of course, we're not happy. Not really. This is the very nature of it, this life, this nagging feeling that there has to be more. We're created in the depth of our cells to feel this uneasy yearning, because this world, after all, is not the end, not our real home as much as a fleeting shadowland.

But it's a different discontentment, a self-inflicted "dis-ease," that the psalmist speaks against so eloquently. I was reminded of it when recently

at a staff meeting of a Ugandan university newspaper, listening to young writers who, in the view of their Ugandan manager, needed encouragement to get on with it and improve their work habits.

"Every generation has its ways," is how he gently put it, alluding to the wrongness of wanting something for nothing. I asked the group some questions. And how the answers came.

"People used to have a mid-life crisis when they're 45. We have them a lot younger," said a 23-year-old. The car and the bank account and the house are what she feels anxious about. It's all just not coming fast enough. "I feel like I'm in crisis now."

You might imagine this sort of talk and head-nodding from places with more resources than a developing African nation. But entitlement issues don't have borders.

More strikingly, these young professionals then spoke candidly about how they're uninterested in actually working for their desires,

and no, they don't need to be told there's anything wrong with not pulling their weight. "I have an answer for everything," is how one young woman plainly put it.

It was a remarkable perspective on work-life balance, especially at a Christian university. All I could offer for advice was the parable of the talents, a reminder to any of us that we're very accountable to do what we can with whatever we're given.

Ignore it and find one problem or another, if not divine anger. The servant who buried his talents was not only publicly shamed, but his original gift was taken and given to another, one who already had more than enough and who, it's assumed, was content for his state of being, not his growing windfall.

As Richard Layard, of the London School of Economics puts it, "We have more food, more clothes, more cars, bigger houses, more central heating, more foreign holidays, a shorter working week, nice work, and above all, better health. Yet we aren't happier."

Sociologists and pollsters are taking a closer look at these things. The "happy poor" are one demographic. People in the slums of Calcutta are found to be almost as happy as a typical university student, and happier than some people on the streets of richer western cities, people who may not have social and emotional attachments, and people often left—like my Ugandan newspaper friends—comparing themselves to others with more.

Also, places that score highest in these new "happiest country" indexes, like the Scandinavian nations, score high for citizens trusting each other.

This is it: earthly trust. How much more when trusting the Divine? Trust and obey is how the song goes. For there's no other way. To be happy . . .

Thomas Froese writes about international issues. Visit him at www.thomasfroese.com, www.dailydad.net

Walk a mile in their shoes

When it comes to the stigma associated with mental illness, we have a lot to learn

Josi Peters
ChristianWeek Columnist

GOOD COUNSEL

Although I don't watch much television, I recently I watched three programs where characters used the words crazy, psycho, or whack job to refer to people with mental illness. The entertainment world reflects what society believes.

So I'm not surprised when clients, still stunned by a diagnosis of depression, bipolar disorder, or an anxiety disorder, tell me that anticipating the stigma they will encounter feels worse than the illness itself. And they know they will encounter it because, until their health problem began, they participated in it. We all do, often out of ignorance.

Stigma is negative judgment or attitudes towards individuals or groups of people based on a trait that sets them apart from others.

It's one of the greatest barriers preventing people from seeking help. We usually associate stigma with racial or ethnic bias and we're rightfully proud of our progress towards eradicating prejudices based on race, culture, religion, or skin colour.

But one important frontier remains, as challenging as any other civil rights issue. The stigma of mental illness also identifies a group of people as different, unacceptable or undesirable and it, too, leads to discrimination.

Mental illness itself doesn't discriminate, touching people of all ages and from all walks of life. It appears as depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, or a host of other disorders.

Twenty per cent of Canadians will personally experience a mental illness and approximately eight per cent of Canadian adults will have major depression at some point in their lifetime. This means mental illness will indirectly

affect all Canadians through family members, friends or colleagues. People living with mental illness are in our homes, our workplaces, our schools, and our churches. Many cope in silence, afraid to admit their distress because they dread the response. They expect to be misunderstood, denied adequate housing, passed over for jobs or promotions, and ostracized socially.

I'm reminded of the saying, "walk a mile in someone else's shoes," exhorting us not to judge people until we understand life as they have to live it. I don't wish mental illness on anyone, not even for a short time, but I long for a way for us to learn the empathy needed to respond helpfully to those who have it.

In my counselling practice, it's often people who are dealing with mental illness themselves that I'm educating, destigmatizing their symptoms or need for medication, promoting patience with

themselves first, and encouraging them to talk with family members and friends about what they're experiencing and to ask for the support they need.

Some of these clients become the first to eliminate demeaning words like psycho, crazy, lunatic, or wacko from their vocabularies. They recognize that messy or disorganized households, neglected yards, and apparent laziness or lack of ambition might be symptoms of mental illness.

They refused to judge because now they are walking that mile. What if all people who deal with mental illness were to speak up and tell us what it's really like and what they need from us? Would we hear it? Could we learn from them? Or do we have to walk that mile, too?

Josi Peters is a wife, mother, grandmother, and professional counsellor, working with clients in the Steinbach, Manitoba location of Recovery of Hope Counselling Services.