

Happiness, Religion, and the Rise of the Nones¹

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Here's a riddle: no one can say what it is, but everyone wants it; the best way to *get* it is to *give* it to someone else; you can *share* it even if you don't *have* it; and whether you hold it tight or turn it loose, it slips away equally quickly. What is it? It is, of course, *happiness*, the mysterious substance that you can find only when you are looking for something else.

This morning I would like to talk about the *science of happiness* and explore the relationship between happiness and *religion*. Is religion essential for happiness, is it merely helpful, does it actually decrease happiness, or does it have no effect at all? If religion matters, what aspect of it has the biggest effect on happiness? Is it belief in a supreme being, ritual practices, shared community, prayer, or something else? And finally, what do our answers to these questions mean for the fastest-growing religious cohort in America today: those who say that they have no religious affiliation, sometimes called the “Nones,” meaning “None of the above”?² What are their prospects for their future happiness or their inclination to eventually embrace religion?

I'd like to ground our discussion with some specific individuals, so let's start with a successful writer whom I'll call Leo. At the height of his career, Leo, who had been raised Christian but was not observant, began to be increasingly perplexed by questions about the purpose and direction of his life. He wrote:

I could give no reasonable meaning to any actions of my life. ... What will be the outcome of all my life? Why should I live? Why should I do anything? Is there in life any purpose which the inevitable death which awaits me does not undo and destroy?

He became obsessed with finding answers to these questions by studying philosophy and science but became convinced that neither had answers to his questions:

I sought like a man who is lost and seeks to save himself--and I found nothing. I became convinced, moreover, that all those who before me had sought for an answer in the sciences have also found nothing. And not only this, but that they have recognized that the very thing which was leading me to despair—the meaningless absurdity of life—is the only incontestable knowledge accessible to man.³

Clearly, being a None was not working out for Leo. He was the very model of existential misery.

Let's contrast Leo with Tina, who said:

The very idea that there is a God up there telling us what to do and playing with us like pawns is

1 (c) 2015 L. Karl Branting

2 “Nones” on the Rise, Pew Research Center: Religion and Public Life, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>

3 Leo Tolstoy, A Confession (1882), http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/A_Confession.

absolutely horrible. ... [What happens when we die?] Absolutely nothing!! I think we are gone. I really think that's it. [Do humans possess a soul or a spirit?] I've never really thought about that before. I don't think that people really need meaning. I think that you work out your own meaning ... And if you can't do that, you'd really better get yourself a better life.⁴

For Tina, being a None is just fine.

Leo is, of course, Leo Tolstoy the author of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*. Leo's existential crisis led him to develop his own idiosyncratic form of conservative Christianity, which he promoted through his later writings and which inspired Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and other non-violent political activists. Tina is a 39 year old chemical engineer from Stockholm interviewed by sociologist Phil Zuckerman as part of his book, "Society without God," about the inner lives of citizens of the least religious societies in the world, the Scandinavian countries. Zuckerman's book shows that the overwhelming majority of Scandinavians limit their church attendance to major life events, like weddings and funerals, and very few believe in God. But, like Tina, the majority seem to be untroubled by worries about the meaning of life or the finality of death.

So, Leo seems to show us that there can be no happiness without God, but Tina seems to show just the opposite, that belief in God is unnecessary for happiness. Which of the two is more typical? Is this really just a matter of individual differences, or is there some deeper explanation? Is the rising tide of Nones more likely to become anguished Leos, or serene Tina's? To investigate this question, let's take an excursion into the *science of happiness*.

Now, when we think of science, we usually think of disciplines that study quantities that we can measure precisely, like atomic weights, astronomical distances, nucleotides and decibels. If the science of happiness were about measuring, predicting, and controlling happiness, then one might expect there to be an instrument for measuring happiness, perhaps a *happymeter* or, if you prefer Greek, a *hedonometer*: put it under your tongue for 3 minutes and it tells you on a scale from 1 to 10 how happy you are. With such an instrument, your doctor could say, "You may think that you're miserable, but the hedonometer says that you have never felt better. Perform 2 gratitude exercises and call me in the morning."

In reality, happiness is subjective, and there is no way to directly measure *any* subjective experience, so researchers have to rely on subjects' self-reporting of happiness rather than hedonometers. Of course, this means that there is no way to calibrate the happiness scale—is your 7 out of 10 the same as my 7 out of 10?—but by averaging across many individuals one can hope that these individual differences average out.

One of the first discoveries of the science of happiness was that we are amazingly bad at both *remembering* and *predicting* how happy or unhappy a given choice or event will make us feel. For example, in an experiment performed around the time of the 2001 presidential election, Gore and Bush voters were asked on November 8 to predict how happy or unhappy they would be if the too-close-to-call election was decided for or against their favored candidate. They were asked their actual feelings on December 14, the day after Gore conceded, then four months later asked how they had felt on the day of the concession. Both the predictions and the recollections *drastically* overestimated the actual change in happiness that the voters experienced at the time of the concession. Gore voters predicted that they would be devastated, and Bush voters predicted that they would be elated, by a Bush victory,

4 Phil Zuckerman, *Society without God: What the least religious nations can tell us about contentment*, NYU Press 2008.

and that is what both recalled 4 months later, but on the day it happened both experienced only moderate disappointment and happiness, respectively.⁵ This inability to accurately recall past happiness or predict how happy we will be in a given future state has been the cause of countless poor career choices, disappointing purchases, and unhappy marriages.

A second discovery is that our overall, long-term happiness seems to be the product of three separate factors: our so-called *happiness set point*, our *life circumstances*, and our *choices and actions*. The happiness set point theory comes from many studies showing that both terrible tragedies like those described in the earlier reading, and tremendous windfalls, like winning the lottery, cause only a temporary change in happiness. Researchers found that, remarkably, the level of happiness in people in both of these circumstances gradually returns to their prior level of happiness, and that this prior level of happiness seems to be a product of each person's genetic makeup. The second factor, *life circumstances*, consists of such matters as looks, whether you are born into a happy or unhappy family, and whether you live in a wealthy industrial country or a poor emerging nation. Finally, our *choices and actions* consist of the voluntary activities that are under our own control.

Some psychologists have estimated the relative contribution of these 3 components to be about 50% set point, 10% life circumstances, and 40% choices and actions, but these estimates should be taken with a grain of salt. We aren't talking atomic weights or decibels here. But the key lesson, in my view, isn't the exact amounts that each of these 3 factors contribute to our happiness, but rather the mere fact that *a very significant portion of our happiness is under our own control*.

Well, if much of our happiness is under our own control, what can we do to maximize our happiness? Research has identified a few ways, of which 5 seem to be particularly important.

First, happiness is increased by *practicing gratitude*, that is, taking the time to be thankful for the positive things in our lives and developing “a ... life orientation towards noticing and appreciating the positive in the world.”⁶

Now, some of you may be thinking of the term “Pollyanna,” which is

sometimes used pejoratively, [to mean] someone whose optimism is excessive to the point of naïveté ... [as in] in the introduction of a 1930 ... George Gershwin song ...: “I never want to hear from any cheerful Pollyannas/who tell me fate supplies a mate/that's all bananas.”⁷

But extensive research has shown that the relationship between gratitude and happiness and other forms of well-being is not mere folklore. Gratitude increases warmth, altruism, and a host of other positive psychological traits and decreases negative beliefs associated with depression anxiety, PTSD, and drug dependence. Practices that have been shown to be effective in increasing gratitude include daily listing of things for which to be grateful, grateful contemplation, and behavioral expressions of gratitude.

The flip side of practicing gratitude is avoiding negative thoughts.

The combination of rumination and negative mood is toxic. Research shows that people who ruminate while sad or distraught are likely to feel besieged, powerless, self-critical, pessimistic,

5 Daniel Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness*, Alfred Knopf (2006), pp.209-210.

6 Alex Wood, Jeffrey Froh, and Adam Geraghty, *Gratitude and well-being*, a review and theoretical integration, *Clinical Psychology Review* (2010).

7 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pollyanna>

and generally negatively biased.⁸

So, never think of yourself as a victim, because to embrace victimhood is to practice anti-gratitude. Instead, be a Pollyanna, and your life will be the better for it.

To introduce a second factor that contributes to happiness, I'd like to pose the following question: How many of you believe that some people are basically just lucky and others are basically just unlucky? O.K., how many of you think that luck is just chance, so there is no such thing as lucky and unlucky people? Well, some years back, a psychologist aptly named Richard Wiseman decided to answer to this question experimentally. Wiseman ran ads in newspapers and magazines asking for people who considered themselves particularly lucky or unlucky. Eventually, he had over 700 participants in his study, ranging in age from 18 to 84.⁹

The first thing Wiseman did was to test whether the outcome of random events was different for lucky and unlucky people by having each volunteer buy a lottery ticket. Lucky people were more confident that they would win, but the actual winnings were, unsurprisingly, identical for the two groups. Wiseman then subjected his volunteers to a variety of clever psychological experiments to try to see if there were behavioral or psychological differences between the two groups. In a typical experiment, Wiseman:

gave both lucky and unlucky people a newspaper, and asked them to [count] how many photographs were inside. On average the unlucky people took about two minutes to count the photographs whereas the lucky people took just seconds. Why? Because the second page of the newspaper contained the message “Stop counting - There are 43 photographs in this newspaper.” This message took up half of the page and was written in type that was over two inches high. It was staring everyone straight in the face, but the unlucky people tended to miss it and the lucky people tended to spot it.

Further testing confirmed that lucky people differ from unlucky people in that they have much greater *openness* to new experiences. When an opportunity comes along, lucky people are better able to take advantage of it because they are more likely to notice it and more willing to take the initiative to seize it. The openness of lucky people often takes the form *positive expectations* that can be self-fulfilling; after all, if you expect something good to happen, you look for it, whereas if you expect nothing, you don't bother to look. Moreover, lucky people tend to build and maintain networks of varied social connections that can create new and unexpected opportunities. Some of Wiseman's lucky participants went to surprising lengths to introduce variety into their lives, creating opportunities to meet people that they would never encounter in their normal routine.

So, factor two is *openness* to positive experiences. Build a network of luck, dare to explore new connections and experiences, look for opportunities, and seize them when they arrive. Opportunity may be staring you in the face in a 48 point font.

To introduce the third factor, *purpose*, I'd like each of you to think about your answer to this question, “Does everything happen for a reason, or do things happen just by chance?” While you are thinking about your answer, let me tell you a little story:

⁸ Sonja Lyubomirsky, *The How of Happiness: A scientific approach to getting the life you want*. New York: Penguin Press, (2008).

⁹ Richard Wiseman, *The Luck Factor*, Skeptical Inquirer May/June 2003; Richard Wiseman, *The Luck Factor*, Arrow Books (2003); Michael Shermer, *As luck would have it*, Scientific American, April 2006.

On April 15, 2013, James Costello was cheering on a friend near the finish line at the Boston Marathon when the bombs exploded, severely burning his arms and legs and sending shrapnel into his flesh. During the months of surgery and rehabilitation that followed, Mr. Costello developed a relationship with one of his nurses, Krista D'Agostino, and they soon became engaged. Mr. Costello posted a picture of the ring on Facebook. "I now realize why I was involved in the tragedy," he wrote. "It was to meet my best friend, and the love of my life."¹⁰

Of course, it would be absurd to claim that the Boston Marathon bombings occurred just so that James Costello could find his soul mate—certainly our friend Tina the Scandinavian skeptic would be very upset at this idea—but the belief that everything happens for a reason is remarkably common even among self-professed atheists. This seems to be a natural consequence of our drive to make sense of the events of life in psychological terms of beliefs, desires, and goals. Cognitive psychologists have shown that "the more likely people are to think about other people's purposes and intentions, the more likely they are to also infer purpose and intention in human life itself."¹¹ People with paranoia and people who are very highly empathetic see the *most* purpose in the world.

But even if we agree with Tina that it's absurd to believe that everything is happens by fate or according to God's plan, it is nevertheless vital to have a sense that there is a narrative to our lives, a sensible progression, and not just one damn thing after another. We may not be able to make sense of bad experiences at the time they happen, but it's important to view them, at least in retrospect, as being for the best. In this view, purpose is less a belief in supernatural agency than a creative process of making sense of one's life as a whole, with each episode standing in a meaningful relationship to the others.

Factor four is *flow*, the state of being "fully engaged, immersed, and absorbed in an activity." When we experience flow, time may seem to stand still, and emotions aren't just contained and channeled, but positive, energized, and aligned with the task at hand. The hallmark of flow is a feeling of spontaneous joy, even rapture, while performing a task, although flow is also often described as a deep focus on nothing but the activity – not even oneself or one's emotions. Flow happens for different people in different ways: through creative activities, physical activities, or being absorbed in whatever activity we are best at. When I was a geeky adolescent, I used to experience flow playing chess in tournaments. When I became a better-adjusted young man, I experienced flow while rock-climbing and still later from writing computer code and composing music. But flow is also what we experience when we are all singing the same moving song, and we are all suddenly synchronized emotionally, with same lump in our throats and the same sense of unity and joy. Regardless of how one achieves it, there is a strong correlation between flow experiences and happiness.

An even more basic requirement for happiness is *social connection*, having relationships with others. The happiest people report having strong social ties with close family and friends and generally spend less time alone and more time socializing than unhappy people. People with close relationships cope better with stresses such as bereavement, job loss, and illness.¹² Volunteer activities that contribute to the welfare of others foster a sense of purpose and connection. It is very hard to be unhappy yourself when you are making someone else happy or even just busy working with someone else on a shared task. Studies have shown that spending money on oneself does not lead to happiness, but spending on others or giving it away does. In this sense, it really is more blessed to give than to receive. We are

¹⁰ Konika Banerjee and Paul Bloom, *Does everything happen for a reason?*, The New York Times, October 19, 2014.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² *Gratitude and well-being*, *supra*.

social creatures, and a sense of meaningful relationship to a family, community, or other social group is essential for happiness.

In summary, psychological research reveals that happiness is enhanced by *gratitude*, *openness*, *purpose*, *flow*, and *connection*. Equipped with this knowledge, we are ready to revisit Leo, Tina, and the role of religion in happiness.

My fantasy would be for Leo the anguished Russian novelist and Tina the serene Scandinavian atheist to battle one another in a reality TV show consisting of an escalating series of happiness-related contests, with the winner getting to have the last word on whether happiness requires religion. Alas, neither of the contestants is with us this morning, so we must try a different tack.

Well, hasn't anyone ever tried *surveying* people to correlate religiosity with happiness? Well, of course, there have been many such surveys! What do such surveys show? Before I reveal the answer, let's have a show of hands. How many think that religion makes you happier, how many think that it does not, and how many think that this must be a trick question or I would not have asked it? You can all give yourselves gold stars because all 3 of these answers are correct. How can that be?

If we look just at the United States, then there is abundant evidence that religious people are happier and emotionally better off than those who are not. Why this is the case is an area of active research. One theory is that religious belief helps reduce existential anxieties about uncertainty, death, and meaninglessness. There is some evidence that religious beliefs can reduce these anxieties, but other evidence shows that the association between religion and happiness comes primarily from:

[R]eligious practice (e.g., religious attendance or prayer), not religious affiliation (i.e., the specific doctrines and beliefs of any particular faith). Moreover, evidence suggests that *social* religious practices are more important than *individual* practices or beliefs: Social practices such as attendance at communal worship services have been shown to be better predictors for attitudes and behaviors than individual practices such as prayer. ... when social relationships are controlled for, religiosity shows no unique prediction of well being.¹³

So, in the United States, the reason that religious people are typically happier than non-religious people may be because many religions involve “participation in a tightly bound community” that satisfies our deep need for social connection; promote gratitude practices and openness to “blessings”; involve communal songs, chants, prayers, and rituals that promote flow-like states; provide explicit narratives about the purpose of our lives; in short, because religions promote connection, gratitude, openness, flow, and purpose, exactly the factors that contribute to happiness.

When one looks outside the US, however, one finds something that seems very different. The happiest places in the world are the *least* religious, like Scandinavia, the Netherlands, and other northern European countries, while the most miserable places on earth, including all of the least-developed countries, are highly religious. In fact, the US is very much the exception in being highly religious while at the same time happy and prosperous. How can we explain that religion is positively associated with happiness among individuals in the US, but on average negatively associated with happiness among the nations of the world?

¹³ Jesse Graham and Jonathan Haidt, *Beyond Beliefs: Religions Bind Individuals Into Moral Communities*, Personality and Social Psychology Review 2010 14:140.

Maybe we can call on Leo and Tina to help answer this question. Tina is an atheist, but she lives in a wealthy, egalitarian society with a high level of social capital, that is, where cooperation between strangers can be taken for granted and social institutions run smoothly. Moreover, Scandinavians may be atheists, but they aren't exactly non-religious; after all, they have a shared religious traditions and shared practices for observing important life events. Under these circumstances, Tina's opportunities for gratitude, openness, flow, purpose, and connection may be equally high regardless of whether she believes in God or is an atheist.

Leo Tolstoy, on the other hand, lived in an unjust Czarist society, and far from being grateful, he was painfully aware of the terrible injustice of wealthy landowners like himself living from the toil of degraded their serfs—indeed, he was guilt-ridden because as a young man he had an illegitimate child by one of his serfs. He was a solitary thinker who spent many years pondering the big questions of purpose and order in the world and had a famously, *seismically* conflict-ridden relationship with his wife. Under these circumstance, an unreligious Leo might well have difficulty achieving gratitude, openness, flow, purpose, and connection.

This brings us full circle back to the future of the Nones. Based on what we have discussed this morning, does it seem likely that the rising cohort of Nones will achieve happiness while staying unaffiliated? One possibility is that our society will become more egalitarian, just, and socially cohesive—in short, more Scandinavian—over time, and the Nones will therefore achieve the serenity that we saw in Tina. Unfortunately, the reality is that our society is becoming *less* egalitarian and *less* socially cohesive, with civic and social engagement rapidly declining, most precipitously among the poorer half of the country.¹⁴ So, I don't see a trend toward the kind of social cohesion that can compensate for lack of religious affiliation. A second possibility is that the Nones will gradually re-affiliate with mainstream religions, perhaps as they grow older and start looking for social institutions to help shape their children's development. However, once again, there is not the least indication that this is starting to happen. Instead, overall affiliation with mainstream religions is continuing its long decline.

A third possibility is that the ranks of the Nones will grow in tandem with a decline in other forms of social cohesion. The absence of a supportive community or other institutions that promote the factors that we have seen as associated with happiness may make life harder for the Nones, with fewer social institutions to help them cope with crises and challenges and fewer opportunity to promote and share happy experiences. A final possibility is that the Nones will create *new* institutions, or rediscover old ones, that satisfy the need for connection and the other factors that we have seen are associated with happiness. Which one of these scenarios, or which combination, will eventually come to pass remains to be seen.

However, I'd like to point out that the growth of Unitarian Universalism is fueled in substantial part by the desire of Nones to find an acceptable religious affiliation. Many UU's have spent time, sometimes many years, as Nones, having renounced, or drifted away from, or never had an earlier religious affiliation. Our UU community illustrates very well how a religion founded on a commitment to shared values, rather than shared theology, can provide community and purpose, promote openness and gratitude, and engage its members in flow-inducing communal practices—in short, promote collective welfare and individual happiness. My lifetime identification as a UU is based on just these many benefits of being a part of a religious community that is based on my values and that respects my religious humanism.

14 Robert Putnam, *Our Kids*, New York:Simon & Schuster 2105

And so I close with the hope that Unitarian Universality will always be a beacon to those Nones who are far from the shore and in desperate need of a safe haven. And may our growing understanding of the psychology of happiness help us better understand the many ways that our UU community promotes our happiness. So be it.