



A Unicorn Called Happiness

By Carolyn Mahboubi

In both my personal and professional lives, I regularly come across the realization that every single one of us is on an endless search for happiness. We believe achieving the next goal allows us to at last experience the joy, relief and peace of mind we've been longing for. We imagine happiness as a destination where we can finally "settle down" and enjoy life. This pursuit is deemed worthy by society and seems to be hardwired in us.

If this premise is true, why do we so often find ourselves having achieved the goals, gained the things and still left wanting?

It's not because we are spoiled, hopelessly ungrateful beings. It's because we are searching for the wrong thing.

My clients fall in two categories – those who have already achieved an extraordinary level of success, and those who are on their way to doing so. Regardless of their placement on the external success spectrum, it's surprising that neither group is experiencing more happiness than the other. Keep in mind that they all have a base level of financial security, as well as mental, emotional and physical health. They are not going hungry, they have shelter, and live in a country that allows them to feel safe. With that baseline secured, they are all longing for more happiness, and at least before starting our work together, they are experiencing a measure of despair because they feel they are on a treadmill rather than a path.

The life changing insight I had in my forties, having achieved material success in the preceding years, along with my deep coaching work with so many people, has led me to the transformational shift that I'm inviting you to consider making in your own life.

What we are actually seeking is not happiness, but rather, aliveness. And it's not a place we arrive and settle into, but a life-long pilgrimage on a path we must build as we walk it. Happiness is not a static state; a won and done. Happiness is a result of making continuous choices and committing to those actions, relationships and conversations that light us up. Not every minute of every day, but often and regularly.

When looking up the definition of aliveness, the answer that shows up most often is, "the property of being animated; having animal life as distinguished from plant life." How interesting that plants and animals are equally alive, but only animals are considered to experience aliveness.

We are animals. When we aim for happiness, we are aiming for a fixed state – one where, like plants, we stay in one place, grow old and die. No wonder even a life full of achievements can feel stagnant so quickly and prompt us to wonder, often with a measure of shame, "Is this all there is?"

When we aim for happily ever after, we set a goal that presumes the existence of a place filled with the right people, achievements, and things that will keep us shielded from life's negative circumstances and emotions. This is a goal set for us by Disney characters when we were too young to question its premise. If your life feels like an endless hustle to fulfill the Disney promise, nothing is wrong with you. The promise is and always has been bullshit.

Life for all of us is a beautiful, painful, and messy playground. Happiness is an emotion, and like all feelings, it comes and goes. But we can invite this feeling into our lives more often and regularly when we arrange to experience aliveness, vitality and wholeheartedness, even as we navigate difficult life circumstances.

I love plants, flowers and trees as much as the next person, but I want to be an animal. I want to feel alive. I want to move, jump, catch, create, win, lose, feel, roar, hurt, and stay alive for as long as I can. To feel alive is to engage with life and all that it offers. This level of vitality requires us to cultivate the practice of radical acceptance as well as the emotional agility to navigate the whole of life's offerings; the good, bad, ugly, joyful, hurtful, and yes, brutal experiences and people.

Aliveness is not a destination, it's a path that is paved by purpose. Alive is how we feel when we are living a life that is creative on purpose. A life that is surely not easy but has us engaging with work, people, and challenges that light us up because they are meaningful, even if only to us.

To begin the journey of uncovering your purpose – at this season in your life, because our purpose changes as we do – a good place to start is by identifying the work, hobbies and people that offer you contrast and elicit the entire spectrum of emotions. If something or someone feels good all the time, it's likely not a candidate for identifying purpose and aliveness in your life. If engaging with that person, work or activity requires you to be creative rather than comfortable, then you are likely on the right track. Robert Greene states this beautifully in his book, *Mastery*, “Engaged in the creative process we feel more alive than ever, because we are making something and not merely consuming, masters of the small reality we create.”

I encourage you to take some time and really explore the question, “What work, relationship or activity makes me feel alive?”

Don't be discouraged if it takes a while for any thoughts or answers to surface. Most of us have filled our life with so much that is deadening for us.

Begin writing your answers, even if they feel impossible to act on at this time in your life. Acknowledge and celebrate yourself for having taken the most difficult step; the courage to ask the right question.

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