

# **ARE THERE UNIVERSAL INGREDIENTS FOR HUMAN HAPPINESS/ WELL-BEING?**

## **1. Introduction**

**During the 17 years preceding my retirement in 1993 my research and publications focused on a philosophical question that goes back to Plato and Aristotle: “Which inherent tendencies or abilities within human beings bring happiness or well-being if they are fulfilled?”**

**There are actually two distinguishable questions, and I’ve been focusing on them since 1993:**

**(1) Which fulfilled tendencies/abilities are necessary for happiness or well-being when many human abilities are replaced by disabilities?**

**(2) Which fulfilled tendencies/abilities would bring human flourishing, where this means maximal happiness or well-being?**

**The main contexts in which I’ve found some answers to the first question have been a hospital and a seniors’ residence. As a volunteer on the 7<sup>th</sup> floor of Bridgepoint Hospital I learned some basic life-skills from patients suffering gradual deterioration of their physical abilities because they have Muscular Sclerosis. I’ve learned similar life-skills from radically-aging fellow residents where I currently live. In neither context have I intended to be doing research. As a hospital volunteer my intention was to be of service and as a seniors’ resident my intention is to participate in the community. My tentative conclusions concerning how to be happy though chronically diseased or disabled have come as a “fringe-benefit”. I’ve found myself to be learning from the real “experts”: not the professionals but some of the patients and the seniors.**

The main context in which I've explored the second question, concerning human flourishing, was teaching about 17 year-long seminars for first-year Arts&Science students between 1993 and 2008. The course, my version of HUM199Y, was entitled "Human Nature in Great Literature". In each seminar about 22 students engaged in dialogue arising from short works by Tolstoy, Camus, Dostoevsky, Ibsen, Alice Munro, D. H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot, Arthur Miller and others. Each author presents a different perspective concerning what crucially promotes or undermines human happiness/well-being. By the end of the course we had considered many possible ingredients in human flourishing. Some of these ingredients were perhaps also necessary for minimal happiness/well-being.

## 2. When disabilities replace abilities, how can people be happy?

I'll discuss the seminar later, but first I'll report concerning what I've learned as a hospital volunteer and in a senior's residence. I vividly remember one patient who had been an active professional into her forties. Joan, as I'll call her, was deteriorating week by week, no longer even able to feed herself. I remember her saying to me, "Don, I'm learning how to give and receive love; there's not much else I can do!"

Centrally, she was learning how to love herself and it was clear what to her what she meant by this. Such love involved both compassion and appreciation. She had developed compassion towards her own malfunctioning body, befriending the ailing parts and patiently accepting the new limitations they imposed on her. And loving herself also involved appreciating for her own hidden possibilities. She was cultivating her own inner resources for courage, creativity and joyful, hopeful living. Sometimes the flames of life within her were merely flickering, but she knew how to fan them again into a blazing fire.

**Her love for herself enabled her to receive compassion and appreciation from others and to love them with a similar compassion and appreciation.**

**Joan was more reflective and articulate than many patients and seniors who manifest similar qualities, so I have described her at length. But I also remember another patient, whom I'll call "John". He was almost totally immobilized and he could not speak. Nevertheless he seemed happy. I discovered, through trusting my intuitions, that he was sending loving energies to the unusually miserable man in the bed beside him.**

**Only a few of the MS patients were elderly, but as things turned out, learning some basic life-skills from them was an excellent preparation for me when, early in 2009, I had to cope with the old-age-type limitations that suddenly took over my life. In the senior's residence where I now live there are many in their nineties who have developed a comparable practical wisdom, including how to give and receive love. Another element in this elderly "know-how" is a spontaneous playfulness that is often present in children, in mentally retarded or minimally-educated adults and in some elders who are developing dementia. Many "baby-boomers" in our society have neglected both love and playfulness, devoting themselves exclusively to seriously-ambitious pursuits. When such pursuits are no longer possible, they lack some necessary life-skills.**

**One expression of playfulness is humour, finding something funny in whatever potentially-upsetting is going on, whether it be from others or in myself. Someone else may be ridiculously rude to me, or I may be surprised by my new klutziness. Rather than angrily rejecting the other person or myself, I'm learning how to respond in a light-hearted, humorous way. Humour is often verbal, but sometimes it is expressed non-verbally, simply by laughing in a kindly way. As a basic life-skill, humour essentially involves not taking too seriously one's self-image and one's sense**

**of identity while nevertheless being kindly and affectionate towards oneself.**

**So humour points towards a more fundamental ability that is necessary to retain some happiness/well-being if one is suffering from a chronic, complex disease/disability or if one is radically aging: the ability to let go of my attachments to people and projects and activities, no longer having to cling to them in order to retain my sense of personal identity and hence my happiness/well-being. This ability to let go of attachments is commended in many diverse spiritual paths and wisdom-teachings. It is not only a preparation for adversity and for dying but also as way to appreciate each present moment in life, instead of being distracted by preoccupations with past and future.**

**In the seminar, to which I will soon turn, one student quoted Socrates' saying, "An unexamined life is not worth living" as a way of expressing his enthusiasm for what the course meant to him. Another student challenged him, "Are you dismissing, as not worth living, the lives of mentally-challenged adults?" A third student reported meeting some of them and finding they were able to give and receive love more spontaneously than most people. This exchange in the seminar raises an important issue for many seniors who fear something similar: an onset of dementia. How essential is an actively-functioning mind for human happiness/well-being? My one observation thus far is that some seniors suffering from dementia do retain happiness in the sense of the Greek word for happiness, which literally means "having a good spirit within". But they depend greatly on initiatives from others who connect with them energetically, especially through music.**

### **3. Seminar dialogue concerning human flourishing**

**Now I will report my findings from the undergraduate seminars on “Human Nature in Great Literature”, especially in relation to the second question: “Which fulfilled tendencies/abilities would bring human flourishing, where this means maximal happiness/well-being?”**

**Prior to the first class I had chosen the texts and drafted the guide-questions to which students would prepare written responses. Each seminar would begin with one student reading their answer. My role was to preside over the ensuing discussion, occasionally clarifying differences in viewpoint between students or posing a new question. The differences in viewpoint among the students were startling and challenging to many of them. Not only did each student have a unique personal history. Their societal backgrounds, from so many cultures and continents, led to many puzzlements and disagreements.**

**Often a student would be surprised when a fellow-student whom he or she had come to respect expressed a conviction that contradicted what the first student had previously regarded as obviously true. Sometimes the first student would then begin to reconsider the unquestioned assumption, and this might even lead to some revision. The main purpose of the dialogue, however, was not to move towards some consensus concerning what is true for all human beings, but rather to expand each student’s understanding of the wide range of human possibilities and to ponder in this widened context their own convictions concerning what is important and real in their own life. The dialogue did stimulate some revisions in viewpoint, however, and sometimes this enabled us to move towards a consensus concerning the two questions I’ve posed in this essay:**

**What is a necessary ingredient in human happiness/well-being?**

**What might be included in human flourishing?**

**Both questions presuppose that even though human beings differ greatly in what for them counts as happiness/well-being, some universal truths applying to all human beings can be established. This presupposition is challenged by many.**

**Suppose, for example, that the ability to give and receive love is proposed as a necessary ingredient in human happiness/well-being. Someone may protest, “I know that I’m happy, yet I live strictly on my own. I’m happy doing my own thing and that doesn’t involve love. Are you telling me I’m not happy?” Indeed, a more general objection arises: If all human beings were polled concerning what counts for them as happiness/well-being this would provide, at best, only some statistically-interesting results. If there is to be some movement towards a human consensus concerning what is necessary for happiness/well-being and concerning what might be included in full human flourishing some people will have to concede that they have been mistaken. And this shift in conviction needs to arise from a shift in their own reflections and their own experience. Such a shift is facilitated by the process of dialogue as such. It also is facilitated by my choice of texts for the seminar. All of them raised the possibility that we may deceive ourselves concerning what is real and important in our lives.**

**Consider, for example, Tolstoy’s classic story, “The Death of Ivan Ilych”. The protagonist refuses to acknowledge that he is dying. Only when he does so is he able to realize the importance and the reality of love. On his death bed he begins to experience love, receiving it and giving it. He sees that his previous sense that he was genuinely happy playing bridge and being a court-judge had been a self-deception.**

**As the students read other stories and plays, the protagonists proposed various other kinds of possible self-deception, various ways that I can blind oneself concerning the importance and the reality of something that, later on, I let myself experience. Here are six examples of matters concerning which I may deceive myself:**

- (1) my own existential freedom,**
- (2) my own spiritual dimension,**
- (3) unconscious motivations originating in childhood,**
- (4) sexual life-energies that pervade nature and my body,**
- (5) roles that I play-act in society, hiding who I truly am from others and from myself,**
- (6) oppressive ideological constraints that society imposes, for example, ideas concerning gender or racial inequality.**

**Typically someone who uncovers self-deception in any one of these areas undergoes a process of personal transformation. This process involves experiences of a dimension of human nature that previously was repressed or radically obscured. Each self-deception, until uncovered, undermines human happiness/well-being, but when it is uncovered by the individual, it can promote human happiness/well-being.**

**Human flourishing would be maximized in an individual if all six were thoroughly uncovered and integrated, but this is an unrealistic goal. People vary greatly in the extent to which their daily living includes this or that dimension of human nature. One person may be deeply spiritual but quite oblivious concerning structures of domination in society. Another may succeed amazingly in endeavours generally recognized by society such as Olympic competition or innovations in information technology but may destroy love in their family. Nobody can be completely fulfilled as a human being. Such a completeness can be approximated only by human beings in community, celebrating one another's flourishing, whatever it is. But such a celebration is**

very constricted if you or I have no appreciation at all of human dimensions that are lived deeply by others. So some limited exposure to a variety of hidden dimensions relevant to human flourishing is important.

#### **4. Open dialogue: its significance and its opponents.**

It seems to me that dialogue open to all the dimensions of human nature is the most promising interpersonal way for human beings to move towards a necessary minimal consensus concerning what we value in common as human beings and towards a celebration of the immense riches involved in being human. My own exploration in the seminars was a miniscule contribution towards a world-wide process that, I hope, is beginning in this century.

There are three major obstacles in the way of such an open, dialogue. Each involves an addiction to a dogma.

(1) The first is traditional organized religion, where sometimes an appeal to the allegedly-divine authority of the institution and/or its scriptures allegedly settles all questions concerning human happiness or well-being; or the appeal rejects them from any consideration, for only “God’s will” matters.

(2) The second is scientific positivism, defined as the assumption that scientific method is the only way to knowledge of reality. This is a dogma because it insists that only impersonal methods of testing are valid, hence the results of any approach that requires a personal transformation are excluded from consideration.

I am not rejecting data concerning human beings that can be established by technical procedures replicable by anyone trained to repeat the procedure. Such scientific data is obviously very important. What I object to is the exclusion of so many

**dimensions of human nature, experienced by many human beings, if only impersonal testing is allowed. For example, the causal relevance of belief in spiritual reality to healing can be investigated in scientific, impersonal ways but an ongoing experience of spiritual reality typically requires personal transformation.**

**(3) The third dogma is post-modernism, where this insists that any so-called “direct experience” of reality is impossible, since all human awareness is shaped by the various perspectival or interpretive frameworks that our minds bring to it. Dialogue between communities or individuals committed to conflicting frameworks is allegedly pointless, for the frameworks are arbitrary alternatives between which one must simply choose. Also, any claims concerning what is true for all human beings have no independent foundation (except, of course, the claims made by post-modernism concerning all human awareness!)**

### **Concluding Questions for Discussion:**

**By way of conclusion I will remind you of three proposals concerning which I welcome your input, in the time that remains:**

**(1) Concerning what abilities are crucial if and when many seemingly-crucial abilities have become disabilities, I proposed the ability to give and receive love, in particular the ability to bring both compassion and appreciation to oneself.**

**I also proposed playfulness and humour and, at a deeper level, no longer clinging to people and projects and activities that had seemed necessary for retaining one’s sense of personal identity.**

**(2) Concerning what abilities are important for human flourishing in the sense of maximal well-being/happiness I proposed that human nature involves more dimensions than most people acknowledge, dimensions that are real and important**

**than. We need to uncover various kinds of self-deception through various processes of personal transformation.**

**(3) Respectful, vigorous dialogue is not only the best way to understand one another but also the best way to move towards a consensus concerning universal requirements for minimal human well-being/ happiness.**