

Happyish: The Upside of Negative Emotions
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Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker

Poor Prince George of Cambridge was grumpy, his adorable mug crinkled into a sad pout. The toddler, bedecked in red shorts and a pin tuck shirt, was being asked to wave to hordes of cackling strangers, walk alongside his father dutifully, and smile through it all. But he was grumpy, not poised, ended up being carried, and the press couldn't get enough of it. Comments from the trolls poured in – what does he have to be grumpy about? He's a prince, for Criminy sake?

Did I mention already that he was 2 at the time? And have you noticed that he is a human being, not a commemorative doll? Even so, we are gob smacked that he might exhibit a negative emotion. Whatever could be wrong? We want happy Prince George. Give us the happy boy!

And then, perhaps you are familiar with the Internet sensation known as Grumpy Cat? Yes, this makes more sense than Grumpy Dog, for sure. As you may know, grumpy cat is a real live cat that genuinely looks grumpy all the time. It's quite amusing. His meme pops up everywhere and we don't seem to mind grumpy cat as much as we recoil from our grumpy Little Prince.

George's emotional spectrum takes us by surprise in our photo-shopped, selfie-obsessed popular culture. Closer to home, we find out a couple we know is getting divorced or experiencing some hiccups and we might be inclined to say, "Really? Them? They always looked so happy on Facebook in all those vacation photos and at those BBQs with their shiny children." The dissonance between the cheery Gerry-rigged images and the glummer reality can be startling and thought provoking, even now, when many of us are living in a grayer space.

Think of how we often respond to the query, "How are you?" or "How goes it?" Typically, we're quick to chirp, "Great. Or, everything's good." Or "Just fine and dandy." "Swell!" "Never better!" I had a neighbor whom I would encounter on daily walks, and her reply was a realistic, but still non-committal, "Not bad. Not bad."

Yes, of course, I get the down and dirty, bad news from people, too. As a minister, I am here to listen to the true, unvarnished answers. But, interestingly, over the course of my ministry, folks have admitted that they did not want me to know of their suffering, because I might think less of them. They somehow thought they needed to impress me with their mastery of human existence, even now, during a pandemic! This is 100% inaccurate!

I understand this fear and tendency, though. If asked, many people will tell you that they'd prefer to be in the company of happy people. But, studies suggest that this is only true when they are also happy. For most of us, our deeper yearning is to be able to express the full range of emotions that make us human, without censure, judgment or rejection. And to find that expression mirrored in the authenticity of others, especially our nearest and dearest.

This requires us, first, to not reject these so-called negative emotions in ourselves when they arise, even if this feels like a revolutionary act that cuts against the grain of a "Don't worry, be happy" culture determined to make us all smile until it hurts, even when we are hurting or anxious.

In fact, we force faux happiness so much in our culture that it breeds unhappiness. In Man's Search for Meaning, Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl tells us, "Our current mental-hygiene philosophy stresses the idea that people ought to be happy, that unhappiness is a symptom of maladjustment. We are afraid of sadness even as it serves a purpose in helping human beings to survive."

We get our ideas about happiness from many corners, including religion. In a provocative piece for Medium entitled, "My spiritual aversion to having a bad day," Jon Headley recalls a pastor telling him that if he has a bad day, he must not be much of a believer or very close to God. "It seemed like I was always surrounded by happy people," he tells us, "because being happy was synonymous with being faithful. Negative emotions were the sign of an attack from the Devil."

When Headley left evangelical Christianity for Buddhist practice, he was relieved to find a belief system that began with the central notion that suffering arises from our constant attempts to be rid of it. He writes: "I want an uncensored, unsanitized faith where being fully human is celebrated. I want a spirituality that doesn't get offended when I am sad."

On the flip side, some of us might be squirmy about appearing too content. Psychologist Gretchen Rubin relates the most pernicious myth about happiness that holds that "in a world so full of suffering, you can be happy only if you're callous and self-centered." Another joy stomper suggests that "Happy people become wrapped up in their own pleasure; they're complacent and uninterested in the world."

Wrong. Studies show that, quite to the contrary, happier people are more likely to help other people, they're more interested in social problems, they do more volunteer work, and they contribute more to charity. They're less preoccupied with their personal problems, too. By contrast, less-happy people are more apt to be defensive, isolated, and self-absorbed, and unfortunately, their negative moods are catching (technical name: emotional contagion). "Just as eating your dinner doesn't help starving children in India, being blue yourself doesn't help unhappy

people become happier.” It’s surprisingly complicated.

As we’re aware, depression is a real thing, a serious thing, a gripping depleting thing. But, this morning, we’re not taking our train of thought all the way to that station. Rather, we’ve landed in that more amorphous Happyland where sadness is a pariah (along with anger, fear, and their ilk); a curated kingdom that can magnify a sense of failure and fakery.

The thing is: It’s okay not to be okay and there has never been a better time to “ditch the toxic positivity” that’s rooted in American culture. And being able to “look on the bright side” at will can also be a sign of privilege not everyone shares. It’s okay to not be okay and also optimistic about the future.

I’d like to pay homage to the Disney Pixar Gods for producing the film *Inside Out* as a perfect vehicle for my message. You may have seen when it was released or on a streaming service. It’s worth a viewing. premiered. I think its safe to say that this remarkable, unique, and dazzling film examines the importance of sadness in a way that’s never been done before on screen, maybe never been done before at all.

Spoiler alert! (As Lynn Cinnamon summarizes in her blog): “In the film 11-year-old Riley suddenly finds her entire personality and emotional makeup in peril after her parents move her from Minnesota to San Francisco. Inside her resides representations of five of the six universal emotions humans express with their face. Joy, who has been the benevolent ruler of Riley’s young life, strives to stay in control without interfering too much when Fear, Anger, and Disgust try to keep Riley safe. She finds it hard, though, to see any potential usefulness in the despondent Sadness.

Riley has her world literally shaken to its core, but her stressed parents do not ask her how she’s doing or tell her it’s ok to be sad about her losses. Instead, they praise her for still being their happy girl. This feedback motivates Joy to go into overdrive mode in her attempt to suppress Sadness, who at this point is bubbling over with the blues.

When Sadness can’t control her compulsion to touch memories, an action that imbues them with her blue, she exasperatedly tells Joy she’s having a breakdown. Instead of trying to listen and understand Sadness, an annoyed Joy responds with false positivity and manipulation. Sadness is a threat to a happy life, Joy thinks. Sadness, she believes, will destroy all the glittering wonder she’s built inside Riley.”

This eye-popping film also beautifully shows how current emotions can “color” our memories. Sadness wanted to touch everything because that’s how Riley was really feeling. This made Joy freak out because she thought those memories would forever be cast in blue. She also believed the blue was an impenetrable stain. This struggle between Joy and Sadness illustrates part of why

we can hurt so badly inside.

The eventual harmony and understanding between Joy and Sadness in the story illustrates how we can heal, which is not by eliminating Sadness, or by squashing Joy, but by letting them both live inside us. We can heal by letting them join hands and color our moments together.

For a fairly large chunk of this animated tour de force, Riley is left to navigate her new world with only Fear, Anger, and Disgust at the helm (Joy and Sadness have been sucked through a tube into the maze of long-term memory). As these negative emotions run amok by themselves, Riley's very personality starts to disintegrate. She needs the influence of both joy and sadness to be a whole and functional human being.

Yet, the film does not sideline these negative emotions, even if they are bit players compared to joy and sadness. The emotional bad guys are the canaries in our coalmines and the Jiminy Crickets on our shoulders. They keep things real, too.

In an article for *Psychology Today*, Matthew Huston suggests that negative emotions do us a great favor by saving us from ourselves. They're signals urging us to change what we're doing, and they're actually necessary for feeling good.

"We have the wrong idea about emotions," he tells us. "They're very rational, they are tools carved by eons of human experience to direct us where we need to go." He explains that anger, for instance, arises from feeling devalued and unloved. This can be a useful tool to taking risks, asserting ourselves, and building confidence, but that when it bubbles over into rage, anger morphs into a destructive force.

While most negative emotions, such as fear, encourage us to avoid situations, anger typically stimulates approach. Well-directed and modulated, anger can motivate us, as individuals, and as a society, to take action. In this way, anger can fuel the progress of social justice.

The Buddhist teacher, Pema Chodron, advises us to make friends with our fears, but we more often fear our fears and want to wall them off. Yet, without fear, we become uncritical risk takers. Riley needs her fear impulse in *Inside Out* to stay out of harm's way.

Anxiety is a slightly different animal. When we are afraid but can't directly address the threat, that fear becomes anxiety. Fear or anxiety about how we are living our lives, about how we will each fare, how the country and world will fare, as we slog through this chaotic time of COVID, social unrest and personal pressures can point to ways in which we're not being true to ourselves, ways in which our actions don't align with our deeper values.

Each of these negative emotions, along with disgust, regret, embarrassment, envy, jealousy, frustration, and boredom, can serve as a beacon,

shepherding us back to a more fully human authenticity. And in case you didn't hear it the first couple times – Not being ok is totally acceptable as your human authenticity.

And now we've travelled full circle, back to the core question of authentic happiness. Years ago, when I was accumulating more coaching and counseling skills, I enrolled in a 23-week distance learning course on Positive Psychology with Dr. Martin Seligman, the acknowledged Papa of the genre.

Since then, his ideas have spawned master's level courses, a plethora of books, scads of blogs spewing inspiration porn on the internet, and sold out courses at places like Kripalu and Omega with snappy names like: Finding Your Radiant Joy and The Spirit and Science of Happy. There is a happiness industry out there and in some cases, it promotes the toxic positivity I mentioned earlier.

Clearly, many people (us?) generally want to be happier, or at least, to maintain whatever state of passing-grade happiness they or we currently possess. Yet, Dr. Seligman has made it clear from the start that authentic happiness (his term) is not perpetual joy or some unconditional bliss that is bestowed by the Universe.

His paradigm goes deeper, suggesting that an authentically happy life is one woven through with broad and well development fulfillment, crafted out of the materials of both joy and sorrow. And he asks us to blend three elements in our lives to achieve this: pleasure, engagement and meaning. This requires us to grapple with the darker corners, not just the sunny window seat.

Like Dr. Seligman, I'm all for joy. But I'm an even bigger booster of the pursuit of full spectrum humanity, a place where sadness touches us with blue and makes us more tender, more grounded, more resilient, and surprisingly, more whole by allowing ourselves to feel brokenness, too; a place where meaning-making by helping others shared top billing with pleasing ourselves.

In your own life, how might you balance personal pleasure, engagement in authentic relationships, and meaning making in the broader world, in order to craft a fulfilling life for yourself, even now in these less than optimal, limited circumstances? You might consider incorporating the "5-3-1 Rule" into your daily lives to increase a feeling of well-being and simple happiness. That's – 5 minutes of meditation, writing down 3 good things or sources of gratitude, and at least, 1 act of random kindness. Will you try it, even this Zoomed-up world we're living in? If you do, please let me know how it touched, supported, or changed you.

I read once that "You have to decide ... are you a Tigger or an Eeyore?" It's a useful question for deciding whether you'll begin your pursuit of happyishness from a standpoint of optimism or pessimism. Even so, the world needs its share of Eeyores: solemn, highly sensitive, realistic, pensive creatures. Moreover, Eeyore

exists in each of us — he balances out the annoyingly hyperactive Tigger. Unless we are mugging for Facebook or goofing on Tik Tok, none of us is truly 100 percent Tigger or Eeyore. We aren't completely Joy or Sadness. We are both and so much more.

Khalil Gibran tells us: "Your joy is your sorrow unmasked. And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes filled with your tears. And how else can it be? The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain."

The poet Galway Kinnell puts a modern spin on this idea One can imagine Prince George has already given it a go on his grumpier days.

"Crying only a little bit is no use," Kinnell explains.

"You must cry until your pillow is wet.

Then you can get up and laugh.

Then you can jump in the shower and Splash, Splash, Splash.

Then you can throw open your window and "Ha Ha Ha Haaaaa!"

And if anyone says, "Hey, what's going on up there?"

"Ha, Ha" sing back.

"Happiness was hiding in my last tear. I wept it. Ha Haaa."

So may it be for us, through all the blue-tinged times of our lives.

Blessed be. Blessed we. Amen.

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