

I grew up in Chicago in an arduous home, which has severely impacted my perspective of my surroundings today. I am not trying to make you pity me with my stories. I am not trying to make you feel remorse for my experiences. I am manifesting and exploring my inner self through exercises of reflection and perspective. I am investigating how one finds happiness in the face of adversity, and with the help of Buddhist ideals, I am attempting to discover what self-resilience is and how to appreciate the things in my life.

How does one find happiness in the face of adversity? I have researched ways to cultivate happiness and resilience, and I have created my own criteria that define what happiness and adversity mean to me. Solidarity, engagement, gratitude, wellness, and curiosity are five values that I believe to be the components of ultimate happiness. Using my personal memories, I am exploring how each element is associated with another. I analyzed studies from psychologists who study happiness and resilience, and read about Buddhist theories on suffering and reaching enlightenment, as tools to help me understand and reconcile with my own experiences.

CHAPTER ONE

Since I was six years old I have wanted my own room. I wanted freedom from my parents and younger brother; I felt that I could be “independent” with my own room. My father is an obsessive hoarder, and because of his idiosyncrasy I spent thirteen years of my life in an apartment with half a kitchen, a dining room, living room, and back bedroom out of sight. A twenty-four foot wide room became a three-foot wide hallway that mazed from the front door to the kitchen table, blocking access to the back door.

I shared a bedroom with my brother until I was sixteen, and he was thirteen. I was never able to have friends over, and the two friends that were ever invited into my house were supposed to keep my house’s condition a secret. I was very embarrassed of my home. It became a habit for me not to invite friends over, and to always go to their houses instead. I felt a lot of resentment for my dad, but whenever I confronted him about his hoarding he would accuse me of disturbing him, and make me feel insignificant.

It took me thirteen years—until the summer of sophomore-junior year of high school—to leave that hellhole. My relationship with my family was worsening exponentially. I tried to eliminate them from my life as much as I could, because associating with them produced problems that I did not want to be part of.

Later, when I was seventeen, my mother moved out into her own apartment, which left my dad alone with my fourteen year old brother, and me at my grandma’s apartment.

Leaving my parents’ home at a young age gave me the independence I craved. I was able to get away from living in constant frustration from the claustrophobic space and was able to stretch out in my own room. My mental state was still tense and stressful because I was still involved in many extracurricular activities and I had to take care of myself as much as I could, but I was relieved that I could have my own possessions in my own personal space. My mental exasperation was alleviated when I didn’t need to come home to an overwhelming maze of clutter, and my general wellbeing was improved.

This experience led me directly to my first criteria for happiness: wellbeing. I was able to attain a more positive mental state by getting out of the detrimental living situation I was in. According to Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, in order to reach self-actualization and to cultivate motivation, one must retain physiological and safety necessities. These include security of body, resources, mortality, health, family, property and employment.¹ Now that I am out of that position, I can see that I was being held back, and was unable to be productive in my life outside of my home.

According to Buddhist philosophies, conformity is one of the eight negative ideals that hold disciples back from reaching enlightenment. I see conformity as being the main obstacle to achieving what I call "wellbeing." Enlightenment is the final state when a Buddhist does not feel suffering, desire, nor the sense of self, and is released from the powers of karma and from the cycle of death and rebirth.² When I was living at home with my parents I was suppressing myself to cope with my living situation. It was a reluctant period in my life where I kept a huge secret from my community, and it was an embarrassment that I kept to myself.

Now that I have established a higher level of wellness in my life, I feel that I have the motivation and inspiration to continue to move onward toward larger goals and dreams without being held back by the anxiety of going home to an uncomfortable environment. Maslow's theory to achieve happiness correlates with Buddhist negative ideals because once conformity has vanished, a person can be closer to reaching the enlightenment of pure happiness.

CHAPTER TWO

I have a bizarre family. My parents have been very involved in my life since I was a little kid. They supported my expensive and painstaking figure skating career (still a huge part of my life today), as well as enrolling me in dance classes since I was three. My mom was a huge participant in my elementary school's PTA and was a teacher's helper twice a week. Besides seeing her at school in front of my friends, she would constantly embarrass my brother and me by always wanting to take our pictures.

My dad was the parent who took me on long bike rides around Chicago and brought me to all my skating practices at 6 am. He would pick me up at friend's houses at midnight and would drive me to whatever date I had to make. Although my parents didn't make a lot of money they tried their best to provide as much as they could for me. I had a bed to sleep in with Mulan sheets, and I had a meal to eat every night, and I could recognize I had those things as a young child. But it wasn't until now am I able to recognize more of the things my parents sacrificed for me and how much they love me. I am so fortunate to have parents who dedicate their entire lives to the schedule of my life, and who care about my feelings, protection, success, and interests.

This brings me to my second criteria, being grateful. Gratitude is the acknowledgement and appreciation of kindness among people. I have recently become more aware of the sacrifices that my parents have made for me for my contentment, like

¹ Burton M.D., Neel. "Our Hierarchy of Needs." *Our Hierarchy of Needs*. N.p., 23 May 2012. Web. 5 May 2013.

² Mookerjee, Ajit, and Madhu Khanna. *The Tantric Way*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1977. Print.

spending time with me and taking me to places I have never been. I know that there are endless sacrifices my parents have made for me that I will probably never know of, but I am completely grateful.

According to University of California- Berkley's Greater Good website, Jason Marsh and Robb Willer make the argument that people who receive large amounts of pleasure tend to find it more difficult to savor it. "All of this research points to a paradox of happiness: It's not tied to abundance, but to recognizing and appreciating what we do have. Once we meet our basic needs our lives become much more satisfying..." Gratitude, according to Willer and Marsh's research, is apparent when one receives pleasure and is not being immersed in it, when given spontaneous, small doses of happiness, a person is able to relish it and feel grateful for it.³

According to my criteria of happiness, the opposite of gratitude is arrogance. Arrogance is a quality that an individual has when they are conceited and egotistical. It is difficult to communicate with someone who is arrogant because he or she believes that they are superior and that they are completely valid. This attitude prohibits an individual from reaching enlightenment because their closed mindedness does not expose them to different perspectives that can enhance their own. Buddhist values state that understanding and experiencing different perspectives enhances ones morals and can lead them toward enlightenment. Gratitude does not come with complete submergence in pleasure, but if I chose to be arrogant, and think too highly of myself to be able to appreciate what my parents have sacrificed for me, I could never feel gratitude for what they have done for me.

CHAPTER THREE

The apartment my family and I lived in was suffocating and unbearable most of the time. I remember being so frustrated lying under my loft bed when I was in the fourth grade, the anger rushing through my head and chest. I was radiating rage off of the claustrophobic space I had to inhabit. The only way I could release my tension and energy was to lie down and gaze into the dusty fan. But I could only lie back with my arms and legs pressed against my sides because there wasn't enough space between my brother's bed and my loft bed. Usually I ended up lying on top of layers of toys, hangers, and un-useful nick-knacks, coping with the discomfort of lying on top of hard plastic bulges against my back. I despised cleaning my room, but I always thought it was better to keep something I didn't need because I might need it in the future. I learned this idea from my dad, not verbally, but by physically mimicking his mannerism. I knew from a young age that not everybody lived in clutter like I did, and I never encountered a pivotal moment when I realized that I was living in a madhouse, but I instinctively knew that I was not living how a normal family should live. Because of this, I began to venture off at an early age into the big city of Chicago.

I spent a lot time at friends' homes and I enjoyed exploring all parts of the city. This curiosity that I established kept me away from home, and sparked many new hobbies and ideas. I began to go places where I could find solitude, and achieve more

³ Marsh, Jason, and Robb Willer. "Greater Good." *Why Lent Makes People Happy (and Netflix Doesn't)*. University of California Berkley, 21 Mar. 2013. Web. 05 May 2013.

independence. I learned how to take care of myself, and act proactively towards what I wanted to do, such as going ice skating, riding my bike alone, and meeting up with friends.

Becoming curious about my life and what I could achieve on my own was important to the development of my character. As stated by Rita Peterson, students that perform natural self- indicated curiosity tend to have more knowledge of their surroundings. This results in intellectual development, facilitates learning, and encourages scientific discovery. It is important to be a curious individual in order to establish your own morals, and to aim to be as rational as possible by knowing and understanding your surroundings.⁴

Opposite from curiosity are doubt and fear, which are two characteristics that keep a Buddhist disciple from achieving enlightenment. When you are too embarrassed to ask questions or begin experimenting, you are kept from knowing as much as you potentially could. Becoming fearless and un-doubtful is a difficult challenge to ask anyone to fulfill, but with curiosity comes confidence. Being able to understand your surroundings and knowing why things happen makes you all-around a more educated and confident individual.⁵

My memory of leaving home, and becoming more in contact with my surroundings made it more apparent for me to understand the way society acts and reacts. I am now able to see how my comprehension of everyday events has impacted me for the better, instead of being a recluse in my real home.

CHAPTER FOUR

Throughout high school I have been involved in many extra curricular activities. It could have been because it was a natural impulse for me not to stay home, but especially because my brother and father began to get intensely aggressive. They would get so physical that they both would end up weeping, screaming, and bleeding simultaneously. I would find myself in the middle of the brawl, so it became imperative never to be home before ten at night. I had skating practice at six in the morning, and afterschool I would spend hours in the ceramics room, then go off to a friends house. This type of behavior caused my relationships with my family to deteriorate. I would rarely encounter them, and when I did it was always uncomfortable and distressful.

This was the way I felt towards my family until I came to Oxbow, two thousand miles away from home. I had an emotional virtual conversation with my brother about why we hadn't spoke in over three years. It was uncomfortable for me to break the thick ice between us, and once I did I realized how depressing it was not to be able to know who my younger brother was anymore. I continued to remember all the memories he and I shared with my mom, who I still was not very close to, playing volleyball and jump rope in our back alleyway. After first receiving neglectful responses, he eventually became sympathetic towards me and how upset I was.

⁴ Peterson, Rita W. "Changes in Curiosity Behavior from Childhood to Adolescence." *Journal of Research in Science Teaching* 16.3 (1979): 185-92. Print.

⁵ "Tibetan Healing Mandala - The Mandala." *Tibetan Healing Mandala - The Mandala*. N.p., n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2013.

Engaging in those messages with my brother was a pivotal moment in our relationship. We have come as far as Facebook friends, which is a huge leap, considering I had only known him from his Twitter-page persona that I occasionally checked on. Sometimes I message him asking him about what is going on back home, and although it's still somewhat hostile, he and I have slowly begun to develop a new relationship. This brings me to the criteria of engaging and solidarity. I have recently begun engaging in a new relationship with my only brother. Although the results aren't really apparent in my life yet, I hope that beginning to engage with him will benefit both of our future lives.

Engaging in activities as a family makes a major impact on the children who grow up in that family. Children that have major family influence tend to have higher performance rates and are more effectively involved in the community.⁶ This relates to solidarity because solidarity brings union and harmony between people, and by being civilized with my brother we now have the potential to live in harmony. In my experience, status consciousness is the opposite of solidarity. My brother has always been very obsessed with his social status and his materialistic items. This is a priority that he and I do not share, and is something that has kept us apart. I hope that now that we are building up our relationship that he can move out of his phase of being such a materialistic person and of being obsessed with his social status.

In conclusion, I have realized how all my criteria of happiness and the Buddhist ideals correlate. Although I have experienced many tragedies and challenges throughout my life, I want to look past my immediate, negative, emotional response to my past. I want to use my stories—both the positive and the negative—to guide me through life, leading me towards being a happier, more enlightened individual.

⁶ *A New Generation of Evidence: The Family is Critical to Student Achievement*, by Anne T. Henderson and Nancy Berla (Washington, DC: Center for Law and Education, 1994) and *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family and Community Connections on Student Achievement*, by Anne T. Henderson and Karen L. Mapp (Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2002 – in press).