

You Can Find “Happiness” in the New Year

Christopher Uhl

As I see it, the greeting, Happy New Year! is an expression of our collective yearning for happiness. Though we want happiness for ourselves and each other, finding it is not easy.

Growing up, I was conditioned to believe that the source of happiness was somewhere outside myself—a good job, the right partner, a fancy car. But is this true?

Take the case of the fancy car. Imagine that is what you want more than anything else in the world. “If I just had that car,” you think to yourself, “I’d be so happy.” And then one day you win a big contest and the grand prize is the car of your dreams. Picture your happiness as you stand, keys in hand, beholding your magnificent new car.

But after a short time, you are no longer happy, even though you still have your fancy car. This is a common experience, right? We want something; we get it; we are happy; and then soon we are no longer happy.

Return now to that moment of pure happiness when the cherished car was first in your possession. In that moment you were no longer craving the car; there was no wanting and because there was no wanting, you experienced happiness, albeit temporarily. So might it be that it wasn’t so much the car that was the source of your happiness as it was the cessation of wanting?

Indeed, it has been said that our happiness is determined by the gap between what we have and what we want. To help myself grasp this, I put a dot on a piece of paper and labeled it “what I have.” Then, I placed a second dot on the paper and labeled it “what I want.” Then I considered that, in any given moment, the distance between these dots—far or near—is the magnitude of my unhappiness.

Next, I erased the second dot and placed it directly on top of the first dot. In so doing I created a vision for living with no gap between what I want and what I have. This would mean completely accepting how life presents itself moment-by-moment. Instead of complaining, judging, blaming, it would mean meeting the present moment with an unequivocal “Yes!”

How might this play out in everyday life, I wondered? A few hours later I was waiting for a friend on a street corner. My friend was late and I became impatient: “Where is he?” “He should be on time!” “Why didn’t he at least call to tell me he was running late?” “How inconsiderate!”

In that moment, the two dots—what I had and what I wanted—were far apart and I experienced unhappiness. Fortunately, I caught myself. Rather than being in an argument with life, I decided to accept what I had—i.e., to accept life exactly as it was presenting itself in that moment. I breathed deeply and said “yes” to my situation, realizing, with a smile, that nothing was wrong. Indeed, life shows up just as it does, moment by moment. It is never wrong. Freed of my story of how things should be, my mind quieted and I became aware of the sky, the breeze, my own aliveness. I noticed, for the first time, the faces of the people walking by; saw the late afternoon sun lighting the top of a tree; heard calls of far-off crows. Slowly I softened, getting a taste of a different way of being in the world. I was no longer frustrated, upset, disappointed, but open, accepting, present.

In the end I was led to conclude that happiness, paradoxically, doesn’t come from outside ourselves, it comes from our capacity to align with life, to accept life in whatever way it presents itself, moment-by-moment. Might such a new relationship with life create happiness in the New Year?