

The economics of happiness

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This fall, Zappos CEO Tony Hsieh asked my University of Iowa students to share their goals.

They responded as you might expect -- "to own a business," "make a lot of money," "travel the world," "start a family."

Pushing further, Hsieh inquired, "Why?"

And not just once, but he asked "Why?" after each of their attempts to explain.

That is, however, until these seemingly disconnected aspirations were all driven down to a common sentiment: They thought it would make them "happy."

With some 27,000 books and articles published on the topic in the past year and a half, happiness has gone "prime time." This is not all good; there are plenty of charlatans in the mix, making comfortable livings on "fluffy" motivational clichés, delivered to people in need. But floating to the top of the pile are a growing number of social scientists with important research-based discoveries to share. We are learning that happiness is a mixture of several factors. Part of it depends on biology -- perhaps as much as 50 percent -- but social and environmental conditions matter, too.

Among the things that contribute to happiness are time with family and friends, satisfying work, a sense of community, trust in neighbors and gratitude. What doesn't seem to matter much are lots of education, or money -- past what is required for modest comfort.

In one of the more profound political speeches ever delivered, Sen. Robert F. Kennedy challenged his audience at the University of Kansas to question the current way success is measured in our country.

Kennedy proclaimed, "We will find neither purpose nor personal satisfaction in a mere continuation of economic progress, in an endless amassing of worldly goods."

After poetically listing the types of things that truly matter, Kennedy concluded that the "Gross National Product measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile."

That was 1968.

Today, Kennedy's vision is further complicated by environmental concerns that seemingly run in direct conflict with an economic model dependent on ever increasing consumption. As economist Tim Jackson so eloquently puts it, the story of wealthy nations is about us "being persuaded to spend money we don't have on things we don't need to create impressions that won't last on people we don't care about." If it turns out that rising incomes is not the path to happiness, as much of the recent research suggests, then the toll inflicted on our personal lives by a culture of work must be re-evaluated.

It will take political leadership, companies and a civil society for a sea change to occur. The good news is that a dialogue of this kind may just be lining up:

- In Washington, the Seattle Area Happiness Initiative is trying to make the city happier. They are conducting a Happiness Survey (www.sustainableseattle.org), with hopes that the data collected will help shape public policy.

- Last November, Hsieh announced that Zappos would be relocating its corporate headquarters to the current Las Vegas City Hall site.

"It's about not just our offices being there," said Hsieh, "but we are going to be creating this environment outside the office."

- Americans increasingly report serious time stress in their lives and appear willing to make work-life balance a higher priority.

Interestingly, author John Irving starts every novel by first creating the last sentence of the book. Once established, every word leads to that point.

While a unique writing technique, it is an even better metaphor. If your life was framed in a similar manner, what would your last sentence be? How would that awareness reshape the way you live your life and treat the world today?

And then my final question, "Why?"

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