

National Unitarian Fellowship

Affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarian
and Free Christian Churches

Viewpoint



Leading a Happy Life

by

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Issue 222



Apr 2012

Registered Charity 1040294

Most of the time I lead an insanely happy life. But it was not always thus I remember a time of getting up in the morning and wondering why my life was so dull and then thinking what had happened to all my friends at School, College and University?

I started to think ‘Would it not be great to be surrounded by friends and family?’

To that effect I started to ponder on a plan. The plan was simple enough – to make a list of thirty or so friends and to contact them once a month. I choose the monthly timescale as of course daily or weekly might be too intense except for immediate family and the routine annual Christmas card was too sparse after all a lot could happen in a year and generally we don’t write too much in a Christmas card.

As you could imagine my idea was welcomed by many and rejected by some – it is still an important way I keep in touch with friends. Rather like the mantra “an apple a day keeps the doctor away” I could invent another mantra “contacting a friend a day keeps loneliness at bay”. Friends rather like plants or animals - need nurturing, love, care and attention after all we are part of nature.

For some of us finding 30 people to keep in touch with may not be a problem. Others might get the response – “but I don’t know thirty people?” It is worth just starting the exercise, perhaps trying to think who you might want to keep in touch with; maybe a member of your family or friends or even someone whom you met at school, college or university. Sometimes it might be someone you met at a club, or via work or on holiday – “Keep an open heart and people just walk in”. In some cases you may need to initiate the friendship - this reminds me of a passage from Michael Heseltine’s book ‘Where there is a Will’. In this book Michael suggests that some people fear stretching out their hand because they will fear it be bitten – but without stretching out your hand it may never be clasped by the hand of friendship.

Take a moment now to write down a few names of people who you might want to keep in touch with – I would suggest - be creative and think out of the box – and perhaps think of some people who you don't normally interact with every day – they may live abroad or be members of a different community – or you might like to strengthen your connections with existing family and friends.

When initiating friendships I find the acronym FORM quite helpful when forming friendships. FORM stands for F- Family, O - Occupation, R - Recreation and M - Message (message may be something you could talk about if you found a common topic) – the four parts of the acronym can be topics that you may wish to talk about when forming friendships. Another comparison which I found helpful was from a book by Norman Vincent Peale – he suggested behaving like an old hat – in other words give the impression that you have known a new person for a long time.

Friends I would like to keep in touch with regularly:

The latest person I am keeping in touch with is a second cousin who I used to know 35 years ago – we had lost touch but partly through my effort I had managed to reconnect with the family and one day I asked her whether she would like me to drop her a line to keep in touch – she responded positively.

Before I start contacting someone regularly I ask their permission saying something like “Hi Tony, how are you? Would it be OK if I dropped you a line to keep in touch as I don't see you regularly and I would like to get to know you better?” In most cases people will agree I might ask

how they would like to be contacted “would you like me to drop you an e-mail or would you prefer me to call you or to meet up in person?” After that you will soon see by the response if the person is indeed keen to keep in touch with you.

When I send a social e-mail I tend to keep the message brief as many people, particularly younger people, are often short of time due to work and other activities. I tend to use a postcard format - just greeting them and wishing them well and then perhaps giving news of two or three activities that are happening in my life before signing off. For those who are very busy I might make the message even shorter or perhaps just greeting them on their birthday or on a national or religious festival.

There are other ways of keeping in touch with people, two examples of which are by using Facebook or Twitter – but to me the personal touch is very important. I would like to use two examples one from the business concept of networking which states “if you don’t touch base – you are out of the race” – the other is from the Bible where Cain answers God with a question “Am I my brother’s keeper?” some including myself think the answer should be yes!

On a practical note I prefer to enter the names on to an electronic reminder system. After all when contacting a group of people outside your immediate family and friends - out of sight might be out of mind – my system of contacting a slightly larger group of people is particularly apt for those who live slightly far away such as another part of the country or world. Also, if I have met a friend recently or I know they are on holiday I may skip contacting them for a month.

Another, idea which I garnered from self-help books and business is the idea of writing a mission statement. After all, I figured if businesses have a mission statement why can’t we have a personal mission statement? The purpose of which is to keep us focussed and helps us when choosing what we would like to do with our lives – in some cases we

have to make a lot of choices in a short time span. Choices could include do we take up a particular job offer? Or which charity to support? Having a mission statement can help us choose rapidly and compare how a particular choice fares with the spirit of our mission statement.

One of the voluntary groups I work for is a local Writer's Circle and as you can see it resonates with the part of my personal mission statement which pertains to "setting up and expanding social networks and the enjoyment of writing".

My personal mission statement at present is as follows: unlike some religious texts – it is not written in stone and I consider it to be a working document:

"To secure my house, to secure my financial assets and to enjoy life – by that I mean: writing, swimming, visual arts, administration, setting up and expanding social networks and an orderly and yet simple approach to life, spirituality and current affairs."

Once a mission statement has been completed I tend to display it in some of my rooms to remind myself of it and to make sure that I abide with its spirit. I am aware of one person who even displays it at work. But to me I just display it in two rooms – mainly as a memory jogger but also to re-evaluate that it is in tune with my current thinking.

After a mission statement is written – I do believe that the very act of physically writing or typing such a document seems to encourage me to feel that the desire, wish, or aspiration is more concrete and doable rather than just a passing fancy.

Would you like to have a go and write a mission statement?

With the mission statement the destination is in sight – but how do we actually get there? – Well the next, perhaps natural step is to create a values and goals chart. I know the philosopher Anthony Robbins uses a pie chart to divide up his life and to measure how he is doing in each sector. I tend to use a series of six rectangular boxes three in two rows. Now what are values and goals? – I may wager a bet that if you asked most people what their values and goals are – they may even give a blank stare or think such a question is odd – other less sceptical people may say that both the mission statement and values and goals to be “happy and healthy”. My only concern with “happy and healthy” is that the words are weasel words in that what do they mean and when would you know if you got to the destination?

In truth both writing a mission statement and identifying values and goals is hard as you mainly have to do this on your own – perhaps with the help of a friend to prompt you or to ask you open questions as long as they don’t end up writing them for you (in which case you may end up living your friend’s or family’s hopes, desires and values rather than your own and you may feel somewhat cheated in time) – there is no hurry with such exercises and both the personal mission statement and values and goals can be redrafted till you feel they reflect what is in your heart.

With values and goals – I translate values as what I value most in life. One way of doing this is to imagine a terrible monster has taken you away from you daily life and trapped you in an empty room and slowly he grants you one or two wishes – this exercise will help you to prioritise your values. For illustrative purposes the six values I came up with include: **communication, relaxation, work, contemplation, politics and spirituality.**

Would you like to have a go at writing some values and goals of your own?

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| Value: Goal: | Value: Goal: | Value: Goal: |
| Value: Goal: | Value: Goal: | Value: Goal: |

Why choose only a few values rather than a plethora of them? This was illustrated to me by a story by Stephen Covey. He mentioned that rather like the Niagara Falls - a man's energy can be destructive if left unchecked or undirected. But he mentions that a man had "channelled" the Niagra Falls and put turbines in each of the channels – and thus instead of destruction - constructive electricity was made by channelling the energy. Another older saying is "Jack of all trades but master of none". The same idea was alluded to in a book called Top of the Class which noted that some of the more successful students chose a few extra-curricular activities to complement their studies and that those who chose too many extra-curricular activities ended up feeling exhausted and overwhelmed and in fact too tired to study.

Once the values have been identified and chosen some self-help books say make your goals SMART – which means Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time Bound. I personally disagree – because I

feel these specific types of goals may be apt in business but for my personal goals I prefer just turning up at clubs and societies and enjoying and hopefully improving the skill or activity – there is a saying that 90% of the challenge is to motivate yourself to turn up – just by turning up you should learn and develop your chosen activity.

To illustrate the benefit of turning up and being with likeminded people – there was a story of a Christian who had lost his faith – he went to see a Priest – who silently took a burning piece of coal out of the fire – it naturally went black – then the priest put the coal back in the furnace it then glowed again. This silent act illustrated the benefits of being in a group of likeminded people who motivated each other. For illustrative purposes to honour my value of communication I attend a Writer's Circle. I try writing a piece for every meeting and therefore the next meeting acts as a deadline and motivates me to write and the feedback received helps me to improve my writing. To honour the relaxation value I attend a swimming club several times a week.

When I plan my week I try to plan sometime for each of my values so that I make some progress towards my goals each week. There is a story about a professor who when talking about time management - had a empty pint glass and into the glass he put some rocks – he asked his students can I put any more in? – the students said 'No' and the Professor proceeded to pour some stones into the glass – again he asked can I put any more in? This time the students had understood what the Professor was doing and said yes and so smaller stones, sand and eventually water were poured into the glass. What does this illustrate? asked the Professor. One student answered that we should cram as much as we can into our lives? – 'No!' said the Professor – "I am illustrating that the large rocks represent the important values in your life - put them or plan them into your week and then the other stuff (activities) automatically fill in the spare time – but if you don't plan to give some time to the important values – (rather like filling the empty glass with water first) - when you try to put in the large rocks – there would be a splash – disruption! There is a business saying which

is “Failing to Plan is Planning to Fail”.

The last belief I would like to leave you with is the idea of subscribing or reading some positive material each day. I subscribe to three free positive e-mails from three American Philosophers for illustrative purposes one is from the Napoleon Hill Foundation – it came about from the desire to associate with wise people, which again is recommended by the Bible and in Hindu Scriptures. It is my belief that often we are surrounded by negative people and negative news stories – it’s a numbers game to outfox the negative dream stealers! The best way I find is to read lots of positive statements of your choice – it’s not necessarily acting as a Pollyanna – although that’s not necessarily a bad thing – but looking at a situation and seeing how to make the best out of what appears to be a bad deal - Americans call it making lemonade out of a lemon. There is generally nothing to lose by looking at life with rose tinted glasses – by all means be realistic – but be brave enough to ask – how can I make the best of this situation?

So returning to the theme leading a happy life. I feel that when we wish to live an ideal life this may not necessarily come about automatically. But sometime by the use of some techniques and habits we can feel more fulfilled.

Techniques, I have talked about include trying to contact a friend a day – to keep loneliness at bay! Writing a mission statement to give yourself direction and a clear vision in life, trying to identify what activities whether work or play may gel with you and bring more satisfaction into your life – I understand that a monk once summarized his rule of life as “find out what you like doing and to do that activity”!

Some other common sense advice may include build in some regular exercise into your daily routine, eating healthy foods, staying off drugs and trying to lead an ethical and balanced life.

Many of the techniques described may involve communications and I find that it is an idea to look at ways of strengthening your communication skills this can be enhanced by joining a public speaking group or writing circle, or by volunteering at work or in the community.

I do hope that some of the advice in this article is to your liking and that it may spur you to try some new activities - which may lead to a happier life.

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Indra is a Londoner of Indian origin. He works for a financial corporation.

His interests include writing, swimming, watching movies, administration, current affairs and spirituality.

He is inspired both by Eastern and Western cultures and interested both in the similarities and differences in cultural values.

Indra became involved with Unitarianism when a friend of his told him about a Unitarian Church in Golders Green where several Hindu (Brahmo) families attended.

Upon attending he was amazed at the similarities between Hinduism and Unitarianism - both were liberal faiths which honoured God or goodness in many forms. Indra describes himself as a Hindu Unitarian.

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