Surprised by Happiness: What We Can Learn from Research on Forgiveness and Gratitude
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For the past five years I have thought seriously about happiness. Twice a year, a group of 20 scholars from different academic disciplines and institutions has convened at Emory University's Center for the Study of Law and Religion to share our work on the pursuit of happiness.

Our project began by examining the Declaration of Independence, which names the pursuit of happiness alongside life and liberty as one of our inalienable rights. We then explored perspectives from law, philosophy, theology, biology, sociology and psychology. Our project concluded with the Summit on Happiness, an interfaith conference that featured Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori, and Islamic Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr of George Washington University, with Emory's Presidential Distinguished Professor His Holiness the XIV Dalai Lama. Panel moderator Krista Tippett of the public radio program "On Being" aptly summed up one of the conference's take-home messages: interfaith conversations at their best go beyond areas of common concern to address honest differences.

We do see the world in quite different ways.

Understandings of happiness differ by worldview and faith traditions, cultural contexts and individual characteristics. While happiness may include simple pleasures, most traditions push beyond this to examine well-being and flourishing, within the individual and in relationship to God and others.

My contribution to the project has been to use the tools of psychological science to examine the ways we can flourish in the face of difficult interpersonal hurts. These hurts come when we hold others accountable for their direct transgressions or failures to respond. The emphasis of my own work shifted from pursuing happiness in the face of interpersonal pain to flourishing in the pursuit of forgiveness and gratitude.

Stop Ruminating, Broaden Your View
When we are hurt, we often see and feel with a zoom lens sharply focused on a few details: "You hurt me. You lied. You are a liar." We tend to express that pain with adjectives and adverbs that communicate and crystallize our hurt and sadness, our anger and contempt.

What happens next? To some degree, that depends on our focus. Keep the zoom lens only on injustice, and we perpetuate distressing rumination. Sometimes rumination depresses us with our inability to undo the past and create a better future. Sometimes rumination agitates us into active or passive aggression, searching for vindication through vindictiveness. We risk myopic vision.
Recent research conducted at Hope College, published in *The Journal of Positive Psychology* (vol. 5, May 2010) and funded by the Fetzer Institute, suggests that exchanging the zoom lens of rumination for wider-angle lenses can give us a bigger picture and lend the depth of field we need to flourish even in the face of pain. Two lens filters can be called *compassion-focused reappraisal* and *benefit-focused reappraisal*. We found that a compassion focus cultivates forgiveness, and a benefits focus begets gratitude.

These perspectives can help us see more of the truth, not less. A good, wide-angle lens situates the original offender, offense and its implications into a larger setting that we also need to see. This larger view, with its depth of field, gives us moral perspective and imagination.

**Compassion and Forgiveness**

A compassion focus clearly sees the offense *(e.g.,* the lie, the betrayal, the failed promise) for what it is and the damage it has caused, while it widens the view to include more aspects of who and where the offense came from. Compassion sees the complexity of the offender as a human being with all her flaws and strengths, and the life circumstances that equipped and failed her. Compassion sees that for all of our differences, we all are prone to err. We all hurt people out of our own hurts and vulnerabilities, the prior offenses done to us, our cognitive or emotional limitations, psychopathologies or undeveloped virtues.

With compassion, one person in our research began to see his own mother's offenses as signs of her need to heal from a history of hurts at the hands of her family. Another person began to pray from a distance for her offender, that he would develop healthy ways to deal with his anger and depression rather than harm others in future relationships. Compassion doesn’t forget or tolerate, deny or become a doormat. Compassion creates the capacity to see more clearly the ways the offender needs to change or grow. The more clearly we see this wider view in a humble stance, the better able we are to see those genuine ways in which we can genuinely wish the offender well in the process of healing and transformation. Beyond a protocol for achieving our own happiness, compassion cultivates empathy and forgiveness as gifts for the genuine flourishing of the other. With binocular vision, we can keep justice and safety concerns clearly in view alongside genuine goodwill.

**Benefits and Gratitude**

Focusing on unnoticed benefits in difficult circumstances similarly broadens our perspective. This approach recognizes the offense and its costly implications -- unlike denial or distraction -- while highlighting hidden benefits. This perspective allows us to recognize insights gained, lessons learned, strengths shown or growth realized. It enlarges our vision and our hearts so that we can see more clearly the insights and understanding we have gained about ourselves and others. It helps us identify the strengths we have shown in persevering through difficulty.

In our research, one person came to see her own capacity for courage through interpersonal hardship as a gift that would help her face future struggles. Another came to see that his offense generated a heart of empathy for those who suffer without access to help, motivating him for a career of service to the underserved. We may recognize ways we wish we never had needed to
grow, while recognizing that we have indeed grown for the greater good. When these gifts come clearly into view, our natural response is gratitude even in the face of adversity.

Research Results

What do the filters of compassion and benefits offer in comparison to the zoom lens of rumination about a past interpersonal offense? The way we choose to look at an offense matters. Research participants in our experiment completed all conditions, counterbalancing for order effects. The following patterns occurred whether the offender was a loved one or stranger, whether the offense was boundary-breaking or a failure to respond, and whether it happened a long time ago or more recently:

Ruminating about the past offense agitated intense negative emotions and facial expressions, promoted a cost-oriented focus, increased cardiac reactivity and impaired the body’s parasympathetic calming response. By contrast, reappraising the offenses using compassion and a focus on benefits created positive emotional and physical responses. Compassion cultivated empathy and heartfelt forgiveness, happiness, joy, calm control and a more social orientation. Compassion simultaneously subdued intense negative emotions and facial expressions, while slowing heart rate. Counting benefits begat gratitude, happiness, joy and smiling, calm control and a more social orientation. A benefits focus also reduced negative emotion and buffered the parasympathetic calming branch of the autonomic nervous system.

The filters of compassion and benefits foster forgiveness and generate gratitude. The choice of which path to pursue may depend on one’s worldview or current situation, whether one prioritizes loving one's enemy (compassion) or counting blessings (benefits). Whichever one pursues, it has cross-benefits in promoting both virtues. Current research is resonating with ancient wisdom. People may struggle in the process of flourishing, finding hints of happiness even now as they pursue forgiveness and gratitude.

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