

Karen Telleen-Lawton: Is Happiness Attainable?

By Karen Telleen-Lawton, Noozhawk Columnist | Published on 11.18.2013 2:37 p.m.

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Remember the Chinese finger trap? It's the little woven-bamboo tube where you stick your index fingers in each end and then try to pull them out. The only way to extricate them is to stop pulling, wherein they come out easily. Happiness is one of those elusive conditions that reminds me of the puzzle. It tops our list of desires, but is it attainable through effort?

A campus-wide roundtable at my recent college reunion featured **Katie Couric** and a panel of experts in psychology, business and neuroscience discussing the new science of happiness and well-being.

Their collective research about what truly makes people happy included some interesting points, including the finding that each age group defines happiness differently. For 18- to 30-year-olds, it's excitement, and as a group they're pretty happy.

The next age group, up to 45, finds happiness in terms of satisfaction, but they find it increasingly difficult to achieve as they age. The happiest people are middle age and older. Fifty-year olds define happiness as balance, a definition that morphs as they age to alignment, meaning, savoring and, finally, contentment. Happiness reaches a peak around age 70, and can plateau there for

nearly the rest of life — with some concession to aches and pains, I suppose.

The panelists agreed that happiness is elusive if you are trying to attain it. This has been measured in many ways, but one interesting point was the effect of technology.

While **Facebook** and other social media are good for empowering far-flung groups to organize for a purpose, they tend to make people feel lonelier. Everyone else seems so happy! The panelists agreed that a meaningful life, which can be achieved deliberately, is a better goal, and often results in happiness as a derivative.

Returning home, I found an online article declaring Denmark to be the Happiest Country on Earth. This was based on research published by economists as the World Happiness Report, co-edited by **University of British Columbia** economics professor John Helliwell. He wrote, “Six factors explain three-quarters of differences in life evaluations across hundreds of countries and over the years.”

The happiest countries have in common high scores in three government-level measures: a large GDP per capita, healthy life expectancy at birth and a lack of corruption in leadership. The other three factors play out on a more personal control level: a sense of social support, freedom to make life choices and a culture of generosity.

Among the evidence the researchers named in rating Denmark the highest was their support for parents, and

health care as a civil right and source of social support. Gender equality is prioritized, biking is common as transportation, and Danes feel a responsibility to one another. Their culture also manages to put a positive spin on its harsh environment. The United States ranked 17th in happiness of the 156 countries surveyed.

If scoring 17th makes you a little unhappy, you just may be able to improve your own personal happiness score. Having recently read **Dr. David Burn's** *Feeling Good*, a classic self-help book first published in 1980, I am convinced happiness is largely a state of mind. Burns' exercises help you recognize and control negative thoughts that lead to mood swings.

If, even after reading *Feeling Good*, you feel powerless to affect your happiness, you may want to consider moving to Denmark.

— *Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations spanning sustainability from the environment to finance, economics and justice issues. She is a fee-only financial advisor (www.DecisivePath.com) and a freelance writer (www.CanyonVoices.com). [Click here to read previous columns.](#) The opinions expressed are her own.*