

Happiness Lecture

First, thank you so much for inviting me. It seems to add to the pleasure of being in Vietnam to end up talking about happiness. It has been a wonderful experience to be here, with such a varied and lovely countryside, interesting people and the best food in the world.

I'm going to talk a bit about how I got involved in the field of non-Western studies, and the benefits of that both to me and to, I hope, some of the rest of the world. And then I'll talk about some of the findings and discoveries made while putting the book *Happiness Across Cultures* together. As always when I start these projects, I have an idea in mind that turns out not to be borne out by the literature.

We were talking the other day, in the house of my son and his new son, about the discoveries you make as you grow older. First, if you go to day care, you find that what was completely accepted at home isn't practiced in other people's homes. This happens again when you go to secondary school, outside of the neighborhood you grew up in. I think for me I found that in the other homes near me, their mothers did not always make a pot of tea with milk when she came home from work which my born-in-England mother did. And again, if you go to university, you find people from different cultures, different countries, different social classes, at least in America (although I also went to secondary school in Canada). If you are lucky, these are experiences that enrich your life and make you open and generous to more ways of doing things and thinking. I like to think that the people in America who hate other people and try to kill them have never had the experience of growing up with different people. Of course here you have a long history of colonization, where other cultures tried to impose their own

ways, which they believed were superior, on yours. It says a lot about Vietnamese people that they were able to resist this, with great loss I realize, as many countries suffered even more under colonialism. I know in the country I lived in in Africa, the feeling of cultural inferiority was felt as much by Africans as by Europeans. I was fortunate enough to be able to live for 3 years in another continent and another culture and especially to be open and able to learn from the people there. The Peace Corps was created with the idea of helping people, when it was obvious from the first that we had so much to gain from the people we were meant to help. That is, I think, the great gift of the Peace Corps is that it has returned to America a large group of people who know that there is another and even a better world out there. In Malawi, despite severe poverty and lack of access to so-called modern conveniences, added to now with AIDS and malaria and serious health issues, people seem to have a better time. Children and women get along really well, not always fighting over their toys and possessions. Even though they work really hard, it is generally in a good frame of mind. They are always kind to strangers and to each other.

In the early 1990s, I was the Science Librarian in a small progressive liberal arts college in Massachusetts (which I was until I retired in August), and we had a three-year program, sponsored by the Ford Foundation, called Comparative Scientific Traditions. As the librarian, there was a \$40000 fund I could use to buy books for the library, so I had a great time finding the (few) books available. We had a big symposium at the end of the three years, and I gave the list of books I'd bought to the participants. Many people asked me if I would annotate the list (the 1990s, remember), and I got a small grant from the National Science Foundation, which gave me some time off from work and made that possible. The book was published as a bibliography called *Science Across Cultures*, in 1992. My editor said,

“How would you like to edit an encyclopedia?” And I very foolishly said yes, without having any idea what that would entail. Six years later, with a different publisher The *Encyclopaedia of the History of Science, Technology, and Medicine in Non-Western Cultures* was published. And, since then, I have edited a second edition of the encyclopedia, and perhaps a third coming up in the next few years, and a series of volumes on Mathematics, Astronomy, Medicine, Nature, and Happiness, among others. I’m working on *Parenting Across Cultures* right now.

The happiness book had a slightly different beginning. My editor at Springer and the head of the company apparently had a discussion that was something like, “What can we get Helaine to do next?” For Springer, my books sell very well—*Childbirth Across Cultures* was the most downloaded book of 2011—not that I made any money from it, and I tend to get my work in on time. So they suggested *Happiness*. I thought this would be really interesting and I agreed.

Happiness Across Cultures consists of 29 chapters. The first section consists of chapters about specific countries, from Australian Aboriginals to Vietnam, and the second has chapters on the Science of Happiness, the relation of climate to happiness, and one on Theories of Happiness. I tried to make the chapters readable; most academics like to have their work not readable except by a very few; I think for this sort of volume, readability is important. I think it can be learned without being dull. The contributors came from all fields: psychology, anthropology, economics, history, philosophy, sociology. You cannot study a subject like happiness from one point of view. Especially if one of the aims of the book is to provide some material so that the people who might have some influence in creating a better and more comfortable life for others can read it. Some of the questions I hope you can find the

answers to in this book concern (1) the relation of happiness to culture; (2) whether there is a difference between happiness, contentment, quality of life, wellbeing, etc.; (3) the connection between equality and happiness; (4) what the role of comparison (closely related to 3) is; (5) if there is a connection between gender and happiness; and (6) adaptation: how does people's ability to adapt help them be happy?

Let me address these issues. It is clear that people in some places seem to be happier than others. In the United States, which always scores high on the Global Happiness issues, most of the people I know are grumbling about something. Children play in organized groups, but there is very little spontaneous, joyful interaction. And yet in a place like Tibet, with a severe climate and access only to basic goods and services, people accept life with a peaceful mind. Perhaps, maybe entirely, it is Buddhism, but life seems to go well for Tibetans despite limited employment opportunities and other hardships. Buddhism plays a central role in Thailand, too, where it is an important ingredient of happiness, influencing people's attitudes, belief systems, moral values and the very meaning of life. A Buddhist's goal is spiritual happiness and freedom from craving, a very different concept from that in the west, where satisfying craving seems to contribute to happiness.

I think this has a lot to do with #3—equality. I live in a small town with a big university, and there is perhaps not so much of a difference in income and possessions than in other places in America and other parts of the world. But I live in one of poorer sections of town, and we are the last on the list to get our roads plowed in the winter, and last year, during a massive power outage after a snowstorm, we had no power for 5 days while the richer parts of town had only a day without power. These are obviously very tiny things, but in places like Rwanda, which have been torn apart by conflict (there was

a massive genocide in 1994, and you yourselves know of a living a country torn apart by conflict), a study shows that health is more important to people than economic happiness, especially as economic happiness is hard to come by. When interviewed, the people talked about what made them happy, not about the things they couldn't change. But inequality seems to be growing in the world. In China, for example, the world's most populous country, there are widening disparities between regions, poverty, social problems and environmental destruction, which will be very hard for the government to deal with. In Mexico, the author talks about "two Mexicos"—each with contrasting interpretations of what makes people happy. And in South Africa, the divide between white and black and rich and poor continues, although for everyone life happiness has increased since the fall of apartheid.

This leads to another issue: Democracy. It seems that in countries like Singapore, where people were previously very happy to have a strong and stable government and economic stability, now people also want to have personal freedom and more social and economic choices. We will have to see, in places like Hong Kong (and here?) whether the limitations provided by the government contribute or get in the way of people's happiness.

There is also a lot of literature on collectivist versus individualistic societies. In collectivist societies, people gain more from being part of the group than from individual achievement, which supposedly contributes to a more peaceful frame of mind. And there is again a growing literature on the differences in happiness in rural and urban populations. In many places in the world, rural people still live in a traditional manner. This has advantages—living close to home and family and social support—but also

disadvantages, such as lack of basic needs and limited education, especially for women.

Gender. Well, women have it worse all over the world. This is certainly less so in countries where women have equal rights under the law and in more Westernized societies. But in many places women do all of the housework, and all of the farming, all the child raising, house building, etc. They are not as well educated, or not educated at all, and have little access to better food, better health care, a better life. We hope this is changing, but it will be a slow change. The United States will probably never have a woman president. (My husband doesn't agree). How about in Vietnam? I've always thought that the women's movement of the 1960s, in which I was very involved, put women in the worst place. Now, instead of just caring for the children, making nice meals and keeping a clean home, I also had to work full-time, and do all the outside work--mowing the lawn, tending the garden, shoveling the snow. We worked so hard so we could have even more work to do. And I think it's even harder for my daughter—having to do everything and doing it well. Again, what about here? Clearly, in some places where women have fewer legal rights, their lives are less happy. And yet in many places it seems that women, even in hard circumstances, find happiness in each others' company.

As for the differences between happiness, contentment, quality of life, and wellbeing, I found the article on Hinduism and what constitutes happiness for Indian women really fascinating. The women consider that the laughing, joyous state that I think of as happy is reserved for children and unmarried girls who are unaware of life's burdens. Once you get to be an adult, happiness comes from control—being able to control younger members of your family, especially your daughter-in-law, being able to represent the

family to the outside world, being in charge of meals and seeing who is entitled to more and better food.

It does seem that the secret to happiness is adaptation. There are many chapters on farmers—in Vietnam, Cambodia, Peru, Malawi, Madagascar—and again, it seems in places where people adapt to their conditions—very hot or very cold climates, droughts and deserts, or where their livelihood depends on the sea—they seem to be happier. It doesn't take that much to make people happy—a good crop, a good catch, some access to good water and sanitation and health, good government, autonomy, control over food, good social relations and a life free of crime, inequality and poverty. Well, that doesn't seem like very much to me, but most people in the world find many of those not in their reach. Why should that be so hard? Why can't we have good governments that provide access to the things that make our lives easier and better? Why does the difference between the rich and the poor increase instead of decrease? These are very big questions, and I hope that governments are starting to think of ways to make life better.

I'd just like to say how happy I am to have been in Vietnam and to have had the chance to speak to you today.