Happy Happiness Day!

Let me be the first to wish you a very Happy Happiness Day! In case you didn't know it, today is the first International Day of Happiness, launched by all 193 UN member states. Happiness Day doesn't mean we've arrived at happiness, but it does mean that we've recognized that happiness is our goal -- and that our societies need to work harder to promote the things that really matter in the 21st century.

The fourth king of the Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan led the way 40 years ago, drawing on ancient Buddhist wisdom. Bhutan should pursue Gross National Happiness (GNH) rather than Gross National Product (GNP) like the rest of the world. Since then, Bhutan has been experimenting with a new holistic approach to development that emphasizes not just economic growth but also culture, mental health, compassion, and community. Bhutan is searching for a balanced society.

It's a worthy search. Bhutan aims to avoid the Easterlin Paradox that grips the US. Professor Richard Easterlin discovered many years ago that America was becoming much richer per person but not happier, at least not according to the direct reports of wellbeing by Americans responding to surveys. This is sobering, indeed. We are threatening the planet with pollution, climate change, and other environmental degradation to chase more and more goods that don't seem to do so much to really make us any happier.

My colleagues Richard Layard, John Helliwell and I reported on the evidence on happiness in last year's first World Happiness Report, prepared for a UN meeting on happiness promoted by Bhutan. (We'll have the Second World Happiness Report out this fall.) We used worldwide survey data to look at the factors that truly make people happy. Income of course matters, but mainly to the poor. When people are hungry, deprived of basic needs such as clean water, health care, and education, and without meaningful employment, they indeed suffer. Economic development that alleviates poverty is a vital step in boosting happiness.

But income of course is only one among many factors that explain the keys to happiness, something that is well known to everybody except perhaps some Wall Street types and some economists. Other key sources of happiness include social support networks (friends, family, neighbors, colleagues, classmates), a low level of corruption in government and business (obviously a point of U.S. failure relative to many other high-income countries), and personal freedom and security from violence and lawlessness. Having a good job is also extremely important to individual and societal happiness.

Mental health is also a crucial source of happiness. We should be doing much more to ensure that people have access to mental health services when they need them. That would indeed boost wellbeing for many people otherwise in great distress.

There is another key to happiness. The great Buddhist monk, teacher, and writer, Matthieu Ricard reminds us that sensory stimuli -- such as consumerism, shopping sprees, TV spectaculars, gambling, food, sex, drugs, you name it -- are not the path to a sustained high level of happiness. Indeed, he says, incessant sensory stimuli are the path to exhaustion, not happiness!

Sustained high-level happiness, he says, in line with the Buddha's teachings, arises from compassion, altruism, and giving rather than receiving. This is not just rhetoric, either in Ricard's own remarkable case or more generally. The power of altruism to promote happiness in the giver has been demonstrated over and over again. Even the neuroscientists have shown it in their clinical experiments.

The world is now discussing a set of goals to adopt to guide humanity in the period after 2015, following the Millennium Development Goals. There is a strong feeling that the pursuit of happiness needs to figure among the measurements going forward. Are we getting happier? We should look, learn, and adjust our strategies as individuals and nations to find a better way. A new report by the OECD, Guidelines on Measuring Subjective Well-being, released today, will be an important guide to nations as they formulate new measurements that go beyond GNP.

As Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon wisely said today:

On this first International Day of Happiness, let us reinforce our commitment to inclusive and sustainable human development and renew our pledge to help others. When we contribute to the common good, we ourselves are enriched. Compassion promotes happiness and will help build the future we want.

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