

What is your idea of perfect happiness?

Douglas Goodfellow
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Oh goodness. Perfect happiness. Is there such a thing? Wouldn't it get boring? Doesn't one need struggle, even conflict, something to set a low or at least a bar in order to enjoy the highs?

Happiness is overrated. Particularly when people confuse it with a constant state of elation, or excitement. And I think, as phrased, that's what this prompt is all about--where would you have to be, what would you have to do, to be constantly elated? Or constantly revved up in a state of excitement?

Like, maybe, be a 70's or 80's rock star, knee deep in cocaine and groupies. Be Elon Musk. In a position to say, "I'm paying \$11,000,000,000 in taxes this year." Wonder what he had to cross off the list for 2022 because of that. "Honey, the cruise is off." "We can't dig that pool this year." "Your mom is going to have to stay in that second-class assisted living place."

I don't think so.

I am much bigger on engagement and satisfaction. On meaning. This comes in large measure from Viktor Frankl: life is at its best, I am my happiest, when I am engaging in a struggle to achieve a worthwhile goal. Doing so consciously, and conscientiously. And I am at my happiest when I achieve those goals. If you want to call that happiness, fair enough.

Some examples:

Latter 90's, I became a bit toxic, I believe. Mom came to me, tears in her eyes, and said, "I love you. I've done everything I can to make you happy. Nothing seems to work. If anything, things seem to be getting worse. I don't know what to do." Not those exact words, but close enough. That's the jist of it for sure.

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I think many guys would have just shot back--"OH YEAH?!? WELL WHAT ABOUT YOU! YOU..."

But I didn't. People romanticize love. I don't think love is in emotion; love is in action. I liked Mom then. Still do, even more!

But she just told me I didn't love her. I didn't act towards her in love. That was her assertion. I remained quiet as she finished saying what she needed to say and walked away. I thought about it. She was right.

I went to her and said, "You hit the nail on the head. I've been a total prick. It's not you—you love me all the time. I'm not happy with the house. With my job. With the way I look. And I've been taking all that out on you."

Then I took on the task of changing all that--the house. My job. My physical condition. Now, I'm not claiming perfection, but after thirty-two years, I think Mom and I are closer than ever. The house looks better than it ever has. I'm in the best shape I've been in years--maybe I was in better shape for climbing and carrying heavy packs in 2004, but overall (adjusting for age!) I think I'm in better shape than I've ever been. Bit of a pendulum on that last one, but that's how it's supposed to go!

Another example? Denali. Probably three years to get that done. Toting progressively heavier backpacks for longer distances and up higher climbs in the Sandias. Gathering the necessary equipment. Taking that training course on Mount Baker. Climbing Rainier. Then Denali.

On summit day, I got emotional after we got past Denali Pass (we were on the other side of the mountain than the one described in the book *Denali's Howl* that you lent me; those guys climbed a harder route and never encountered Denali Pass). But at the summit, I could feel a bit of a letdown: "Okay, I've done it. Here I am. Nothing to do now but get down. Then what?"

Luckily, I had a new challenge lined up: finishing my degree. Originally, I thought I'd take six or if I felt spunky nine credit hours per semester as I ran the agency.

But after climbing Denali (really well--I absolutely was the strongest client on the climb!) I felt ten feet tall and invisible. Took fifteen hours per semester while running the agency in both spring and fall, graduating with a 4.03 GPA.

Worthy challenge. Difficult struggle. Satisfaction. Happy.

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Kind of the same thing with my Master's degree, but actually the challenge of becoming an excellent teacher has served me well.

Then rafting, and the Grand Canyon. Worthy challenge, associated struggle, took two times to get it to where I wanted that experience and how fortunate to have that second chance!

Most recently, I felt like my hikes failed to do what they used to do--provide a challenge and an associated goal. Mom showed less enthusiasm about backpacking (though I hope that part of my life continues!); why did I haul forty-five pounds up to the five-mile marker on La Luz if backpacking, regular backpacking, didn't come after?

So, most recently, the bike. Mom let me get the bike. And I knew (know) that if I didn't set up a goal to work towards, I'd never get out of that bike what I wanted. So Triple Bypass.

I worked like the proverbial dog (I really don't know, personally, of any dogs who work like the proverbial dog, so proverbial) to get ready for that ride. All those climbs in the East Mountains. Working up to be able to take on Sandia Crest, and then doing it. Five times. Creating my own century route with over one-hundred miles (hence, century) and over nine-thousand feet of climbing to get ready and have some confidence for taking on 106 miles and over 10,000' feet of climbing.

So on Triple Bypass day, while I got a little irritated with the bike paths, particularly between Georgetown and where we finally got back on the highway for the last four miles up Loveland Pass, I never thought I'd have to call Mom and say, "Better just come get me. I can't do this."

Always a little niggling doubt in the back of my head, though. When I did feel myself ebbing, I'd think about all the work I put in to get ready, and the fact that every single ride I'd mapped out, generally increasing in length, altitude and hence difficulty, I'd finished. And I just. Kept. Pedaling.

So when I crested Vail Pass, the last of the three for the day, and had only the descent into Avon left, I felt very much like I did just after Denali Pass: "I'm going to get this done. All the work. All the hours. All the struggle. I've earned the payoff, and it, barring disaster, is going to happen."

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Not bad for 62! And, since I'm starting at a much higher level of capacity and fitness, my goal for this year is to do it again, but ever so much better.

So if I haven't made it clear, my idea of perfect happiness is to find a worthwhile, challenging goal. Struggle for that goal. Achieve it. And then find the next one.

Elation? On occasion. Excitement? Love a good movie, and a roller coaster. (Though these days I have to gird myself with a little Dramamine beforehand!)

But using my life in the pursuit of those kinds of moments? Waste of time.

I'll hang with satisfaction. :)