

VITAL TOPICS FORUM

On Happiness

Barbara Rose Johnston, *Guest Editor*, and Elizabeth Colson, Dean Falk, Graham St John, John H. Bodley, Bonnie J. McCay, Alaka Wali, Carolyn Nordstrom, and Susan Slyomovics

ABSTRACT What do anthropologists have to say about happiness? For some contributors in this Vital Topics Forum, happiness is a sensory force that colors and shapes human evolution and experience. Others consider happiness, or the lack thereof, to be a faceted reflection of the arrangements in society. All recognize the potential power of human happiness, where a distant memory, fleeting experience, or idealized vision can serve as a driving force in transformative change, prompting individual and collective desire and action to give new meaning, sustain life and livelihood, restore dignity, make peace . . . to dream again. [*trouble, happiness, well-being, engaged anthropology*]

INTRODUCTION TO HAPPINESS

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In 1992, calling for a cultural critique of “trouble” to comprehend contemporary difficulties and develop programs for correcting them, Roy Rappaport outlined his vision of an engaged anthropology in which the study of the varied manifestations of humanity’s maladaptations are purposefully deployed, through advocacy and action, in corrective programs, challenging us to act as citizens as well as anthropologists (Rappaport 1993:300–302; see also Messer and Lambeck 2001). Today it is apparent that maladaptation is a biocultural force driving planetary change: for varied reasons, humans seem to have lost the ability to achieve, sustain, and reproduce a healthy way of life. Anthropological efforts to understand and attempt to ameliorate ulcerating and degenerative crises demonstrate that we have much to say about trouble and the many miseries that trouble produces (Bodley 2008; Crate and Nutall 2009; Farmer 2003; Hale 2008; Hinton 2002, 2010; Johnston 1994, 2009, 2011c; Low and Merry 2010; Merry 2005; Rylko-Bauer et al. 2009; Scudder 2010). These and numerous other efforts to study, communicate, and advocate for transformative change demonstrate that an engaged anthropology of trouble is a dominant concern in the discipline. However, the corrective interventions envisioned by Rappaport prove elusive. Predictable troubles and their consequences continue to erupt and ulcerate.

One recent example, of many, involves the Fukushima nuclear meltdown. The anthropogenic impact of Pandora’s nuclear box has been documented and debated (as well as

often censored or denied) for years, beginning with Earle Reynold’s Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission study of the adverse effects of fallout on the growth and development of children (Reynolds 1959; see also Price 2007). In the years since, the nuclear–anthropology intersect has examined the following, to name a few: sociocultural impact of atomic nomadism in the Pacific (Kiste 1974); fallout and battles over censorship and accountability in the U.S. West (Kuletz 1998); human–environmental consequences of Pacific island fallout, bioaccumulation, and contamination in the food chain and human body (Johnston and Barker 2008); the sociopolitical anatomy of the Chernobyl disaster, response to it, and its lingering degenerative costs (Petryna 2002); and the political and cultural forces shaping Hiroshima’s memorialization of atomic annihilation (Yoneyama 1999:58–59; see Figure 1). Critical analyses of nuclear science, militarism, energy, and disaster response made embedded culture and power biases and their consequences visible, especially demonstrating the corruptive impact of censorship and denial (Button 2010; Gusterson 1998; Johnston 2007; Masco 2006; Nader and Beckerman 1978; see also Nader 2010). Yet, despite decades of work demonstrating the problematic human factors that lead to nuclear disaster and the immense human costs, recommendations for transparency and risk reduction were largely ignored in the immediate aftermath of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant meltdown. To pacify public fear and thus reduce the economic ramifications of another “Chernobyl,” statements from industry and government minimized and, at times, censored information on the extent and content of radiation emissions, fallout, and its accumulating presence in the atmosphere, water, soil, food chain, and human body in Japan, the United States, and the



FIGURE 1. Japanese youth visiting the Nagasaki Peace Park a short distance from ground zero. The atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and its horrific consequences are part of the Japanese national education curriculum, including field trips to those cities' peace parks. In the background is Seibo Kitamura's ten-meter bronze "The Peace Statute," which was erected in August of 1955 by the citizens of Nagasaki "as an appeal for lasting world peace and a prayer that such tragedy would never be repeated." According to the interpretive plaque, "The elevated right hand points to the threat of nuclear weapons, while the outstretched left hand symbolizes tranquility and world peace. Divine omnipotence and love are embodied in the sturdy physique and gentle countenance of the statue, and a prayer for the repose of all the souls of all war victims is expressed in the closed eyes. Furthermore, the folded right leg symbolizes quiet meditation while the left leg is poised for action in assisting humanity." (Courtesy of Barbara Rose Johnston)

global downwind community (Johnston 2011a, 2011b). Although the consequences of this institutionalized denial may indeed keep industry and trade relatively healthy, it is the Japanese citizen and global downwind communities whose exposures might have been through proactive effort avoided or reduced that subsidize this economic happiness.

The point here? Like many of my colleagues, I find myself immensely frustrated at the huge distance between knowledge, communication, and remedial action and, frankly, depressed at the apparent ineffectiveness of our efforts in these perilous times. In a world full of trouble, we focus on dark matters with hopes that the critical analysis of ulcerating conditions will illuminate corrective action and encourage transformative change. Yet, the nature of our global crises is both synergistic and cumulative, and in the urgent need to respond to an ever-expanding cascade of calamitous events, the cautionary concerns of the case-specific critical analyst are often muted or eclipsed. Thus, with the notion that a holistic analysis of trouble is incomplete without an understanding of the absence of trouble, this Vital Topics Forum challenges anthropologists to shift their conceptual lens and add their voice to a very different, yet completely related, conversation: What do anthropologists have to say about happiness?

For this *American Anthropologist* forum, I invited a range of prominent anthropologists to voice their insights on happiness in reflexive and provocative ways. Although the no-

tion and expression of happiness is conceived of differently in different social and cultural contexts, are there also commonalities? What role might happiness play as a driving force in transformative change? What can be said about the human initiative and experience in expressing happiness through vocalization, music, movement, and art? What happens when societies are organized around the common pursuit of happiness? Given that our globalized world is largely organized around the idealized notion that economic growth is the primary means to secure health and well-being, where does happiness figure into this calculus? Whose notion of happiness? Imposed and implemented at what cost? If, as some argue, happiness is a qualitative dimension of health and well-being (Mathews and Izquierdo 2009:3–5), are the material conditions necessary for individual, family, community, society, and planetary survival key indicators in the happiness calculus? Is it possible to restructure societal priorities to sustain it?

HAPPINESS

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Approximately 50 years ago I wrote, "We cannot measure or record happiness" (Colson 1962:54). Over the years, I have changed my mind about many things but not about this,

despite various attempts to construct happiness scales. Instead, I increasingly wonder what anyone means by *happiness*. My dictionary tells me that *happy* means lucky, fortunate, content, glad, apt, or felicitous (Pocket Oxford Dictionary 1949). I would add pleasure, a sense of comfort, joy, elation, satisfaction, ease, and contentment. Despite the ambiguity of meaning, people can be asked if they now feel more or less contented, joyous, fortunate, lucky, elated, or satisfied than on some occasion in the past or if they think some action would increase such a state, but I doubt that people commonly seek to calibrate emotions for comparison across time and circumstances. *Happiness* and other words that refer to emotions invoke transitory states that can be experienced but retreat under attempts to describe and analyze them.

If the English term is ambiguous, still greater ambiguity is introduced when we try to translate and create a happiness scale for those who speak different languages and have their own categories of emotional responses and then attempt to use such a scale to examine the benefits of given changes. Much of my research these past 65 years has been among Tonga speakers in southern Zambia. Their word *ku-kondwa* (infinitive) I have learned to translate contextually as “content,” “pleased,” or “glad,” but I have also learned that I am a dubious judge of when people are appropriately so designated unless I know them well. Emotions are internal states to be inferred from externalities, but wherever I have lived emotional states are at least partially hidden by the conventional face exposed to the world. In Zambia, under most circumstances it is appropriate to appear as though all is well with one’s world, to smile and joke even under adversity, and to conceal pain and anger, but at funerals women should wail and shed tears. I have seen women switch to frantic wails and blubbery tears on reaching the outskirts of the place of death and as abruptly switch back to smiles on turning to greet earlier arrivals. Tonga say you cannot know what someone feels or thinks from the facial expression. Only previous experience of the person or knowledge of the probable emotional response in given circumstances allows one to intuit what someone else is likely to be feeling. They also say that anyone can be a witch, and the witch conceals his or her real emotion behind a smiling face—that emotion, of course, may be glee at misfortunes soon to befall you. The witch who dances naked outside one’s doorway at night is said to smile while he (it is usually he) thinks, “How sad that you will die” or “Isn’t it sad that your child will suffer.”

How can I judge if 60 years of changes initiated often by aliens, who claim to be motivated by a wish to make local conditions easier and local people happier, have added to or detracted from overall contentment or happiness? Some would certainly say that life is much better. It probably is for some. Others say life was better once. It is probably irrelevant that I think village life is marked by more insecurity, more distrust, and less contentment than in the 1940s, although I can document increasing inequality, an ever-

expanding list of wants that tax most people’s resources beyond the limit, and a conviction that others benefit while they suffer. But happiness is in the heart and not in the eye of the beholder.

HAPPINESS: AN EVOLUTIONARY PERSPECTIVE

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Although other animals such as our closest cousins, the chimpanzees, may show signs of contentment or playfulness, they do not spend time contemplating whether or not they are happy. That is an activity engaged in only by humans, consistent with the observation by psychologist Martin Seligman that happiness is “all in one’s head.” I believe that human experiences of happiness have a unique cognitive component that is tied to brain evolution in our earliest ancestors. In a recent study that focused on happiness, 2,250 adults from numerous countries were contacted randomly during their waking hours (via an iPhone application) and asked how they were feeling at that moment (rated on a happiness scale from 0 to 100), what they were doing, and if they were thinking about something other than what they were doing (Killingsworth and Gilbert 2010). The results revealed that people’s minds were wandering (a.k.a. daydreaming) nearly half of the time and that this was true to varying degrees during all of the many activities that were reported—except one. Minds did not wander while making love, which, perhaps unsurprisingly, also had a significantly higher happiness rating than any other activity. (Other activities that received high happiness ratings were exercising, conversing, and listening to music.) Remarkably, people reported being less happy when their minds were wandering than when they were focused on an activity, which led the authors to conclude that “a human mind is a wandering mind, and a wandering mind is an unhappy mind.”

If it detracts from their happiness, why do people daydream so much? I believe it is because minds that are capable of wandering are an evolutionary tradeoff for ones that remain contentedly in the here and now. Daydreaming depends largely on two-way circuitry between parts of the frontal and temporal lobes. It is initiated in the frontal lobes, which stimulate the temporal lobes to activate memories of previous experiences similar to those being imagined along with their previous emotional impacts. This happens largely at unconscious levels, and the emotional valence of the associated memories is rapidly communicated back to the frontal lobes, which is where intentional acts are facilitated. The temporal lobes also respond to imagined situations that the individual may not have personally experienced but that, nevertheless, evoke strong emotions that became adaptive during our species’ evolution (e.g., fear of snakes). Mind wandering thus allows a simulation or “preview” of the emotional consequences of possible future actions, on which an individual may, or may not, then choose to act (Gilbert and

Wilson 2007). Neuroscientists have established that the part of the prefrontal cortex that is important for worrying about the future, planning, and carrying out intentional behaviors has increased dramatically in its relative size and in the complexity of its circuitry since our ancestors split from those of chimpanzees some five to seven million years ago (Semendeferi et al. 2011). This part of the brain accesses the gut-level feelings associated with memories “because they encode the wisdom that our species has acquired over millennia about the adaptive significance of the events. . . . Actually perceiving a bear is a potentially expensive way to learn about its adaptive significance. . . . When we preview the future and prefeel its consequences, we are soliciting advice from our ancestors” (Gilbert and Wilson 2007:1354).

We may not be particularly happy as we plan what to do if a tornado strikes, how to behave in a particular social situation, or the order in which we will complete a list of errands. But it gets us through the day, and we owe it to those early hominins who seeded the evolution of the neural machinery for daydreaming by beginning to anticipate problems in their physical and social environments. A wandering mind may not be a happy mind, but it is a prepared one. As Matthew Killingsworth and Daniel Gilbert discovered, a focused mind, however, is a happier one. The ability to focus on creative endeavors is another product of our species’ evolved cerebral cortex (Falk 2004). From my personal perspective, when I am working on an academic project (such as writing this article), time stands still, all worries fade into the background, and the process is enormously satisfying. I am, in a word, *happy*. This is not unusual. According to psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky (2011), hundreds of studies have shown that happiness is associated not only with physical well-being, material comfort, and satisfying human relationships (as we all know) but also with creativity and productivity. So give yourself permission to focus on that creative project you’ve been putting off! For safety’s sake, however, you had better keep some daydreaming in the mix.

ALTERED TOGETHER: DANCE FESTIVALS AND CULTURAL LIFE

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Worldwide, throughout human history and across cultures, festivals are integral to reproducing socioeconomic, religious, and political life, but they are also thresholds of innovation, sources of joy and happiness among participants, and barometers of peace beyond their borders. As histories of colonialism, totalitarianism, and indeed the modern state illustrate, where a people are denied their festal life or where festivals serve despotic ends and military causes, they become stripped of their capacity to serve cultural vitality, collective consciousness, and intercultural harmony. There is nothing new in these statements, because they condense—

and indeed oversimplify—the views of Émile Durkheim, Georges Bataille, Victor Turner, and others devoted to the study of intoxicating ritual, liminality, and cultural celebrations. There is remarkably little research conducted on contemporary festivals outside of their role in bolstering communities of faith or measuring socioeconomic viability. Qualitative data on festal life in the present are in short supply, especially data on those events involving that activity often dismissed as unproductive, irrelevant, and inconsequential, yet a common source of human happiness: dance. But we would be misguided to maintain such views and not simply because “clubbing” is one of the chief leisure activities outside of sports worldwide. Confusing the boundaries between leisure and religion, recreation and spirituality, ecstasy and theater, forms of festal life in which dance—or “trance dance”—are integral are of vital concern to public understanding, not least because they elicit joy and happiness from their participants but also because they are mechanisms and models for intercultural well-being.

The transnational cultures of dance to which I refer are electronic dance music (EDM) cultures. More specifically, over more than ten years, in ethnography conducted in over ten countries, I have become immersed in the world of psytrance, a movement manifesting in dozens of countries since the mid-1990s from its genesis in Goa, India (Goa trance). In my research, I have investigated trance and visionary arts dance festivals as experimental worlds apart and as spiritual technologies. These transnational events have grown increasingly popular as liminal sites for the embodiment of happiness in which dance is the chief expression of this need. Critically, these events facilitate the dissolution of individuality in dance ecstasy, just as they are stages for the performance of difference. Oscillation between the dissolution and performance of distinction has long been native to Carnival. Today, from local parties to international festivals, EDM events evidence the return of what Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* (1968) called the “people’s second world,” the carnivalesque as source of cosmic laughter. Among my principal field interests is Portugal’s Boom Festival, the biennial weeklong festival that, in 2008, attracted over 40,000 people from over 80 countries (St John 2009). Notable at Boom are the Liminal Zone, a space in which the *sacra*, or ultimate concerns, of its community—for example, sustainability, peace, well-being—are presented, and the Dance Temple, an extraordinary plateau of visionary experience, playfulness, and sensuality. On one of the world’s largest open-air dance floors, Dance Temple occupants share in an experience that might be an amalgamation of Henry Corbin’s *mundus imaginalis*, Rudolph Otto’s *mysterium tremendum*, and Aldous Huxley’s “Mind at Large” (St John in press).

My research has shown that visionary arts and dance events like Boom in Portugal, Burning Man in Nevada, and the Rainbow Serpent Festival in Australia illustrate an extraordinary commitment on the part of management and participants (see Figure 2). Event cohabitants optimize an



FIGURE 2. *Rainbow Serpent Festival 2011, Australia. Photo by Vagabond Forest. (Courtesy of Graham St John)*

assemblage of technologies and design frameworks to maximize convivial passions that appear in reverse equivalence among official representatives committed to regulating the festal life, preventing the liminal from breaking its levees, killing the “vibe.” That events occasioning altered states of consciousness are subject to prohibitions and ordinance signifies their status as ambivalent sites of risk and awe, tensions evident at the inception of the “rave” phenomenon in London in the late 1980s, a period when MDMA (“ecstasy”)—the “happy drug”—grew popular. The round yellow “smiley face,” a winking icon for a cult of intense joy and hope appealing to young adults from backgrounds of mixed opportunity, became a sign of pathology and deviant leisure for authorities. As a result, the disputed symbol was banned from public display, and raving became the front of a culture war that, with various subsequent global flash points, has been waged into the present. In 2003, for example, the third annual Samothraki Festival, a psytrance festival held on the Aegean island by that name, was routed by Greek authorities in the lead-in to the Athens Olympic Games, the institutionalized exultation of altered states of consciousness in its most legitimate, individualized, and commoditized form: competitive sport. It was a curious juncture, a telling story, a clash of cultures of altered consciousness. Although transnational trance dance festivals are remote from the international stage of the Olympics, they are no less realms of “collective effervescence” and cooperation, offering considerable insight on play, goodwill, and the human spirit.

Festivals are governed by the radical logic of impermanence, their indeterminacy a source of pleasure for habitués and insecurities among those without. But as fleeting and uncertain as they are, these are realms of the possible, as inhabitants export the joyful products of the festal into the neighboring terrain of everyday life—no small consideration

if we recognize the potential for transnational events to impact consciousness beyond their convivial core. That potent liminal thresholds are not simply sites of cultural revitalization but dramatic modes essential for cultural evolution is the terrain on which Victor Turner delivered some of his final thoughts. It is a short distance from here to Boom and other emergent dance and visionary events, where being altered together facilitates the variable transcendence—performance of human differences and where the public expression of this dynamic offers insight on contemporary ways in which the need to be happy is actualized.

SMALL-NATION HAPPINESS: A SCALE AND POWER PERSPECTIVE

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If happiness is measured by success at maintaining and reproducing people, society, and culture, then scale of society is the primary variable underlying happiness. Anthropology’s most important contribution to the understanding of happiness may be our paleoanthropological and ethnographic documentation that human evolutionary history has shaped us for life in families and small face-to-face groups. If my estimates are reasonable, perhaps two-thirds of some 2.6 trillion human-life years, representing approximately 70 billion lives over the past 100,000 years, were lived in small-scale tribal societies, compared with some 20 and 15 percent respectively lived in ancient civilizations and the commercial world. Our larger, more complex world has brought colossal human failures. For example, by 2009, in spite of high levels of material productivity, more than a billion people were malnourished because of food insecurity (FAO 2010:8). That is roughly the entire population of the world in 1820. It is tough for anyone to be truly happy when

those around you are not happy. Human happiness is also threatened by the relative deprivation that accompanies our consumer-based culture (Sahlins 1996). Commercial world values for competition, personal power, and financial success may suppress the cooperation, altruism, community relationships, and autonomy that produce higher levels of subjective well-being (Kasser 2002).

One of my most vivid impressions of the Asháninka in the Peruvian Amazon in the 1960s was of self-confident people whooping with laughter even in the face of what to me seemed grueling hardships. I concluded that the Asháninka were happy because they controlled the conditions of their daily life and because their primary concern was their success at what I call “the humanization project”: nurturing and sustaining a people and their culture. Humanization is a complex challenge, but it is easier for the Asháninka because they live in a small-scale society focused on family and household. The real key is their perception of social justice rooted in their cultural consensus that everyone has access to the social, cultural, and material resources needed by successful human beings. Even with their minimal material culture, the Asháninka were very wealthy in social, cultural, and natural capital, and their wealth was well distributed. The primary material basis for their prosperity and happiness was their rich tropical-forest ecosystem, which they protected by keeping their ecological footprint very small.

Tribal culture is neither a certain nor the only pathway to happiness, but the small size of a society and equitable distribution of social power are crucial variables. I met another self-confident, happy people on a recent visit to the Commonwealth of Dominica, a Caribbean small island nation of about 80,000 people. An assessment by the Caribbean Development Bank (Halcrow Group Ltd. 2003) noted that Dominicans reportedly enjoyed high state of well-being but paradoxically were cash-income poor. In fact, social justice and “adequate means of livelihood for all” are fundamental principles enshrined in the Dominican constitution, and the majority owned their own homes and garden plots. Dominica ranked number four out of 179 countries on the 2006 Happy Planet Index (HPI), based on high self-reported levels of life satisfaction, high life expectancy, and low environmental impact (Marks et al. 2006). Fourteen of the HPI top 20 happy countries were also small nations. Another small nation, Bhutan, a constitutional monarchy, ranked 13th on HPI, has made “Gross National Happiness” an explicit policy objective. Bhutan is on the fringes of the commercial world, and as a Buddhist culture it explicitly makes knowledge acquisition, communal enrichment, and personal development more important national goals than materialist economic growth.

In the contemporary world, I take “small scale” to mean autonomous or semiautonomous political jurisdictions, or “nations,” of fewer than ten million people who share a broad cultural consensus for justice and sustainability (Bodley 2003, 2011). Peoples that live in successful small nations

better understand the limits of their physical world and can more readily constrain the power of their leaders. The biggest threat to widespread happiness is that leaders who are not constrained by cultural consensus for social justice can be expected to promote growth in scale and complexity. Such unconstrained elite-directed growth concentrates the benefits of growth in the hands of the advantaged elite minority and then distributes or socializes the costs to the relatively disadvantaged and relatively deprived majority. Growth then must be subsidized by costly administrative bureaucracies, militaries, advertising and marketing, ecosystem degradation, and the unsustainable use of fossil fuels. Small nations can do without such subsidies, and this allows them to focus on those essential human needs that constitute the fundamental prerequisites of happiness.

HAPPY AS A CLAM: A COMEDY

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When Barbara Rose Johnston asked me to join this discussion of “happiness,” I resisted, and then, once she had twisted my arm, procrastinated. What do I know about “happiness” in any scholarly sense? Nothing. I was tempted to Google my way to some of the literature on the topic and was quickly humbled by how much I found from social psychology and other disciplines. I also played the etymological game, always a satisfying diversion, noting, for example, that the English term *happiness* has an ancient association with the idea of being “lucky, favored by fortune, prosperous”; that it has genealogical connections with “silly”; and that the notion of “greatly pleased and content” is modern, from the 16th century (see <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=happy> [accessed December 7, 2011] and many other sources, which say much the same).

From my etymological quest, I also learned that the phrase “happy as a clam” (1630s) was originally “happy as a clam in the mud at high tide,” indicating a time when said clam is less likely to be dug up and eaten. This last, the happy clam saying, is the only bit of information that comes close to my own scholarly expertise: ecological anthropology of fishing and shell fishing. Indeed, I once led a team that transplanted large clams to a bay in the hope that they would spawn and repopulate Barnegat Bay, a happy prospect for the shell fishers of New Jersey and the basis for musings about “muddling through” decision making and adaptive management (McCay 1988). Stretching the metaphor a little, further research showed that the spawner clams were not happy enough, a finding that led to renewed focus on the larger issues of water quality in the bays.

A more promising entrée to this challenging topic is to connect it to comedy. Although like the Greeks and Romans we tend to think of comedies as performances with happy endings, M. Estellie Smith (1984) once identified an alternative, based on an encyclopedia definition of comedy in the ancient Greek tradition (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2011).

Comedy, as distinct from tragedy, is “the drama of humans as social rather than private beings, a drama of social actions having a frankly corrective purpose,” and Smith offered this as an entrée to her participation in what emerged, in the mid-1980s, as an anthropology-led critique of the use of the “tragedy of the commons” way of explaining why common property and open-access property arrangements seem to be connected with poverty and environmental deterioration (Smith 1984; see discussion in McCay and Acheson 1987). Smith’s reading of comedy has allowed those of us involved in transdisciplinary scholarship on environmental matters to posit a competing explanatory trope: “the comedy of the commons.” It draws attention to the essentially social and cultural nature of the commons and more broadly of environmental problems. It posits an alternative to the “tragedy” model, which is based on assumptions about individual rationality and market failures. Tragedy is about individuals and inexorable destinies; comedy is about social groups and surprising outcomes.

More to the point, the “comedy of the commons” idea calls on us to examine how people do in fact interact for “frankly corrective purposes,” whether or not the ending turns out to be happy for everyone. It has inspired some of us to rethink the question of community capacity for effective engagement in using and managing common-pool resources (Dietz et al. 2002; McCay and Jentoft 1998; Ostrom 1990), serving as an intellectual tool among others available to support efforts at participatory and community-based governance of natural resources in worlds otherwise dominated by authoritarian or neoliberal sources of governance. It helps remind us of the need to recognize deep-rooted connections between people and places, interwoven to form the socionatural units we call “the commons” or, as is more fashionable these days, “complex, adaptive coupled natural and human systems.” In systems terms, the trope of comedy can inform our search for sources of transition from “positive feedback” to “negative feedback” in the lives and scientific and management institutions that involve the people and places we study, confronted as they are by climate and other environmental changes (McCay et al. 2011). In that effort, we may be moving toward a new definition of *happiness* as resilience, a buzzword of today’s transdisciplinary environmentalism (Davidson 2010; Davidson-Hunt and Berkes 2003) and a possible focus for another “Vital Topics Forum.”

A DIFFERENT MEASURE OF WELL-BEING

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Economists and politicians have discovered happiness. After spending decades reducing the measure of well-being to a single indicator measured at a national scale—Gross Domestic Product—the essays of economists and others in policy journals and media outlets are currently full of discussions about how to find alternative measures for happiness. The discov-

ery of happiness spans the left–right political spectrum, making for strange bedfellows. The conservative administration of French President Nicolas Sarkozy commissioned progressive economists Amartya Sen, Joseph Stiglitz, and Jean Paul Fitoussi to produce a report on measuring well-being beyond the GDP (Stiglitz et al. 2009); conservative United Kingdom Prime Minister David Cameron launched a national survey effort to gauge happiness standards; the former monarch of Bhutan was the first to develop the Gross National Happiness index; and now there is an effort to develop a similar index in the United States of America (www.gnhusa.org). Most of these efforts stress the need to supplement the GDP with other standardized measures, such as health status (measured as life-expectancy rates) and educational status (measured through formal educational attainment), thus including what the United Nations terms “human development” indicators (HDI; see <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/hdi/>, accessed December 7, 2011). The progressive economists stress that adding human development measures to the assessment forces a focus on wealth redistribution and the capacity of a society to mitigate the inequality that accompanies the accumulation of GDP. Conservatives emphasize values and beliefs as a way of deemphasizing the need to address income inequality (BBC News 2010). Yet, all continue to operate under the same assumptions that guided the development of the GDP: namely, that there are standardized quantifiable measurements of these characteristics.

But why should there be universal standards that conform to only one definition of what it means to be “healthy, wealthy, and wise”? Does everyone have to be “literate” in the same way? What value can be attributed to literacy that comes from walking in the forest and learning from your parents the names, shapes, and utilities of a myriad diversity of life forms? Should health only be defined as being able to live as long as you can, or are relatively shorter life spans that are packed with meaningful experiences also acceptable for health measurement? And is wealth only to be attributed to monetary value, or can wealth also be assigned to accumulated ecological knowledge or memories of ancestral lore stored in collective memories passed on from generation to generation?

Asking these questions enables anthropologists to reframe the debate by contributing a perspective derived from long-term comparative study that spans the record of human history and the expanse of cultural formations around the globe. We offer measures of happiness found in different places than the statistics that inform the economists’ standards: we craft a concrete visualization of the conditions necessary to attain happiness through our analyses of the stories people tell, the webs of relationships people build, their expression of emotions, and the aesthetics of the everyday. In other words, we see beyond materiality to the inestimable number of qualities that people rely on to counteract the toll of social life. We account for cultural difference (Escobar 2000).

Ironically, it has been our lot to live and study among those considered the least materially “well-off” in the popular imaginary. Our chronicles have illuminated the injuries and brutalities of stratified systems, but we have consistently also chronicled the resilient and creative response to inequality.

Here are a few examples of alternative measures of happiness from my own experience. Among forest dwellers in Amazonia, well-being must include assessment of the balance between humans, other life forms, and supernatural beings and a moral dimension that regulates relationships, especially across generations (Chirif 2007; de la Cadena 2010; del Campo and Wali 2007; Viveiros de Castro 1998). In urban Chicago, for some, the pursuit of well-being entails freedom from work regimens (time flexibility); people therefore choose to earn less income to have more control over time (Wali et al. 2002). In both locales, the inclusion of these “extramaterial” measures troubles assessment of relative well-being because at the same time that people assign value to these qualities of life, they are repressed by the experience of relative material poverty and accompanying injustices. The cost of maintaining a state of well-being expressed in these alternative dimensions under oppressive material conditions is physically and psychologically high (Mullings and Wali 2002), but people persist to do so nevertheless. The insistence on holding on to what is important, what counts, is an indicator of the seemingly boundless capacity to generate hope and creativity in the bleakest of circumstances.

These alternative definitions of *well-being* are reinforced in the anthropology collections of the Field Museum. Here, I am overwhelmed by the importance of aesthetic design in the creation of utilitarian objects. Thousands of spoons, hundreds of shoes, innumerable urns, pots, and bowls, large quantities of spears and harpoons, fishing weirs, baskets, and other objects from around the world fill the shelves and cabinets—all uniquely decorated, shaped, and crafted. Testament to the depth of human creativity, these collections remind us of the emotional undercurrents that drive our search for well-being, the passion and joy we seek in our endeavors, and the irrepressible force of the desire for dignity no matter what material circumstances we find ourselves in. Indeed, we might advocate for a “dignity index” as an alternative to measuring material well-being.

The challenge for anthropologists is to present the varied evidence we have accumulated of these radically different constructs of well-being in formats as powerful as the GDP or the HDI. This does not have to entail the reduction of diverse constructions to a single index, but it does involve synthesizing a great amount of ethnographic and archaeological evidence to make our case. Anthropologists have used the strategy of synthesizing accumulated evidence to influence policy before: consider, for example, the inclusion of gender considerations in economic development programs, social costs of forced resettlement in calculating rates of return for large infrastructure projects, and “harm-reduction” strategies in treatment for drug addicts. Today, however, we can

create a “knowledge” base faster and more efficiently. Measures of well-being that might result from such a synthesis hold the potential for powerful changes in the reallocation of resources to expand the space for dignity and the reconsideration of the value of cultural difference to the well-being of our kind.

HAPPINESS (IS NOT A WARM GUN)

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My first thought on being asked to write about happiness was: What do anthropologists know about happiness? Our social capital trades on the currencies of angst, struggle, and splintered meaning—or as Neil Thin sums well in his title “Happiness and the Sad Topics of Anthropology” (Thin 2005). So I began to instead explore the question: What does what we write on happiness tell us about . . . us?

I little expected this would lead to a conclusion that (writing about) happiness over the last several thousand years appears to be profoundly linked to struggles for justice, perilous times of ruthless power, and a concern for the soul of humanity.

* * * * *

A conversation captures this essence of happiness for me. Two Mozambican friends of mine who did not know each other ended up at my dinner table in Berkeley, along with a few local academics. To me, knowing Mozambique, their conversation was normal: they asked about their homes and families, enjoyed finding mutual acquaintances, and extended sympathy for loved ones harmed or killed in the war. Shortly thereafter, one made a joke on a neutral topic, and they both laughed together. The Westerners looked uncomfortable, and finally one asked: “How can you laugh at a time like this, when you’re talking about losing loved ones in war?” The two Mozambicans shared a knowing look, and one replied: “How can you not?”

* * * * *

Mencius, the Confucian philosopher writing 2,300 years ago, equated happiness with joy and virtue—and righteous deeds against ruthless leaders and warring states. Half a world away, Socrates (like Aristotle and Plato) spoke of *eudaimonia* (happiness) as grounded in courage, justice, and wisdom shaping mind and soul alike. Not all, clearly, share these views: Thrasymachus, whom Plato wrote against, argued that justice prevents *eudaimonia* in that it stops people from fulfilling their desires.

Locating happiness in thick webs of meaningful relationships spans 2,000 years to frame the birth of the United States—which takes “the pursuit of happiness” as a fundamental political human right. Simultaneously, within this framework, the “rule of law” seeks to thwart the nefarious and illegal actions of Thrasymachus’s philosophical descendants.

In truth, this several-millennia-long history surprised me. In researching this piece circa postmoribund modernity,

I find “happiness” everywhere and nowhere. I uncovered 150 million Google sites, noticed it on practically every magazine and commercial, looked at countless books headlining it, learned that 164 million prescriptions were written for antidepressants in 2008, and found that it fuels myriad personal, spiritual, and health quests—as well as discovered that it seems to be a core fixation of the early-21st-century United States.

Whatever it is, we as a society don’t have it. It represents the iconic “unfulfilled seeking.” The happiness-shaped void. Happiness resides in pills, love, exercise, cars, laughter, worship, cosmetic surgery, consumer goods, soul searching. But like tomorrow, happiness never arrives—for the starting point of every story is that you are without it.

Happiness in the United States has been powerfully molded by Western modernity and capitalism: creating the individual and elevating this ideal over the social interactive, honing identity in the material, and relegating happiness to a personal emotion detached from Aristotle’s reason and Plato’s soul.

There is (very) little embracing happiness as social justice, fighting brutal power hegemony, and sustaining dense interpersonal (and transcendent) relationships. People dedicated to fighting against Mencius’s “warring states” don’t represent our ideals of “happy”: noble, yes, but hard suffering.

Reflecting on the war zones I’ve worked in, from Sri Lanka to Mozambique, I realize a significant number of people I know define *happiness* in pursuits of deep justice, thriving social relations, and standing against abusive power. The two Mozambicans at my dinner table asking “How can you not share laughter in the midst of adversity?” illuminated a deeper insight: happiness is in part what builds countries, heals violence-torn societies, stands as a font of creativity and solutions. Eudaimonia—as the poetic soul of humanity.

Here, happiness is world creating. The antidote to the “unmaking” of the world in violence. The path to restoring dignity, to “dreaming again,” in Barbara Rose Johnston’s words.

People in Mozambique explain: power abuses are like illness—they arise periodically in societies. And it is the responsibility of societies, person by person, working together, to cure these pathologies. Happiness helps forge the ideals and relationships that reanimate the world. Mencius—and the warring states.

What happens when happiness becomes alienated from this history?

HAPPINESS, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND THE ARAB SPRING

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As soon as one lives this extraordinary moment, one grasps the real meaning of liberty: that it has a subjective value before an objective

being, meaning that the quest is to make the interior of one’s being, of one’s person, and of oneself. When one feels oneself free, it’s the same whether the body is behind the walls or outside them. Liberty is to be free to believe what one wants, to think what one wants, to embrace what one thinks is just and true. The soul attains liberty when it is free, it is of little importance that the body is in prison or elsewhere, ill or healthy, the essential is to explode the frontiers and to yell at the top of one’s voice to the torturer: “I am free, you can do what you want with my body, you can never break my soul.” Only then does the smallness of the jailer appear, the ridiculousness of his actions, and the grandeur of the human soul that none can control. —Bouahud, in Slyomovics 2005, p. 181

Abdessamad Bouabid penned this entry in a diary he kept while incarcerated in Kenitra Central Prison, Morocco’s pre-eminent penitentiary to house political prisoners. A copy was given to me, dated midnight March 3, 1993, during a gathering of Moroccan human rights activists in the year 2000 and in response to my questions about the possibilities for liberty and happiness within the space of political prison. According to all relevant indicators, those punished solely because of their beliefs should not experience happiness. The imprisoned suffer; they do not thrive. Dissidents, and often their families, occupy the lowest unhappy ranges of any happiness indices. They are at the mercy of their respective authoritarian regimes’ practices, cross-culturally consistent and pervasive, that include torture, deliberate deprivation of adequate standards of health and access to education, and the constriction of emotional well-being through minimal contact with family and friends. Nonetheless, as literary critic Simona Livescu notes, their “abrupt initiation into prison happiness, at times individual and at times collective, infuses political prisoners with unique civic values that reverberate in their communities after release” (Livescu 2011:185). Moroccan political prisoner Mohamed Srifi, who experienced 19 years of political detention, informed me that prison functions as a university where human rights is nurtured. He maintained that, paradoxically, it was the only free space in his country. Srifi was imprisoned for Marxist and Bouabid for Islamist nonviolent activities, yet they share with many prisoners of conscience elsewhere the emotions of “spiteful euphoria” under oppression, a phrase coined by Soviet Gulag inmate Vladimir Bukovsky (1979:128). Having demanded that their jailers, torturers, and politicians adhere to international human rights norms, once released into the population, the political prisoner’s happiness is contagious.

Consider a project initiated by the King of Bhutan in 2008 that sought to establish a viable assessment tool, the Gross National Happiness (GNH) index, to measure the extent and probability of happiness among his subjects (Centre for Bhutan Studies 2008). More widespread in the West is the Gallup survey to measure well-being according to the Cantril Self-Anchoring Scale (Cantril 1965). These polls have determined that a nation’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) does not reliably correlate with happiness. Consequently, for the popular uprisings collectively subsumed under the rubric “Arab Spring” that have swept Egypt, Tunisia, and other Middle East and North African states in the year 2011,

protesters went to the streets despite a rise in their respective per capita incomes because they were unhappy about the lack of freedom, human rights, justice, and equality (Clifton and Morales 2011).

Although autocratic regimes in the Middle East and North Africa have criminalized all manner of activities, censored literary production, and controlled the social connectivity of cafés, Internet networks, national demonstrations, and local meetings, it remains as yet unclear why an act such as Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in a small town in Tunisia on December 17, 2010, would spark the dynamic evolution of the Arab Spring. The possibility that people may radically change the conditions in which they live owes much to our discarding disillusion and hopelessness in favor of happiness and human rights. The complexities and modalities of euphoria and unhappiness, seen for example during the Arab Spring or among political prisoners, underpin a vast social sciences literature on resistance and human rights. For anthropology, questions persist regarding where claims about human rights begin—in the prison cell, at home, or in the street?—and how to document intimate and emergent human rights processes ethnographically. Once again the famous lines of anticolonialist revolutionary poetry penned by the Tunisian Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi resound in street demonstrations throughout the Arabic-speaking world: “If someday the people decide to live, fate must bend to that desire / There will be no more night when the chains have broken” (al-Shabbi 1994, vol. 1:231). Whatever the outcomes of the Arab Spring, in the language of Michel Foucault, who taught at the University of Tunis in the 1960s, “the fear of ridicule or the bitterness of history prevents most of us from bringing together revolution and happiness . . . or revolution and pleasure” (Foucault 1976:13).

ON HAPPINESS AND TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE
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The insights offered in this forum aim to inspire a disciplinary conversation on happiness. The core themes in these varied conversations? For some, happiness is a sensory force that colors and shapes human evolution and experience. Key concerns include how human groups define and express *happiness*; the commonalities in the awareness, experience, and endeavor to achieve a state of happiness; and the myriad of ways that the expression of happiness sustains and shapes a sense of common experience, of community. Others consider happiness, or the lack thereof, to be a faceted reflection of the arrangements in society, voicing critical concern over how we humans operationalize this notion as a social or political construct and the relationship between societal priorities and the material, social, and cultural conditions that sustain or inhibit happiness. All recognize the power and potential of happiness as a motivating and sustaining force.

Drawing on six decades of work with Tonga speakers in Southern Zambia, Elizabeth Colson reminds us that the

perception and experience of happiness is hugely varied and influenced by social and cultural contexts. How can such variability be clinically identified, let alone measured? People understand, experience, and express happiness in different ways. Yet, although happiness is both a subjective and elusive dimension of the human experience, it is also an essential ingredient and reflective outcome of health and well-being, and thus, as Dean Falk notes, it plays a crucial adaptive role in the development of the human animal and the adaptive capability of the species. Graham St John picks up on this theme of happiness as an evolutionary force with insights on emergent culture, underscoring the significance of happiness as a sensory and social lubricant, observing that the human ability to express, circulate, and amplify the liminal state generates the shared experience and expression essential to the formation, sustenance, and reproduction of a community of like-minded souls.

In considering happiness as a social and political construct, John Bodley notes that when it comes to adaptive success in societies, size matters. The dynamics of family and small-scale society life demands a certain cohesion in cultural values and equitable attention to priorities and needs. Drawing the linkages between people, the commons, and viable, long-term, sustainable ways of life, Bonnie McCay underscores the key role of societal relationships and culturally informed notions of value and good as shaping individual and societal priorities. Even within the context of complex societies, smaller collaborations form around shared relationships, commitments, and concern for a collective good (e.g., the health of the commons), and this process of communality, immersion, and engagement creates the medium for biosocial resilience to take root and (ideally) grow. In essence, Bonnie McCay argues that happiness adds a functional resilience to humanity's adaptive toolkit.

Can happiness be measured? Elizabeth Colson rejects the notion of anthropological ability to measure happiness, reflecting on her experience with efforts that confine, limit, and define the essence of human lives into a checklist of “quality of life” indicators that, when employed, legitimize the small and large tragedies and disasters that accompany large-scale development. Alaka Wali argues that happiness can and should be measured, although she argues for indices based on the more holistic notion of well-being, with a prioritization on the qualities that shape cultural difference and the conditions that determine social inequities in life. What if, as she asks, societal success (and developmental priorities) were organized around a dignity index?

Behind John Bodley's, Bonnie McCay's, and Alaka Wali's comments lies the assumption that transformative change must and can be achieved through the articulation and application of lessons from place-based ways of life in which “success” relies on deep knowledge, a sense of the varied needs of a living biosocial system, and socially constructed and culturally informed decision-making structures that integrate varied biosocial factors in ways that allow decisions to prioritize health over short-term economic gain.

Sure, as both John Bodley and Carolyn Nordstrom remind us, there are a gazillion ways in which ideals are corrupted, especially in a world in which the mantra of “consumption equals happiness” is fabricated and fed to the individual from birth to death to sustain and reproduce a nonthinking culture of work, buy, live, die. But as Carolyn Nordstrom’s and Susan Slyomovics’s commentaries suggest, we truly live in interesting times. Not only do the ulcerating consequences of our consuming culture reflect the maladaptation embedded in a prioritization of short-term comfort over deeper sustaining values, but the resulting deficits in varied forms of sustenance can prompt radical and transformative action, a point brought home by Susan Slyomovics’s powerful discussion of the Arab spring. Happiness is the antidote to hopelessness, to use Carolyn Nordstrom’s words; it helps forge the ideals and relationships that reanimate the world.

And so, with this provocative input, I bring this brief conversation to its conclusion. A smile, a twinkle in the eye, a blissful sigh, a chirpy tune, a tender caress, an evocative memory, an exuberant dream . . . such individual indications of happiness are experienced, savored, and expressed in intimate and often in infectious ways, circulating as a form of sensory currency that both sustains and motivates. Immense tragedy and horror can silence such sensory currency. Yet, in this emotional dead zone a distant memory, fleeting experience, or idealized vision of happiness can take root, serving as a driving force in transformative change, prompting individual and collective desire and action to give new meaning, restore dignity, make peace, sustain life and livelihood . . . to dream again.

VITAL TOPICS FORUM COMBINED

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