



# Happiness@ TheSpeedofLife

## Happiness@TheSpeedofLife Newsletter Edition 57: Where Did You Learn That?

1,913 words of content in a tips-filled edition -- approximate reading time required: 7.65 minutes.  
And isn't your Happiness worth it?

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Welcome to my e-newsletter, which focuses on defining and applying the Principles of Happiness and Positive Emotion in your life and work. SPREAD THE WORD: Please forward to a friend who needs more Happiness.

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### IN THIS ISSUE

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- I. Where Did You Learn That?
- II. In The Workplace: Story Creates Culture
- III. Shameless Commerce Division
- IV. Instructions and Contact Info

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### I. WHERE DID YOU LEARN THAT?

Think about the person you are today. Where did you come from?

Physically, of course, you're a genetic mix of your birth parents' traits; personality-wise, you're a product of both those genetics *and* the environment in which you were raised.

Fortunately, we humans are skilled at rapidly assimilating everything that happens around us. Unfortunately, we humans are skilled at absorbing *everything* that happens around us – whether it benefits us or harms us, we absorb and conform to the attitudes and conversations in which we are immersed.

#### Historical Discourse

Every family, community, and nation has different sorts of conversations. Over time, we can begin to identify what we call the Historical Discourse, or the historical pattern of stories that give us identity.

Every family and society has a different discourse, and there's no right or wrong, or good or bad to these. Yet these are important, for our historical discourse affects how we hear things, how we approach issues, the questions we ask, and even how we relate to others.

#### What Were the Messages You Learned?

In my family there were many messages. From my German dad, a child of the Great Depression, I was imprinted with the importance of ceaseless hard work and thrift. From my Irish mom, I learned that St Patrick's Day is a major holiday and that Responsible People volunteer their time





in the community. I learned that boys go to college and girls learn to sew and cook (Hey, I'm not sayin' I bought it all! I'm just sayin' what I learned thru absorption in my family). I also learned that money is scarce, rich people are selfish, procrastination is an art form to be perfected, and that Real Men don't express their feelings.

Some of these messages I saw for the propaganda they were, and I consciously rejected them, e.g. I learned how to cook, and I raised children who believe in gender equality. Some discourses remain strong in me today -- procrastination, for example ☹. And some of those discourses nearly killed me, literally, before I realized that I had other choices. The inability to express my feelings meant I kept them all shut up inside me till years of killer migraines forced me into considering that maybe – just maybe – there was a different way to live.

Consider what messages were planted in your absorbent mind as you grew up, concerning:

- The roles of men and women?
- Work and Money? (e.g. joy or drudgery? scarcity or abundance?)
- Parenting and children? (hard? easy? privilege? duty?)
- Religion and God/Spirituality?
- Love & sex/sexuality?
- "Us" versus "them" (who were the "them" in your world?)

The question is not whether the stories are right or wrong, but whether they are working for you today. Let me share a couple examples.

## Some Client Stories

**#1 – Managers Are Jerks.** Chris constantly struggled with the coaching aspect of being a leader, and finally admitted that what stopped him was fear of being perceived as a 'jerk.' "Where did you learn that holding people accountable for their work made you a jerk?" I asked. The short story, it turned out, was that Chris was raised in a blue-collar union family, and the conversation at the dinner table and at all family functions was about the 'idiots in management.' Even though Chris had gone to college and his family was thrilled that he'd 'made it' into leadership ranks, he still owned that old story from decades of dinner table conversations.

**#2 – I'm Not Good Enough.** Pat was accomplished, independent, in a great marriage, and in a well-paying job where she felt valued. Still, happiness eluded her. We began with a lot of work around self-talk and mind-body shift, and Pat was diligent in all her practices – mental, emotional, and physical. Still, she struggled with self-acceptance. "I'm afraid I'm not good enough," she confessed, "and I worry that people will discover I'm a fraud." So I asked, "Whose story is that? Where did you learn that?" Probably from her father, from whom a constant insult was, "you're just a girl."

Neither Chris nor Pat truly believed the old conversations. But when a story is played over and again, it eventually wears deep grooves in the brain – and plays automatically in our head even when we don't want it to.

This happens all the time – someone else's story becomes our own story. Again, there's no good or bad -- it's just *present*. You cannot be cut from your history; but you *can* with awareness, choose a different path if the old one does not serve you.

### Create a New Story

Chris, once he was aware of that old discourse, quickly created a new story about leaders that focuses him on creating a positive environment and helping people solve problems, being a partner versus an obstacle. Pat, on the other hand, took a long time to find a new story that did not feel too 'alien' to her. She reports that her first reaction to stressful situations is still, "I'm not good enough," but she's learning to quickly follow that up with, "I am, however, FABULOUS!" as she consciously shifts to a grounded, confident body.

What are the historical discourses you hold from your family or community? Some of them make you proud, I'm sure, and some of them may leave you stressed and frustrated. Here's the thing: you have the power to choose which of them you continue to honor and which you change.

1. First, notice the story in your head. It may be true, yet it is not yours. That story belongs to someone else. Once you accept that fact, you are free to choose what is *yours* versus others'.
2. Next, rewrite the story to fit what you now believe or want to live more fully. Actually write/type it out, to make it real. Once you say it out loud/write it down/own it, the possibility it will show up increases.
3. Third, notice what emotion the old story creates in you, and consider what emotion you want to associate with the new story.
4. Finally, pay attention to how your body reacts in the old story – what happens to your posture, your breath, your speed of movement, your behavior? Now, shift your body into the emotion you want to feel in the new story. How will you breathe, sit, stand, and move in your new story? Practice that body posture, as often as you can (at least daily).
5. Keep practicing. That old story worked on you for decades... it may take more than a few weeks to overwrite it with the new story. With diligence, you can make a huge shift happen for you.

Remember me, the guy who could not express emotion? And who, today, makes his living in the study and practice of emotional shift? Yep, it's possible to choose!

### The Happiness Discourse

So, let's tie this all back to my favorite subject: Happiness. What have you been 'taught' about happiness in your life? That it's for other people? That it takes money and stuff? That you have to wait for it, till you're older/wiser/healthier/married/divorced/etc? That you can never have it because....? Or you don't deserve it because...?

Instead of talking about 'how it's always been,' or playing old recordings in your head all the time, why not create a new story of the way you want it to be? The tagline for my business (which, by the way, has also been my personal motto for 20+ years) is that "Happiness is a Decision, Not an Event!" Happiness is a mode of travel, not a finite destination. You can choose to view life thru a positive rather than a dirty lens, pay more attention to the good than the bad, and spend more time in Gratitude than Fear and Anger.



You CAN create your OWN discourse.

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The 13 Principles of Happiness provide powerful ideas to support your decision to create and live a Happiness Discourse. Why not download and post a copy of the original 13 Principles on your workstation wall or on your refrigerator at home? You can download a 1-page summary here: <http://www.theexecutivehappinesscoach.com/happiness/philosophies.cfm>. Choose Happiness.

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## II. IN THE WORKPLACE: STORY CREATES CULTURE

I spent my formative work years with a little niche-insurance company called Progressive, which in 1978 was the 374<sup>th</sup> largest company in the auto insurance business – about 1-2% of the size of the industry leaders of the time. Our CEO would get up on stage and talk about our goal to become the #2 or #3 player in the industry. Laughable?\*

One of the company founders, then in his 80s, still pattered into work most days, and I remember sitting in rapt attention as he told stories from the company’s early days. He talked about how many times the company nearly went bankrupt. And how, for many years, he and the company’s other founder would grab the cashbox on Friday afternoon, hop into a car and drive from Cleveland to the notorious Beverly Hills Supper Club/Casino in Cincinnati (not an easy drive in pre-interstate days!) and gamble around-the-clock, returning red-eyed to Cleveland on Monday morning, hopefully with enough cash to make payroll and keep the company running another two weeks.

Small wonder, with those kinds of stories as part of our historical discourse, that the company culture embraced high-risk, entrepreneurial behavior and “living on the edge.”

Another story I heard a lot was that “Progressive only hires the brightest and the best” and those stories served to create a very elitist culture in which we all believed we were brilliant and creative...and thus no problem was unsolvable, no challenge too great, and anyone could be a Hero.

After I left Progressive I learned that there were plenty of other brilliant people out there, but so many times I saw them trapped in cultures that smothered their creativity -- cultures where the dominant stories were about how people got fired for taking risks, or where all the conversations were about compliance, or where the only person who was ‘allowed’ to be the Hero was the CEO.

What are the stories told in YOUR organization? Do the heroes in those stories demonstrate the competencies you most want people to emulate? Are they stories with Happy Endings...or are they mostly dramas and tragedies? Recognize that the stories held most dear by the organization are creating the reality for the people who live in your company.

Remember: Leadership is not about a title. Anyone can be a leader who knows how create positive stories that honor people and their contributions, and which inspire others to reach higher, farther, and faster – and in which anyone can be the Hero.

\*\*In 2008 Progressive was the third-largest player in auto insurance industry – that’s the power of positive stories to build a dynamic culture!

