M o r n i n g

What does it mean to be happy?

Everyone thinks they know, but it's a tricky terrain when we get to explanations. Words make navigation confusing and difficult. We think we know what we mean when we speak certain words, but do we? When we say we love our fresh, organic peanut butter spread thickly over whole wheat bread and that we also love God, are the verbs really equal? Are the values the same? Happiness is like that too. We can be happy to have survived after struggling in painful conditions after a massive earthquake, and we can just as easily be happy to lounge on a fair weather beach in Central America.

Meditations of The World's Happiest Man

As long as we've touched the subject, let's think about what I'd call the most indescribable of all things. What exactly do we mean when we say, "God?" Are we all indicating the same something? Generally, maybe. Specifically, never. How about oneness, a favorite buzzword lately among the spiritual? Oneness–is the universe really only one big bowl undifferentiated soup? Are our differences illusory? What about beauty? Give "reality" a spin on your definition machine, too. The list goes on, and these are just a few of the most obvious trouble spots. Words, even at their most basic, can never be what they're describing. Words are labels we post for reference, icons or rough approximations of the characteristics of something. They are symbols enabling us to talk about reality, nothing more, and they are inadequate. Animals, Temple Grandin has argued, think not in words, but in pictures, another seeming advantage for them, closer to the reality. The development of human speech and logical thought brought many pluses but at the cost of substantial disconnection with the natural world. Speech is a product of objective thought, even when the object is us, and objective thought demands separation. Burdened with words, things are reduced and less accessible as objects apart from us.

Poets sometimes try to infer a deeper connectedness by invoking images or impressions that manipulate subconscious ideas and meanings. Among contemporary poets, John Ashbery's illusions have most often released and broadened my imagination. Even while getting only glimpses of the crystal clarity he intends, I experience reading his poems like taking a spiritual and sensory workout. First, aerobic agility is in focus, and then, weights must be lifted. It's no coincidence that Ashbery has a parallel career writing prose about the visual arts. He uses words to expose his insight that real wisdom is somewhere well behind them.

One my all-time favorites, a poem that first grabbed me when I was a teenager and comes back to me frequently, is Poe's *A*

Dream Within a Dream. His verses are ultimately cynical, describing the distressingly illusive nature of reality. Is it a dream about a dream, illusion collapsing into illusion into infinity? Good question, and the sort of thing we need to feel safe asking ourselves as we consider what it means to be happy. Happy, it seems, may be unique to every individual, something we can know only about ourselves.

Happiness, as well as I can describe it, is the fulfilling integration of the layers making up the physical and nonphysical stuff we call us, balanced, and not one thing overpowering another. Simple, huh? It's easier than it sounds. Honest.