

Book Review: Stumbling on Happiness, by Daniel Gilbert

Review by John K. Chidester, originally composed for the Mount Vernon News on August 22, 2006

Are you happy? Really? Would you like to be happy tomorrow and next month and three years from now? Of course you would. Do you think you have a pretty clear idea of what developments it will take to bring that happiness about and what other developments would make you unhappy? Nearly everyone would answer that last question in the affirmative, but according to Harvard psychology professor Daniel Gilbert, they would almost certainly be completely wrong. In his remarkable new book, "Stumbling On Happiness," he explains why happiness can be such an elusive object and why everything we think about our own happiness—past, present and future—is wrong.

Gilbert's teaching and research have won him numerous awards, including the American Psychological Association's Distinguished Scientific Award for an Early Career Contribution to Psychology. His work has been reported in a slew of publications from the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal to Scientific American, Glamour and Psychology Today, among many others. He says his research into the quirks of happiness began when he experienced a series of personal calamities and discovered that they didn't leave him nearly as devastated as he would have predicted. He wondered if he was alone in being so bad at predicting his future emotions. It turns out he's got lots of company, and that may not be all bad.

Human beings are the only species who think about the future, Gilbert says, and it's natural that we try to predict what will make us happy and then set a course for that objective. But we tend to be really bad at predicting our future feelings—whether about how much we're going to enjoy the Twinkie we just bought or how our choices of career, spouse and child rearing options will pan out—and that's not the half of it. Though few of us realize it, we're equally bad at remembering how we felt about things in the past

(solid scientific research studies support this surprising fact). The reason is that our brains use the same neurological wiring and protocols for remembering the past and imagining the future that we use for perceiving our present circumstances. As a result, our notions of both the past and the future tend to look a lot like the present.

Because there's only so much neural wiring and storage space to go around, Gilbert says, our brains have to economize and take short cuts, but they keep those short cuts hidden and offer us instead a host of illusions about ourselves and our world and how our minds work. Our mental blind spots (which work much like the physical blind spots in both of our eyes) are why 90 per cent of all drivers think they're above average, the great majority of cancer patients are more optimistic than the rest of us, conjoined twins refuse to even consider being separated and people who've experienced incredible losses (their jobs, their spouses, their children) often say their calamities were blessings in disguise (long after the fact, not in the immediate aftermath).

The bottom line, Gilbert says, is that we can't really know what will make us happy until it does so, and no amount of personal experience or learning from the wisdom of sages can change that. What's more, the one means by which we could more accurately gauge what will make us happy (relying on reports of total strangers who are actually in the situation we think we want) is almost universally rejected. We all want to make our own choices from the menu, rather than have someone else pick for us (no matter what the research studies show). On top of that, we tend to not want what will make us happy and to want things that will not make us happy, such as more money, faster cars and fancier houses. And this remains true even after repeated bitter disappointments which should have shown us the errors of our thinking.

Gilbert's writing is exceptionally lucid and engaging, filled with wisecracks that are actually funny (okay, some of them), anecdotes that illustrate his finer points, summaries of some fascinating research results and pithy quotes from literature (a lot of

Shakespeare) that illuminate his meaning. "Stumbling On Happiness" won't tell you how to achieve happiness, but it will help you understand why the things you thought would make you happy ultimately let you down.