

THE PURSUITS OF HAPPINESS

Sissela Bok, Lowell Lecture, October 14, 2003

I want first to say how happy and honored I am to have been asked to give this year's Lowell Lecture. To introduce my subject, let me quote from an anonymous poem, published in London in 1771. Its title is "The Pursuits of Happiness, Inscribed to a Friend." The poet addresses that friend, and all of us as readers, as follows:

Pursued by all, by all pursued in vain,
The Sage's secret and the Poet's dream
Be the wide wish of HAPPINESS my Theme.

My own theme tonight, too, is that wide wish, those pursuits, not only of happiness in its own right, but also of the theme itself of happiness, carried out by philosophers and poets and social theorists through the ages and increasingly, in recent decades, by psychologists and economists and others in the interdisciplinary field of "happiness research."

I feel grateful to have been able to take part in discussions of the new approaches to the study of happiness and human thriving in psychology, economics, health care, and the brain sciences, both in a study group sponsored by Harvard's Mind Brain Behavior Initiative and in a seminar series at the Center for Population and Development Studies. And I feel grateful, more generally, for having had a chance to learn from so many here at Harvard and in the larger Boston community in what I do think of as a precious opportunity for "continuing education."

I want to focus not only on the pursuits of happiness in the poem's title, but also on the dialogue implicit in the last half of that title -- "Inscribed to a Friend." The poet brings us, as it were, into an ongoing dialogue about those pursuits. The more I have had a chance to study the clashing views about happiness and the passionate advocacy it can inspire, the more intrigued I have become with the voices of others who have embarked on a similar study. In listening to them, I have been struck by the difference between those who relish dialogues with friends and adversaries, present and past, and others aiming to block off all dialogue, at times to silence all critics.

Embarking on my own pursuit to study the different views about happiness has reminded me of the folk tales and myths of young persons setting out to seek their fortune. They have to traverse strange regions, encounter seductive lures, take high-stakes risks, sometimes come back empty-handed. The same is true for anyone embarking, not so much on a quest to find happiness as to seek to understand its nature, its role in human lives, how it is experienced, and what factors extend or diminish its scope. Just as those seekers need a dose of healthy skepticism, so does anyone who ventures into the jungle of claims and counterclaims about happiness.

What I offer, tonight, is an interim report on what I have found – what you might call field notes from my travels in pursuit of what has been thought and written about that “wide wish of HAPPINESS.” I shall conclude by bringing in an exchange that took place a century ago right here in Cambridge, between two Harvard colleagues who would have been entirely at home in this Science Center -- President Charles William Eliot and Professor William James – then mention a conference just a month ago at MIT that I believe both would have found fascinating.

Early on in my travels, I was almost stopped in my tracks by a dismissive objection to the entire undertaking – one so common that it may be a natural first response to hearing that someone is studying happiness. Why study that subject now? Isn't it a luxury to do so, given the anguish and insecurity of our own time and given our awareness of how many people live in dire poverty, devastated by wars and epidemics? Shouldn't my inquiry be focused, rather, on suffering in all its forms?

I asked myself the same question at the time of the devastation in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks. I felt unable to return to the topic of happiness for weeks. Then I realized that happiness – indeed everlasting bliss in an imagined paradise -- was at issue even in those murderous assaults, held out as a tantalizing reward by instigators claiming to convey God's commands.

Even apart from such violations of the most basic respect for human life that is upheld by religious and moral and legal doctrines alike, it is precisely in times of high danger and turmoil that concerns for happiness are voiced most strikingly and seen as most indispensable. From earliest times, views of what makes for human happiness were set forth against the background of human suffering, poverty, disease, and the inevitability of death, by thinkers such as Confucius, Buddha, Zoroaster, Aristotle, and Epicurus and in texts such as the Bible and the Koran. The Roman Stoic thinker Seneca wrote his most moving letters on the subject while being hunted by the henchmen of the Emperor Nero who finally forced him to commit suicide. And the American Declaration of Independence, stating as inalienable rights “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” surely did so at a time of exceptional insecurity and massive threats to life and liberty.

More recently still, consider the juxtaposition of happiness and grim reality conveyed in the following two statements, made by individuals who would have had every reason to doubt that the Declaration of Independence would protect the lives, the liberties, or the pursuits of happiness of persons like themselves. One is by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, in his book No Future Without Forgiveness (1999), describing going to vote in South Africa for the first time:

The moment for which I had waited so long came and I folded my ballot paper and cast my vote. Wow! I shouted, “Yippee!” It was giddy stuff. It was like falling in love. The sky looked blue and more beautiful. I saw the people in a new light. They were beautiful, they were transfigured. I too was transfigured. It was

dreamlike. You were scared someone would rouse you and you would awake to the nightmare that was apartheid's harsh reality.

The is other by Gulalli Shirzai, a teacher at Tramor Shahi Secondary School in Kandahar, Afghanistan, speaking in March, 2002 of how she felt on the first day after the school opened and girls could attend along with boys:

It was like a dream. It didn't seem real. And I worried that the Taliban would still come and hit us. / . . . / I was so exhausted and so happy. All these children going to school for the first time.

The subject of happiness never was a luxury to be postponed until more serene, peaceful times. Pursuits of happiness have often been debated as matters of life and death. But I believe that the study of these pursuits may be more needed than ever in our time, in part because there has been an unprecedented shift in how people the world over perceive the possibility of happiness in their own lives. Over the course of the last century, societies the world over have seen dramatic reductions in illiteracy, infant mortality, and premature death. The majority of the world's peoples now enjoy standards of living and political freedoms unimaginable to their great grandparents. By the end of the twentieth century, average life expectancy in some of the world's poorest societies, such as Bangladesh, was higher than that of Britain at the beginning of that century.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, therefore, ancient notions about the need for submissive acceptance of misery, segregation, discrimination, perhaps in hopes of a better life after death, are losing their power. Take the announcement made by Samuel Johnson, echoing Ecclesiastes, that no one could surely wish to be born, who had a chance to contemplate beforehand all the miseries that would await him in life. Today, in many societies, such a claim would be met with uncomprehending stares. People might disagree as fiercely as ever about what happiness is and about what factors make it more or less likely, but far fewer disagree about whether it is at least possible.

A second reason why I believe that the study of happiness is not a luxury has to do with the need to bring into the open the stark political and moral assumptions that underlie most debates about its pursuit. These assumptions are familiar in philosophy and political science, but often go unspoken in social science research on happiness. They concern questions of power -- power exerted or defended against, whether in families, communities, or political and religious institutions; and in turn questions about freedom, justice, and equality. Do all or just some people have the right to the pursuit of happiness? At what costs to others? How are the means to happiness best distributed? What else should matter in human lives aside from happiness? And how should we weigh efforts to achieve personal happiness in a world where we are aware, as never before, of extremes of misery and opulence?

The mounting differences between haves and have-nots has exacerbated the perennial tension over these questions. Even as so many people the world over now do enjoy political freedoms and standards of living unimaginable to their great grandparents,

the near-quadrupling of the Earth's population has also meant that far more individuals than ever are beset by poverty, poor health, and religious and political oppression.

These levels of suffering and deprivation are rightly seen as the more unjust because they are unnecessary, given the vast resources in principle available to overcome them. And here is where a third reason why I find the study of happiness so timely comes in. Recent research in the natural and social sciences has made it possible to examine factors and policies that contribute to human happiness or detract from it in ways about which past thinkers could only speculate.

The world over, psychologists, economists, and sociologists are exploring the degree to which factors such as age, health, income, employment, and marital status contribute to felt happiness or unhappiness. Neuroscientists use magnetic resonance imaging to map fluctuations in the brain when people experience pleasure and pain, happiness and unhappiness, elation and dejection. Geneticists are tracing inherited differences among individuals in regard to such factors as temperament, energy level, and ability to withstand stress. And psycho-pharmacologists are studying differences in how individuals react to a variety of drugs that influence mood.

As a result, it is possible, for the first time, to compare what large groups of people say about their actual experiences of happiness and unhappiness in different societies; and to be more specific about what sorts of policies, in families, communities, and societies, might increase human happiness. We are nowhere near agreement about how individuals and societies can benefit from a more sophisticated understanding of factors and policies that contribute to, or detract from, happiness; but there is no doubt that the studies now under way are indispensable to arriving at such an understanding.

Without the insights they can provide, a perennial temptation has been to issue portentous one-dimensional declarations about the state of human happiness. Theologians contrasting the miseries of earthly existence to heavenly felicity have been as likely to utter grim estimates on this score as secular thinkers declaring that most people lead lives of quiet desperation. John Stuart Mill went so far as to draw a figure out of his hat, in Utilitarianism: "Unquestionably, it is possible to do without happiness: it is done involuntarily by nineteen-twentieths of humanity." His godson Bertrand Russell, while speaking with less mathematical precision in the Conquest of Happiness, nevertheless still claimed that the great majority of people were unhappy: all you needed to do to recognize this state of affairs was to look at your friends or at people you meet in the course of an ordinary day, or to stand on street corners observing the expressions on the faces of passers-by.

Today's cross-cultural surveys of what people say about how happy or satisfied they feel about their lives represent an improvement over such armchair speculation. The results flatly contradict both dismal and exultant generalizations. No, fortunately for humankind, most people do not see themselves as leading lives of quiet desperation; instead, the majority among them regard their lives as moderately or very happy -- at all levels of income and education. No, however, it is equally wrong -- and indeed

sentimental – to imagine that happiness has nothing to do with standards of living, that it can be achieved equally well by all persons regardless of poverty, ill health, or denials of basic human rights. Although some people can be happy even in direst misery, more individuals in democratic societies with higher average incomes and standards of living report feeling happier, more satisfied with their lives, than those in the poorest societies. On these scores, all studies agree.

There are puzzling differences, however, that cannot be explained on grounds of income or standard of living alone. Citizens in states that were, up to recently, under Communist rule report considerably lower levels of satisfaction with their lives than those in neighboring countries. Another discrepancy arises for people in Latin nations, such as Spain and South American countries, who report being happier, on average, than people in other societies with comparable levels of income, whereas the reverse is the case for nations of the Pacific Rim, such as Korea, China, and Japan.

I have been interested from the beginning of my pursuit, in studying what social scientists say about the degree to which particular factors contribute most to human happiness. How much does it matter to have close friendships? To be wealthy? Wise? Religious? And coming from philosophy I have wondered what research might have to say about the role of factors thought indispensable from earliest times, such as splendid health or high virtue.

Health has the longest antecedents in the philosophical debate about happiness. Thales, one of the Seven Sages, whom Aristotle called the first philosopher, when asked what man was happy, answered “He who has a healthy body, a resourceful mind, and a nature capable of being well taught.” Yet few would maintain, on reflection, that happiness has been denied to individuals with bodies less than healthy, minds less than resourceful, or natures not at all attuned to teaching or being taught.

Even less can we agree with the 18th century French author, the Marquis d’Argens, who specified in “On the Happy Life,” that true happiness requires three things: not to have anything criminal to reproach oneself for; knowing how to make oneself happy in the state where Heaven has placed us and where we are obliged to remain; and enjoying perfect health. We cannot be truly happy, he adds, if we lack one of the three. Again, fortunately for humankind, such claims are simply false.

Virtue, or goodness has played a special role in philosophy. Ancient Greeks agreed that it was indispensable for someone to be able to be happy, but disagreed strenuously about whether other factors were needed as well, such as wealth, pleasure, reputation, friendship. Works such as Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics, Cicero’s Tusculan Disputations, or Seneca’s On the Happy Life report on these debates in illuminating fashion.

As I look over the research on subjective well-being, I note that no one factor or set of factors has been found to be necessary for people to feel happy or satisfied with their lives. Neither health, nor goodness, nor poverty, faith, or any other factor can be

seen as a defining factor. Scholars may disagree with respect to just how much good health or any of the other factors contributes to people's sense of well-being; but all agree that none is indispensable. Human beings are so complex, they experience happiness in so many different ways, that for any factor some take to be indispensable, examples will be found of someone thriving without it.

But that is hardly a reason to conclude that none of them contribute to a happier life. It's just a primitive logical error to go from admitting that no one factor is necessary for happiness, much less sufficient, to concluding that, somehow, none of the ones long thought important matters or contributes to happiness.

All evidence indicates that certain factors are more likely than others to correlate with happiness in most people. Health is surely among them, as is being above a threshold of economic well-being. So, in all probability, is goodness. And among factors most likely to detract from happiness are, not unexpectedly, deaths in the family, divorce, and prolonged unemployment.

Meanwhile, vast number of self-help books on quick ways to achieve lasting happiness continue to find a ready market, with exultant titles inviting readers to "find" or "choose" happiness. And some entrepreneurial social scientists hold out equally vast hopes for achieving personal happiness. Most others strike a more cautious note. One of the leaders in the field, psychologist Ed Diener, underscores that the two characteristics or "ingredients" that his research shows are most needed for subjective well-being – solid mental health and good social relations – are far from equally distributed; he speaks for many colleagues in cautioning that research regarding how to increase one's personal happiness is still in its infancy.

Earlier this evening, I indicated why I disagree with those who object to the study of pursuits of happiness on the grounds that it is somehow frivolous, constituting a luxury when what is needed is a focus on how to alleviate suffering and injustice. I want to take up, now, a different objection to basing conclusions on how happy or satisfied people say they are with their lives, on the grounds that most people are simply wrong, deluded, about what constitutes real happiness.

This objection often comes from people who are convinced, on a variety of religious and political grounds, that they know what constitutes "real" or "true" happiness and that those who do not see this must therefore be living in a state of illusion. So, for instance, Karl Marx famously wrote, in his Contribution to a Critique of Hegel, that "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of men, is a demand for their real happiness."

Rabindranath Tagore, with an entirely different ideological outlook, wrote to a friend in 1929, while visiting New York, that in America, he lived "in the dungeon of the Castle of Bigness. My heart is starved. / . . . / Those who are in possession of material

resources have become slaves of their own instruments. / . . . / What makes me so sad, in this country, is the fact that people here do not know that they are not happy.”

A year later, in 1930, Sigmund Freud wrote, in Civilization and Its Discontents, from yet a third perspective, that “One feels inclined to say that the intention that human beings should be ‘happy’ is not included in the plan of the ‘Creation.’” To be sure, he argued, we cannot avoid embarking on a quest for happiness; but only self-blinding and wish-fulfillment allow us to imagine it is anything but an illusion.

Those engaged in the interdisciplinary studies of happiness will hardly be deterred by dismissive views of their efforts, based on different convictions about what does and does not constitute real, or true happiness. But it would be a pity if they ignored the underlying doubts brought out by such challenges, asking how they can be so sure just how happiness is best defined, and pointing to the vast role of bias and self-deception in what people say about their own happiness as well as that of others.

I do take the researchers’ stress on asking people about their own experience to be indispensable. But there is no reason to neglect the long-standing debates about these challenges by philosophers. As Robert Nozick points out, for instance, in The Examined Life, we would hesitate “to term someone happy at a particular moment or in life in general if we thought the evaluations upon which his emotion was based were wildly wrong.” And Amartya Sen warns, in On Ethics and Economics, that the metric of happiness may distort the extent of people’s deprivation in a politically biased direction:

The hopeless beggar, the precarious landless labourer, the dominated housewife, the hardened unemployed or the over-exhausted coolie may all take pleasures in small mercies, and manage to suppress intense suffering for the necessity of continuing survival, but it would be ethically deeply mistaken to attach a correspondingly small value to the loss of their well-being because of this survival strategy.

Just as we need a measure of healthy skepticism whenever we run up against thinkers who tell us that we, along with most people, live mired in illusion, unable to see our way to true, or real happiness unless we follow their guidance, so we should heed Nozick’s and Sen’s cautions against uncritical acceptance of what people say about their own happiness or well-being.

In addition to drawing on the contributions of the (rare) contemporary philosophers who have paid attention to social science research on happiness, those engaged in such research will benefit, I suggest, from considering what people say about their experiences, not just in surveys and experimental studies, but also in letters and journals and other personal accounts, and from how such experiences are portrayed in art.

To neglect these deeper, sometimes more intimate forms of testimony is to waste a precious resource for the study of happiness. After all what people recount about experiences of happiness, bliss, joy, elation, contentment, pleasure, euphoria, or ecstasy,

as about sadness, sorrow, melancholy, despair, pain, misery, grief, and agony, turns out to be so much more vivid than dictionary definitions or responses to surveys. We need little imagination to share, almost viscerally, the experience described by Claire Pic, an eighteen-year-old French girl, writing in her journal in 1867, rebelling against being told it was a spiritual sin to keep a journal:

Sometimes I experience an exquisite joy in savoring the blessing of being, not the banal and material existence of eating, drinking, sleeping, seeing pretty things, hearing sweet sounds, but the different, delicate happiness of being a distinct part of the great whole, of being oneself a whole with one's life, one's impressions, one's thoughts. It is a beautiful and grand thing, the right God has given us to say "me" and it is an even greater dignity to be capable of thinking.

Or consider two passages recounting very different experiences, one from Charles Darwin's Autobiography (1887), the other from "A Sketch of the Past" (1939) by Virginia Woolf:

The geology of St. Jago is very striking yet simple: a stream of lava formerly flowed over the bed of the sea, formed of triturated recent shells and corals, which it has baked into a hard white rock. / . . . / It then first dawned on me that I might perhaps write a book on the geology of the various countries visited, and this made me thrill with delight. That was a memorable hour to me, and how distinctly I can call to mind the low cliff of lava beneath which I rested, with the sun glaring hot, a few strange desert plants growing near, and with living corals in the tidal pool at my feet.

If life has a base that it stands upon, if it is a bowl that one fills and fills and fills – then my bowl without a doubt stands upon this memory. It is of lying asleep, half awake, in a bed in the nursery at St. Ives. It is of hearing waves breaking, one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach; and then breaking, one, two, one, two, behind a yellow blind. It is of hearing the blind draw its little acorn across the floor as the wind blew the blind out. It is of lying and hearing this splash and seeing this light, and feeling, it is almost impossible that I should be here; of feeling the purest ecstasy I could conceive.

In responding to these and so many other accounts, we draw on shared experience, beginning in earliest childhood with a rudimentary capacity for feelings of comfort, pleasure, satiation, warmth, affection, and joy in interaction with others. We can think of ourselves as wired for such experiences. Infants the world over express a range of similar responses of sheer relishing, satisfaction, security, even bliss from touch, sound, smell; and parents everywhere use the same sing-song intonations to elicit such responses.

Charles Darwin postulated that expressions of basic emotions such as those of anger, disgust, grief, and joy were universal. Psychologist Paul Ekman, expanding on Darwin's often anecdotal documentation, has corroborated his conclusions. Ekman has

shown photographs of faces expressing happiness, anger, disgust, surprise, fear, sadness, and anger to people in cultures across the world. A happy face, he found, was one of the emotions that the majority in each culture immediately recognized as such.

As neuroscientists learn to track experiences of pleasure and pain, joy and distress, through brain imaging, they also find support for another of Darwin's postulates; namely that it is because expressions of basic emotions are universal that human beings can respond with empathy to another's joy, say, or grief. It is now possible to follow how facial or verbal expressions about particular experiences of pleasure or pain stimulate particular electrical pathways in the brain, so as to correlate what people say about their experience with events in their brains.

Some people respond far more deeply, broadly, intensely than others, much as some experience color more vividly than those who are color blind, have weak eye sight, or are capable of perceiving only part of the visual field or spectrum. By adolescence, individuals already exhibit great differences in their sensitivity to degrees, intensities, kinds, and nuances of happiness and unhappiness, as well as in the ability to discern these in oneself and in others.

Beyond all that we can gain from journals, letters, and auto-biographical writings in seeking to understand the range and depth and richness of experiences of happiness and unhappiness, works of art can give us still more. As the novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch points out, in The Sovereignty of Good,

Any story which we tell about ourselves consoles us since it imposes pattern upon something which might otherwise seem intolerably chancy and incomplete. However, human life is chancy and incomplete. It is the role of tragedy, but also of comedy and of painting, to show us suffering without a thrill and death without a consolation.

When it comes to conveying the range and depth and richness of experiences of happiness and unhappiness, given all their forms and all their contrasts, art transcends the limitations of particular autobiographical writings, however unmatched these may be for giving voice to, and illuminating, particular experiences. To take just one of the passages I have quoted tonight, compare what Virginia Woolf writes about her own experience to how she captures and relives and reworks that experience in her novel To the Lighthouse.

I can think of no one studying the pursuits of happiness who drew more consciously, not only on experimental findings but also on the resources of art and autobiographical writings than did William James. James took as a starting point for all his research the assumption that how to gain, how to keep, how to recover happiness is for most people "the secret motive of all they do and of all they are willing to endure." In Varieties of Religious Experience, he used excerpts from the personal accounts of St. Teresa, Rousseau, Emerson, and a wealth of others to illustrate his discussion. James succeeded in being a thorough experimentalist even as he drew on every form of

psychological, religious, medical, and philosophical inquiry; in this way he points the way to the genuinely interdisciplinary study that the subject of happiness deserves and too rarely receives.

In concluding my remarks this evening, I want to turn to the exchange I mentioned at the beginning, between President Charles William Eliot and Professor William James. President Eliot knew James well. Years earlier, when James studied chemistry with him, Eliot had noted how frequent were this student's "excursions into other sciences and realms of thought; . . . his mind was excursive and he liked experimenting, particularly novel experimenting." Later, as colleagues, they exchanged many letters having to do with finances, possible instructors and professors to invite to Harvard, and departmental affairs.

The exchange I want to mention took place in August, 1902. President Eliot was writing to James about his newly published Gifford Lectures, The Varieties of Religious Experience. He had been reading these lectures carefully, Eliot wrote, finding them "very interesting and instructive." He noted the chapters that he had liked best, including the chapter on saintliness, the one on Philosophy, and Chapter XXII, the Conclusion. "Dear President," James answered, "I am much gratified at your caring enough for my book to have read it so carefully, and in particular that Chapter XXII passed muster with you."

As I have been going through the correspondence between the two, I have searched in vain for letters back and forth on an earlier work dealing with happiness – the short book that Eliot himself had published six years earlier, in 1896, entitled The Happy Life. It went on to be published in many editions, in a series entitled "What Is Worthwhile," alongside volumes by John Ruskin, Tolstoy, Emerson and Matthew Arnold, but also a variety of now forgotten works with titles such as "The Blessing of Cheerfulness," "True Womanhood," and "By the Still Waters."

Reading Eliot's book makes me understand with what great interest he would have approached all other works that dealt with happiness. And after seeing his many references to philosophers and literature, I don't think it can be a mere coincidence that his book bears the same title as Seneca's De Vita Beata. Biographers tell us that happiness was, for Eliot, the supreme social good. In this book, he focuses on ways in which individuals can seek to make their lives happier, regardless of their lot in life.

Finding no written comments by James on Eliot's small book, I shall resort to imagining a few. I believe that James would have agreed wholeheartedly with Eliot's insistence that "all discovered and systematized knowledge is as nothing compared with the undiscovered" – that we live on "a little islet" of sense and fact in the midst of a boundless ocean of the unknown and the mysterious -- and that we must therefore be welcoming to what science can do to dispel some of the mystery.

James would have appreciated, too, the ways in which Eliot developed contemporary perspectives on the factors contributing to human happiness that ancient philosophers had discussed. Eliot described the role that friendship, love for family,

service to others, and physical exertion play, but also the pleasures from the “trained and quickened senses of sight, hearing, and touch,” the joys of reading and singing and relishing the vast field of natural history. He cited Charles Darwin, “the greatest naturalist of this century,” as holding that with natural history and the domestic affections a man could be happy.

James might have chuckled at the prominent place Eliot gave to sensuous pleasures such as eating and drinking, and at the anecdote he told of the old woman, nearing death, who brightened up when her minister asked which of the Lord’s mercies she was most thankful for, and then surprised him by answering “My victuals.”

But James might have taken issue with Eliot’s insistence that happiness would not be promoted by increasing a community’s wealth or by distributing it more evenly; and thought passages such as the following too facile, skimming past the very differences in temperament and social advantages and sensitivity that he himself charted in his works:

We may be sure that cheerful beliefs about the unseen world, framed in full harmony with the beauty of the visible universe, and with the sweetness of the domestic affections and joys, and held in company with kindred and friends, will illuminate the dark places on the pathway of earthly life, and brighten all the road.

Both Eliot and James would, I believe, be fascinated to return, a century after their exchange of letters, to see what “happiness researchers” are now exploring. They would be as interested to learn of the international surveys as to consider the frontiers of research in psychopharmacology and the neurosciences.

And they would surely have been astonished but utterly attentive could they have taken part in a two-day conference held at MIT just a month ago in which questions of happiness were central. Sponsored by the McGovern Institute at MIT and the Mind and Life Institute, it was entitled “Investigating The Mind: Exchanges between Buddhism and the biobehavioral sciences on how the mind works.” The purpose of the conference was to facilitate dialogues among Tibetan Buddhists, including the Dalai Lama, and leading scientists on the subjects of attention, mental imagery, and emotion; and to explore the degree to which the most advanced techniques of brain imaging could illuminate what happens during states of consciousness achieved at the most advanced levels of meditation.

As I come to the end of these field notes from my travels in pursuit of what has been thought and written about happiness, I think I speak for most of those who were in the audience on those two days at MIT in saying that the exchanges were riveting from beginning to end. I felt fortunate to have witnessed such remarkably open and probing dialogues, bringing together individuals from entirely different perspectives. I was surprised, at first, to hear how often William James was cited, until I recognized how natural it would be for those present to take him as a model. And President Eliot’s words about our living on “a little islet” of sense and fact in the midst of a boundless ocean of the unknown seemed to me as true then as a hundred years earlier; but there was a sense

that we now have unprecedented means of extending that territory, so long as we remain prepared to modify convictions that no longer square with the facts.

I shall close by returning to the anonymous poem from which I quoted earlier -- The Pursuits of Happiness, Inscribed to a Friend – and to a stanza that I see as inviting to further dialogues among friends and colleagues about happiness and its pursuit:

Some fleeting hope we start, pursue, and miss,
Then rouse another and pronounce it bliss:
Yet may not spleen the Sovereign Will arraign,
Yet may not spleen believe we run in vain;
'Tis the pursuit rewards the active mind,
And what in rest we seek, in toil we find.