

University of Arizona
College of Social & Behavioral Sciences
Convocation & Recognition Ceremony
December 19, 2015

The Secret to Success: Choose Happiness!

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I am honored to be with you to celebrate your graduation from this marvelous institution. This is the part of your day when an older person – me -- shares what I have learned so far about the secret to success so you can take shortcuts.

I have discovered the secret to success is to make your decisions based on maximizing your happiness.

Happiness is what we most seek in life. Aristotle said, "*Happiness is the meaning and the purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence.*" The Dalai Lama said "*Our purpose in life is to be happy. From the very core of our being, we simply desire contentment.*"

Sadly, you were born into a culture that's been brainwashing you to believe that success is measured by how much money you earn or have, your status, your job title, how big your house is, and what kind of car you drive. If you focus on maximizing *those* measures of success, you will be disappointed, my friends. Happiness doesn't come from having 10 million or a hundred million dollars, from starting your own billion dollar company or from being on the cover of a magazine or winning the Nobel Prize. It isn't based on what other people think of you.

Happiness comes from the choices you make every day, and I'm here to tell you that the most important guide you can use in living your life is whenever you are faced with a decision, ask yourself, "Which choice will make me happier?" Even though I have been studying psychology and happiness for more than 25 years, my most significant learning has resulted from asking myself, and my clients, that question.

First, let me tell you **how I define happiness**. It's a deep abiding sense of contentment, and being able to say "*I love my life!*" It isn't a result of the pleasures of the moment, whether sex, drugs or fabulous food, although those can be nice! It isn't the fleeting high of getting something you want – whether an iPhone or a car, or even a great job. It doesn't mean you have no troubles or challenges, because overcoming challenges and

learning lessons from them is actually one of the sources of happiness. You might wonder if choosing happiness is selfish. It is not. Because humans are social animals and care about other people, happy people spread happiness. Happy people also tend to be more productive, generous and have more friends.

One good thing about happiness is that in any circumstance, even very difficult ones, there is a way you can choose greater happiness. Even when you don't choose what happens to you, you get to choose your responses – how you interpret what happened to you which determines how you feel - and what you think, say and do. Every decision you make will lead to new circumstances in which you'll learn more about what makes you happy, or unhappy, so that you'll get better at choosing happiness.

Over the next few minutes, I'm going share some of the tools I've learned that help me make choices that lead to me saying, "*I love my life!*" It's my hope you will find two or three ideas to use as your guide, and most importantly, that you will choose maximizing happiness as your goal.

- You choose happiness when you have the **courage to change** the things that make you unhappy – whether changing your situation or changing the story you are telling yourself that creates your unhappiness
- You choose happiness by **accepting** things in life that you cannot change, and finding the positive in everything, even losses
- You choose happiness when you believe that you, like all humans, are **worthy and loveable** and good enough, and decide it doesn't really matter what other people think.
- You get it from knowing your **values** and making decisions based on being the kind of person you want to be. There are resources on the bookmark you received to help you identify the values you most admire. When I'm faced with a decision, I ask myself, "What would a loving, compassionate, honest, generous person who cares about her impact on the planet do in this situation?" Then I find the courage to do that.
- You choose happiness by focusing on what you already have in your life, and **appreciating** what is working and the beauty that surrounds you.
- You discover happiness by doing something that makes the world a better place. This is finding a way that **your life makes a difference**. It doesn't have to be a big thing. You contribute by being a good friend, or a loving and supportive parent, or treating each being you meet with kindness and compassion. You can make a difference by volunteering your time to help a cause that is important to you. Ideally your work brings you some sense that what you do matters, because the money you earn won't be a big enough reward to bring you lasting happiness.

I want to focus on work because it will fill a large part of your life, and you will be happier if your work is satisfying and feels like a way to express who you are and who you are becoming.

- How many of you have already found a job that feels like a great first step into the career you dream of?

Congratulations to the several of you who raised your hands! I would not have been able to raise my hand at my graduation. I hope what I'm about to share makes all of you who didn't raise your hand feel more at ease.

While your first post-college job is important, know that 30 years from now you will probably be doing something you can't even imagine right now.

When I graduated with a degree in economics I had no idea what I wanted to do, but I did some research and decided to work in a bank. My first job was as a clerk in the operations department of a bank at the equivalent in today's dollars of about 24 thousand a year. Five months later another bank offered me a management training position, from which I moved into the trust department. My first job there was preparing tax returns 52 hours a week during tax season – which was not fun. There was enormous pressure, the work wasn't very interesting, and my boss was a difficult person. It took almost a year to move into doing the work I thought I wanted - administering trusts and estates. But by the time I was 29 I was so unhappy in my job that I had ulcers. The death of my 27-year-old sister-in-law from melanoma cancer became a wake-up call that made me leave that career. I was about to apply for an MBA to become a consultant when a family crisis involving the brother whose wife died led me to discover that helping people learn how to be happier was my true calling. I decided to go back to school again and pursue a doctorate in psychology.

As I look back, my unhappiness with my job gave me the courage to try something different, to choose to be happier. I find that my work, some of which is unpaid, has evolved over the years as I shape it by doing *less* of what makes me unhappy and *more* of what makes me happy. Since who I am has evolved throughout my life, my work has evolved too. This happens to people who choose happiness, and it is good.

It may take time to figure out what you love doing. Work helps you learn what you like, what you don't like, and what you are good at. It gives you a place to develop your skills and your sense of what your gifts are. It can help you figure out how you want to make a difference in the world. You learn how to get along with people in different kinds of

relationships - boss, co-worker, customer – and you get to observe the choices other people make as they pursue what *they* think will bring them happiness.

Even when you find meaningful work that you love there will be tasks you don't particularly enjoy. There will be challenges and bad days. Challenges aren't a bad thing, they make us use our skills, and we can learn from them.

As you move through jobs on your life path, trust your intuition, your heart and your gut. Your brain can confuse you with other people's ideas about success. If your work isn't bringing you happiness, change jobs, refining your direction with the knowledge gained from your experiences. Don't let other people's opinions of what you should do trump your heart. Don't let fear stop you from changing careers, no matter how much time you've invested in your current career. Even though you may have to reduce your earnings expectations, it is more important to spend your time doing something that is meaningful and enjoyable to you. I know from hundreds of clients that how you spend your time will have far more influence on your happiness than how much money you make or have.

If you are not sure what you want to do, ask yourself these questions:

- What would I do if money was not a concern?
- How would I *really* enjoy spending my life?

Ignore the voice that says, "You may love that, but you can't make money at it." You may not be able to make as much money as you can doing something else, and you may need to get really good at what you want to do before you can make a living at it, but we only invest enough time to get great at something when we love it. And the world benefits when we love what we are doing because we do that well (plus you're choosing happiness!).

Alan Watts, a Buddhist philosopher from the middle of the twentieth century said,

"If you say earning money is the most important thing, you will spend your life doing things you don't like doing in order to live – that is to go on doing things you don't like doing -- which is stupid! It is better to have a short life full of what you like doing than a long life spent being miserable in your job."

A growing number of young people today choose to live a modest lifestyle - shop at resale stores, rent rather than buy - so they can do meaningful work. Parents, I encourage you to support your graduates in figuring out what makes them happy rather than pressuring them to pursue the biggest possible paycheck. I realize you may be afraid of having to continue to support them, but if you let them know that as long as

they are paying their bills, you value them being happy over them being rich, you will give them a great gift. And if your days of paying tuition are over, perhaps it is time to pursue work that brings *you* more happiness!

Graduates, while no doubt your parents are very happy and proud of you today (especially if they have invested in you by contributing to the cost of your education), you are not responsible for living your life to please them, you must please yourself.

I have a caveat on choosing happiness, and that is before you act, imagine the future impact of your decision - on yourself, others and the planet. If you don't, you may make a choice today that limits your future happiness.

These can be individual choices or those we make as a society or community. For instance, as a society we are making choices – like continuing to burn fossil fuels, pollute our water supplies and poison our oceans -- that have dramatic limiting consequences on the future for all of us. It is important to use the power of your vote and your voice in the public arena to impact the political and social decisions that will affect your future happiness, and that of your children.

Humans are social animals and the highest correlations of life choices to happiness relate to having one or more **relationships where you can be yourself** and know you are loved and accepted for who you are. Intimacy develops when you let go of worrying about what other people think of you and expose your imperfections and vulnerabilities. Choose to be with people who want you to be happy and who bring out the best in you, and who will be there for you in the challenging times – whether to hug you when you are suffering, or let you sleep on their couch if you are homeless.

You choose frustration and unhappiness when you try to change another person because we can't change what other people feel, think or do. If someone in your life is bringing you unhappiness, you can let go of worrying about what they are feeling or doing or choose to limit your contact with them.

When I graduated from the University of Vermont, my college boyfriend, who graduated 18 months ahead of me, asked me to marry him. Since I didn't know what kind of job to seek, or where I wanted to live, I agreed. I wish I had followed my grandmother's advice to "just live with him first." By the time I was 25 I had 'caught' his depression and was resigned to living the rest of my life without love when my best friend visited and asked, "Do you think you'll get divorced?" She challenged my assumption that marriage was a life-long commitment, and gave me permission to consider choosing happiness by

getting divorced. My current husband and I lived together for six years before we decided to get married.

Even if you follow all this advice, and make choices based on what you think will make you happier, things will not always work out the way that you want them to. Your expectations (or other people's expectations for you) may not be met. You will make mistakes. You may not get the job you really want, or get the promotion when you think you deserve it, it might snow on your wedding day, you may have a child with autism. You may decide you are in the wrong job, or career or marriage for you. While you don't get to choose all the things that happen to you, you always have a choice about how you respond, and that will make the difference between having a happy life and being unhappy. You can be disappointed, and still find a silver lining. Everyone suffers at some point. Troubles aren't distributed fairly, some seem to be given lives with more difficulties and challenges. But unhappiness isn't a result of what happens to you – it is a result of whether you take an attitude of being a victim in your life, or whether you look for something you can change in the situation, so that you will be happier.

In graduate school I studied people who learn they have a potentially fatal illness. I discovered many of them find that stage of life the happiest because they appreciate every day of life they still have, and they make a point of doing the things that are most important to them.

To live your life fully, you must take risks, which means **mistakes** are inevitable. We often discover mistakes because we become unhappy or someone else becomes unhappy with us. Unhappiness is a signal that something needs to change – either your situation, or something within yourself. When you discover a mistake, the mature and healthy response is to own up to it, address it by taking responsibility for the consequences including making the changes called for, and then use what you learned to make better decisions in the future.

I love the line attributed to Mulla Nasrudin “Good judgement comes from experience. Experience often comes from bad judgement.” So forgive yourself for your mistakes and reframe them as life lessons. Beating yourself up with regrets serves no one.

Live like you are dying, because we all are. This knowledge helps us focus on what is important – maximizing happiness. When I'm deciding whether or not I want to do something, I ask myself, “If this were my last year on earth, would I do this with my precious time?” “If I live another forty years, will it matter if I did this thing?” The answers to these two questions help me decide how important the thing is, and then I

can do whatever makes me happiest in this moment, knowing the consequences for the long term.

I wish you a happy life today, tomorrow, next year, and forty years from now. When the end of your life nears, that is what will really matter. So may you have the courage to make your decisions based on maximizing happiness for yourself with awareness of the consequences on your future, others and the planet.

Choose happiness!