Judging by the number of books released in the past few years with the word “happiness” or “joy” in the title, one might suspect that Americans are in desperate pursuit for the elusive emotion of bliss; a never ending string of spiritual highs. A recent issue of TIME magazine ran a cover story on the pursuit of happiness examining everything from genetic endowment (starting with early immigrants looking for a better life) to dopamine and serotonin levels found in the brain. Happiness may be the new buzzword, but there is no agreement in psychological circles on its origin or constitution. Is happiness an emotion or the expectation that precedes a positive emotion? Are people born happy or can they learn to be happy? Is happiness an absolute aspect or is there a continuum of pleasure? Are optimists happier than pessimists? Would you be as happy if you couldn’t share your experience on social media? Is happiness an expression of the ego wanting satisfaction or simply the soul experiencing gratitude? Can money really buy happiness? Can you be happy with nothing? Is true happiness better than that reached by means of repeated addictive behaviors? What is the relationship between joy and sadness? These questions are more than an investigation into our emotions. They
constitute a principle aspect of spiritual wellbeing as well.

For many people the term “human spirituality” conjures up images of warm fuzzy puppies, stunning sunsets and orgasmic experiences of varying degrees; what is commonly known as the “Disney World effect.” In today’s jargon we can add the words “happiness” and “bliss” to this paradigm. Yet there is more to human spirituality than happiness. Metaphorically speaking, there must be a time to empty one’s cup so that it can be refilled. In the immortal words of beloved poet Kahil Gibran, “Your joy is your sorrow unmasked.”

It is this emptying process that elicits a whole different set of emotions (e.g. anger, fear, grief, etc.), many of which seem to derail the quest for happiness. Sadness and grief, however, are also included in the collective spiritual experience. In the words of Jungian Analyst, Jean Shinoda Bolen, “We are not humans on a spiritual path, rather we are spirits on a human path,” meaning that all experiences, the good, the bad and the ugly are part of the human condition. Ask most any person going through a significant loss or painful experience and they will surely tell you that stress is not part of the human spirituality equation. Wisdom keepers, sages and mystics would strongly disagree: Not only are stress and human spirituality partners in the dance of life, but all things being equal, the collection of emotional highs and lows follow a spiritual rhythm.

Seasons of the Soul: A Lesson from Nature

Before the Internet and the Worldwide Web. Before NPR and CNN, even before books, people accrued the foundation of personal knowledge through the observations and lessons taught through nature; the change of seasons, the tides and the arc of the sun across the sky throughout the course of each year. Living so close to the Earth and being completely dependent upon Mother Nature for food, sustenance and security, one paid close attention to the ways of the natural world, so one could not only survive, but live in harmony with them. Becoming aware of and following these natural cycles wasn’t just a good idea; it was essential to one’s health and wellbeing. This ageless planetary wisdom spans the history of humanity from the ancient Celtic spirituality and Lau Tzu’s classic book, the Tao de Ching, to our contemporary understanding of circadian variation in the human body clock. It also underscores the cornerstone of human spirituality.

One of the great insights gained from the observations of the natural world is the recurring patterns of cycles;
the ebb an flow of the ocean tides, the 2-day cycle of the moon, the change of seasons, the migration of birds and animals, and of course the diurnal cycle of daylight and darkness. Indigenous elders the world over remind us that we are a part of nature, and it is a part of us.

This inherent wisdom of cycles and rhythms is becoming forgotten in the rapid hectic, high tech lifestyles of the 21st century. Our current love affair with technology (what some are now calling screen addictions) has created an ever-growing abyss between us and the natural world, to the detriment of our physical and spiritual health. One of the casualties of this withered relationship is the loss of perspective of these natural cycles and how they are so integrated into our physical, mental, emotional and spiritual wellbeing.

Over the millennia, the wisdom keepers and sages have reminded us that just as there are cycles in the physical world that parallel the Earth’s natural cycles, so too is there a parallel between the Earth’s seasons and the seasons of the soul. The following is a brief overview:

The Centering Process (Autumn): a time to go within and focus on the Self. It is a time of soul-searching and self-reflection where one quiets the mind to calm the soul. It is a time to unplug from the external world and turn inward....

Taking time to be still. The Centering Process is a time to “Enter the Heart.”

The Emptying Process (Winter): This is a time to release, let go, and detach from thoughts, attitudes, beliefs and perceptions, which at one time may have served us, but now they only seem to hold us back. Only when room has been made by this cleansing process may new insights and wisdom be revealed.

The Grounding Process (Spring): a time to seek and process the answers to life’s problems and challenges that come to us. The grounding process is the “vision” of the vision quest. Remember, Nature abhors a vacuum. The grounding process is time to access our intuition and perhaps even attain a glimmer of enlightenment in preparation for the next stage (season) of our life journey.

The Connecting Process (Summer): a season when we come back “home” to our community and share what we have learned on the leg of our most recent experience and the wisdom gained from the grounding process. The Connecting Process is based on the premise of love—nurturing our connections with friends, family, acquaintances (even strangers). As such the Connecting Process is a time of celebration.

Among nearly all languages and cultures, the words spirit, wind and breath are used synonymously; a means to represent a flow of energy. For spirit to stay healthy it must move or flow. When the flow of spirit is halted, it becomes toxic. For this reason we are reminded not to remain too long in any one season but to move gracefully through each, for there are many revolutions in this spiritual cycle of the seasons.
The Emptying Process Revisited

Of these four seasons of the soul, it is the emptying process that is most feared and hence often avoided; mostly our perceived pain of separation or disconnection. The emptying process goes by several names, most notably, the “dark night of the soul” and the winter of discontent, both of which are the antithesis of happiness.

Described by many a person as THE abyss or the VOID, most people make a habit of avoiding the void. Still others teeter on the edge, frozen with fear. The end result is a case of spiritual constipation or toxicity to the soul. For spirit to be vibrant, it must keep moving. Ultimately, the emptying process is neither an abyss, nor a void; it is the womb of creation. Simply stated the emptying process is a cleansing that creates a silence in the stillness that the soul needs for rejuvenation. Once cleansed, we may move forward gracefully on our journey. Ironically, rather than emptying, in the nature of human addictions, the common response is to fill the void with material possessions or behaviors that act as a quick fix to appease, if not seek that eternal moment of happiness. Can there be happiness in the emptiness? As one crosses the threshold from winter to spring, the realization of cleansing and releasing the old thoughts, attitudes, perceptions and beliefs that at one time may have served us is more than blissful, it’s liberating.

References:

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