

## **In Praise of Melancholy**

### **American culture's overemphasis on happiness misses an essential part of a full life**

By ERIC G. WILSON

Ours are ominous times. We are on the verge of eroding away our ozone layer. Within decades we could face major oceanic flooding. We are close to annihilating hundreds of exquisite animal species. Soon our forests will be as bland as pavement. Moreover, we now find ourselves on the verge of a new cold war.

But there is another threat, perhaps as dangerous: We are eradicating a major cultural force, the muse behind much art and poetry and music. We are annihilating melancholia.

A recent poll conducted by the Pew Research Center shows that almost 85 percent of Americans believe that they are very happy or at least pretty happy. The psychological world is now abuzz with a new field, positive psychology, devoted to finding ways to enhance happiness through pleasure, engagement, and meaning. Psychologists practicing this brand of therapy are leaders in a novel science, the science of happiness. Mainstream publishers are learning from the self-help industry and printing thousands of books on how to be happy. Doctors offer a wide array of drugs that might eradicate depression forever. It seems truly an age of almost perfect contentment, a brave new world of persistent good fortune, joy without trouble, felicity with no penalty.

Why are most Americans so utterly willing to have an essential part of their hearts sliced away and discarded like so much waste? What are we to make of this American obsession with happiness, an obsession that could well lead to a sudden extinction of the creative impulse, that could result in an extermination as horrible as those foreshadowed by global warming and environmental crisis and nuclear proliferation? What drives this rage for complacency, this desperate contentment?

Surely all this happiness can't be for real. How can so many people be happy in the midst of all the problems that beset our globe — not only the collective and apocalyptic ills but also those particular irritations that bedevil our everyday existences, those money issues and marital spats, those stifling vocations and lonely dawns? Are we to believe that four out of every five Americans can be content amid the general woe? Are some people lying, or are they simply afraid to be honest in a culture in which the status quo is nothing short of manic bliss? Aren't we suspicious of this statistic? Aren't we further troubled by our culture's overemphasis on happiness? Don't we fear that this rabid focus on exuberance leads to half-lives, to bland existences, to wastelands of mechanistic behavior?

I for one am afraid that American culture's overemphasis on happiness at the expense of sadness might be dangerous, a wanton forgetting of an essential part of a full life. I further am concerned that to desire only happiness in a world undoubtedly tragic is to become inauthentic, to settle for unrealistic abstractions that ignore concrete situations. I am finally fearful of our society's efforts to expunge melancholia. Without the agitations of the soul, would all of our magnificently yearning towers topple? Would our heart-torn symphonies cease?

My fears grow out of my suspicion that the predominant form of American happiness breeds blandness. This kind of happiness appears to disregard the value of sadness. This brand of supposed joy, moreover, seems to foster an ignorance of life's enduring and vital polarity between agony and ecstasy, dejection and ebullience. Trying to forget sadness and its integral place in the great rhythm of the cosmos, this sort of happiness insinuates that the blues are an aberrant state that should be cursed as weakness of will or removed with the help of a little pink pill.

I'm not questioning joy in general. For instance, I'm not challenging that unbearable exuberance that suddenly emerges from long suffering. I'm not troubled by that hard-earned tranquillity that comes from long meditation on the world's sorrows. I'm not criticizing that slow-burning bliss that issues from a life spent helping those who hurt. And I'm not romanticizing clinical depression. I realize that there are many lost souls out there who require medication to keep from killing themselves or harming their friends and families. I'm not questioning pharmaceutical therapies for the seriously depressed or simply to make existence bearable for so many with biochemical disorders.

I do, however, wonder why so many people experiencing melancholia are now taking pills simply to ease the pain. Of course there is a fine line between what I'm calling melancholia and what society calls

depression. In my mind, what separates the two is degree of activity. Both forms are more or less chronic sadness that leads to continuing unease with how things are — persistent feelings that the world is not quite right, that it is a place of suffering, stupidity, and evil. Depression (as I see it, at least) causes apathy in the face of this unease, lethargy approaching total paralysis, an inability to feel much of anything one way or another. In contrast, melancholia generates a deep feeling in regard to this same anxiety, a turbulence of heart that results in an active questioning of the status quo, a perpetual longing to create new ways of being and seeing.

Our culture seems to confuse these two and thus treats melancholia as an aberrant state, a vile threat to our pervasive notions of happiness — happiness as immediate gratification, happiness as superficial comfort, happiness as static contentment. Of course the question immediately arises: Who wouldn't question this apparently hollow form of American happiness? Aren't all of us late at night, when we're honest with ourselves, opposed to shallow happiness? Most likely we are, but isn't it possible that many of us fall into superficiality without knowing it? Aren't some of us so smitten with the American dream that we have become brainwashed into believing that our sole purpose on this earth is to be happy? Doesn't this unwitting affection for happiness over sadness lead us to a one-sided life, to bliss without discomfort, bright noon with no night?

My sense is that most of us have been duped by the American craze for happiness. We might think that we're leading a truly honest existence, when we're really just behaving as predictably and artificially as robots, falling easily into well-worn "happy" behaviors, into the conventions of contentment. Deceived, we miss out on the great interplay of the living cosmos, its luminous gloom, its terrible beauty.

The American dream of happiness might be a nightmare. What passes for bliss could well be a dystopia of flaccid grins. Our passion for felicity hints at an ominous hatred for all that grows and thrives and then dies. I'd hate for us to awaken one morning and regret what we've done in the name of untroubled enjoyment. I'd hate for us to crawl out of our beds and walk out into a country denuded of gorgeous lonely roads and the grandeur of desolate hotels, of half-cracked geniuses and their frantic poems. I'd hate for us to come to consciousness when it's too late to live.

On November 30, 1820, as the autumn orange decayed into earth's winter muck, John Keats, suffering from the tuberculosis that killed his mother and his brother Tom, sat down to draft a letter to his good friend Charles Brown. This was to be his last known correspondence. Between horrific bouts of coughing — coughing that stained his tongue with blood — Keats wrote these striking lines: "I have an habitual feeling of my real life having past, and that I am leading a posthumous existence." At the age of 25, when he should have been relishing opportunities for love and for growth, for summer's larks and pretty girls, Keats already felt like a corpse. It seemed to him as though he were already in the grave and therefore looking back on his days as one would witness a character in a finished story. There he was, composing, viewing the world with a dead man's eyes.

When he was only nine years old, his father fell from his horse and died the next day. A few years later, his mother was diagnosed with tuberculosis. Though Keats nursed her assiduously, sitting up with her all hours of the night, cooking for her, reading to her, she died in 1810, during Keats's 15th year. Keats was assigned to a guardian and soon after taken from a beloved boarding school and required to apprentice as an apothecary. He found the work tedious, for during these years, his late teens, he was awakening to the grandeurs of poetry, especially the verse of Spenser and Shakespeare. To complete his training, Keats had to learn surgery. Day after day, he toiled in a hospital, malodorous and bloody, where he witnessed nothing but suffering. As he was turning from surgery to poetry, his first substantial poem, "Endymion," was published in 1818. Two of the leading literary magazines of the time attacked the poem for not making sense.

Around this time, Keats's brother Tom died after a long and painful illness. While attending Tom, Keats met the love of his life, Fanny Brawne, and became engaged to her. However, he soon realized that he would never be able to marry her because he himself was doomed to fall prey to the same disease that killed his family members. He knew he would die without ever consummating his ardent love.

One would think that Keats's life would have fostered bitterness in him, but he remained generous in the face of his difficulties. He didn't flee to the usual 19th-century escapes: Christianity or opium, drink or dreaming. Though he unsurprisingly underwent pangs of serious melancholia (who wouldn't, faced with his

disasters?), he nonetheless never fell into self-pity or self-indulgent sorrow. In fact, he consistently transformed his gloom, grown primarily from his experiences with death, into a vital source of beauty. Things are gorgeous, he often claimed, because they die. The porcelain rose is not as pretty as the one that decays. Melancholia over time's passing is the proper stance for beholding beauty.

Keats understood that suffering and death are not aberrations to be cursed but necessary parts of a capacious existence, a personal history attuned to the plentiful polarity of the cosmos. To deny death and calamity would be to live only a partial life, one devoid of creativity and beauty. Keats welcomed his death so that he could live.

Taking this double stance — suffering death while transcending death — Keats was in his pain and yet above it. He developed this interplay between detachment and attachment in one of his most famous letters, written in 1819. "Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a Soul?" he asked. He's here implying that an abstract mind can develop into a full-hearted person only through enduring long periods of sadness and pain.

In another famous letter, this one from 1818, Keats compares a human's life with a "large Mansion of Many Apartments." He states that the only way to engage the great mysteries of life is to suffer "Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and oppression." Undergoing these troubles, one moves from the "Chamber of Maiden Thought," the room of innocence, into darker passages, the regions of profound experience. In this latter place, one finds the inspiration for poetry, poetry that explores the mysterious burdens of life. In this case, too, Keats shows himself to be intensely aware of the painful world but also keenly willing to embrace this same pain. It's as if he were somehow in the world but not of it, able to suffer sadness but also able to see beyond it.

In his 1819 "Ode on Melancholy," he urges us not to alleviate our blues with befuddling chemicals, seek escape through suicide, or "drown the wakeful anguish of the soul." Remaining conscious of our dark moods, we might fall into a "melancholy fit," a deep experience of life's transience but also of its beauty. This melancholy fit is a mixed affair. It falls from heaven "like a weeping cloud,/That fosters the droop-headed flowers all." But it also brings rain and nourishment. Indeed, this cloud "hides the green hill in an April shroud."

What can we call this fit but a meaningful experience of generative melancholy, of that strange feeling that sadness connects us to life's vibrant pulses? Alienated from home and happiness, we sense what is most essential: not comfort or contentment but authentic participation in life's grim interplay between stinking corpses and singing lemurs. This "fit" shivers our souls.

In this tense mood, we are in a position to understand the relationship between beauty and death. Keats urges us to "glut" our sorrow on a "morning rose" or "on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave" or "on the wealth of globèd peonies." He then says that if our "mistress" shows "rich anger," we should take her hand and let her "rave" and "feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes." Each of those recommendations features the melancholy soul's experiencing something beautiful but also something transient. There is a connection among melancholy, beauty, and death.

These associations make for several conclusions. The "wakeful anguish" of sharp melancholia can lead to a shuddering experience, a "fit." This vital moment grows from an insight into the nature of things: Life grows from death; death gives rise to life. This insight animates melancholy, makes it vibrant. But it also intensifies the pain, for it emphasizes this: Everything, no matter how beautiful, must die. Rather than flee from this difficult position, the melancholic appreciates things all the more because they die. In enjoying the beauty of the world, the melancholic himself wants to create beauty, to commemorate his resplendent experience of earth's transient gorgeousness.

Melancholia, far from a mere disease or weakness of will, is an almost miraculous invitation to transcend the banal status quo and imagine the untapped possibilities for existence. Without melancholia, the earth would likely freeze over into a fixed state, as predictable as metal. Only with the help of constant sorrow can this dying world be changed, enlivened, pushed to the new.

These are not metaphysical claims, not some New Age claptrap. On the contrary, these statements are attuned to the sloppy world as it simply appears to us in our everyday experience. When we, with apparent happiness, grab hard onto one ideology or another, this world suddenly seems to take on a static

coherence, a rigid division between right and wrong. The world in this way becomes uninteresting, dead. But when we allow our melancholy mood to bloom in our hearts, this universe, formerly inanimate, comes suddenly to life. Finite rules dissolve before infinite possibilities. Happiness to us is no longer viable. We want something more: joy. Melancholia galvanizes us, shocks us to life.

Melancholia pushes against the easy "either/or" of the status quo. It thrives in unexplored middle ground between oppositions, in the "both/and." It fosters fresh insights into relationships between oppositions, especially that great polarity life and death. It encourages new ways of conceiving and naming the mysterious connections between antinomies. It returns us to innocence, to the ability to play in the potential without being constrained to the actual. Such respites from causality refresh our relationship to the world, grant us beautiful vistas, energize our hearts and our minds.

Indeed, the world is much of the time boring, controlled as it is by staid habits. It seems overly familiar, tired, repetitious. Then along comes what Keats calls the melancholy fit, and suddenly the planet again turns interesting. The veil of familiarity falls away. There before us shimmer bracing possibilities. We are called to forge untested links to our environments. We are summoned to be creative.

Given these virtues of melancholia, why are psychiatrists and psychologists attempting to "cure" depression as if it were a terrible disease? Obviously, those suffering severe depression — suicidal and bordering on psychosis — require serious medications. But what of those who possess mild to moderate depression? Should these potential visionaries and innovators eradicate their melancholia with the help of a pill?

Right now, if the statistics are correct, about 15 percent of Americans are not happy. Soon, perhaps, with the help of psychopharmaceuticals, melancholics will become unknown. That would be an unparalleled tragedy, equivalent in scope to the annihilation of the sperm whale or the golden eagle. With no more melancholics, we would live in a world in which everyone simply accepted the status quo, in which everyone would simply be content with the given. This would constitute a nightmare worthy of Philip K. Dick, a police state of Pollyannas, a flatland that offers nothing new under the sun. Why are we pushing toward such a hellish condition?

The answer is simple: fear. Most hide behind a smile because they are afraid of facing the world's complexity, its vagueness, its terrible beauties. If we stay safely ensconced behind our painted grins, then we won't have to encounter the insecurities attendant upon dwelling in possibility, those anxious moments when one doesn't know this from that, when one could suddenly become almost anything at all. Even though this anxiety, usually over death, is in the end exhilarating, a call to be creative, it is in the beginning rather horrifying, a feeling of hovering in an unpredictable abyss. Most of us habitually flee from that state of mind, try to lose ourselves in distraction and good cheer. We don inauthenticity as a mask, a disguise to protect us from the abyss.

To foster a society of total happiness is to concoct a culture of fear. Do we really want to give away our courage for mere mirth? Are we ready to relinquish our most essential hearts for a good night's sleep, a season of contentment? We must resist the seductions of mindless happiness and somehow hold to our sadness. We must find a way, difficult though it is, to be who we are, sullenness and all.

Suffering the gloom, inevitable as breath, we must further accept this fact that the world hates: We are forever incomplete, fragments of some ungraspable whole. Our unfinished natures — we are never pure actualities but always vague potentials — make life a constant struggle, a bout with the persistent unknown. But this extension into the abyss is also our salvation. To be only a fragment is always to strive for something beyond ourselves, something transcendent. That striving is always an act of freedom, of choosing one road instead of another. Though this labor is arduous — it requires constant attention to our mysterious and shifting interiors — it is also ecstatic, an almost infinite sounding of the exquisite riddles of Being.

To be against happiness is to embrace ecstasy. Incompleteness is a call to life. Fragmentation is freedom. The exhilaration of never knowing anything fully is that you can perpetually imagine sublimities beyond reason. On the margins of the known is the agile edge of existence. This is the rapture, burning slow, of finishing a book that can never be completed, a flawed and conflicted text, vexed as twilight.

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### ODE ON MELANCHOLY

NO, no! go not to Lethe, neither twist  
Wolf's-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine;  
Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kist  
By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine;  
Make not your rosary of yew-berries,  
Nor let the beetle, nor the death-moth be  
Your mournful Psyche, nor the downy owl  
A partner in your sorrow's mysteries;  
For shade to shade will come too drowsily,  
And down the wakeful anguish of the soul.

But when the melancholy fit shall fall  
Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud,  
That fosters the droop-headed flowers all,  
And hides the green hill in an April shroud;  
Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose,  
Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave,  
Or on the wealth of globèd peonies;  
Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows,  
Emprison her soft hand, and let her rave,  
And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes.

She dwells with Beauty — Beauty that must die;  
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips  
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,  
Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips:  
Ay, in the very temple of Delight  
Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine,  
Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue  
Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;  
His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,  
And be among her cloudy trophies hung.

— John Keats (*The Oxford Book of English Verse:*  
1250-1900, 1919 edition)

## **BORN TO THE BLUES**

American happiness is a temptation, one to which I've succumbed on several occasions. More than once I've grown weary of the pervasive gloom of my soul. Like millions of other Americans, I have tried to flee the sadness, attempted to escape, by any means possible, the weight, the fatigue, the fret. Let's be serious: Life, in any form, is terribly and irredeemably hard. Why shouldn't we all scurry from the heartache in the most superficial ways possible, through BlackBerrys and Lexapro and liposuction? Why shouldn't we bask in the gaudy glow of the pervasive American dream? What's lost in this collective stupor? What's wrong, finally, with wanting nothing but bliss?

At the behest of well-meaning friends, I have purchased books on how to be happy. I have tried to turn my chronic scowl into a bright smile. I have attempted to become more active, to get out of my dark house and away from my somber books and participate in the world of meaningful action. I have taken up jogging, the Latin language, and the chair of a university English department. I have fostered the drive to succeed in my career. I have bought an insurance policy, a PalmPilot, and a cellphone. I have taken an interest in Thanksgiving and Christmas, in keeping my hair trimmed short, and in meticulously ironing my clothes. I have viewed Doris Day and Frank Capra movies. I have feigned interest in the health of others. I have dropped into the habit of saying "great" and "wonderful" as much as possible. I have pretended to take seriously certain good causes designed to make the world a better place. I have contemplated getting a dog. I have started eating salads. I have tried to discipline myself in nodding knowingly. I have tried to be mindful of others but ended up pissed as hell. I have written a book on the hard-earned optimism of Ralph Waldo Emerson. I have undertaken yoga. I have stopped yoga and gone into tai chi. I have thought of going to psychiatrists and getting some drugs. I have quit all of this and then started again and then once more quit. Now I plan to stay quit. The road to hell is paved with happy plans.

My basic instinct is toward melancholia — a state I must nourish. In fostering my essential nature, I'm trying to live according to what I see as my deep calling. Granted, it's difficult at times to hold hard to this vocation, this labor in the fields of sadness. But I realize somewhere in the core of my bones that I was born to the blues.

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