

From *Finding Happiness: Monastic Steps for a Fulfilling Life* by Christopher Jamison (Weidenfeld and Nicolson 2008)

A Happy Death

The words 'happy' and 'death' do not come together naturally in contemporary culture. By contrast, the Catholic tradition has prayers "for a happy death". So let's look at a happy death to illustrate this distinctive meaning of happiness.

Father Michael Smith was a monk of Worth and the story of his death conveys the monastic meaning of happy much more clearly than any theorising. For many years, Worth had a small community of monks living and working among the poor in Peru. Father Michael had worked there and was famous for his ability to walk over the mountains of the Andes to serve the needs of people living in remote villages: he became known as 'el gran misionero', 'the great missionary'. When he finally retired back to England in his eighties, he became ill and was hospitalised. He was diagnosed with inoperable, internal melanoma, the result of living for years in bright sunlight. When the diagnosis came and the consultant had explained the nature of the disease, Michael came home and I sat with him to talk it through. I explained that this disease usually affects the skin but that in rare cases it occurs internally. 'So *that's* what's going to get me then,' he said with a tone that suggested he'd always wondered what he would die from. I said: "Michael, you have climbed many mountains in your life and now you have to climb the highest one of all." His eyes lit up and he replied: "Yes, I've often thought of it like that...and the best part of climbing a mountain is the view from the top".

So for two months, Michael climbed that mountain with great faith and during that time, his deeply spiritual qualities emerged. During his final weeks, Michael was unable to leave his room and was unable to eat; his life was reduced to the bare minimum. Having been the servant of the least, he now himself became one of the least. Yet he retained what had always been the essentials of his life: the broad grin; the prayer; the acceptance of discomfort; the concern for others, especially for Peruvians whom he still enquired about. He died as he lived. And every day he received Holy Communion in his room, with focus and great dignity. On the penultimate Sunday of his life, he was very weak and a small group of monks celebrated Mass with him in his room; at the words of consecration, 'this is my body...this is my blood...' his eyes opened very wide and his faith seemed to penetrate through the bread and wine to the Body and Blood of Christ, creating a deep sense of contemplation and communion for all of us present. During the days that followed he slowly slipped into unconsciousness and died the following week. We as a monastic community had the privilege of

sharing in depth the experience of a happy death; it remains for us all a great source of inspiration and comfort.

Some of us may have had an elderly parent or relative with whom we have shared a similar experience. What is noteworthy for me is not simply that somebody on their death bed can be grateful for having led a happy life, though that itself is a great blessing. What struck me about Father Michael's death was that the dying itself was a happy experience. In his living and in his dying, Michael knew the joy of contemplating God and the delight of living virtuously.

Clearly, dying at an advanced age, knowing that we are dying, surrounded by the loving support of friends and family are elements of a happy death. But a happy death can therefore take many forms. As part of our journey to find happiness, if we can appreciate what happiness means in the context of death, which, after all, is the one future experience we will all share, then we may have found an understanding of happiness that will also serve us well in life. In his *Rule*, St Benedict says that 'a monk must have death daily before his eyes'. Some may feel that this is a morbid attitude and indeed that the idea of finding happiness through thinking about death is morbid. But I believe that this approach is just the opposite; morbid means dwelling on death and being enthralled by it. I am suggesting instead that we look death in the face and in some sense conquer it by describing how it might be happy.

People diagnosed with a life threatening illness often describe how the illness has led them to reassess their life and its priorities. This sometimes leads them to a better way of life that is simpler, giving time to what matters most in life. Without realising it, such people are fulfilling St Benedict's injunction to keep death daily before our eyes. They would be surprised if anybody called them morbid; rather, they would insist that they had found a better way to live. Keeping death daily before our eyes means thinking about how our own death could be happy. This not only enables us to accept the reality of death as part of life, it also helps us to live life now with full attention to what is truly important and so is an important part of finding happiness.

An example drawn surprisingly from the business world also illustrates how this could work for us. In the world of project management, starting at the end of a project and working backwards is called

'back planning'. When we know what the final stage looks like then we can work backwards to describe the beginnings. This approach has the advantage of generating a whole picture of what is involved; as well as telling the last step it also tells us the first step. So at the start of our journey towards finding happiness we should do some 'back planning' for a happy life which means beginning with a description of a happy death.

Apart from the usual features of daily care and nourishment a happy death might involve: the absence of mind-numbing pain, (but the total absence of pain is not essential); the absence of anger, either because it has been passed through to acceptance or because it never occurred; a sense of communion with loved ones and with God. Ideally, it also involves a conscious awareness of what is happening so that there can be a letting go – no greedy clinging or demanding things of others. It may include a grateful looking back at life and expressions of gratitude to loved ones. This is not an exhaustive list but an intuitive one drawn from my personal experience. I suggest that we each draw up a description of our own happy death because as we do so, we will probably be discovering what a happy life involves.

A happy death as part of a life informed by contemplation and virtue describes the overall picture of our journey. This classical view of happiness can seem impossibly idealistic and excessively restrictive for people today. Freedom is integral to the modern understanding of happiness and so we must now turn to see if such a view is compatible with modern understandings of liberty and happiness.