

# village view

by Andrea Leonard

Every time you see acquaintances, neighbors, friends or family during the next couple of weeks, you'll greet them with warm wishes for a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

You'll send cards wishing them happy holidays and invite folks in for eggnog and cookies. You'll exchange thoughtful gifts with people you love, and plan ways to make everyone, especially the children, happy.

It's the season when it's particularly important to be happy and assure everyone else is happy too.

What's this stuff called happiness, anyhow?

Half a century of observation still leaves me full of wonder about happiness even though they've been reasonably happy years. Or should I say they've been reasonably satisfying years? Or should I say they've been quite contented years?

Dictionaries define happiness as luck or good fortune; prosperity; having or demonstrating pleasure or satisfaction; gratification. Also, well-adapted, appropriate, and felicitous. Felicity means bliss or great happiness, 'tis written.

Satisfaction is fulfillment of a desire, need or appetite, or a source of gratification. Contentment is a state of not desiring more than one possesses.

Someone once attempted to describe happiness as "absence of pain"; I reject this notion as too negative and failing to express the necessary positive aspects of happiness. Absence of pain might mean the absence of pleasure, as well, and such neutral state would not be a happy one.

If happiness is felicity and felicity is bliss, then happiness is fleeting indeed. Bliss has no staying power, delightful though it is.

If happiness is a deep lasting experience, it must be made up, in part, of satisfaction and contentment. What happiness is not, is instant gratification of desire, but rather a slow growth of strong and positive assurance that being alive is worthwhile.

One of our inalienable rights as Americans, we've grown to believe, is to be happy. Upon closer examination of those inalienable rights, however, we find that what is guaranteed is the pursuit of happiness. No one guarantees the achievement of it.

And it's the pursuit of happiness most of us engage in all our lives. The pursuit varies with individuals, but the chase is one we all participate in.

There are those who pursue happiness through gratification of hungers: hungers for sweets, for attention, for physical contact with others, for communication and recognition, for acclaim and fame.

There are those who pursue happiness through gratification of needs: enough to eat for maintaining health, comfortable clothing and adequate housing, feeling loved and loving, fulfilling desires, hopes and dreams of our families.

There are those who pursue happiness through gratification of greed: greed for money, for conspicuous affluence, the biggest and grandest house, the most expensive cars, the finest in attire, for social standing and adulation.

There are combinations of these, with most of us wanting a little bit of all these things, and being generally satisfied if we feel successful in our pursuit of happiness fifty per cent of the time.

Living on Cape Cod, we have opportunities to observe all levels of humanity and affluence in ways most people living in cities, suburbs or rural areas seldom can. Our population includes people of all walks of life from the very wealthy, many of whom spend their summers here, to the least fortunate, those whose annual incomes are extremely limited.

Most of us, and most of the Cape's visitors, belong to a middle group and are neither very rich nor very poor.

We're satisfied if we can pay our bills each month, replace our car with a newer model every half-dozen years, take a vacation now and then, educate our children if they want to go beyond public school, and provide a bare minimum of savings to supplement our retirement incomes.

That's happiness? Not exactly. That's satisfaction, maybe; that's enough for self respect.

We're contented if we have enough to eat, a comfortable home, companionship and communication with people we love, and if we feel we contribute to the general well-being of the society of which we're a part.

That's happiness? Again, not exactly. It's enough to make us feel good about ourselves and our world. But it's not quite happiness.

We look about us at some of our well-to-do neighbors and, judging from their behavior with one another and the rest of the world, they're no happier than we are.

We look at some of us who can only be described as poor in worldly goods and, judging from the way they live, how they treat each other, and their attitudes about our society, they have achieved happiness, when some more fortunate obviously fail.

What is this elusive quality we spent so much time and effort pursuing? It's a lot easier to say what it is not; that's plain. And it's not hard to recognize when experienced or observed; it's as difficult to describe, however, as it is to achieve, it seems.

Speaking only for myself, I'd say it's a combination of satisfaction and contentment and one other ingredient: bringing joy to someone else.

Without that, you haven't got happiness no matter how many other things you've achieved. Happiness is yours only if your life is one of sharing.

Happiness comes when you've helped someone. No one has to thank you. No one even has to know it. You know it.

Happiness comes when someone you love reaches out for no apparent reason and gives you a hug. It's a shared joy.

Happiness comes with a phone call from someone you've been missing and who's been missing you; it comes when a child snuggles close as you read a bedtime story; it comes when someone says, "That was a good dinner," or "It's been a good weekend."

Happiness may, of course, mean something different to you than it does to me. For you to be happy, perhaps other needs must be met. You may need public acclaim, you may require a more complex environment than someone who is most comfortable in simple surroundings.

Maybe you can't really be happy without a cushion of cash in a savings account, just in case there's an emergency. Possibly you feel dissatisfied unless you receive mental stimulation, physical satisfaction, and unless all your emotional needs are met by your partner in life.

For each of us happiness is something a little different; we know when we're happy and when we're not, even if we can't describe it.

At this joyous season, giving happiness is the surest way to find it, and as the old year's days pass swiftly into history and those of the new year dawn, happiness will glow warmly in our hearts if we bring it to others, share it, sacrifice to assure it for someone else.

During this closing month of 1976, may you know a deeper and richer Christmas happiness than ever you felt before.