



*Stumbling On Happiness*. By Daniel Gilbert. Vintage Books. 2007. Trade Paperback. \$14.95

February 2011

“Balancing on the Fulcrum,” A Book Review by Carolyn Copenhaver

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It was the eye-wetting sting of grief that brought me to this unusual and brilliant book for the third time in as many years: my brother’s “treatable but incurable” illness diagnosed last summer when I was in Waco visiting my mother. After absorbing the hard news and breaking it to Mom, I drove to Waco’s Barnes & Noble and bought a copy of Daniel Gilbert’s best-selling, internationally-acclaimed book, *Stumbling on Happiness*, whose cover displays an upturned bowl of cherries. The visual pun is well suited to this book’s theme, content, and sometimes “goofball prose.” As the back cover blurb explains, the work draws upon “the latest research in psychology, cognitive neuroscience, philosophy, and behavioral economics.” First, Gilbert establishes that, universally, human beings consciously and unconsciously, incessantly strive for happiness. The BIG question that his book investigates is this: *Why do humans forever wrongly predict what will make them happy?* His answers span 263 pages of readable, witty writing and 34 pages of academic notes.

### **The Author**

Professor Daniel Gilbert, once a 19 year old high-school drop-out, is more than a gifted writer. He is an esteemed award-winning Professor of Psychology at Harvard University and a world-famed pioneer in “affective forecasting, with a special emphasis on cognitive biases.” Nicknamed Dr. Happiness by his colleagues, Gilbert continues to produce stacks of research filling up academic journals, anthologies, newspapers and magazines. He also writes science fiction short stories. In 2007, he won the Royal Society Prize for Science Books. In 2008, he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In 2010, he hosted a six-hour NOVA series, “This Emotional Life”. *Stumbling on Happiness*, a textbook for countless college seminars and lay study groups, has been translated into more than 25 languages.

### **The Book: Happiness as a State of Being**

After examining the issues of definition, methodology, and measurement regarding the subject of “happiness,” Gilbert devotes the greater part of his work examining the three basic mistakes that keep us mortals from skateboarding smoothly along the sidewalk of life. The culprits are our beloved triad of memory, imagination, and perception. Many of these mistakes are “lawful, regular, and systematic.” Law 1 (Memory): We confuse “reality” with what is actually “out there”, trapping us unknowingly in our own biases. Law 2 (Imagination): When we imagine the future and our future happy selves, we unknowingly again “leave things out”—and the further into the future we imagine ourselves, the more we omit. Law 3 (Perception): While our evolved “psychological immune system” blesses us with mental health and allows us to cope with loss and disappointment, it exacts a price. Our eyes may see “facts”, but our brains (never asking permission) unconsciously cook them into more palatable fare, sometimes even endowing us with Panglossian hope. Thus, we do NOT reside in a social universe of random sampling. We choose companions who like or even admire us, ask questions designed to elicit answers we

want to hear (Do you love me?) and pick churches (like Oakhurst) and other collectives that deliver the goods we (consciously and unconsciously) need to acquire. In short, says Gilbert, we “live at the fulcrum of stark reality and illusion ... and most of us don’t know our own address.” He may joke, but he seriously means it and by writing this book, he intends to come to our aid. “There is no simple formula for finding happiness,” he concludes. But “if our great big brains do not allow us to go sure-footedly into the future, they at least allow us to understand what makes us stumble.”

### **Research Article: Moments of Happiness**

An ancillary study, co-authored by Dr. Gilbert and one of his doctoral candidates published in the journal *Science* last November, attracted national attention. Using an iPhone web app, the authors called 2,250 volunteers at random intervals, asking them how happy they were at that exact moment. Given 22 choices of activities and using a “happiness scale” of 1-100, the respondents rated sex in the 90s, followed 20 points lower by exercise and conversation, then even lower by prayer and meditation, cooking, and attending to kids. The study concludes: “They were least happy when resting, working, or using a home computer.”

You, too, if you own an iPhone, can participate in an ongoing “Track Your Happiness.org” scientific research project that investigates “what makes life worth living.” Take a short survey and sign up at <http://www.trackyourhappiness.org/>. Gilbert promises that “you’ll be able to...find out what factors—for your personality—are associated with greater happiness. You’ll also be contributing to science.”

I have observed during the last ten years that “moments of happiness” occur often at Oakhurst. Our members frequently note them on our list serve. The Chin Nativity Pageant. The dancing during “Breaking up Christmas.” The flares and waves of chorus and bells from our singers and musicians. The often majestic Prayers of the People. Our ministers’ frequent word-strings of solace and wisdom, including those three resonant messages honoring Martin Luther King Jr. on a recent Sunday morning.

More personally, I am comforted by similar “flashpoints of happiness” that bring my brother to mind, flashes that buoy me along in the wake of his wit, his keen and restless intelligence, his huge encirclement of life, his fierce independence, his appetite for delicious food, his enjoyment of dog and garden, his unfettered love of family and friends. I know a great truth: during his 70 years, my brother stumbled onto Gilbert’s elusive Golden Grail, “happiness as a state of being.” He had the exceptional good fortune to live these last three decades in a second marriage filled with the joy of a loving blended family: wife, daughters and a son, and van-load of adoring grandchildren.

### **Final Thoughts**

To my Oakhurst friends: this book will inform you, even offer you new insights into the “human condition.” But you may not find comfort in it as I do. Dan Gilbert admits at its beginning that there are conditions (war, famine, epidemics, etc.) to which “happiness” cannot apply. During those tragedies we can only cope. My ragtag coping is this: that by understanding the nature, dynamics and flaws in my own striving for happiness, I can place myself “less blindly, with “more awareness,” on Gilbert’s metaphorical fulcrum. *For each of you a better balance.*

That is the remarkable blessing of Gilbert’s fine book.

### **Notes and References:**

- Daniel Gilbert Stumbles onto Something Big (<http://www.powells.com/authors/danielgilbert.html>), Dave Welch. Powers.com
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel\\_Gilbert\\_\(psychologist\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel_Gilbert_(psychologist))
- To view the PBS “This Emotional Life” 12-second celebrity clips on “The Meaning of Happiness”, go to: <http://pbs.org/thisemotionallife/perspective/meaning-happiness>. Don’t miss Schopenhauer’s porcupine fable.
- Matthew A. Killingsworth, Daniel T. Gilbert. A Wandering Mind Is an Unhappy Mind. *Science*, 2010; 330 (6006): 932 DOI: 10.1126/science.1192439.