

The Future Of Happiness

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TOMORROW WILL BE better? Better than what? Which way?

Depends on what you're looking for. Health? "Freedom"? (What's that?) Material comfort?

Convenience? "Beauty"? (What's that?) Knowledge? "Relationships"? (Eh?) Just plain happiness?

Whether you use crystal balls, clairvoyants, or computer simulations to predict the future, there are only two clear answers.

First, tomorrow will be different. Our society, like our biosphere, is unstable. It can only stabilize through change.

Second, the future will bring dizzying heights of happiness--and dismal depths of despair. And everything in-between. Even as now. Even as ever. Delight and discontent are relative and related. One is a measure of the other, and the stimuli that produce them vary for every society, and for each individual.

(Did you really experience more sheer joy with your first orgasm than with your first true-love teenage kiss? Or: after the orgasm, can the kiss still bring the same burst of heaven?)

Happiness comes in every color of the rainbow. Like the rainbow, it can be experienced, perceived, pursued--but never possessed, prepared for, or reliably predicted. Like the rainbow, it is an event

dependent on the percipient's position in a particular environment. Like the rainbow, it is more likely to manifest itself after a storm.

For the last 100 years or so, it has been fashionable to predict the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth.

Utopian socialists, technocrats, people's revolutionaries, transcendental meditators have come up with formulas for glowing happiness for allâ"all the time. The briefly more credible of these happy prophecies were based on the reasonable assumption that when everyone had enough of the necessities, and at least some of the luxuries, joy would reign.

Not so. The happiness of affluence is always over the next hill because our definitions change.

"Necessity" means new soles for shoes one decade, color televisions the next.

And how about the year after tomorrow? Where to find happiness in 50 years, or 100? In the unexpected moment, as always.

The year is 2029. A half century ago, everybody talked about energy and population and pollution, but nobody did anything constructive. Every year the shortages of food, fuel, water, shelter, space grew worse. When the bottom finally dropped out of the world economy in the 1990s, the industrialized world, with its complex production and delivery systems, completely collapsed. There were riots and bloodbaths in New York and Tokyo, Amsterdam and Moscow, Berlin and Buenos Aires.

The great cities died. But handfuls of refugees survived in scattered settlements, and on the rebuilt foundations of abandoned family farms.

Martha draws her ragged blanket around her, shivering, as she opens the peepholes of the dugout, one by one. All quiet. No sign of feral dog packs, no scent of feral human marauders. No sign of Will and the boys either. If the wild dogs have moved on, game must be even scarcer than before.

She cannot endure another day inside. The sun is bright and brilliant through the peepholes; it will be warm and beautiful outside. At the back of the dugout, the baby wakes, wailing. The cry is too thin. So is Martha's milk. She picks up the baby and, defiantly, recklessly, steps out into the sunlit clearing, undefended.

She sits on a cushion of skins on the ground nursing her child in spring sunshine. And then she sees. Six feet from where she sits, the plot of land she turned over so painfully with the broken spade last week is covered with green.

Green!

For eight years (the births of seven children, the deaths of four), she has dug and planted some of the stock of hoarded seeds, and watched as the poisoned land refused to bring forth.

And now--green--tiny seedlings sprouting promise across 15 square feet of sun-warmed soil!

. The baby squalls, but Martha lifts her with a smile, and points. She is trying to remember which seeds she planted. Beans? Carrots? Squash?

She can almost taste the sweet fibrous starchiness of the squash. Let there be squash! she prays, and sings happily to her baby, sitting warm in the sun, on sweet lifegiving soil. In the distance there is an animal's cry.

No. It is six-year-old Bart's high voice, carrying across the valley. They are on their way home.

There will be meat. And milk for the babe. And greens. And summer, soon, at last.

Right. That same year marked the beginning of another careful harvest. Not all of the planet had suffered as severely as Noramerica. Some of the medium-size, medium-growth, modest population countries (particularly in the Caribbean and central Africa) had been able to retain enough technology and leadership to begin a cautious reconstruction based on the use of recycled materials and energy from wind, water and the sun.

But the fossil fuels were gone, and memories of enemy attacks on nuclear power plants made uranium technology virtually taboo. In 2029, the first meeting was held, somewhere in Senegal, to begin planning the construction of a solar-power satellite--the only hope of an energy source adequate for major re-industrialization.

Then, in 2079--

Estrella wriggles out of the duty-seat, turns over the monitoring board to Sergiu, and edges out of the cramped cabin, feeling an unquenchable yearning for a long soapy shower-as unnecessary in the dustless, smokeless, moisture-and-temperature controlled canned air as it is unavailable. On the Station, water is for drinking.

She shoves off along the companionway toward the only slightly less-cramped and equally predictable leisure quarters at the opposite side of the space satellite. The glamour of space!

Fifteen years of studying, sweating, bitterly competing to win a job on the Station! She can still remember that old film, the startling image

of an astronaut named Edward H. White tumbling free in space, that started it all for her.

She stops at an open terminal, checks out her request with the computer, gets clearance, and walks down a different passage.

Twenty minutes later, she is standing in the airlock, performing the ritualized rundown on suit and helmet.

Then the outer lock-cycles open; she steps forward; hooks her lifeline to the ring next to the lock, and--tumbles. Tumbles, soars, swirls, careens--exults!

All the work, all the training, all the boredom and discomfort--this is what it was all about-- weightless, free, in love with the universe in the glory of space!

Two steps forward, one step sideways. A different 2079. The collapse never quite happened.

Instead, the practical application of nuclear fusion power led to a global economy based on unlimited energy. After a period of wildly unpredictable social, political and economic upheavals, the world settled down to the experience of total automated affluence. Computerized planning of servo-mechanism production and distribution systems and the development of recyclable biodegradable synthetics now make it possible for 95 per cent of the planet's population to live out their lives as luxury consumers. In fact, the declining death rate (the result of computerized diagnostics and universal preventive medical care delivery) has people packed so tightly over the earth's surface, there is literally no work space available, except for an elite corps of computer attendants and programmers.

The good news is that the birth rate is finally falling as fast as the death rate, due to the increasing tendency of the consumers to automate their leisure time as well.

Zelda reclines in her contoured massagecouch. She has just experienced a hard-fought victory in the world chess championships. Triumphantlly, she flicks channels, rejects folksingers and helicopter-racing options, is tempted by a new experimental religious ecstasy program. Then she opts for Lady Of The Lagoon. (She has always thought of herself as basically an outdoor type.) Green leaves rustle in the gentle breeze of her sylvan bower, touching her sun-warmed skin with the gentlest of air pressures. A spicy scent--she frowns, and makes a small adjustment, and .lemon whiffs up over cinnamon. She focuses outward, and the gleaming shape on the horizon shows itself to be a gilded catamaran, crimson-sailed. On the ship's deck a bronzed figure is now visible. The sail tightens against the wind.

Shivering deliciously, Zelda makes another small adjustment. Diaphanous clouds of gauzy silk enfold her limbs. Music? No. Realism, she decides, is better: the breeze in the leaves and the lapping of waves are all the sound she needs. She pushes the button for Play-through...

... and as the moon rises over the lagoon, Zelda savors the taste of roast pork and pineapples still on her tongue, and revels in the marvelous torpor suffusing her body. Night dew patters on the bower of palm fronds arched over her couch of balsam and pine. The gentle night wind blows softly through.

The tube to the intravenous needle falls limp, the sleep-tapes murmur satisfaction, the couch kneads her flaccid muscles in restorative massage, and Zelda sleeps in total joy.

Or perhaps 2001?

In the garden, Jan contentedly ties up dahlias. The warming sun, the glowing colors, the faint scent of baking bread wafting from the open kitchen door to mix with the fragrance of roses and petunias, the baby's babbling nonsense syllables--Jan stops a moment and feels--this is purest pleasure in a classical pattern feels simple gratitude to a bountiful universe.

A tug at jeans leg: the baby is silent now, lips com pressed, face intent, she clutches parental cloth, pulls herself clownishly erect, chortles with glee, lets go, and stands alone!

Jan sits back on haunches, breathless, fearful even to stir the air, hand held cautiously to be grabbed when--

When needed--now! Baby overbalances, grabs, holds, and steps into Jan's exultant embrace!

He tosses her up in the air, hoists her to his shoulder, and bounces her into the house.

Checks the time.

Noriko's big meeting should be over by now. He dials, beaming.

"Noriko, she took her first step!"

All the colors of the rainbow. How do you measure red against blue? Baby's first step or a twirl in space? Is the joy of the triumphant chess master greater or less than that of the long distance swimmer?

Is religious ecstasy more or deeper than the delight of the three-year-old with a shiny new red ball?

Will tomorrow's happiness be bigger or better or brighter than

yesterday's? No. Just different--the way it always has been.