

Palaima: Perhaps we should be honest about unhappiness

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In his recent book “Cowardice,” Chris Walsh points out that the life expectancy of American males doubled between 1850 and 2008, going from 37.2 years to 75.5 years. He pinpoints one momentous effect that this and other changes, like increased urbanization, have had on us. They have made our “greatest fear, that of death, seem distant and vague.”

Here is a related case in point. At a recent meeting of experts on public health care issues in Texas, a psychiatrist speaking on behavioral (mental) health care quoted Sigmund Freud on what his therapy was aimed at. Freud stated that he was trying to transform the “hysterical misery” of his patients into “common human unhappiness.” This prompted general laughter from the audience and other panelists. I wondered why.

To borrow a phrase Willie Nelson used when I interviewed him about his classic song “Jimmy’s Road,” the general laughter at Freud’s remark struck me as “some kind of strange thing.” Willie’s song, written back in 1968, expressed his deep feelings about the damage the hard experiences of war can cause to the body, mind and soul of any young person. Listen to it once or twice and you, too, will wonder what is funny about Freud’s insight.

Freud was dead serious, and the word “misery” connotes pity and sympathy for those who are suffering. When I was a young and pious

Roman Catholic altar boy, during the Easter season we performed a solemn ritual known as the Stations of the Cross. We followed Jesus Christ on his suffering path from his condemnation (station 1) through his crucifixion and death (stations 11 and 12) to his entombment (station 14). We sang and chanted prayers in Latin in our thankful belief that Jesus, the son of God, took on such misery himself because he saw our suffering and pitied us.

Recognizing our own suffering, we sang the Litany of the Saints, petitioning Jesus Christ, “miserere nobis,” “have mercy on us.”

Freud like all caring medical practitioners treated those who came to him as literal “patients,” from the Latin *patior* “I suffer.” He knew their psychological suffering deserved to be relieved. He also knew that, no matter how successful he was, all he could do was to return his patients to the normal human condition.

Why does it strike us as “some kind of strange thing” that our normal human lives partake of “common unhappiness”? Is it because not wanting to confront our own doubts about our lives, we look away from the general misery of our fellow human beings? Our founding fathers looked at reality. On July 4, 1776, they declared that happiness was a goal to be pursued. We now seem to view it as a state that is already ours, and rightly so, so long as we ourselves have acquired and maintain the right mix of income, power, education, job security, retirement income, religious piety, and health and life insurance.

We delude ourselves when we equate happiness with a protected and blinkered way of living. This delusion will vanish if we reflect upon the many hardships and sorrows we face moving through relatively privileged lives. It will vanish if we look at those on the bottom of our increasingly steep social and economic and educational pyramids. It will also vanish if we take time to look, listen, read, hear and learn.

To return to the medical profession, I recommend the writings of poet William Carlos Williams, a medical doctor among the urban poor and needy. In his essay “The Practice,” he flatly declares, “I have never had

a money practice; it would have been impossible for me.” And he speaks of “the peace of mind that comes from adopting the patient’s condition as one’s own to be struggled with toward a solution.” Rejecting what we would now call nightly news as a useless distraction, he finds “whole academies of learning” in a single patient’s eyes.

Walt Whitman, too, discovered soul-shaking truths about our general capacity to look away from human unhappiness. In late 1862, he became aware of the abominable treatment of wounded Civil War soldiers while searching for his wounded brother George in field hospitals. He stayed and worked devotedly with the wounded. He found that just listening in a human way might be enough to help a soldier pull through.

We all know in our hearts that human unhappiness is not uncommon, no matter how much we want to pretend that it is distant, vague or laughable.