

Pursuit of happiness isn't about pursuit of pleasure

If you are curious about other human beings and what makes them tick, it is hard to resist reading the articles by Statesman writer Michael Barnes. Barnes is identified as a social columnist, but his interests are different from those of standard newspaper society-page writers.

I was reminded of this after a long road trip that took us in mid-August through the again flood-stricken communities around Lake Charles and Baton Rouge, La., just after the high point of the August storms there. Already relatively poor communities were just recovering from the storms in March that had flooded their homes and businesses. One community spent five months and \$400,000 getting their fire station back in operating order, when it was flooded again. The social memories of the devastation caused by hurricanes Katrina and Rita 11 years ago were awakened in the New Orleans area. Grass-roots organizations to pay it, in this case, backwards were springing up and seeking money, goods, and volunteers to help other communities that were now suffering. Bart Pitchford, a military veteran and Ph.D. candidate at the University of Texas who is heading the National Endowment for the Humanities-funded Warrior Chorus veterans project, took time out from this important work to help his family in Baton Rouge.

When we think of the society pages, we generally think of reports on the doings of those people who by accident or choice hobnob as what we call socialites. High-end magazines like St. Charles Avenue Magazine give us

news and photographs of fêtes and soirées like a Fête for Feathered Friends to benefit the NOLA zoo's Tropical Bird House. The Sake Hop "cocktail journey" to benefit the Southern Food and Beverage Museum takes "let-them-eat-cake-ism" to another level, with no proceeds visibly trickling down to the masses, human or animal.

That is why Barnes' articles on Lee Elementary School's new namesake Russell Lee's Depression-era photographic masterpieces or on Choc-taw World War I hero Joseph Oklahombi are so refreshing. They take us out of our own all-too-comfortable zones.

I teach an ethics and leadership class at the University of Texas. It is called "Placing Ourselves" because that is what the word "ethics" meant to the Greeks who used its original form. It acknowledges that from the time we are born, we as individual isolated creatures are responding to other human beings within smaller and larger social groups. No one, high or low in wealth, social class, ethnic group, or education, has an easy go of this. The readings give us historical perspectives that make us aware of how privileged in general we are to be living in 21st-century America.

Students this year hopped on a passage from Dostoevsky's "Notes from the Underground," written at the time of our Civil War. In it the Russian author argues that even if we "shower upon human beings every blessing and drown them in a sea of happiness," they will risk these great advantages in order to prove that they are human beings and

"not keys of a piano." What startled everyone in the class was how complete happiness and full blessings are defined, namely as "economic prosperity, such that they should have nothing else to do but sleep, eat cakes and busy themselves with the continuation of the species."

Think of how you would define happiness and the highest order of blessings. Would you limit this condition to sleep, desert foods and lovemaking for yourselves? The question then is, why could or would Dostoevsky? One component surely is the conditions of life that prevailed in Russia in the 1860s. To an ordinary Russian, tasting a refined pastry would have been a tremendous luxury; to have a limitless supply, unimaginable. Likewise having secure surroundings and the economic standing to sleep at will.

The pursuit of happiness is a defining element of who and what we are as a nation. When we turn nowadays to defining for ourselves happiness and think about what makes us feel discontented and unfulfilled or treated unfairly in life, what do we come up with? If we really take in Russell Lee's Depression-era images, we should be ashamed of the minor inconveniences and disappointments that bother us and of why our appetites are unsated. Our own lives and the point of the current presidential election should be more about what we do unto others than what we accumulate in order to please and amuse ourselves and our own.