THOMAS G. PALAIMA ▪ REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

The root of our desires

It seems like longer than 22 years since Bobby McFerrin's "Don't Worry, Be Happy" swept the nation and won three Grammy Awards. The Berlin Wall was falling. The Cold War was ending. The world looked secure. We looked forward to reducing our military and redirecting expenditures toward making more Americans less worried and happier.

Desert Storm, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Rwanda, Starr v. Clinton, the dot-com bubble, 9/11, al Qaeda, WMDs, Iraq, Afghanistan, the sub-prime real estate and Wall Street implosions and, closer to home, the Fort Hood shootings and Joe Stack and his airplane — all have made the idea of putting on a happy face and singing our worries away seem absurd.

Still we all have desires for happiness. Our capitalist system depends on creating desires in us that we will work hard to fulfill. Our democracy tells us we can speak our desires and be heard.

Our desires are hard to pinpoint. A belief prevails that pursuing our desires may lead to no good. The two classic explorations of desire on the American stage in the 20th century make that point. Eugene O'Neill's "Desire Under the Elms" transplants Greek tragedy to a rural New England family. Desires lead to fraternal rivalry over inheritance, adultery between a son and his stepmother and infanticide. Tennessee Williams' "A Streetcar Named Desire" explores the destructive force of desires within a Southern family.

The very word "desire" has us reaching for something beyond our grasp. Its Latin source "desiderare" conveys a longing connected with the "stars." Moralists, evangelists, ethical philosophers and psychologists all have stressed that our desires can lead to ruin.

Samuel Johnson struck these two themes in his "Rambler" essays in the early 1750s: "It is very common for us to desire what we are least qualified to obtain," and "Every desire, however innocent, grows dangerous, as by long indulgence it becomes ascendant in the mind." The Epistle of St. James traces wars to our desires for things we cannot, without violence, obtain.

The stress placed on curtailing desire is so strong that we may overlook the positives that come from our desire to love another human being. Since love entails understanding, desire can be a vehicle for creating empathy and sympathy, two qualities that are neglected in our educational and political systems these days.

I do not mean the empathy and sympathy that stops at reciting the commandments about loving our fellow human beings and not doing them harm. I am talking about "feeling in" ("empatheia") and "feeling with" ("sumpatheia") other people so strongly that we cannot tolerate injustices or social inequities that lead to human suffering.

These thoughts were prompted by two tours through the exhibit "Desire," that runs until April 25 at the Blanton Museum at the University of Texas. The show presents works by 32 contemporary artists paired with written responses to their works by 31 other creative human beings. I went first chaperoning a group of 10th-graders and then with the show's curator, Annette Carlozzi.

The first piece in the show, Robert Kushner's "Scriptorium: Devout Exercises of the Heart," is riveting. Kushner offers exquisite paintings of live flowers executed on various "found" pages taken from books. The individual pages are pinned up and may flutter slightly, emphasizing the fragility of our desires.

Other photographs, videos, sculptures, paintings and drawings explore the nature of human attraction in ways that are witty, perplexing startling and disturbing. The images reach out and pull you in to an understanding of what makes the human heart, like the octopus in Amy Globus' video, a lonely hunter.

Carlozzi told me she "aimed at encouraging openness and tolerance by including a deliberately broad and creative range of representations of desire and by stressing its subjectivity." She wanted to "address the students, who are 'living desire,' as well as the self-aware and youthful population of Austin with new ways of imagining the universal and yet very particular human experience of desire."

True to UT's motto, your visit to "Desire" may change our world for the better.

tpalaima@sbcglobal.net