

Happiness and the Spiritual Quest: True Stories of Today

Joe Mannath SDB

I prefer true stories to grand theory, for three reasons (apart from the obvious one that most people prefer to read stories, and retain them better, than theory or exhortations):

One: One never knows how the so-called famous theologian or philosopher or spiritual writer actually responds to life, to trials, to pain and death. Do they follow the theories they teach others? Do they find them life-giving and adequate? How do they face and overcome fear and jealousy and greed and lust and hurts? Do they know whether their grand theories really work?

Two: Narrative is closer to life, and to truth, than theories. A true story is richer and deeper, and more reliable, than a clever theory. To quote a mentor and friend, Tony De Mello, “The shortest route between a person and the truth is a story.”

Three: We do not need many theories and much knowledge to live meaningfully and happily. Those who cultivate knowledge—professional theologians or philosophers or psychologists—are not necessarily wiser than so-called “ordinary people.” Personally, I have found more wisdom and inspiring examples among these “ordinary folks” than among the professionals of academia or religion. What follows is an exposure to their wisdom. There are teachers of wisdom all around us, everyday, if we have our eyes and ears open.

Teachers Extraordinary

When a parishioner asked me whether I could accompany her to visit a sick friend, I had little idea that I would be meeting a person from whom I was to learn precious lessons.

Jean, a single woman in her forties, was confined to her apartment, with emergency medical equipment taking up a good part of the small flat. She had had twenty-four surgeries, and was suffering from lung cancer when I met her. Her brother, the only living relative for years, had died a few months before. “That,” she said, “has been hard.”

But, with all this, Joan told me, “I am convinced that God loves me very much.” She had a warm and a pleasant face, and welcomed us with evident delight. There was no cribbing about her health condition, nor tragic medical stories meant to evoke pity. In fact, what she did say struck me: “When some people are diagnosed of cancer, they say: ‘Why me?’ I think that is the wrong question. Why not me? I am not better than others.” Joan did not see any reason why she should be exempted from cancer.

Joan believed in living, not in complaining. She—very wisely—did not see the point in self-pity. All through her illness, she retained the certainty that seemed to give her strength and buoyancy—the conviction that God loved her very much.

Joan died a few months later. From all I know, she retained her serenity and composure up to the end.

People like Joan help us to capture the true meaning of joy or happiness, as supposed to having an easy time, or going through pleasant experiences.

They also invite us to get in touch with our deep inner resources, which we seldom discover when the going is easy. Just as we discover the strength and endurance of our leg muscles only when we have to walk, especially climb, we do not feel the need of digging beneath the surface when the circumstances are not challenging. Many statements we ordinarily make about happiness (“Oh, we had a lovely time” or “What a wonderful day!”) *may* refer to happiness, but it is quite likely they are superficial statements made by persons who have never experienced deep joy, because they are not in touch with their deep selves.

It may be relevant here to refer to a favourite theme of Thomas Merton—the difference between our false selves and our true self. Finding happiness—or getting closer to God—is not about adorning our false, superficial self. It often involves letting go of these false selves, in order to find our true self. Just as it is not good for a diabetic to eat halwa, simply because he likes it, following our superficial desires is often the greatest obstacle to our deepest happiness.¹

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Another person I have quoted often and thought of with deep affection and esteem is a ninety-six-year-old man called Tim. Whenever I visit the city he lives in, I make it a point to visit him. He still continues to amaze me.

Tim was nine years old when his thirty-four-year-old father, a miner, died of consumption. Before he died, Tim’s father called him to his bedside, and told him: “Tim, promise me two things before I die: One, that you will look after your mom, your granny and your little brother.” The seven-year-old Tim said, “Yes.” His father’s second request was that he should never work in a copper mine; for he himself was dying of inhaling the metallic dust.

As an old man, Tim would tell me how he got over his sense of helplessness. “I used to feel so bitter,” he told me. “Here I was, with my mom, my younger brother and my granny, who was paralyzed and sat in a wheel chair. It was my granny, paradoxically, who got me over my bitterness. Like many old people, she used to pray aloud. During storms, she would pray for travelers; during examinations, for students; during the harvest, for farmers. I never heard her pray for herself. And yet, she was in constant pain. She had sores in her feet, which hurt.”

Tim grew up into a very positive and very happy man, looked up to by so many people who know him, beginning with his own children and grandchildren. One day, he shared with me his secret of happiness:

“I learnt early in life to distinguish between wants and needs. There is no limit to what I want. There is very little that I really need. Making this distinction has helped me.” In fact, he lived a very, very simple life. But what a rich life—rich in joy, rich in contentment, rich in friends, lavish in the good he has done.

I remember another friend, a sister working in a school, whose values have often inspired me. Apart from being very committed, she is a very happy person, wherever she works. I noticed that when I would ask her, “How are you?” her normal reply would be: “Very happy.” I noticed, too, that I seldom said that. I would say things like, “OK,” or “Fine,” or even “Happy,” but that I usually did not say, “Very happy.” What was I waiting for? I was waiting for a more perfect situation to be very happy. This is utter

¹ Merton pursues the theme of true and false selves in a number of his writings. See, for instance, his *New Seeds of Contemplation*.

foolishness. I was OK, things were going well, I had health, education, meaningful work and the love of a number of people, as well as the admiration of others, but I was waiting for a still more perfect setting to be really *very* happy. Why wait for another day to be very happy? Why not be deeply happy in your imperfect setting right now?

The lesson I needed to learn came in the form of a greeting card sent me by a friend. It was a cartoon showing a man standing on the moon and looking at the earth. The words on the card said, “Only on the moon will some people realized how happy they could have been on the earth.”

How true! That was true for me, too!

The Triple Secret of Happiness

Happiness is, basically, a by-product, and not something we can chase and win directly. It is like the roof of a house (visible from near and far, yes, but resting on what supports it). The pillars that support this roof are: something to believe in, someone to love and something to live for—faith, love and sense of purpose. I have explained this triple secret elsewhere.²

Let me summarize these central requirements in a few words:

You are more likely to be happy if you are sustained by a living faith. Faith gives you inner strength, an anchor through the storms of life, and a vision that provides meaning. Faith helps you move from fear to boldness, from loneliness to joy. We know what happened to the frightened bunch of men and women headed by a coward called Peter after they experienced the Risen Jesus. You can come across such transformations even today.

One man whose sense of God seemed to give him deep serenity and strength was Father M. M. Balaguer, S.J., who was my spiritual director during a crucial period of my life. He would tell me, “In everything that happens to you, the Lord has a message for you. You must try to find it.” This is how he himself faced the unexpected and met unpleasant situations, never losing his remarkable poise and peace.

Another priest, whose name I will not quote, in order not to embarrass him, says he has never been unhappy. One reason for his constant sense of joy is his willingness to forgive others, and see hurts with a sense of faith. One day, he told me: “When someone speaks ill of me, I pray extra for that person.” I have never seen him unhappy or bitter.

Next comes love. Love energizes and heals. To love and to be loved is probably the surest and most common source of happiness. People put up with hardships and are ready for the most demanding of sacrifices for the sake of those they love. Love can give a person both ecstasy and peace. Can you guess who wrote the following words? The writer is a very famous person. Do you know who he/she is, and who the “you” in the statement is:

*All through the long years
I sought peace.
I found ecstasy.
I found madness.
I found loneliness.
I found the solitary pain
That gnaws the heart.*

² Joe Mannath, *A Closer Look* (Chennai: Arumbu Publications, 2001), pp.24-33.

*But peace I did not find.
But now, old and near my end,
I have found Thee.
And, having found Thee,
I have found both ecstasy and peace.
I know rest.
I know
What life and love may be.
Now, if I sleep,
I shall sleep fulfilled.*

What is your guess? Who do you think are the two persons in this poem?

These words were written by Bertrand Russell, philosopher, mathematician and social reformer. They are the dedication of his autobiography.³ The title of the dedication is: *To Edith*. Edith was his fourth wife.

What did Edith's love for him and his love for her bring him, that all his fame, achievements and recognition did not give him?

The third pillar supporting the edifice of happiness is a sense of purpose. You tend to be happier if you have something worthwhile to live for, goals to pursue, meaningful tasks to perform. When you are busy clearing a mountain, you have no time to complain about the pebbles. If your attention is only on pebbles, any little pebble will be enough to upset you.

Faith, love and purpose—these are the three pillars on which the roof of happiness rests.

In training sessions on happiness and fulfillment, I have often asked participants to recall an experience of happiness. What they recall further confirms what I have just said. The commonest experience of happiness has to do with human relationships—being with a loved one, hearing that a loved one is safe and fine, the birth of a baby, etc. The next commonest setting of deep joy is religious experience. People attest to find deep peace and joy even in the midst of suffering and turmoil, through a personal God-experience. The third kind of experience participants recall is achievement. Happiness seems to follow meaningful achievement. People experience it when they feel they have done something really worthwhile.

There is also a fourth setting of happiness some people mention. It needs to be mentioned, since it is paradoxical. I refer to the experience of pain and suffering. Some people recall some very hard times as happy times. But the hard times are remembered as happy ones, not because they were hard, but because something worthwhile was achieved through the suffering, or the setting was one of love. There is joy in suffering for someone you love.

In fact, going one step further, we can say this: Some of the best teachers of happiness are men and women who have suffered incredibly more than most of us do.

Viktor Frankl and Etty Hillesum

Take the case of the world-renowned psychiatrist Viktor Frankl. Most of us have heard of his particular brand of therapy, called Logotherapy, which holds that the most important element in our mental health is not what happened to us in the past, but our

³ Bertrand Russell, *Autobiography* (.....), Dedication.

having something to live for. In his own case, he and his family were arrested and sent to the inhuman Nazi concentration camp. He was separated from his dear ones. People died around him everyday, from disease and ill-treatment. Others were killed in the gas chambers. Through all these horrors, Frankl sought to give himself something to live for. He knew that once he lost the will to live, he would die. In fact, he observed that it was not the physically stronger prisoners who survived, but those who had something to live for. He would compose his destroyed manuscript mentally, he would give himself other reasons for living. Then, one day, he made a simple and beautiful discovery.

With hundreds of other starved and brutalized prisoners, he was digging the frozen ground on a bitterly cold morning, with hardly anything to eat. He felt depressed and lonely. Then, he started to visualize his wife's face. He did not even know whether she was alive or not. But he could see her face, and it shone in his mind and heart. In that moment, everything changed. The weather remained bitterly cold, the guards were inhumanly cruel, the pangs of hunger continued, but Viktor Frankl was a different man. He would write later that in that moment he discovered for himself the truth the poets and philosophers have been saying, namely, it is love that makes the world go around.⁴

Have you heard of Etty Hillesum? If you will read just one uplifting human story, just one fascinating, incredible spiritual diary this year, read her story, published under the title, *An Interrupted Life*. It is the diary this young Jewish woman kept between the ages of 27 and 29, in the years 1941-43.

As the diary opens, Etty is a frightened, flighty, intelligent, articulate, passionate young woman, with a small circle of friends, and a bohemian life-style. Etty is not religiously trained, nor interested in that area. What comes through is her sharp eye, her terror, as well as her powerful sexual passion. "Mortal ear in every fibre. Complete collapse. Lack of self-confidence. Aversion. Panic"—that is Etty at the beginning of her diary. Two years later, the same young woman would write: "Very well, then, this new certainty that what they are after is our total destruction, I accept it. I know it now and I shall not burden others with my fears. I shall not be bitter if others fail to grasp what is happening to us Jews. I work and continue to live with the same conviction and I find life meaningful, yes, meaningful."

She started talking to God in her diary. As the life of the Jews became harder and more restricted, as they are rounded up and sent first to a transit camp and from there to the extermination camps, Etty discovered profound inner strength and deep meaning. She saw the tragedy unfolding around her, and knew she herself might be consumed by it, but she found life meaningful. As she began to listen to her inner discoveries, and talk everything over with God, she saw a new Etty evolving—a deeply compassionate, courageous and loving human being.

In fact, she decided to be "the loving heart of the barracks." Incredible as it may seem to us, while people went crazy with fear around her—they knew they were on their way to Auschwitz—Etty discovered her true mission and her home. "We can be at home anywhere," wrote this incredible woman, "if we carry home within us." She wrote that right within the camp, surrounded by barbed wire and cruel guards, she walked with a

⁴ Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Freedom* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

spring in her step. She did not feel defeated. Etty saw that no one can take away from us this one basic freedom—of how to respond to a given situation.⁵

Isn't one Etty worth more than a thousand mediocre human beings? Aren't people like her the teachers who can show us the way to peace and happiness?

Different Expressions

This deep, underlying joie de vivre can be expressed in different ways. Some happy people strike us as serene and contented. We can see it on their face. But they do not crack jokes, or clown, or act noisy. They are not easily ruffled. In circumstances that seem to throw others off balance, these joyful spirits move through the hassle, calm and reassured, and reassuring others, ready to help, but slow to shout and scream. Very often there is a quiet prayer going on in their hearts and on their lips.

I think of Rose, a very serene woman, a widow with five children, who has had a very hard life. When I remarked to her that she looked radiant—yes, radiant, not just resigned or satisfied—she replied: “It is not that I have no problems. But we must pray a lot. When we pray, we find peace and joy.” She brought up five children, and nursed her father-in-law and her mother-in-law with love all through their battle with cancer, and thinks it was a privilege being able to care for them in their old age—a privilege, she said, not a burden.

Rose's is a quiet style—quiet, but powerful and effective.

A religious sister who herself strikes me for her poise and warmth, told me how much she enjoys meeting an aunt of hers, and what she learns from this person. “My uncle was a rough man, whose ways were not pleasant. His marriage to this fine woman has transformed him completely. Now, what a wonderful way he has in dealing with people! My aunt changed him without a fight—through the power of her serene and joyful presence. I have so much to learn from her. She has such a wonderful way of dealing with people.”

Others exhibit their joy in exuberant and even noisy ways, not because they want to get others' attention, but because this is their spontaneous style.

One of my relatives is a woman who has always been noted for her spontaneous laughter. One day, she fell into a well and sprained her foot. When her husband got down to reach her, he found her standing at the bottom of the well—there was very little water—with her foot hurting. But she was laughing!

Another time, after her husband's death, she and her children were alone in the house. Hearing loud shouts and screams that could be heard from far, an uncle who lived across from them on the other side of the property, told someone: “The noise is coming from her house. Go and see if she and the children are OK.”

When the man came to check, he discovered the real reason for the loud noise. The woman and her children were laughing so hard they could be heard far away. It is not that they had no problems. But I have not seen them sit down and grumble, or go around with gloomy faces. They do smile and laugh a lot. Other relatives love visiting them.

One man I associate with loud laughter is the late Anthony De Mello. During meals at the Sadhana Institute, you could easily make out the table where Tony sat. It was

⁵ Etty Hillesum's extraordinary story is found in her diary, published under the title, *An Interrupted Life* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984). Her letters were published separately, under the title, *Letters from Westerbork* (New York: Random House, 1986).

generally the table from which you heard the loudest laughter. There was nothing overly “pious” about Tony, no effort to look the part of the guru, or to sound edifying. The truth is that Tony was himself, without pretenses, and this helped the participants to be themselves. There was no artificiality or “guru-worship” at Sadhana. Jokes abounded. Loud laughter could be heard everywhere.

The Healing Role of Laughter

Author Dostoyevsky, whose deep insight into the human heart comes through in his famous novels, had this to say about laughter. He was of the opinion that, if you wanted to get to know a person’s character, there was no need to give him any complicated psychological tests or anything of that kind. It was enough to watch the person laugh. He believed that the way we laugh reveals a lot about ourselves.

This precious spontaneity can, at times, be destroyed by misguided ideas on proper behaviour.

Freda, a young woman many of us know, was known for her good grades in college, her love for the poor, and her spontaneity and warmth. Her family really hoped she would get married, but she wanted to become a nun, and look after the aged and the sick. She joined the congregation of her choice. I did not see her for a long time.

One day, her elder sister told me of a “remark” Freda received from her superiors: “You laugh too much and too loud!” “Really?” I asked. “Have they really told her that?”

I hope convent life has not destroyed the laughter and spontaneity of this loving and lovable woman, who joined precisely to bring love and joy to the elderly and the ill. I hope she does not become an inhibited, fear-filled person, with an eye on whoever is watching her. I hope she does not give up her laughter and her spontaneity, her cheerfulness and her humour, for a “play-it-safe” policy of survival and suspicion. How damaging that would be! What a loss it would be, for herself, for her dear ones and for the sick and needy who could have experienced her joy and warmth.

Quite opposite was the worry expressed by a mother about her married daughter. “I am a bit worried, because Minnie does not laugh like before. She used to laugh so much. She tells me she is OK, and has no problems, but I miss her laughter. She is become too serious. I wonder what is wrong. What has happened to her laughter? We all used to enjoy it so much.”

Another mother shares a different, and very reassuring, experience: “My daughter is so happy in her marriage, especially since the birth of their baby. When she phones, she is laughing the whole time. She laughs much more than she used to. I can make out she is really happy. I know the reason. Her husband is an unusually good man, a much better person than we even imagined. And they love their child so much. It is so good hearing my daughter laugh so much, and sound so happy!”

I like going for walks on Marina Beach, Chennai, the most popular spot in the city for those who like to walk or jog. If you go for a walk there early morning, you will come across a group of men and women near the Mahatma Gandhi statue who stand in a circle and laugh out loud. They make it a point to laugh, and laugh really loud, with their whole body involved in the laughter. They believe—and they are right, with medical research supporting their view—that laughter is good for health, of both body and mind.

That brings us to the point of humour.

When medieval philosophers and theologians indicated the specific difference that set human beings apart from animals, they mentioned, of course, reason. When they wanted to pick out a unique quality that is found most typically in human beings, they picked out—guess what?—humour.

Humour—the ability to see the funny side of things, to say things tongue-in-cheek, to smile and laugh at human foibles—is a typical human trait, based on the gift or reason. We are gifted with intelligence, unlike animals; so we understand when something is said in jest, and we laugh. We enjoy cartoons and jokes, we tease our friends, and enjoy being teased by those who love us.

How dreary would life be if we were drastically serious the whole time, if there were no pranks, no jokes, no fun, no laughter!

What makes humor—think of your favourites jokes, for instance—possible is the fact we have brains to understand what is being said, and the tone and setting. The other element essential to humour is *surprise*. If we knew the punchline as soon as someone starts a joke, there would be no surprise, and hence no joke. This surprise element, too, is rooted in our particular type of intelligence. Unlike God, we get to know things step by step. We cannot see the future, nor read another's mind. The Olympic Games and the daily basketball game are thrilling because we do not know the outcome beforehand. The surprise element is essential to the enjoyment of games, and of humour. All fun, including pranks we play on our friends, needs an element of surprise.

Our intelligence helps us to be creative, to visualize and plan, to build and invent. This is the realm of work. Creative work is the root of all human progress—vehicles and medicines, telephones and computers, writing and the paper we write on. Without it, we would have no history, and no progress.

The other important side of life is play—things we do for enjoyment, like playing a game or a musical instrument, playing with one's children, or just being with someone we love. We do not put a money value on such activities, but these are the most precious moments of life.

Human beings need both work and play. To survive, I need food. To have food in my plate today, I need to work. But, how enjoyable the meal is, depends to a large degree on the company I share, and how pleasant our interaction is.

Happiness and the Spiritual Quest

Happiness, this marvelous by-product, is the fruit of balance—balance of work and play, seriousness and humour, a faith vision and people to love, worthwhile goals to pursue and the wisdom to let go when our efforts seem to fail.

Spirituality is what provides the vision and the fire.

Vision: to see ourselves as precious for the Greatest Lover of all, whose wisdom directs my day, and to whom no single detail of my life is lost or insignificant.

Fire: Lovers have it, mystics have it, artists have it, children have it. If cynicism, cruelty, excessive fear or crookedness does not destroy it, it is seen in the warmth and aliveness and spontaneity and joy found in the saints and in creative artists and in children.

A vivid example of someone who combines spirituality and evident joy is found in the following example.

I was visiting a elderly woman named Margaret suffering from cancer. She was in the last stages of a painful form of cancer. In spite of her usual optimism and humor, she was in no position to be cheerful. She could not stand or sit up. She was hardly able to speak. “This year has been hell,” is how she summarized it.

But, then, I mentioned the name of the Sister in charge of the sick in the parish. This Sister—let us call her Ernestine—used to do wonderful ministry among the sick and the shut-ins. She really brought much warmth, joy and love to the sick, together with a very positive outlook on life.

When I mentioned Sr. Ernestine, Margaret’s face lit up. Her whole demeanour changed. This is how she described this loving nun:

“When Sister Ernestine enters a room, she lights it up!”

What a great way to summarize a person’s life and work! Isn’t this what spirituality is all about—to light up our corner of the world through our presence?

You will probably know what I am talking about, for (hopefully) you have been blessed to meet such people, and experienced the healing power of their presence.

Or, better still, others have let you know that your presence lights up their life.

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This is perhaps the meaning of the halo artists paint around saints—that people with that extra divine spark walk through the world lighting up their surroundings. Their presence—to paraphrase the prayer attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi—brings darkness where there was light, hope to despairing souls, joy in the midst of sadness. The reason seems to be their undiluted commitment to follow where Love leads, and not let selfishness, fear and deceit mar the purity of their vision. This is what spirituality is supposed to mean, isn’t it? In pursuing that path with single-mindedness, there is an abundant overflow of joy.

Father Joe Mannath SDB is a professor at Madras University and an adjunct professor at the Catholic Theological Union, Chicago. Experience: twenty years of formation work, graduate teaching in different countries, counselling, research, parish ministry. Writings: *You Surprised Me*, *A Closer Look* and many articles. Address: Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras, Chepauk, Chennai 600005. E-mail: jmannath@vsnl.com For more information, including sample writings, see: www.joemannath.org