

“Que Sera, Sera”

By

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Good evening ladies and gentlemen. I am honored and humbled to stand before you as President for the 142nd season of a Club I love. The Chicago Literary Club is an important part of my life for several reasons, but chiefly as a place where I can be with congenial, curious and intellectually alive individuals. It is the people that make the Club special. So, thank you all for your participation in your Club and for being here tonight. I confess to being a bit apprehensive about the coming year. Naturally, I would like the Club to have an especially wonderful year on my watch. But, I have to remember that I do not control what will happen in the future. Nature, national and world events, and my fellow members, are not within my power to control. So, I repeat to myself: “Que Sera, Sera”.

We all know the meaning of this phrase from the song: “What will be, will be.” It suggests an acceptance of reality and an acknowledgement that I have no control over future events. It is heard throughout the world in its Italian, French and Spanish spellings. Interestingly, it is ungrammatical and makes no sense in any of these languages. It appears nowhere in Italian, French or Spanish literature before the modern era. The phrase first appears in 16th century England. As a young man, the First Earl of Bedford was in Italy and

fought in the battle of Pavia in 1525. He took some Italian words and strung them together using English rules of grammar to form a family motto. The phrase, Que Sera, Sera, was engraved on his tomb when he died in 1555. Thereafter, the phrase appears in English literature, including Christopher Marlowe's play "Doctor Faustus." I recently asked an Italian friend of mine about the phrase. She said it is in common usage in Italy today. When I asked if it made any sense in Italian, she gave me a puzzled look and, after a long pause, said that it did not make sense in Italian, but everybody says it because of the song.

Why did this phrase become so popular? Maybe because "What Will Be, Will Be" is a shorthand reference to, or a verbal guidepost directing us towards, how to have a happy, contented life, which is my topic for tonight. Is it possible to define what a happy life looks like? I suspect that if we each were asked to write our personal definition of a happy life or happiness on a piece of paper we would discover many definitions, some unexpected.

Earlier this evening, at my request, we heard the song "Happy". It was delightful, upbeat, and elevated the mood in the room. The lyrics, however,

are a bit of a puzzle. For instance: “Happiness is a room without a roof”? That’s what you get when a tornado blows through town. Or, “Happiness is the truth”? The song is an exuberant celebration of happiness, but is it a satisfactory definition?

Is happiness hilarity, pleasure, excitement? Or, is it gratification of physical or emotional desires? I think not. These feelings, while pleasant, are fleeting, superficial and ultimately not satisfying. Happiness is often described in the negative. The most cynical being: “ I never knew what true happiness was until I got married, and then it was too late.” A common, concise definition states: “Happiness is good health and a short memory.”

Am I unusual in failing to understand, yet actively seeking, happiness? We are all busy people in the world; preoccupied by myriad distractions, large and small. We tend to focus on what is in front of us, whether it is important or not, whether it is real or not. The ineluctable minutia of daily living can preoccupy us and cause us to lose perspective. Some people may prefer not to think too much about the nature of a happy life. I am reminded of a cartoon. A man struggles to the very top of a mountain, to approach the wise man sitting there. Exhausted, the seeker says:

I assume the first question is always ‘How do I find true happiness?’

“You’d think so,” says the wise man, “but usually it's ‘Where’s the washroom?’

For our purposes, let us agree that the definition of happiness is slippery, and necessarily individual. Let us also agree that the benefits of happiness are undeniable. In addition to the mysterious *je ne sais qua* of happiness there are many external, measurable benefits. Several recent studies suggest that happy people are healthier and live longer than unhappy people, up to 14% longer. Several biologic markers improve with happiness. Other research suggests that happy people are more productive at work and contribute to better workplace outcomes.

Happy people perceive the world as safer, feel more confident, make decisions more easily, and are more cooperative and tolerant with others. They live healthier, more energized and more satisfied lives. Happiness broadens thinking, increases creativity, and enhances problem solving. Not surprisingly, two studies report that happy college students go on to earn more money than their unhappy classmates. Honestly, don’t we all prefer the company of a happy person over an unhappy person? Wouldn’t we all be

better off, and more attractive to others, if we learned to increase our happiness?

So, let us explore the nature of a happy life and how to get it. Looking back, I do not recall any classes in school on this important topic. It is possible that there was some instruction on having a happy life, but I was either absent or not paying attention. In any event, I grew up with the impression that life was about duty, hard work and fighting through adversity. Happiness was something that might happen, probably in heaven, if I made it there. So, I just did not think about or expect much happiness in life.

Given my lack of education in this area, I have had to look elsewhere for guidance. When I have a question to research, I prefer to start with the first recorded mentioning of the subject and work my way to the present. I usually begin by perusing my own bookshelves for primary and secondary sources, paying attention to the bibliographies and “further reading” notes. Then I ramble through card catalogues and now, of course, the internet, for additional materials. There is some serendipity involved. I enjoy it like a good mystery, following an idea through different eras, civilizations and places.

In this matter, my search began with the discovery of a book on the shelf that I did not recognize. When I retired from the practice of law, one of the projects on my list of “ long deferred things to do” was to explore all of the books I had accumulated but never actually read. There was a work titled “ The Art of Living, The Classical Manual on Virtue, Happiness and Effectiveness” by Epictetus, with a new interpretation by Sharon Lebell. It was an invitingly slim volume. Reading it piqued my interest. Since I was reimagining my life in light of my retirement from gainful employment anyway, virtue, happiness and effectiveness were a good place to start.

Epictetus was a Stoic philosopher. For many of us the word “stoic” evokes a dour, negative, suffering person, the opposite of happy. A tongue in cheek title of an article about stoicism in the American Philosophical Quarterly was “ How to be Dead and not Care”. It turns out that the popular impression of stoicism is completely wrong. Stoicism is, among other things, about having a happy, fulfilling life.

Stoicism began around 300 BC when Zeno taught his philosophy under a colonnade overlooking the agora in Athens. Eventually, Stoicism became the dominant philosophy among the educated elite in the Hellenistic world and

the Roman Empire. We know the names and have bits and pieces of the writings of many Stoics, with most of the writings dating to the Roman period, including Cato the Younger, Seneca, and, of course, the Emperor Marcus Aurelius. For my study I focused on Epictetus, in part because we have preserved a relatively large amount of his teachings.

Epictetus was born a slave in present day Turkey about 55 AD. He spent his youth in Rome as a slave to a wealthy freedman who was secretary to the Emperor Nero. Epictetus was lame and walked with a pronounced limp. He studied with Stoics while a slave in Rome. Sometime after Nero's death Epictetus obtained his freedom and began teaching philosophy in Rome. When the Emperor Domitian banned all philosophers from Rome in 93 AD, Epictetus went to Nicopolis, Greece and founded his own school, where he taught until shortly before his death in 135 AD.

Epictetus' school thrived. One of his pupils was Flavius Arrian. Arrian later became a consul of Rome, Roman Legate to the Province of Cappadocia and a biographer of Alexander the Great. But, for our purposes Arrian's significant contribution was that he transcribed Epictetus' lectures. The lectures were in eight books, four of which survive. Arrian also prepared a

digest of Epictetus' teachings, called "The Manual" in English, which has survived. It is said that the Emperor Hadrian was an admirer and attended Epictetus' lectures. In his "Meditations", the Emperor Marcus Aurelius quotes Epictetus many times.

What was the Stoicism taught by Epictetus? In sum, it was a philosophy of emotional self-management to achieve inner peace and happiness. Epictetus teaches us how to make wise choices in a world of myriad conflicting, confusing options. Remember, he was born a slave; but, he also lived in the orbit of Nero's court, the epicenter of wealth, power and pleasure. Epictetus' stoicism drew on his experience and observations of choices and lack of choices in life.

I focused on how Epictetus addressed two basic questions. How do I live a happy, fulfilling life? And, how can I be a good person? Epictetus taught that happiness and personal fulfillment are the natural consequences of doing the right thing. The reason for doing the right thing is not to win the favor of the gods, but to achieve inner peace, serenity and happiness now. He taught that goodness, the necessary step to happiness, is available to all. It is not limited to the rich, the educated or the spiritual professional such as

priests and shamans. Goodness, or virtue, is found in many small decisions every day; not in conspicuous or heroic acts.

Epictetus' first principle is that we must distinguish between what we can control and what we cannot control. Many of his lectures and portions of the Manual consist of elaboration on this point and practical illustrations of this principle.

Most of us have lives that include wonderful, exciting and satisfying moments mixed in with dull, frustrating and painful moments. Life can present difficult challenges. Some of us lose a loved one too soon. Some have difficult, painful relationships with family members. Some have professional setbacks or a debilitating physical condition. Most of us find ourselves caring for increasingly frail parents at the end of their lives. All of us will face certain challenges. At some point, our adult life's work will end: either by retirement from a job or our children are grown and out of our daily care. This transition is often a challenge to a happy, contented life. All of us age, our physical features and abilities wane, until we meet our final challenge, death. Each of us must find ways to deal with these conditions and still have a happy life.

Woody Allen made a living describing how he made his present life miserable by focusing on his inevitable decline and death. Must it be so? Must I prejudice a happy present life because adverse events are inevitable? Or, can I have a happy life despite the certainty of change, pain and death?

Epictetus' philosophy addresses how I may achieve happiness and contentment in a life that includes unavoidable challenges. He taught that happiness and contentment begin with an understanding of what things are within our control and those that are not. Both desire and aversion are but habits, and we can learn new habits. If I desire what is within my control, I can gain my desire. If I desire that which is not within my control, it leads to frustration and disappointment. Similarly, I must not try to avoid that which is inevitable in life. That leads only to unhappiness. I must accept aging, sickness and death for myself and loved ones to avoid unnecessary suffering. The key word is "unnecessary". It is said that in life pain is inevitable, but suffering is optional. We have a choice in how we respond to pain. Do we respond to painful events with equanimity and continue to try for a happy life? Or, do we turn pain into continuing suffering, anger and resentment?

Generally speaking, the only things within our control are within ourselves:

our opinions, aspirations, desires, aversions. These we have some control over. Not within our control is everything else: our physical self, our circumstances of birth and family, the opinions and actions of others, the physical world. These we have no control over.

Epictetus taught that it is not the things outside our control that trouble us, but our emotional reactions to those things that cause suffering. If we can detach our emotions from those things outside our control, we can be happy. Stated another way, peace and happiness lay in accepting reality, it is our own minds which create fear and suffering. Rene Descartes, an important early modern philosopher, borrowed liberally from Epictetus. In his “Discourse on Method” he wrote:

I undertook to conquer myself rather than fortune, and to alter my desires rather than to change the order of the world, and to accustom myself to believe that nothing is entirely in our power except our own thoughts... Here, I think, is the secret of those ancient philosophers who were able to free themselves from the tyranny of fortune, or, despite suffering and poverty, to rival the gods in happiness.

In my research, I discovered a fascinating, more recent application of

Epictetus' principles. James Stockdale, an American fighter pilot shot down over North Viet Nam on his second combat tour of duty, credits Epictetus with helping him survive eight years as a prisoner of war, including serial torture and four years of solitary confinement. He wrote a monograph, published in 1993, titled: "Courage Under Fire, Testing Epictetus's Doctrines in a Laboratory of Human Behavior". It recounted how he relied on the teachings of Epictetus to maintain his sanity and inner peace during his eight years as a POW. It was vividly clear to Stockdale that nothing outside his own thoughts and emotions were within his control. Indeed, his captors used their complete control over all aspects of his physical existence to try to break him intellectually, emotionally and spiritually. It was the ultimate test of the first paragraph of Epictetus' Manual where it says:

In each situation ask: "Is it concerned with what is in my power, or what is not in my power?" And if it is concerned with what is not in my power, be ready with the answer that "It is nothing to me."

Stockdale had to let go of everything outside of his own emotions and attitudes. In this extreme situation he found a sense of freedom and peace because he could maintain his thoughts and emotions, while letting go of what he could not control. As the senior officer in the POW camp, Stockdale

was responsible for the morale of several hundred fellow prisoners. He writes that he was able to perform those duties for his fellow prisoners because of what he learned from Epictetus.

This example may lead you to think that all this philosophy is more about managing tragedy or avoiding unhappiness, than about gaining true happiness. Where is the exuberant joy and giddy happiness of childhood? Isn't that the type of happy life that we should be seeking?

Most of us wish to recover that giddy, excited joy of childhood that resulted from the simplest things. But as children everything was new and exciting; we did not know about consequences, and we had no responsibilities. As adults we might experience peaks of exuberant joy, but our daily life is more about managing responsibilities, frustrations, loss and pain. What many of us call "adult" activities, from drugs and alcohol to sex and skydiving are often explicitly about momentary relief from our responsibilities, anxieties and frustrations; achieving a few moments of that exuberant joy.

In my life, I feel that there remains within my body some of that effervescent childhood happiness, if only I can free it by removing the accretion of

disappointment, worry and doubt accumulated over the years. Is that what the philosophers are addressing? How to reverse the process, to uncover my natural, happy self by removing negative sediment?

I know that in my life when I am trying to control other people or events, it is usually because I somehow feel responsible for things that are not within my control. It is a heavy responsibility and an exhausting task that I have assumed. I am Sisyphus pushing the boulder up the hill, to no avail. If I can step back, remove my emotions, I can see that I do not have to assume responsibility for things I cannot control. I can walk away from the boulder.

A complaint I have heard myself utter is “I have responsibility, but no authority.” This is really saying I feel responsible for situations over which I have no control. This is an example of the teaching that it is not the thing outside our control that bothers us, but our feelings about it. My misguided assumption of responsibility is the problem to be removed.

Looking back, wasn't part of the happiness of childhood, the simple assumption that I was not responsible for, nor in control of, the world around me? Children accept life at face value, without judgment.

Epictetus was practical. He discussed the challenging things that happen in life while expounding on how to find true happiness because all of us will have difficult things happen in our lives. Finding true happiness is not about removing bad things from life, but the process of removing unnecessary, unproductive bad feelings and attitudes from my life. Such feelings are usually the result of trying to change the past or control the future; refusing to let go of things not in my control.

Six hundred years before Epictetus and on another continent, the same precepts for having a happy life were being taught. The Buddha also taught that the key to having a happy, contented life is to view reality clearly; distinguish between what is in my control and that which is not; and, to not crave or try to control that which is not mine and not within my control. The Buddha also said that my emotions and attitudes are the only things truly within my control. Everything else is in flux and not in my control. Attempting to have or control those things leads to frustration and unhappiness.

Almost 2000 years after Epictetus and on yet another continent, these precepts are current again. Twelve Step programs, which began in the

United States, have popularized a certain prayer all over the world.

There are several versions of the Serenity Prayer, the most common being:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
The courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference.

The author of this prayer is said to be the American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971). However, the essence of the prayer has a long history. As we have seen, both Epictetus and the Buddha emphasized distinguishing between what is in our control and what is not.

More recently, a Seventeenth Century English rhyme frames the same thought as:

For every ailment under the sun,
there is a remedy, or there is none.
If there be one, try to find it;
If there be none, never mind it.

How do we avoid making a difficult life situation worse? How do we avoid

unnecessary suffering and accept happiness? Let me tell you a story from my life.

I am a swimmer. Starting in 1973 I swam five to seven days a week for decades. I did intervals: 100 yards, a brief rest, 100 yards, rest, repeat. I prided myself on being able to swim 100 yards in under 60 seconds. My daily routine was 1200 yards in under 20 minutes, day in, day out.

Swimming this way is challenging physically, but it is also very much about will power. You have to will yourself to push to the last ounce of strength and endurance, over and over again. If I lost focus on the stroke or the breath for a moment, or failed to execute the flip turn perfectly, a 60 second hundred was out of reach for me. It was an exercise in synchronizing body, mind and will perfectly.

My swimming was very important to me on many levels. It was my refuge, a stress reducer, and, my validation. In my mind, if I could do 60 second hundreds, I was Okay. I might be going through a horrible divorce, my kids could be saying they hated me, my work be filled with frustrating challenges; but, as long as I was doing 60 second hundreds, I was Okay. I

was fit, I was strong, and I could handle anything.

When my daughter was born I started her in the pool as a newborn. In those days, in new baby swim class, we would hold our baby a couple of feet over the water and then drop them feet first. She would sink about three feet under the surface and reach equilibrium. Then, amazingly, she would blow bubbles, start a frog kick, and come to the surface with eyes wide open. I would pick her up, smiling and laughing, and repeat the process. Naturally, my darling, brave girl became quite a swimmer. I took her to a pool most weekends for recreational swims, until she was old enough for a swim team.

As a teenager, she was a four-year varsity letter member of a pretty good high school swim team, and qualified for the State Championship meet twice. Early in her high school career something disconcerting began to happen. She started to beat me in 50 and 100-yard races; at first occasionally, then on a regular basis. About the same time, I was finding it more and more difficult to swim 100 yards in under 60 seconds. Soon I was only getting my first one in under 60, and all the rest in the work out were in times relentlessly creeping upward. Eventually, I could not do one, even on a good day. I was so upset by this that I gave up swimming completely. I was

angry, resentful and vaguely embarrassed by my inability to swim fast.

Several years went by with me engaging in less satisfying forms of exercise. I was unhappy with this aspect of my life. Eventually, I realized that I had to make peace with swimming. I am a swimmer, body and soul. It gives me more, physically, mentally and emotionally, than any other form of sport or exercise. The only person I was hurting by boycotting swimming was myself. Gradually, I made my way back to the pool; to swim for health and pleasure. I no longer measure my individual splits against the clock. I focus on my stroke, my breathing and my turns; not to improve my times, but as a meditative exercise in being present in my body.

Looking back on this episode, my anger and resentment in response to my increasing swim times, was really masking fear. My swim times foreshadowed my inevitable decline and death. I was scared and just did not want to face it; I could not accept the reality of life. Stopping swimming was running away from reality. Obviously, stopping swimming did not alter reality, it merely facilitated my temporarily blocking it out of my mind.

Epictetus would have understood. He taught self-forgiveness. Nobody is

perfect and we all indulge in a bit of denial and procrastination. Epictetus encourages us to forgive ourselves and move on. Self-flagellation and guilt are also barriers to a happy life.

Swimming makes my life better and gives me happiness. But, to have the happiness of swimming in my life, I had to accept something outside my control, my physical decline. I had to let go of the anger, resentment and fear arising from my inability to swim as before. I had to accept the reality of changes in my life and accept the happiness that is available now. This story, perhaps trivial in the context of challenges others face, is nonetheless an example of the choices we all face from time to time: accept the reality of our life gracefully or struggle against it, creating suffering for ourselves and those around us.

Don't I, don't we all, sometimes find ourselves in unhappy, self-defeating emotional dead ends as the result of refusing to let go of what we cannot control? Jim Stockdale was in a Viet Cong prison, but don't I, don't we, create our own prisons in our minds. When confronted by an unwanted, uncomfortable situation or a painful injury by another, if I ruminate, fulminate and castigate in my mind, it merely compounds the anger and

frustration, it digs the negative channels in my mind deeper. I create my own emotional prison, where I pace from wall to wall, all impotent fury and resentment.

Stockdale could find internal peace and freedom through his application of Epictetus' principles. I can do the same, I can break out of my self created prison, if I see reality clearly and accept what I cannot control. I can blow the prison ceiling off; I can create a room without a roof. Perhaps this is what Pharrell was referencing in his song.

What Will Be, Will Be is a useful adage for what we cannot control in life. With those things we can control, our thoughts and attitudes, we can help ourselves to a happy, more fulfilling life. Epictetus, the Buddha, and others can help us find the wisdom to know the difference.

Both of the songs tonight express more wisdom than was evident at first blush. Human happiness cannot be comprehended by logic. But, we all know it when we feel it; and, we all could use more of it.

What is my definition of happiness? Happiness is a calm acceptance of

reality and a feeling that all is well. Some may say that sounds boring. Perhaps so, but the idea that a happy life follows from seeing reality clearly, that is, distinguishing what is within my control and that which is not, has a long and distinguished history in human thought. Similarly, detaching my emotions from those things not within my control leads to a sense that all is just as it should be, that all is well. Each of the traditions briefly reviewed here, Stoicism, Buddhism and the Serenity Prayer state that having a happy life revolves around the same core concepts for managing my internal life. Fundamentally, happiness is a choice I can make every day.

So, has any one heard this one? A Stoic, a Buddhist and a recovering alcoholic are in a foursome, playing golf. Naturally, they are discussing frustrations, in golf and in life. Eventually, they end up debating how does one have a happy life. Well into the back nine, after sorting out many issues of language and nuances of thought, they are finally able to agree on a common prescription for happiness. They recite together:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
The courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference.

“Well”, you might ask, “what about the last member of the foursome? What did he think about finding true happiness?” Unfortunately, we don’t know. He was off looking for the washroom.

Thank you and good night.