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The Pursuit of Happiness

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Kimbrough, Carla, "The Pursuit of Happiness" (2008). *Faculty Publications, College of Journalism & Mass Communications*. 29.
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The pursuit of happiness

I am happy," the dying husband and father of three said.

A \$200,000-plus mortgage eliminated. College funds established for three young daughters. A brand new Ford truck. "Remember when" memories that will last for years to come.

"Oprah's Big Give" contestants — with a heavy dose of star power — also gave a man the priceless gift of peace of mind. His terminal case of cancer made his family's future uncertain, but the big givers put them on solid ground.

Yes, he was happy.

Not many of us may directly benefit from "Oprah's Big Give," but we can still achieve happiness. And, I believe, happiness is attainable even after spending significant days and years immersed in a journalistic culture where cynicism is a badge of honor.

Happiness is not elusive, but it is a decision. It is an attitude. And, it is a journey. After all, the Declaration of Independence proclaims that the pursuit of happiness is among the unalienable rights endowed by the Creator.

Gretchen Rubin of New York City takes the pursuit of happiness seriously. A few years ago, Rubin decided that what she wanted from life was to be happy. Although she had much to be happy about, she said she realized she wasn't as happy as she could be and that her life wouldn't change unless "I made it change."

Now, she's writing a memoir about a year she spent testing every tip and theory related to achieving happiness, "The Happiness Project" (www.happiness-project.com). I asked her to share three of her best lessons:

First, take care of your body. Most importantly, get enough sleep and exercise regularly. Sleep deprivation is a major source of bad moods. Exercise can quickly boost moods, she said.

Second, act the way you want to feel.

"We think that we act because of the way we feel, but in fact, we often feel because of the way we act," she said. "So to feel cheerful, act cheerful. ... I admit this sounds a bit Pollyanna-ish, but it is uncannily effective."

Third, cultivate relationships.

"Everyone from contemporary scientists to yep olde philosophers agrees that the key to happiness is loving relationships with other people," she said.

Rubin advises taking time for friends and family, showing up at places where you'll connect and even using technology such as e-mail and Facebook to foster those relationships.

I would add that being selective about the relationships you continue is important. One of my

favorite tests: How do you feel after interacting with that person? If you feel good or at least better than you did, that's a relationship to continue. But if you feel drained, that's a relationship where limits can be beautiful.

Rubin and I agree on what stands in the way of happiness for most people: It's neither fortune nor fame; it is the people themselves. In other words, if people aren't happy, it's their own fault. Luckily, unhappiness does not have to be permanent.

Thinking mindfully about one's happiness — or starting your own happiness project — can show you what you need to do to be happier, Rubin said.

"Some people argue that it's selfish to think about your own happiness," Rubin said. "In fact, I think there's a duty to be happy. Happier people are more friendly, more altruistic, more helpful, more kind."

Happiness also is determined, in part, by perceptions and attitudes. When I visited Ghana, I was struck by the happiness exhibited by the some of the people I met. By U.S. standards, some did not have much in the way of material goods, but they were rich in smiles, hospitality, deep spirituality, laughter and joy.

As journalists, many of us have covered stories in which people lost much through natural disasters or other tragic circumstances. Still, there are those who say they are grateful in the midst of their loss.

Gratitude is among the keys to happiness that Dennis Leonard, pastor of Heritage Christian Center in Denver, cites in his book, "Happiness Matters, 21 Thoughts That Could Change Your Life."

"When you are grateful, you can be in the worst circumstances imaginable and be happy. ... Being happy is a natural consequence of being grateful to God for everything in our lives," wrote Leonard, who relies upon biblical examples to make a strong case for happiness.

Whether one ponders happiness in spiritual or secular terms, achieving happiness is clearly an ongoing and deliberate act. The good news is that enjoying a sustained state of happiness doesn't take a lot.

Happiness that is lost in life's complexity can be recaptured in life's simplicity. Happiness can be found by shifting focus — from worries to gratitude; from material goods to priceless moments; from yourself to others.

"One of the best ways to make yourself happy is to make someone else happy," Rubin said, describing this philosophy as one of her splendid truths. "One of the best ways to make someone else happy is to be happy yourself." ♦