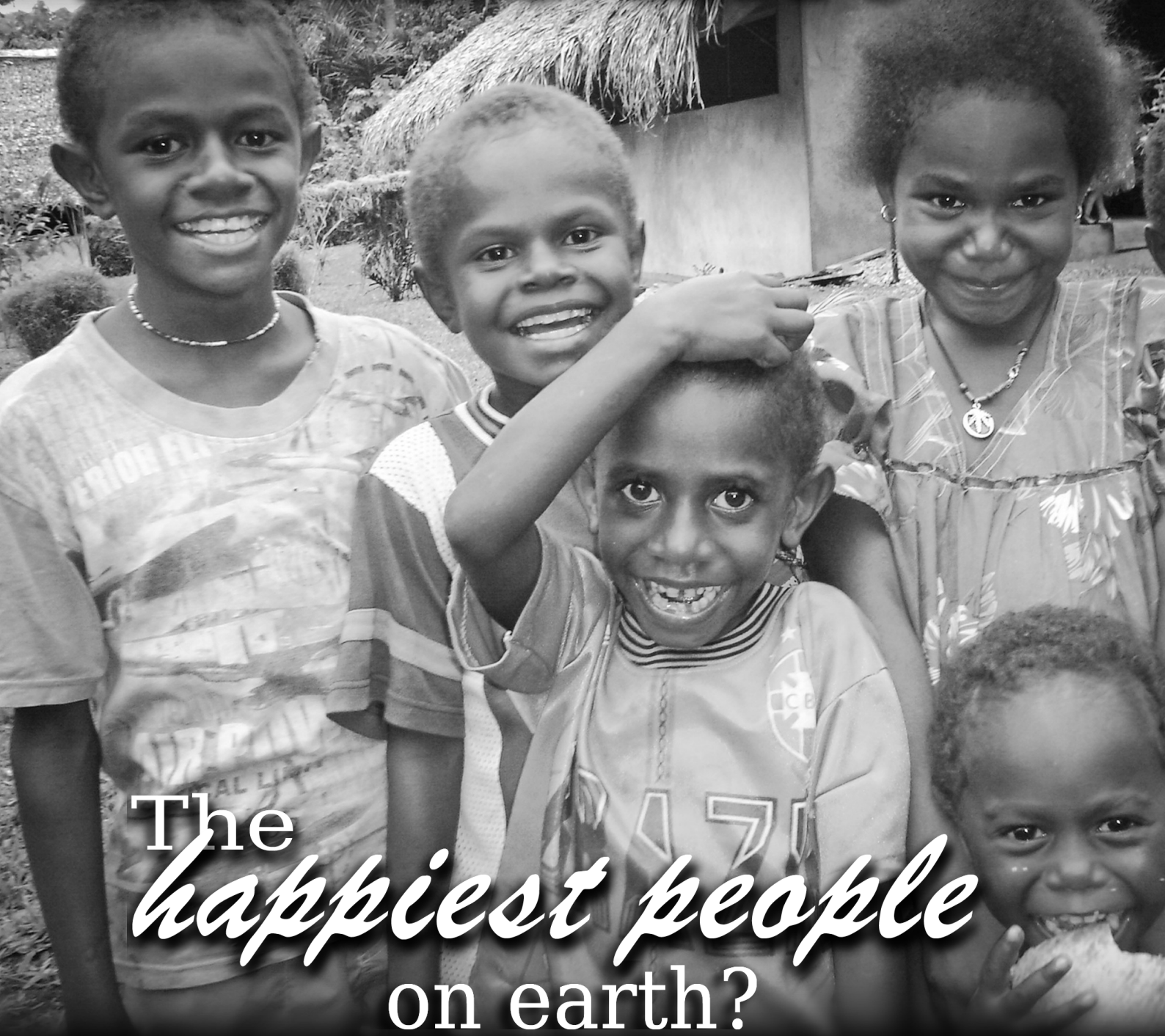


Inside Life



The
happiest people
on earth?

**IN THIS
ISSUE:**



Elvis Lives!



A World of Change...You Asked for a Sign



Inside Life

A magazine of understanding

Number 7, February 2008

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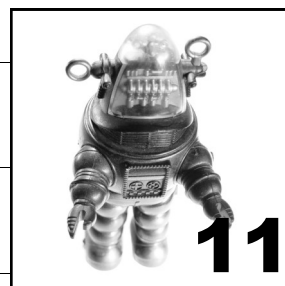
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Inside Life is a magazine of understanding. Rather than just reporting on life, **Inside Life** seeks to delve *inside* the marvellous mystery that is *life*, to discover what it is all about. What does life mean? Where did it come from? How can we make the most of it?

Inside Life seeks insight and answers to life's deep questions and challenges, and aims to provide articles of lasting hope, help and encouragement for successful living in today's fast-moving world.

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Our Cover: A recent survey listed the South Pacific nation of Vanuatu as the happiest place on earth. Visitors to Vanuatu often remark on the friendliness and joy expressed by the people there. Our lead story this issue examines the important topic of happiness and its causes.

Photo taken in Malekula, Vanuatu, by Rex Morgan



The Happiest People on Earth?

By Rex Morgan

The “Happy Planet Index”, a survey released in July 2006, listed the South Pacific nation of Vanuatu as the happiest place on earth. The index was compiled by a British think tank, the New Economics Foundation. It rated 178 countries for national happiness, longevity and environmental impact, seeking to show “the relative efficiency with which nations convert the planet’s natural resources into long and happy lives for their citizens”. The survey reported that Vanuatu came out on top because “its people are happy, live to nearly 70 and do little to damage the planet”.

I have travelled to Vanuatu regularly for a number of years and can confirm that the people there definitely appear to be rather happy.

They display an endearing positive and carefree spirit, as illustrated by the photos I took to accompany this article. Why are the people of Vanuatu so happy? Are they really the happiest people on earth?

“Happiness economics”

Recent years have seen a dramatic burgeoning of interest in the new field of “happiness economics”, which has become a major area of research in economics and psychology.

A number of nations, including Australia, Canada, China and the United Kingdom have started measuring and publishing happiness indices to be used alongside Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a guide to national progress. The concept of “Gross National Happiness” (GNH) was introduced

by the King of Bhutan in 1972 as an alternative to GDP. Other countries are following the lead, with Thailand for instance now releasing monthly GNH data.

Sydney’s Happiness Institute sponsors annual “Happiness and its Causes” conferences, with the August 2007 conference attended by the Dalai Lama. The third international conference on GNH was held in Thailand in November 2007.

“The Art of Happiness”, by Dr Howard Cutler and the Dalai Lama, “Stumbling on Happiness”, by Daniel Gilbert, and “Happiness: Lessons from a New Science” by Richard Layard are just some of a large clutch of best sellers recently released on this topic. And “The Pursuit of Happiness”, a popular movie starring Will Smith, did the

rounds of the theatres in 2006.

This is a subject worthy of attention because many people find today's fast moving world to be stressful, difficult and dangerous. Poverty, divorce, crime, drugs and depression seem to be rampant. *The NZ Herald* reported that "prescriptions for anti-depressants have soared to an all-time high in Britain, with more than 31 million written last year".¹

It is hard to imagine anyone not wanting to be happy. Surely this is one of the fundamental desires of all of us – the pursuit of happiness. Thomas Jefferson enshrined it in the US Declaration of Independence as a basic unalienable right, on the same level as life and liberty. According to Dr. Timothy Sharp, a leading Australian happiness expert, "Happiness is the ultimate purpose in life".

So how can we be happy? What have the experts in the new field of happiness economics found?

Can Money buy Happiness?

It is easy for us to reason that if only we could have some more money, or a better job, a palatial mansion to live in, a brand new Mercedes... then we would be happy. But someone who had all the money anyone could wish for, billionaire J Paul Getty, famously stated that he

would be willing to give away all of his fortune in return for one happy marriage.

It is hard to imagine anyone not wanting to be happy. Surely this is one of the fundamental desires of all of us – the pursuit of happiness.

Happiness economists generally agree that extra wealth does add to happiness for people living in poverty, but once we have a reasonable standard of living, additional wealth doesn't equate with greater happiness.

The Bible relates the history of King Solomon, who ruled over the nation of Israel in around 950BC. He was a monarch of renowned wisdom, wealth and power. Having access to almost any possessions and pleasures he liked, Solomon decided to run an experiment to see what would bring him the most happiness and fulfilment in life.

He recorded this fascinating experiment in the biblical book called "Ecclesiastes". The account explains how he accumulated land, livestock, gold and silver. He constructed magnificent buildings,

extensive parks and gardens, and bought all sorts of musical instruments. He wine and dined lavishly, and married hundreds of beautiful women. These exploits titillated his senses for a while, but his conclusion was that they didn't bring happiness. He still felt frustrated and empty!

A modern day NZ counterpart of this story was played out recently by millionaire Logan Miller. *The NZ Herald* reported that this "party pill king owned a multimillion dollar home, at least six cars (including a Lamborghini Gallardo worth more than \$500,000), had gorgeous girlfriends and ran a successful company".² But behind the scenes of his ample fortune, Miller was struggling with depression, and he died, apparently taking his own life, at the age of just 31.

If wealth was the determinant of happiness, New Zealand, with a much higher GDP than Vanuatu, should have done better than Vanuatu in the Happy Planet Index results. But Vanuatu, which ranks 207th out of 233 economies in terms of GDP, came first, and NZ lagged way behind in 94th place.

"Just a little bit more"

The basic problem with seeking to find happiness in possessions is that no matter what or how much we have, we always want more! John D. Rockefeller's answer to the question "how much wealth does it take to satisfy a person?" was right on the money, if you'll pardon the pun. He answered "Just a little bit more". The Romans had a proverb, "Money is like sea water; the more you drink, the thirstier you become". Jesus Christ summed it up succinctly when he said "happiness does not consist of the abundance of possessions".³

Frank James, author of "Richistan", a study of the burgeoning number of super rich individuals owning fortunes measured in billions of dollars, goes so far as to say, "The rich are never happy, no matter what they have". The increase of things only creates an appetite for more.

Contentment is the Key

A hard-working Kiwi businessman was dismayed to find a South Pacific fisherman lying lazily beside his canoe, munching on a fresh pawpaw.

"Why aren't you out fishing?" asked the businessman.

"Because I have caught enough fish for the day," said the fisherman.

"Why don't you catch some more?"

"What would I do with them?"

"You could earn more money," was the businessman's reply. "With that you could have a motor fixed to your boat and go into deeper waters and catch more fish. Then you would make enough to buy nylon nets. These would bring you more fish and more money.

Soon you would be able to afford two

boats... maybe even a fleet of boats.

Then you would be a rich man like me."

"What would I do then?" asked the fisherman.

"Then you would really enjoy life."

"What do you think I am doing right now?"





The ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus stated "If you want to make a man happy, add not to his possessions, but take away from his desires." The biblical writer Paul gave great advice when he counselled people to "be content with what you have".⁴

Someone who had all the money anyone could wish for, billionaire J Paul Getty, famously stated that he would be willing to give away all of his fortune in return for one happy marriage.

In other words, happiness is a state of mind rather than a list of possessions; a journey rather than a destination. It is something you are rather than something you *have*. As Australian happiness guru Dr Timothy Sharp phrases it, "Happiness is determined more by our minds than our circumstances".

This is one explanation for the happiness of the people in Vanuatu. They are *content* with their circumstances. They haven't been spoilt with an abundance of wealth, which simply spurs people on to be continually greedy for more.

Lyn Croxon, an Australian profes-

sional artist who has lived in Vanuatu for 7 years, was asked by a local newspaper for her reaction to the survey labelling the people of Vanuatu as the happiest on earth. Her answer: "Well, I can see that they really are, because they are still in touch with their gardens and their planting and looking after the beautiful area they live in and I think that of course is coming from living the life of the islands. If they can keep off from being caught up in western ways then I think it is going to be a free place and a happy place for much longer."⁵

"Contentment is the key"

The common saying that "money can't buy happiness" has a very solid foundation. The Dalai Lama hit the nail on the head with this comment: "Contentment is the key. If you have contentment with material things, you are truly rich. Without it, even if you are a billionaire, you have nothing."

Happiness then is something that primarily stems from inside us rather than from the outside. It is a state of mind, an attitude or way of thinking, whereby we are content with our current situation, right here and now. If we have the outlook

that we'll only be happy "when such and such happens" there will always be yet another "such and such" up ahead, just out of reach! The time to be happy is right here and now. Happiness isn't a destination to be reached in the future; it is the journey itself. We need to be content with what we have at this moment in time. In other words, to be enjoying life. If you're not happy now, when will you be happy?

The ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus stated "If you want to make a man happy, add not to his possessions, but take away from his desires."

If we appreciate and treasure the things we have every day – the New Zealand scenery, our job, our car, our home, our clothes – happiness will be automatic. Abraham Lincoln once remarked that "Most people are about as happy as they make up their minds to be". Happiness has aptly been



Simply satisfied: Young children in Vanuatu enjoy a meal of rice served on local banana leaf "plates". Although Vanuatu's GNP per head is far smaller than NZ's, the people seem amazingly happy. What is their secret?

VANUATU TIME

When, as regularly occurs, an event in Vanuatu starts half an hour late, or a bus arrives an hour late, the locals smile shrug and acknowledge the common expression that things are being done in "Vanuatu time" (a similar expression applies in other Pacific Islands).

In New Zealand, we are quickly concerned and upset when things don't happen with clockwork punctuality. The relaxed "don't worry, be happy" attitude of the ni-Vanuatu people can cause a visitor to reflect on the value of the frenetic treadmill of activity that often characterises western society. Why do we constantly risk exhaustion as we keep on rushing around trying to fit more and more into our lives? Would moving towards the "Vanuatu time" perspective bring us more happiness? It's a question worth thinking about.

defined by one writer as "the capacity for enjoyment".

Solomon, the King of Israel who carried out a multi-million dollar experiment to see what brought happiness, came to a similar conclusion. The way he phrased it was, "There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink and enjoy good in his labour."⁶ A little later in his account he added, "I know that there is nothing better for them to rejoice, and to do good in their lives."⁷

This aspect of doing good to others has been found in modern studies to be an important determinant of happiness. "There is a strong link between personal happiness and showing kindness and compassion to other people", states Dr Howard Cutler, co-author of "The Art of Happiness".

A London University survey of 10,000 people for the British Household Panel survey concluded that good relationships, social interaction and good health were much more important factors than money in generating happiness.

A recent article in "USA Today" concluded, "The happiest people surround themselves with family and friends, don't care about keeping up with the Joneses next door, lose themselves in daily activities, and most important, forgive easily". The article highlighted the finding of recent psychological studies that "gratitude has a lot to do with life

satisfaction. Talking and writing about what they're grateful for amplifies adults' happiness, new studies show. Other researchers have found that learning to savour even small pleasures has the same effect. And forgiveness is the trait most strongly linked to happiness, says University of Michigan psychologist Christopher Peterson. There's also evidence that altruistic acts boost happiness in the giver".⁸

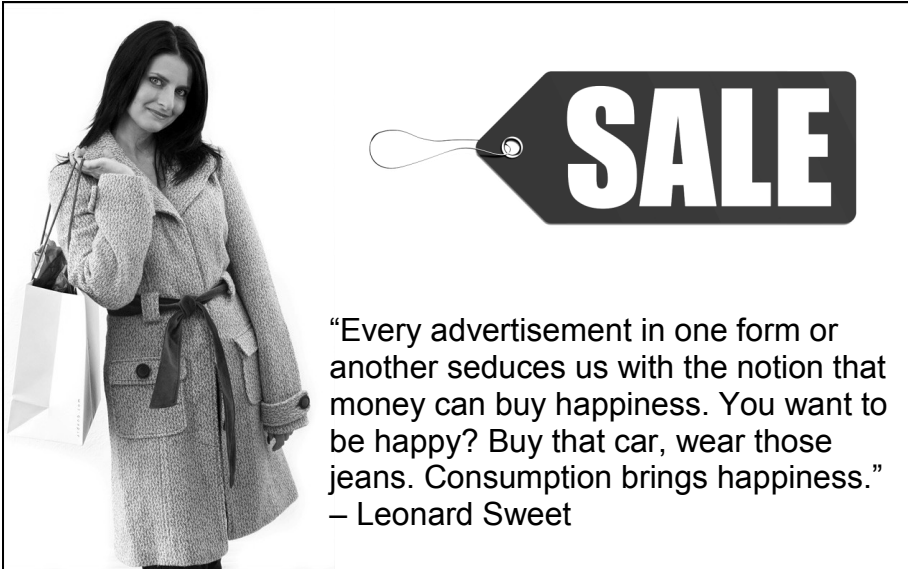
This is a restatement of a principle recorded in the Bible 2,000 years ago that "It is more blessed (the Greek word used here is the equivalent of our word "happy") to give than to receive."⁹

A senior policy advisor to the UK Government, David Halpern, commenting on happiness research in 2007, stated "The way in which people treat each other is really, really important. Acts of consideration and kindness loom very large."¹⁰

Social psychologist Niki Harre, a senior lecturer at the University of Auckland says, "The very happiest people are rich in activities that involve community, contributing to other people's well being..."

This research mirrors statements made 2,000 years ago in the Bible. The Christian principles of loving





"Every advertisement in one form or another seduces us with the notion that money can buy happiness. You want to be happy? Buy that car, wear those jeans. Consumption brings happiness."
– Leonard Sweet

one another, being gentle, thankful, kind and forgiving are shown to be valid as keys to happiness. No wonder Jesus said "Now you know these things, happy are you if you do them."¹¹

**"There is now extensive research suggesting that 'religious' people are happier and less stressed."
-- Wikipedia**

The Impact of Religion

The *Wikipedia* article on happiness states: "There is now extensive research suggesting that 'religious' people are happier and less stressed. Surveys by Gallup, the National Opinion Research Centre and the Pew Organisation conclude that spiritually committed people are twice as likely to report being 'very happy' than the least religiously committed people.

"An analysis of over 200 social studies contends that 'high religiousness predicts a rather lower risk of depression and drug abuse and fewer suicide attempts, and more reports of satisfaction with life and a sense of well-being'. A recent systematic review of 850 research papers on the topic concluded that the majority of well-conducted studies found that higher levels of religious involvement are positively associated with indicators of psychological well-being

(life satisfaction, happiness, positive affect, and higher morale) and with less depression..."

There is certainly a high level of religious involvement in Vanuatu, which probably contributes to the Happy Planet Index finding that it is the happiest place on earth. Mark Lowen of Vanuatu Online states: "People are generally happy here because they are very satisfied with very little. This is not a consumer-driven society. Life here is about community and family and goodwill to other people. It's a place where you don't worry too much."

Having been to Vanuatu many times, I would have to say that although in many ways it is a wonderful place to be, Vanuatu also has its share of troubles. The tiny South Pacific nation is prone to cyclones, and suffers the scourges of drugs, hatred, corruption in government, bribery, unemployment, disease, and poverty — just like anywhere else. These problems mar the serenity of this delightful place. But the people are happy anyway, because happiness is a matter of something you *are* rather than something you *have*. If you have an authentic attitude of contentment, you will be happy regardless of your circumstances. The Biblical writer Paul was in a Roman dungeon chained to his guards when he told his readers "Rejoice always, and again I say, rejoice."¹²

Happy whatever the circumstances

You don't have to live in Vanuatu to be among the happiest people on earth! We can all be happy if we

realise happiness isn't determined by *what* we *have*, but by *who* we *are*. The way to happiness is to be content, to enjoy the present moment, to be thankful, loving and forgiving. The key is to take on board the timeless virtues extolled in the Bible — things like generosity, peacefulness, mercy and love.

Jesus outlined his principles of happiness in a section of the Bible known as the "beatitudes". These short sayings each begin with "Blessed are..." The Greek word translated in the Bible as "blessed" equates to our modern word "happy". Jesus' principles contain such unlikely things as "happy are the meek, the poor in spirit, and the pure in heart".¹³

These maxims are different from what the average person would think leads to happiness, but they lead to a deep inner contentment which is a spiritual rather than a physical quality, and something we can have in any circumstance. This level of happiness, experienced by the Apostle Paul, explains why he was able to rejoice even though he was in prison. This is an enduring, lasting happiness, not one that is dependent on fickle feelings, which are so brief and transitory.

Yes, the people of Vanuatu came first in the Happy Planet Index survey, but the happiest people on earth are those who follow the principles taught by Jesus Christ.

Notes

1. NZ Herald, August 18, 2007, page A16
2. NZ Herald, October 6, 2007
3. Luke 12:15
4. 1 Timothy 6:8-9
5. Vanuatu Daily Post, September 29, 2007
6. Ecclesiastes 2:24
7. Ecclesiastes 3:12
8. USA Today, December 8th, 2002
9. Acts 20:35
10. Article in The Observer, reprinted in the NZ Herald, March 10, 2007
11. John 13:17
12. Philippians 4:4
13. Matthew 5: 3-11

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ELVIS

LIVES

By Rusty Wright

Elvis lives. At least in the hearts of his fans.

And they are everywhere.

Twenty years after his death, our culture is still fascinated with the raven-haired, swivel-hipped entertainer. His songs fill the airwaves. His face graces postage stamps and velvet paintings in the U.S. and abroad. Thousands of the faithful annually trek to Graceland, his Memphis home, to pay homage to the king of rock and roll.

The National Association of Amateur Elvis Impersonators promotes the cause while the "Flying Elvi" (plural of "Elvis," get it?) jump from 13,000 feet. Featured in a hit movie, these Las Vegas daredevils combine skydiving with Elvis nostalgia. They're even available for Las Vegas weddings: "Why settle for just one Elvis look-alike," asks the ad, "when you can have the entire ten-Elvi team in attendance on your special day?" They "make terrific groomsmen as well as perfect Las Vegas-style witnesses."

Internet sites tout Elvis fan clubs and even Elvis baby food. A Santa Cruz, CA, mall displays a plaque commemorating an Elvis sighting. Former NFL coach Jerry Glanville often left two tickets for Elvis at the will call window on game days.

Even academics are into Elvis. The University of Mississippi has held International Conferences on Elvis Presley. Scholarly seminars included, "Civil Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and Elvis"; "Elvis, Faulkner, and Feminine Spirituality"; "Elvis: The Twinless Twins' Search for

Spiritual Meaning" (Elvis's twin brother died at birth), and "Elvis 'n' Jesus."

Hound Dog?

What is all this about, really? My own informal, non-scientific survey yielded fascinating analyses from many levels of society.

"I gave my wife an Elvis Valentine's Day candy box," admits a Miami interior designer. "Our cat is named Elvis Presley," explains his wife. "He's fat with a black coat, white collar, and eyes that glaze over--Elvis in his later years." The husband quips, "The other day, we had an Elvis sighting--in a tree." (Was a hound dog responsible?)

A Sacramento van driver attributes today's craze to "all the lonely people who sit around and watch TV. 'Besides,' the driver says, "Elvis's grave wasn't marked right, and there's evidence he's not really buried there. I read it in the tabloids."

A California mayor feels people need to link up with something, to create a sense of belonging. "They could be seeking memories of better times," she reasons. "Some people wish he was still alive. My husband is an Elvis fan. He knows Elvis is dead, but he likes the music."

A southern California doctor wonders if fans may be bonding with a romanticized part of their youth. He adds, "People who don't have God make a god out of all sorts of



things."

Indeed. Deep reverence and even worship characterize many pilgrims to Graceland. Some hold candlelight ceremonies, offer flowers, and display icons.

One scholar at Mississippi's International Conference notes that "without looking at spirituality, you can't explain the Elvis phenomena....There's a tremendous force that brings people back to Graceland."¹

Are You Lonesome Tonight?

Elvis's August 16, 1977 death brought an unusual outpouring of grief -- feelings of loneliness and despair. Those feelings, though perhaps not as intense now as when he died, are still very real in many people.

"I get so depressed," admits a Texas woman. "Anytime I've got anything bothering me, I can get in my car and turn on the stereo and listen to Elvis and just go into a world of my own. It's like he's right there singing directly to me....It's like he's always there to solve everything."²

"I sit and talk to him," claims a New Jersey follower. "I feel he hears what I say to him and he gives me the will to go on when things are really bad....Somehow you talk to Elvis.. I know if anybody ever saw me, they would probably tell me I was crazy, but I do. I love him. I talk to him and I know he understands and I feel so much better after. I think I always will."³

Some fringers actually believe Elvis is still alive. My informal survey encountered no actual Elvis spotters, though a few claimed they had seen the Energizer Bunny.

"I'm not a weirdo like that," you might say. "What's this craze got to do with me?"

Years of interacting with people on six continents have convinced me that nearly everyone is looking for happiness and fulfilment in life. Some seek it through fame, success, wealth, or career. Others look to relationships, friends, or family.

Pursuits from sports to sex can be driven by the need to fill a void. Probably everyone has at least one "Elvis" in his or her life, a person or idea or team or goal or possession or practice to which they are devoted and from which they seek happiness.

Many feel a spiritual emptiness, a need to personally connect with something that represents greatness, something that will replace inner loneliness with friendship, fear with love, and desperation with hope.

Loneliness is rampant today. Broken marriages, fragile relationships, and general incivility have raised emotional armour over hurting hearts. Newspaper personal ad sections swell with pleas for companionship. Lonely singles and lonely marrieds search cyberspace for someone to connect with. Humans need belonging and

acceptance.

Once I was in a motel room convalescing from surgery. My best friend had just deserted me. Some co-workers had betrayed me. The inner pain felt like the worst argument I'd ever had, multiplied by a trillion -- like I was being reamed out by an emotional Roto-Rooter. Loneliness ran deep.

Then a close friend called to ask how I was doing. What a lift! Everyone needs friendship to counter loneliness.

Probably everyone has at least one "Elvis" in his or her life, a person or idea or team or goal or possession or practice to which they are devoted and from which they seek happiness.

Love Me Tender

We also need love. Los Angeles psychiatrist William Glasser says everyone needs to love and be loved and to feel a sense of worth-- both to themselves and to others. He says we each need to become involved with at least one other person who cares for us and for whom we care, someone who will accept us for what we are but tell us when we act irresponsibly. Without "this essential person," he writes, "we will not be able to fulfil our basic needs".⁴ It's nice to be accepted based on our looks, personality, or performance, but these criteria can also bring fear and pressure. What if my looks change or I don't perform well? Will I still be loved?

To be loved unconditionally, to be accepted in spite of our faults, can bring peace and contentment and motivation to excel. "You are so special to me," says a spouse "I want to please you," feels the mate.

Human love is great but not perfect. People can disappoint us or give us wrong advice. Those you trust can show their selfish side, use you for their own ends, or discard you. Is there something better?

Besides friendship and love, we also



Elvis Presley meeting Richard Nixon. Public Domain (NARA).



need hope. A study showed that many of the 31,000 Allied soldiers imprisoned in Japan and Korea during the 1940s suffered from lack of hope. Although they were offered sufficient food, more than 8,000 died. Psychiatric researcher and editor Dr. Harold Wolff believed many of them died from despair. He wrote, "Hope, like faith and a purpose in life, is medicinal. This is not merely a statement of belief, but a conclusion proved by meticulously controlled scientific experiment."⁵

Ultimately, however, searches for hope based purely on human endeavour lead to emptiness. For most of us, there will always be someone faster, richer, more intelligent or articulate, better looking or more popular than we are. Our favourite teams will lose. Our heroes will show their faults.

Even if you reach the top, what then? According to the latest statistics, the death rate in this nation is still 100 percent.

How Great Thou Art

Oddly enough, some clues to solving our struggles with loneliness and our quest for love and hope may lie in one of the songs Elvis recorded. Few may realize that Elvis's only Grammy Award for a single came for his 1967 recording of "How Great Thou Art," a famous hymn. The lyrics, which likely reflected his own spiritual roots, speak in "awesome wonder" of God's creation of the

universe as a majestic display of His power.

The God this song alludes to is described elsewhere as a friend of those in need. If we let Him in our lives, He promises to be there in our successes and in our failures, when others praise us and when they desert us, when things are going well and when we're painfully lonely.

"How Great Thou Art" also tells how all this is possible. Because of God's great love for us, He sent His Son here to die, to carry the burden of humanity's injustices, selfishness, and wrongs.

God's love is endless, and He offers us hope. When we tell Him our problems, unlike Elvis, He can do something about them And not only can we rely on Him for our needs today, but the Bible promises a new heaven and earth in the future, free from death, sorrow, crying, and pain.⁶

Oddly enough, some
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Jesus Himself promised, "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life".⁷

Friendship, love, and hope -- from one who cannot fail us. Sounds great. But is it true?

Jesus said the final test of the truth of His claims would be His resurrection. Historical records indicate that he was executed on a cross and declared dead. His body was wrapped like a mummy and placed in a solid-rock tomb. A huge stone sealed the tomb's entrance where an elite Roman guard kept watch.

On the third day the stone had been rolled away and the body was missing but the grave clothes remained in place. Hundreds of people witnessed him walking around alive again. Cowards became heroes as ten of His previously frightened disciples were martyred for their faith.

Some years ago, as a skeptic myself, I discovered that His resurrection is actually one of the best-attested facts of history.⁸ It's all true!

If you're longing to link with someone great, He's the greatest. Since Jesus is alive, you, too, can know Him as a friend.

Elvis Presley is dead. Chances are, you might have hints that some of the "Elvises" in your life really have little or nothing lasting to offer. But Jesus is alive. Long live the king.

Notes

1. Gregory Rumberg "I Know Your Elvis," *Contemporary Christian Music*, February 1997, p. 31.
2. Ralph Burns, "How Great Thou Art: Photographs from Graceland," California Museum of Photography, University of California Riverside Website.
3. Ibid.
4. William Glasser, M.D., *Reality Therapy*, New York: Harper & Row, 1965, p. 7.
5. "A Scientific Report on What Hope Does for Man" (New York State Heart Assembly, n.d.), quoted in S. I. McMillen, M.D., *None of These Diseases*, Old Tappan (NJ): Fleming H Revell, 1968, p. 110.
6. Revelation 21: 1,4.
7. John 5:24
8. See, for instance, Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, San Bernardino (CA): Campus Crusade for Christ, 1972.

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A world of CHANGE

... for better or for worse?



What a fast-changing world we live in! It is instructive to stop and think from time to time of some of the changes that have occurred in just the past few years.

Taking a look at the recent past is a bit like looking in the rear-view mirror of a fast-moving car: you don't want to take your eyes off the road ahead for too long for fear of crashing! And when things move as fast as they do these days, it can be disconcerting to see things in the rear-view mirror that you never even saw up ahead.

A longer look backward tells us that it took from 4 BC to 1900 AD for the world's body of knowledge to double; then until only 1950 for it to double again; just 10 years for another doubling; only five for the next; and since 1965 it has doubled every three years. Current theory is that our body of knowledge now actually doubles at least every 18 months.

Let's look briefly at three major areas of change in our world in the past few years. These are not the only areas of change, but they are significant and they have affected

everyone, particularly in the western world. For better and for worse.

Science and technology

It's hard to imagine what life would be like without computers, television, ultrasound, e-mail, or satellites. Never before have human beings enjoyed so much technological support, assistance and convenience.

For better...

- * We're able to heal illnesses that once scourged whole populations.
- * We're able to see our world (via television images) as never before.
- * The quality of life of people with disabilities has been improved.
- * We know more about our universe, our earth and history.

For worse...

- * "Every technological invention has had unintended consequences," said Jacques Ellul.
- * Computers were supposed to eliminate paper; machines were going to do all our work for us; the 70s visionaries said we wouldn't know what to do with all our leisure

time. So now we're drowning in paper, constantly learning new technologies, and working longer and harder than ever.

* We can become unrealistic and demanding in our relationships, expecting people to perform as quickly, unquestioningly and accurately (well, usually!) as computers do.

For reflection...

For many people, science has replaced religion, although as Stephen Jay Gould pointed out in *Time* magazine, "no factual discovery of science (statements about how nature 'is') can, in principle, lead us to ethical conclusions (how we 'ought' to behave) or to conclusions about intrinsic meaning (the 'purpose' of our lives)".¹

"The means by which we live have outdistanced the ends for which we live," said Martin Luther King way back in the 1960s. "Our scientific power has outrun our spiritual power. We have guided missiles and misguided men."

If only they could change what they said...

"Everything that can be invented has been invented"

-The commissioner of the US Office of Patents, 1899.

"Computers in the future may weigh no more than 1.5 tons"

-Popular Mechanics magazine, 1949.

"I have travelled the length and breadth of this country and talked with the best people, and I can assure you that data processing is a fad that won't last out the year"

-Editor in charge of business books for Prentice Hall, 1957.

"But what is it good for?"

-Engineer at the Advanced Computing Systems division of IBM in 1968, commenting on the microchip.

Human beings don't do well in a vacuum of spiritual nourishment. Or when we live on spiritual junk food.

The self

"The dominant theories in psychology shifted focus in the late 1960s from the power of the environment to individual expectation, preference, choice, decision, control, and helplessness," writes Martin Seligman in his book *Learned Optimism*. "For the first time in history--because of technology and mass production and distribution, and for other reasons--large numbers of people are able to have a significant measure of choice and therefore of personal control

over their lives. Not the least of these choices concerns our own habits of thinking."²

Look in any bookstore and you'll see the shelves sagging under the weight of books and tapes about self-improvement. Self-help, self-actualisation, self-determination, self-identity, self-fulfilment. Will the early 21st century become known as "the selfish age"? Everyone is familiar with "the Me Generation", which became the greedy generation, which has become the disillusioned generation.

For better...

* Our societies are healthier when they acknowledge and respect the

rights of each individual, when they support the right to choose, the freedom of expression, and the value of each individual. The gender revolution and respect for indigenous and minority groups reflect positive aspects of a focus on individuals rather than dominant groups, institutions or nations. There's richness in the diversity individualism offers.

For worse...

* "Thirty years on, the Me Generation are in their forties and early fifties, and they are experiencing a full-blown mid-life crisis," said social researcher Hugh Mackay in his book, *Reinventing Australia*. "The Me Generation are

beginning to acknowledge that the process of a value-shedding through the sixties and seventies has left them with a vague sense of emptiness—a feeling that life lacks some of the meaning and some of the sense of purpose (and even some of the simple pleasure) which they observed in their own much-maligned parents and grandparents.”³

* Despite an apparently greater freedom for self-expression, there's an awful sameness about our society, as if the self has become a packaged commercial property: we even wear the same labels!

“One change leaves the way open for the introduction of others”
— Niccolo Machiavelli

For reflection...

Human beings don't have a great record when we're left to set our own standards of morality, when we look to ourselves for meaning, or when we try to pretend that anyone's moral standards are as good as anyone else's. The sad truth is that we haven't found fulfilment within ourselves.

Information

There's no doubt ours is, if nothing else, an information age. We're wired, connected, cabled, and hooked. Literally. Never before have populations had access to so much information. But so what?

For better...

* The worldwide web brings to our fingertips instant information on almost everything.

* E-mail access has sped up the way we do things and given us international networks.

* The "tyranny of distance" now only operates when your modem drops out.

* We can see what's happening anywhere in the world, so long as there's a video camera there.

For worse...

* "Information overload" is a daily reality.

* More information does not mean better information.

* Data does not equal information; information does not equal knowledge; knowledge does not equal wisdom.

* The "entertainment culture" provides quantity rather than quality.

* Commercialisation and materialism rule.

For reflection...

"We may seem to be united by the Internet, but sharing information is not the same as having a real relationship," writes Michael Yapko in his book, *Hand me down blues*. "While our range of knowledge and our access to information has increased dramatically in the past fifty years, so has the rate of depression."⁴

Useful, informative, relevant, helpful information is one thing, but too much of what bombards us every day is simply useless at best, damaging at worst.

Living with change

The massive changes and the rate of change in our world are realities we can't escape. We simply have to learn to deal with it.

If we're to successfully cope with continued change into the future, it helps to have a frame of reference, a foundation, something upon which to base our lives that can provide us with, if not certainty then at least perspective.

"Even change has changed," the theorists tell us. No longer is change incremental or "Newtonian" (one thing leading to another), it's discontinuous, abrupt and chaotic (as in "chaos theory").

Of course, some things have not changed: the "war to end all wars" spawned a successor within two decades, and a series of other major regional conflicts. People still get killed, but progress means that it can now be done from 10,000 metres in

the air and the world can watch it happen "live" (an ironic word to use to describe war coverage) on CNN.

Perhaps more than ever we need to rediscover some basics like community, truth and meaning.

"Our scientific power has outrun our spiritual power. We have guided missiles and misguided men."
— Martin Luther King

Living in a "global village" is fun, but it doesn't replace the neighbourhood, the sense of belonging, and the shared history and meaning, that genuine community offers. Maybe those needs explain the quest for simplicity (the "back to basics" movement) in the midst of such rapid technological advancement. Perhaps it's not a retreat from progress, but an instinctive resistance to the overrunning of something central to the human experience.

"If we're finally learning how to cope with the instability of life in a kaleidoscope, why aren't we more optimistic, more buoyant, more confident of our future?" asks Hugh Mackay. "The curious feeling that 'something is missing' is more than conventional disillusionment with governments. It is reflected in an uneasy sense of trouble at a deeper level. We need something to believe in, yet faith lies beyond our sceptical grasp and inspiration seems in short supply... Could one explanation for all this be that, like a child raised on a diet of flummery, we are simply lacking sufficient intellectual and spiritual nourishment?"⁵

It's a good question. One that challenges us in a world where information has replaced knowledge, technology has overtaken relationship, and the self has superseded the community.

Notes

1. Gould, Stephen Jay, *Dorothy, it's really Oz*. Time magazine, 23 August, 1999.
2. Seligman, Martin, *Learned optimism*. Random House Australia, 1992, pp. 9-10.
3. Mackay, Hugh, *Reinventing Australia*. Angus & Robertson, 1993, p. 236.
4. Yapko, Michael D., *Hand me down blues*. Golden Books, 1999, p. 27.
- (5) Mackay, Hugh, *Good times fail to roll on*. Sydney Morning Herald, 7 Feb., 1999.

You asked for a sign

- God

By Gael McInnes

Has your curiosity ever been aroused, if you have read this sign?

You might have seen the various billboard signs up around Auckland and elsewhere. Plain black background, with white lettering.

Have you ever thought about God, or if you think there is a God, or not? Have you ever challenged Him to give you a sign to prove his existence? Are you waiting for a dramatic, earth shattering revelation? You probably won't get one.

Listen to the waves roll in and out as the tide ebbs and flows. What about the sea creatures that inhabit the vast oceans? "Well, you asked for a sign" --God

What is a sign? If you look up the Oxford Dictionary, you'll wish you hadn't, as a full page of meanings will leave you more confused!

However, one that stood out for me was, "a publicly displayed board etc. giving information; a signboard or signpost."

Look around you. Take time to walk through one of the many beautiful parks that are scattered throughout the country. There are signs everywhere.

The trees, the many varieties, shapes, sizes – how could they just evolve from nothing? What about the flowers, their individual colours, intricacies, scents? The birds, each breed, their habits, their individual call signs. The insects, the butterflies. What variety, what incredible lifecycles. Look at the mountains, the snow. Ponder on the beauty of nature. Look up at the sky – the blue beyond, the clouds, their formations and colour, the sun – feel its warmth. Don't forget to look at the night sky too. How awesome are the trillions upon trillions of stars, and the moon!

Take a walk along a beach, feel the sand beneath your feet, and the breeze against your face. Where did that breeze come from? Where did it go? Pick up a shell, or two, ponder

What about the flowers, their individual colours, intricacies, scents? The birds, each breed, their habits, their individual call signs. The insects, the butterflies. What variety, what incredible lifecycles. "Well, you asked for a sign" --God



over their inhabitants, long gone. Listen to the waves roll in and out as the tide ebbs and flows. What about the sea creatures that inhabit the vast oceans? Could this be the handiwork of a great Creator?

Where did this universe of wonderful things come from? "Well, you asked for a sign" –God.

Could that be the answer? Have you ever thought about that? It seems to me that all of nature is a public sign, making a statement and giving us information. Look at the wonder of a new life – human or animal. Have you ever thought about that miracle? Have you ever thought about how you came into being, why you are here, and what your purpose in life is?

I fear people are too busy these days, earning a living and fitting in everything today, just in case tomorrow doesn't come. Busy looking at, and sending text messages, talking and walking, or listening to iPods and dreaming of another place. Connecting with others via all available technology, just in case they are forgotten, or isolating themselves with their music or game plans. Meeting face to face only when necessary, but craving for relationships. We humans need fellowship with people.

Guess what? Our Creator made us for relationships. With each other, yes, but also with him. God is not far from any of us. He would love a relationship with you, but he won't force you into it. You have a choice. He made you to have the freedom to choose. Take time out of your busy day, look, hear and ponder on signs. I think you will find they are everywhere...

"Well, you asked for a sign" – God.



Gael McInnes, who lives in South Auckland, is a recently retired nurse and midwife, experienced in holistic care. Gael worked in diverse health arenas and taught at tertiary level.

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The rest of your life

By Simone Worthing

Are you one of those people who bounds out of bed in the morning, sings in the shower and brims with enthusiasm over the challenges of the day ahead? Or do you blearily stagger from between the sheets, try to regain consciousness in the shower, and then prepare for the day slumped over a cup of strong coffee?

If you're one of the many who find it hard to stay awake until morning tea, who relish the thought of afternoon siestas, and who doze through most of the evening news bulletin, then maybe, just maybe, you are tired. And you are not alone.

Parents are finding it increasingly difficult to rouse their youngsters in the mornings. Teachers complain about their students falling asleep during class. Children talk about burnout. Employees who catch public transport to work sleep for much of the journey. In shopping malls, offices, schools, and on the streets it seems that everyone is yawning.

Many people, young and old, are talking about feeling weary and worn out. Some are tired physically, often finding that even when they do get a good night's sleep it fails to refresh and energise them. Others feel emotionally drained, worn down by the daily onslaught of emotional and psychological challenges at home, work, school, in their local communities, and beyond. Still others are mentally exhausted, feeling that all their reserves have been depleted in the struggle to work through life's continual, varied and intense challenges.

There's a spiritual exhaustion we experience, too. In our frenetically paced world there's precious little time for meditation, introspection, searching for meaning and contemplating those higher--but very real--aspects of life.

We get tired of being tired: physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. And so many say they are too tired even to relax, to get away and have some fun. Others are too exhausted to think about why they are so tired or about how their situation could be changed.

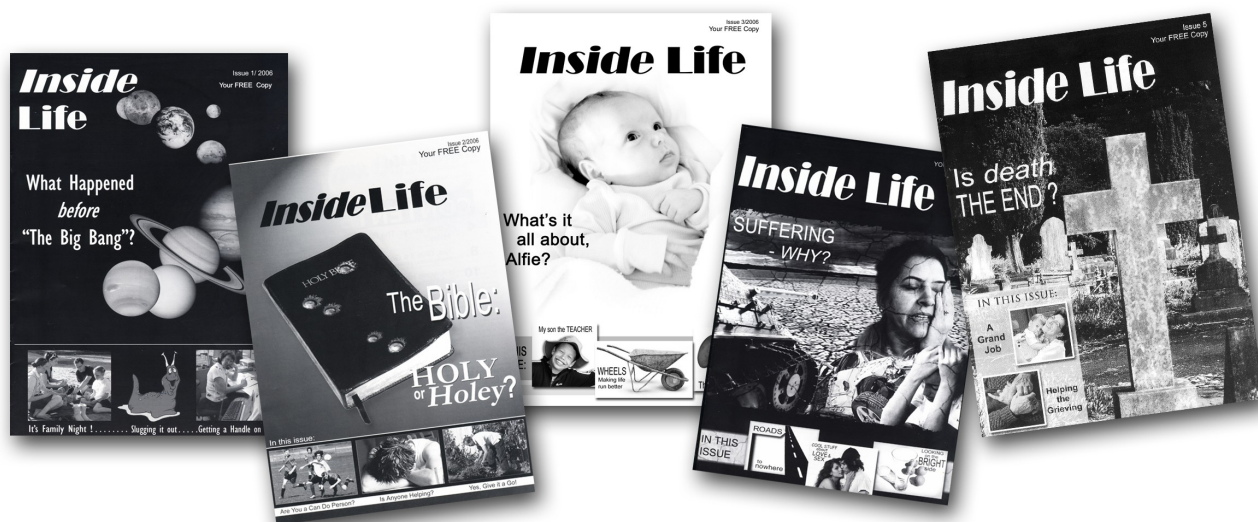
If that's you right now, maybe it will help a little to hear these words--spoken to our spiritual needs--from Jesus Christ. What would he know?

Lots, as it turns out. He understands our exhaustion. He knows how to help us deal with it. This is what he said while he was on earth as one of us: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

He invites us to come to him in our weariness and to give him our worries, cares, anxieties, and fears. He wants us to rest in his peace, grace, consistency, and strength, whatever our personal circumstances.

Maybe it sounds too good to be true. Or maybe it sounds like it will take too much effort to even think about. But in days such as these, when so many are worried about the threats of global warming and fuel shortages, and the world is changing at a frenetic pace, at least considering his invitation must be worth some effort.

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