



# The Happiest People on Earth?

By Rex Morgan

**T**he “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".<sup>1</sup>

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.

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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 wined 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".<sup>2</sup> 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 207<sup>th</sup> out of 233 economies in terms of GDP, came first, and NZ lagged way behind in 94<sup>th</sup> 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".<sup>3</sup>

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.

man.

"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”.<sup>4</sup>

**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.”<sup>5</sup>

**“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?

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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."<sup>6</sup> 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."<sup>7</sup>

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".<sup>8</sup>

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."<sup>9</sup>

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."<sup>10</sup>

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.”<sup>11</sup>

**“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.”<sup>12</sup>

### 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”.<sup>13</sup>

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 6:6-8
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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