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# Jeffrey Sachs: America and the Pursuit of Happiness

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**A**merica is a country of vast wealth and vast anxiety. America's high Gross National Product per person, around \$50,000, and its vast net worth, around \$500,000 per household, are among the highest in the world. Yet growing numbers of Americans are unhappy, unhealthy, and increasingly pessimistic. America fought for independence to secure the inalienable right to the pursuit of happiness, but today happiness seems out of reach to tens of millions of Americans.

One reason is obvious. The income and wealth measures refer to averages, while inequality of income and wealth has reached all-time highs in our country. Wealth may be soaring, but since the top 1% of wealthy households have more net worth than the bottom 90% it's not surprising that not everybody is thrilled. As the top 0.01% of households (about 14,000) receives more income than the poorest 25 million households, can we be surprised that the mood today is not over the top?

Yet there is something even deeper underway. In America today, the quest for profits has crowded out almost every other value. Corporations own our politicians, sports stadiums, charter schools, mass media, and even much of our military. The logic of the corporation has become the logic of America, to the point that the Supreme Court can no longer tell the difference between free speech and untrammelled corporate power.

America is threatened with something even greater than the loss of democracy as corporate power and corporate-owned mass media come to dominate our lives. We are at risk of losing our values as well, and even the birthright to the pursuit of happiness. GNP may be way up over the past thirty years, but

social trust, honesty, and compassion are down.

The time has come to reconsider the basic sources of happiness in economic life, not just for a better distribution of income and wealth, though we need that, but also for a better distribution of values, ethics, and goals. Economic progress is important and can greatly improve the quality of life, but only if it is pursued sensibly in line with other goals in the society.

There is a small and beautiful country on the other side of the planet that can help America, and the rest of the world, to regain our bearings in an overbearing age: the Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan. Forty years ago, Bhutan's fourth king, a young and newly installed leader, made a remarkable statement, that Bhutan should pursue Gross National Happiness rather than Gross National Product. Since then, the country has been experimenting with an alternative approach to development, one that takes a holistic approach, putting emphasis not only on economic growth, but also on culture, mental health, social values, compassion, and community.

Dozens of world experts on economy and society recently gathered in Bhutan's capital, Thimphu, to take stock of the evidence on these issues. I was honored to co-host this meeting with Bhutan's remarkable Prime Minister Jigme Thinley, a world leader in sustainable development and great champion of the concept of Gross National Happiness. We assembled in the wake of a recent UN declaration calling on nations to examine the ways that national policies can measure and promote happiness in each society.

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The question we examined is how to achieve happiness in the world today, a world that is characterized by rapid urbanization, mass commercial media, global capitalism, and environmental degradation. How can economic life be re-ordered to recreate a sense of community, trust, and environmental sustainability? Here are some of the initial conclusions.

First, there is a real role for economic development in raising happiness. When people are hungry, deprived of basic needs such as clean water, health care, and education, and without meaningful employment, they suffer. Economic development in order to alleviate poverty is a vital step in raising happiness in each society.

Second, however, the relentless pursuit of GNP to the exclusion of other goals is no path to happiness. In the United States, GNP has risen sharply in the past forty years, but happiness has not. Social trust has collapsed. The prevalence of clinical depression appears to be rising. The mass media have become outlets for corporate propaganda, much of it directly anti-scientific, and Americans suffer from an increasing range of consumer addictions.

Third, happiness is achieved through a kind of balanced approach to life, both as individuals and as a society. It is one thing to organize economic policies to support a rise in living standards, but quite another to subordinate all the rest of society's values to the pursuit of profit.

Fourth, modern life provides many direct threats to happiness. Global capitalism is destroying the natural environment through climate change and other kinds of pollution, yet many people are unaware of this as a result of relentless corporate propaganda by Big Oil. Global capitalism is undermining democratic values when companies buy up the politicians. Social trust is on the wane, and many people are suffering extreme anxieties and clinical depression

in the anonymity of today's urban and suburban communities.

The market economy is fostering an explosion of advertising that is causing us to lose our balance as consumers. Consider, for example, how the fast-food industry uses oils, fats, sugar, and other addictive ingredients to create unhealthy dependency on foods that contribute to obesity. Now one third of all Americans are obese, far ahead of the rest of the world. Mass advertising is contributing to many other kinds of consumer addictions as well.

Fifth, to promote happiness, we must measure it and identify the many factors other than GNP that can raise or lower society's wellbeing. Most countries invest heavily to measure GNP, but spend little to identify the sources of poor health (like fast foods and excessive TV watching), the reasons for the decline in social trust, and the causes of environmental degradation.

With the world increasingly unstable and dangerous, the time has come to regain our balance and moderation. The mad pursuit of corporate profits is threatening us all. Yes, we should of course support economic growth and development, but in a broader context: one that promotes social trust, compassion, business honesty, the environment, and ultimately our happiness. The beautiful mountain kingdom of Bhutan is helping to shed light on these critical challenges to our global society.

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