Wok & Roll

Peter Kwong

**Finding joy in the happiness of others**

My wife drives a lot. It is a two-hour drive down to Cochrane where she preaches every week.

Cochrane is a very small town near the Mississippi River with a population of about 500 residents. There are two churches, but five taverns at which the locals can hang out.

I still can’t figure out how folks that wear purple jerseys can sit next to folks flaunting green and gold and still chat as buddies. Most mind-boggling indeed. Life is sure different living in the Northwoods.

Last summer, my wife hit a deer and totaled her car. To follow suit, I hit one a month ago. The booger came out from nowhere, didn’t even give me a chance to step on the brakes. I heard a bump and that was it.

I kept driving until I got home. It was pitch black so I decided to take a look the next morning instead. I couldn’t believe my eyes, there was a big dent right in the middle of the hood.

It’s a miracle the car kept running and brought me home. The estimate of the damage to the hood was about $1,300. However, when they lifted the hood, they found that everything inside was dented.

Nothing was broken, but it was all damaged. To replace all the parts, it would be another $5,500. Thank goodness for auto insurance.

I know deep down inside, the insurance company will increase my premiums — first a 50-pound turkey shattered my windshield, then a deer totaled my wife’s car, and now $6,500 of damage to mine. The price of living in the Northwoods!

To help reduce the boredom of driving the long distance, my wife likes to listen to books on tape that she gets from the library. Sometimes, I drive so as to give her a break — and earn more brownie points.

Of course, I then listen to her books on tape on the way. The last one was about an interview with his holiness the Dalai Lama, a Buddhist, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a Catholic, two of the most compassionate people to ever live.

They were brought up in totally different environments, yet they share many of the same philosophies, especially when they talk about happiness and joy. I was most intrigued by their points of view and their own senses of humor.

The whole set consists of eight CDs. I was delighted that I got to listen to two of them before we had to return the package back to the library.

Just how do we define joy and happiness? Aren’t they the same? After listening to the conversation between the two wise men, I began to understand more about the differences. No wonder they are the wise men.

Happiness is holding a newborn baby; joy is giving birth to the newborn baby. It took me a while to comprehend that.

It is total happiness holding a newborn baby, watching the baby smiling in your arms, maybe even giggle a little bit. Doesn’t that melt your heart? It does make you happy, does it not?

However, after a long hard labor to bring the baby into this world, a mother’s joy is indescribable. Looking at the new life that she created, the love and the bond that they are going to share, the future, hopes and dreams that they are going to build together. That is indeed joy.

In a sense, happiness is just an external feeling, and joy is a deep-down spiritual emotion from within. Hmm, that’s pretty heavy for my brain to digest overnight. It might take a while to comprehend the differences further.

So, I’ve been pondering on the differences of joy and happiness for a while. It is a strange habit of mine — once I take on a thought, it lasts a long while till I can solve the issue.

Looking at the Dalai Lama, how can he find joy or happiness? He was exiled from Tibet, his motherland, for over 50 years. Away from the people he loves and living far away from his own home. Yet, he is happy and continuously sharing his joy of living in harmony with others.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu is a black man who is still fighting the effects of apartheid in South Africa. Just how does he find joy and happiness living in constant fear, with threats from the government and the local authorities who are mostly whites?

Then one day it dawned on me. Their happiness is not based on having any earthly possessions like a luxury car, an expensive watch, or a new home. Their happiness is based on seeing the joy of other people. That is a new concept indeed.

How can I be happy when I see my next-door neighbor just drove home a brand-new car? Or better yet, knowing that my good friend just took his family on a cruise in the Bahamas while I am shivering in the below 10-degree temperatures?

Yes, my own happiness derives from seeing others happy. Hence, “I,” “me” and “my” are not in the equation at all. The joy comes from the happiness of others.

Wow, I spent many sleepless nights pondering on that thought. But it becomes clearer and clearer every day; and I like that more and more. I started to think about my own joy and happiness. Just what brings me joy and what makes me happy.

I love teaching cooking classes, I love singing, and I love writing. One sleepless night, I woke up in the middle of the night and thought loudly -—“I got it. By George, I got it.”

Here are my own definitions of joy and happiness that I would like to share with you:

**In cooking:**

Happiness is when the students can follow my recipes and make something they can be proud of and say “Wow.”

Joy is when they make a feast for their friends and family using what they have learned and then send me the pictures to show off.

**In singing:**

Happiness is when I can sing my heart out and not miss a beat.

Joy is watching the folks tapping their fingers or feet with the rhythm. Or better yet, singing along, or crying in tears, as I have touched their hearts.

**In writing:**

Happiness is when someone recognize me in public.

Joy is when they grab my arm and say, “Sonny boy, I love reading your column, don’t you ever quit writing.”

**In family:**

Happiness is spending time with Ellie, my granddaughter.

Joy is watching her grow, learning new things.

So, I have found my own joy and happiness. What’s yours?