Four More Years of Happiness

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Published: January 20, 2005

Cambridge, Mass.

By now, most of the people I know should be Canadians. At least that's what they said they'd be if President Bush won re-election. And yet, my unofficial tally suggests that the number of disgruntled Democrats who actually emigrated northward is roughly zero, plus or minus none.

November saw more than its share of cursing, wailing and gnashing of teeth in some quarters, but by the middle of December the weeping had largely subsided and most of the people I know were busy buying gifts. With the exception of the junior senator from Massachusetts and a few hundred others whose lives and livelihoods hinged on the election's outcome, most Democrats had a good cry, kicked something until it broke, then slipped quietly back into their daily routines of family, work and television.

The speed and ease with which normalcy returned should not have surprised anyone. In the last decade, psychologists and economists have conducted numerous studies to determine how accurately people can predict their emotional reactions to future events. They've studied people's responses to misfortunes ranging from romantic breakups to financial losses, from personal insults to personal injuries, and the results of these studies have converged on a single conclusion: people typically overestimate the intensity and duration of their emotional reactions to adversity.

Mr. Bush in particular has been breaking Democratic hearts since he first ran for governor in Texas in 1994. But studies of that and subsequent elections reveal that voters were rarely as unhappy a few weeks after he won as they predicted they would be when they were doing their best to help him lose. And it wasn't Mr. Bush's performance that changed their minds, because those who voted against him returned to their original levels of happiness even before he was sworn in.

So what happened? Research suggests that human beings have a remarkable ability to manufacture happiness. For example, when people in experiments are randomly awarded one of two equally valuable prizes, they quickly come to believe that the prize they won was more valuable than the prize they lost. They are often so surprised by their apparent good fortune that they refuse to believe the prize was awarded randomly, and they are generally unwilling to swap their prizes even when the experimenter offers to sweeten the deal with a little extra cash.

Things do seem to turn out for the best - but studies suggest that this has less to do with the
way things turn out than with our natural tendency to seek, notice, remember, generate and uncritically accept information that makes us happy.

Our ability to spin gold from the dross of our experience means that we often find ourselves flourishing in circumstances we once dreaded. We fear divorces, natural disasters and financial hardships until they happen, at which point we recognize them as opportunities to reinvent ourselves, to bond with our neighbors and to transcend the spiritual poverty of material excess. When the going gets tough, the mind gets going on a hunt for silver linings, and most linings are sufficiently variegated to reward the mind's quest.

So when President Bush puts his hand on the Bible today and begins his second term, Republicans will not be the only ones thinking about how lucky they are. Democrats will surely remind one another that the dollar is down, the deficit is up, foreign relations are in disarray and the party that presides over this looming miasma may well have elected its last president for decades to come.

At the same time, Democrats will tell themselves that they did everything they could - they wrote more checks and cast more ballots than ever before - so if the president and his party insist that Democrats now enjoy a fat tax break, then why feel guilty? And they will inevitably note that if just over half the fans at an Ohio State football game had voted for John Kerry instead of the president, a different man would be taking the oath of office today.

In short, Democrats will realize that winning isn't always such a good thing - and besides, they almost won.

Of course, not everyone will be happy today, because not everyone has this talent for reasoning his way to happiness. Throughout history, there have always been a few unfortunates who found it impossible to reframe negative events in positive ways, and these poor souls were predictably less happy than the rest of us. Lincoln, for example, was perpetually melancholic. Martin Luther King Jr. had more bad than good days. "Suffering and evil often overwhelm me," said Gandhi from the midst of a depression, "and I stew in my own juice."

Many of the heroes and redeemers we most admire were unhappy people who found it impossible to change how they felt about the world - which left them no choice but to change the world itself. Outrage, anger, fear and frustration are unpleasant emotions that most of us vanquish through artful reasoning; but unpleasant emotions can also be spurs to action - clamorous urges that we may silence at our peril.

As we watch the inauguration today, Republicans will take satisfaction in their victory and Democrats will find satisfaction in their defeat. But tomorrow it will be a nation - and not a party - that faces the dire problems of war, terrorism, poverty and intolerance. Perhaps over the next four years we would all be wise to suppress our natural talent for happiness and strive instead to be truly, deeply distressed.

Daniel Gilbert, a professor of psychology at Harvard, is the author of the forthcoming "Stumbling on Happiness."

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