

Our Greatest Obstacle to Happiness and How to Transcend It by Maria Popova

Perhaps the greatest paradox of human life is that although happiness is the most universal of our longings, it is unobtainable by striving. Every seeming end we seek — love, money, purpose, the perfect cappuccino — we seek as a means to happiness, and yet happiness defies the usual laws of effort and achievement: The more ferociously we try to attain it, the more it eludes us.

How to break out of this paradox and transcend our self-imposed limitations in the pursuit of happiness is what artist Agnes Martin (March 22, 1912–December 16, 2004) examines in a set of notes prepared for a 1979 lecture at the University of New Mexico, Santa Fe, included in *Agnes Martin: Paintings, Writings, Remembrances* (public library) — the wonderful monograph that gave us Martin on inspiration, interruptions, and the ideal atmosphere for creative work.

Agnes Martin at her studio in New Mexico, 1953 (Photograph: Mildred Tolbert)

Martin was deeply influenced by the Zen teachings of D.T. Suzuki. Reminiscent of the Chinese philosophy of wu-wei — roughly translated as “trying not to try” — Martin’s ideas are formulated in a Zen-like style of profound simplicity evocative the Tao Te Ching, and speak to the difficult art of holding life with unattached awareness. She writes under the heading “The Current of the River of Life Moves Us”:

What we really want to do is serve happiness.

We want everyone to be happy, never unhappy even for a moment.

We want the animals to be happy. The happiness of every living thing is what we want.

We want it very much but we cannot bring it about.

We cannot make even one individual happy.

It seems that this thing that we want most of all is out of our reach.

But we were born to serve happiness and we do serve it.

The confusion is due to our lack of awareness of real happiness. Happiness is pervasive.

It is everywhere... When we are unhappy it is because something is covering our minds and we are not able to be aware of happiness. When the difficulty is past we find happiness again.

It is not that happiness is all around us. That is not it at all. It is not this or that or in this or that.

It is an abstract thing.

Happiness is unattached. Always the same. It does not appear and disappear. It is not

sometimes more and sometimes less. It is our awareness of happiness that goes up and down.

Happiness is our real condition.

It is reality.

It is life.

In this life, life is represented by beauty and happiness.

If you are completely unaware of them you are not alive.

The times when you are not aware of beauty and happiness you are not alive.

[...]

By awareness of life we are inspired to live.

Life is consciousness of life itself.

The measure of your life is the amount of beauty and happiness of which you are aware.

Agnes Martin, Summer 1964

Martin considers the artist's task as a midwife of awareness:

The life of an artist is a very good opportunity for life.

When we realize that we can see life we gradually give up the things that stand in the way of our complete awareness.

As we paint we move along step by step. We realize that we are guided in our work by awareness of life.

We are guided to greater expression of awareness and devotion to life.

We recognize the great exultation with life of great artists like Beethoven and we realize that all great artists praise and exult life.

Surely, a cynic might dismiss such a perspective as a function of privilege. But Martin had a hard and unusual life, working an astonishing array of odd jobs before becoming an artist. Her ideas spring from a place of deep self-reflection and are heavily influenced by Eastern philosophy. Addressing her audience of young aspiring artists, 67-year-old Martin offers her most direct, life-tested advice:

You must say to yourself: "How can I best step into this state of mind and devote myself to the expression of life."

You must not be led astray into the illustration of ideas because that is not art work. It is ineffective even though it is often accepted for a short time. It does not contribute to happiness and it is finally discarded.

The art work in the Metropolitan Museum or the British Museum does not illustrate ideas.

The great and fatal pitfall in the art field and in life is dependence on the intellect rather than inspiration.

Dependence on intellect means a consideration of observed facts and deductions from observation as a guide in life.

Dependence on inspiration means dependence on consciousness, a growing consciousness that develops from awareness of beauty and happiness.

To live and work by inspiration you have to stop thinking.

You have to hold your mind still in order to hear inspiration clearly.

Agnes Martin, *With My Back to the World*, 1997

In a sentiment of discomfiting pertinence today, she points to one such major realm of conditioned ideas:

The political world is a structure conceived and agreed to by us but it is not a reality. You have been conditioned to believe that this political world is in fact real. With this conception it is believed that we have come into ownership of the world and that we are responsible for creating it. And with this concept we have placed ourselves in a condition of perpetual responsibility and reform. But since we are not creating the world, since it was created before us and we are merely in it, and since we do not own it, our whole political concept is false.

Turning once again to how our forceful striving stands in the way of attaining the very things we strive for, Martin considers the life-expanding alternative:

The world evolves due to changes that take place in individuals. By individuals I mean all living things. The world evolves due to a growing awareness in the lives of all things and is expressed in their actions. The actions of all things are guided by a growing awareness of life. We call it inspiration. Living by inspiration is living. Living by intellect — by comparisons, calculations, schemes, concepts, ideas — is all a structure of pride in which there is not beauty or happiness — no life.

[...]

Where pride walks nothing of life remains. It is the supreme destroyer of life. Pride leaves nothing in its path. It is death in life.

Echoing Maya Angelou's unforgettable assertion that "life loves the liver of it," Martin crystallizes her central point:

If you want life on your side or to be on the side of life against death you must surrender completely to life.

A century after Nietzsche proclaimed that "no one can build you the bridge on which you, and only you, must cross the river of life," Martin counsels:

Hold fast to your life, to beauty and happiness and inspiration, and to obedience to inspiration. Do not imitate others or seek advice anywhere except from your own mind.

No-one can help you. No-one knows what your life should be. No-one knows what your life or life itself should be because it is in the process of being created.

Life moves according to a growing consciousness of life and is completely unpredictable. If you live according to human knowledge, according to precept, values and standards, you live in the past.

If you live entirely in the past you will not know beauty or happiness and you will not in fact live.

You must believe in life. Believe that you can know the truth about life.

[...]

The current of the river of life moves us. Awareness of life, beauty and happiness is the current of the river.

With great awareness we move rapidly. With no awareness we do not move.

Complement this particular fragment of the wholly fantastic Agnes Martin: Paintings, Writings, Remembrances with Hermann Hesse on how to live with greater awareness, Søren Kierkegaard on our greatest source of unhappiness, and Alan Watts on happiness and how to live with presence, then revisit this rare vintage conversation with the reclusive Martin about art, life, and happiness.