How America Lost Track of the Good Life - and Where to Find It Now
by Sarah van Gelder

For decades, we’ve been taught that economic growth and buying more stuff will make us happy—while trashing the planet. The good news is, there’s a better kind of happy: It starts with meaningful work, loving relationships, and a thriving natural world.

Photo by Tom Wang / Shutterstock.

In the last 100 years, we got very confused about happiness. This is no small thing. The way we define happiness drives what we do, what we’re willing to sacrifice, and how we spend our money and our time.

This confusion didn’t just happen. Advertisers spend billions spreading the illusion that more stuff will bring us happiness. And policy wonks of all political stripes—but especially those connected to business interests—spread the message that economic growth leads to well-being. Both are false promises that have instead been undermining the very conditions that could lead to sustainable happiness.

Sustainable happiness is built on a healthy natural world and a vibrant and fair society. It is a form of happiness that endures, through good and bad times, because it starts with the fundamental requirements and aspirations of being human. You can’t obtain it with a quick fix; sustainable happiness cannot be achieved at the expense of others.

The good news is that sustainable happiness is achievable, it could be available to everyone, and it doesn’t have to cost the planet. It begins by assuring that everyone can obtain a basic level of material security. But beyond that, more stuff isn’t the key to happiness.

It turns out that we don’t need to use up and wear out the planet in a mad rush to produce the stuff that is supposed to make us happy. We don’t need people working in sweatshop conditions to produce cheap stuff to feed an endless appetite for possessions. We don’t even need economic growth, although some types of growth do help.
The research shows that sustainable happiness comes from other sources. We need loving relationships, thriving natural and human communities, opportunities for meaningful work, and a few simple practices, like gratitude. With that definition of sustainable happiness, we really can have it all.

Canadapanda / Shutterstock.

A short history of American-style happiness

Consumption has not always been king in the United States. It became a national preoccupation beginning in the 1920s when business leaders began worrying that Americans were satiated, that they had all the appliances and consumer goods they wanted. Executives and pro-business politicians thought the economy would stall if people chose to spend time enjoying life rather than working more and buying more.

So the advertising industry joined forces with Freudian psychologists to channel our desires—to link the universal wish for status, love, and self-esteem with the new “Gospel of Consumerism.”

“Wants are almost insatiable,” claimed President Herbert Hoover’s report on the economy, published just months before the 1929 crash. “One want satisfied makes way for another…. We have a boundless field before us; there are new wants that will make way endlessly for newer wants, as fast as they are satisfied... by advertising and other promotional devices, by scientific fact finding, by a carefully predeveloped consumption, a measurable pull on production has been created... it would seem that we can go on with increasing activity.”

The modern advertising industry systematically set out to redefine our beliefs about happiness. Freudian psychoanalyst Ernest Dichter is one of those who joined forces with the advertising industry. “To some extent,” he said, “the needs and wants of people have to be continuously stirred up.”

Their strategy works. Today, an iPad, the right vacation, or the latest sneakers have become prerequisites for getting respect. Certain brands of beer are synonymous with friendship and a sense of community. An oversized house points to status and proof of your earnings and ability to provide for a family. These are all, of course, ideas created by advertisers whose clients profit when we buy more than we need.

Advertisers spend billions spreading the illusion that more stuff will bring us happiness.

But buying all this stuff has real consequences. Houses today are, on average, twice as
large per person as they were 40 years ago. The burden of debt for those extra rooms and deluxe finishes lasts for decades. Some get addicted to the buyer's high that follows a big purchase, but the initial exuberance spikes and disappears quickly. The debt, the extra work hours required to pay it off, and the resulting time away from friends and family go on and on.

Exhausted by long hours working and commuting, people begin to wonder what happened to real happiness. Advertisers are there with the answer: You just need to spend still more on plastic surgery, antidepressants, or a new car. The average child in the United States sees between 50 and 70 ads a day on television; the average adult sees 60 minutes of ads and promotions a day.

For the working poor, those on limited incomes, and the unemployed, much of the stuff that advertisers claim will bring happiness is out of reach, making the false promises a cruel joke. For all income levels, but especially for the poor, advertising becomes a relentless reminder that one is falling short of what others have—and of the good life.

“Who tells the stories of a culture really governs human behavior,” said media scholar George Gerbner. “It used to be the parent, the school, the church, the community. Now it’s a handful of global conglomerates that have nothing to tell, but a great deal to sell.”

The conversation about sources of fulfillment and joy has been colonized by the advertisers that manufacture the mindset of the consumer culture.

Photo courtesy of IBE Electronics Shenzen.

Paying the price for cheap stuff

The workers who make and distribute our stuff are among those who pay the price for our consumer lifestyle. When people lack money but are told that more stuff is essential to their happiness, low prices become paramount. Local businesses are driven into bankruptcy by big-box stores that can slash prices by paying rock-bottom wages.

Production workers find themselves unwilling participants in a race to the bottom for the lowest wage. Employers pick up and relocate if wages and safety standards are lower somewhere else or if workers begin organizing a union.

The nonhuman life of the planet suffers, too, from the colossal ecological burden of producing all our stuff. Human activity is causing species to go extinct at 1,000 times the rate that would otherwise occur in nature, according to a recent study published in Science. Industrial chemicals turn up in the bodies of sea mammals in the Arctic—and in our own bodies. A giant patch of plastic garbage circulates in the Pacific Ocean, poisoning wildlife up and down the food chain. Most troubling of all are the effects of burning massive quantities of fossil fuels and clear-cutting and burning forests. The carbon saturating the atmosphere is turning the ocean acidic and overheating the planet. The
disruption of the climate threatens our coastlines, food supplies, and sources of fresh water, and supercharges wildfires and massive storms.

Growth no longer delivers happiness

More consumption was supposed to bring happiness to us as individuals, and, likewise, economic growth was supposed to bring well-being to society as a whole.

The postwar period was considered an economic success story, and especially in the 1960s and 1970s, it was a time when many were lifted out of poverty and the gap between rich and poor was much smaller than it is today. The growth of the economy as measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP) rose steadily.

We don’t need people working in sweatshop conditions to produce cheap stuff to feed an endless appetite for possessions.

But the GDP is an untrustworthy measure. It gauges economic activity, whether or not that activity means improvements. Dig a strip mine and sell the metals, minerals, or coal, and the GDP will thank you—even if you pollute the drinking water for thousands. Raise fresh food in your garden, share it with friends and with the local homeless shelter, and stay healthy and happy, and the GDP doesn’t budge.

The Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI), on the other hand, measures overall well-being; it subtracts out harmful things like crime, illness, farmland loss, and declining water quality, and adds in contributions to the economy that the GDP doesn’t count, like unpaid work in the home and volunteering in the community.

Until 1979, GDP and GPI both increased in the United States, more or less in tandem. But after 1979, something different happened. The GDP continued growing, while the GPI stalled. More and more of our time and resources were invested in economic growth, but it was no longer delivering happiness, especially for those still stuck in poverty.

Why did the size of the economy continue to grow while well-being stagnated?

The culprits are “a rising of income inequality combined with environmental and social costs rising faster than consumption-related benefits,” says Ida Kubiszewski and colleagues in a paper published in Ecological Economics.

In other words, we’re not getting much happiness for all the time, money, and natural resources we’re using—and the benefits are going mostly to those at the top.

What changed? Among other things, free trade agreements and pro-corporate governments now make it possible for transnational corporations to outsource production to the lowest-wage regions of the world with the fewest regulations guarding worker and environmental safety. That strategy keeps prices down. But it makes it easy for corporations to slash good jobs and exploit workers here and internationally. The poverty wages and abuse of farmworkers in the United States, the numerous factory fires and the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh, the suicides at the Chinese factories that make Apple products, and the blood diamonds in the Congo are just some examples
Productivity has risen throughout the postwar era, especially with the deployment of computers and robotics. More is now produced with an hour of worker time than ever. The increased income from that productivity could have been shared with workers in the form of higher pay or fewer hours for the same pay. Or the profits could have been taxed to fund higher education, infrastructure upgrades, a high-speed transportation system, a transition to a green economy, or any number of other things that would increase sustainable happiness. Instead, companies used the increased productivity to lay off workers, offer huge compensation packages to executives, purchase other companies, and pay out high returns to wealthy stockholders. And they spent billions on lobbyists and campaign contributions to win favorable laws, reduced taxes and regulations, and sweetheart trade deals. Organized labor no longer has enough clout to negotiate for a share of the increased income; wages have stagnated since the ’70s, while the income and assets of the top 1 percent—and especially the top 0.1 percent—have skyrocketed.

A diminished quality of life

The dominance of this profit-driven economy is undermining our quality of life.

To get by in an age of stagnant wages and government indifference, Americans work longer and longer hours. Those at the bottom of the income ladder, especially single parents, often work two or three jobs to bring in enough to get by, and many live in poverty even while working full time. With long hours (plus long commutes), who has time to be happy?

This form of corporate-driven consumerism increases inequality and undermines family life, and it’s gobbling up the natural resources of our planet. Mountaintops are blown off, forests converted to tar-sands open-pit mines, and farmland converted into fracking drill sites and strip malls. The planet has limits—a reality overlooked by those who preach unending economic growth. We now have industrial chemicals in our water supply, Dust Bowl-style droughts, acidifying oceans, dying bee colonies, melting polar ice, and extreme hurricanes and fire storms. There’s a saying: “If mama ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy.” Mother Earth is not happy.

Wages have stagnated since the ’70s, while the income and assets of the top 1 percent—and especially the top 0.1 percent—have skyrocketed.
Many people are concerned about these issues, of course. But ordinary people don’t have the resources to get the attention of elected officials, who must raise millions of dollars to run national campaigns. A recent study by two prominent academics, slated for publication in the Fall 2014 Perspectives in Politics, confirms that the United States has become an oligarchy. The views of ordinary people and their advocacy groups have virtually no effect on policy, the study found. Yet economic elites and organizations representing business interests have “substantial independent impacts” on government policy.

This is how inequality undermines sustainable happiness. The promise that more stuff brings happiness turns out to be a false promise. Likewise, the claim that the rising tide of economic growth “lifts all boats” is also false.

So where can we find sustainable happiness now?

If economic growth and consumerism aren’t a recipe for sustainable happiness, then how do we get it?

Sustainable happiness is a form of well-being that goes deep—it’s not a fleeting sensation of pleasure or a temporary ego boost. Instead, it is enduring because it taps into our most authentic aspirations and involves building relationships and practices that support us through good times and bad.

Sustainable happiness is built on a mutually supportive community. It grows out of the recognition that our well-being is linked to that of our neighbors. When we know that we can count on others in difficult times, that there is a place for everyone, and that we can make a meaningful contribution and be recognized for it, we have the foundations of sustainable happiness.

And sustainable happiness grows out of a healthy living Earth. At a very basic level, it comes from recognizing that each drink of water, each breath of air, the food that grows out of the soil or comes from the waters—all is possible because of the living ecosystems of the planet. Sustainable happiness goes deeper, though, to a celebration of the natural world even when it is not offering us a direct benefit.

The good news is that sustainable happiness is compatible with a healthy environment, an equitable world, and our own fulfillment. And it is contagious—the things that create well-being for one person tend to be good for others and for all life.

Sustainable happiness is possible—but much depends on the choices we make individually and as a society. Here are some places to start: 1) Stop the causes of trauma and support healing, 2) Build economic and social equity, 3) Value the gifts we each bring, 4) Protect the integrity of the natural world, and 5) Develop practices that support our own well-being.

1. Stop the trauma

Like the common sense rule contained in the Hippocratic Oath, we could start by doing no harm.

Life inevitably brings some kinds of hurt: A relationship breaks up, a loved one dies, or a job fails to materialize. With support from friends and family, we recover and go on.
Yet there are types of trauma that can be debilitating for a lifetime and even across generations. And many are preventable.

Veterans suffer high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, 30 percent of those treated in VA hospitals after returning from deployment in Afghanistan or Iraq have PTSD. Their children also suffer and are more likely to be anxious or depressed.

Sustainable happiness goes deeper, though, to a celebration of the natural world even when it is not offering us a direct benefit.

Sexual violence is another way large numbers of people are traumatized. An estimated one in five women will be raped over the course of her lifetime, and a third of rape survivors will experience PTSD. Survivors are also three times as likely to have an episode of serious depression.

Nearly 700,000 children are subjected to sexual and physical abuse each year in the United States, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Children suffer disproportionately from poverty, which also causes lasting trauma.

And there are the intersecting traumas caused by generations of exclusion, economic dislocation, and violence directed at people of color, who experience higher rates of PTSD as a result of ongoing racism, according to research cited by Dr. Monica Williams in Psychology Today.

Among the most important ways to create a happier world is to end the wars, abuse, and exclusion that are sources of continued trauma, and to support the healing of survivors.

2. Create equity

Stress can be healthy, if it's the right kind. Short-term stress actually increases memory and mental function. But chronic stress—especially stress caused by events over which we have little control—increases the risk of heart disease and the likelihood of death. The Whitehall Studies—the famous 20th century investigations into the causes of death and disease among British civil servants—showed that low-status workers had a death rate three times higher than those in the upper reaches of the hierarchy, even when controlling for other class-based stress factors. Moreover, the damage caused by inequality extends beyond the workplace. Epidemiologist Richard Wilkinson has demonstrated that those living in unequal societies have many times higher rates of mental illness, homicide, and teen pregnancy.

So if we want healthier and happier lives, we need a more equitable society—fairer in both an economic sense and in terms of the empowerment we all have to determine our own lives.
Beatrice Webb left a bourgeois life to work in a textile factory, inspiring her to campaign for improved conditions for some of London’s most vulnerable workers. Photo credit Wikimedia Commons.

3. Value everyone’s gifts

It may be counterintuitive, but sustainable happiness comes from what we give, not what we take or even what we have. People who find their unique gifts and are able to offer them to others are often happiest.

Cameron Anderson, a professor at the Haas School of Business at the University of California, Berkeley, published a study in Psychology Science that shows winning the respect and admiration of our peers matters more than having stuff. “You don’t have to be rich to be happy, but instead be a valuable contributing member to your groups,” says Anderson. “What makes a person high in status in a group is being engaged, generous with others, and making self sacrifices for the greater good.”

Likewise, research cited in YES! Magazine by Stacey Kennelly shows that our happiness increases when we have the respect of our peers, but not necessarily when we have a higher income or more wealth.

College students who are politically engaged are happier, according to research by professor Tim Kasser. “Political activism scores were associated with feeling more pleasant emotions, reporting greater life satisfaction, and having more experiences of freedom, competence, and connection to others,” he says in a YES! Magazine article, “Making a Difference Makes You Happy.”

4. Protect the integrity of the natural world

The natural world doesn’t just bring us happiness; it is what makes life possible, and protecting its integrity contributes to sustainable happiness.

Getting out into nature improves our sense of well-being and is especially important for children. Benefits include reduced stress, improved health, more creativity, and better concentration, says Amy Novotney in the Monitor on Psychology.

The illusion that humans are separate and apart from the living Earth is finally giving way to an understanding that our fate is tied to the fate of the planet on which we all depend. Our work to protect and restore the planet’s ecosystems will mean clean water, healthy foods, a stable climate, and a better shot at sustainable happiness for generations to come.

5. Develop practices that support our own well-being

An egalitarian society that protects the natural world; minimizes war, racism, and abuse; and welcomes the expression of each person’s unique gift provides the foundation for sustainable happiness. But we don’t have to wait for the world to change. There are things we can do at home, too, that boost our own sustainable happiness.
We can exercise, a better cure than prescription drugs for much of what ails us. A sedentary life is as dangerous to health as smoking, according to studies cited by the American College of Sports Medicine. Regular moderate exercise not only reduces the risk of heart disease, diabetes, and stroke; it also makes us happier, often controlling depression as effectively as prescription antidepressants. It’s much cheaper, and all of the side effects are good.

Sustainable happiness goes deeper, though, to a celebration of the natural world even when it is not offering us a direct benefit.

We can also develop a practice of gratitude and learn to be mindful.

Some of the happiest people are those who have survived great illnesses or other major life challenges and have become conscious of the choices they make about their finite lives. There’s something about facing the possible end of life that brings into focus the precious choice we have about how to spend our remaining days.

“Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way,” Viktor E. Frankl wrote.

Bhutan. Photo by Adwo / Shutterstock.

A global happiness reset

As endless growth and bottomless consumption lose their luster as aims for our lives, many people are seeking out better ways to achieve happiness. New approaches are beginning to take hold around the world.

Buen vivir

Out of the indigenous regions of South America comes the idea of buen vivir (the good life). In this way of thinking, well-being does not just come from the individual pursuit of happiness. It comes from being part of a vibrant world that includes both human and natural communities. Instead of serving the economy, the economy exists to serve us. We are here to live well with our families, and it is in relationships of respect and reciprocity with neighbors and with our ecological neighborhood that we will find happiness.

This, of course, is a radical reversal of the economic growth aims of society as promoted by both liberal and conservative political leaders. Instead of seeing nature and human labor as an input into a production machine we call the economy, this perspective aims to
foster an ethic of stewardship, mindfulness of the interests of descendants seven generations on, gratitude for what we have—along with a sense of enoughness—and the acknowledgement of the rights of all life.

Buen vivir has now been embedded in the constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador. This framework has inspired a grassroots approach to the climate crisis and has become the foundation of international discussions, especially in Latin America.

Bhutan’s gross national happiness

In 1972, soon after ascending to the position of the Fourth Dragon King of Bhutan, the young Jigme Singye Wangchuck declared that he was more interested in gross national happiness than in gross domestic product. This statement launched studies and assessment surveys, based on Bhutan’s unique culture and values, so that happiness could be used as a yardstick for policymaking in this small Asian nation. Gross national happiness as defined by Bhutan includes psychological well-being, health, education, time use, cultural diversity and resilience, good governance, community vitality, ecological diversity and resilience, and living standards.

Focusing on the well-being of the people guided Bhutan as it followed its own path, rather than adhering to the interests of global economic forces. Bhutan decided not to join the World Trade Organization, for example, when it concluded that such a move would undermine happiness and well-being.

“If we look at things holistically, based on health, community connection, arts and culture, the environment, we will govern the country differently.”

“If Bhutan joins the WTO, it surrenders, by very definition, the right to determine who participates in defining and achieving the happiness of the Bhutanese whole to external forces. In other words, Bhutan surrenders to market forces and to the powers that are dominant in the market its own sovereignty,” said Stanford history professor Mark Mancall.

Bhutan’s idea that happiness, not growth, should be the measure of progress is spreading. The United Nations General Assembly adopted a Bhutan-sponsored resolution in July 2011 that calls on other nations to make happiness and well-being a central feature of their development work, and to develop indicators to measure the well-being of their own people.

The happiness movement in the United States

In the United States, the states of Maryland and Vermont are using the Genuine Progress Indicator to measure happiness. They are factoring in the benefits of volunteer time, housework, educational achievements, and functional highways and streets while subtracting things like crime and the depletion of nonrenewable energy sources. By measuring these and other factors, a more complete picture emerges of real well-being.

“If we look at things holistically, based on health, community connection, arts and culture, the environment, we will govern the country differently,” John deGraaf, a co-founder of
the Happiness Alliance, told me. “We will understand that success comes more in societies that are egalitarian, that have great time balance—short hours and shared work, strong social safety nets so people feel secure. We’ll have greater confidence in government and greater trust in each other.”

Maybe happiness sounds like a frivolous endeavor for us as individuals, and especially for governments and the United Nations, to pursue. But consider Thomas Jefferson’s insistence on including the “pursuit of happiness,” rather than “property,” along with life and liberty in the Declaration of Independence. Jefferson was deeply influenced by the Greek notion of eudaimonia, which refers not to a fleeting pleasure but to the essentials of what it means to be human—in other words, to human dignity.

In this sense, sustainable happiness is not frivolous at all. There aren’t enough resources in the world for all of us to live a consumer lifestyle. But by choosing wisely, we can have a world in which each of us can live in dignity.

Those who are affluent can gain happiness by eschewing excess consumption, de-cluttering, practicing gratitude, relishing good times with loved ones, and protecting the natural environment.

Much of the stuff that advertisers claim will bring happiness is out of reach, making the false promises a cruel joke.

For those lacking the means to provide for themselves and their families, an increase in access to resources can result in real improvements in well-being.

As a whole, we stand to gain a lot. A more equitable world fosters trust, increasing our capacity to work together to solve the big problems of our time. It means a world with less crime, less disease, less corruption, and less waste. And it’s a world in which we make the best possible use of the natural resources we extract from the Earth by making sure that—to loosely paraphrase Gandhi—our natural wealth goes to meet needs, not greed.

Ways of life that focus more on happiness and less on economic growth leave time for family, community, and the development of the many dimensions of our lives that we know bring real happiness.

One more thing: In a time of increasing disruptions related to a changing climate and economic dislocation, our challenge will be to create the conditions that encourage us to turn to each other in hard times, not turn on each other. We are far more likely to achieve that in a more equitable world, where we are mindful of the many blessings we have and skilled at discovering sources of happiness that don’t cost the planet, but are abundant and free.