

Podcast #31: What is a “Good Enough Life?”

I’ve have come to feel—increasingly--that happiness isn’t and shouldn’t be my goal in life, and that, instead, I should aim for a “good enough life” that’s aligned with my values. So, I’m going to try to make a general point here by using my own personal experience.

What do I mean? Well, let me start by telling you that I’ve been in psychotherapy on and off for 45 years. And—well, believe it or not-- that’s not all that unusual for psychotherapists my age. Most of this work was based on this notion—it’s a psychoanalytic notion—namely, that ***if the patient can get to the bottom of what ails him or her, the foundation, the origin if you will, of his or her***

suffering, and bring that original thing (usually a trauma of some kind) to the surface, then the patient will be cured.

And I got a lot from all of these years of therapeutic work. But I think now that there was something in that effort that eventually misled me.

It was misleading in a way that made therapy function too much like an addiction. Let me explain.

The addiction-part stemmed from the following assumption--- ***that if I could excavate my early traumas deeply enough, I could, in effect, get rid of them, and the suffering they created, and what would be left would be the good stuff, a good life.*** The promise seemed to be that I could just get rid of the bad and be left with the good. And when an addict gets

high, he or she is trying to change the way they feel—the negative feelings they have—in order to—Ta Da!! to, well, to feel good.

It doesn't work that way, unfortunately. This view of therapy is based on the fantasy that a good life—the goal of therapy, after all-- is and should be defined as the absence of suffering.

Now, that goal is a fantasy, but it's an understandable one, right? Because no one **LIKES** to suffer of course. But I think that we need to face the uncomfortable fact that suffering of some kind is also part of life. There are limits to our control over our bodies, over our emotions, over other people, or over the natural world. So, sometimes our bodies get tired or break down and create pain. Sometimes, in the course of normal living, we feel disappointment, anxiety, loss, frustration, or anger. Sometimes,

in relationships, we don't get the type of approval or love or understanding or recognition we need from others. And sometimes the natural environment makes us too hot, or cold, or wet. These experiences are not "afflictions." They are part of living.

So--If we aspire to a life without these forms of suffering and frustration, we will be forever dissatisfied. And I think that too many people are in this exact predicament.

They—we—chase a state of being that is ultimately impossible to achieve. We call this state of being "happiness" and—here's the key-- *we equate happiness with the absence of discomfort.*

Or we define happiness as feeling "good" all the time. It's fine and natural to want to feel good, but to make the pursuit of "feeling good"

be the focus, the essential meaning of your life, is a fool's errand.

Of course, our culture tells us that feeling “good” **is, indeed**, what happiness is all about and is the essential measure of a good life. TV commercials assault us with images of the “good life” in which, of course, everyone is smiling and laughing all the time--ebullient people in a constant state of high-octane pleasure and enjoyment. This is a fantasy of the good life that can never be met. You can feel such things at times; but they're temporary—always. And when they end, when you come back to earth, you're filled again with a sense that your life isn't where it should be. Our capitalist system depends on this outcome, of course, because then it can sell us products that promise to fill up that hole.

This is why people become addicts. They seek a “high” which is, by definition, *a state of being that is everything that ordinary everyday life is not*. This is why therapy can be addictive, because it can implicitly, unwittingly, inadvertently if you will, *suggest that distressing feelings can be—well--- just eliminated*.

I think that we have to give up the fantasy that feeling “good” is the be-all and end-all of life and that happiness is feeling good all the time. Even Freud agreed with me here—he famously said this: “you will see for yourself that much will be gained if we succeed in turning your hysterical misery into common unhappiness.”

And Buddhist thought mirrors this attitude as well with its teaching about mindfulness—the practice of allowing oneself to feel what’s there,

what's real, without having to respond or do anything about it.

My own view is that we have to, instead, identify our values and try to live our life aligned with these values. And that the result is, to use my words, a "good-enough life."

What do I mean by values? Think about it this way. Values are what you come up with when you are asked these questions:

"Deep in your heart, what do you want your life to be about?"

"What do you want to stand for?"

"What do you want to do with your brief time on this planet?"

"What truly matters to you in the big picture?"

Values are like a compass, and so we ask the question:

“Where is your true north?”

Values are a way of living; they aren't a goal.

Values include things like being caring or loving, being a learner, or making the world a better place for others; they might include parenting well, or being a good friend, or living a healthy life and treating your body well. These are values and if you are living these values in the present moment, in every moment, then I believe you are living a good-enough life.

The concept of a “good enough life” is meant to evoke something particular here. The British psychoanalyst, D.W. Winnicott, wrote about the “good-enough mother,” by which he

meant a mother who is attuned to and highly empathic with her baby, but also a mother who allows the baby to experience small and manageable frustrations. In other words, a good-enough mother isn't a perfect mother. A perfect mother is merely an idealized fantasy. A good enough mother helps the baby feel safe, comforted, and understood, but at the same time, also helps the baby and toddler learn how to tolerate the inevitable frustrations of being a separate person with limitations. This is a "good enough mother."

In the same way, I think that we should aspire to a good-enough life, by which I mean a meaningful life, one lived animated by our values but also with a capacity to mindfully and compassionately tolerate the distressing aspects of life without having to control or escape them.

It means being present to the whole mess of life and to find within it a sense of purpose and meaning.

A good enough life isn't about feeling good, it's about feeling alive. It isn't about getting rid of bad feelings but *living with them* while pursuing value-driven action. And it's not about always looking to the future and striving to achieve the next goal under the illusion that then ***that*** will bring happiness or contentment. Sure, one might feel "good" in the short run, but not in the long run. Our minds seem to have evolved such that we are wired to continually seek short-term relief and pleasure at the expense of long-term satisfaction.

I'll end with a poem..this one is called ***Life Will Break You, by Louise Erdrich***. (pronounced "erdrick")

**Life will break you.
Nobody can protect you from that,
and living alone won't
either
for solitude will also break you
with its yearning.**

**You have to love.
You have to feel.**

It is the reason you are here on earth.

**You are here to risk your heart.
You are here to be swallowed up.**

**And when it happens
that you are broken
or betrayed
or left
or hurt
or death brushes near**

**Let yourself sit
by an apple tree and
listen
to the apples**

falling all around you in heaps

wasting their sweetness.

**Tell yourself that you tasted as many as you
could.**