

Happiness movement a non-starter

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My ancestors came to Nova Scotia in the late 18th Century under a thick fog of funk and fury. Forced from their hovels near Edinburgh by poverty, disease and oppression, they were not happy to make the months-long Atlantic crossing. And, having landed, they were not happy to call their rock-strewn plot of scrub along the Eastern Shore home.

They griped when their patriarch, James Bruce, met an untimely end after a tree fell on his head. They whined when their crops failed, leaving them with nothing but wild roots and tubers to munch. They wailed when their animals vanished, their houses burned, and their children died.

If only these incorrigible complainers had known what we know now. According to the organizers of the second International Conference on Gross National Happiness, every hardship or setback can be overcome simply by embracing peaceful, easy feelings, and working (happily, I assume) to manifest them in daily life. Apparently if incongruously – this is especially true on the blood-drenched battlefields of business and industry.

Says Ron Colman of GPI Atlantic, a non-profit research group that hosted this don't-worry-be-happy shindig in Antigonish, N.S., last Monday: "(We want to know) what are some of the social, economic and environmental conditions which are likely to produce higher levels of well-being . . . (For some, the goal is) redirecting global development towards socially and environmentally responsible policy and practices. The goal is to ensure long-term prosperity and equity for everyone."

Oh, is that all? And when this lofty objective fails to produce anything material (because nobody actually knows how to "ensure long-term prosperity and equity for everyone"), would we still be happy?

Never mind. Here's what Paddi Lund – an Australian dentist who once contemplated suicide, but decided instead to take a chainsaw to his receptionist's desk and write a book about building "happiness-centred businesses" – has to say: "Imagine members of your team saying how nice it is to work with you, what a wonderful environment it is, and saying that after they've been with you for years. Sound too good to be true? Well, you can read all about how (I) made a happy environment for (my) team through a system for communication."

Dr. Lund is the newest hero of the worldwide happiness movement. His tome, which sells for \$29.95 a pop, and includes such carefully chosen words of wisdom as "customers don't buy because the products are cheaper or better, but because of the people in the business," have topped bestseller lists around the world. Doubtless, the recovering orthodontist is now, finally, happy.

All of which is to say that the standard of joy in one business is the measure of misery in another. And that renders the happiness movement – like the "slow-down" and "play-at-work" trends – nothing more than rank marketing, promising solutions to problems it can't possibly solve and usually for a fee.

In the Atlantic provinces, where we still struggle to remain commercially competitive, productive, innovative and bottom-line driven, sturdier objectives should preoccupy us: better schools, easier access to higher education; more accountability among our elected officials; more intelligent and productive approaches to

international trade and investment.

In the long run, achieving these ends will provide greater social and economic comfort than most of us have a right to expect. Happiness I prefer leave to philosophers and the judgment of my own ancestors who, if they were alive today, would say to those who expect more: "Quit your complaining."