

Bhutan aside, happiness can't be legislated

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There is a tiny country in the mountains north of India where the average annual income is about \$1,400.

The nation, with a population of less than a million, has had television for only seven years, and Internet access for less than that.

The national airline has two planes, and the country's two access roads are often blocked by snow or rock slides.

Police there charge citizens who don't wear the nationally approved costume, climbers are not permitted to scale the awesome Himalayan peaks for fear of disturbing the spirits, the law limits investments from other countries, and tourist numbers are regulated.

By current Western standards, that sounds like a recipe for poverty and misery.

But the Kingdom of Bhutan has surplus happiness, and it is exporting it to the rest of the world.

Thirty years ago, King Druk Gyalpo Jigme Singye Wangchuck decreed that happiness is more important than money, and he put his money where his mouth was.

King Wangchuck and his ministers hung back from the global rush to progress, legislating policies in keeping with the philosophy that having money is not the same thing as having happiness.

That involves conserving its fragile mountain ecology, including the protection of 86 per cent of its forests. Unlike its nearest neighbours, Bhutan spends about a fifth of its budget on health care and education.

It doggedly preserves and promotes its traditional Buddhist culture, and pursues the ideal of good governance.

It sounds like paradise, but it's becoming harder for Bhutan's leaders to maintain happiness policies in the face of the electronic images flashing into their isolated nation from the rest of the world.

The Bhutanese are not smiling, mindless robots, but humans with hopes and fears and wants and needs – all the things that make us susceptible to the lures portrayed on TV and computer screens.

While Bhutan is catching our techno–bug, we want their happiness quotient. Bhutanese happiness is proving so desirable that hundreds of people from 33 countries met in Antigonish this week to hear all about it.

At the second International Conference on Gross National Happiness, they pondered how things like literacy, shorter work hours, mass transit and waste reduction could make us happier.

I didn't go to the conference, but I read all I could find about it, which was surprisingly meagre, given the importance we place on happiness.

How often do parents say that they only want their children to be happy? Not wealthy or healthy or smart or

handsome or popular, but happy!

In Canada our homes are chockablock with stuff. The deadliness and power of our simplest military firearm would shock King Arthur's knights. Children who can't attend school are rare.

We have more food and drink than we need in this land; and most of us have experienced communication via telephone, TV or the Internet. We have more of everything than in any previous generation, but do we have more happiness?

Legislation on helmets, driving, hunting, playground equipment, baby furniture, boating, workplace practices, and more, provide for our safety. Tax laws enforce our contributions to health care, education and other social initiatives.

Our government tells us to treat our families with care, lays out parameters for reproduction and, to a certain extent, protects us from ourselves.

Our lives are so closely regulated that it appears we could live til we die and never suffer a moment of personal responsibility.

And, apparently, we are still not happy – or not happy enough. So are happiness laws next, then? Pay attention to this: One corner of Bhutanese happiness rests on the country's strong spiritual culture. That point seems to have been downplayed in this week's conference, but King Wangchuck gave it equal weight with ecological protection, health and education, and care-filled government.

That doesn't mean we should all be forced to observe the same spiritual tradition or religion. That is not Canada. That is not where we are as a nation.

But, just maybe, we could treat our spirituality as something more important than an hour on one day a week.

Maybe we could experience it as something other than an extracurricular activity, shoehorned between soccer practice and the regular weekly card game.

Maybe we could exercise and feed our souls and allow them to thrive along with our bodies and our wallets.

Maybe we shouldn't be holding our collective breath waiting for someone else to make us happy.

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