

Showdown: happiness versus misery

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COLUMN: Ralph Surette

There was a big international conference in Antigonish this week on "happiness." Specifically, some 450 delegates from over 30 countries gathered to advance the cause of Gross National Happiness (GNH) – that is, the promotion of policies that lead to greater well-being rather than merely to more money and consumption which, it is argued, only lead to greater unhappiness in the long run.

You might think the whole idea rather odd – "happiness" these days being as likely as not to connote a kind of fuzzy-headed cheerfulness, as opposed to the "reality" of bad news.

Nevertheless, this is a big idea that's gaining traction. One of the reasons is that the prevailing big idea – economic growth at all cost – is not only not making us happy, but is arguably destroying the Earth and its environment, which will make us spectacularly unhappy in the long run. Various countries – Great Britain, Brazil, among others – have written social well-being into their policy aims instead of presuming, as we generally do, that economic growth will take care of everything.

Another reason is that we all – or at least most of us – want "happiness." Few want trouble and misery. Defining it, however, is an old problem that philosophers have chewed on for millennia.

In that connection, there was an intriguing paper from a team at the University of Texas, in which the authors retrace what is historically the most dramatic happiness issue ever. When Europeans "discovered" the Western Hemisphere, they found the inhabitants remarkably content compared to European misery under feudalism. Leading European philosophers like John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau were profoundly influenced by this as they evolved theories of "natural rights," as were European nation-builders in the New World.

The fact that the newborn United States declared "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" as its stated aim owes much to native ways, say the authors. Thomas Jefferson, framer of the U.S. constitution, asserted that native peoples possessed "an infinitely greater degree of happiness than those who live under European governments." They are not submitted to "any coercive laws" and their "only controls are their manners, and the moral sense of right and wrong . . ." Notably, the land and its creatures were considered a gift of the Great Spirit to everybody. Being at one with it was a key part of their contentment.

Others – Benjamin Franklin, Simon Bolivar (creator of several Latin American countries), even Christopher Columbus ("they are the best people in the world and the sanest . . . they love their neighbours as themselves . . . they are faithful and do not covet what others have . . .") – had similar views. Despite this, Europeans couldn't help but try to wipe them out. Is misery always destined to prevail? Or are we learning something now? The elements of happiness are presumed to be a sound relationship with nature and other people, which implies sustainable economic development, good governance and cultural integrity, values that counter the acquisitive compulsion of modern life. Many of the presentations at the conference were highly academic, dealing, for example, with the ins and outs of ways to apply such policies within bureaucracies. Others dealt with examples of community development, including some in fishing communities in the Maritimes.

This is the second such conference. The first was last year in Bhutan, a Himalayan constitutional monarchy between India and Tibet, and a country which prides itself on its social and environmental integrity – to the

point of limiting the number of tourists (9,000) that may enter each year. It was its king who, in 1972, declared that GNH would thenceforth be more important than Gross National Product in the mountain state.

It's in Nova Scotia this time because GPI Atlantic, which is constructing a Genuine Progress Index (GPI) for Canada – measuring progress by more than just economic production, as the standard measures do – did the footwork to get it here. For GPI founder Ron Colman, "there's no reason why Atlantic Canada can't be a leading world model" in good development practices.

Meanwhile, last fall, a study done at the University of British Columbia found that the happiest people in Canada were in Atlantic Canada, the unhappiest in the biggest cities. Colman has something to work with.

Ralph Surette is a veteran Nova Scotia journalist living in Yarmouth County.