

C'MON, GET HAPPY

By Craig Lancaster

The recent news that our fair state ranks 7th in the United States for happiness first inspired a bit of chest-beating indignation (“What the hell is so great about Louisiana?”) and then a deeper contemplation of what happiness actually is.

Watch out for that second step. It's a doozy.

Taking on happiness – as a concept or as a state of being – means gazing into our DNA as Americans. Think about the audacity it took for Thomas Jefferson to write these words: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Not just life and not just liberty, any one of which would be coveted by millions of people around the world to this day. No, we believe we're entitled to something well beyond that, something grand and wonderful: the ability to pursue happiness.

So how do we do that?

Ken Egan, the executive director of Humanities Montana, cites the view of American philosopher Martha Nussbaum and says “human beings need self-examination, a sense of world citizenship and narrative imagination – the ability to feel our way into others' lives and needs.”

“Of course,” he added, “Freud put it even more simply: All we need is love and work.”

The concept of happiness, long the province of poets, has landed squarely in the sights of scientists, and what they have to say about it is by turns corroborative and mind-blowing. An episode of PBS's “This Emotional Life,” called “Rethinking Happiness,” dove into the subject, focusing on research that gets at the core of qualities that drive happiness: compassion, forgiveness, trust, love.

We are odd ducks, we humans. At times, we have a seemingly limitless capacity to absorb cruelty and violence and move back to a set level of happiness. But a lesser event can cause us to ride off into a ditch. Scientists have an explanation for this dichotomy: We assimilate horrible situations because we have no alternative; we experience it, we deal with it, we pack it away and return to normal. But if we have the opportunity to flail away at something relatively minor, we take the bait – despite its not being in our best interest.

The PBS program examined all sorts of case studies: people who had suffered devastating injuries, or had endured isolation and beatings, or were struggling to let go of a grudge. The path to happiness for each was different, but the commonality is hard to ignore. Indeed, happiness eventually filters down to one thing, researchers say. It lies in our connections with each other.

The University of Warwick and Hamilton College researchers who determined the states' rankings looked at two sets of data. One involved people's self-assessment of their happiness, a subjective accounting. The other looked at measurable, verifiable external factors, such as rainfall, taxes, commuting time and crime rates.

So bearing that in mind, as well as the areas that PBS covered, let's see if we can divine why we're at the lofty ranking of No. 7. We're behind such places as Florida and Tennessee – chippy comments not only welcome but also encouraged – and ahead of flashier locales like New York and California.

Here are a few thoughts:

- Montanans are proud but not prideful. The Rev. Jim Herron, senior minister at First Congregational United Church of Christ in Billings, recalls seeing a sign in Cooke City: “Montana: The Texas Texans Brag About That Exists Only in Montana.” It's an apt observation. We don't make a big deal about our great state, nor do we slap obnoxious slogans on it. (As a reformed Texan, I can tell you that the compulsion to say things like “Don't Mess With Texas” is endemic there.)

- Ours is a state where you can feel a close-knit connection with others without having to worry about them butting into your business. We give each other a wide berth *and* a helping hand.

- Montana remains pregnant with possibility. I once lived in Silicon Valley, and while I loved many things about it, the idea that it could reinvent itself seemed preposterous. A place once known as the Valley of Heart's Delight has been paved over and has cast its lot with high tech. Montana, on the other hand, often seems ascendant. The frontier mentality that has been a part of this place for so long persists today.

- The PBS episode touched on this, and it seems particularly apropos here: Older people, by and large, are happier people. They're aware of their mortality and thus live in the moment. They have learned to use their strengths and have accepted their weaknesses. And here in Montana, we're old and getting older. By 2025, some projections say, nearly a quarter of the population will be 65 or older. Let's hope that happiness follows.

That's not the whole story, of course, but then, the whole story cannot be told, and anecdotes are particularly ill-suited to account for an entire state's happiness. Our pursuit of happiness, as Jefferson wished for us, is an intensely personal thing. We find it in the path we choose and the people who walk it with us. We celebrate individualism, but we need each other.

Perhaps that's why, when I now contemplate happiness, I travel back to a moment around last Thanksgiving, as my wife and I made our way northeast to Richland County to see her family. Between Miles City and Terry, I looked to my left and saw the hills bathed in orange. I glanced in the rearview mirror at the setting sun, which backlit the scene and made the road ahead look almost ethereal.

And then I looked to my right at Angie, who smiled back at me. I knew I was in the right place, making the right journey with the right traveling companion.

I was, in a word, happy.