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Why I quit my day job researching happiness and started cycling to Bhutan

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I'd had enough. It was October 2017, and I'd been wondering what the point of my job was for far too long, and while I'm sure there was something meaningful somewhere and to someone in what I was doing day-to-day, it had certainly lost meaning for me. For all the good that writing another academic research paper would do, I thought I might as well be cycling to Bhutan.

The idea of cycling to this small country nestled in the Himalayan foothills is one I'd had for many years. Bhutan is famous for deciding to value its population's happiness and well-being over economic growth. As an academic researcher focused on understanding happiness and well-being, the journey looked to me to be something of a pilgrimage.

Before I quit, I'd spent more than ten years at different universities, trying to understand what the most important contributors were to well-being. But what I found was that I was burnt out. Given the nature of my research, the irony of this was not lost on me. I needed to do something different. I wanted to travel; to explore and understand happiness through a non-academic lens. But I wanted to connect the research I'd been doing over the years with what was happening, or indeed not happening, in the world.

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Taktsang Goemba, Tiger nest monastery, in Bhutan. Kai19/Shutterstock

Purpose and meaning

When I began my research, I was motivated by the importance of the subject. Most people I knew wanted to be happy and so, I thought, my research might help people to do that. I did what academics are incentivised to do: publish in the best peer-reviewed journals (indexed by academic readership and citation counts), as well as bring in research funds. I also did things such as engage with people outside of academia that might not ordinarily read my research – the public, the media, governments, policymakers – things I wasn't always incentivised to do, but nevertheless did because they contributed to a personal sense of purpose and meaning.

When it comes to living happy and fulfilled lives, we humans need meaning, we need purpose. People who feel there is a deeper purpose and meaning in what they are doing in their day-to-day lives tend to be happier, healthier, and more satisfied. Research shows, for example, that a life orientated towards meaning brings greater satisfaction than a life oriented toward hedonic pleasure. Those that have a strong sense of purpose in life live longer, and having a strong sense of purpose may be just as good for your health as engaging in regular exercise. Some would even conceive that purpose is, by definition, a key aspect of happiness itself.

Work is an important source of purpose and meaning for many people. When people get made redundant or become unemployed, much of the loss in well-being they experience is often due to the loss of purpose and meaning, rather than the loss of income. Even if there is no deeper personal purpose and meaning in the actual work itself then there is much to value in our daily social interactions and the structure that work provides us, although they are easily overlooked.

It is purpose and meaning that helps people get up each day and it doesn't necessarily have to be specifically about work. Purpose and meaning can take many different forms and is deeply personal. It might be looking after family, following a hobby, passion, or faith. Purpose and meaning is also an important source of resilience, helping people get through the difficulty and challenges that are an inevitable part of life.



Having purpose and meaning are an important component of being happy. Evgeniia Freeman / Shutterstock

The importance of purpose and meaning is well recognised. In the UK, for example, one of the four questions that the government's Office for National Statistics asks in its Well-Being Survey is: "Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?" To which people are asked to respond on a scale from zero "not at all" to ten, "completely". In the UK the mean score to this question is about 7.8, suggesting people feel their lives are relatively worthwhile. However, there is variation around this mean. Around 15% of the population answer a score of six or less on this question and this level has been relatively stable.

Walking the talk, being authentic

It has always felt important to me to apply my research findings to my own life. My research consistently showed that once basic needs are met, having more money is only weakly related to happiness and well-being, relative to other things such as relationships, health (mental and physical), and our personality characteristics. Taking this on board, I have decided not to take better paying jobs or strive for promotion (one of my first ever published papers demonstrated that promotion can have detrimental effects on one's mental health) for the sake of it. Instead, I tried to create a life where I had more space to focus on those aspects of life I knew to be the most important for well-being.

Another important contributor to our well-being is something psychologists term authenticity. Authenticity reflects our tendency to live in line with our beliefs and values rather the demands of others, of society. So in following what I believed to be true from the research I and others were doing I was doubly rewarded; I was happier.

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Nonetheless, the longer I spent in academia the more I began to question the wider relevance of my research. I began to realise that a lot of debates around happiness could sometimes be shockingly misleading such as the extent that money can buy happiness – which too often gets overstated. Gazing out beyond the academic world, I saw a society that seems to act, whether consciously or not, as if the most important thing is to keep the economy perpetually growing, regardless of the ill effects that endless consumption has on the planet and people's mental health.

I felt despondent. What was the point in writing another academic paper? Perhaps, I thought, I ought to be doing something a bit different. Not only to rediscover meaning and purpose, but to continue striving for an authentic existence and, through that, perhaps a little more happiness too. It was then that I finally decided that it was time to leave my full-time job at the university and to start my cycling odyssey to Bhutan.

A kingdom of happiness

We might not hear about them very often, but there are actually many places in the world where economic growth is not so overtly favoured above other things. It might be just a few people who have decided to live together and put their well-being above economic gain; there are small communities, towns and cities already doing this. But in the case of an entire country – Bhutan – the stated central aim of government is to increase happiness and well-being.

In 1972, the fourth king of Bhutan, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, first expressed the idea in an interview. He said: "Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross Domestic Product." Initially, Gross National Happiness was a concept rooted in the country's spiritual traditions, and government policies would be evaluated based on their supposed influence on well-being rather than its economic effect.

Back in 1972, however, there was little in the way of reliable metrics to compute the influence of a policy on well-being. So the idea of increasing happiness remained more of a philosophical concept. Nevertheless, the happiness concept became embedded in the policy-making process. Some of the decisions that arose from this approach included a ban on television (up until 1999), making tobacco illegal, and restricting tourism to preserve the country's culture.



Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the fourth King of Bhutan (right) and the current king, his son, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck (left). Gelay Jamtsho / flickr, CC BY-NC-SA

The Bhutanese have since developed a **Gross National Happiness Index** to measure the country's collective level of well-being – this has been the government's goal since its constitution was enacted in 2008. The index has direct links to policy making and it is meant to provide incentives for the government, non-governmental organisations, and businesses to operate in ways that increase the happiness index. For example, environmental protection is enshrined in its constitution, which puts a limit on profitable industries such as logging.

Yet Bhutan is by no means the happiest place on Earth, despite its focus on happiness. Finland topped the UN's 2018 World Happiness Report and Bhutan came in at 97 out of 156 countries. A number of factors are at play here, but Bhutan has been criticised for having a top-down focus on what constitutes happiness. It also suffers from considerable poverty, human rights abuses and many other issues that numerous countries face.

Nevertheless, the case of Bhutan continues to inspire conversations as to what should be the purpose of society and how countries can measure success. Bhutan also illustrates what might just be possible if there were the political will.

The journey, not the destination

Against this backdrop, I set off from the UK in October 2017 with the barest of essentials packed onto a bicycle and my route, you might say, has been circuitous. As I write I am in Canada, and it was important for me to travel across South and North America, as I wanted to pass through other places that, much like Bhutan, are exploring new ways of living and where the economy does not necessarily dominate political and social life.

In Costa Rica, for example, there's a real emphasis on "pura vida" or the pure life. Citizens live long and happy lives (comparable to that of financially rich countries) on levels of income that are much lower. I met many a living example of what I'd seen in the research – happiness that comes from relationships, good health, and being in connection with ourselves and nature. Once basic needs are met, money adds little to well-being and I met many people with not very much; but enough to be able to help me as I passed through their village or town on my bicycle.

I also wanted to visit Canada, which has an exemplary national index of well-being that was developed in conjunction with citizens. It was developed as a bottom-up process with clear and direct links to policy. From a research perspective we know that autonomy and having a voice is important for well-being and I have learnt from personal experience how important it is to feel heard.

And, of course, there were many places in between that I wanted to visit that felt important to help me understand happiness more deeply: communities intent on happiness, natural wonders of the world, and various cities with something to contribute.

I've flown some of the way (across oceans) but cycled most of it in a bid to make the journey authentic and purposeful. Not only did I think cycling would be good for my own well-being (physical and mental) but because it is a form of travel that has minimal ecological impact and therefore would not harm the well-being of those around me. Plus, my experiences travelling on a bicycle before I began this journey showed me that it is a fantastic way to meet people. It is a fairly unusual form of travel in some parts of the world and it draws interest and builds connections.



Life on a bike. Christopher Boyce, CC BY-ND

People can often make a place. I knew that the people I met would form an important part of my trip and I wanted to create long lasting connections, which are of course an important component of a happy life. These connections have come through sharing experiences of what it means to be happy – sharing my own research and personal experiences of happiness and also being willing to hear about the experiences of others, from the people I have met in the street and the plazas to the people making policy decisions.

There are many people who are interested in implementing programmes and happiness policies into their own lives and the lives of others as a means to genuinely promote happiness and well-being in the area where they live.

When I spoke with people involved in policy decisions in Costa Rica, for example, we discussed the country's involvement in the **Wellbeing Economy Alliance**. This is an organisation that resembles the G7 group of countries, but rather than a focus on the size of the economy, these countries – including Costa Rica, Scotland, New Zealand and Slovenia, among others – aim to promote well-being.

Overcoming challenges

My journey has been undeniably amazing on a personal level. Each day can bring something different, unexpected, challenging, and that demands a lot psychologically. Suddenly I might find myself in the home of a person I met in a plaza sharing food with their family. The next day I could find myself sitting in my tent alone but in the company of a beautiful night sky. There have been some truly special moments and, through these, I have often felt happy and learnt many interesting things about myself. For example, that I am **much more than just an academic**, and that sometimes what we perceive ourselves to be can limit what we can be.

Yet it has not been easy, and has definitely not been a holiday. My journey has involved a substantial amount of physical effort and at times deep challenge. About two months into my trip I got bitten by a street dog in a tiny village in Peru. The need to deal with the physical effects aside (treating the wound, getting to a hospital, getting vaccinations), the experience really affected me psychologically.



The journey's not always been easy. Christopher Boyce, CC BY-ND

I wanted to come home. I was struggling to find the emotional strength I needed to get through. I felt alone. But I persevered and I put my ability to do so down to eventually finding the support I needed (both locally and from back home), as well as having that clear sense of purpose.

I'm glad I persevered with the journey as all the other experiences I've since that incident and the people I have met have been enormously enriching and given me a greater feeling of wholeness. Plus, an important part of happiness is dealing with adversity and building resilience for when difficult things happen, as they inevitably do.

Now, I'm in Canada and, in truth, I'm surprised I've made it this far. I often wonder whether I'll ever actually make it to Bhutan; there are many more mountains to climb and seas to cross. Lately, I've been having a difficult time on the road – it's been a year and I deeply miss the surroundings of home, friends and family.

Maybe I don't actually need to go all the way to Bhutan. Maybe what I've done is enough. Either way, I can rest assured that happiness is found in the journey – not the destination.

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