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Well-Being: The Heart of Being Human, the Art of Being Whole

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Health is a state of well-being and the capability to function in the face of changing circumstances.

—NH Citizens Health Initiative and Healthy UNH

It was late on a hot August evening. We had finished supper and it was not, yet, dark, so my husband, two children and I set out to take a short walk in our neighborhood. As we were returning home the moon, an enormous orange-gold ball, appeared on the eastern horizon. The dusky sky was still a pale shade of blue with Venus the only other visible light. The trees stood silently, their silhouettes looking like black filigree against the diminishing light. The air was so clear one could see the contours and craters of that stunning orb with unusual clarity. For almost an hour the four of us watched in quiet amazement as the dazzling moon rose slowly and impressively into the night sky.

Later, upon returning home, as we tucked our children into bed, Emma, then six years old, her eyes still shining with joy from the experience, said, “Oh mama, I don’t think I’ve ever seen such a beautiful moon, so big and full. It made my heart feel full just to see it.” Indeed, I too had felt a “full heart” at the exquisite beauty of that moonrise and felt grateful that my young child could feel such joy and wonder. As we turned to leave the room, our ever questioning four year old, Zachary, asked, “do you think the moon was as happy to see us?” Then he smiled and said, more to himself than to us, “I think so,” and closed his eyes in peaceful slumber.ⁱ

It is a scene repeated many times...an experience of awe, a response of joyful gratitude, a deeply felt sense of connection and belonging. Such encounters are often the source of inspiration for artists and writers and provide opportunity to experience a moment of human awareness that can fill one with a deep sense of peace, contentment, and well-being. Even as you read this essay, I invite you to pause and consider when you have had such an experience. What places or circumstances fill you with wonder or awe? In what ways do such experiences add to your sense of peace or well-being?

Though such awareness can arise in a variety of settings, nature often provides an endless source of such healing calm. Poet Wendell Berry describes finding peaceful well-being in the midst of his own frantic and harried life.

When despair for the world grows in me
And I wake in the night at the least sound
In fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be,
I go and lie down
Where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water,
And the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
Who do not tax themselves with forethought of grief.
I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day blind stars
Waiting with their light

For a time I rest in the grace of the world,
And am free.ⁱⁱ

Most of us know about despair. We look out at a world of increasing environmental degradation, global economic crisis, devastating poverty, terrorism, and the challenges and struggles of our own daily lives. The resulting stress and anxiety can be overwhelming. We do wake in the night with worry and we do fear what the future holds for us, whether it is concern over a job when we complete our education, or if there will even be a livable planet in 40 years. In a nation that enjoys one of the highest standards of living we do not seem to match that with high levels of happiness or personal satisfaction. In fact, many studies report that Americans have much higher rates of depression than their counterparts around the world. According to noted psychotherapist Bruce Levine, this may be due to an extremist

consumer culture that breeds discontent, coupled with medical and therapeutic definitions of what constitutes “health” that are far too limited and limiting.ⁱⁱⁱ Despite a high standard of living many suffer from deep feelings of alienation and despair. One study suggests that this reality stands in stark contrast to that of some of the poorest nations in the world. Nigeria, a nation plagued with rampant poverty, AIDS, and civil strife, is used illustratively on this very point, as their rates of depression are significantly lower than in the United States. Reflecting on this very study in an article about the psychological and spiritual importance of community and sense of belonging, Gregory Boyd comments,

A major difference (between the Nigerians and Americans) has to do with a sense of community. Nigerians generally know they need one another. They don’t have the luxury of trying to live solo, even if they have the inclination to do so. Consequently, they tend to have a sense of belonging that most American’s lack and this provides them with a general satisfaction in life, despite the hardships they endure. Many studies have shown that personal happiness is more closely associated with the depth of one’s relationships and what one invests in others than it is with the comforts one “enjoys.”^{iv}

If Boyd and others analyzing the data are correct, the challenge facing us today in regard to creating patterns of health and well-being within our own lives and communities, may involve intentionally derailing the myth of the consumer culture that claims money can bring happiness and well-being, and instead reclaiming and revaluing the human capacity to experience awe, gratitude, and to create meaningful connections. In the midst of these changing and challenging times, does higher education, itself, have a particular role in helping to derail some of the destructive aspects of consumer culture, and instead promote a more holistic concept of well-being that includes humans and the natural world? Could even the learning community of UNH be a place that promotes the values of awe, wonder, compassion, mystery, curiosity, not as something separate from its educational goals, but as an integral aspect of what it means to become an educated and contributing member of society? Once again, even as you read and seek to digest this essay, I invite you to pause and consider how you experience these issues. What causes despair to arise within you? How would you rate yourself as far as happiness and personal life satisfaction? What experiences bring you peace and a sense of belonging? Do you

believe these themes have relevance within higher education? Within your own life?

Pulling our selves free from a worldview that sees nature exclusively as resource, with life’s goal being to acquire and accumulate, will be no small task. Most of us have inherited a very particular way of viewing the world, nature, ourselves, even the concept of “community.” The American Dream has become one that focuses on getting and having, to the extent that we are now jeopardizing human health and that of our planet. Depression, heart disease, obesity, cancers, other physical and mental health issues are increasingly viewed as by-products of lives that have become out of balance. And that lack of balance has also led to planetary distress in the form of global climate change, the extinction of species, and an increasingly toxic environment. In response to the negative consequences of consumer culture there is a growing movement aimed to restore balance to our lives and to the planet through a shift toward more holistic and sustainable patterns of living. In the groundbreaking book, *Beyond the Limits: Confronting Global Collapse, Envisioning a Sustainable Future*, the authors acknowledge the urgent need to reclaim a deeper sense of what it means to be human and what truly brings health and wholeness. They challenge the perceived human need for cars and clothes and evermore “stuff,” and instead claim that humans need respect and meaning, experiences of beauty, joy, love and a sense of community,^v if we are to find sustaining and sustainable patterns for the future.

The simple story at the beginning of this essay becomes more than just a mother’s tender tale, but may provide a valuable illustration of what these times invite us to be about as we reclaim the heart of being human and the art of being whole. For the story reminds us that the ability to feel awe and wonder is not taught, but is intrinsic to our nature. Czech playwright, former dissident, politician, and respected world leader, Vaclav Havel refers to this as an awareness of the “Miracle of Being,” the human capacity to experience the sheer wonder of life and be filled by the miracle of existence. Retired UNH Philosophy and Religious Studies professor, Dr. Paul Brockelman, in the same spirit as Havel and six-year old Emma, has written extensively about amazement at the jaw-dropping reality of the universe and the ways such experiences can move one to a profound level of gratitude and feeling a part of that larger reality that is life itself.^{vi} And it is that experience of gratitude, the heart-filling sense of appreciation and connection that may be one of our most valuable assets in the quest for well-being and wholeness. “Gratitude

theory” as articulated by psychologists Dr. Robert Emmons and Dr. Michael McCollough states that gratitude can actually lead to good health as it decreases feelings of depression, fear, stress, bitterness, sadness, while helping increase enthusiasm, problem-solving abilities, optimism, and even a better night’s sleep. Their 2004 study involved participants keeping track of their experiences of gratitude and indicates that gratitude has far-reaching implication in regard to health and wellness.^{vii}

The moonrise story also provides an example of the ways we humans are not merely observing nature or our environment, but are intimately connected to it. When the child’s mind envisioned the moon experiencing happiness, he demonstrated a way of viewing nature in an “I-thou,” rather than an “I-it,” relationship (Martin Buber). Such a shift is not insignificant as it places humans in an entirely different context, no longer outside of nature, but truly embedded within and at home in the natural world. Geologist and priest, Thomas Berry refers to this as moving from viewing the natural world as a “collection of objects,” to experiencing the natural world as a “communion of subjects.”^{viii} No longer isolated or alienated from the natural world, the human comes to experience himself or herself as part of a larger, living reality, truly part of a community out of which a deep sense of belonging, satisfaction and peace can arise.

As you conclude your reading of this essay, once more I invite you to consider the role that gratitude plays in your life? Do you note, with appreciation, the vast, vault of blue on an early autumn day, as you look skyward? Do you allow yourself to be “filled” by the alluring call of the geese as they fly toward warmer climes? Does nature serve as the backdrop for your own existence, or the interconnected web that makes your own life and health possible? How might such awareness shape your day or add to your sense of connection and belonging?

Within higher education, indeed within our culture at large, there remains a long history of devaluing the very human capacities this essay seeks to name and celebrate. Descartes’ well-known words, “I think, therefore

I am,” were a break-through that placed new emphasis on the human capacity to think rationally, and has been a defining concept in our understanding of the “educated” person. His understanding, however, does not make room for many other essential qualities that not only bring meaning and texture to life, but also are intrinsic aspects of being a whole and educated person. “I feel therefore, I am.” “I love, therefore I am.” “I experience awe and wonder, therefore I am.” These concepts allow human beings, indeed, well-being itself, to be described and defined in increasingly holistic and dynamic ways. As we think about what it means to create health and well-being in our lives and communities, how might awe, gratitude and a deepening sense of community add to the discussion. Indeed, how might they add to our experience of life itself?

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