



GEN Z AND THE SELF: CRACKING THE HAPPINESS FORMULA

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Thank you very much for your kind words, and especially for the invitation to join you. Having the chance to talk with you today is, for me personally, a real privilege.

So, today we'll talk about happiness. My goal for the next forty minutes is to see whether there might be a recipe for achieving happiness – a formula that, if not infallible, could at least be effective. More specifically, I'd like to explore whether your generation has its own formula for happiness – one that differs from that of previous generations, like mine, for instance.

Unfortunately, although I'm a proud father of a member of Gen Z – or "Zed," as you might prefer to say – I must admit that I don't know the answer to this question. So, what I intend to do is something a bit less ambitious: I'd like to share a few reflections on the pursuit of happiness in our time and offer them to you as a stimulus for your own thoughts. If these reflections serve as a starting point for your personal thinking on the topic, I'll consider myself completely satisfied.

Perhaps, though, I should begin by addressing those of you who don't believe that there can be any formula for happiness – the disillusioned, who think that lasting personal well-being simply doesn't exist and that it's better to settle for more modest goals in order not to risk disappointment. Well, that's a reasonable objection. I don't deny it – perhaps it's even too reasonable. It's the sort of opinion you'd expect more from an older, seasoned person than from someone young.

But people's attitude toward happiness, and toward the very possibility of happiness in life, is also a matter of mood, temperament, and the most basic feelings – whether you feel at home in the world or not, whether the world seems to you a good place to live or more like a kind of hell. Such feelings may depend on our earliest experiences, so it's unlikely that reasoning alone,

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however convincing, can change them. Still, to involve even the disbelievers in this conversation, I'll try at least to whet their curiosity.

I suppose you already know, without me pointing it out, that most people around you are pursuing happiness. They believe that it's possible to be happy in this life – and this belief is supported everywhere:

- in pop songs,
- in mainstream movies,
- in novels,
- in advertisements,
- and even, or perhaps especially, in the videos and posts we scroll through on social media, overflowing with happy people who often parade their happiness quite shamelessly.

If you think about it, the fact that so many people today believe they have a natural right to pursue happiness is actually a good sign. It shows that our society has reached a stage of development where, for most people, the main concern is no longer survival but living well. It's no longer about being, but about well-being.

But what's the difference between living and living well? Between being and well-being? That's what I want to explore today.

Intuitively, to live, to exist, means satisfying basic needs: having a home, enough food, a decent job, security. But what does it mean to live well?

If we judge by what we see – often with a bit of envy – on social media, happiness seems to mean fulfilling as many desires as possible. Happy people are those who can satisfy most of their wishes. For example:

- You might wish to go on vacation as often as possible.
- Not to have to get up early for school or work.
- To move somewhere beautiful, maybe exotic, where you can do something unusual – dive in a tropical sea or ski off-piste in the Alps.
- To go to the concert of your favourite musician and perhaps be called on stage to dance.

Or, more generally, to celebrate your personal successes – in school, at work, in sport – or share joyful moments with friends and loved ones.

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These are all familiar desires: wanting to live without stress, but also to experience excitement and adventure; wanting to excel, to stand out, to be admired – and to receive praise or likes, even from people you don't know.

And of course, we can easily understand the joy of those who achieve these things – successful people. Human desires, after all, seem to be obvious facts of our inner life. They arise spontaneously – we simply find ourselves desiring. There's nothing mysterious about wanting to travel, to be rich, to live a life of comfort.

And, as was mentioned earlier, the fulfilment of desires is also a fact of the world. Success happens – getting into a famous football team, for instance – but so do failures.

Our challenge, then, is to find a way to bring together these two facts—our desires and reality – in order to achieve happiness. On the one hand, we have our desires: to succeed, to be admired, to be wealthy. On the other, we have the world as it is. We must strive, work hard, and persist until desire and reality meet. Keep dreaming, stay hopeful. Stay hungry – keep desiring. Stay foolish – keep believing in your eventual success. We must trust that it won't rain during the vacation, that the exam will go well, that the person we like will say yes. One could say that reconciling desire and life is half a technical problem and half a matter of luck.

If that really were the case, we'd have cracked the happiness formula – and I could end my talk here. The steps would be simple:

- Know what you want.
 - Create the conditions to fulfil your desires.
- Result: lasting well-being – a happy life.

That's the fairy-tale recipe: "And they lived happily ever after."

But, sadly, things don't usually work that way. Why not? That's the second idea I'd like to explore. Why does such a brilliant formula fail in the end? Everything seems fine in theory, yet it just doesn't work.

The problem lies, as you might guess, in how our desires actually function. It's not at all clear that the ultimate goal of our actions is the *fulfilment* of our desires. Do we really want to stop desiring? Sometimes desire seems to have a

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life of its own – its true aim is not satisfaction or peace, but its own renewal. A kind of perpetual motion.

If our desires exist mainly to save us from boredom or dissatisfaction, then our real goal isn't happiness but distraction – an endless change of state. The 17th-century Spanish Jesuit Baltasar Gracián once wrote, "There must always be some unfulfilled desire if we are not to be unhappy in our happiness."

That's a paradox, of course – how can we be unhappy in our happiness? But it's an important one, because it reminds us that we can achieve all our desires and still be unhappy. Perhaps that's because the desires we think are ours are not really our own. Why do we crave success, wealth, or fame? How can we be sure that we don't desire them simply because others do—out of imitation, out of conformity? How do we know which desires are truly ours?

Think of it this way: wanting to be rich isn't the same as wanting to be fulfilled. Wanting to be rich often just means wanting to go on desiring endlessly – a state of permanent wishing.

Can that really be the formula for happiness – an endless stimulation of desire?

Take the desire to be somewhere else, for example. That's a very common one. You might long to be somewhere else, like in a place where you were once happy. But as soon as that place becomes familiar, the pleasant feeling fades and restlessness returns. We become a mystery to ourselves.

This longing for elsewhere is so common that it's been captured in many pop songs. For my generation, for instance, Luca Carboni's *Mare Mare* tells of a man who dreams of the Riviera but, once there, wants to be somewhere else. The Beatles' *Nowhere Man*, Tracy Chapman's *Fast Car*, Bruce Springsteen's *Born to Run* – they all describe this same human condition.

Philosophers, since ancient times, have warned against it. In early Western philosophy, Socrates challenged Callicles' idea that happiness means having every possible desire and fulfilling it. Socrates compared this to being a pierced jar that can never be full, or a mythical bird that can never satisfy its hunger, or someone who keeps scratching an itch endlessly. The idea is simple: too many pleasures can become an obstacle to happiness.

There's a funny scene in Zerocalcare's animated series *Strappare lungo i bordi* (*Tear Along the Dotted Line*), where the main character goes crazy trying to

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choose a movie on Netflix, then gives up, wondering if something is wrong with him. Of course, there isn't – it's just human nature. This endless searching, from Plato to Netflix, is part of who we are.

So, to sum up so far: we thought we'd found the formula for happiness – recognize your desires (step one) and fulfil them (step two) – but it doesn't work, because knowing our desires isn't easy. They're constantly changing.

How can we escape this confusing situation? That's a question for a philosopher.

As a philosopher, I'd like to try to give you an answer. A life without desire wouldn't be attractive either. Some philosophers might argue, "Give up your body – in a sense, renounce desire altogether." Yet, if we want to preserve the idea of happiness as something meaningful, it seems unreasonable to separate happiness on the one hand and desire on the other. In his exchange with Socrates, Callicles perceptively likens such a state to that of a stone or a corpse. Happiness without desire would be lifeless. After all, happiness is fullness, vitality. And fullness presupposes its opposite – lack.

Let's go back to that scene from *Strappare lungo i bordi*. The protagonist desperately searches for a movie to watch but refuses to watch the second season of his favourite show, *Sense8*, because he wants to save it for a special moment. So the movie he's looking for becomes a substitute for the "true" desire. The funny thing is that he's postponing fulfilment forever, trying to preserve the special nature of his happiness.

Why do we do that – distinguish between "true" and "ordinary" desires?

Often, we're advised to find an anchor in life – a heavier, deeper desire among all the lighter ones. Socrates would agree. He tried to show Callicles that pleasure and good are not the same thing – that we can and must distinguish between good and bad pleasures, between what is merely pleasant and what is genuinely valuable.

The real challenge, then, is not simply to recognize our desires, but to discern which of them truly matter. Cracking the happiness formula now seems increasingly tied to this task: Which desires are genuinely good for us? Which lead to fulfilment rather than emptiness?

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How can you know, for instance, whether your desire to be admired by your friends or to become rich will really bring you closer to happiness?

It's not an easy question. Some people believe that self-denial or altruism – the sacrifice of one's own interest for others – is the best path to happiness. Others believe that happiness lies in doing one's duty, being able to go to bed proud of having done what was right.

I don't deny that these are noble paths. And although I was raised with similar values, I'm no moral saint. I've always looked for happiness – and the formula behind it – within the experience of being happy itself. So, what I'll say to conclude my talk comes from the perspective of someone who has sought happiness in the ordinary sense: by trying to fulfil my desires in this life.

For me, happiness is something that happens to you. You experience it first-hand and then try to understand it from within – not the other way around.

When happiness happens, it changes your relationship with reality, and that's its most fascinating aspect. You become more alert, more receptive. The American writer Ralph Waldo Emerson once said that a happy person is like a "transparent eyeball" – all-seeing, all receptive. Another good image is musical: happiness is resonance. A happy person vibrates in harmony with the world.

Happiness, then, is like something opening inside us—like springtime, like the month we are experiencing today, the month of April. The word *April* comes from the Latin *aperire*, "to open." Happiness makes us blossom.

But how can we know whether this resonance with the world is something substantial, something essential?

Like everyone, I've had many desires in my life that felt essential, only to dissolve over time, leaving little behind except faint memories. Yet one bond, present since childhood, has never faded: my connection with the mountains. I wasn't born there – my parents were – but I spent every summer of my childhood in the Dolomites, and the mountains somehow shaped me.

What strikes me about this story is the effect that the mountain landscape has had on my desires. The mountains were never an explicit object of desire for me; they were simply a familiar presence, slipping into my inner life without my noticing. One could even say they *colonized* my desires, transforming them

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until, in the end, they came to *own* them. I didn't possess them – if anything, they possessed me.

But what kind of value is one that doesn't depend on your desire, yet shapes it? My idea is that the desire leading you into a resonant relationship with the world is valuable as such – valuable precisely because it shapes your actual desires. It changes you for the better, transforming your desires and, ultimately, helping you become who you truly are, even if you didn't know yourself before.

So the familiar notion that the first step to happiness is knowing yourself is more complicated than it seems. It's not a matter of will alone, but of the experiences you undergo – experiences that guide and shape your desires in ways you may not have anticipated.

Personally, I feel the mountains act as a kind of magnifying glass, helping me to see things about myself and the world that I barely understand. Marcel Proust said something similar about books – that when we read, we actually read ourselves. I would say: when you go to the mountains, the mountains, in a way, come to you.

If mountains can be books, for me they are like an encyclopedia of human existence. The mountain environment, with all its variety – from snow-capped peaks to forests, from rocky cliffs to meadows – reveals to me the essentials of the human condition. The summits of life, but also its lowest valleys, abundance and scarcity, calm and storm, belonging and alienation, harmony and dissonance, ascent and descent. This, to me, is resonant happiness – a way of being in tune with the world in all its complexity.

Happiness is not just a reflection of ourselves; it's an opening to a wider space of meaning. It transforms us, heals us, enlarges us.

So, for me, "cracking the happiness formula" meant recognizing my truest desires not *within* myself, but *outside* myself – in a place. That was the gift of the mountains: they opened a wider space of meaning, where a happy self exists, but is not the centre of everything. This happy self is, in a sense, distributed – it is not contained within you, but extends outwards. The self becomes both the centre and the boundary of your sphere of happiness. A place – whether mountains, sea, or anything with which you enter a resonant relationship – has the power to decentre and re-centre you at once. For me,

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the mountains did exactly this: they helped me move beyond my desire, while revealing my truest desire.

And that, I believe, is the surprising and healing effect of happiness.

I don't know if this confession—this reasoned testimony—will be useful to you. Maybe it will even make sense to Gen Z. Perhaps you too are looking for your mountains, your wider space of meaning. I hope so. Because if that's the case, our conversation doesn't end here—it continues.

Thank you for your patience and for following me so far.

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