



DESPERATELY SEEKING SATISFACTION

HOW IS IT WE CAN “HAVE IT ALL” AND STILL FEEL UNSATISFIED WITH OUR LIVES?
FIND OUT HOW TO USE YOUR LONGING TO CREATE LASTING SUCCESS.

By CAT THOMPSON

These days, dissatisfaction seems to be swallowing us whole. While standing in checkout lines, having dinner in a restaurant or waiting for coffee, I can't help but overhear the conversations around me. More often than not, these conversations are filled with everything that's missing. We are not satisfied with our work, our love lives, our bodies, our options. We are not satisfied with the quality of our lives. And the more energy we spend trying to achieve satisfaction, the more elusive it seems to become.

What's going on? Why are we — people who enjoy the most affluent lifestyles in recent history — so unhappy with what we have?

ELUSIVE BLISS

One reason satisfaction often eludes us is that from an early age we are far more educated in the experience of being dissatisfied. The strongest, most consistent messages most of us hear about achieving satisfaction are delivered chiefly by the media. The whole role of consumer advertising is to create desire and cultivate a constant, low-level state of dissatisfaction that keeps us striving to possess more things. And of course, the ads themselves are wrapped around the fantasy lives delivered by television, movies, fashion and celebrity magazines. These people look satisfied, and even though their circumstances are often unrealistic (think about the size of the Manhattan apartments depicted on the TV show *Friends*) they are held out as models for what we should want to achieve.

So we keep emulating, keep shopping, keep striving, keep searching for the joyful feeling that comes from being satiated and full to the brim. We try to fill the holes of our dissatisfaction with the latest self-help books, the latest diets, the latest rejuvenation techniques. We change jobs, change lovers, change clothes. We try harder. And still, satisfaction eludes us like some slippery, ethereal Shangri-La.

DEFINING OUR DESIRES

How many of us truly know what would satisfy us? Can you make a list that you could hand to another person and say “Here, get this for me and I will be satisfied.”? We might run for the pen and paper saying yes, yes, yes — a new car, a bigger house, a new girlfriend, a different job — yet so many of us, after years of struggling hard to actually get those things, find ourselves no more satisfied than before.

It seems that for as much as we all desire satisfaction, we don't understand it particularly well. So let's start by looking at what satisfaction really is. The dictionary lists the following definitions:

- 1. the feeling of pleasure that comes when a need or desire is fulfilled.
- 2. the fulfillment of a need, claim or desire.
- 3. happiness with the way something has been arranged or done.
- 4. the assurance that something has been fully explained or settled.
- 5. compensation for an injury or loss.

This turns out to be a pretty rich vein of material. The first few definitions, of course, are the ones we usually associate with satisfaction: A feeling of pleasure that comes when a need, claim or desire is fulfilled; happiness with the way something has been done or arranged. Satisfaction, evidently, is first and foremost a feeling of emotional completion.

Next, let's consider the definitions involving “the assurance that something has been fully explained or settled” and “the compensation for an injury or loss.” Hmm, we're now getting into some deeper shades and layers — those concerning values of fairness and justice, of making things right.

The satisfaction of a food craving, clearly, will not produce the same feeling as the satisfaction that comes from having something fully explained. One thing satisfies my →

body; the other satisfies my mind. A satisfaction that compensates for an injury or loss may touch me even more deeply — at a soul level, or at the point of my deepest convictions about what is right and wrong.

Can you place the difference between these different feelings of satisfaction? Which register most powerfully for you? Try to identify some sources of personal longing and completion in each of these different categories of satisfaction. Where does your body register and file those feelings? How do they motivate you?

It might help you to imagine the experience of eating something delicious or getting a great hug from someone you love. How does that feel in your body? Next, imagine the satisfaction that comes from finally knowing or understanding something you have been puzzling or worrying about for months. Consider the satisfaction of receiving a sincere apol-

important. They are, because often they are waypoints — stops along the legs of our journey that show us how to move through our lives with integrity. We are meant to hone ourselves by learning to direct our energy in the service of our desires, but as we grow sharper and stronger, we're also meant to strive deeper, to go after the more value-oriented, soul-serving forms of satisfaction. When we do this, we discover a far deeper sense of completion. It's only when we get caught up in thinking of the small waypoints as ultimate destinations — when we refuse to go deeper with our goals — that lasting satisfaction seems always beyond our reach.

DEEPENING THE DESTINATION

So how do we get a grip on lasting satisfaction? What is a worthy destination? These goals look and feel different for each of us, of course, and will depend on our own sense of

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ogy or compensation from someone who wronged you in the past, or of putting right some situation that matters to you.

Obviously, these different feelings of satisfaction feed us in different ways. But how many individual pieces and kinds of satisfaction does it take to make a satisfying life? More importantly, is true satisfaction even possible?

FINDING OUR WAY

I suspect that much of our chronic dissatisfaction originates from a lack of evolution in our desires. A more comfortable home, a new job, a buff body — all of these things are important personal achievements, but they are designed, I think, to help us grow toward a still bigger desire and greater capacity: To make a difference in the world around us. As we fulfill small desires, we are supposed to learn things about ourselves: what makes us tick, what energizes and inspires us, what we need to create our dreams, and what we don't.

Ultimately, true, lasting satisfaction is only achieved when it is in the service of our deepest values and convictions. Our more superficial longings for ephemeral things can put us on the path toward empowering ourselves and becoming aware of our larger goals — but if we get too ensnared and obsessed with small satisfactions, they can also totally distract us.

That is not to say our smaller goals and desires are not



personal mission and vision. Generally, though, I would say the key is service.

On some level, most of us have a desire to be of service. It is inherent in our humanity. Without a feeling of contributing to the benefit of the whole (whether that be to our family, our work group, our community or our planet), our personal satisfactions tend to lack substance. Seeking satisfaction through service allows us to see our personal strengths and powers magnified. It is also a powerful way of recognizing the help that we ourselves have received from

WHAT SATISFIES YOU?

The more intimately you understand the sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction in your own life, the more success you'll have creating satisfaction in effective, lasting and evolving ways. Use these exercises to get you started:

1) Make a quick list of the things or experiences that bring you satisfaction (e.g., three-day weekends, recognition for a job well done, a great piece of chocolate, purchasing a new piece of furniture, resolving a conflict, accomplishing a task, etc.). Then, ask yourself the following questions:

- Which of those things satisfy you fully in the moment?
- How long does that satisfaction for each of these things last?
- Is there a connection between the effort put forth and the satisfaction received?
- Which of your satisfactions are externally influenced, and which relate to deeply held values or convictions?

2) Make a list of the things in your life that you are dissatisfied with and ask yourself:

- How could you change these things?
- How might your life be different if you changed these things?
- Are a large number of your superficial dissatisfactions (new clothes, new car, etc.) related to larger, deeper dissatisfactions or unrepresented values (need to make Dad proud, need to prove I can be a success)?
- What minor dissatisfactions are standing in your way of achieving larger ones? Which can be bypassed, and which must be resolved before you can move forward?

others. Giving back to the whole is our way of keeping the circle turning.

It's important to note, though, that when it comes to the field of service, our current culture is highly imbalanced. On one side we have the belief that serving others first will bring us to personal satisfaction. This is not only false, but it is responsible for delivering a tremendous amount of pain, resentment and judgment along with the services we render.

Have you ever received "help" from someone who wasn't particularly happy or gracious? How about when your sister comes over to help you paint a bedroom, and then

complains the whole time because she really doesn't want to be there? Or when a co-worker offers to help you meet a deadline but then smugly reminds you of it every day for weeks on end? Whatever beliefs motivated these people to help you, it wasn't the spirit of true service. Rather, buried somewhere in their psyche, there was probably the notion that they would receive some sort of personal reward or "brownie points" by doing you a favor. This is a very different thing than the innate satisfaction that comes from sharing your gifts.

Gifts mixed with obligation, guilt or moral superiority almost always result in bitterness. So do personal successes that come through the filters of scarcity (the feeling of never having enough, or having "just enough" to get by). Success, by its very nature, implies abundance, and the truest satisfaction lies in sharing that abundance with those around us. Whether it is donating money to a charity, volunteering at the local food bank or helping mentor a younger person, true success and satisfaction come from giving back to the world not because we feel we must, but because we have already achieved an important desire; because we are overflowing and genuinely feel we have plenty to share.

BALANCING ACT

We must attain a certain amount of personal satisfaction in order to feel motivated to share our successes with others, but we must also share our success with others in order to be truly satisfied. Once we have achieved our desire, the ability to share our experience with others is a way of giving back. It helps those coming behind us, and it perhaps inspires others to take risks they wouldn't otherwise. But it also magnifies and deepens the pleasure we receive.

Full satisfaction generally comes in two stages: the first state is a personal satisfaction with the way we have accomplished/understood/achieved something; the second stage occurs in the subsequent sharing. If our personal success cannot be shared with others, it will not be nearly as satisfying and we may be left at the finish line hungry for something we cannot articulate.

The joy and happiness we generate from our achievements have a natural tendency to spill over and feed those around us. After all, what is the point of having a great job, a great lover, a great body except to be leading a great life? And how great can our life be if we are not connected to community and family and service — if we are not radiating and sharing the bounty we have and watching the pleasure it brings others?

If you've been achieving a great deal lately but not finding much satisfaction in your accomplishments, or if you've lately found yourself unmotivated to achieve much of anything, remember that achieving personal desires is not an end point. Rather, it is a place from which we move forward to serve the betterment of the whole.

In charting your goals for the coming New Year, ask yourself if your accomplishments stop at the limits of your personal success or if your vision carries you further — toward the deeper and more lasting satisfactions of contributing to the whole. ●

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