

Wisdom Sometimes Comes from Weird Places

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NMAIMH competencies addressed

- Observing and listening
- Maintaining perspective
- Contemplation
- Self-awareness
- Curiosity
- Emotional response

it. It was an article by Stephen Moegling entitled “What Kurt Vonnegut Taught Us about the Science of Happiness.” Being a fan of the author of *Slaughterhouse Five*, I was intrigued.

I approached this information with a different lens than many of you—that of a clinician in a related field, as a long-time behaviorist, trained as a psychologist, who worked with people with developmental disabilities and/or mental illness. I am also an artist, who intuitively gravitates to curious topics, craving to uncover another, not so obvious side of a story. Lately, one of those primary topics has been gratitude or being thankful. With all the uncertainty, unrest and divisiveness in today’s world, I want to look more closely at the flip side...what is “good” about these times. Is *anything* good about these times?

So, it turns out, the article was based on a book *Hardwiring Happiness* (Hanson, 2016). Curious, I had to find out more! The primary premise of this book involved the search for peace, contentment and love. By “taking in the good” one could—with consistent practice—rewire one’s brain to compensate for the brain’s tendency toward “negative bias.” (Hanson, 2016) It seems our brains do not retain positive memories as well as they do negative ones. Hanson goes on to explain the Velcro-Teflon experience of our memories. We tend remember things that are negative because we ruminate about the experience, so it clings to our brains like Velcro. We tend to brush off things that are positive, rather than relish them, so they slide off like Teflon.

The practice of “taking in the good” refers to times we make it a practice during our day to be present and attentive to the good and beautiful things around us—actively rating a positive experience and installing it into your brain. The article by Stephen Moegling goes on to note that Kurt Vonnegut’s words of wisdom helped one to accomplish this. He relates that he read an essay where Vonnegut told a story about his uncle who encouraged him to take in the good moments. Vonnegut writes, quoting his uncle: “I urge you to please notice when you are happy, and exclaim or murmur or think at some point, ‘If this isn’t nice, I don’t know what is’” (Moegling, 2016).

In his book, Dr. Hanson goes on to say that most of us don’t stay with positive experiences long enough for them to be “encoded” into our brain’s neural structure. In other words, if you let a moment of

happiness pass without being intentional about taking it in, it won't stay with you. Hanson goes on to say that one must hold these thoughts for a dozen seconds or more to "make it stick." A daily practice of recognizing and honoring positives—beauty, love, warm feelings, etc.—helps us to "take in the good."

So, in these intense and emotional times, look for and take in *the good*. Take time during your day to be impressed and amazed by what you see around you that beautiful, inspiring and amazing. Immerse yourself in the sight, sound and feeling of the experience. Make it stick. Say to yourself "if this isn't nice, I don't know what is," and hold that thought.

Questions to encourage discussion and reflection...

- During your day, did you take time to "take in the good?"
- What was that?
- How did it feel?

References/Additional Resources

Hanson, R. (2016) *Hardwiring happiness: The new brain science of contentment, calm, and confidence*. Harmony Books.

Moegling, S. (2016) What Kurt Vonnegut taught us about the science of happiness. *The Elephant Journal*. Elephantjournal.com