

## Phony baloney for our students?

May 17, 2015 by Daniel J. Bauer

The phrase “the secret to happiness” sounds so beguiling that we’ve a right to be skeptical about it. People may say there is such a secret, and they know what it is, but most of us probably shake our heads in wonder. We doubt anyone can tell us a secret such as that.

I am onto the question of happiness because of two sources: a quote I saw this week by Richard Layard in an article by Alex Renton, “Seeking to put a price on happiness,” and memories of a student I once knew. First, an anecdote about the student.

A young woman who has since graduated re-entered my life a few years ago in her senior year. She had taken two of my courses earlier for both semesters of her freshman year. That meant meeting each other in classes for 3 hours a week for an entire academic year. As I say, then she popped up in a different course three years later, in the final months of her college career.

As a freshman she had made a deep impression on me. I sensed an underlying restlessness about her, a lack of inner peace. For me, a lack of inner peace spells the word “unhappiness.”

As a freshman, this student often came late, or missed class entirely. She once went AWOL for three weeks. When with us, she was erratic. She’d participate some days, but most of the time I had to push her to open her mouth to say a word. Interestingly, she did not cotton to my efforts to help her improve her English language skills. She denied her English was fractured. She once accused me of lacking the objectivity to give her a fair grade. “You don’t approve of me,” she said. Gosh, but we had a rocky relationship, she and I.

Three years later came that final semester of her senior year. For me, it was a case of *déjà vu*.

When the late arrivals and late homework became regular, and the absences bothersome, a two week campus-approved activity in New York, for example, I began to worry. Then she sent an email, informing me of a plan to be absent two more weeks because of job training in Taipei. No word of request for permission. She simply said she’d be gone.

I told her that I was shocked. I asked questions, and she answered. She studied abroad as a junior, she said, and fallen behind on requirements in her Taiwan life. She wanted to “build a good resume.” She was taking 20 credits that semester, held a part-time job, was pressured by an internship downtown and weekly classes in Korean. She said all this in a breathless gush of email, sprinkled with her usual quota of English errors. Oh, and her job? She was an “on-line tutor for students of English.”

Richard Layard, author of “Happiness – Lessons From a New Science” (2005) speaks of a struggle nowadays between “the macho culture that puts more and more pressure on people to compete to get the better of each other, versus the ‘well-being’ movement, where people get satisfaction from what they contribute to other people.”

I believe we have in some ways sold phony baloney to our student population. We’ve convinced them (and perhaps ourselves) that appearances are far more important than reality. Stacks of credits are what count on a piece of paper, not deep knowledge of subjects adequately and carefully studied. Resumes look best when beautified with phrases about activities off campus which sparkle with titles, but may lack actual achievement. We applaud students who are “busy” and “accomplishing great things,” but do we ask them to analyze what their busyness gives them, and what the meaning of “great things” is? Do students sweating their “c.v.s” even know what those little letters mean? “Curriculum vitae” originates of course in the Latin term for “life.”

When we over-emphasize the urgency of competition (Layard above), we run the risk of losing sight of life. Too much focus on competition blinds people to the value of well-being. How much are our busiest of students truly learning about themselves and how to be happy? I really wonder. The memory of my former student haunts me.

I always thought the primary purpose of a university education is to give students the tools to live a full and happy life. One of the unhappiest students I ever met was the one whose year abroad and excess of impressive-sounding activities made such a shambles of her final year with us. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

## Talking points

1. The story of the unhappy student in this column suggests that "too many activities" outside of courses may cause problems and may even make students unhappy. Have you ever been unhappy because you are "too busy"?
2. What does it mean to be "too busy"? How do we know if we've become "too busy"? How much is "busy a-ok," and how much is "too busy!"?
3. The author here speaks of the difference between the goal of beating the COMPETITION in life, and searching for "well-being," or happiness in life by contributing to other people. Is competition good for you? Have you ever experienced "contributing to other people" in contrast to "competing with people"?

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