THE FEAR OF HAPPINESS:

Implications for Hypnotherapy

Abraham Levitsky, Ph.D.

San Francisco Gestalt Institute

References

Levitsky, A. The Concept of Existential Guilt. Unpublished manuscript, 1957.

Tillich, P. The Courage To Be. Yale University Press. New Haven, 1952.

Abstract

The fear of happiness is an extraordinary and paradoxical phenomenon which is nevertheless widespread and seemingly present in many neurotic constellations. This notion has important implications for techniques in hypnotherapy. Specifically, patients can benefit from dealing with negative, frustrating, and challenging situations in hypnotic fantasy. This provides an opportunity to confront the many-sidedness of life situations.

I am convinced that there is indeed such a thing as a fear of happiness. A strange and intriguing paradox! Since on the surface most people wish for and strive for a state of happiness, what in the world is there to be afraid of? Nevertheless, I observe this phenomenon over and over again and I believe it to play an important role in many neurotic constellations; perhaps in all.

I

We are all familiar both in ourselves and others with examples of being uncomfortable with varieties of "good things." Such incidents as inability to accept compliments; not being able to say good things about ourselves; depressions, big or small, following successful venture; biting the hand that feeds you; woefully poor choice of love objects, etc. The list is long and sadly familiar. Many of these actions fit in the category of that hallmark of neurosis--self-defeat. I have been led to employ the wry phrase "how to be happy though contented."

The phenomenon of being against one's very own self is also seen on a sociological level and it is also a commonplace observation that a negative self-image develops in entire social, cultural, and national groups. It is painfully obvious, for instance, in the case of Blacks and Jews. We see that large groups who are exposed to discrimination, to various hardships and difficulties, develop hate against themselves. Blacks call themselves niggers, jive-asses, etc. Jews, for all their outstanding cultural and historical achievements, are also famous for their very own antisemitism.

Traditions of self-mockery and wallowing in suffering develop even in entire nations. The Irish certainly have such a tradition. The spectacle of the Irishman crying in his beer, which he does rather literally, is such that

there is a huge literature depicting just that.

The attachment to suffering and melancholy crops up in rather unexpected places. For myself, I have been surprised and interested to see it in a great deal of western and cowboy music--what I have come to call the cowboy lament. Very commonly cowboy and country songs about love are about unrequited love; the loved one has done everything but what he wants. Now there is nothing inherently strange or neurotic about expressing in song or poem the pain and sadness of unrequited love. But it soon becomes evident, as one listens to these endless cowboy laments, that the pain and rejection are almost being celebrated and that the defeat is being worn rather as a medal of distinction. Particularly interesting is that the cowboy who, on the one hand has for us the image of the pioneer and he-man, also has built into him the psychodynamics of mournful self-lament.

II

Now of course we all know that the phenomenon of guilt plays a central role in most of these reactions. And it is hardly necessary to say much at this juncture about the incredible role in all of Western civilization, not only of guilt but of the whole doctrine of original sin. According to this doctrine, we do not merely learn or acquire sinful behavior, but the very nature of mankind is that we are born sinners. One of Jesus' great contributions is that he died for our sins, interceding with God to absolve us of our inherent badness. Obviously if human nature is defined as sinful or bad in its essence, experiences of pleasure and happiness will necessarily be fraught with conflict and fear.

The notion of inherent sin has been so pervasive and has such profound emotional impact, both consciously and unconsciously, that it is well worth

asking ourselves whether it is possible to arrive at some view of this matter which will have more appeal for our rational and scientific outlooks.

I have dealt with this question at some length in a former paper entitled "The Concept of Existential Guilt." I find it useful to apply some of the ideas developed there to my present analysis. In that paper I draw extensively on the work of the theologian Tillich. In his great work "The Courage To Be" (2), Tillich characterizes Christian doctrine as stating that man's essential nature is good but that this created goodness has been lost.

Certainly the doctrine of the fall and sin wrestles with deep human problems, but obviously we must demand a more tenable scientific formulation. We can hardly take seriously the idea that at a given historical moment the goodness of man was lost. Still we must acknowledge that the appeal of such a religious doctrine lies in its having appreciated a great conflict in the human psyche, and in its efforts--however primitive--to explain the source of the conflict.

With regard to the fall of man, specifically with regard to the myth of Adam and Eve, can we find some "scientific" interpretation of this most powerful myth which concerns itself with the very origins of man's social nature? In the story, man is given permission to eat of the tree of life, but he is forbidden to eat of the tree of knowledge. So what is the effect of eating of the tree knowledge? Can we find some "rational reason" in symbolic terms why eating of the tree should constitute a sin? Yes, in fact. Viewed from a certain angle we can sense that the acquisition of knowledge _is_ a sin, in a way, in that it leads to man's intelligence, his complex social structure, his capacity for enduring conflicting wishes, his perception of the numberless moral ambiguities which we know to be part of his social life. Thus, as a result of knowledge,

man is no longer a primitive, unreflective, animal-like being. He organizes himself into social groups, he acquires a code of ethics, and, in the act of regarding himself through the eyes of others, the human tragedy is conceived. He is no longer a unitary self, but a divided self. Man is now necessarily alienated from himself. Please note, in this last sentence the word "necessarily." In this particular analysis alienation is seen as a necessary condition, as a feature which is built into the very nature of social man no less than lungs are a part of the nature of biological man. This inner division is of the essence, i.e., existential.

It is apparent, therefore, that this most basic and inherent self-alienation is of a different order than the alienation of a particular individual from his surroundings, etc. I deal here with a kind of inner division which is ineradicable, which is not a neurotic symptom, not a learned behavior subject to re-learning or treatment, but a fact of our social natures which can only be acknowledged and--hopefully--confronted. It is a structure in the moral area akin to that of the difference between existential and neurotic anxiety. Neurotic anxiety is treatable; existential anxiety is only to be recognized. The same is true of existential guilt.

It should be apparent, from this analysis, why any doctrine which defines man as originally sinful or bad should have such a powerful appeal. The fact is, however, that man is _not_ originally sinful; he is simply subject to an inherent inner moral division, a condition quite different from sinfulness.

III

Let us now examine a number of psychological phenomena. One patient of mine gets headaches and anxiety attacks when things are going well. Another

young man evidently feels that he has to be in bad shape in order to get my attention. At one point he says, "You know, I have a terrible fear that I'm mentally defective." My reply is, "How about the even greater fear that you're not defective?"

And in a sense that is my entire theme: that to be able to accept oneself as not defective is frightening. Let me see if I can elaborate that a bit. In an interview with a professional colleague, I said to him, "It's frightening to believe you're okay."

"Why?" he asked.

I replied, "Well, look: right now you're isolated. If you decide you're okay, you'll go towards people. You'll take all of those risks which you now avoid. If you decide you're okay and you get angry, you'll raise your voice, express your feelings, and take risks which that behavior involves. In your current isolation, there hasn't been a woman in your life for some time. If you decide you're okay, you'll be more likely to be interested in women, with all of those risks. So not feeling okay has its advantages because you live within careful limits."

It is natural to wonder how this process starts; how does it develop? This question has been examined at great length in the psychoanalytic literature, and here I can only sketch it briefly. The basic notion relies on the Freudian concept of the repetition compulsion, a concept for which there is enormous evidence in therapeutic experience. Essentially this concept points to the following paradox in human development: that whatever obstacles to growth have been encountered in early development, there will be a curious, mysterious need or impulse to repeat or recreate a similar kind of frustration. Now on the surface that seems rather crazy.

You would think, looking at it naively, that if someone did something painful to you that's the last thing in the world you would seek out. However, it turns out, to put it graphically for the moment, that if someone repeatedly banged you on the head, you're gong to have a most curious tendency later on to produce someone else in your life who will bang you on the head. A strange contradiction. How does this function? What is the structure of this contradictory behavior?

It is well illustrated with the phenomenon of trust and mistrust. A female patient of mine was mistreated by her father and learned that men were not to be trusted. How does she deal with this in her therapeutic relationship with me? Obviously it would be very risky to trust me at the outset. If she lets go of the mistrust at a given moment she will take a step in which she does something new. She will reveal a new facet of her character, of her history, of her behavior. At the moment that she does that she cannot yet know what kind of reaction she will get; will I be sympathetic or rejecting? Supposing I am accepting? Her reservoir of trust is somewhat built up and she goes on to another step; perhaps she now takes an even bigger risk. The more trust she develops the more she is willing to behave spontaneously, to let go of old defenses, to make herself vulnerable.

Is it not plain that this is a very stressful process? If she lets go of mistrust with husband, lover, friend, therapist, she is repeatedly exploring frightening new areas of vulnerability. And so there is a very powerful built-in motive not to do that at all. If she can convince herself once and for all that I, the therapist, am not to be trusted then life becomes simpler for her. She could then say to herself, "Ah, see? Just as I thought. The conviction that I've had these many years, that men are not to be trusted, is quite correct.

He has let me down just as I thought he would. It is pointless now to take him seriously, to take my feelings seriously, to share myself with him, and to adventurously explore any and all areas of my life. I'll just get kicked in the teeth again. So that's the state of the world. That's what men are like. Now I don't have to face the frightening task of looking into myself, of examining what are _my_ fears of growth, what are my conflicts, _my_ shortcomings. I have now proved and re-proved what I have known for so long: you can't make it with men. Yes, perhaps this keeps me incomplete, but at least it keeps me safe."

And we observe over and over again how both men and women with this kind of trust conflict will select lovers whom they know (at an unconscious level) to be untrustable and by whom they will be betrayed in a manner resembling the original betrayal. They are employing the mechanism of externalization, a mechanism which I find to be so central in the neurotic structure. One arranges one's world, or one perceives one's world in such a way that the central conflict appears to be external to one's self. Thus one avoids the challenging task of looking within and of taking responsibility for one's very own fears and conflicts.

As pointed out above, if my female patient can prove to herself that I, like other men, am not to be trusted, she has simplified her life. This inability to tolerate the unknown, the urge for certainty, is seen over and over again, often with most painful consequences.

A young man I was working with, a very bright psychologist, was depressed because his girlfriend had left him. But he said perfectly clearly, "I got her to reject me; I behaved in such a way that she would reject me."

Why would he do that? Why make himself miserable? It must have been that getting acceptance was the frightening thing, getting rejection the more familiar

and less frightening. What was frightening about acceptance? I think you can begin to see.

If they remain together, he is not going to be loved perfectly, in all ways and for all time. It is only the infant who (if good fortune attends him) receives all-encompassing love. We all, of course, have an urge to repeat this cozy state. But the very nature of the growth process makes this impossible. So we must learn to value and accept a more adult caring, one which is imperfect, inconstant, conditional.

There is another imperative dictated by the growth principle: the need for a relationship to evolve. If two people are not to bore each other to extinction, they must each develop and individuate. The relationship cannot be the same next year as last year. One needs the capacity, the freedom, and also the courage to view one's mate differently as time goes on.

It turns out, therefore, that to be intimate, to have love or to be in love is one of the greatest challenges possible. There you are standing forth naked, in a sense, before someone else and hoping that you're okay. How frightening! You have invested yourself seriously in another person and naturally you have a great desire to hold onto them. But you can't hold on. You must accept that the other is a free adult, you cannot dictate his or her development, you don't know what is going to happen. In brief, you face this existential uncertainty. There are a number of possibilities: yes, no, maybe, and many variations and gradations. We need the willingness, the courage to be open to the simultaneous possibility of yes and no. The young man described above was so utterly terrified at the possibility of the "no" that he had to create the "no" in order not to endure the terrors of dynamic openness.

I want to draw attention now to another vital element in this matter of

relatedness or being together. If refer to a very common outlook in which people think, "If only I could find the right person, if only I could fall in love, all would be well." The fantasy is that someone else will provide your salvation, someone will love you enough to pull you through. It is indeed a fantasy. Of course loving and being loved is what we all want. But where is the true heart of the matter? Certainly someone else can provide the encouragement, the company, the sharing, perhaps even the wisdom. But the job has to get done by yourself. Another way of saying that is that ultimately we are all alone, and when you get right down to it we are all in business for ourselves. Except that at the very same time we are not in business for ourselves.

I draw again on the work of Tillich who describes the two kinds of courage: (1) the courage to be as oneself; and (2) the courage to be as a part of. It must be quite plain to see that the task of integrating such factors is fraught with contradictions and heartache. Almost by definition it cannot be done perfectly. How to be totally oneself beset by the requirements of a lover, a friend, a community, a nation? To be as oneself and to be as a part of. Probably the greatest chess game there is. Accepting the struggles, accepting the metaphysical headache is what I call accepting existential anxiety.

Thus we arrive at a most intriguing formulation: the refusal to accept and confront existential anxiety results in neurosis, in neurotic anxiety.

I have attempted to illustrate, from a number of angles, the essentially self-contradictory nature of man's being. We observe over and over again that it is only through the endless balancing and harmonizing of opposing forces which impinge on each other that movement, development, and growth occur. An imposing task.

And that leads me to my point. The way I like to state it is that

<u>happiness is not happy</u>. Which is to say that happiness is not <u>simply</u> a matter of being happy. Happiness is a matter of fully being, with everything that being entails. I have considered the formulation that being is frightening, but I don't think that is quite true. Being is many things including frightening. The willingness to look at and be all the sides of our nature, which is in essence open, unknowable, self-contradictory, etc., when you really come to terms with and accept that, then I think you feel a kind of all-rightness, a kind of fittingness, which feels very good and full and which I think can be identified as happiness. But it is not happy. Much of the time it involves agony, sadness, insufficiency, helpless concern for the pain of others—we all know the catalogue.

There is a most apt quote from William James:

> Life and its negation are beaten up in extricably together. The two are equally essential facts of existence, and all natural happiness thus seems infected with contradiction.

IV

Do these ideas have any relevance for the methods of hypnotherapy? The connections are not as dim as one might think. We have all observed that any approach which enhances our understanding of important life processes will soon get translated into therapeutic techniques and this includes the suggestive therapies.

Emphasis in this paper has been on such notions as the many-sidedness of experience, the role of self-contradiction in human nature, the necessary acceptance of pain and frustration in the maturation process. I have searched for ways of encompassing these ideas in some of my work with hypnosis and suggestion. The techniques I have found most useful for these purposes have

been guided fantasies and exercises in visualization.

In order to convey the spirit of what I mean, let me first illustrate with the simplest possible example in a case having nothing to do with hypnotherapy.

A woman patient was in therapy for recurrent depressions. We had been through a recent period of very intensive work. She announced one day, "I'm cured; I'm feeling so much better." Some time ago I would probably have simply expressed my satisfaction with her improvement. This time, however, my reply was, "Does your notion of cure allow for depressive episodes in the future?" She took the question quite seriously. She replied in a straightforward and level-headed manner, "Sure, I'll have some more of those things." At that moment I was confident that we were very close to ending our work.

I've been working with a young man who got his first professional-level job and worried for many weeks whether his work would be acceptable. When he is in a light trance, I ask him to fantasize that after some time he is quite competent and well thought of. Immediately his fantasy takes the form that he would quickly be bored and would look for another position. Of course I was particularly interested in that reaction since it showed his inability to have a concept of down-to-earth, day-to-day competence. I gradually had him consider—in hypnotic fantasy—situations in which his work was highly regarded but his boss was obnoxious and erratic. What might he do?

Encouraging him to deal with these fantasy frustrations was giving him another message, a meta-message in a sense; namely that even success was not a bed of roses. It contained its own brand of thorns. It was simply not the case that one "got married and lived happily ever after." Who ever heard of such a thing? And yet our ears ring with this fairy-tale cliche.

I have had an uncomfortable feeling for some time that much of our

suggestive work constitutes a Pollyanna-ish oversimplification. Suggestions are made with the flavor of "You'll be fine," "You'll be confident," "You'll handle this pain beautifully," etc. Now it's all very well for the therapist to supply encouragement, but if he cannot find both a language and belief system which he genuinely stands behind and believes in, then he is going to experience himself as hollow and will be reacted to accordingly by the patient. It is far better that the therapist shake hands with reality and guide his patients to do likewise.

We come back to the old story: physician heal thyself. More specifically, you can't teach what you don't know. If you do know—and know deeply—that is, if the therapist has assimilated deeply into himself certain learnings and attitudes, then the teaching as such recedes into the background and becomes more a being, a way of being. At such a point, words and techniques flow quite naturally. For just as the medium is the message, it is the therapist himself who constitutes—for better or for worse—the most powerful suggestion.