

Happiness and unity in a troubled World

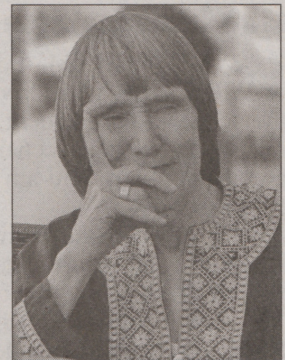
Ginny Sassaman 'Preaching Happiness: Creating a Just and Joyful World' Rootstock Publishing, 2020.

Preaching Happiness is a collection of 16 sermons Sassaman preached at the First Universalist Church of Barnard, VT, over the summers of 2017-2019 and later revised for publication. They are based on the theory of Gross National Happiness, a paradigm seeking to make life fulfilling for a maximum number of people, as opposed to the more familiar paradigm of Gross National Product, which encourages accumulation of wealth for the few. GNH, as it is called, originated in the small south Asian country of Bhutan, where it has been put into practice on a national level. Introduced to the concept by a friend, Sassaman, trained in meditation and possessing a graduate degree in the science of happiness, became the co-founder and later president of Gross National Happiness, USA. Behind her accessible, impassioned sermons there lies not just glass-full or -empty truisms, but warmth, compassion, and a study of happiness based on wide reading and great deal of personal hard work.

Happiness, according to Sassaman's second sermon, is "contentment and peace of mind, with an enhanced capacity for joy, laughter, and other emotions." Quoting Aristotle, she adds that it's "the meaning and purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence." Happiness, in other words, is not just a momentary state of being cheerful. It's a choice that requires continual understanding of the human need for compassion, kindness, and forgiveness. If you think compassion, kindness, and forgiveness come easily, think again. Take, for example, the struggle with personal inertia. You're so busy, you just can't find time to talk to a lonely neighbor. Sassaman calls this the battle of showing up. It's not a matter of choosing between doing good or doing evil; it's a matter of choosing

between doing good and doing nothing. Unless you work on your "happiness muscles," you will content yourself with thinking of showing up but not doing it. The result? Less local—hence, general—happiness.

Or what about social comparison? When you see people with (choose one) more money than you have, more successful children than you have, better clothes than you have—are you happy? Most likely, desiring what they have makes you unhappy. Choose instead to be contented with what you have. None of the choices Sassaman recommends to people who want to be happy are easy.



One-Minute Book Reviews

Laura Stevenson

One of her most poignant sermons is entitled "The Road to Happiness Includes Frequent Stops in Conflict Land." To mitigate conflict, you need to know its source. Are you upset because somebody else violates your unspoken rules (like "sweep the kitchen every day"); or perhaps is somebody upset with you because you broke their unspoken rules? The sermons are filled with little stories of personal experience, each with its own demonstration of unmade choices that prevented happiness. Perhaps the most poignant, because it's the simplest, is Sassaman's memory of seeing a turtle trying to cross the road on which she was driving. She thought about stopping and helping it along, but she didn't. Sometime later, she drove along the same road—and there was the squashed body of the turtle. She took a piece of the shell, to remind her that happiness, even a turtle's, rested on her obligation to be kind and compassionate to all.

