

Brooklyn Woods

ENGL 1010-15

Dr. Julie Simon

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### Light in the Darkness

I believe that happiness is a choice. As someone who has struggled with depression I can tell you that sometimes however it is a very hard choice. Throughout my life I have come to realize that happiness changes and develops. Happiness, in and of itself, has countless variables and definitions. Throughout my life these three things have impacted me the most in my pursuit of happiness: My environment, my religious faith, and my ability to focus my attention outside of myself.

As a small child I was very happy: I loved to sing and hum and always wanted to be the center of attention. But I was born into an abusive home and from the age of five I knew something was very wrong. How could daddy, my best buddy, yell at mommy and be so angry. As a child I, like all children, thought in very black and white term - good guy and bad guy. It hurt me to realize, in my little head, that my daddy was a bad guy. I started to hate him almost as much as I feared him and it ate at me. I used to wish he would die but then I felt guilty and angry at myself for even wishing that. Even though he has very mean, scary, and said awful things I always knew he loved me. Because of my guilt, I started to wish I could die, maybe if I died then he would feel bad and become gentle and kind. That is how the great conflict started. Even at this young stage, my view of happiness was skewed. Happiness to me became dependent on my dad. The environment around me controlled my every feeling. Happiness became the absence of worry: if I wasn't worried about anyone or anything then I could be happy.

One of the only places I found happiness was church. I belong to *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter day Saints*. As a child, I loved all the singing we did in primary and being around all the kids. Being homeschooled, I didn't get to interact as much as I would have liked with other kids. Like a sponge, I soaked up everything I was taught because it brought me so much peace and happiness. These are some of the teachings I learned that helped me. My Father in Heaven loves me personally. The Spirit or The Holy Ghost is always there as a comforter and guide. Jesus Christ is always there to help me up and bless me. Even as a child, these things brought peace to my little heart. It was a comfort to me to know that even if my dad on earth was fallible, I had a Father in Heaven who was the best dad ever. After all, he sacrificed his own Son, the Savior, so I can come live with him again. Learning to pray and reach for that comfort and receiving it even as a small child helped me find happiness even on the worst days.

As I grew older, things got worse. With a dad who was a time bomb and a mother who was emotionally unavailable; my five siblings and I found it was easier on everyone to just act like perfect little children, to suppress any kind of emotion. Growing up, I became the second mom; I had a lot of responsibilities and felt a lot of pressure - my siblings called me mom more than they did anything else. I worried about everything, especially my mom. No girl should ever have to see her mom crying because of something her dad did or said. He often said unkind things to me: "You laugh too hard it's obnoxious." "You are fat." "Don't ever cry." "Women have only 2.3 brain cells." Needless to say, in an environment like this it was very hard to be happy. Any kind of individuality or opinion wasn't permitted. We were told in great detail how to do everything from washing the dishes to working for hours on yard work. Church was the highlight of my week and something I looked forward to it was the one place I could relax. During this time I don't think I even knew what happiness was anymore, my childhood joys

where near nonexistent. I think I lived in a numb world not really expressing very much. Just repeating my prayer of “Please Heavenly Father all I want is one peaceful day.” But it never happened.

Then something amazing did happen: I was given a horse. It came along with a house my dad bought. We had moved nineteen times before I reached the age of eighteen. I loved horses. There ended up being a horse trainer right around the corner from where we lived, he let me become his apprentice. Those few years were the happiest of my childhood, from eleven years old to thirteen I practically lived there and loved every minute of it. The trainer was a gentle man who loved and respected his wife. I idolized him. He was like my second dad, the dad I had always wanted. He took me under his arm, loved me, and built me up. He was the one who taught me that work can be full of fun and that just being with someone, not even talking, can be a happy and wonderful thing. He taught me that women deserve respect. He helped me feel like I was worthy of love and someone people could be proud of. All these things made me happy just knowing that the whole world wasn't like my home. He gave me hope. Sadly, he and his wife moved away and I cried myself to sleep for months. It was hard for me to keep up that self-esteem with no one around to remind me about the good things in life. That happiness isn't something that is earned it is something that is all around is in the moments we share with people, in the feeling we get from uplifting influences, and in the experiences we create.

When I was sixteen, my parents finally got divorced. That plunged me into full time public school for the first time. My life was a mess. This is when I started to seriously think about death not so much as a lesson to my father but just as an escape. My self-esteem was twelve feet in the ground already and I didn't value myself at all. Happiness had lost its value to me; I thought it was over rated and for other people not me. This all lead to some decisions I

deeply regret. I had a lot of boyfriends, and, because of my longing for that male affection, for someone to want me, I let them do things to me that were against my personal standards.

Somewhere along the way, I had wrapped my identity in others' need for me; if no one needed or wanted me, then there was no point in existing anymore. I was so lost inside myself it was like I had fallen in a deep dark hole and all I could see were my faults, my fears, and my hatred for myself. Sleep at night was impossible, and I obsessed over the thought of dying or getting seriously hurt. This was the darkest time in my life, and no one knew it. I had no one to reach out to, who I thought would understand. I didn't want to be happy; I didn't want a solution; I wanted to give up to disappear and fade away.

But I couldn't no matter how much I wanted, and even tried. I never could jump or make that final choice to end it all. Somewhere underneath all my despair and anger, I knew I was loved. I knew that if I would just keep going a little more, I would get out of my darkness. I knew I had a Father in Heaven who loved me and didn't want me to give up, that he was there to help if I would let him in. I knew that my Savior had felt what I was feeling and that he truly understood when no one else could, and knowing that made all the difference. So I clung to that hope, and even just that hope started to let small amounts of light in. For the first time in a long time, I wanted to be happy even if it was just a little bit. I decided to go to counseling and get help with my depression. I knew it was out of my control; I didn't know how to be happy. It helped, but not immediately: it took a long time, and it was a lot of hard work, but I could feel a difference.

Around this time, I met a sweet young man who is now my husband, Jason Woods. I fell deeply in love with him. I loved how gentle, affectionate, and patient he was with his down-syndrome older sister. He was soft-spoken, a good listener, and a hard worker. But the best thing

about him was that he respected me. He didn't try to get me to do things I didn't want to, nor was he about all that physical stuff that I was used to. We didn't even kiss till four months after we started dating. I loved it; I enjoyed our relationship so much it was unlike anything I had before, he really respected me and listened to me. We were able to confide in each other. We build a lot of trust. We could tell each other anything and be able to know that we would always have each other's back. I was so happy when I was with him I think it was because I was focusing on someone else's happiness not just myself. After nine months of dating, we got engaged and three months after that we were married. People say that marriage is so hard, however we have been married for a year now and I am still waiting for that "so hard" part.

Marriage isn't easy but I have been more happy in this last year then I have my entire life. I think this is why: I have someone in my life who is constant and stable, who always loves me and always wants me to be happy. My husband has my trust that if I need him he will be there for me. In turn, I am focused on making my husband happy and, when I focus my attention outside of myself on someone who I love, it brings more happiness than any other way. We also set long term goals religious, academic, and personal. Achieving those goals together brings me a lot of happiness because I feel that I can do hard things when I have a faithful partner who supports me. Jason and I set a religious goal to be sealed for time and all eternity in the St George Temple a year after we were married, and we did. That was a huge lifelong goal sense primary. I can't express how much happiness it brings me to know that my sweet husband and I are sealed to be together even after death. My religion brings me so much happiness and peace of mind. Without my Faith, I do not think I would have made it through those really dark years in my teens. Choosing to be happy is easier when I have a stable environment and remember my faith.