

yes! magazine

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Positive Futures Network
P.O. Box 10818
Bainbridge Island, WA 98110-0818
206/842-0216
www.yesmagazine.org

FAX: 206/842-5208
subscriptions: 800/937-4451
email: yes@yesmagazine.org

Building a Just and Sustainable World

DISCUSSION GUIDE | ISSUE 48 | SUSTAINABLE HAPPINESS

YES! Discussion Guides are designed to help you explore your own experiences, opinions, and commitments as they relate to material found in YES! Magazine. Use them in group discussions, classrooms, or study circles. We believe that when people discuss with mutual respect and care the critical issues of our time, they create a powerful avenue for constructive social change.

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Kristin Carlsen and Jon Sayer

How happy are we really? Have the things we thought would make us happy done so? In the midst of post-election euphoria and economic and environmental gloom, what is the meaning of sustainable happiness? This issue of YES! explores different ways to find happiness—meditate, de-stress the holidays, restore the earth, embrace the bad with the good, simplify, and downsize. People all over the planet are finding ways to live happier lives, and discovering that a key part of that is reconnecting with our communities and with ourselves. The good news is that happiness isn't about who has the most stuff. And it's not too late or too expensive to pursue a more fulfilling kind of happiness that still allows us to tread lightly on the planet.

This discussion guide focuses on these articles:

- Sarah van Gelder and Doug Pibel, “Be Happy Anyway”
- Andrew Simms and Joe Smith, “The Good Life Doesn't Have to Cost the Planet”
- Colin Beavan, “Christmas with No Presents?”
- Wendy Call, “Grief's Hidden Gift”
- Matthieu Ricard, “This Is Your Brain on Bliss”

Be Happy Anyway

In “Be Happy Anyway,” Sarah van Gelder and Doug Pibel say there may be an upside to the economic downturn America is experiencing. As many people are figuring out, stuff, stuff, and more stuff doesn't make us happy. A high GDP has no connection to a country's overall level of >>

» happiness. People in Indonesia, which has a very low per capita GDP, rate much higher on the Happy Planet Index than the U.S., which has a high per capita GDP.

1. How well do you think Americans have done in their pursuit of happiness? Are there parts of the culture you see shifting? What stuff makes you happy, and what stuff reduces your happiness? What did you learn about happiness growing up?

2. Van Gelder and Pibel note that we don't make very much of what we actually use these days, and that we have become dependent on money to get what we need and want. Have you seen people in your town, church, group of friends, yoga studio, etc. finding ways around using money to buy things for themselves or to offer things to others? What kinds of creative exchanges have you witnessed already taking place in your community or beyond?

The Good Life Imagined

What could a happier, healthier world look like? In "The Good Life Doesn't Have to Cost the Planet," Andrew Simms and Joe Smith help us begin to imagine such a world, taking us through one spacious-feeling day, from a leisurely morning, through wholesome meals made at home and shared with loved ones, to a laid-back evening of conversation, music, and homemade entertainment. Because each day holds many opportunities for connection with family, friends, and neighbors, people feel more connected and less lonely.

1. How do you feel imagining a world like the one Simms and Smith describe? What thoughts and emotions surface for you? Do you share their vision of what a day in the good life would look like? If not, where does your vision differ?

2. Simms and Smith envision communities that are more walkable and bikeable, with less traffic and more attractive public transit options for those longer trips. Do you think restructuring our communities to become those kinds of places is possible? What evidence of change in that direction have you seen in your own community?

3. In the authors' scenario, people use technology in a more balanced way that actually facilitates closer connections with people in their own community. In what ways

does the use of technology currently affect your quality of life? In what ways has the digital age enhanced or diminished your work and social life?

4. Do you see any gaps in Simms' and Smith's vision of a better world? Have they forgotten anything you consider essential to a newly imagined world?

The Holidays without All the Stuff

In "Christmas with No Presents," Colin Beavan explains that although most of our time and money around the holidays is spent giving, receiving, and buying gifts, such behavior does not actually contribute to holiday cheer. "Subjects who gave or received gifts that represented a large percentage of their income ... actually experienced less Christmas joy."

1. Can you identify with the stress of gift giving that Beavan mentions? Has exchanging presents been a big part of your family's celebrations?

2. Have you given "no impact" gifts before? What kinds of gifts? What no impact gifts can you give this year instead of buying something new?

3. If you've already changed how you celebrate the holidays, how have you worked that out with your extended family? Has it been challenging? Have you discovered any tricks that Beavan didn't mention?

4. Adults changing holiday traditions is one thing, but when children whose friends and schoolmates get gifts are involved, it can be tricky going as they get older. If you have kids or nieces or nephews, have you come up with any creative gifts or new traditions that went over well with them?

5. What do you most want out of your holiday celebrations? Have you reconsidered any of those ideas after reading this article?

Losing a Mother: The Hidden Gift of Grief

Wendy Call describes what it was like to be close by in her mother's last months. In her article, she expresses what she learned from watching how her mom decided to embrace life as much as possible before death.

1. In her article, Call writes that "Happiness comes not from the avoidance of pain and despair, but in the healing

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from it.” What do you think? What is your experience with moving through (or not moving through) those feelings?

2. Within a few months of her mother’s death, Call says that she felt pressure from people around her to “get back to normal.” Have you experienced that after a loss, or watched others have that experience? What would you have liked to receive from others that you didn’t get?

3. Call writes that she came to consider all of her moments with her mother as gifts, even those that didn’t seem so at the time. Have you spent time with someone close to you in their last days or months? Are there gifts you can see now, even though it may have been painful or overwhelming at the time?

Your Brain on Bliss


Matthieu Ricard, a cellular geneticist who left his science career to study Buddhism almost 40 years ago, believes

meditation is central to finding a deeper, more lasting kind of happiness. He talks about authentic happiness as “a way of being and a skill to be cultivated,” and compassion as something that can be “developed boundlessly.”

1. Do you have any rituals or practices that tend to lift your mood?

2. If scientists were to scan your brain, what do you think they would see?

3. Have you ever meditated before? What was it like? If not, does this article make you want to give meditation a try? Why or why not?

4. Ricard says that when we experience “moments of grace” or “magical moments” in our daily life, we have left the burden of our inner conflicts behind, and feel more in tune with ourselves and the world around us. Have you experienced moments like that? Where were you? Were you with others or alone, enjoying solitude? 

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