

# **Having more, Enjoying it less: No matter how much we possess, we in the West can't find happiness unless we change the way we look at life's riches**

By Douglas Todd

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Talk about the paradox of progress. When the Dalai Lama was in Vancouver, the affable Buddhist monk surprised many by saying people in the West -- who are experiencing levels of material comfort the world has never before seen -- have an unprecedented chance to attain authentic happiness.

But if, while the Dalai Lama was having a great time in B.C., you happened to turn on a network TV news channel, say KIRO from Seattle, the dominant images would have been murder, rape, abduction, car-jackings, looming pandemics, corruption in high places and terrorism. You would have picked up the impression the so-called "Emerald City," the once-pleasant and rich centre of the high-tech boom, had turned into a 21st-century hell-hole.

This false media image of Seattle or a host of other places would not have been a problem someone would have had to face in the early 1900s, when a B.C. lumberjack would have fretted a great deal about protecting himself from downpours and getting decapitated by trees he was sawing down. But he would have hardly worried about endless crime reports from a city he didn't live in, let alone grisly conflict in the Middle East.

Today, the media give us minute-by-minute accounts from wherever and whenever horrible things happen. It sparks fear. It's one of those modern technological advances that's helping to produce stress, drawing us into a sea of free-floating anxiety. Forget about contentment.

Who would have guessed unease and unhappiness would be one of the dominant characteristics of a wealthy Western culture that, by practically every measure, has been improving in the past century? asks Gregg Easterbrook in his book, *The Paradox of Progress: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse*.

As a result of the marketplace, Easterbrook says, most of us in industrialized countries now have material comforts our grandparents could only dream about. He thinks we should celebrate it. But he's painfully aware it doesn't seem to be enough.

"Standards of living keep rising, with the typical house now more than twice as large as a generation ago; middle-class income keeps rising, although more slowly than income at the very top; more [North] Americans graduate from college every year; longevity keeps rising; almost all forms of disease, including most cancers, are in decline; crime has dropped spectacularly; pollution, except for greenhouse gases, is in long-term decline; discrimination is now down substantially," writes Easterbrook, an editor at *The New Republic* magazine and an acclaimed science writer.

"Yet despite all these positive indicators the percentage of Americans who describe themselves as 'happy' has not increased since the early 1950s, while the incidence of depression keep rising - and was doing so long before the morning of Sept. 11, 2001. This is the progress paradox. Life gets better while people feel worse."

The rate of clinical depression has risen 10-fold in recent years, according to an extensive Yale University study. Of the 500 million people in North America and Europe whom Easterbrook calculates now have solid incomes, personal freedom, strong educations and good health, he says 100 million are seriously depressed, in constant melancholia. Anti-depressants have flooded into our homes.

The Dalai Lama is one of those who doesn't want to romanticize the lives of the world's poor. In Vancouver, he suggested the simplistic image of hordes of poor-but-happy people, say in Africa or Latin America, is a false one. People have to have minimum physical comforts, he said, to achieve self-realization, which he also describes as happiness.

The problem in the wealthy West is that too many of us mistake the pursuit of happiness with chasing after material things, whether they're high-rise condos, flashy cars or elegant clothes. It seems easier to run after things than to find love or inner calm. Materialism is the default position, and it always requires escalating our demands, because when we get something, we soon feel it's not enough.

Modern society seems to manufacture discontent.

Prof. Martin Seligman, past president of the American Psychological Association, lists four ways it does so:

1. There is too much emphasis on individualism in Western culture, so minor setbacks become major catastrophes. We don't see our problems in the context of a larger community or purpose.
2. The self-esteem craze: We think there's something fundamentally wrong if we don't feel fabulous all the time.
3. A media-led culture of victimology, which makes us feel frightened and helpless.
4. Runaway consumerism.

In another time, we might have attributed our unhappiness to old-fashioned moral failings: Call them pride or greed.

But, today, we might also justifiably conclude widespread unhappiness is related to information overload and the fantasy that instant bliss is just around the corner, if we could just snag the best product -- the coolest vacation spot, the most wonderful meal, the top doctor, the toniest house, the most alluring wife or successful and charming husband.

In her book, *Dematerializing: Taming the Power of Possessions*, Jane Hammerslough says people in the well-off West, particularly in the U.S., gorge themselves on things they hope will counteract the onslaught of everything from stress to fear to nostalgia to guilt.

A recovering shopaholic based in California, Hammerslough remembers having a revelation about the difference between "having" and being happy when she overheard a rich, perfect-looking woman say, "I love my lifestyle, but I hate my life."

At that moment, Hammerslough thought: "Whoa! If you looked at this woman, you were looking at what we consider the standards: Attractive, thin, great jewelry, great car. But no matter what the woman was projecting in tangibles, I was hearing despair. If you stripped away everything, what loneliness! The problem is when you can't see what you have, you keep looking somewhere on the horizon."

Canadian theologian George Hermanson says all the great religions make the point that material things make it possible for us to live, but that something deeper makes our existence liveable.

"Poverty is a curse, but wealth is in a real sense accursed. Prosperity has exacted a terrible toll from its favourites," says Hermanson, a leading thinker in the United Church of Canada.

Our obsession with consuming, with constantly searching for the product that will make us feel better, Hermanson suggests, has also penetrated the way we approach the once-authority-filled realm of religion, which many now prefer to call spirituality.

"We live in an age of choice. Personal preference is honoured above loyalty. This is played out in the religious reality, where we are blessed, and perhaps burdened, with an array of spiritual options. We now have a spiritual buffet which people keep sampling all their lives," Hermanson says.

"This can be good news. But the bad news is this buffet attitude creates free agency, which demands: 'Give us the message we want or we will switch.'" Hermanson suggests the marketplace approach to spirituality may ignore the value of committing to a long-term, caring community. It may be leading us down a path to superficiality.

This constant stress on consumption and satisfying immediate desires is not surprising, Hermanson suggests, in a world saturated with media; it seems to beam dozens, if not thousands, of "choices" into our homes every hour.

The nightly news, as well, keeps us jumpy and scared. Watch enough movies and newscasts and we forget the crime rate is dropping and many of the world's oppressed are now getting a taste of democracy. Easterbrook suggests the "elites" in our society -- including intellectuals, artists, newspaper columnists, business people and religious leaders -- promote doomsday scenarios as a matter of habit.

Canadian commentators such as Robert Fulford argue: "It is the unique ability of journalists to turn everything into bad news." He cites, for instance, how the Canadian dollar can't do anything

right; if it goes up it hurts exporters, if it sinks we all become poorer. Meanwhile, TV, Fulford argues, has become a mere "chronicler of disaster," whether it's West Nile virus, sex crimes or forest fires.

The news and entertainment media leave ordinary people thinking things are getting worse rather than better. A culture of complaint takes hold. Going further, Easterbrook suggests "negativity sells:" The powers that be grab our attention with conflict and fear, then use it to shape our wants and yearnings.

Canadian philosopher Mark Kingwell joins Fulford in worrying about how politicians manipulate our media-shaped insecurity. For instance, the media have been filled with wall-to-wall terrorism in the three years since the attacks on New York and Washington. But, as former president Jimmy Carter told the Democratic party's national convention, since that fateful day only about 400 people have died around the globe in terrorist incidents.

No one wants to take terrorism lightly, but 400 deaths is tiny compared to the destruction caused by war, famine, poverty and disease. On the other hand, the media rarely bother to tell us about the billions of people on the planet who are managing to somehow survive and even find meaning in their lives.

Perspective is everything. The media often don't seem to have it.

This is where the Dalai Lama and the great philosophers come in.

They don't believe happiness is found in pursuing narrow pleasures.

They don't think contentment can be "consumed" through a steady diet of passionate sex partners, fabulous food, endless entertainment or in obtaining things, even if they're beautiful. In terms of possessions, maybe hundreds of millions of us already have enough.

Easterbrook is hardly the first to suggest some of the following keys to happiness: Find ways to reduce stress (including turning off your TV an hour before you go to sleep), practise forgiveness and, most important, feel gratitude for all that you have. Count your blessings.

The Dalai Lama, in *The Art of Happiness*, also put simply the answer to having a good life: Meditation can be effective at combatting negative emotions -- but the real source of happiness is compassion, giving to others even when they don't reciprocate.

As Aristotle said 2,500 years ago, you can't find true happiness living in your own little cocoon: you find it in living an admirable life. Canada's greatest philosopher, Charles Taylor, says it's not a bad thing to have the freedom to attain self-realization, but you only reach it by "engaging wider horizons of significance" and working toward not only your own enjoyment, but the enjoyment of all.

It's not necessary in this essay to agree on how exactly to serve the common good. But here are a few of Easterbrook's concrete proposals for how the wealthy West could offer the possibility of

happiness to more people: By providing much more aid to the 1.2 billion people struggling in abject poverty, by bringing in universal health care in the U.S. and by mandating a North American minimum "living wage" of \$10 an hour.

In the context of our paradoxical Western world getting better while many in it feel worse, it turns out another way to happiness may lie in changing our view of progress. We may have to shift from seeing progress as economic and technological advances and thinking about it more as ethical and spiritual development, which requires changing not only oneself, but the world.

Or, instead of idealizing conventional concepts such as progress, with all its contradictions, it's better to talk about hope. Christopher Lasch put it this way in his book, *The True and Only Heaven*: "Hope does not demand a belief in progress. It demands a belief in justice."