

# GRATITUDE AND THE HAPPINESS MACHINE

Zak Schmoll on the Root of Joy

What if there was a happiness machine? Leo Auffmann, a central character in Ray Bradbury's *Dandelion Wine*, is convinced that he can build it. After being challenged by the men of the town to "invent something that will make the future brighter, well rounded, infinitely joyous," he begins to construct a booth-like device in his garage.<sup>1</sup> His ambitions are noble as he muses, "How have we used machines so far, to make people cry? Yes!"<sup>2</sup> The power of technology can also be harnessed for good, or so he thinks. Others do not understand his ambition; when he tells his wife, Lena, about his plans, she assumes, "Something's wrong?"<sup>3</sup> A local grandfather advises his grandson, "Don't hold your breath," when the young lad gets excited about the prospect of this fantastic machine.<sup>4</sup> Not deterred by the skeptics, Leo continues his mission to create happiness.

Despite a series of disagreements with his wife, whom he neglects as he single-mindedly focuses on his

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<sup>1</sup> Ray Bradbury, *Dandelion Wine* (1946; repr., New York: William Morrow, 2006), 44.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 47.

construction project, his machine is finally ready for demonstration. His wife and children gather around the orange booth, and his wife sarcastically says, "That's *happiness*? . . . Which button do I press to be overjoyed, grateful, contented, and much-obliged?"<sup>5</sup> With their concerned children urging caution, Lena Auffmann enters the machine and begins exclaiming, "Oh!" and then again, 'Ah!' in a startled voice. 'Look at that!' said his hidden wife. 'Paris!' and later, 'London! There goes Rome! The Pyramids! The Sphinx!'"<sup>6</sup> Leo's machine appears to be having its desired effect. Her exuberance causes him to laugh until one bitter moment as he hears a terrible sound from within, "She simply can't be crying!" Leo Auffmann, blinking, pressed his ear to the machine. 'But . . . yes . . . like a baby . . .'"<sup>7</sup> His utilization of technology for the benefit of those he loved seems to have unbelievably backfired.

"Oh, it's the saddest thing in the world!" she wailed. "I feel awful, terrible." She climbed out through the door. "First, there was Paris . . ."

"What's wrong with Paris?"

"I never even thought of being in Paris in my life. But now you got me thinking: Paris! So suddenly I want to be in Paris and I know I'm not!"<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Bradbury, *Dandelion Wine*, 75-76.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

She was not unhappy with her life until she realized that her life was lacking something, even something unnecessary. Although Lena knew she had never been to Paris, the happiness machine made her feel that, in order to be happy, she must vacation in Paris. Her life must be surrounded by not just ordinary beauty but specific sceneries. The air must always smell like the perfume that Leo made the machine emit. Anything short of this singular perception of happiness created what has been termed the fear-of-missing-out. After Lena calms down a little bit, she expands:

“Leo, the mistake you made is you forgot some hour, some day, we all got to climb out of that thing and go back to dirty dishes and the beds not made. While you’re in that thing, sure, a sunset lasts forever almost, the air smells good, the temperature is fine. All the things you want to last, last. But outside, the children wait on lunch, the clothes need buttons. And then let’s be frank, Leo, how long can you look at a sunset? Who wants a sunset to last? Who wants perfect temperature? Who wants air smelling good always? So after awhile, who would notice? Better, for a minute or two, a sunset. After that, let’s have something else. People are like that, Leo. How could you forget?”

“Did I?”

“Sunsets we always liked because they only happen once and go away.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Bradbury, *Dandelion Wine*, 78.

At this point in the story, Leo and Lena could almost be described as a supernaturalist and a naturalist, respectively. Leo believes in the existence of something higher, something better. Even though his view of happiness is perhaps somewhat shallow and reliant on external stimulation, he believes that happiness can be and should be pursued. He wants to believe that everyone can be happy; he wants to believe that a bad day can be turned around by an experience in his almost miraculous device. He draws close to playing God, trying to bring happiness to those around him, which is almost reminiscent of the way that Christians believe abiding joy can be found by drawing closer to God. Leo would probably not claim to be trying to replace God, but he wants people to draw close to his vision and find transcendent, perhaps even supernatural, happiness.

Lena, on the other hand, is very committed to the material world. She wants to forget about the parts of the world she can't have. There is a little bit of a romantic essence to her naturalism as she explains how scarcity makes a sunset, for example, more special. Nevertheless, rather than embrace full pleasure all the time, she would prefer to take a more realistic view of the world.

Bradbury is not content to leave his characters in such a simplistic dichotomy, however. Leo's machine might bring happiness to some, but it is not safe as it catches on fire. Leo lets it burn, disappointed in the fact that he had not created something that could even bring the people he loved the most a degree of happiness. However, he begins to reflect,

The first thing you learn in life is you're a fool.  
The last thing you learn in life is you're the  
same fool. In one hour, I've done a lot of

thinking. I thought, Leo Auffmann is blind! . .  
. You want to see the real Happiness Machine?  
The one they patented a couple thousand  
years ago, it still runs, not good all the time,  
no! but it runs. It's been here all along.<sup>10</sup>

From this undefined vantage point, the reader is left to wonder what the true machine is. Christian readers could certainly think of a monumental event that happened a few thousand years ago as Jesus Christ came to earth. However, Bradbury was not a Christian in any traditional sense of the word, so that kind of direct interpretation seems unlikely. In the context of the story, Leo's interlocutors also question what he is talking about, and the narrator explains:

And there, in small warm pools of lamplight, you could see what Leo Auffmann wanted you to see. There sat Saul and Marshall, playing chess at the coffee table. In the dining room Rebecca was laying out the silver. Naomi was cutting paper-doll dresses. Ruth was painting water colors. Joseph was running his electric train. Through the kitchen door, Lena Auffmann was sliding a pot roast from the steaming oven. Every hand, every head, every mouth made a big or little motion. You could hear their faraway voices under glass. You could hear someone singing in a high sweet voice. You could smell bread baking, too, and you knew it was real bread that would soon be

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<sup>10</sup> Bradbury, *Dandelion Wine*, 81.

covered with real butter. Everything was there and it was working.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps Bradbury is suggesting that the family itself, the family that he had been neglecting in pursuit of creating artificial experiences of bliss, was the true happiness machine, working naturally as his children occupied themselves and his wife cooked. The chapter concludes with one more touching, thematically consistent image of Leo with his family. "Inside, Grandfather, Douglas, and Tom saw him tinkering, making a minor adjustment here, eliminate friction there, busy among all those warm, wonderful, infinitely delicate, forever mysterious, and ever-moving parts."<sup>12</sup> While he had been pursuing happiness through technological means, the true happiness machine was something that he already had.

To be precise, Leo did not obtain happiness. He was given happiness. He did not create his wife; presumably he met his wife through a providential encounter and their eyes met for the first time. While he biologically played a part in creating his children, he did not give them life; the gift of life is not something that humans can give or ought to take away. His happiness came through a recognition of all that he had been given. In short, it was only through gratitude for what he had that he was able to see the true Happiness Machine.

G.K. Chesterton once wrote,

The test of all happiness is gratitude; and I felt grateful, though I hardly knew to whom.

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<sup>11</sup> Bradbury, *Dandelion Wine*, 81-82.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

Children are grateful when Santa Claus puts in their stockings gifts of toys or sweets. Could I not be grateful to Santa Claus when he put in my stockings the gift of two miraculous legs? We thank people for birthday presents of cigars and slippers. Can I thank no one for the birthday present of birth?<sup>13</sup>

Chesterton argues that one can only be happy by showing gratitude, and one can only show gratitude if there is someone to receive that gratitude. Gratitude, like gift-giving, requires a recipient. While one could perhaps thank the universe, thank fate, or thank biology, the universe, fate, and biology are unable to receive gratitude; they cannot actively receive anything. Gratitude must be directed to someone who can receive it. To answer Chesterton's hypothetical question, Christians have the ability to show gratitude for their own existence because that gratitude is directed towards God Himself, the Giver of everything.

Some readers might be tempted to be hard on Lena, constantly squelching Leo's enthusiasm with her more black-and-white view of the world. However, she does rightly recognize the beauty of scarcity. It is easy to take even beautiful things for granted if they become too commonplace. I live in Vermont, and it is easy to take our beautiful mountains for granted until you are somewhere that doesn't have them. You then begin to miss them. There is beauty in the ordinary things of our lives; we do not have to go to London or Paris. However,

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<sup>13</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (1908; repr., Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), 84.

that should not lead us to despair as it did for Lena; it should remind us to be grateful for them.

Bradbury's definition of happiness seems to be substantially broader than a temporary experience of cheerful emotions, especially as he contextualizes it in the aftermath of the destruction of the Happiness Machine. Leo begins by thinking that happiness can be created by lights, smells, and sounds, but he soon realizes that happiness is much deeper, much more closely related to how many Christians would use the word joy, and he realizes that it is caused by something even deeper than that. While readers will always have to wonder about Bradbury's true cause of happiness that came about only a few thousand years ago, Christians can know the source of all lasting joy and be grateful to Him.

# Bibliography

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