

Discovering the Bubbles and Balloons of “Happiness”

Happiness: Variations on a Theme

Dozens of people formed an audience. I stood up on the stage, my back to the audience. *It's not hard, I thought. I've done it so many times. A few steps, a swing, and a few moments of anticipation, and then it would be over.* Even so, waves of anxiety and winds of doubt suppressed the expanding bubble in my chest. The butterflies in my stomach threatened to pop it.

It's a great sport; the concentration on a single motion, a few seconds of movement; and although so many people have tried for so many years, no one has perfected the consistency in this move. Perfect games have come about, and even perfect series of three games has been achieved. But no one has the perfect swing that can eliminate the inevitable variation between every shot, or the chance occurrence that creates mistakes. Between the starting position, the swing, the footwork, the release, the wrist movement, the equipment, and the thoughts of the player, there are hundreds of tiny factors that will change the outcome of the shot. There's too much to take into consideration, and too much that can make the difference between a strike and a miss. Too many factors that can make the difference between a victory and a loss.

The steps, the swing, the anticipation, all followed through in a single fluid motion. A *BANG!*, and flying pins. That moment of realization. My first perfect game of bowling, a three hundred score. A single repetitive movement, twelve times. The crowd cheered.

I pressed a button.

Hello, World!

The two words popped up at me, twelve bright characters in a rectangular sea of darkness. Two feet away from my face, they appeared out of nowhere, and existed in a two-dimensional window into their strange artificial pseudo-world. I didn't understand this world, but at that moment, I knew that joining that world would lead me to amazing places. The same two words, so simple and childish, had the power to change our world in wondrous ways.

Uncle stood behind me, obviously less in awe than I was. Well, they were the ones who had showed me how to conjure up the magical phrase. They themselves had done it countless times before — it was only the beginning when it came to their expertise. With hundreds of others, they had continued on to multi-billion dollar empires serving many millions of people, they themselves being the ones to secure the foundation in this mystical new universe.

The computer hummed and I sat in my thoughts, while Uncle lectured me on the scientific workings behind this “magic”; he explained the zeroes and ones that this translated into, the history of the amazing artificial invention we call a computer. Ideas made more and more sense; my cluelessness focused to an amazing clarity, branching off to further areas unreachable before; strange concepts didn't seem so abnormal anymore.

With this, he went on to teach me more. I pressed another key, typed another letter, entered that world again. That greeting — that “Hello, World” — truly led me somewhere new. I was a little blue balloon, soaring off to the sky.

Professor’s voice drifted towards us, then passed by without any notice. His voice carried no emotion, and his hands held a piece of chalk that fought with the blackboard fiercely. No one paid any attention to the lesson, instead chatting in their groups or staring at screens. The world continued around me, unknowing of the carefree students or the chaos within me.

Maddening voices ruled my head. *He’ll find out*, they muttered. *You’ll fail*, they taunted. They made a leak in the little bubble of hope deep inside me. Nonetheless, Professor continued.

BEEP! Class ended, I was saved, and the voices suddenly ceased. Over the commotion of students escaping, I heard, “The quiz is tomorrow. No time today.” Relief rolled over me, gently, waving away the dread. The first and only blissful phrase to ever come from Professor.

I gazed over the din of the familial crowd. Laughter, card games, gifts, fire. Colorful, upbeat, carefree, merry. Playing, chatting, eating, singing. The air was saturated to the maximum with positive vibes in the air and the joyful memories of youth.

Huddled around the fire were the youngest ones, the generation of my children. They stared at the fire, entranced by the dancing brightness and the intense heat, the ability to turn the otherwise dull piece of wood into a wonderful sensation. They sat there, on the stone next to the fireplace, just smart enough to know to keep their distance.

The opposite, the elders of the family, chatted away. They had no intention of being as lively as us kids, but they told their stories for the tenth, twentieth, thirtieth times, but always in a unique way, always in a way that would captivate us no matter how repetitive it might be. The stories of a poor but free childhood, one without the pressure of school or the hopes of a good future, always excited us. We could only imagine what it was like.

The repeated sounds of “Diu Zhuo!” echoed throughout the rooms day and night as the parents tirelessly played cards. This game of Chinese poker never bored them, and often they would continue late into the night and into the morning, unwilling to give in. They did most of the work now — they needed this time to play.

And then there was us. The adolescents; the kids and teens; the ones in school; the rising generation. We were the greatest benefactors, the ones who get to learn and play and do what we want without having to work. The ones with a perfect balance of responsibility and fun and choices; the ones with the greatest amount of opportunity.

And the more I studied the room, the more evident it was that the ones with the brightest smiles and the shiniest eyes and the heartiest laughs were my sisters and my cousins. The rising wave of optimism, a parade of colorful balloons, energetic and lighthearted, striving for the sky.