**Our Self-Deception of Happiness**

*Understanding what stands at the basis of our most personal deceptions could unlock the answers to the lies we have been seeing so much of in 2016.*

Photo caption: *Depressed person broods in tunnel.*

In the past year, many of us began to see much more clearly through the lies that have distorted our vision for so long. Public discussion of the lies that [liberal democracy](http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/The-end-of-Liberalism-as-we-know-it-474068), [politicians](http://nypost.com/2016/05/23/how-big-money-funded-the-echo-chamber-that-pushed-obamas-iran-deal/) and our very [culture](http://europe.newsweek.com/truth-were-all-raging-liars-78965?rm=eu) tell have brought us closer to seeing our reality as it truly is.

President-elect Trump is accused of taking the art of lying to a completely new level, but actually, he simply [dropped the pretense](http://www.thespectrum.com/story/opinion/2017/01/06/politics-has-always-been-post-truth-trumps-just-honest/96278076/) of honesty that every other politician strives to maintain, and in this sense, is truly more honest than others.

Perhaps the greatest of [pretenses](http://observer.com/2016/05/as-boyish-ben-rhodes-drops-truth-bombs-obamas-media-mask-drops/) was that of outgoing President Obama, behind which hid the great [injustice](http://news.nationalpost.com/full-comment/john-robson-now-we-know-barack-obamas-foreign-policy-wasnt-principled-it-was-malicious) and [damage](http://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/editorials/2017/01/08/home-and-abroad-obama-trail-disasters/YOaU1KuAT3hSHaGHkmGCeN/story.html?event=event25) that has been inflicted upon America and the world. Obama represents the general expiration of neoliberalism that held us  [captive](http://europe.newsweek.com/college-campus-free-speech-thought-police-463536?rm=eu) in a politically correct culture that obscured the magnitude of the true separation, intolerance, and hatred that [festered](http://thefederalist.com/2016/11/15/trump-media-suddenly-care-anti-semitism/) beneath the surface.

Everywhere you look; there are lies that have been exposed. Fake news, [media](http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/dec/1/americans-dont-trust-the-media-37-percent-say-medi/) [echo chambers](https://www.wired.com/2016/11/facebook-echo-chamber/), and social networks creating false realities, are only some of the outrageous phenomena we have seen this year.

We live in an era that has uncovered the truth of our culture’s egoism. This is actually a step forward, for only seeing the problem can help us begin to solve it. Doing so is vital, not only because egoism has damaged us on a national- social level, but because it has affected the most personal level of our happiness and ability to find meaning in life.

**The Truth About Happiness**

Summaries of 2016 used plenty of bleak terms. Some assessments sought encouragement through comparisons with other times in history “even more” dark and depressing, and many called it “[the worst year ever](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/28/opinion/2016-worst-year-ever.html?_r=1).” Yet, a [poll](http://www.goodnewsnetwork.org/what-americans-were-most-happy-for-in-2016/) conducted by Ipsos showed that the large majority of Americans still considered themselves to be happy in 2016, or at least, so they say. [Other polls](http://time.com/4389726/harris-poll-happiness-index-2016/) reveal the “general principle that people self-report that they’re happier than they may actually be.”

For all the [effort](http://www.vox.com/first-person/2016/10/4/13093380/happiness-america-ruth-whippman) that Americans put into hunting down happiness, they have [not](http://www.marketwatch.com/story/5-reasons-americans-are-unhappy-2015-10-12) become happier. Reports [show](http://www.marketwatch.com/story/americans-less-happy-now-than-in-2007-says-latest-world-happiness-report-2016-03-17) that in the past ten years Americans have actually become less and less happy. According to the World Health Organization, The U.S. is one of the most [depressed](http://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2016-09-14/the-10-most-depressed-countries) countries in the world.

[Studies suggest](http://fortune.com/2016/06/22/loneliness-is-a-modern-day-epidemic/) that the percentage of Americans who report chronic feelings of loneliness has risen dramatically over the past few decades, from 11% in the 1970’s to 20% in the 1980’s, to 40% to 45% in 2010. Not unrelated to loneliness, American culture is also [plagued](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-color-anxiety/201201/why-american-culture-is-plagued-anxiety-two-good-reasons) by [anxiety](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/19/opinion/sunday/the-anxious-americans.html). Anxiety disorders are the [most common](https://www.adaa.org/about-adaa/press-room/facts-statistics)mental health complaint in the U.S.**,** affecting 40 million adults age 18 and older, 18% of the population.

## But what may most tell the truth behind any bias of self-reported happiness- is [America’s addiction to opioids](https://www.drugabuse.gov/about-nida/legislative-activities/testimony-to-congress/2016/americas-addiction-to-opioids-heroin-prescription-drug-abuse), heroin and prescription drug abuse. Nearly 60% of Americans (the highest percentage ever), take prescription drugs. For [many](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/may/09/opioid-addiction-appalachia-tennessee), drugs are the way to feel happy and forget their problems. Sadly, this path has [proven deadly](http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/11/most-americans-now-have-personal-experience-painkiller-addiction), with 1 out of 10 Americans reporting that a family member or friend has died due to painkiller abuse.

**Why is this Happening?**

Although various reasons are cited for the unhappiness that is prevalent in western culture, all revolve around one fundamental problem: We base our meaning in life on things that are transient, and that cause us to suffer.

American society is known for its ambition to achieve and its focus on material success. These tendencies can also be framed as the results of an egoistic desire to increase self-gratification by coming out on top in comparison to others. As Victor Tan Chen puts it in his [article](https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/12/spiritual-crisis-modern-economy/511067/) in the *Atlantic*, “The main source of meaning in American life is a meritocratic competition that makes those who struggle feel inferior… and when other sources of meaning are hard to come by, those who struggle in the modern economy can lose their sense of self-worth.”

The emphasis on career success has created a culture of overwork, where even policies that aim to create work life balance [cannot](https://qz.com/876210/flexible-family-friendly-work-policies-are-more-popular-than-ever-so-why-are-we-still-so-stressed-out/) keep people from stressfully overworking themselves and skipping vacations. Couple this with [reports](http://www.forbes.com/sites/susanadams/2014/06/20/most-americans-are-unhappy-at-work/#659847ef5862) showing that most Americans aren’t really happy at their jobs and you’ve got a nation where both those who have no jobs are unhappy, but so are those that do.

Basing self-worth and happiness on competitive career success is not only problematic because it creates a culture of “winners and losers,” it’s a problem because it never actually brings anyone to the desired goal. Well known research in recent years shows that happiness is [most greatly](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2449513/Money-DOESNT-buy-happiness-How-friends-family--flashy-possessions--bring-true-contentment.html) influenced by time spent with family and friends, and not by improving financial positions. However, [recent reports](http://www.goodnewsnetwork.org/what-americans-were-most-happy-for-in-2016/) show that in 2016 we still fixated on monetary items as a means to attain future happiness.

Luckily (or not), jobs are probably not going to be diverting our attention from what really matters for very long. With [robots](https://www.wired.com/brandlab/2015/04/rise-machines-future-lots-robots-jobs-humans/) gradually putting more and more people out of work, the quest for meaning must find a way beyond the current job race.

**The Question of Meaning**

The competition induced by our egoistic culture has not only proven to make happiness a fleeting goal, which will become even more so as jobs become obsolete, it has brought us to a point that motivation for life itself is dwindling.

As we become less and less excited about the options our society has to offer us as means of self-fulfillment; tired of chasing plastic dreams, secluded to our smartphones and anxieties, deeper questions [begin to arise.](https://qz.com/874535/jean-paul-satre-and-albert-camuss-existential-nihilism-can-help-explain-why-2016-felt-like-the-worst-ever/)

At the root of the current [depression epidemic](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jonathan-rottenberg/the-depression-epidemic-will-not-be-televised_b_5367479.html) are questions about the meaning of life. Even if the questions are not explicitly asked, they are there beneath the heaviness and the difficulty to get out of bed in the morning. We mostly push them aside because we don’t think they can be answered, but somewhere inside we must know that these are questions that come from a higher state of being, some higher level we long for. These are the questions that make us human, most of all, and these are questions no robot can ask.

**Celebrating Our Humanity**

The kinds of questions that arise today are existential, and we must study the world we live in to find answers. These questions require a deep knowledge of nature, of the [intelligent power](https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg22930660-100-evolution-learn-natural-selection/) that drives all of life, and of our special part in it. Nature is far more than what we see when hiking in the woods! It is everything that we see, feel and sense all around us, and beyond.

Scientists have only begun to discover the intricacy of our world. We already know that it is round and thoroughly interconnected in a system of symbiosis and mutual reciprocity. The more we discover, the more we see its incredible wisdom, with absolute laws that [create evolution](https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg22930660-100-evolution-learn-natural-selection/) on the inanimate, vegetative, animal and human levels.

Our culture’s current state of ruthless competition is diametrically opposed to nature’s complementary harmony. Thus, it’s no coincidence that we are headed toward collapse. Our only option to save ourselves is to change our course.

**Completing the Circle**

In natural systems such as our bodies, for example, each organ is special and important, providing a unique service to the whole, without which the rest of the body would be imbalanced. In the same way, we need to see that each of us has their own purpose and unique contribution to offer society, which complements everyone else’s.

When we adhere to the [acquired understanding](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/am-i-right/201304/happiness-depends-upon-close-relations) that the way forward is in improved relationships, we will also discover our own self-fulfillment. But, to do so we must shift our focus from self-gratification at the expense of others, to wishing to fulfill ourselves by benefiting others, just like a mother enjoys giving to her child. However, such a change in attitude doesn’t come naturally.

For millennia, Jewish sages developed the method of learning how to “Love thy friend as thyself.” The book, *Likutey Halachot* (*Assorted Rules*), writes, “The essence of vitality, existence, and correction in creation is achieved by people of differing opinions mingling together in love, unity, and peace.” These sages understood that our individual differences are necessary elements of connection and must not be erased, that in the correct connection above our differences, we create something new and better, where each contributes his unique part to the whole.

Throughout the world, my students conduct what they have termed “[Connection Circles.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CfnnotwX7Yc&feature=youtu.be)” which are based on this deep wisdom. In these circles, strangers- people of different backgrounds, opinions, and types, create an environment where they complete each other while also finding their own self-expression. In these circles, everyone is equal, no one imposes his or her opinion on others, and everyone listens. The goal is unification, not to convince others or come to a pre-determined goal, but simply to strive for connection. When differences or hard feelings arise, they are used as means to rise above the separation to create even greater connection than before.

**Learning to Unite**

Even though we know our happiness depends on the quality of our relationships, current societal values and habits keep us from acting upon this wisdom. Meanwhile, we feel forced to continue to live the lie of our culture’s materialistic paradigm.

Practical methods, such as the Connection Circles mentioned above, are necessary to reshape our current mistaken priorities into ones that allow each to find their true calling in the world and to focus on what actually yields lasting happiness.

It is possible that the unemployment crisis foreseen by many will push us into change, but we can already begin to heal our cultures and our souls that are so hungry for meaning, without waiting for robots to drive us to develop our humanity.