

Stock Doc: The Pursuit of Happiness

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As a performance coach and psychologist for some of the wealthiest financial types on Wall Street, I work with many brilliant individuals, some of whom, however, have fallen victim to their own self-destructive and perfectionist minds.

Many of those who sit across from me on a weekly basis are focused on obtaining financial nirvana but somehow seem oblivious to all of the wonderful things that they already have or will accomplish in the future.

They compare their successes and their wealth to those who work next to them and even to their friends. They compare their stock portfolios to their friends' and anguish over failures far longer than they savor successes. My clients fall prey to their insatiable drive to obtain material wealth that they believe can supply their families with security and happiness.

While it is true that money can contribute to an individual's sense of security and the ability to live comfortably, it does not directly relate to obtaining happiness. Many of my clients are so competitive that they often forget to look around them and appreciate the commodities that they already possess. For them, nothing in life worth having comes without a price tag.

My job is to help them channel their thinking and focus on some of the quintessential moments in their past and current lives. Moments once lived, cannot be purchased or frozen in time, so it is important to really take them in and appreciate them. I would never tell my clients to work less. I would just help them to work more efficiently so that they might be able to enjoy the fruits of their labor.

Recognizing Life's Joys

When I was a senior at Muhlenberg college, in Allentown Pa., I would often go to lunch by myself after finishing up my internship at a local hospital. The coffee shop was no frills and many truck drivers came in there and became regulars. I would often sit at the counter reading a newspaper quietly.

One afternoon I had a momentous experience. I didn't see it that way at the time, but in retrospect what I heard and saw has impacted my life and the way that I conduct my coaching.

I was reading my newspaper when a very tall truck driver came into the restaurant and slid up to the counter to sit next to me. He greeted the waitress and she said, "Hey Jim, good to see you again, what will it be today for you? The usual?" He responded: "Nope, today all I really want is a piece of cherry crumb pie!"

Jim's order at the restaurant didn't resonate with me until years later when I was lucky enough as a graduate student in Miami to be relaxing with three close friends on a yacht. One of my friends was wealthy, which afforded me the opportunity to do something like this for the first time. I was a poor grad student and it was a gorgeous, sunny day that we spent listening to great tunes and working on nothing but a great tan.

I remember sitting at the back of the boat thinking about how little time I had left before I had to take on responsibility and the workload of a real psychologist. These would be the last moments of complete freedom and indulgence and I wanted to freeze them in my mind almost like a snapshot from a camera. I allowed myself to step out of myself for a few minutes to objectively take in everything around me.

I recall the laughter between friends, the serenity and color of the water, and the lyrics of Bob Marley. I doubt very much that any of my friends on the boat that day would remember that ride with the same imagery that I do to this day.

This quintessential moment made me think of that burly truck driver in Pennsylvania and how simple his request was that day at the coffee shop. For him, it wasn't about yachts, condos or filet mignons. To make him happy at that single moment, all he needed from the waitress was a piece of cherry crumb pie.

Learn to Appreciate

We often forget how simple it is to please ourselves because we are constantly looking out at the world and sizing up our self-worth against other people's accomplishments.

What happens to us in our maturation that prevents us from appreciating things the way we used to when we were younger? I believe the answer to this question lies in our perceptions of things and how our pasts color them in the present.

I always tell my clients the story about my first and last boat ride as an innocent and young adult. I recommend that they also examine small moments in their lives and not take them for granted. It is important to step outside of yourself and take objective "snapshots" of events or moments as they are happening. As you grow older, these moments remembered with clarity can serve as a positive force when things get tough.

I suppose the lesson is that happiness, as elusive as it may seem, might not be as far away as you think. Sometimes you just have to look outside of your work and take in the moment objectively to recognize it sitting there with you.

So the next time you find yourself watching your child at play or walking down the beach with your significant other, take the snapshot in your mind and carry it with you everywhere. Stocks can go up and down without our control, but happy memories can remain consistently with us for the rest of our lives. Only we have the power to harness them.

Please [write to the Stock Doc](#) with your trading, emotional or investing dilemmas. Dr. Cass always welcomes comments and stories, for which he'll try to offer valuable solutions in later columns.

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