

Interoffice Memorandum

to: Dr. Billy Reynolds, Dean of Liberal Arts; Sandy Bohnet, Vice-President for Human Resources; & Library Archives

from: Jenny Ott, Communication Instructor

subject: Sabbatical Report: Leave Complete

date: February 20, 2015

attached: Original Sabbatical Proposal

Sabbatical Leave Report: My Happiness Journey – Your Happiness Journey

Leave date	Fall 2014 semester.
Original Statement of Purpose	To examine what it means to be happy so as to develop tools for self and others to create personal “Happiness Journeys.”
Activities Performed	<p>As noted in my sabbatical proposal, my sabbatical process followed most of Gretchen Rubin’s <i>Happiness Project</i> stages (as outlined in her book of the same name): Preparation, Resolutions, and Maintenance. Yet, as I predicted, I could not separate my reading, discussion, application, reflection, and development of my own materials (for use in workshops and classes) into separate chunks of time because it was, and is, all integrated. Therefore, while I spent my time reading academic and non-academic sources (books, articles, research & blogs), I also had discussions with those who consider themselves to be happy (and not). Simultaneously, I watched a number of lectures, talks, speeches and documentaries on or related to happiness, which ultimately led me to take an e-course on “Wholehearted Living” with Brené Brown, Ph.D., LMSW (a research professor at the University of Houston). Her course involved eleven lessons of writing, reflection, reading, art creations, which took me fourteen weeks to complete. The e-course was the absolute highlight of my sabbatical and heavily influenced my sabbatical conclusions.</p> <p>Also, as correctly anticipated in my proposal, I am in the earliest part of the maintenance stage of my happiness journey having just completed my sabbatical. Consequently, instead of only concentrating my efforts on maintaining what I’ve gained over the last fifteen weeks, I am continuing to create, organize, reflect, and prepare for the workshops that I will offer in conjunction with the Faculty and Student Success Centers, and work on the materials I have started to integrate into my academic courses. I anticipate being able to note additional successes and difficulties of the process as it continues to unfold, during the subsequent facilitations I will lead.</p>

In sum, I completed four main activities during my sabbatical:

1. **Read** a number of books and articles on and/or related to Happiness (references included).
2. **Completed** an eleven-lesson and fourteen week e-course on “Wholehearted Living” with Dr. Brené Brown and two sets of 21-day each Meditation practice led by Deepka Chopra and Oprah Winfrey called, “Expanding your Happiness” and “Energy of Attraction”.
3. **Watched** a number of lectures, TED talks, videos, and documentaries on and/or related to happiness (references included).
4. **Created** exercises, reflections, and lessons for use in future workshops for KVCC students, staff and faculty, many pieces of which can be incorporated into my future courses (on-going).

Objectives Accomplished

I included a number of objectives in my sabbatical proposal and not only did I increase my knowledge on happiness during my sabbatical, but I also grew emotionally and in my relational skills. I completed these objectives as an integrated whole rather than as perfectly separated parts:

1. Clarified and defined happiness.
2. Understood others’ views of being happy.
3. Applied happiness variables personally.
4. Created a personal happiness journey.
5. Evaluated the successes and difficulties of the process through personal on-going reflection.
6. Created exercises, tools, and materials for others’ use on their happiness journeys (which has included infusing relevant and appropriate materials in my current academic courses, as well as in the workshops I will lead upon the completion of my sabbatical).

I am currently in the process of completing the last objective I included on my proposal. That objective is to (7.) organize and plan workshop sessions for students, staff, and faculty at KVCC on creating individual happiness journeys.

Conclusions Drawn

“Traveler, there is no path, the path must be forged as you walk.”—Antonio Machado (Spanish poet) from Dr. Brené Brown’s *Daring Greatly*, Appendix, p. 251.

The line above captures the spirit of my Happiness Journey. I did not know where this project would take me, how it would look, or even how it would feel. I had assumptions, hopes, and goals. However, as the saying attributed to Buddhism goes—when the student is ready, the teacher will appear, and with that, this happiness journey (I’m still on) has manifested as my awareness as expanded. My project has had many teachers bestowed through my readings, research, conversations, and moment-to-moment experiences. In my narrative below, I touch on some of the books I have read, the talks and/or documentaries, lectures, and videos that I have watched, and the e-course and meditations I have completed, along with some of my reflections or conclusions as they relate to the objectives of my sabbatical.

My path started simply by exploring the notion of *happiness* and one person’s own happiness project by reading author Gretchen Rubin’s book, *The Happiness Project*. (In fact, I credit Rubin with the idea for my sabbatical project.) Yet, I quickly became interested in the current and popular happiness research beyond just Rubin’s experience and perspective and turned to reading and exploring the talks, lectures, and research of Shawn Achor. He is the author of the books *Happiness Advantage* and *Before Happiness*, and writes about cultivating happiness as a way of life. In fact, his books are living positive psychology philosophy how-to’s—especially at work. Achor’s college course on Happiness is wildly popular at Harvard University, and has become mainstream relevant and popular because of his appearances on Oprah’s *Super Soul*

Sunday series, his PBS documentary, and real-life applications—all while anchored in research.

Because much of what Achor and Rubin write is about is rooted in understanding happiness by way of understanding the essence of the self (which relates a lot to the theoretical perspectives of intrapersonal communication), I turned also to reading some selected philosophy and research (especially the books, *The Untethered Soul* by Michael Singer, and *Daring Greatly & The Gifts of Imperfection* by Brené Brown). As Singer and Brown suggest, the relationships we have with private and public faces, self-talk, its origins and limitations, vulnerability, shame, perfectionism, and connection, are all inexplicitly linked to our joy and happiness. In-between and through these books (and various paths of exploration within), I also explored parenting as a wholehearted, engaging, aware, mindful way-of-living that addresses one's own tender self and our children as spiritual beings to nurture, not control—as a path within happiness. This latter part was explored via reading Dr. Shefali Tsabary's *The Conscious Parent* along with her interview and facilitations on Oprah Winfrey's *Super Soul Sunday* TV series.

Incidentally, each of the books I read and lectures/documentaries I watched and discussed above are quite different, although I find the themes are very much rooted in reaching for self-actualization, spiritual growth, connection to self and other, higher purpose, wholehearted living and ultimately, happiness. Gretchen Rubin's approaches in both her books, *The Happiness Project* and *Happier at Home*, are very matter-of-fact, habit-focused, research-and personalization-driven ways of achieving more happiness in life. I find Gretchen Rubin's website, blogs, writings, reader contributions, etc. to be exceptional resources, especially when I needed (and need) more information, more examples, more recent reflections, or just want to feel connected to those that are on their own happiness journeys. Rubin doesn't overthink happiness or how to manifest it. She doesn't go into all of the psychological, sociological, spiritual reasoning that may reveal our lack of "whatever" thing or issue that may be missing or not present in our lives, contributing to a lack of happiness. She acknowledges her own successes and shortcomings but in a real friend-kind-of-way. She is not judgmental, shallow, nor critical. She is just living life and trying to do it happier and better. I love her accessible writing style, her bits of research, humor, and quotes—especially historical and philosophical inclusions. As I've noted, I credit Gretchen Rubin's books with the inspiration for my sabbatical. I didn't know what "to do" before her book and her book gave me the permission and format from which I felt safe and confident enough to propose my project. I will be ever grateful for her books!

Shawn Achor's books, writings, talks and lectures reflect similar straight-forward approaches to living happier and being happier at work in his books, *The Happiness Advantage* and *Before Happiness*. His perspective is research-based, but very practical and his roots in positive psychology are accessible and not far off of common sense principles. (I found myself saying, "I could have guessed that would be true! That makes complete sense!"). I especially liked Shawn Achor's TED talk and his interviews with Oprah Winfrey on her "Super Soul Sunday" series. His two-part interview called, "The Secret of Happy People" (repeated air date: June 1, 2014) and his PBS series, "The Happiness Advantage" (original air date: August 2012 & on-demand), suggest, quite simply, that being happier is as accessible as engaging in some common sense behaviors and practices that I will discuss as part of the conclusions of my sabbatical.

The book, *Untethered Soul* by Michael Singer is a bit overwritten for me on the philosophy of the self-concept. Perhaps because I know a bit about the research and theory of self, I feel I can distance myself from, critique, or not fully embrace the ideal Singer describes as "leaning back" from situations where our ego is drawn in. Without oversimplifying it, he contends this distancing is, at least in part, what can contribute to our happiness or unhappiness in situations and life as a whole. Either way, there are pieces of wisdom in Singer's book to absorb but some

of it requires, at least for me, a picking and choosing of what works versus a full immersion into the release of self as he describes. I found a short video interview he gave with Oprah Winfrey much more accessible than parts of the book.

Dr. Brené Brown's books, talks, writings, and e-course were quite a compliment to Gretchen Rubin and Shawn Achor's works—but also a nice contrast. Brown argues that a look at self, alongside some cultural expectations, can ultimately transport us to places of joy, happiness, satisfaction, connection and intimacy through vulnerability (or on the other side of things) to spaces of shame, guilt, masks, perfection, emptiness, and feeling unfulfilled. It is Brown's books, lectures, and most certainly her e-course on "Wholehearted Living" that I completed, alongside of Deepka Chopra and Oprah Winfrey's 21-day each Meditation experiences "Expanding your Happiness" and "Energy of Attraction", that influenced my sabbatical experience and conclusions the most. This is true not only in the sense of what I will share with others in my academic courses and workshops at the college, but also in my own personal sabbatical take-aways.

Related, Dr. Shefali Tsabary's *The Conscious Parent* is a philosophical way of living life, rather than a parenting strategies book. Her lessons are about recognizing that our kids (all people, but especially our kids) are here to teach us about cultivating our authentic selves as much as we are here to provide them with the ability to actualize into the person they are "destined" to be. Her approach is mindfulness, awareness, understanding, and practicing compassion, empathy, kindness, and the notion that we are here to learn from each other rather than to project our will, desires, control, power or purpose on another human being. I was first "introduced" to Dr. Tsabary's perspective on an Oprah Winfrey two-part "Lifeclass" called, "Confessions of Stressed Out Parents" and "The Children Speak Out" (air date: September 28, 2014), and while her connections with happiness are not overt, they were important to include as part of my experience and study of happiness because much of my life is spent being a parent. Not only is it important to me to live my best life for myself, but also for the role modeling I provide for my children. Additionally, as with most parents, I want to understand how to help my children live their best lives—as happy or should I say—Wholehearted people.

*Conclusion 1:
The opposite of
happiness is not
depression or
sadness.*

The key in each of the resources noted above, and as a result, one of my sabbatical conclusions is that **the opposite of happiness is not depression or sadness**. It is unhappiness. I have concluded that there is space in our lives for happiness and unhappiness, and while we can strive to carve out a life that is "glittery" and exuberant with joy all the time, the truth is that is not how life unfolds, nor should it," as a friend of mine said when interviewed (Cooke, interview). Yet, if you're unhappy, it doesn't mean you are defective. It may be as a result of a mindset, a practice (or a lack thereof), unawareness, or just a phase of "funk".

*Conclusion 2:
The feelings of
happiness are
inextricably linked
to one's personal
outlook on almost
everything.*

A second conclusion as a result of my readings, viewings, and discussions with others, is what happiness is—and spoiler alert—it is not profound. I noted in my sabbatical proposal, before I was awarded the opportunity to spend time exploring happiness more deeply and personally, that I already had a good sense of how the main stream literature, pop sources, and my own heart defined happiness. Some of what I knew was admittedly cliché (happiness is journey, not a destination; happiness is like a smile—we all have one, but mine is different than yours), some was just common sense (money can't buy happiness, but happy people are more likely to have personal success, be healthy and have strong relationships) and some was personal (the most important thing I know about happiness is that I'm already happy). And yet, what I discovered in all my reading, course work, and reflection was that **the feelings of happiness are inextricably linked to one's personal outlook on almost everything**. In Gretchen Rubin's books, for example, she identifies a dozen concrete and measureable resolutions she tackled each month for a year.

Interestingly, while Rubin’s overarching process worked well for me (that is, the stages of the happiness journey), I found that her view of being happy reflected her very personal view of happiness in her life. Namely, Rubin has a strong need to control, modify and measure specific variables identified in various happiness or happiness-related studies or philosophy. I, on the other hand, get somewhat stressed and unmotivated when I have to check boxes in my personal life based on a controlled, measured and assessed formula (interestingly, this is something Rubin discusses in her upcoming book, *Better Than Before: Mastering the Habits of Our Everyday Lives*). I found this very personal perspective repeated itself whenever I read someone else’s take on happiness, or spoke with them about their process. As a result, my specific and personal happiness process ended up being quite different from Rubin’s. In fact, Rubin suggests early in her book, *The Happiness Project*, discovering and determining what inspires personal happiness is as individual as the journey itself. The process has to unfold in its own way—and it did and still is, just as it will for those I desire to empower in their own journeys (in my classes and workshops).

Further on the first two conclusions, when it comes to defining personal happiness for me, the aspects of living a more Wholehearted life speak more to me than philosophical definitions, other people’s personal perspectives, or research-driven conceptualizations of happiness. In other words, happiness is intertwined with living Wholeheartedly for me, but being happy is not my ultimate goal. However, being unhappy almost always indicates that my Wholeheartedness is out of balance in some way, not that I’m depressed or sad. These revelations came to me while reading Dr. Brené Brown’s books, taking her e-course, and listening to her lectures. Her grounded-theory research has demonstrated ten guideposts for Wholehearted living, which “is about engaging in our lives from a place of worthiness. It means cultivating the courage, compassion, and connection to wake up in the morning and think, “No matter what gets done and how much is left undone, I am enough.” It’s going to bed at night thinking, “Yes, I am imperfect and vulnerable and sometimes afraid, but that doesn’t change the truth that I am also brave and worthy of love and belonging” (Brown, e-course, part 1, lesson 1).

For me, the ten guideposts include both the aspects of a more complete and fulfilling life, while also acknowledging the parts of not being wholehearted. These latter elements are what can contribute to unhappiness, less fulfillment in life and feeling less satisfied overall. Brown’s guideposts begin with cultivating something and letting go of something else. They include: Cultivating authenticity and Letting go of what other people think; Cultivating self-compassion and Letting go of perfectionism; Cultivating a resilient spirit and Letting go of numbing and powerlessness; Cultivating gratitude and joy and Letting go of scarcity and fear of the unknown; Cultivating intuition and trusting faith and Letting go of certainty; Cultivating creativity and Letting go of comparison; Cultivating play and rest and Letting go of exhaustion; Cultivating calm and stillness and Letting go of anxiety; Cultivating meaningful work and Letting go of self-doubt and supposed to; and Cultivating laughter, song and dance and Letting go of being cool.

As one might imagine, some of these guideposts contained elements of cultivating more of what I already was doing to live Wholeheartedly, and some of them contained ideas and behaviors that I had not realized were absent from my way of living. Related, I also struggled with letting go of some of the things that have contributed to living less than Wholeheartedly. For example, I did not realize how much I had “bought into” a perception of living in a culture and life of scarcity (Brown, e-course, lesson 3). I have been guilty of uttering, “There is never enough... [time, energy, love, support, resources]” on more than one occasion and I was utterly unaware of how much this way of thinking contributed to a state of feeling like I was always running to keep up (a phrase I also have said way too much in my life). Interestingly, combating this cognitive bombshell was cultivating gratitude—and not just in a passive, quick, passing way. It was in creating a gratitude practice (that’s not perfect, but is in process) that seeks to keep my

scarcity perspective in check, and as a result contributes greatly to my overall sense of well-being, happiness, and wholeheartedness.

Conclusion 3:
Happiness is cultivated through every day, personal practices related to creating and sustaining happiness.

Related, a third conclusion about happiness was also not surprising, but is maybe one of the most important things I learned about happiness. That is, happiness doesn't just *happen*. **Happiness is cultivated through every day, personal practices related to creating and sustaining happiness.** Happiness is a lot like a person's overall health in that we are all born with certain qualities that make us more or less susceptible to being healthy or sickly. If we want to modify this predisposition, we integrate certain changes and behaviors into our lifestyles so we can feel better, live longer, and (hopefully) decrease our likelihood of getting sick, and increase our ability to fend off disease. If we want to live happier, it's important to acknowledge that our baseline level of happiness is likely less a part of the equation than even our baseline level of health. (Note, one can determine their level of Happiness through the Authentic Happiness Inventory offered by the University of Pennsylvania). In other words, we can modify our level of happiness simply by incorporating some basic practices into our lives. Things like creating an on-going practice of everyday gratitude (as noted above), writing for two minutes every day about a positive experience that's just occurred, exercising for at least ten minutes a day, meditating for two minutes so as to combat the multitasking habits that contribute to our levels of stress and undermine well-being, and/or writing one email a day thanking someone in our lives for their ongoing social support.

Conclusion 4:
Happiness involves embracing the paradoxes of life.

While the last two conclusions I've noted may seem contradictory, they actually support a fourth conclusion: **Happiness involves embracing the paradoxes of life.** In order to be happy, one has to engage in some tried and true, research-based practices—but the way one practices happiness, calmness, wholeheartedness and so on, doesn't have to manifest in the ways it might for someone else. In my own application of happiness practices, as noted earlier, I created a gratitude tree that I started with my family. We created a paper oak-type tree that we then hung paper leaves on each day. The leaves were the place we each wrote our gratitude for the day, but we didn't get to it every day and we still don't (our tree is now a gratitude & happy memories jar). Additionally, this semester, I've started the practice of writing at least one email a week to a student in one of my classes that has made a positive contribution to the class. I'm not writing an email a day, but I am writing an email a week—and I've already seen the quick notes of appreciation to my students pay off in several ways: additional engagement and interest in the class, words-of-kind in return emails or verbal comments outside of class, and the best—this past week, a class discussion about the impact of my positive teaching style along with the content of the class. What a huge payoff!

Another relevant paradox of life that I have learned to embrace on this journey is that happiness doesn't always make you *feel* happy (in fact, Rubin writes a great deal on this subject both in her book and on her blog in an article by the same name, April 20, 2007). Rubin writes, "the activities that contribute to long-term happiness don't always make me feel good in the short-term. I don't always look forward to those activities. I may find them actually upsetting" (par. 3 from https://www.gretchenrubin.com/happiness_project/2007/04/happiness_doesn/). In fact, I embraced some diametrically opposed ideas and behaviors on my happiness journey as I hoped to in my proposal: to work smarter and maximize my time, while slowing down to appreciate the fact I have precious time; to do less so as to have more; to be wiser and more enlightened by enthusiastically embracing who I am right now, rather than seeking to be *better*; to connect with others, while taking more time for myself, and so on. I also worked hard to combat some of the less-than-wholehearted habits I had adopted over my life that were undercutting my overall sense of well-being and happiness. I didn't always enjoy these processes, lessons, insights, memories or conversations. However, the work I have done is paying off now in that I better

Conclusion 5:
One's happiness
journey is an on-
going life-long
process.

**Summary of the
manner in which
the criteria for
sabbatical leave
proposals were
fulfilled.**

understand myself, my life's purpose, and I have practices in place to help keep me on the Wholehearted path.

Finally, something else I know now to be true as a result of my sabbatical is that **one's happiness journey is an on-going life-long process**. In other words, there is no completion or goal to achieve here; rather, if one wants to cultivate more happiness in his or her life, he or she also has to trust the process to unfold in its own way and own time (with nudging now and then). In my own experience, I've found that as I learn more, the journey continues, the path grows ever wider, the options to explore ever greater. This is true for me in the moments that emerge to practice and reflect on the knowledge I've gained ("Did I really understand it? Can I really apply it? What's in my way? What worked? What feels off?"), as well as in the gifts of wisdom that are still sitting on the bookshelves, embedded in unspoken conversations, and uncovered thoughts. But, it will all come in good time with enough space for thoughts to grow and time for seeds to take root. And yet, tangibly, as the process continues to unfold, I continue to create, integrate, and personally practice exercises and behaviors that help to keep me, and others, on a wholehearted living path.

My sabbatical's objectives and benefits met all of the general criteria guidelines for Sabbatical Leaves including:

1. In learning how to positively thrive by increasing my happiness and better understanding what contributes to a Wholehearted life (or not) for me and others, I have and continue to *increase my professional effectiveness* as a faculty member, as a chair, committee member, and active member of the KVCC community. As noted earlier, I have already begun to incorporate elements of what I learned and created from my sabbatical into my academic classes. This process will only expand when I begin offering happiness workshops for all members of the college.
2. Additionally, as noted above, my sabbatical has started to, and will continue to *enhance KVCC's ability to fulfill its mission and/or improve service to students* through my communication with others about creating their own happiness journeys—not only in my academic courses, but also in the workshops I've discussed. Workshops will be open to faculty, staff, and students. I will work with the Student Success Center and Faculty Success Center to offer these workshops.
3. The opportunity this sabbatical provided for *refreshment of mind and body, creative challenges, and/or incentives for critical thinking* was inherent in its purpose and goals. As noted early on in this narrative, I worked through some opposing goals—relaxation and mindfulness, creative thought and simplicity, time with others and time alone—but I specifically needed the time and space this sabbatical allowed for to disconnect from routine so that I could reconnect with what I understand now is my Wholehearted Life.
4. Finally, this sabbatical leave *exceeded the routine, ongoing professional development* that I typically seek from conferences/workshops, reading scholarly journals and engagements with colleagues. In breaking from the conventional path, I achieved greater insight and awareness (I studied shame and vulnerability as counters to Wholehearted Living from a sociologist—Dr. Brown—and I would have likely never investigated her work on my own for academic or personal reasons). As a leading happiness researcher notes, "Not everything has to be complicated all the time" (Steger, as cited in Levitt, 2013, 45), even though, for the record, there were times this journey was complicated!

In conclusion

Happiness is currently a hot topic and likely will continue to be as academic disciplines, philosophers, and business leaders move away from only focusing on what's wrong with people and toward positive psychology focusing on people's strengths and their ability to make choices that result in more satisfied lives. As the premiere edition of *Live Happy* magazine cited, "[i]n 2000 there were 50 books published on the topic of happiness... [and] this year more than 1,000 books on happiness have been released in the last three months alone" (2013, 4). And, just over a year ago now, in an online search about happiness, I discovered Harvard University's most popular course is on Positive Psychology which "focuses on the psychological aspects of a fulfilling and flourishing life. Topics include happiness, self-esteem, empathy, friendship, love, achievement, creativity, music, spirituality, and humor" (Marlisa, no date, par. 3).

As these sources suggest, I'm not alone in thinking about happiness. That's why the focus for my sabbatical was to answer the following questions about happiness, with the primary and overarching goal of ultimately creating more happiness in my life and developing tools to help others do the same: What is happiness? What makes people happy? How can I cultivate my own lasting happiness? How can I help others cultivate their lasting happiness? I noted over a year ago that I was already happy—but wondered if I could be *happier* and if so, how could cultivate an authentic happiness that *lasts*? Related, could the cultivation of my own happiness journey also provide an opportunity to inspire others to make a positive difference in their own lives (which ideally would create a ripple effect to others)?

This report has sought to answer those questions with a resounding, but not oversimplified—yes! Yes, I can cultivate my own happiness, help others do the same, and in doing so help others to reach their goals at KVCC, whether they are students, faculty, and/or staff members. In exploring what makes me happy and unhappy, it is no surprise that at the core of what brings me joy is teaching. I am at my best and I feel my best when I am engaging in my craft—teaching others how to live more fulfilling lives through appropriate and effective self-expression and engagement with others in various contexts. This is true not just in standing before a classroom to facilitate learning in real time, but also in the creation and preparation of questions, ideas, and exercises that engage those who show up to learn. Helping others access what inspires, energizes, and fuels them is a big part of my happiness journey—and certainly will continue to be as the process continues to unfold.

With Great Gratitude...

I would like to thank all the people that made this sabbatical possible and who supported my leave. These people include, but are not limited to KVCC's Board of Trustees, President Marilyn Schlack, Vice President Sandy Bohnet, Vice President Dennis Bertch, Dean Billy Reynolds, all the members of the Sabbatical Committee, the Communication Department, and especially my spouse and department colleague, Steve Ott who graciously stepped in as interim department chair during my absence, and assumed some of my class load—including a new course preparation for him. This experience, as noted in much of my narrative above—without sounding overly dramatic—has been life-changing for me in immeasurable ways. It was exactly what I needed at the time that I needed it. I will be ever grateful.

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