



Audio essayist: Eric Weiner

Title: Looking for happiness around the world

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About this transcript

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Introduction

As a foreign correspondent, Eric Weiner performed what he saw as the main task of journalism: Travel to the least happy places and interview the least happy people in them.

In this Skype-recorded episode of Bookpod, Weiner talks about *The Geography of Bliss*, the book in which he used a "happiness index" to travel to the happiest places in the world. He shares with us the lessons he brought back with him into his own life.

Presentation

Let's take Iceland as an example of a happy place.



I loved sort of the coziness of Reykjavik, the capital, in the middle of winter, in January, when it's not only cold, but it's dark.

You know, I arrived at ten-thirty in the morning and there's no sun, there's no sign of the sun. When I asked people when I might see the sun, the answer I got was like mid-March. And they were sort of exaggerating but sort of not. The sun peeks over the horizon for an hour or two on a good day and it goes away again for twenty-two hours.

And yet there is this really tremendous coziness in the city. It's a great city of coffee shops and bars, but you know on a very human scale. There are only 300,000 people in all of Iceland. About half that number live in the capital Reykjavik, so it's not this sprawling city.

And it's a city where nature is always around the corner. Like, you'd be on this shopping street with all your cafes and boutiques, and you turn the corner and there's the sea or mountain or just a vista that was totally raw and natural.



So, unlike, say, New York, in Reykjavik you never forget that nature gets the upper hand and nature is boss, and I mean that in a good way.

So that's one thing I loved was this coziness and this access to nature, even in a very urban setting.

The other thing I loved is, frankly, the Icelanders are a little bit crazy, and I think they would be the first to admit that. They have this sort of binge mentality, where, you know, they would drink like fish on Friday or Saturday nights. But if it's a Tuesday night and you have, like, a glass fine or beer, you're labeled a lush.

They tell me, at least, this goes back to their Viking days where it was feast or famine. So, if you had a catch of fish or a shipment came in from Denmark or wherever, you binged. So they still have this binge mentality.

And they have a very interesting attitude toward failure, which I quite like. And that is, basically, they like failure. They embrace it, and not in the way that we do in America. In America we love a failure story but only as back-story to a very successful one.



You know, you hear the story about the politician who tried several times to run for office and didn't succeed, but now Mr. Obama's doing very fine. Or the businessman whose first few ventures failed, but now Mr. Buffet has succeeded quite well. Those kind of stories.

But in Iceland they love failure for failure's sake. You know, as one Icelander put it, "Better to fail for the right reasons than to succeed for wrong ones."

So, there's sort of a heroic notion of failure that could be very liberating.

So, you would meet these Icelanders, who, every 18-year-old has a garage band, and their parents encourage them to have a garage band. Or they will constantly, to use this tired phrase, "reinvent themselves."

You know, I met this man named Lars who was going into his fifth or sixth career and he was my age, mid-forties, and it was perfectly natural and normal in Iceland. There are so many things that I love about that country.



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I would go to a place that had a lot of some ingredient that we thought made us happy, like money, for instance. If you believe that money buys happiness, then Qatar in the Persian Gulf should be the happiest place in the world because they're just loaded with money – on a per capita basis, the wealthiest country in the world.

So, you know, I didn't just go by the sort of data because I would have spent a lot of time in northern Europe, which is where a lot of the happiest countries are. But that was part of my criteria. And then I went to places like Bhutan, where they have a policy of Gross National Happiness. I mean, come on, I had to go there! And besides it's an absolutely amazing place.

One of the things that really stuck with me is what this man named Karma, whom I met in Bhutan, told me. Karma said, "Happiness is not personal. There's no such thing as persona happiness. Happiness is one-hundred percent relational." And, you know, it sounds obvious, but when you think about it, it's kind of profound because we think of our happiness as being just another thing we work on by



ourselves, like our career and our physique and whatever else.

So work on your relationships. You know, do something meaningful with your life. Because ultimately I sort of conclude that the kind of smiley face, frothy version of happiness that we're sold is not really what we want. We want a happiness that's also dispersed with moments of unhappiness, with grit and truth, with the rough spots.

I think that happiness is not something that we can tackle directly. It's a – it's a byproduct of a life lived well. So, ironically, even though I wrote a book about happiness, I'm advocating that we don't think about happiness too much and don't buy too many books about happiness, except for mine, of course.

Valedictory

For more information about Eric Weiner, visit

www.ericweinerbooks.com.

Incidentally, Weiner dubbed Moldova, the landlocked country between Romania and Ukraine, as the least happy country in his travels. The reason? Moldovans are eaten up with envy.



Bookpod producer is Barbara Finkelstein. Music is by Kevin MacLeod.

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