

Praise for  
*Finding Sanctuary: Monastic Steps for Everyday Life:*

“There is much to be appreciated at this buffet. What’s most appealing is that it is written for a significant and growing audience: the unchurched spiritual seeker. . . . There’s much to recommend this book to that unchurched seeker who’s looking to learn more, or simply someone who may be interested in contemporary applications of monasticism. It all depends, I guess, on what you’re hungry for.”

—*American Benedictine Review*

“. . . readers will be surprised at how important ancient monastic practices are for our modern lives. The book is well worth reading.”

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—*Cruz*

“There is much food for thought and prayer as Jamison details counter-cultural chapters on silence, contemplation, obedience, humility, community, spirituality and hope. In his explanation of each of these qualities of a Benedictine-informed life, he assists us to assess our own spiritual awkwardness, states of denial and compromise, lack of religious depth and avoidance of conversion. Whatever might be our failings or foibles, Jamison supports us in creating a meaningful and theologically grounded sanctuary for everyday living.”

—*Catholic Studies*

“At one time, spirituality and religion were the same; not today. One can experience spirituality without being a member of a religion, and many have turned away from Christianity or other religions looking for some kind of spirituality that will make them feel good or give them whatever they need in life. Abbot Christopher talks about those who shop for spirituality and shows that religion and spirituality should not be separated. Abbot Christopher’s last chapter is on hope; the Rule of St. Benedict encourages all followers not to lose hope in life and, especially, in life everlasting. . . . *Finding Sanctuary* is highly recommended to those looking for more in life than the rat race.”

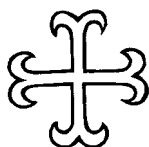
—*Curled Up With A Good Book*

“Few will be able to simply read this book, but instead will find themselves absorbing it.”

—*Writing Works*

# FINDING HAPPINESS

*Monastic Steps for a Fulfilling Life*



Christopher Jamison  
Abbot of Worth



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*Dedicated to the memory of my father  
who showed me how to be hopeful,  
to my mother who still shows me how to be faithful  
and to my brothers with their wives  
who continue to show me love.*



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# Preface

**T**his book is for everyone in search of happiness, so I hope that people of all religions and none will read it. The book begins by looking at ancient and modern ideas about happiness before turning to the insights of the first Christian monks and nuns. Their monastic wisdom is built upon the Christian Gospel, a faith that I delight in sharing with them, but you do not need to share this faith to enjoy their teaching as presented here. All that is needed is an inquiring mind and an open heart.

The simple idea running through the whole book is that happiness comes to us indirectly as the fruit of defeating the causes of our unhappiness. To take steps in this direction requires determination and a readiness to look at ourselves unflinchingly. The best monks and nuns of every age have possessed this determined honesty to an extraordinary degree and so they make invaluable guides on our way. I hope that some of their guidance will help you as it has helped me.

Abbot Christopher Jamison  
Easter 2008



# Introduction

**A**t the start of the BBC TV series *The Monastery* I offered a simple observation that was then repeated at the beginning of each episode: “We find that more and more nowadays, people say to us that life is too individualistic, that their life is too materialistic, that there’s consumerism everywhere and that they’ve got more and more superficial pleasures in life and yet at a deeper level they’re not happy.” This single sentence was referred to time and again by those who came to the monastery on retreat in response to the programs. “You were talking about me,” they said.

People are searching for happiness, but not everybody knows how to find it. They speak about an ache in their hearts and disappointment with lives that on one level seem fine. This spiritual longing is becoming a common part of modern life, but many people do not know how to address it in their daily existence.

In Britain today, we are wealthier than ever and yet it seems there is a general feeling of dissatisfaction. Our society’s obsession with seeking happiness through consumption and pleasure often leads to the very opposite. People are surrounded on all sides by the raging waters of modern living,

a torrent so great that it seems they have to jump in and go with the flow. This flow promises happiness in abundance and yet for many people the power of the flow far outstrips the strength of the happiness. All that activity and all those apparent gains give so little fulfillment.

One way of surviving the torrent of modern living other than by going with the flow is the monastic way of life. It offers not only monks but also laypeople a series of stepping-stones to help us keep our footing when the current is flowing strongly. Stepping-stones are not a destination and they are not a technique, but they can help to steady our stride, giving us the confidence to keep traveling.

The stepping-stones in this book come from the Benedictine tradition, the oldest monastic way of life in the Catholic Church. One of the reasons for the durability of this tradition is that the founder, St. Benedict, recognized how difficult it is to stay on the spiritual path. In the Prologue to the Rule of St. Benedict (RB), he writes:

Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the outset. But as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love. (RB, Prol 46-47)

Contrast this with the books about happiness in the Mind, Body and Spirit section of any large bookshop. They assume that happiness is a simple word with a simple meaning and

we just need some good advice in order to achieve it. Many of them say something like “read this book and learn a system that will make you happy.” They imply that finding happiness is a systematic process and that it is relatively easy.

The modern science of happiness offers plenty of good advice about how to achieve happiness, but remains strangely silent about how it is to be defined. The underlying assumption is that when people use the word happiness they all mean the same thing, namely, the very loose concept of “feeling good.” A further assumption is that what makes each person feel good is a subjective opinion beyond challenge and hence happiness is irreducibly subjective. The convenient consequence of these assumptions is that these self-help books do not have to examine the harder question as to whether there is a right and a wrong definition of happiness.

When I worked as a headmaster, prospective parents would frequently say to me that above all they wanted their children to be happy. While this is a very reasonable aspiration for parents, part of me wanted to challenge them and say: What do you mean by happy? Do you really want your children to “feel good” above all else, even if they have to compromise their integrity in order to carry on “feeling good”? Why do you not want your children to be above all decent, just and honest? I suspect that for some parents, “happy” does indeed involve virtue, but the atmosphere around the word today means that this cannot be taken for granted. It seems some people are quite prepared to be vicious rather than virtuous in order to be what they call happy.

Recently, some schools have attempted what they call “happiness education”; yet this easily becomes health education, where health has now been expanded to include mental health. To offer mental health education in schools is a welcome development, but health should not be confused with happiness. To teach happiness does not simply mean offering healthy lifestyle advice; it means teaching that goodness and virtue are integral parts of happiness.

The Christian monastic tradition, like all classic religious and monastic traditions, sees a profound link between happiness and virtue. While there is nothing morally wrong with feeling good, it is not in itself a moral guide to right and wrong. To find such a guide, we need a wider framework. The commonly used principle “avoid harm to others” seems to be that guide for many people, but it has the unforeseen result of allowing people to neglect the interior, spiritual world from which all our actions spring. This book offers a framework that builds on the spirituality and virtue that lies within each of us. While consequences of actions are important, the monastic framework looks into the heart and the soul of the person behind the actions. If we are to find happiness, we need to go beyond the world of simply feeling good and avoiding harm to enter the world of knowing good and doing good.

In seeking happiness, we need to keep in mind as a cautionary image the perils that await those prospecting for gold. We must beware of “fool’s gold,” the natural but inauthentic mineral that looks like gold, because I believe that there is such a thing as fool’s happiness. For example, some people

claim that getting drunk makes them happy. But what sort of happiness is this? Is it “fool’s happiness” or real happiness? I believe that happiness is like gold and hence fakes are possible.

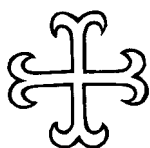
It is a recurring human error to identify happiness with pleasure, an error that in our day is widely promoted by our consumer culture. Monks and nuns appreciate life’s simple pleasures; we often live in places of great natural beauty and we have a long tradition of producing honey, wine and cheese. Pleasure is a perfectly moral and desirable part of life. Yet such pleasures do not of themselves make a person happy; they can only be enjoyed fully if one is already happy.

Tastes in pleasure vary, so one person’s pleasure is another person’s displeasure. If pleasure and happiness are confused, then happiness also becomes a matter of taste. By contrast, if we *distinguish* happiness from pleasure, then we can see that pleasure is indeed a matter of taste, but that happiness is not. As with gold, so with happiness careful work is needed to discern the real thing. The monastic tradition offers support in making that discernment, stepping-stones to steady our nerve as we make our choices about where to go next in search of happiness.





PART ONE  
*Purity of Heart*





1

*The History  
of Happiness*



*Who among you delights in life?*

Psalm 34:12

**A**re monks happy? To say that somebody is happy can have so many different meanings: they're in love, they're drunk, they're high, they're enjoying themselves, they're exultant, they're content, they're jovial, they're lucky, they're in high spirits, they have found the perfect life. Usually the person describes his experience by saying: "I feel good," where "good" has an equally diverse set of meanings. Now I cannot say that monks have all or any of these experiences or that they go around feeling good the whole time. Instead, I want to make an alternative statement: I want to affirm confidently that monks are not *unhappy*. This is easier to affirm because "unhappy" seems to be a word with a narrower spectrum of meaning: unhappy simply means gloomy, forlorn and miserable.

Now I can definitely affirm that monks are not unhappy because nearly all the monks I know who are in good health (and even most of those who are unwell) do not experience life as gloomy, forlorn and miserable. They are positive people, who often carry their own and other people's burdens with impressive reserves of faith, hope and love. In essence, the monastic tradition helps us to handle what makes us unhappy and that leads to a particular kind of happiness that is some-

times at odds with many of those diverse meanings of happiness described above.

My reluctance to describe monks as happy was shared by the father of Western monasticism, St. Benedict, in his Rule. The title “Rule” often misleads people into thinking that Benedict wrote a book of rules. In fact, he wrote a book of insights about Christian living, with some practical suggestions (rules) about how to put those insights into practice. The insights are still guiding people today, even though many of the rules have been adapted to local conditions as Benedict asked that they should be. At no point in his Rule does Benedict ever use the words “happy” or “happiness.” He lived his monastic life in Italy in the early sixth century, the time of the barbarian invasions of Europe, a time of extreme violence and instability, and so perhaps he wished to avoid the primitive understanding of happiness that many invading tribes brought with them. He prefers instead to speak of joy and delight, and in describing those qualities he is describing the monastic understanding of happiness.

◆ ————— ◆

THE ORIGINS OF  
MONASTIC HAPPINESS

◆ ————— ◆

Our monastic sense of happiness does not come out of the blue, however, and while its principal source is the Christian Gospel, the monastic tradition has built upon the Gospel with insights from ancient Greek philosophy. A good way to understand how that development happened is to look at the language people use to describe happiness.

The Latin word for happy, *felix*, also meant lucky, but even further back, *felix* came from the Greek word for fertile. In the ancient world, if you and your land were fertile, then you were lucky, and if you were lucky then you were happy. It follows then, that if luck is what makes you happy, and there is no science behind luck, then happiness is just a roll of the dice. This fatalistic sense is the primitive meaning of happiness and it is deeply seated in European culture. All the languages of Europe reflect it. In German the connection is quite explicit: the word for happiness is still the same as the word for luck: *das Gluck*.

The connection is less obvious in other languages, but a little digging soon reveals that it is there. *Happy* has its origins in the old English word *hap*, meaning luck, as still found in words like *perhaps*, *hapless* and *haphazard*. The French for happiness is *le bonheur*, easily mistaken for the words *bonne heure*, meaning “good hour”; in fact, *bonheur* is a simplification of the old French *bon augure*, meaning good augury or good omen.

Fertility and luck are the first steps in the history of happiness, and alongside luck were the pagan gods, the unpredictable dispensers of fertility and wealth, and hence the dispensers of luck, whose goodwill had to be retained through ritual and sacrifice. While traces of happiness as luck remain in developed countries today—revealed, for example, in the popularity of horoscopes—most modern people do not see luck as the primary source of happiness. So how did we move beyond this primitive sense of lucky happiness?

The philosophers of ancient Greece who lived six centuries before Christ were the first people to set about freeing happiness

from pure luck. They tried to see beyond the material unpredictability of life and began by looking at the constant features of nature such as mountains and rivers. Yet even as they sought permanence they perceived permanent flux: “you can never step into the same river twice,” observed Heraclitus.

The first great philosophical writer to develop a whole system of thought around stability was Plato. He arrived at Europe’s first clear definition of what he considered to be the permanent aspects of life and hence of permanent happiness.

His understanding of reality took human thought into new realms, and the river provides a good illustration of this philosophy. While the water in the river is always moving and the river always changing, the idea “river” does not change. And that unchanging idea must come from somewhere. For Plato, it came from the realm of unchanging ideas, a region where the perfect idea exists, the perfect form of everything that is. While our bodies experience change and decay, our minds know that there is something permanent beyond the material. Our minds derive such thoughts from the ideal forms of everything that exists. These forms are permanent and do not depend on human minds, although human minds can understand them. This is the origin of idealism, the belief that beyond the ceaseless change and imperfections of daily life there is a world of unchanging, perfect ideas from which every object derives its existence. While the term “idealism” is most often used today to express belief in immutable moral ideas, Plato believed immutable ideas lie behind all aspects of life.

The existence of such a permanent, fixed world of ideas immediately has implications for the understanding of happiness; the culture of chance within which happiness had previously been imagined no longer holds sway. If life is not simply determined by a throw of the dice and the whim of the gods, if there is some permanence, if there are permanent ideas, then it becomes possible to ask a previously pointless question: how can we be happy? When life is chance, then all we can do is make offerings to the gods and hope for the best. There is no point in wasting time on thinking about how to be happy. But when at least some part of human life is permanent then human happiness might be permanent as well and there emerges a whole new area of human endeavor, namely, finding happiness.

From the fifth century BC onward, the history of European culture is driven by the search for happiness as something that humans can achieve for themselves. No longer simply fighting to survive and hold at bay the fickle elements, a growing number of people believed that they could take positive steps to be permanently happy and that they could help other people to do the same.



PLATONIC  
CONTEMPLATION



Plato's contribution to European culture is immense, but on our journey toward finding happiness we will concentrate on just one aspect of that contribution: his understanding of human desire. Plato believed that the fulfillment of our deepest



desire leads to happiness. By speaking of desire rather than necessity Plato was giving freedom to the desirer. In the primitive view there is a chain from basic needs, to those needs fulfilled if you are lucky, to happiness. In the Platonic view another set of links emerges: the link from chosen desire, to action to fulfill that desire, to happiness when the desire is fulfilled. This self-conscious link between desire and happiness enabled people to break away from the idea of luck as the source of their happiness. Between basic need and happiness lies luck, but between chosen desire and fulfillment lies, possibly luck, but also the possibility of action. Plato and his contemporaries argued about which desires were right and which were wrong, and how they might be fulfilled. But they were agreed that the active fulfillment of desire was their key to happiness and they set about describing how to achieve it.

In essence, they said that all earthly desires are derived from the world of perfect ideas and that they all derive ultimately from the desire for perfect goodness and perfect beauty. As Plato expresses it in *The Symposium*: “happy means possessing what is good and beautiful . . .”

He continues: “Climbing from the love of one person to love of two; from two to the love of all physical beauty; from physical beauty to beauty in human behavior; thence to beauty in the subjects of study; from them he finally arrives at that branch of knowledge that studies nothing but ultimate beauty. Then at last he understands what true beauty is.”

But Plato was skeptical about the value of lower pleasures that could detract from the journey to the higher happiness

of goodness and beauty. People can only find happiness if they learn how to discipline their desires and regulate their lives—avoiding misguided attempts to fulfill desire. For desire has a dark potential that comes out in dreams and fantasies, in sudden obsessions and uninhibited acts. That is why for Plato, deep human desire needs to be channeled through a life of careful discipline.

This contemplation of the good and the beautiful is Platonic happiness, the first complete picture of how happiness can be achieved not by luck but by design. If the continued presence of the horoscope in our culture shows that some of us still give luck a place in our search for happiness, there is also plenty of evidence to suggest that Platonic happiness still holds sway for many people. For example, walking in beautiful countryside, attending concerts and viewing public art galleries have rarely been more popular; it's fair to assume that all those crowds at the concerts and the exhibitions believe that the contemplation of beauty will make them happy. We don't just stay at home waiting for luck to come to us, we go out to enjoy the beauty.

## ◆ — ARISTOTELIAN VIRTUE — ◆

Alongside this Platonic love, there is one more classical root to the monastic tradition: the classical tradition of virtue. For St. Benedict, monks are people who “delight in virtue” (RB, 7.69) and the monastic observances are “tools for the cultivation of the virtues” (RB, 7.3-6). Monks are happy to be virtuous and sad when they fail in virtue. Aristotle was Plato's most famous stu-

dent. He shared his master's conviction that happiness was achievable and that it came from stepping beyond immediate material pleasures. Yet he was, quite literally, more down-to-earth than Plato. Where Plato looked beyond the physical realm, Aristotle looked into it. In doing so, he concluded that everything has a purpose, a final end, and that this purpose is imprinted within the thing itself. The task of the philosopher, therefore, is to discover the final end of every individual thing.

The purpose for human beings, according to Aristotle, is to be happy, but the kind of happiness we seek is also imprinted in the human soul. He argued that what distinguishes humans from other beings is reason, the rational soul, and so human happiness must be rational happiness. Rational here means acting in harmony with the final ends of all things, including the purposes of one's own body. Food and hunger provide simple examples of this: one should eat but not overeat, because the purpose of food is to nourish and give pleasure, not to make one sick and cause pain. This rational behavior he called virtue, a way of living in harmony with nature. Hunger should tell us when to eat: to overeat is one vice, but to starve oneself or others is also a vice. The virtue is in the balance.

Aristotle knew that, while virtue was rational, it was not habitual. It can become so, however, if people are educated to it. Virtue, he said, is a disposition a person has toward making good choices, and the way we learn to make good choices is through imitation. As children, we are not virtuous, but we can be told what acts are virtuous and learn to do them until gradually they become habitual. For example, if I am brought

up by a parent who is fair and consistent and teaches me to be the same, then I will grow up to be just; the virtue of justice will be natural and habitual in my dealings with other people. Such justice will bring happiness to me and to others.

Happiness for Aristotle is “the activity of the soul expressing virtue.” So in essence where Plato sees happiness as contemplation, Aristotle sees happiness as living virtuously. Yet Aristotle, unlike Plato, concedes that luck still has a place in happiness. To call a person suffering misfortune “happy” is a paradox he could not defend. While the luck of health and wealth is not sufficient to make us happy, Aristotle concedes that it is a necessary foundation for happiness. The skill is learning to use health and wealth virtuously.

Aristotle’s virtue is as hard to achieve as Plato’s contemplation, yet it too has consistently held sway over the European imagination of happiness. In contemporary society, Aristotelian virtue is alive and well at a very practical level. We believe more than ever that children need to learn love and fairness, wisdom and good living from their parents and at school. We are told by researchers that a child’s early years’ experience is the key to a fulfilled adult life. In other words, the virtue of our parents and our teachers is a vital part of everybody’s future happiness.

◆ — PHILOSOPHY AS A — ◆  
WAY OF LIVING

The ancient philosophers saw themselves as describing not just an analytic method but above all a way of living, so they

devised exercises to live out their philosophy. They advocated the learning by heart of key philosophical teachings to be constantly remembered, an exercise that they called “meditation”; they promoted self-control to live out these teachings and they devised an exercise called “the examination of conscience” to assess how well they lived out the teachings day by day. These spiritual exercises were used by people with very different philosophies, but, long before the coming of Christianity, all agreed that such interior self-awareness was an essential component of a happy life.

From the second century AD onward, Neoplatonism was the dominant philosophy of the Greek world, combining elements of Plato and Aristotle with philosophical exercises. Some Christian thinkers combined these Neoplatonist exercises with the way of life advocated by Christ in the Gospel. This combining of Neoplatonism and Christian faith was not without difficulties and to this day remains problematic for some Christians. It is, however, a key element in Christian monasticism. The center for this work of combining Neoplatonism and Christianity was Alexandria, the great Egyptian port city that looked across the Mediterranean to Greece. Here Christian thinkers created a new wave of theology that had a profound influence on the early Christian monasticism that was coming to life nearby in the deserts of Egypt.

Platonic contemplation and Aristotelian virtue are key elements of monastic living. Indeed, the two are linked at the core of the monastic vision of happiness; both imply a struggle against the lower passions that lead us away from beauty and

goodness. When we put the two elements together, we see that monks are people who find joy in contemplation and delight in virtue.

So if we contrast this with those meanings of happiness with which we began this chapter, we can already see a rough map of the territory we must cross. Contemporary meanings of happiness mainly involve feeling good, with the emphasis on *feeling*. Platonic contemplation involves *knowing* the good, the sense of knowing here being like that of knowing a friend rather than knowing a fact. Aristotelian virtue involves *doing* good, as in living out the virtues.

Benedict describes these experiences of knowing the good and doing good as joy and delight. For example, a monk is somebody who “delights in virtue” (RB, 7.69). The desire to know God is described as joy when Benedict invites a monk to “look forward to Easter with joy and spiritual longing” (RB, 49.7). So monastic steps across this territory will involve being wary of signposts that point to happiness as feeling good and will look out for paths that lead to the joy of knowing the good and the delight of doing good. To know the good and to do good we will have to struggle with all sorts of thoughts that tempt us away from the good. All the while, the siren voices of feeling good will offer us shortcuts to happiness. The monastic way of happiness as joy and delight is stronger than those voices. It offers a happiness so enduring that it can even make death happy.

◆ ————— A HAPPY DEATH ————— ◆

The words “happy” and “death” do not come together naturally in contemporary culture. By contrast, the Catholic tradition has prayers “for a happy death.” So let’s look at a happy death to illustrate this distinctive meaning of happiness.

Father Michael Smith was a monk of Worth and the story of his death conveys the monastic meaning of happy much more clearly than any theorizing. For many years, Worth had a small community of monks living and working among the poor in Peru. Father Michael had worked there and was famous for his ability to walk over the mountains of the Andes to serve the needs of people living in remote villages: he became known as *el gran misionero*, “the great missionary.” When he finally retired back to England in his eighties, he became ill and was hospitalized. He was diagnosed with inoperable, internal melanoma, the result of living for years in bright sunlight. When the diagnosis came and the consultant had explained the nature of the disease, Michael came home and I sat with him to talk it through. I explained that this disease usually affects the skin but that in rare cases it occurs internally. “So *that’s* what’s going to get me then,” he said with a tone that suggested he’d always wondered what he would die from. I said: “Michael, you have climbed many mountains in your life and now you have to climb the highest one of all.” His eyes lit up and he replied: “Yes, I’ve often thought of it like that . . . and the best part of climbing a mountain is the view from the top.”

So for two months Michael climbed that mountain with great faith, and during that time his deeply spiritual qualities emerged. During his final weeks, Michael was unable to leave his room and was unable to eat; his life was reduced to the bare minimum. Having been the servant of the least, he himself now became one of the least. Yet he retained what had always been the essentials of his life: the broad grin; the prayer; the acceptance of discomfort; the concern for others, especially for Peruvians whom he still inquired about. He died as he lived. And every day he received Holy Communion in his room, with focus and great dignity. On the penultimate Sunday of his life, he was very weak and a small group of monks celebrated Mass with him in his room; at the words of consecration, “this is my body . . . this is my blood . . .” his eyes opened very wide and his faith seemed to penetrate through the bread and wine to the Body and Blood of Christ, creating a deep sense of contemplation and communion for all of us present. During the days that followed he slowly slipped into unconsciousness and died the following week. We as a monastic community had the privilege of sharing in depth the experience of a happy death; it remains for us all a great source of inspiration and comfort.

Some of us may have had an elderly parent or relative with whom we have shared a similar experience. What is noteworthy for me is not simply that somebody on their deathbed can be grateful for having led a happy life, though that itself is a great blessing. What struck me about Father Michael’s death was that the dying itself was a happy experience. In his



living and in his dying, Michael knew the joy of contemplating God and the delight of living virtuously.

Clearly, dying at an advanced age, knowing that we are dying, surrounded by the loving support of friends and family, are elements of a happy death. But a happy death can take many forms. As part of our journey to find happiness, if we can appreciate what happiness means in the context of death, which, after all, is the one future experience we will all share, then we may have found an understanding of happiness that will also serve us well in life. In his Rule, St. Benedict says that “a monk must have death daily before his eyes.” Some may feel that this is a morbid attitude and indeed that the idea of finding happiness through thinking about death is morbid. But I believe that this approach is just the opposite; morbid means dwelling on death and being enthralled by it. I am suggesting instead that we look death in the face and in some sense conquer it by describing how it might be happy.

People diagnosed with a life-threatening illness often describe how the illness has led them to reassess their life and its priorities. This sometimes leads them to a better way of life that is simpler, giving time to what matters most in life. Without realizing it, such people are fulfilling St. Benedict’s injunction to keep death daily before our eyes. They would be surprised if anybody called them morbid; rather, they would insist that they had found a better way to live. Keeping death daily before our eyes means thinking about how our own death could be happy. This not only enables us to accept the reality of death as part of life, it also helps us to live life

now with full attention to what is truly important and so is an important part of finding happiness.

An example drawn surprisingly from the business world also illustrates how this could work for us. In the world of project management, starting at the end of a project and working backward is called “back planning.” When we know what the final stage looks like then we can work backward to describe the beginnings. This approach has the advantage of generating a whole picture of what is involved; as well as telling the last step it also tells us the first step. So at the start of our journey toward finding happiness we should do some “back planning” for a happy life, which means beginning with a description of a happy death.

Apart from the usual features of daily care and nourishment, a happy death might involve: the absence of mind-numbing pain (but the total absence of pain is not essential); the absence of anger, either because it has been passed through to acceptance or because it never occurred; a sense of communion with loved ones and with God. Ideally, it also involves a conscious awareness of what is happening so that there can be a letting go—no greedy clinging or demanding things of others. It may include a grateful looking back at life and expressions of gratitude to loved ones. This is not an exhaustive list but an intuitive one drawn from my personal experience. I suggest that we each draw up a description of our own happy death because as we do so, we will probably be discovering what a happy life involves.

A happy death as part of a life informed by contemplation and virtue describes the overall picture of our journey. This classical view of happiness can seem impossibly idealistic and excessively restrictive for people today. Freedom is integral to the modern understanding of happiness and so we must now turn to see if such a view is compatible with modern understandings of liberty and happiness.