

THE BLESSED LIFE: THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN

Everyone wants to be happy. That's a given. We'd all like to find our bliss, to use a popular expression. We'd all like to move through life free of the problems and concerns that seem to plague everyday existence. But how to do that? How can we find our bliss?

Robyn Orkant, a yoga teacher from Chicago, is trying to figure that out for herself. And she thinks she may have found the key to happiness. In a nutshell: living life like Oprah. You see, Ms. Orkant has decided to dedicate this entire year to following every bit of advice offered up on Oprah Winfrey's television show, her website and in her magazine "O".

Oprah, as most everyone knows, is a self-made woman, and hugely successful. She heads up a multi-million dollar entertainment empire. "If's she's lifted herself up from the horrible background she came from," says Robyn, "[then] she's got the key." (*New York Times*, 9-17-08, Sunday Style Section, 10)

Robyn is eating the foods Oprah promotes, following the relationship advice she and her guests dole out, reading the books she recommends and even wearing the clothes modeled on the show. Her husband is less than amused. "I hear her comparing herself to something she saw on television, commenting on a way a piece of clothing fit . . . . She worried about being schlumpy . . . ." (*Ibid*)

But Robyn persists. "It takes a huge amount of pressure off [me]" she told a reporter, "to be handed a spiritual path." (*Ibid*) She'll probably end up with a book deal out of it all, but will she find her bliss? Only time and any number of shopping excursions will tell.

Don't get me wrong. I have a great deal of respect for Oprah Winfrey. She has worked hard and well—and has made some serious contributions to the welfare of others. But still, I'm not sure her way is a true spiritual path. And even if it is, it's quite different from the one taught by Jesus. For the man of Nazareth didn't offer up hair and make-up tips. He didn't advance any investment schemes. And in the end, he didn't care if you were schlumpy or not. In fact, in teaching his way of life he often pointed to the schlumpy, the despised, the downtrodden, as those who might be best positioned to understand what he was saying. Instead of saying the rich, the well-coiffed, the emotionally secure and the well read have the key, he suggests it is all those we might think least likely who are on the path to true joy. Indeed, he seems to turn commonplace understandings upside down. We think of riches or long-life or the ability to take pride in ones accomplishments as a sign of blessing. But Jesus says otherwise. In fact, each of the beatitudes seems to say something contrary to our normally held ideas.

These Beatitudes are at the beginning of what is often called the Sermon on the Mount. It is a collection of Jesus' teachings about what it means to be a follower of Christ. He is portrayed as delivering this sermon to a crowd. Perhaps as he looks out at the assembled, he spots a poor man, a grieving widow, someone hiding behind a friend. Blessed," he says pointing to each one, "are the poor, those who mourn, the meek . . . ."

The Latin word *beatus*, which is at the root of the word beatitude, can be translated as "happy" or "blissful," But the word translated as "blessed" comes from the Greek word *makarios*, which means "sharing in the life of God." (Jim Forest, *The Ladder of the Beatitudes*, 20) Those who are blessed are those who share life with God.

Over the next few weeks we'll examine each of these beatitudes a bit more closely.

The first: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (5:3) Yes, this says poor *in spirit*, but I don't think we should dismiss this as simply a statement about personal piety. Anthony Bloom, a leader in the Eastern Church, is certainly right when he paraphrases poor in spirit as "those who understand they are nothing in themselves." (*The Way of the Desert*, rev. ed., xiv) Certainly it reminds us of the importance of remembering our ultimate worth comes from the fact that God loves us. But there is more to it than mere piety. The use of the word 'poor' is not accidental. While materially poor people can be so overwhelmed by their poverty that they fail to seek after God, the truth is that wealth poses an even greater danger to our spiritual well-being. One scholar puts it this way: "The proud self-reliance that is fed by prosperity all too easily prompts forgetfulness of our dependence on God." (Douglas Hare, *Interpretation: Matthew*, 36)

When you live in the fifth richest town in America, as those of us who live here in Westport do, these can be rather unsettling words. But Jesus often works that way. He often afflicts the comfortable and comforts the afflicted. Its not that the materially well-off can't be poor in spirit, but it is more difficult. If we want to share in the blessing, and in the kingdom, we must let go of our emotional and spiritual dependence on the things of success, and trust in God.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." (5:4)

It is sometimes said that grief is the price you pay for love. Perhaps that is what Jesus means when he says "blessed are those who mourn." Its not that mourning itself is a blessing. Its not that tears and depression and all that goes with grieving are good in and of themselves. Rather, it is that one who is mourning has loved. And one who has loved and been loved, is more apt to be open to receiving comfort.

Syndicated columnist Ellen Goodman's mother died at age 92 about two years ago. Ellen Goodman's mother Edith died at age 92 about two years ago. Edith was the sort of mother who offered unconditional love and support for her children. As Ellen once wrote: "My mother is someone who will listen to your problems until *you* are bored with them." (CT Post, 12-12-06, A-7)

Shortly before Edith's death, Ellen and her daughter and her three year-old grandson Logan paid Edith a visit. Despite Edith's advancing dementia and ill-health, all four generations reveled in the mutual love.

The next day, little Logan asked Ellen a very blunt question.

"Grandma," he said, "is your mommy going to die soon?"

Ellen, though surprised, answered truthfully, "I'm afraid she is, Logan."

"But Grandma," he said, "then you won't have any Mommy!"

He paused a moment, then, looking right at her, he said, "Grandma, when I grow up I'll be your daddy." (Ibid)

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." (5:5)

Now there's something we don't want to be—especially in Fairfield County. You wouldn't even be able to make a left-hand turn out of the church driveway if you were meek.

But once again the original Greek holds a clue. The word translated as meek is *praotes*, and is better translated as humility. William Barclay suggests "Blessed are those who have the humility to know their own ignorance, their own weakness and their own need." (DSB) And why is that a blessing? Because knowing our own needs, opens us up to receiving the help that is offered us by God. One is better able to inherit the earth.

Our Conference Minister, Davida Crabtree, is no wallflower, no Casper Milquetoast. She knows who she is, and whose she is. But she is also meek in the best sense of that word. She is humble and aware of her own needs. Now more than ever. You see, she is currently undergoing chemotherapy for breast cancer.

She has been losing her hair, and recently shaved her head. A few days ago in her blog, she spoke of the impact that has made on her. "Living with a shaven head," she writes, "is quite the experience. When I . . . see myself [in a mirror] . . . I am reminded of the Holocaust and of the gaunt women of famine around the world. I am not gaunt, however, nor hungry nor

oppressed . . . Yet in my shavenness I bear a token of their suffering . . . . It is the starkness, the lack of artifice that does it. . . . I am not finding it difficult but rather freeing in an odd sort of way.” ([www.caringbridge.org](http://www.caringbridge.org))

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”

In the Beatitudes Jesus turns the world upside down. But in that topsy turvey view of life, there is blessing, there is hope. A blessing not found in shopping bags, or diets or even good advice. But rather a blessing found in openness to God. A blessing bestowed on all those who seek after God. Not just the rich and famous, but those who have little in the way of things. Those who rely on the love of a little child for comfort. Those whose shaven heads bring new connection to the wider world. The poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek—even the schlumpy. Despite appearances, theirs is the blessed life.

Amen

John H. Danner