

Happiness and compassion go hand in hand

By William F. Felice, special to the Times Published Friday, January 4, 2013
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Why are the citizens of wealthy Singapore so unhappy? A recent Gallup poll of nearly 150,000 people around the world revealed that the residents of Singapore are the saddest population on the planet.

How can this be? Singapore has invested heavily in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) and developed a whopping per capita gross national income of \$52,569. Yet, if the inhabitants of Singapore are miserable, something clearly has gone wrong.

Perhaps the cliché is correct and money really can't buy happiness. Singapore, of course, is an autocratic country where freedom of speech and public demonstrations are restricted, homosexuality is illegal, and drug offenses can bring the death penalty. This denial of basic liberal freedoms in Singapore not only stifles democracy but also seems to destroy happiness as well.

It was thus deliciously ironic that the same week that this Gallup poll on happiness was published, Gov. Rick Scott argued forcefully that the main point of a higher education was to make money ("Scott: Higher Learning is About Higher Earning," *Tampa Bay Times*, Dec. 23). Scott's focus on conformity and financial gain mimics the educational system of Singapore and ignores the heart of a liberal arts education based on principles of civic engagement, critical thinking, civil liberty, nondiscrimination and political freedom.

With his focus on investing in STEM and career training for financial gain, Scott seems to have missed the vital link between a vibrant democracy and a liberal arts education. It is a truism that an effective democracy relies upon an informed, educated and compassionate citizenry. A liberal education is to a large degree designed to create informed, educated and compassionate citizens.

Prominent cultural critic Andrew Delbanco notes that we are bombarded every day with advertisements, propaganda, punditry and deceptions. How are citizens able to sort out the conflicting claims in the public sphere regarding, for example, immigration, charter schools, health care reform, nuclear energy and gay marriage? Thomas Jefferson and John Adams argued that American democracy depended on an educated citizenry able to tell the difference between demagoguery and honest arguments.

In fact, a successful democracy depends upon individual citizens accepting the Socratic command that only the "examined life" is worth living. Educators have noted that this process often involves giving up the false comfort of the familiar — tradition, family and culture. Engagement at this level gives us the ability to empathize and, perhaps for the first time, to see others in a new light and extend moral compassion. Compassionate individuals are, more often than not, "happy" in their lives and able to contribute to global understanding.

Thus, while a STEM focus is absolutely a top priority in our colleges and universities today, it is equally critical for our schools to help students become "liberally educated." To be a liberally educated person requires that students open themselves up to new cultures, new languages, new ways of interpreting reality, and new ways of seeing the world and understanding history.

A liberally educated person puts his or her own cultural tradition in conversation with the broad range of diversity in humanity's traditions, history and values. A liberally educated person thus comes to understand the limitations of one's own understanding and knowledge and comes to appreciate that a peaceful future depends upon all of us learning to live together with empathy and mutual respect.

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