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The Way of Things

We are continually exhorted to be happy – or, more correctly, happier than we already are. The urgings of advertisers, politicians, investment advisors, psychologists, priests, journalists, celebrities, counsellors, authors, motivational gurus, friends, relations and sundry experts all combine to create a dense miasma of advice about how to achieve this universal goal. While a few such folk may have our best interests at heart, most of these opinions are a product of their advocates' self-interest: some of them wish us to adopt their own beliefs, others simply want to part us from our hard-earned money.

The overriding result of this constant clamour urging us to be happy is that we have come to believe that happiness is what life is fundamentally all about. This book will not only scrutinise many of the myths that Western culture has adopted in its headlong pursuit of greater happiness but will also dare to question whether happiness is itself a valid and useful goal.

Former Australian Deputy Prime Minister, Tim Fischer, called for a national well-being and happiness indicator. This, he asserts, could be collated by the Australian Bureau of Statistics and used by governments and other agencies as an alternative gauge of the country's progress. In other words, rather than simply relying on economic statistics, trade figures, or employment levels to determine policy, Fischer claims, 'it is time to adopt a people-driven wellbeing index, which will provide a broader balance'.¹ In a speech delivered to the Australian National University, Fischer spoke of community cohesion, of finding better work–life balance, and 'life beyond the economic template'.²

Whoa! What's going on here: a conservative politician challenging the orthodoxies of his own peers? Plainly there's something in the air.

In a paper titled 'The Paradox of Australia', two international economists pondered why it should be that Australia ranks third in the world on the United Nations' Human Development Index (HDI), yet quite poorly on a wide range of happiness indicators. The HDI measures lifespan, educational attainment and comparative income, and in 2004 Australia exceeded all other English-speaking countries, to be pipped only by Norway and Sweden. Yet international studies on well-being have, they argue, tended to put Australia at the bottom of the English-speaking world for family satisfaction, job satisfaction and personal happiness. Indeed, an analysis of 35 countries shows that individual happiness amongst Australian citizens falls below those of Austria, Brazil, Great Britain, Japan, Mexico, Chile, Northern Ireland, New Zealand, the Philippines, Switzerland and the USA.³

Now, economists regularly disagree about the reliability of such analyses (as they disagree about just about everything), but even the OECD has pegged Australia at a low 21st out of 28 member nations scaled for happiness.⁴ It would seem that we're not reaping the rewards of our extreme good fortune.

A wide range of international research projects confirm that increased prosperity within developed industrial nations has little impact on well-being. The shock of this realisation has inspired a recent surge of cultural analysis and self-reflection. It's symptomatic of a discontent that is becoming increasingly evident across most Western nations. The assurance that ever-increasing prosperity would automatically deliver greater happiness is proving to be a hollow pledge.

Associated with this seeping disquiet are occasional media stories broadly deploring the pursuit of self-gratification. Generally these critiques are inspired by the findings of current academic research on, say, compulsive shopping, the social cost of gambling, or the impact of our decadent lifestyle on health issues such as obesity, diabetes and heart

disease. But the commercial media are not the ideal avenue through which to challenge popular culture, for that necessarily requires that they bite the very hands from which they feed. Research into happiness, as we shall see, largely discredits the consumerist, individualistic dreamworld on which media advertising revenue depends. The message of any dissenters is crushingly overwhelmed by the bulk of media content which continues to reinforce the status quo.

Perhaps some aspects of what I have to say may prove unsettling to certain readers. Sacred cows will certainly be offered up for slaughter. I am, however, just one of many growing voices in this particular wilderness. Of course, there have always been alternative thinkers and provocateurs, from Luddites to hippies, but right now there is a discernible clamour for answers to the paradox of our times. It's not particularly evident as a movement (unless you call sea- and tree-changes a movement), or a specific school of thought, but rather as a more subtle, pervasive disquiet. In part it may be a product of a growing secularism. It could also be inspired by our recent passage into a new millennium. There's certainly an evident knee-jerk reaction to what appears to be an escalation of self-interest and ostentatious greed. But mostly, I suggest, it's just because many of us are tired of being conned.

Hey, check out this great culture we've created!

People living in Western democracies have a lot to be thankful for. We enjoy personal freedoms that would have been the envy of previous generations. These freedoms are generally enshrined in government statutes, laws of state, bills of rights, international conventions and the like. Most of us are free to move about, change jobs and houses, speak our minds, involve ourselves in the politics of the day, have children (or decide not to), choose our spouses, pursue our religion of choice, practise our sexuality, take vacations, educate ourselves, access vast amounts of freely available information, move between social classes,

and freely broadcast or publish our opinions (as I am doing here). Many of these individual liberties have been hard won over decades of popular struggle. It is undeniable that, in terms of personal choice, we enjoy a veritable Eden of liberty compared with people of previous eras.

Not only do we enjoy greater personal freedoms, but we are also living longer than our ancestors. The average person today can expect to live around 63 years, compared with 48 years a century ago, just 24 years in 1800,⁵ and 36 years in Greek and Roman times.⁶ (Of course these are averages, and therefore reflect infant mortality rates as well as longevity.) If you live in a developed country today you can expect to live even longer than the global average – between 78 and 85 years if you are female, and some five years less if you are male.⁷ James Vaupel, of the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research, has noted that over the past 160 years average life expectancy has risen by 40 years, or an incredible three months per year.⁸

And how are we spending our bonus time on the planet? Mainly enjoying the material luxuries of our culture. According to Australian Treasury figures, after allowing for inflation, private wealth increased for 15 consecutive years up to June 2006. In the 2005–6 financial year alone, net private sector wealth grew by a staggering 19%, or in real terms (allowing for inflation) 15.4%. If we look at just the last five years of their analysis (June 2001 to June 2006), this amounted to a real increase of \$150,000 per Australian.⁹

More people today possess their own homes than ever before. Almost everyone who can drive owns a car: in 2002 Australians registered 12.8 million vehicles, two and a half times as many as in 1971.¹⁰ We are awash with all manner of material goods designed to make routine tasks easier and to enrich our lives. Between 1994 and 2000 the number of Australian households with home computers doubled, and between 1996 and 2000 those with internet access increased almost ninefold.¹¹

We are spoilt for choice in many areas of our lives, not the least of them food. At one supermarket an American researcher counted 285

varieties of cookies, 230 soups and 275 different breakfast cereals.¹² We can buy pie-makers, global positioning systems, garden mulchers, MP3 players, home satellite dishes, electric nose-hair trimmers and countless other goods completely unimagined just a few generations ago.

But for all this we are palpably still not happier. Professor Richard Layard of the London School of Economics (LSE) has noted that good measurements for Britain, America and Japan show no increase in happiness over the period since the Second World War.¹³ Even more alarmingly, the proportion of Americans telling the National Opinion Research Centre that they are 'very happy' actually declined from 35% in 1957 to 29% in 1996.¹⁴

Multinational comparative studies are somewhat problematical because they cannot factor in all of the differences between cultures. However, they do consistently point to a couple of trends: people around the world are generally happier than many of us assume; and once a certain level of gross national product is achieved, further wealth does not bring significantly greater happiness to nations.

A cross-cultural study assessment by Richard Layard notes that when people are on the breadline, income does matter. For very poor countries, there is often a clear correlation between per capita income levels and overall happiness of the population. But once a country's average per capita income reaches over US\$15,000 per head, higher income levels do not result in greater happiness or increased satisfaction with life. As he pointedly observes, such findings should 'bother economists'.¹⁵

In this study the bottom-ranking country was Moldova in Eastern Europe, and the leader was Iceland. Plainly climate and daylight hours do not have a dramatic effect on happiness! Furthermore, in this study, which was carried out in 2000, some poorer nations still ranked higher in happiness scores than more developed ones. Colombia, Brazil, Venezuela and the Philippines, for example, beat Spain; while two of the very poorest countries, Ghana and Nigeria, were happier than moderately wealthy Portugal. Of course Western nations mostly do rank well in the

happiness stakes, but even the OECD has noted that people in some relatively poor countries, such as Mexico and Nigeria, are in fact happier than many of those in the developed world.¹⁶

A study comparing 400 adults from a range of different demographics living in Calcutta found that around a quarter enjoyed a high level of life satisfaction, 58% a moderate level, and a mere 17% a poor level. Not only did socio-economic status have little effect in determining perceived quality of life but, surprisingly, those in the lower socio-economic group were relatively happier. The researchers theorised that this could be because they were less exposed to material prosperity and other influences on their expectations.¹⁷

Another researcher was also surprised to find a reasonably high level of happiness in the Calcutta slums. Robert Biswas-Diener interviewed and tested Calcutta prostitutes and street dwellers about their life satisfaction. He found that their overall life satisfaction was only slightly negative (1.93 on a scale of 1 to 3). Even more interestingly, Biswas-Diener discovered that the pavement dwellers of Calcutta were significantly happier with their lot than were the street people of Fresno, California.¹⁸

Obviously how we judge our level of personal satisfaction is very much a product of what society we live in and to whom we compare ourselves. People are most likely to make comparisons with others in their own immediate culture, rather than the vast range of disparate cultures across the planet. Calcutta pavement-dwellers no doubt compare themselves with other Calcutta residents of their own caste, whereas Californian street people compare their lot with Americans of all social standings. Perhaps it may be more instructive, then, to compare poor with wealthy people in our own Western culture. Just how much happier is the millionaire as compared to the person on 'struggle street' in Australia or America? Again the research results are surprising.

Upper- and middle-income people in wealthy countries tend to be slightly more satisfied with life than those at the bottom end of the income scale, but the difference amounts to only a couple of percentage

points. In other words, there is not the substantial difference one might expect. And the slight difference that does occur may be because the wealthy carry out skilled jobs that are inherently more interesting and fulfilling.

According to evolutionary psychologist Geoffrey Miller of University College London,

The ‘usual suspects’ in explaining individual differences in happiness have almost no effect. A person’s age, sex, race, income, geographic location, nationality, and education level have only trivial correlations with happiness, typically explaining less than 2% of the variance. An important exception is that hungry, diseased, oppressed people in developing nations tend to be slightly less happy – but once they reach a certain minimum standard of calorie intake and physical security, further increases in material affluence do not increase their happiness very much.¹⁹

(Miller attributes the major variances in individual happiness levels to heritable genetic factors – something we shall consider much later in this book.)

So, if greater affluence isn’t bringing us increased happiness, why are our governments hell-bent on improving our so-called ‘standard of living’? Why are we continually berated with political and economic doctrines which emphasise increased fiscal performance and escalating wealth? Why do we concern ourselves with political fear-mongering which threatens diminishing prosperity?

The want spiral

For many people around the world, the single most important goal in life is simply to stay alive. Avoiding hunger and physical harm, and raising children, are the motivating factors that dominate their daily activities. For the rest of us, the basic problems of survival have been solved, so

we tend to search elsewhere to find personal fulfilment. New needs are thus generated, and our efforts to attain these needs become the hunt for happiness.

Strangely, however, the more affluence we achieve, and the more comfortable our physical conditions, then the greater our expectations become. Increased prosperity, beyond that which we require simply to live, not only fails to make us significantly more satisfied, but actually serves to escalate our wants and goals. Each time we achieve a goal, we quickly become accustomed to our new state, our sense of self-satisfaction dissipates (the novelty wears off), and we create new goals to strive for.

This process has been labelled the ‘adaptation-level phenomenon’. We judge our situation by what we have already experienced. If you live in a very cold climate, then your notion of what is a cold day will be quite different from that of someone who lives in the tropics. Your neutral level, the middle ground by which you judge what is extreme in either direction, will have been set by your experience. We judge our income level, our social status, even our appearance, based on what we have come to consider normal or average. As we will come to see, the media play a significant role in determining what we relate to as the norms in our society.

If everyone’s prosperity is rising at the same time, the concept of what is normal will plainly tag along for the ride. What was understood by ‘wealthy’ 20 years ago is no longer appropriate when judging what is meant by the term today. Thirty years ago a dishwasher was a luxury; now labour-saving dishwashers are considered *de rigueur*. Because we’re continually ‘adapting’, we’re failing to appreciate and enjoy the benefits of progress. Even more significantly, we’re actually encouraged to aspire to perceived norms that are continually being inflated. The economic imperative behind this whole process is neatly summarised by ANU social analyst Richard Eckersley:

We are experiencing more and more pressure from marketing in order

to aspire to more materially. That is actually having a negative impact on wellbeing, in part because it ramps up expectation beyond what our level of wealth can sustain. In other words, we really want more than we can afford, and we're often going into debt to achieve it. These marketing pressures are really part of the engine of economic growth. If we're to sustain the levels of economic growth which our current political philosophy, indeed our world view, demands, that growth depends on increased private consumption. We need to have a system that keeps people wanting more and more and more. In other words, we can never have enough. So we're beginning to see a highly distorted, even perverted, system at work here that actually militates against people's happiness.²⁰

Impact statement

Perhaps even more importantly, the level of consumption required to feed this habitual cycle may prove to be catastrophic for both our species and the planet as a whole. This is not being unnecessarily alarmist. If economic and material growth across the globe continues, the planet's resources will inevitably be outstripped by demand. Natural resources are finite, but wants, unfortunately, appear to increase exponentially.

This global phenomenon – the impact of consumption on the environment – is hardly news. We are regularly reminded of the precarious balancing act we play between nature and our modern lifestyle. For example, 1998 and 2005 are considered to have been the hottest years since records began in 1880. Since 1996, only one year has failed to make the hottest 10 list.²¹ This might just indicate a cause for significant concern. And whilst there remain a handful of climate change naysayers, men and women of science who specialise in the field appear unanimous in their belief that we are witnessing unprecedented climate change of our own making.

It's not the intention of this book to convince you that we are heading for a global environmental catastrophe. But the issue is clearly on our minds, as 91% of surveyed Australians admit they are worried about the future of the environment.²²

As often happens, public opinion appears to be well ahead of political will. But it's one thing to fear a possible catastrophe, and another altogether to instigate behavioural change. No doubt many of us choose to believe that environmental disaster will be headed off by scientific and technological advances. There have certainly been times when technology has helped us to avoid calamity. Agricultural advances have allowed us to successfully feed a burgeoning world population, in spite of the dire warnings of the zero population growth movement in the 1970s. It's nonetheless a big ask to expect that science can deal with the repercussions of a global GDP that looks set to triple before the middle of the century.

To be fair, environmental destruction occurs not only because of excess consumption, but also as a result of comparative poverty. Economically impoverished nations may exploit their natural resources in an attempt to redress their fiscal woes. Forests are destroyed, rivers polluted and native peoples displaced in many developing nations. But wealthy nations should not use the poor nations' environmental record as an excuse to avoid taking responsibility for their own actions.

In an open letter to President George W. Bush, former Soviet leader and Nobel peace laureate Mikhail Gorbachev wrote,

it is time for America's electorate to be told the blunt truth: that the present situation in the US, by which a part of its population is able to enjoy a life of extraordinary comfort and privilege, is not tenable over the long run as long as an enormous proportion of the world lives in abject poverty, degradation and backwardness.²³

Are we desperately trying to maintain a lifestyle that is actually bringing us decreasing benefits, and possibly greater misery? A series

of studies have demonstrated that mood disorders, depression, anxiety attacks and mental disease have tripled since the Second World War. The World Health Organisation predicts that by the year 2020 depression in Western countries will have become the second highest global burden of disability after heart disease. The LSE's Richard Layard notes,

Most studies in most countries show a secular increase in depression... The size of the increase is disputed, but nobody believes depression has diminished, despite the much greater ease of our material life.²⁴

Relationships appear to have become ever more problematic, and divorce rates have increased, as have child-behaviour problems. It may surprise some to discover that amongst 30 OECD nations, Australia exhibits the highest illicit drug use in consumption of cannabis, amphetamines and ecstasy as a percentage of population – considerably more than the USA.²⁵

Perhaps indicative of all these issues is the disturbing news that the number of Australian children in need of foster care jumped from 14,000 in 1995 to 24,000 in 2005.²⁶

Even our physical health appears to be now slipping backwards, with epidemic levels of obesity, heart disease, diabetes and other conditions associated with a decadent lifestyle. In 2005, the chairman of Australia's National Obesity Forum warned that, without immediate intervention, the current generation of children will be the first not to live as long as their parents.²⁷

Now I'm not suggesting there haven't been great advances made by humanity. Arguably, there is much less individual suffering in the world today. According to many analysts there are fewer wars, and smaller numbers of casualties. Since 1992, the number of armed conflicts in the world has decreased by a sizeable 40%.²⁸ Overall there is less oppression, there are fewer slaves, and greater individual freedoms across the planet, and this is no small feat.

I would argue that one of the great success stories of modernity is

the growth of interpersonal tolerance and understanding, particularly in regard to gender roles. Increasingly, men and women are negotiating responsibilities in the areas of work, parenting and leadership. Who would have imagined, 200 years ago, such social institutions as paid paternity leave, women high court judges or laws protecting the rights of homosexuals? Perhaps even more significantly, it would have been unthinkable a hundred years ago that female national leaders could be democratically elected in countries such as India, Liberia and Indonesia, let alone Britain. In fact, at the time of writing, there are 11 women prime ministers or presidents in the world, and that number is continuing to grow.

There are many sophisticated and humanitarian achievements of which we have every right to be proud. But there remains this nagging issue: if our purpose is simply to become more and more affluent, then at what cost do we achieve that goal? If our purpose is to make people happier as well as better off, then according to current research we are definitely flagging.

We Australians are unwittingly participating in a social experiment that we can call the Western, democratic, capitalist system. Perhaps we have reached a critical point, where it is time to assess some of the results of this grand experiment. In part we can do this by closely examining many of the ingrained myths to which our culture adheres.

Myth opportunities

Every culture has its myths: traditional narratives that embody popular ideas about natural or social phenomena. Because they are widely accepted beliefs that justify or support existing customs or moral stances, myths carry elements of ideology. Founded on implied truths generally perceived as fact, the body of myths which each culture creates serve to help define that culture and to bond its individual members. Myths are generally socially cohesive because they provide a commonality of belief

for their adherents. That doesn't mean, however, that they necessarily always operate in the best interests of the culture.

Along with the cultural myths we share, we each create myths of our own. Our personalised myths are a means by which we make sense of the world, particularly those aspects that are mysterious, or that we cannot readily verify through personal experience. Whereas cultural myths tend to be accepted by the majority, personal myths are distinctly more varied. But both personal and cultural myths are created realities: *they are not actual truths.*

Everyone develops a set of beliefs that define his or her own version of reality. For example, one of my realities is a strong belief that corporal punishment does not act as a reasonable deterrent to antisocial behaviour, and further that it reinforces the unhelpful notion that conflict can be resolved through violence. Your reality may be that corporal punishment is an appropriate form of retribution for certain misdemeanours. I don't smack my children. You may use smacking as a regular means of controlling your children's behaviour. In this hypothetical instance I believe I am right, and you believe you are right. Is there an actual truth? Well, no. Each position is simply true for those who hold the beliefs. We have created our own realities on this issue.

Acknowledging that our fervently believed truths are actually just individual constructs doesn't reduce their potency. I am still going to argue against the smacking of children. I acknowledge that it is simply my reality that I am pursuing, and that there are alternative realities. But I still believe that my reality serves the best interests of humanity, and I will aver the case until I become convinced that an alternative reality serves us better.

This concept of constructed reality is a theme we'll return to in chapter 10. For now, it is important only to emphasise that any time anyone attempts to convince you of a particular belief or attitude, they are simply presenting a manufactured reality. You have to weigh up whether or not their reality fits in with your own constructed reality. If it

doesn't, then you need to determine whether you are prepared to alter your own reality to accommodate this new belief.

Reading this book clearly involves this process. You will have to decide whether the ideas I have set down – ideas that represent my constructed reality – are persuasive. I urge you to question everything I write. Weigh it up in your mind. This is not a self-help book entrenched in a dogmatic mindset. I will argue my case, often with the use of selected research and examples, but you must decide on its validity in accordance with your own beliefs. I urge you to apply an attitude of critical reservation about everything. Question everything.

Just as personal beliefs and mythologies are completely subjective, and never, ever objective, so too are cultural myths. They are generated, reinforced and altered because they serve a purpose. That purpose might be religious, it might be political, or it might simply promote social cohesion, but unless myths have resonance for people within the culture, they will not survive.

One of the most pervasive myths in our culture is the myth of a *fair and just world*.²⁹ This is the belief that, in the scheme of things, good guys win and bad guys lose. Every night, television reinforces this myth with fictional stories where miscreants get their just deserts. It's plainly a myth that serves our culture by reinforcing good behaviour over bad behaviour. It also reinforces the concept of a just and fair God, so it plainly serves the church too. It is the basis for the theory of karmic debt, which provides solace to believers of some eastern religions and New Age theories. The *fair and just world* myth also aids the behaviour enforcers in our culture – the judiciary and police – because it helps contain anarchy by instilling a fear of reprisal. The *fair and just world* myth is also used by politicians to support legislation, to justify war, to rationalise taxation and to explain almost every policy they institute.

The *fair and just world* myth promises rewards for good behaviour and warns of reprisals for bad behaviour. It is reductionist and simplistic because all people who wield power over others want the world to appear

simple. They need converts and adherents. The simpler they can make their message, the better chance they have of winning over hearts and minds. Complexity is difficult to impart and even harder to sell. The only way that an authority can get large numbers of people to agree to their version of reality is to present it in an easily digestible form. Belief in a just world is just one simplistic idea that is fed to children by their parents and fed to adults by other adult authority figures.

Obviously the *fair and just world* myth is a functional sort of myth, but it is a myth nevertheless. It is not supported by empirical fact. Like it or not, dreadful things continually happen to good people. Bad guys do get away with their misdemeanours. The world is bursting with examples that counter the myth's basic tenet, and the more fervently we hold to the myth, the harder it is to deal with these unavoidable bad events.

Happiness for sale

The easiest myths to sell to a culture at large are those that pertain to individual happiness. We all want to be happy. We all want to be happy more often. We are, arguably, obsessed with the notion. As Edward de Bono has written,

We can call it the happiness religion because it recognises happiness as the legitimate purpose of man's existence.³⁰

When you are happy, you tend to feel safer, more adventurous, more amorous, and the whole world seems to be more manageable. There is also a direct physiological component involving pleasurable neurochemicals. Psychologists have found that people who are happy are more inclined to help other people, and have dubbed this the 'feel-good, do-good phenomenon'.³¹ Who wouldn't want to be happy more often?

Ask a variety of people what it is that makes them happy and one will inevitably get a diversity of answers. This is because what we each refer to as happiness is bound up with other emotional states such as

exhilaration, relaxation, intimacy, security or joviality. In large part, what we associate with the notion of happiness is learned from our culture.

As psychologist and author Dorothy Rowe points out,

Much of the definition of happiness which people use comes from what they have been told constitutes happiness by their family and by their State. The family and the State commonly define happiness-making those things which they can provide, because then they can use such things as rewards for good behaviour. Thus, only a mother who can afford to buy her children ice cream will teach her children that ice cream is happiness-making and a reward for good behaviour. A State which can afford to encourage the production of objects like cars, televisions, fancy clothes and holiday hotels will teach its subjects that such objects are happiness-making and a reward for good behaviour. A State which cannot afford to encourage the production of such objects will teach its subjects to scorn them and to regard as happiness-making and reward-giving service to one's country and the respect of one's fellows for such service.³²

Just as our parents and political leaders teach us the symbols of happiness, so too does every aspect of our culture. The mass media, and advertising in particular, constantly reinforce notions of what should be making us happy.

Some of these paths to happiness may appear to represent complete or partial truths, whilst others seem like falsehoods. Accordingly, we each pick and choose which trails we shall ramble down. Some people firmly believe that they can increase overall happiness by improving their self-esteem for example, and that may become, at least for a time, their primary objective. Others are convinced that they will be happier when they find Mr or Ms Right, attain that coveted promotion, win the lottery, or achieve public notoriety.

But whilst we may engage in pursuing such culturally sanctioned goals, there is often a niggling reservation in the back of our minds:

will our efforts actually win us the greater happiness or fulfilment we desire? This internal doubting Thomas is a product of both our past experience and our observations of others. So often we have found that lasting happiness is not only elusive but that it also doesn't automatically arrive with the achievement of coveted ambitions. We know this, yet we just can't seem to avoid fantasising about becoming happier people. We barge on amassing wealth, buying more stuff, chasing social status, seeking perfection in romance or hunting spiritual surety. It's as though the harder we try, the more we can convince ourselves that Heaven on Earth really can exist. Fantasies, however, must inevitably be tempered by realities.

Herein lies the central conundrum which this book attempts to address – we can call it the happiness conundrum, if you like: for the most part we appear to know what genuinely makes us happy, yet we frequently seem to be incapable of acting on that knowledge. For example, it is an oft-quoted aphorism that 'money can't buy happiness', yet the great majority of us spend the bulk of our time pursuing greater personal wealth. If we accept the axiom that we're not going to be happier when we're wealthier, why do we waste so much energy trying to amass riches when we could be spending more time pursuing those things which actually do lead to satisfaction and contentment?

The same conundrum applies to many of the cultural myths about happiness. If pressed, most people would acknowledge that the famous are probably no happier than the hoi polloi. So why do so many folks both fixate on the famous and even fantasise about joining their ranks? If we admit the terrible truth that amassing material goods doesn't substantially increase our happiness quotient, why do so many of us use shopping to try and make ourselves feel better? If three-quarters of Australians acknowledge that gambling does more social harm than good, why do 82% of us gamble? Is it that the culture, through politics, marketing and other means of coercion, is working assiduously to override our better judgement? Or is there something deeper within

the human psyche that leads us to always want for more than we already have, thus encouraging us to embrace unsupported myths in preference to our own observations and experience? And what of those omnipresent alternative paths to greater happiness: higher self-esteem, goal setting, stress reduction, romance or even spiritual fulfilment? Are they just more empty promises?

If there is some biological imperative propelling humans to hanker for greater happiness, can we in fact become happier people?