Material Things Will Not Bring You Happiness

Material things do not necessarily bring you happiness. That is a fact of life. It is a hard fact to understand sometimes, especially in a society that tries very hard to teach you otherwise.

It is very common to get into a mode where you think, "If only I had object X, my life would be perfect and I would be happy." You REALLY want something: a new TV, a new car, a special pair of shoes, whatever. Then you buy it and you LOVE having it for a few days. But over time you get bored or it wears out. You can see this pattern repeated constantly in your own life. For example, your parents and grandparents likely spent thousands and thousands of dollars on toys for you as you were growing up: Dump trucks and Barbie dolls and video games and electric cars and on and on and on. All of those toys got boring or broken or outgrown eventually. They brought happiness for a moment or a week, but over time they became worthless and your desire turned to a new object.

This pattern begs the following question: "If material things bring just a temporary and short-term happiness, then what does that mean?" It might mean that you have to buy material objects at a rate of perhaps one per day to sustain the temporary and short-term high of getting something new. The problem is, that begins to sound a lot like a drug habit. This train of thinking can get you into some very deep areas. Things like:

- What is happiness?
- What does it mean to be happy?
- What do I want to do in my life?
- Does life have meaning?
- And so on.

Very deep.

There is a difference between material happiness, which implies having all the basic (or extravagant) comforts necessary to live life, and spiritual happiness, which implies something else altogether. I had a friend whose philosophy was this:

No matter how much money you make, you always want more. So if you make $25,000 (1997) you believe that if you just made $50,000 you would be happy. But then you begin to make $50,000. At that point you believe that if you just made $100,000 you would be happy, and so on through life. This pattern is true whether you make $25,000 or $10,000,000 a year, because as you earn more money you acquire more expensive tastes. It seems to me that you might as well learn to be happy on $25,000 a year, figure out an easy way to earn it and then have the rest of your time free to do what you want.

This sort of philosophy implies that you can find something other than material happiness to give meaning to your life.
The thing about "wealth" is that there is more than one way to measure it. Traditionally it is measured in dollars, but there are many other scales. You can be "rich" in ways that have nothing to do with money. For example:

- Rich in friends—A person who cultivates friendships and who is a joy to be around can have hundreds of good friends and can be rich beyond the wildest dreams of others.
- Rich in health—A person who spends time eating right, exercising and relaxing from stress can be extremely healthy, and this health can be far more valuable than any amount of money.
- Rich in strength—A person who works out with weights every day, runs, swims, etc. can be rich in strength and will have an attractive body.
- Rich in family—A person who devotes time to his or her spouse and children will have a strong and happy family that is rewarding throughout life.
- Rich in knowledge—A person who reads and studies will become rich in knowledge.
- Rich in skill—A person who practices anything daily (a skill, a sport, prayer, whatever) will become excellent in that skill area. Excellence has its own rewards.
- Rich in character—A person who works hard at being honest and truthful in all situations will become rich in character and will be trusted by everyone.

One funny thing about all of these different areas is that none of them are taxed. You are taxed on the money you earn, and that is it. There is no knowledge tax, for example. You can learn freely throughout life and acquire a huge "bank account" of knowledge. No one can steal it or diminish it in any way. Presumably, knowledge is the one thing you might be able to take with you to Heaven.

All of these alternative types of wealth are different from financial wealth, and yet all of them can be equally rewarding in their own ways. The point is that the act of buying things by itself, despite what television tells you, may not be what will bring you maximum happiness in life. Things like good friends, a loving spouse, well-raised children, a home built on love, a good relationship with God, a clear conscience, a worthy goal and a job you truly enjoy bring you contentment that lasts and has meaning. These things are often very hard for some teenagers to understand, but as you mature they become more important.

As you look at the world around you and come to understand what is important to you, keep these things in mind. Think about what it is that you enjoy and what makes you truly happy. See what you find. In thinking about it consciously, you might be surprised by what you discover. Money is incredibly important—you need it to survive. But it is not the only thing you need, and money itself will not bring lasting happiness to most people. Man does not live by bread alone.

**The Meaning of Life**

As you ponder things like the importance of money and the role of happiness, you often end up at the question, "What is the meaning of life?" For most teenagers, this question is both important and confounding. Like its partner, "Who am I?" it is unique to you. Only
There are as many answers to the question, "What is the meaning of life?" as there are people. However, the answers often break into broad categories. By looking at some of the categories (as well as creating categories of your own) you can often come to understand how you want to answer the question. The following three sections look at three different ways that you can think about the question. This list is not exhaustive, and I am not advocating any of them. They simply offer you some examples.

Life Has No Meaning

What is the meaning of life for a rabbit? A rabbit is born. It eats and sleeps. It reaches sexual maturity and has children of its own. It is either eaten or dies of natural causes. When it dies there is no "heaven." It simply dies and that is the end of it. In such a scenario it is possible to conclude that life for a rabbit has no meaning. Rabbits exist to produce other rabbits and thus keep the species alive, but even that has little or no meaning in the grand scheme of things.

The "life has no meaning" school of thought applies that same line of reasoning to human beings. Humans, so the logic goes, have no soul and no afterlife, and therefore are no different from rabbits. When we die we die, and that is the end of it. This thought process can lead to one of several behavior patterns:

• Because life has no meaning, there is no point to living. I should wallow in self-pity and a private misery for years at a time.
• Because life has no meaning, I might as well be as obnoxious as possible—This is the "juvenile delinquent" and "career criminal" school of thought. Since life is meaningless, you might as well make as many people miserable as possible by killing people, robbing them, vandalizing things and so on. It is unclear how the connection from "my life has no meaning" to "therefore everyone else should be miserable" is made, but these people make it nonetheless.
• Because life has no meaning, I might as well enjoy it while I am alive—A corollary is "I may die tomorrow, so I had better live it up today." Another somewhat more positive corollary is, "Life is a journey; enjoy the ride." In either case, life is seen as a terminating state of being, so the more you enjoy it now the better.
• Life may have no meaning, but I choose to make other lives better during my time here—This is the opposite and positive side of the "juvenile delinquent" school of thought.

Life Has Meaning Through Human Society

Assume that there is no God and no afterlife. Even so, it is possible for life to have meaning through the larger and ongoing society we live in. By looking at your life as a part of a whole rather than as an individual life, it can have meaning when you ask a question like, "Where is humanity, as a whole, headed?"

Think of it this way: Human beings have progressed from the point where we were
strictly animals to the point where we are thinking, knowing beings who have just started
to harness space travel, computers and communication. In just 100 years we have gone
from an agricultural society to a technical society. This transformation has not occurred
because of one person, but instead because of the contributions of billions of people.
Each of us does one small thing that moves society forward. For example, many people
worked to develop the telephone and build the switching infrastructure that makes up the
telephone network. Many other people invented the Internet and built the systems on top
of the phone system that make the Internet possible. Many more people worked to get a
phone wire to your house. Still more people invented, refined and popularized computer
hardware and software. Many more worked on modems and web sites. As a result of all
of this effort you can now easily dial in to the Internet and retrieve billions of bytes of
data from around the world using the World Wide Web.

Given our rate of technical progress, imagine what you will be able to do 100 years from
now in terms of communication, calculations, travel, and so on. One day we will be able
to colonize other planets. One day we will be able to travel to other solar systems and
galaxies. One day we will be able to move huge amounts of matter to create new planets.
One day we will, in theory, be able to design our own universes. When that happens,
humanity will have become something else entirely. If we become immortal and can
redesign or create universes, then we will be entirely unlike what we are today. Perhaps
at that point we will find a completely different way to look at the universe and
understand its significance.

In such a context, you are one part of the process that gets us there. Choose a worthwhile
goal that moves humanity forward and work toward it.

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