

Capturing CONTENTMENT

Live in the now and learn to let it be says **Fiona Hoban**



COVERwell-being

It has been said that all over the world, men and women in top executive positions share a common fear – that one day they will be found out! Beneath the exterior of confidence and achievement lies vulnerability, a doubting of oneself and one's abilities. In short a sense of "not good enough".

Brene Brown from the University of Houston, Texas spent six years researching this strange phenomenon of afraid of not being good enough and she concluded that in order to live wholeheartedly we must all make our peace, and reconcile ourselves, with this vulnerability. Most of us deny it even exists! Many of us try and hide it, and numb it out and go about our lives trying to control, predict and perfect everything that comes our way. When we realise that we cannot control everything; that it's impossible to predict what tomorrow will bring; that as human beings we are not perfect – we can live our lives with a sense of self acceptance.

Do you find it hard to accept praise or a compliment? Are you inclined to rubbish the compliment – "this old thing, sure I have it for years". Can you hear the sense of "not good enough" coming through? And whilst we are often generous with praise for others, we seldom have any such praise for ourselves. The saying goes: "self praise is no praise". But I'm not talking about big-headed vanity, I'm talking about an ability to acknowledge that we're doing OK, that we're doing our best, that we may even be doing better than we think. If we could practice acknowledging this to ourselves regularly it would result in a greater sense of "good enough" which is a cornerstone of contentment.

Another cornerstone of contentment is the ability to live in the now. Think about it, you can only breathe in the now, you can't breathe in the past and you can't breathe in the future. You can only breathe in the now. So you can only live in the now. If only our minds could learn this truth! How much of our headspace is taken up by going back into the past or going forward into the future?

I often wonder what the future will hold; sometimes I'm apprehensive about it, other times I'm more optimistic. But here's the thing: if you want to know what the future will hold, tune into your base level of contentment right now. Because whatever level of contentment you find, that is what will be with you in the future – regardless of what the future brings.

Studies have shown that when people have a big win on the lotto, they invariably experience a massive surge of excitement, celebration etc. But these feelings are relatively short-lived. It's only a matter of time before they return to their base level of contentment they had before their win. So if they were a miserable so-and-so before their win, chances are they will return to being a miserable so-and-so!

I said this to a friend of mine once and she replied, "I know money can't buy me happiness but I'd rather be a rich, miserable so-and-so than a poor miserable so-and-so!" It's hard to argue with that I suppose, but I think the trick is to be content regardless of being rich or poor. How is that possible? With so much financial hardship, so much stress and pressure, so much uncertainty, so much fear. How is it possible to be content; how is it possible to be impervious to the economic nightmare that's going on around us?

The answer may in part be found by looking at people who have been dealt a seemingly harsh card by life and yet still manage to be upbeat (this is quite different to putting on a brave public face and then going home to fall apart). What are they doing that allows their overall levels of contentment remain in tact? What's their secret? One such secret is the ability to accept whatever card has been dealt, not to resist it in any way. The Buddhists say "yield to overcome". Eckhart Tolle says "leave life alone; let it be". Paul McCartney wrote many years ago "when I find myself in times of trouble, mother Mary comes to me, speaking words of wisdom – let it be; let it be."

Another key is to release our tight hold on wanting things to turn out a particular way – we can get very attached to outcomes. Richard Carlson in his book *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff* asks us to imagine that we have a favourite glass, one that is special to us and holds many happy memories. Now imagine that favourite glass smashed on the floor. This increases our awareness of the fact that a glass is created and will eventually break. This is true of everything, ourselves included – it's only a matter of when. Obviously nobody wants his or her favourite glass to be broken, but there is peace in the teaching that when we expect something to break we are not surprised or overly disappointed when it does. Instead of saying "oh no" we can say "ah, there it goes" and be grateful of the time we had to enjoy it.

I used to think that practising non-attachment would mean I'd end up a passive, apathetic, low achiever. Of course, it doesn't mean this at all. Non-attachment is a realisation that things and people and even places are transitory. We often relate to them as if they were permanent and behave like clinging children when faced with their passing. This narrows our perspective on how life really is and limits our ability to be open to life as it unfolds and changes. I think it was the Jesuit priest Anthony De Mello who said something like "Dear God, I will do everything I can to achieve my goals, but I'll leave the outcome up to you."

So as we head into the busy Christmas period maybe we can all just relax a bit and be content with being perfectly imperfect!



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For more details go to www.fionahoban.ie