



Mary and Bob often find themselves sharing common ground when it comes to philosophy and ministry. When approaching ministerial concerns from different angles, He Said - She Said is a venue to share differing perspectives.

Outsmarting the Mousepocalypse aka Happiness is Like Heroin

Mary's Perspective:

Ever have one of those days when several strands of thought keep intertwining and presenting themselves to you? Let me share a few seemingly unrelated strands that have caused me to ponder...

My husband and I were chatting over breakfast about a book he'd been reading (this happens a lot.) The book referred to a scientific study that I have since researched. In a nutshell, a sociologist named John Calhoun set about creating a series of experiments using rodents, to examine what would happen to society if all our needs are met. Essentially, he took four breeding pairs of mice (specifically chosen to be free of disease) and set them up in a custom-made "utopia". The environment was designed to eliminate problems that would lead to mortality in the wild – the climate was optimally maintained; limitless food, water, and nesting material were provided; and no predators were present. The most famous of his experiments was named Universe 25. You can find all the details with a quick web search.

Anyway, the questions revolved around how the mice would integrate into a society, and how they thrived in the utopia. Spoiler alert: after an initial period of growth ("the strive period"), it ultimately resulted in a collapse referred to as "mousepocalypse". Eventually the population died out. We have had some lively conversations about how this mouse utopia can be compared to modern society, and the implications of mouse behavior paralleling the human condition, and how it could influence our own societal status. Yes, we are a bit nerdy.

Second strand of thought... I was listening to a couple of different podcasts during recent walks. (Remember, I walk a lot!) One of them included a conversation with Dr. Daniel Amen, a nationally recognized expert on mental health. The main message I gleaned from that podcast was that happiness reacts with our brains much like heroin. Experience happiness, get a dopamine hit. More social "likes"? Dopamine hit. Acclaim or fame or success? Dopamine hit. Except, like heroin, it takes more and more of the substance to elicit the same dopamine experience – more likes, greater success, more notoriety, etc. One actually needs to experience struggles or losses or failures to regulate the dopamine cycle and truly feel happiness. Interesting.



The second podcast included a conversation with Arthur Brooks, a social scientist who talked about why addiction to achievement is bound to yield disappointment. He has recently written a book to address planning for retirement – with emphasis not on the financial aspects of it, but rather the happiness side. He talked about two different curves. Essentially, we all have a “fluid intelligence” curve earlier in our careers, when our raw smarts put us at peak professional performance. That’s the cutting edge, creative part. The second curve, “crystallized intelligence,” happens later, manifest more as wisdom, or the ability to use knowledge learned from the past. He compared the two curves as the parent’s head and the grandparent’s heart. Brooks offered practical advice on how to transition gracefully from one curve to the other, so that as we move from career success into retirement, we move from Strength to Strength (which is the title of his book.) Given Bob’s recent retirement and the fact that I’m not getting any younger, I was drawn to this book, which I am currently reading.

So, interweaving these strands of thought, we need struggle in life. If everything comes easily, we won’t experience true happiness. If we don’t invest in relationships with people – as compared to accumulating “stuff” – the dopamine won’t do its thing. Without my challenges, I wouldn’t recognize grace. If I don’t have the pain of my muscles being torn down at a cellular level, I don’t experience the growth that results as they repair themselves and become stronger. (Hence, all the walking.) Impurities are removed as gold is refined in fire.

The moral of all of these musings? Sometimes life is hard. Things don’t go our way, or we lose a job, or people disappoint us. Appliances break, and it snows in April, and there’s a traffic jam when we’re in a hurry. We experience pain and anxiety and sadness. Though in the moment it can be difficult, perhaps we should rejoice at the hard parts – because without them, we wouldn’t truly appreciate the good parts!

So here’s your probing question to ponder today... what piece of your life has been disappointing, frustrating, annoying, or made your mad or sad? Really think about it. What is being refined? Something good has or will come out of that challenge. Why did you need to walk through the hard parts? So that you could experience the joy of the journey ahead. What will that joy look like?

And what’s the next step to take on that journey?

Bob’s Perspective:

As Mary mentioned, I recently retired from full time parish ministry. My last official Mass at St. Monica Church was on December 31st. However, since that time, (to date) there have only been three weekends that I haven’t played music at some parish – many of which involved remuneration, and some were donated time. What can I say? I love playing music.



In addition, I am still fully immersed, along with Mary, in our *Sustaining the Journey* ministry – and have a number of other projects in the works.

So why (despite retirement) am I still so busy? Before I go on any further, let me address the elephant in the room: No matter what Mary thinks – I don't put the "dope" in dopamine.

On a personal level, challenge is the spice (heroin) of life. For the past 22 years, one of my duties as the parish Director of Liturgy and Music was to plan and prepare all of the music for parish celebrations. We utilized music from a wide variety of resources, and I thought we pretty much covered the gamut. Now, with filling in at number of other parishes, I'm constantly being introduced to a wealth of new music. Some pieces are familiar, but many are not. A good part of each day finds me practicing and learning new repertoire. I'm pretty sure that I practice much more now than I did on a daily basis over the last 22 years. I like much of what I'm learning, but there are some pieces that I would not have chosen to do. However, my call is to play music that I'm asked to play – and play it well and enthusiastically – which I fully intend to do.

Years back in my martial arts career, I often quoted our school's definition of "discipline." Discipline is doing what you have to do, when you have to do it, whether you want to do it or not. There is usually satisfaction in doing things we like to do – however, (in my mind) there is no better satisfaction than accomplishing something well that we *didn't* want to do. Case in point: as I was coming up through the ranks, I hated board breaking. Let me rephrase that: I HATED BOARD BREAKING! I wasn't very good at it and it was somewhat painful (especially when the board didn't break.) Unfortunately, there was no advancement without being able to perform the required break for each rank. Since I didn't find it palatable to be a white belt for my entire life, I grudgingly did what I had to do, eventually making it to 4th Degree Black Belt. By that time, I had become quite proficient at board breaking, and even got a perfect score in the last tournament in which I competed. There was no better feeling than when I received the first-place medal for that event. All of the misery, the pain, and the struggle just melted away!

True satisfaction can't be well appreciated without the struggle for success. Throughout life, I've crossed paths with a variety of people in various stages of retirement. All too many times, I've witnessed the rapid decline of those who no longer challenged themselves to be better. They had their social security benefits, pensions, and savings on which to rest their laurels. I heard sentiments like, "I've worked hard all of my life, now it's time to kick back



and do nothing." Similar to the "mousepocalypse," it wasn't long before they withered into premature agedness and met with their end.

Admittedly, we're not here forever. As my Pappy used to say, "Don't take life too seriously, because no one survives it anyway." At the same time, God created us to live, to take on life's challenges with zeal, and be successful and happy. Life's about honing and pruning ourselves in order to be fruitful throughout our lives – to enjoy the dopamine of success. As we age, maybe we lose some of our physical skills, our edge, so to speak. Maybe it becomes more about sharing our wisdom and knowledge with others – passing on that which we've learned and experienced.

To be continued...