

World Knowledge Forum 2012

October 10th, 2012 – Debate on Happiness: Equation of Work, Success, and Happiness

The afternoon session of the second day of the 13th World Knowledge Forum was highlighted by a friendly debate between two panelists with differing views on the role of happiness in relation to work and success. Todd Buchholz, the author of the best-selling book *Rush*, and Shawn Achor, author of *The Happiness Advantage*, shared their respective views and challenged one another.

Mr. Buchholz and Mr. Achor both shared the view that the harder society works, the more benefits that are generated. Happiness, according to both authors, does not necessarily follow success, and “the joy that we strive toward our potential,” according to Mr. Achor, is what ultimately leads to happiness.

The fundamental difference in their perspectives is the role of happiness plays in relation to success in people’s lives. Whereas one panelist argued that happiness is a prerequisite for success, the other asserted that happiness is a by-product of self-worth that comes through constant challenges and engagement.

“Striving and taking chances,” Mr. Buchholz argued, “is what drives happiness.” He criticized scholars who denounce free enterprise and competition by proclaiming that “capitalism is what’s destroying our souls.” Mr. Buchholz pointed out that “we cannot go back to Eden,” and that practically all existing systems are competitive. He also added that in a free-trade system, history repeatedly demonstrates that people are fairer and less violent.

“Why do human-beings work?” Mr. Buchholz asked. He argued that people work to achieve a sense of self-worth, and that “we strive to be alive.” He continued to argue that the current generation is the beneficiary of competition, and that life expectancy around the world could not have risen without competition. For example, China’s life expectancy “has risen from 47 [years of age] to 80 [years of age],” and this would not have been possible “if we had not been rushing around.”

However, “competition doesn’t have to be a zero-sum game,” Mr. Buchholz added. In the realm of competition, one person’s gain does not have to be another person’s loss. “We can compete against ourselves,” Mr. Buchholz noted. “That is a perfectly valid way to compete, and get the dopamine flowing, another means happiness.”

Mr. Achor’s main counter-argument was that happiness is not the result of success, but rather the very reason for success. “The reason we work,” Mr. Achor argued, “should come from that deep sense of happiness, where if we believe if we find enjoyment in our work, we work better and faster.” He also pointed out that when human brain is positive, then “every single business, education, health outcome improves.”

When discussing the role of money in relation to general happiness, Mr. Achor argued that “10 percent of overall happiness is predicated on the external world.” According to Mr. Achor, there is actually a negative correlation between how we care about money and happiness.

Furthermore, Mr. Achor argued that when people become happy in the present time frame and allow the brain to work positively, “we can get out of depression,” referring to the current global economic crisis. “We work to make better quality of life, but rush is destroying quality of life,” Mr. Achor contended.

The main difference between Mr. Achor’s view and Mr. Buchholz’s views on money lies in people’s perceptions of money. When a regular work wins a lottery and decides to quit his or her job, for example, Mr. Buchholz’s main concern is “what happens next” with that money, whereas Mr. Achor’s counterargument is “how you view money.”

Despite their core differences, both Mr. Achor and Mr. Buchholz share the belief that they are both capitalists, that they both believe in free-market enterprise, and that they both believe that happiness has a place in success. Economically speaking, happiness can be created by striving toward one’s potential, and that happy workers exhibit better efficiency and increased productivity.

It is the core issue of how the happiness is generated that fundamentally highlights their differences.