“Open Happiness.” That tagline — the centerpiece of Coca-Cola’s 2009 advertising campaign — sounds like the perfect encapsulation of our culture’s definition of bliss. The idea of happiness on offer (or on sale) couldn’t be simpler: Consumption equals contentment. Pop open a soda and all will be well.

If only it were that easy. It’s not, of course. Since antiquity, humans have struggled to define the good life. What makes us happy? How do we find personal fulfillment? What does progress look like?

Here in the United States, the quest for happiness is as American as apple pie. Our Declaration of Independence states that each person is endowed with “unalienable rights… among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Its author, Thomas Jefferson, didn’t mean hedonism. He meant something like the word Aristotle used when musing on humans’ purpose: eudemonia, which means contentment, or flourishing. Jefferson envisioned a society where all people thrive in all aspects of being. “The only orthodox purpose of government is to secure the greatest degree of happiness possible,” he wrote.

Sounds great; Aristotle would likely approve. But, as the Coke ad shows, something got lost in translation. Turns out that we’re defining happiness all wrong. For the last few generations, we’ve been using a single indicator — Gross Domestic Product, or GDP — to gauge society’s well-being. While GDP boasts a certain simplicity (it just adds up all the stuff bought and sold), it’s a blunt instrument for calculating whether we are, as individuals and communities, actually content. In fact, it measures all the wrong things. Our singular focus on GDP has made us obsessed with economic growth and has put the most meaningful goods — physical health, personal relationships, ecosystem resilience — as distant also-rans.

It’s long past time for that to change. We must develop another measure of happiness. The effort to create new, more accurate indicators of progress takes on new urgency given the cascading destruction to the environment. Our understanding (or misunderstanding) of happiness isn’t only a threat to our personal well-being. It’s also a threat to the very ecosystems on which we depend. Redefining how we calculate progress has become a cultural imperative as well as a personal one. Turns out that our very continuation as a successful species might depend on it.

Fuzzy Math

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“Our gross national product … if we should judge America by that, counts air pollution and cigarette advertising, and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage…. It counts the destruction of our redwoods and the loss of our natural wonders in chaotic sprawl…. Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education, or the joy of their play…. It measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.”

Such rhetoric would sound strange in today’s reactionary political environment. But just a few years before Kennedy’s speech, President Lyndon Johnson called for a society characterized more by “quality of life than quantity of goods.”

A New Measure of Societal Progress Can Help Save the Planet — and Us

by John de Graaf and Laura Musikanski

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Such rhetoric would sound strange in today’s reactionary political environment. But just a few years before Kennedy’s speech, President Lyndon Johnson called for a society characterized more by “quality of life than quantity of goods.” Then, in the early seventies, came dire warnings of “limits to growth” and author Edward Abbey’s well-turned phrase that
“unlimited growth is the ideology of the cancer cell.”

How did our national priorities become so skewed? The idea that economic growth could serve as a measurement for well-being took root during the Great Depression. People could not meet basic needs, and Congress did not have enough information about the economy to make good policy decisions. So in 1934 the government hired economist Simon Kuznets to help. He created the equation: Consumption + Investment + Government Spending + Net Exports = Gross National Product, or GNP. (The US government began using the term GDP in 1991.) The equation was a useful tool for telling government officials how efficient our economy was in producing the goods people needed. It was especially helpful during World War II, when the government used GNP to manage a booming war economy without causing so much inflation that people could not afford bread.

When he created his formula, Kuznets warned that GNP did not actually measure well-being. He cautioned Congress that “the welfare of a nation can, therefore, scarcely be inferred from a measure of national income.” Thirty years later, he again warned that overall economic growth wasn’t the same as societal welfare: “Distinctions must be kept in mind between quantity and quality of growth,” he wrote.

But by then it was too late. Government economists had firmly established GNP growth as the main indicator of national progress. The idea that prosperity and growth were synonymous was further embedded in the national consciousness by the media, whose fixation on GNP made it the go-to thermometer on whether the country was feeling good or bad. Kuznets’s words went unheeded.

Growing Backwards

In the past 30 years, our Gross Domestic Product has doubled. During that same time, some other important figures have also increased: the number of threatened species, the amount of greenhouse gas emissions, the rates of diabetes and heart disease. Meanwhile, almost all the income gained from the GDP growth went to the richest one percent of Americans, creating the widest income gap in the industrial world.

Many of us instinctively feel that disconnect between a growing economy and decreasing quality of life. Some statistics tell us we’re not alone in that feeling. According to polls taken by the National Opinion Research Center, about one-third of Americans described themselves as “very happy” in the 1950s; the percentage remains the same today. More troubling is that clinical depression is three to ten times more common today than two generations ago.

The paradox of growing material prosperity coexisting with diminishing personal satisfaction has spurred a number of efforts to develop measurements of economic success that are more holistic than GDP. In 1995, the organization Redefining Progress developed what it calls “The Genuine Progress Indicator,” or GPI. The GPI takes the government’s GDP figures and adds housework and volunteerism while subtracting the costs of such things as divorce and pollution. The result is sobering. According to Redefining Progress, the
United States’ GPI has remained nearly flat or has fallen since 1970, even as GDP increased.

Another alternative to GDP paints an even gloomier picture. According to the World Bank’s measure of “adjusted net savings,” well-being is actually declining. Adjusted net savings accounts for investments in human capital, depletion of natural resources, and damage caused by pollution that has an impact on our well-being. Adjusted net savings has decreased by about 25 percent since the late 1990s.

A quick glance at some other numbers helps illustrate the decline in human capital in the United States. Yes, we have more stuff than we did 30 years ago, but we are working longer hours than we did then and carry frightening levels of personal debt. Our health is arguably the worst in the industrial world, even though we spend twice as much per person as other countries on health care. The CIA World Factbook ranks the US fiftieth in the world in life expectancy; a recent University of Washington study found that, for the first time ever, life expectancy for women is declining in 30 percent of America’s counties. A recent AARP/Time magazine poll found that chronic loneliness among Americans over 45 has increased from 20 to 35 percent in the last decade.

In his Italian bestseller, Manifesto for Happiness, University of Siena economist Stefano Bartolini compares happiness data around the world and concludes that America is “the example not to follow.” Bartolini says Americans are caught in a vicious cycle. Our consumption habits demand more debt and longer work hours, reducing our social connections, a central foundation of happiness. To compensate for the feelings of loneliness, we then buy more stuff, seeking friendship through products. This consumption treadmill is reflected in faster economic growth than in Europe, but it exacerbates Americans’ social disconnection and the deterioration of our environmental commons.

Bartolini argues that the US’s rapid economic growth is more a matter of the inefficiency of the American economy in meeting our actual needs than it is an indicator of dynamism. In short, GDP obscures more than it reveals. The numbers give us a sense that we are wealthy; in fact, we are impoverished when it comes to the things we value most.

Life After Growth
Our culture’s laser-like focus on growth is also a threat to Earth’s ecosystems. Our economy has grown without regard for the environment, so that now the Global Footprint Network estimates we would need more than five planets to replicate the American lifestyle throughout the world. Obviously we can’t go on like this. But is there life after growth?

The people of Bhutan think so. For a couple of generations, the tiny country high in the Himalayas has been using a more holistic gauge of happiness to make policy decisions and allocate resources. It began in 1972, when Jigme Wangchuck, the king of Bhutan, declared that, “Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product.”

More recently, the Bhutanese have been measuring happiness and using the results to make their country happier, healthier, and more sustainable. Bhutanese life expectancy has increased by 50 percent since King Wangchuck’s proclamation. Its environmental policies include keeping 60 percent of land under forest cover to protect precious habitats. At the same time, the Bhutanese economy has also grown. That matters a great deal for a poor country. But the Bhutanese consider material well-being as linked to, and dependent upon, improvements in other areas of life. Employing their own traditional knowledge and the assistance of experts around the world, they have identified nine domains that are central to happiness or well-being:

- Psychological Well-being
- Physical Health
- Work-Life Balance
- Education
- Cultural Vitality
- Community Vitality
- Environmental Quality
- Material Well-being
- Democratic Governance

With the Gross Domestic Happiness (GDH) Index, no one domain is more important than any other.

The Bhutanese conviction that happiness should take priority over economic growth has led to some perhaps radical decisions. When Bhutan’s government was deciding whether to join the World Trade Organization, it considered how such a step would impact the country’s happiness. Government officials determined that membership (which is coveted by many countries) would result in a net loss of well-being. The country decided not to join the WTO — at least for now.

Happiness Is Catching
Since Bhutan’s pioneering effort to better measure well-being, the idea has spread around the world. In the United States, efforts to measure sustainability more holistically began in 1991, when Sustainable Seattle developed the world’s first regional indicators of well-being. Today, more than 350 community organizations in the United States alone have developed some kind of well-being or sustainability indicators. Local governments in Brazil, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom are also beginning to measure happiness. In July, the idea that GDP is an insufficient gauge of progress reached the highest level of global governance when the United Nations General Assembly invited member coun-
tries to “pursue … additional measures that better capture the importance of the pursuit of happiness.”

The two of us are involved with one of the newest efforts to measure and improve well-being, which is the focus of Sustainable Seattle’s work today. Based on the most up-to-date social science and psychology, “The Happiness Initiative” begins measuring progress by asking people about their own personal well-being in nine domains very similar to those used in Bhutan’s GDH survey. Developed by the city of Victoria, BC, the initiative has attracted the interest of officials in Seattle, Portland, OR, and several other cities. “It might seem flaky at first to measure happiness,” says Dean Fortin, the Mayor of Victoria, but “the most important thing for any mayor is how happy are your citizens. If you can measure and mark out happiness, you can better understand how you are affecting your community and your neighborhood.”

In Seattle, the city council plans to use the happiness survey to help shape public policy, based on input from a series of “town meetings.” About 7,000 people have taken the survey already. Most respondents said they had strong connections with family and friends (an average score of 81 out of 100) and high levels of interpersonal trust (71). But community participation (at 41) was low, as was time balance (43), and quality of their environment and access to nature (46).

The results don’t necessarily mean that people in Seattle are unhappy. But such scores are a warning sign that something in their lives is out of whack. For example, if someone has a low score on work-life balance, that will likely impact other domains upon which happiness rests: community vitality, health, and psychological well-being.

How can we correct such imbalances? The answer lies in the wisdom of ecology.

It’s All Connected
John Muir famously pointed out that, “Whenever you try to pick out anything by itself, you find it hitched to everything else in the universe.” That is the essence of ecological insight. Every plant and animal is connected — in some fashion, no matter how long the thread — to every other one in a great global web. If this is true for the biology of Earth, why shouldn’t it be the same for human biology and psychology?

In fact, modern Western science — as well as the traditional wisdom of Eastern medicine — confirms this to be true. If you’re mentally depressed, you’ll be physically unhealthy, and vice versa.

The fundamental weakness of GDP is that it ignores interconnections. It only covers a single metric: economic growth. It’s reductive. In contrast, The Happiness Initiative, like Bhutan’s GDH, is intuitive. That’s what the nine domains are all about — recognizing that personal happiness and societal progress are multifaceted and connected. For sustainable economic well-being, we must have environmental, social, and personal well-being. For long-term environmental health, we must have economic, social, and personal health. And so on.

The unbalanced lives that many of us lead help illustrate the idea. People with poor time balance make poor environ-

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