

Happiness -Does It Exist?

by Joyce A. Pratt

Preface: Maya Angelou wrote, “women should know that her childhood may not have been perfect, but it’s over.” This essay is an attempt to serve as a kind of catharsis and provide a perspective on how one can belabor unhappiness by living in or fearing the past.

The sun shined brightly, in a three-dimensional haze, through the hospital window and down on Fran’s small frame as she laid almost motionless on her bed. Her coughing had subsided and her shallow breathing appeared to be coming to an end. There was a soft smile on her lips.

Fran Scott, a 21+ young, high school graduate who had landed a job in her mountainside neighborhood YWCA, was generally happy excluding the stones and rocks life throws at one. She spent most of her youth in the home of her grandmother where her mother and aunts also resided. The men were no longer in these women’s lives for various reasons, including Fran’s father from whom her mother had separated. One of Fran’s aunts lived on the third floor because she had tuberculosis (TB) and was quarantined. It was a time when little was known about TB, but Fran loved her family and particularly this aunt because she was so very sick and secluded from the others. Every chance she could get, Fran would go to the third floor and read to her aunt while trying to get her to eat more.

During that time, Fran met Webster Brooks, a very handsome young man who worked for his father’s successful electrical business on the other side of town. He was at first exceedingly charming and together with his style and good looks, swept Fran off her feet. For a young woman, raised in a strict home of devout Christians with little opportunity to interact with the youth of her day as did her younger sister, Fran succumbed to his charms. They married shortly after meeting, and marriage was strange to her for it was completely different from her home life and short courtship and now she was pregnant. But, she had high hopes because she was starting a family and remembered when her mother and father were happy. With her mother’s emotional support and many prayers, she persevered, determined to find happiness for herself, her husband, and now their daughter Ann.

During her daughter’s six-month check-up, Fran was diagnosed with TB and her daughter had a touch of the disease. Fran later died in the hospital they called a sanitarium and her daughter Ann lived there for almost three years. Ann was considered a miracle baby for few children survived the disease, and adults were succumbing by the thousands.

There were different versions about why Ann’s paternal grandfather checked her out of the hospital at the age of three and not her father. Her maternal grandmother Scott told Fran that she had asked grandfather Brooks if she could raise her, but he said he wanted his son to take on his responsibilities. That never happened, and grandfather Brooks and his wife raised Ann the best they could. Luckily for Ann, her grandparents lived well financially because of his electrical business. Grandmother Brooks had only raised four sons, did not want to raise another child at her age, and questioned whether Ann was her son’s child because she was unattractive.

Between three-year old Ann, who had been taught at the hospital about caring for herself, and Grandfather Brooks, the years went by quietly. Strict rules were applied for Ann because her grandfather always worried about her health and later as a teenager, wanted to protect her from unsavory males. She wasn't allowed to date until after high school graduation, could only leave home upon approval, and had to return home before dark. Ann obeyed her grandfather without question for other than Grandmother Scott, he was the only one who appeared to care about her.

After high school graduation, Ann worked a couple of years, saved her money and moved to New York City. She obtained a job at a prestigious foundation and met her first love. She lived happily with him by her side because like Grandfather Brooks, he protected her and encouraged her educational goals. Years later, he convinced her to move to New Jersey and helped her relocate when he discovered there was no remedy for his lung cancer. His death left her devastated and lost because she was unaware of his disease and Grandfather Brooks had just died a few years earlier.

After a year of grieving her first love, she met and later married Webster Brooks, a very handsome young man who worked for his father's restaurant and later as chef for a state youth facility. One year after their first date, she found herself walking down the aisle and was frightened. However, it was a good marriage allowing Ann to grow and develop as a woman, wife and professional. Having no children of her own, she even tried, without success, to become a good step-mother. Thirty years later, Webster died of cancer and again she had no knowledge of a loved one's terminal illness until the final weeks. All her hopes and prayers had been for naught because last week was the milestone of exactly five years since she had been told Webster took his last breath.

Mya Angelou's message that realizing a "childhood is over" seemed to be more of a portent than a reality. Recently, Ann read an article of a widow who experienced happiness until the death of her husband destroyed it all in one breath. The woman wrote "I don't like it, but I am now trying to get used to the new normal." Ann is absorbing this new concept as she wonders at her late age is happiness a normal that can be experienced again? Dare she date again? And if she treads lightly, will her fear of happiness gained and lost dissipate enough for her to live a new normal? Does happiness exist?