



ESL MiniConference

Why Are You Smiling? An Analysis of the Human Smile

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The author, Mary Giles, at TJ

My old friend Robb Scott showed me some research suggesting that by smiling more, we can enjoy better health and happiness. I don't want to argue against smiling, or argue against Robb Scott. But I wonder. Are all smiles about happiness?

A government leader or movie star has to wear a smile in front of a camera while meeting fans or appearing before an election. But wearing an obligatory smile is not associated with becoming happier. A passage often quoted from Doctor Zhivago even says "Your life is bound to be affected if [you]... rejoice at what brings you nothing but misfortune," adding that our nervous systems and our souls "can't be forever violated with impunity." Social scientists like Dr. Richard Wiseman, author of *Quirkology*, explain that true smiles of inner happiness are called Duchenne smiles. They use a different set of muscles, and are easy for scientists to recognize. Scientists have discovered that not all smiles will promote happiness, but that genuine happiness can create Duchenne smiles.

But is happiness the only good reason for smiling? The most interesting smiles may not come from happiness at all, but they can still be valuable. So I searched my memory garden, its bright and its sunless places, its mild seasons and bitter ones, and gathered this little bouquet of seven smiles as a tribute to the smiles in your own lives.

Example 1: The Determination Smile

This smile is like a field of dandelions. (I think a lot of languages must

have a word for this flower. Dent-de-lion, Lengua de vaca, Oduvanchik, Tampopo.) It grows in the worst soil, it's a bright sunny color, and even if someone steps on this flower to crush it, its seeds will scatter all over the wind and grow again. This clip shows a determination smile:

Louis Armstrong, "What a Wonderful World"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vnRqYMTpXHc>

A radio host who met many jazz musicians told me that Louis Armstrong, early in his career, would often perform as a popular star in hotels; then before driving on to the next show he would go outside and sleep in his car. Why? There was a time in the U.S. when some hotels rented rooms only to White guests. Louis Armstrong made money and enjoyed fame, especially in later years. But he had a difficult life, and also knew poverty and harsh treatment. In this appreciative song, watch his eyes at 1:33 when he sings "They'll learn much more / than I'll ever know." Is it only my imagination? Could it be that when he sees happy children, he remembers his own childhood carrying coal instead of learning in school? He had reasons to be upset and discouraged, but his bright smile became part of his famous image because it reflected genuine determination to succeed, share music, and appreciate life.

Here is another determination smile:

Jack LaLanne, the "You Bet Your Life" TV show:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJFYkuumI28>

Jack LaLanne was born in 1914 and is still giving public talks now at age 95. Since the 1930s, he has encouraged all Americans, including women and senior citizens, to be physically active. According to his website, he still exercises "every morning for two hours, spending 1 ½ hours in the weight room and ½ hour swimming." In 1984 to celebrate his 70th birthday, Jack handcuffed his hands together, and against strong wind and waves swam 1.5 miles. All along the way he pulled 70 boats holding 70 people. He did this to encourage older people to stay in good shape.

In this clip you see Jack at age 44, a guest on a TV show. (Culture note: this show had a new "secret word" every day. Jack uses the secret word without realizing it; that's why the young lady appears and gives the guests a prize of \$50.) In those days, a man who did vigorous exercise and ate raw vegetables was considered foolish and eccentric, and people would enjoy making fun of him. When Jack explains that to encourage exercise he put on handcuffs and swam from the Alcatraz Prison island to San Francisco, the host Groucho Marx says "Handcuffs? Isn't that the way everyone escapes from Alcatraz?" Watch Jack's smile: despite Groucho's many interruptions and jokes, Jack uses this TV appearance to

show an optimistic attitude about his life work.

Does the determination smile grow from happiness? Not necessarily. Sometimes it's a cover for discouraged feelings. But with this smile the person can respond not to outer difficulties, but to inner self-respect. It can say "Yes, I may be sleeping in the car tonight, or you can laugh at me. But I have a mission and a talent, and I came to work."

Example 2: The Helping Smile

This smile is like a water lily. You can see its white flower best in very dark, troubled, muddied water. It can float with the waves and remain calm. This smile means that you are willing to see and recognize the best not only in yourself, but in the other person. It tells others "You're not alone; we'll take care of things," especially when the situation is serious. At our hospital, on the private patient elevators, passengers may be injured, ill, or dying. Staff members must be ready to set aside their own emotions. When they enter an elevator, especially when they need to help, they have a cheerful smile all prepared so they can respond in a calm way. This smile means "No matter how upset or sick you are, no matter how your face or body look now, I respect in you the deep human condition that we will all experience one day. You are the same person that you always were. That is how we will see you and care for you."

Example 3: The Serenity Smile

This smile is like the flowers of a Witch Hazel tree, blooming only in the coldest time of late winter. Its delicate yellow blossoms shine when every other flower is frozen. On a windless day, they have a gentle sweet perfume.

Thich Nhat Hanh is a Buddhist monk from Vietnam. He invites listeners to find their inner smile, and to express it in their lives. On this page, <http://www.plumvillage.org/thay.html> the second photograph shows the smile of this respected Thay (Teacher). Like a terrible winter, the violence and cruelty in his life took away all kinds of happiness. But his remarkable smile remains.

A serenity smile is acted out in the very last second of the movie "East West" with actor Oleg Menshikov. The movie is based on a true story. The lead character, Aleksei, has just lost everything, because he made a heroic moral decision, so he keeps his honor and his conscience and his love for his family. I won't tell you about the ending; if you don't mind English subtitles, you can rent this movie and watch the whole thing. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vASLNeEaQEA&feature=related>

In the very last minute of the 1998 movie "Les Miserables" with Liam Neeson and Geoffrey Rush, there is another resignation smile, and for the same reason – the hero made very hard moral decisions for years, and now after losing everything he is starting his life all over again, but doing it with his conscience and his honor. The two main actors speak good English; in their scenes together the movie is well worth watching.

Perhaps your teachers assigned you the book *The Grapes of Wrath*. The final words describe the resignation smile of the daughter of a very poor family. The family members were very hungry and in desperate circumstances. But suddenly they found people who were even more hungry and desperate. Then, by being generous, the family fed their sense of dignity and their connection to one another.

Example 4: The Flow Smile

This smile is like the small green flower buds of the tall trees here in the Pacific Northwest. There is nothing bright or showy about them. In fact, they are invisible unless you look closely. They're not trying to attract bees or end up in a vase. But the flowers give a little touch of brighter green to these great trees and help them to carry on for generation after generation.

This is a smile among people who forget themselves completely, doing something that they really love to do, such as painting a picture or observing nature or sewing a dress for their child. (By the way, it's not the same forgetful condition as staring at a video game or TV show for hours, or drinking a lot of beer!) Psychologist Mihály Csikszentmihályi described this as a state of "flow," times when our energy and talents are in harmony and creating something good. A person in this state may forget to feel tired or hungry or bored. He is not thinking "How does my smile look? Is it attractive? Should I smile more?" The smile just happens.

What activity expresses your talent? In America, do you have an opportunity to express this talent in your life right now?

Example 5: The Hidden Smile

This one reminds me of a Japanese water garden with no flowers at all, only stone and sand raked perfectly smooth. This garden presents not brightness or color, but a slice of free space and stillness that we can feel and carry away as breathing room inside us. For a little while, 30 years ago, I was a student in the Soviet Union. Most of the smiles (and in that climate, most of the flowers) were sheltered and protected inside the home, shared with loved ones instead of with strangers on the street. At that time, most citizens were not allowed to speak to Americans. To

protect themselves from accusations of being friendly with me, strangers would put on a blank well-smoothed face – the perfect disguise for acts of kindness! When I left the country, a Red Army soldier at Customs saw on my declaration "one religious picture." It was a sentimental amateur coloring of Mary, mother of Jesus, on several square centimeters of cardboard. The soldier held the little picture high overhead and shouted at me, loudly enough for the other inspectors to see and hear. "Have you lost your mind, carrying trash like this? It's produced by crazy fanatics, just to deceive students like you with their lying fantasies!" Frowning, he hid the picture in his hand and tucked it in a pocket of my knapsack with gentleness and care. "There. Just don't bring her back here," he whispered. Keeping his stern look, with an encouraging nod he waved me right through the gate: "Go on, you're free now. You're free."

Example 6: The Unexpected Joy Smile

This smile blooms under pressure, cracking through difficulties. It's like the snowdrop, a little white flower that grows right out of the snow in very early spring. (And if we did not have snow, there would be no snowdrops. There are none in a climate that is pleasantly warm all year.) These smiles do not depend on a happy ending, or optimism about the future. For a short time, they break out of icy places when you don't expect them.

At the hospital early one morning, a visitor had a heart attack. Teams of doctors and nurses came running with all their strength, pushing "code carts" of emergency equipment. One team arrived first, picked up the young man, and began first aid while they raced to the elevator. The other teams stopped and leaned on one another to catch their breath before they could speak. Then one said "This has been a VERY exciting night. I declare that today there will be no more code emergencies." The other doctors and nurses said "Yes! No more emergencies! Everybody will stay healthy and safe." They began laughing and cheering at this decision -- the cleaning staff, the ambulance drivers, the coffee shop vendor. "Yay! Health day for everyone!" Of course they were not expressing happiness at seeing anyone suffer. Instead, they felt relieved and thankful that the young man received immediate help. Their level of adrenalin and concern was extremely high during the emergency, and they needed to calm down by laughing. Besides, many had been fighting emergencies all night! Their minute of laughter refreshed their energy and reinforced the good team spirit of their colleagues.

Once I taught introductory ESL to several classes of war refugees, young men 18 years old. I wrote a long dialogue about buying a pencil for 50 cents. Then I went to a friendly discount store near our classroom. I gave copies of the dialogue to the teenage cashiers, and let them know that the

guys were coming in soon to buy a pencil. The class rehearsed the dialogues, then carried the handout to the store and shouted their lines in a loud happy chorus. Students and cashiers alike all demanded a turn. These students had lost their country, family members, houses and jobs, everyday language, and the chance to go home. They were still in shock, and they faced years of problems with physical and mental health, money, jobs, and loneliness. But for one hour they shared the absurd hilarity of joking with cute teenage cashiers to spend Teacher's money. For my fifty cents the best laughing yoga I ever knew was with young people who finally felt safe.

This clip says unexpected joy to me. Sting, age 55, "Lazarus Heart":

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f24Y66ZBOWE>

There are several theories about which difficult events in his life inspired this song. The theme is a wounded heart which never heals -- but instead of bitterness it grows courage and flowers:

"Every day another miracle: Only death will keep us apart To sacrifice a life for yours, I'd be the blood of the Lazarus heart."

Vaclav Havel wrote, "Hope... is not the same as joy that things are going well... [and] is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out."

Example 7: The Last Smile of All

What flower is most like this smile? Just as white light contains every color of the rainbow, this last smile is many kinds in one.

Father Tom was a youthful man with curly black hair, a wonderful sense of humor, and boundless optimism and energy. He loved to sing and play his guitar at beaches and parks. People would listen and talk to him about their problems and the meaning of life. At his church in our neighborhood, at a little shrine built in the wall, there are green candles burning at a prayer altar for people affected by cancer. That's how Father Tom died a few months ago, in the house next to the church. The week before he died, with the last of his strength he served Mass with the other priests, then stayed to shake hands with about 200 people, blessing each one. This picture shows his last smile, before the other priests helped him back to the house.

<http://www.uwnewman.org/files/Newsletter-09Winter-Insert.pdf>

In Father Tom's religion, green is the color of hope. Every day in his church the candles burn themselves out, and new candles will take their place; but their green fire remains, burning day and night.

What are some smiles in the garden of your memory?
What are you smiling about?

By Mary Giles

This story is owned by Mary Giles.

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