

## The mystery of happiness

Joe Ferullo | Jan. 8, 2010 NCR Today

A little over a year ago, I agreed to volunteer as the parish council president at my church in Los Angeles. Swamped at work, overwhelmed with things to do, I was sure this obligation would make me miserable -- but at least earn me a few days less in purgatory.

I was wrong. Yes, I attend more parish functions than ever, volunteer at events, and drag my family along to help whenever I can. But it all makes me, for some reason, happy.

The elusive "why?" in all this is hinted at in a recent deluge of articles and video, seeking to unravel the mystery of what makes us happy -- a mystery only because the things we expect bring happiness rarely do, and the real answer is too shockingly simple to believe.

In Thursday's *New York Times*, columnist Nicholas Kristof writes [about Costa Rica](#) [1], home to people listed as the "happiest on earth," according to a database compiled by a Dutch sociologist.

Kristol runs through several possible reasons for this, including Costa Rica's decision in 1949 to abolish its army and spend more money on education. But Kristof also notes that many other Latin American countries also routinely land high on these happiness lists, despite disadvantages like systemic poverty. He writes: "Perhaps one reason is a cultural emphasis on family and friends, on social capital over financial capital."

Friends over money? Huh. Consider another study [released earlier this week](#) [2], that showed American's happiness with their jobs at the lowest level in 22 years: only 45 percent of us like our work.

Hard times are not the reason why: many workers just said their jobs were not that interesting, and left them vaguely unsatisfied. But it may be that we expect too much from work -- perhaps too many expect their jobs to make them, well, happy.

The documentary "Rethinking Happiness" -- an episode of the PBS series "[This Emotional Life](#) [3]" that aired this week -- says that, if we look to work as a main source of happiness and satisfaction, we are wasting valuable time.

The program is hosted by Daniel Gilbert, a professor and author of the book *Stumbling on Happiness*. In both print and on television, Gilbert reports on what you could call the "Wizard of Oz" effect: we race through our lives searching for happiness, when it is right under our noses the whole time. In our family, our friends, in our church, our neighborhood, and hometown. Surveys show the happiest people are those who get involved with others, and stay involved.

And that's why folding up dozens of chairs and dragging heavy tables out of the way after some parish fundraiser leaves me unexpectedly smiling, I guess. I have less time, true -- and the work is certainly still there when I get back to it. And yet, I am happy.

Jean-Paul Sartre said: "Hell is other people." (Leave it to the French.) And sometimes, maybe, sure.

But, as studies increasingly show, they can be heaven, too.

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[2] [http://www.sltrib.com/business/ci\\_14121101](http://www.sltrib.com/business/ci_14121101)

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