

Buying happiness?

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Someone has paid a million and a half dollars for a “recipe” of happiness written down by Einstein. But he bought a paper, not happiness. Reaching lies in walking.

—And what good does it do you to own the stars?

—It does me the good of making me rich.

—And what good does it do you to be rich?

—It makes it possible for me to buy more stars, if any are ever discovered.

The Little Prince.
Saint Exúpery

It is not immortality, wealth or the conquest of other planets; human species is still fighting tooth and nail to grasp happiness.

It's about an old crusade. For millennia, the inhabitants of this planet pursue that goal.

And barely a few days ago, in late October, certain resident in the German city of Hamburg, who wanted to conceal his identity, decided to buy at an auction house in Jerusalem a couple of notes where, allegedly, the secret of happiness was revealed. They were signed by Albert Einstein.

The anonymous buyer, who made his phone calls at the auction, afforded the astronomical figure of \$1.5 million for one of those notes and \$240,000 for the other.

The story of two papers

In late 1922, the man who is considered today among the fathers of Modern Physics was on a tour through Asia delivering academic lectures, when the news came to him by telegraph: he had won the Nobel Prize in Physics.

He could not travel to Stockholm to receive the coveted prize personally, but the news had already reached the Japanese capital and he was welcomed with great fanfare. It was so great that at the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo, where the 43-year-old scientist was staying, the most mixed feelings of pride, modesty and even confusion for his debut fame overwhelmed him.

It was then when a courier arrived at his room with some delivery. It hasn't been clear whether the man did not want to accept the tip, according to the Japanese costumes of the time; whether, knowing such habits, Einstein did not offer it to him; or whether he wanted to give it to him but he did not have cash available.

The truth is that he chose to reward his service in a very original way and based on his newly gained popularity. With his quick handwriting and brief writing, he wrote some sentences on a pair of sheets and handed them to the man commenting: "If you are lucky, these notes will be more valuable than a regular tip."

The author of the Theory of Relativity did not figure out how valuable they would be 95 years later.

On a 13x21cm- sheet with the logo of the Japanese hotel, one could read: "A quiet and modest life brings more joy than the pursuit of success bound with constant restlessness."

On the other paper, smaller, 14x18cm, also in German, he had written: "When there is a will, there is a way."

Regarding both messages, which feature certain contradiction, Roni Grosz, the archivist in charge of Einstein's largest collection in the world, at Jerusalem's Hebrew University, told the press that, although unfortunately it could never be known whether it was the physicist's own musings on his fame, at least they provide clues of his ideas about happiness.

And happiness is so relative that the courier recipient of such notes did not benefit with them at all, but his nephew, who took them to auction, when the world

celebrates 102 years of creation of the Theory of Relativity.

Study “Lottery Winners and Accident Victims: Is happiness relative?, by University of Chicago Booth School of Business Professor Christopher Hsee, showed that those who won big prizes, in the long and medium run, were not happier than those who did not win them.

According to the research, the winners got accustomed to their new level of wealth, which a year later, they consider a daily thing and, therefore, undesirable. It is the phenomenon known as hedonic waterwheel, the psychological mechanism by means of which, once a desire is satisfied, another need takes its place and we remain as dissatisfied as before.

In fact, happiness is not money nor can it be bought with money. According to Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky, Professor at the Department of Psychology of the University of California, among today’s most authoritative voices in the so-called positive psychology and author of such volumes as *The Science of Happiness* and *The Myths of Happiness*, this can be conceived as “the experience of joy, contentment or positive well-being, combined with a sense that one’s life is good, meaningful and worthwhile.”

Using the same phrase, the noted professor of the Faculty of Psychology of the University of Havana agreed, in general terms, with the expert during a debate on Cubans’ happiness, held last September at Felix Varela Cultural Center.

Calviño, also known for his TV program, stated that happiness cannot be analyzed from a unidirectional perspective, because it depends on experiences, human values, feelings. “It’s episodic, it is not rational in nature”, IPS reported.

He recalled that “the daily life of today’s Cubans is extremely rigorous”, but it is “interesting that in multiple religious and philosophical vocations, happiness lies in the exercise of overcoming the rigors of life.”

“Happiness is their pursuit. Reaching lies in walking. I think there is a primary gift in every human being: we were born to build happiness, to be happy, because the only way to succeed in life is to feel that life is worth living”, Calviño said.

Meanwhile, scholars are still providing their definition of happiness and showing roads to achieve it, as singers, poets and the neighbors who wait in line at the grocery stores make their contributions to the concept, the grandson of my friend becomes entranced watching a lizard that enjoys the sun.

The man, who paid \$1.5 million for Einstein’s notes, is probably so tense and in a hurry taking accounts at auctions, that he has no time to discover the happy and pleasant lizard.

Translated by Jorge Mesa Benjamin / Cubasi Translation Staff
