

The Value of Contentment

By David Munn, CFP

"He who is not contented with what he has, would not be contented with what he would like to have." - Socrates

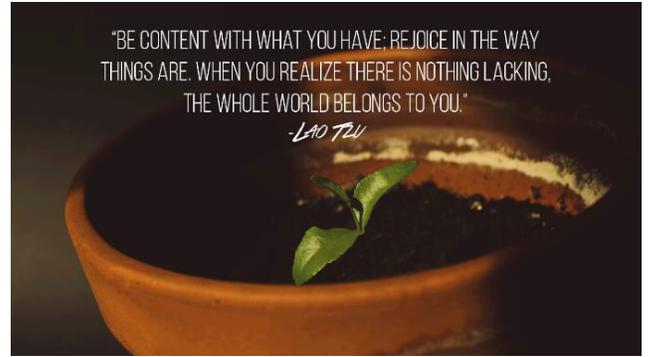
Think back to a time in your life when you really wanted something, whether a pay raise, bigger house, nicer car, or target balance in your bank account or investment portfolio. If you ultimately achieved your target, did it permanently satisfy you in the way you expected? Or was the satisfaction temporary, soon replaced by a new or bigger desire?

We will all attain varying levels of career success, wealth accumulation, notoriety, material possessions and life experiences, and all of them will fluctuate over the course of our lifetimes.

But contentment can be found in our current circumstances, and even in any circumstances. If we find ourselves anxious, envious, greedy, unhappy, ungrateful, or dissatisfied in our situation, what we may need is not “more” or “nicer” or “bigger” anything--as that may only magnify our current negative state. Instead, we can *decide* to be content with what we already have.

Is contentment a bad thing?

For some people, the words contentment and satisfied may carry a negative connotation. They might relate them to unfulfilled potential, mediocrity, or sloth.



But contentment is not about stopping short of our best effort, it's about the motivations behind our effort. A satisfaction and peace that exists regardless of what our efforts produce.

For example, a business owner should not stop growing his business just because he has achieved a desired level of lifestyle and financial wealth, but he also should understand the motivations that may be driving him.

If his motivation is to stroke his ego or prove something to others, he might question if continued growth is worth pursuing.

Conversely, if he views his business as a way to add value to others, whether employees or customers, continued growth may in fact be the most worthwhile and purposeful action he can take.

Similarly, an individual aggressively saving for an early retirement might consider if her motivation is to simply pursue a life of leisure--which is ultimately unsatisfying--or instead pursue a new opportunity for significance, be it paid or unpaid.

It's the difference between a focus on self and a focus on others. When we choose to limit the self-focus in our lives, we create space to focus on others, which will ultimately be most rewarding and satisfying.

How do we pursue contentment?

Once a year our nation commemorates a day of thanksgiving by gorging ourselves on two of the greatest American indulgences: food and football. It is perhaps the most ironic of holidays, albeit one of my favorites.

In most other cases, a focus on thanksgiving will lead to personal moderation and generosity. An acknowledgement that I have more than I need--and others do not--should lead to a behavior change.

Similarly, when I *acknowledge* I have enough to meet my needs, and likely many of my desires, I have taken the first step in pursuing contentment.

Secondly, I can *decide* that rather than continuing to enrich my own life, I will instead focus on adding value to the lives of others.

Finally, I will take *action*. Rather than continuing to grow my lifestyle or wealth, I will use my surplus resources for the benefit of others.

If I acknowledge I have enough, but don't decide to change my behavior, I demonstrate my true belief that I will be most happy focusing on "me" rather than others.

If I decide to make a change, but never take action, I will simply continue pursuing "more", stuck in a cycle of good intentions with no results.

When I go through the entire process of acknowledging I have enough, deciding to focus on others, and taking action to do so, I free myself from the hamster wheel of always pursuing more for me, and can instead live a life of satisfaction and peace, regardless of my circumstances.

"I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want." --Philippians 4:12

*"Wealth consists not in having great possessions, but in having few wants." — **Epictetus***

*"I have learned to seek my happiness by limiting my desires, rather than in attempting to satisfy them." — **John Stuart Mill***

I am content; that is a blessing greater than riches; and he to whom that is given need ask no more.

-Henry Fielding

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