



The gift of presence

Living in the moment and giving of yourself to others are two of the surest ways to finding daily bliss

By Josephine Brouard

DON'T YOU HATE people who tell you to "smell the roses" when you're feeling grumpy or down? We all know it's important to cultivate the right attitude and consider the glass "half full" instead of "half empty" but when you're up to your eyeballs in financial worries or family crises, who can honestly muster the wherewithal to see things through rose-tinted specs?

Not me, I mutter. And yet, the past couple of weeks have been packed with unexpected, inexplicable moments of joy: there was a moment this week, for instance, when I was so overcome with love as I gazed into a five-week-old baby's face that I felt my heart billow like a ship's sail. Baby Ruth wasn't my child, but babysitting this angelic infant, at that instant, felt like the perfect place for me to be. And a good 15 minutes or so must have passed before my frisson of pleasure passed.

These slivers of heaven are often fleeting, but it's wonderful when you capture one, like a butterfly-catcher with a net. "Aha," I say to myself, "here's another of those precious moments," and I sit and savour the sweetness like a naughty child with a prized lollipop.

Perhaps it's the onset of summer that has me so full of the joys of life – walking my dog in the morning and smelling the

jasmine everywhere puts vim in my step and a jig in my heart. I find it natural and easy to smile at strangers, and to feel positive about life.

Typically, I've found three situations that almost always open the gateway to moments of bliss: 1) When I'm in nature; 2) When I exercise; and 3) When I hang out with people that I love.

Take nature. A glorious day filled with sunshine picks up most people, but what pleases me is a moment that offers a delightful contrast to what has come before. After days of stultifying heat, a light rain, for example, can seem like the sweetest thing. And after a spell of cold, spring's floral sprigs appear positively radiant.

On a recent visit to Hangzhou, China (see page 82), I was admiring the willow-fringed islets all around me as I cruised the glittering waters of a lake in a junk. "How beautiful it is in the sunshine," I exclaimed as everywhere birds wheeled around us. My guide replied proudly in a sing-song voice: "In China, we say that the lake is beautiful in the sunshine, but it is more beautiful in the rain, and it is at it's most beautiful when it snows."

I was taken aback by this pronouncement, but as I imagined the lake in winter I was able to see in my mind's eye how exquisitely silvery and peaceful it would be when drenched in snowflakes. It struck me again how



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nature, in all its guises, elicits such brief, intense reactions of awe and wonder.

Exercise is another happiness-inducing phenomenon, releasing the body's endorphins naturally the more we push ourselves. I am far from athletic, but I savour the highs when my training efforts are done. Suddenly I'm transformed from sluggish couch potato into what feels like Superwoman (for a few hours at least).

And, finally, it's the pull of close family and friends that makes life really seem rosy. I think I'm chipper most of the time... simply because I feel loved. And I believe a lot of the love comes my way because I work so hard at loving others.

I never take other people's affections for granted; rather, I work hard to make myself available, and to be part of others' lives in helpful ways.

Thus, when an old friend needs company, I oblige. When a new mother needs respite, I'm there. And when a friend is sick, I'm at her bedside with chick flicks and a carton of fresh orange juice.

It's true what they say about giving: it always gives back. So next time you're feeling blue, don't focus on what you're not getting; rather, focus on what you can give. Why? Because giving of yourself is the surest way to experience more of those instances of bliss. ●

Josephine Brouard has a psychology degree and a fascination for human behaviour.