

Goals for America

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Thank you.

An October 4th article in the New York Times described how, some thirty years ago, the small Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan stopped measuring the wellbeing of its people just according to their economic output, and began measuring their sense of happiness. They then began crafting public policies in every area of life to advance the happiness of the people, and these new public policies have also included moving the nation from monarchy toward a democracy. What happened in 1971 in Bhutan was true leadership by King Wangchuck, who looked to his people's happiness instead of his own. Do we have any leadership in the U.S. to compare with his? And now he moves his nation toward democracy, for freedom is a necessary ingredient of happiness.

A free people naturally want to have good jobs and good public health and a vibrant economy so that they may find success in the pursuit of happiness. Our own Declaration of Independence describes this vital link between freedom and happiness. A truly free people do not choose to be unhappy, so unhappiness may be a measure of the oppression of a people and the defects of its democracy, if it has one.

Why has it taken us so long to get to the point of our own national happiness? Measurements of gross domestic product and balances of trade are useful, but the larger questions are this: are we happy? How is the future looking for us and for our grandchildren? Do we feel empowered to take care of our families and to develop the highest potential of our own lives? Are we living in a sustainable way? Surely we must do so to be deeply happy. Measure these things,

and Congresses craft laws to serve those goals. That would be a great nation served by great leaders--so very, very far from what we have today.

There was recently a meeting in Nova Scotia of 400 economists and sociologists and others from around the world, who are working to redefine the wealth of nations along these lines. The tiny country of Bhutan sent three-dozen representatives to share what they have learned. Such gatherings give me more hope than anything else in the world today.

What can we do to move this idea along?

I think we need a Goals for America program, and goals programs in each city and state. They should be guided by regular surveys of the people's subjective feelings, not just by the traditional objective measurements.

From these regular reports, let us arrange our legislative priorities and let us encourage slates of candidates to rise to their defense.

It is clear that the world's atmosphere and water and health systems cannot long endure our present ways of measuring and pursuing progress—ways that, where they leave people and our future behind, can hardly be called progress at all.

The way forward is fairly simple. Local groups need to raise the money necessary to have good surveys done by reputable researchers. Those reports, issued every few years, can be the energetic moments when our communities and our nation inches forward. If we set this in place, we will know that we have done something with our brief lives.