

ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGE OF CONTENTMENT**By Jim Mathis**

I have been struggling with the concept of contentment for some time. It seems to be a fleeting virtue. For a few moments we feel content, then something happens and discontent begins to creep in again. At other times, discontent can be a good thing, a positive motivator. If you feel stuck in a job with no hope for advancement or greater challenges, for example, feeling discontented can spur you to make changes.

A student that has become content with earning mediocre grades needs someone to build a fire under them. If a person is 30 years old, still living in his or her parents' basement and content to play video games all day, they have a real problem. In either scenario, some discontent would be beneficial. However, if you are a 60-year-old who is not content, you will soon become a grumpy old man or a cranky old woman, faced with enduring a life filled with regret. The question is, how do we find contentment?

In our culture, contentment is often related to apathy or laziness; it can be in one sense. But many of us also have made the discovery true contentment is a secret to finding happiness. When I was coming of age in the 1960's, there was a lot of discussion about "finding yourself." This built on the idea that we were created for a specific purpose and put on Earth to accomplish something meaningful. I believe this is true. So the sooner we find our purpose, the better. If we feel confident about doing what we are supposed to be doing, we can feel content.

Therefore, in one sense, contentment is age-related. An older, mature person should be content. Younger people probably should not feel contented unless they have already found their life's purpose and vocational calling, rather than waiting until they are well along in their career.

For me – and I presume for most people – the mystery of finding out what we should be doing next is a lifelong challenge. This does not mean, however, I am not content with where I am or with what I have accomplished so far, because I am. If we are to approach each new day with optimism and enthusiasm, having a sense of contentment with our place in life at the moment is important.

In my case, it took me many years to realize I am an artist. This was because I do not fit the stereotype of what I perceived an artist to be. I am good at math and science, and not eccentric or quirky, as many artists seem to be. At least I do not think I am. Once I got past my preconceptions and realized I am indeed an artist, part of who I am as a person, I started doing what artists do – make art. In my case, this came about through photography and music, partly as a businessman and in part for the enjoyment these pursuits provided.

Of course, not everyone is an artist. But in whatever way we are uniquely designed – as executives and administrators, salespeople, support staff, accountants, lawyers, physicians, teachers or for many other possible vocations – striving to achieve contentment is important.

In the Bible, the apostle Paul stated this clearly: "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). Of course he was speaking about much more than work – about finding contentment in every aspect of life. Whether in the workplace or in our personal pursuits, without contentment, happiness and joy always lurk beyond our grasp.

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Reflection/Discussion Questions

1. What does "contentment" mean for you? Have you experienced it? Are you experiencing it now?
2. Can you think of a situation or two in which feeling discontented proved to be useful and beneficial for you? Explain your answer.
3. How have feelings of discontent proved to be problematic for you – or for someone you know well?
4. The apostle Paul wrote that he had "learned the secret of being content in any and every situation"? What do you think he meant in saying that? Do you think such an attitude is realistic, especially in our ever-changing world? Why or why not?

If you would like to look at or discuss other portions of the Bible that relate to this topic, consider the following brief sampling of passages:

Proverbs 14:30, 27:20; 1 Corinthians 4:10-14; 2 Corinthians 11:9, 23-30; 12:7-10