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Are you happy?

Is there a trickier question than this: Are you happy? The answer tends to shift from moment to moment, ache to ache, stock market close to stock market close.

The pursuit of happiness remains an American obsession, right up there with the pursuit of money. Often the two are intertwined, mistakenly considered by some to be, at their core, one and the same.

This is a holiday season that imposes a certain expectation of gaiety, if not outright happiness, upon us. The mad credit-card-crushing dash through innumerable stores inevitably leads to thoughts of what a wonderful world this would be, if only we had a lot more cash. Yet the kind of happiness money can buy—and it certainly can buy some—tends to be, at best, fleeting.

As Jack Whittaker has discovered, coming into money can also buy a ton of trouble.

Whittaker, of West Virginia, became an instant celebrity two years ago this week after he won the richest undivided lottery jackpot in U.S. history, $314.9 million. At the time, as a recent Associated Press report said, "he was a boisterous, happy-go-lucky guy in a big cowboy hat who loved his family, work and God, and promised to share his good fortune with the church and the poor."

He took his winnings in a lump sum of $113 million after taxes and promised to donate 10 percent to his church and contribute to other causes. He has apparently kept many of his promises, creating, among other things, a charity to help people find jobs, buy food or get an education.

But ever since his stroke of good fortune, he and his family have not lived happily ever after. Whittaker has been arrested twice for drunken driving in the past year and has been ordered to go into rehab. A briefcase containing $545,000 in cash and cashier's checks was stolen from Whittaker's SUV while it was parked at a strip club. Earlier this month, he pleaded no contest to charges he attacked a bar manager. He is accused in two lawsuits of making trouble at a nightclub and a racetrack.

"That's probably the unfortunate situation of maybe having too much money, too much time on his hands," one local observed.

Most tragic of all, Whittaker's 17-year-old granddaughter, Brandi Bragg, was found dead last week of an apparent drug overdose. Some suggested a link to the lottery—too much money, people said, had fueled some bad habits.

There's a certain amount of *schadenfreude* in Whittaker's plight. That's the dark human emotion of reveling in others' troubles, especially if they're rich, or famous, or otherwise celebrated.

The Whittaker saga provides an opportunity for parents to trot out the old platitude about money and happiness, even if the kids suspect otherwise, based on keen observation of parents.

Let's not be naive: Money helps. It insulates people against some, though not all, catastrophes. But happiness is a lot more complex than a fat bank account. Research suggests that people tend to have a happiness "set point," and that it's difficult to make large, enduring changes.

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Wealth above a certain level of middle-class comfort, researchers say, does not produce dramatic differences in happiness as psychologists measure it. The biggest leaps in happiness, research shows, come when people move from dire poverty to a middle-class wage. After that, the gap narrows. As Harvard psychology professor Daniel Gilbert says, "The difference [in happiness] between a guy who earns $3,000 and $30,000 is much bigger than the difference between a guy who earns $100,000 and $100 million."

And it's certainly true that a lottery windfall can bring a confusing and even traumatic torrent of requests for money from long-lost relatives and strangers in desperate need of help.

This is the time of year when most people gather friends and family close to them. Those who most often answer the question at the beginning of this editorial with a resounding "yes" are usually those who find the greatest satisfaction in those relationships.

Whittaker's wife confessed to reporters that she wishes she'd torn up the winning ticket.

The obvious implication: The big money caused all the trouble. Who'd turn down $314.9 million? No one, of course.

But her lament is a timely reminder that a holiday-depleted bank account is an imprecise way to measure wealth—and certainly isn't a very good reason to declare ourselves unhappy.

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