

Happy Tears



Illustrations by Jim M'Guinness



Donald L. Steinweg, MD, FACP

The author (ΑΩΑ, University of Maryland, 1978) is associate professor in Internal Medicine at Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine.

I gave my mother a record album for her Christmas gift when I was in the ninth grade. Having previously watched her swoon when Nat King Cole's "That Sunday, That Summer" played on the radio, I had high expectations for the joy that my thoughtful offering would generate. As she slid off the bright red ribbon and peeled back the festive wrapping paper, I was rewarded with a tender hug and a kiss on the cheek before she turned to the stereo. Watching in anticipation, I swallowed the lump in my throat—the palpable expression that it is truly more blessed to give than to receive.

What happened next has been lodged in my hippocampus for the last fifty years. She started to cry while listening to her favorite song. It didn't seem like such a good gift after all!

"What's wrong, Mom? Why are you crying?" I asked. Forcing a smile she responded, "Nothing is wrong dear. These are *happy* tears." She went on to say that it was a beautiful summer Sunday afternoon when my father asked for

her hand in marriage and the song "just brought back all those good memories." My father, sitting across the room taking in all of this, nodded in agreement. It seemed like a marginal explanation, but it served to redeem my choice of her gift. Maybe people actually do cry when they are happy?

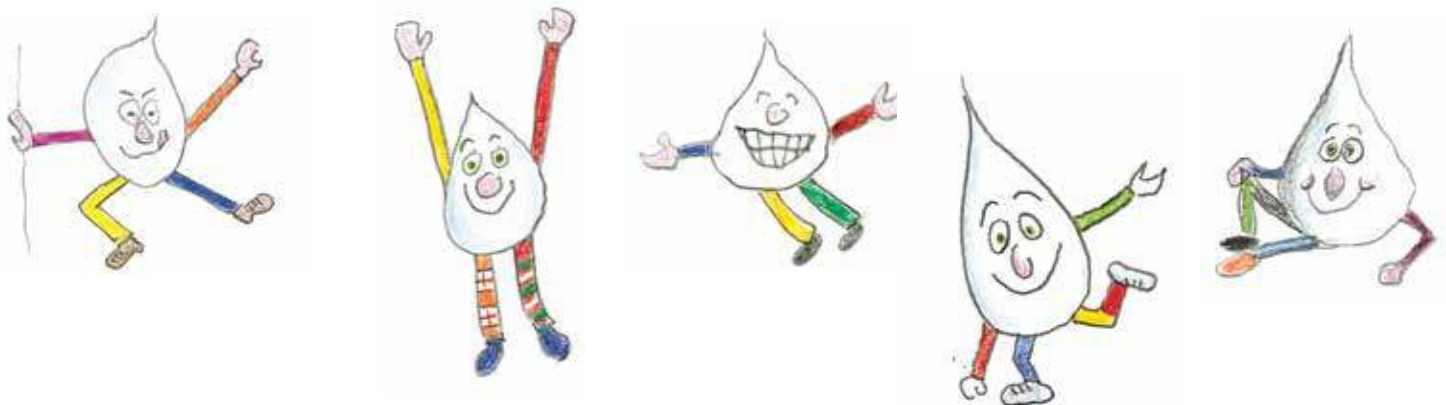
Attempts to understand the lacrimal physiology of happy tears lay dormant until I caught myself shedding them the day I accompanied my daughter on her college tours. I was following her as she walked with a group of applicants through the beautiful tree-lined sidewalks of a campus on a crisp fall morning. The well-maintained old red brick buildings trimmed with white shutters and the early fall colors triggered flashbacks to my own wonderful college years on a similarly beautiful campus. I found myself becoming tearful, conscious only of how special it was that I could be in a position to offer our daughter her next life experience in such lovely surroundings. Yep, these were definitely happy tears.

During a conversation with my older brother the next month, I mentioned that I had choked up with such pleasant memories related to my daughter's impending college experience. Ken is three years my senior and at the time

had recently been through similar strolls in life raising his two daughters. He responded, "Don, you might have been able to recall happy memories that day, but those weren't your only memories, and those definitely weren't *happy* tears." I remember that his conclusions annoyed me and that I openly rejected them, countering that he couldn't possibly know what I was thinking.

Our conversation ended with our agreeing to disagree, but he had planted a seed. On the one hand I found it bothersome that he would cast an undesired shadow over the trip with my daughter and on the other hand he encouraged me to look in the mirror and ask the very reasonable question, why *would* a happy man be tearful? Before long I was exploring the ambivalence that comes with letting your only daughter go off to college. My field of vision broadened, so I could see the more somber side of having your daughter leave home. In the end, Ken had given me a gift! By the time my wife and I moved our daughter into a college dorm the next year, I was able to share the full range of emotions with my departing "little" girl.

My mother probably didn't have a clue why she was crying on Christmas morning and I don't think her explanation was



Happy tears

meant to spare me sadness or redeem my gift. She was just doing the best she could. "That Sunday, That Summer" took her back to wonderful mountaintop experiences in her courtship that had only more recently become juxtaposed to feelings that were anything but joyful. It would be two more years before we both would understand how her alcohol dependence and strained marriage could generate tears in response to her favorite song.

Mrs. Downing came to see me again last week. She is a sturdy seventy-four-year-old woman with shoulder-length straight gray hair who is working through the challenges of longstanding diabetes complicated by severe peripheral vascular disease. Recovering from multiple toe amputations earlier this year, she travels through our clinic hallways in a wheelchair. Linda has always risen to meet the challenge, whether urosepsis in the ICU or being in and out of the operating room for multiple vascular procedures. Neither hypotension nor post-operative pain has ever completely extinguished her smile, and her deep crow's feet stand as evidence. Her early adulthood years trained her for this. She grew up in southwest Virginia and was married at the age of eighteen to a "man who liked other women." Twelve years later she divorced him, launching her into single parenthood with two sons and two daughters to support. Linda worked long, hot, and hard hours in the local textile factory, while maintaining her other full-time job at home, never to marry again.

This day, Linda's wheelchair is parked directly in front of me, and Lisa and Theresa, her two attentive daughters who always accompany her, are seated several feet to her left on the exam room couch. As Linda reviews her current glucose

numbers and highlights her podiatric progress I notice that Lisa and Theresa are both busy taking notes. At one point, Theresa hands her mother the diabetic log to show her that some of sugar levels are actually a little bit better than she is reporting to me. "Thank you, dear," Linda adds with her indelible smile.

The three of us help Linda get up on the exam table, and after the exam the trio guides her back into the wheelchair. Lisa carefully re-positions one of Linda's shoes that had slipped off. As I summarize my findings and outline our next steps together Theresa leans forward, busily taking down each of my instructions. Lisa seems just as deeply engaged, but she settles back in her seat, just smiling at her mom. After my concluding remarks, both daughters pose questions. "When should we bring Mama back? Does her insulin dose need any adjustment?" they ask.

Seeking eye contact with all three, my main focus is on Linda. I tell them how pleased I am that things are going well. My pleasure, however, goes far beyond what I see in Linda's healed foot wounds and controlled sugars. I am deeply moved by the depth, detail, and precision of her daughters' caring. If love is a verb and not a noun, they are the operational definition! Wanting to express my feelings, I begin, "Linda, as we finish up today, I want to say what a privilege it is for me to work with a family like yours. It is so heartwarming to see children caring so much for their mother!" Turning my attention to Lisa and Theresa I conclude, "It is an honor for me to help you care for your Mom."

The room quickly goes silent. All eye contact is lost, and it only takes a moment for both daughters to reach for the tissue on my desk. With subliminal flashbacks

of a ninth grade Christmas morning and an older brother's conclusions about my college tours, I am paralyzed with indecision. A series of rapid-fire ideas flooded my head: Should I ask them what they are thinking? Would that be a violation of their privacy? Should I apologize for making them cry? Would it be right to finish the visit like this? I had just given them a ringing endorsement of how wonderful they are, and it all ended with *happy tears*?

Theresa is the first to break that silence, closing her notebook and rising to her feet with a half-smile, she says, "That was a really sweet thing to say. Thank you very much, Dr. Steinweg." I smile in return as I watch her begin to unlock the wheels of Linda's wheelchair. *Just plain old happy tears*, I thought.

Lisa remains seated as she collects herself. Wiping her tears and fumbling through her belongings, she adds, "Thank you for saying that. I guess this is the first time I have ever thought about all we have been doing for Mama. We are just doing what seems right. After all, Mama was the one that did so much for us after Daddy left."

Linda is looking at her girls with a new wrinkle I had not seen before in her courageous smile. She adds, "I probably don't tell you often enough how thankful I am for you both." Theresa sits back down and reaches over to hold her mother's hand. It is a sweet, tender moment.

Happy tears. Often more than meets the eye.

The author's address is:

3 Riverside Circle
Internal Medicine
Roanoke, Virginia 24014
E-mail: dlsteinweg@carilionclinic.org

