

AN OPINION

IS EVERYBODY HAPPY? BY RALPH KEYES

One of the more insidious coercions of this society is the pressure to be "happy." Happy hours. Happy buttons. Happiness is a Safeway store.

The National Enquirer pays \$5 for "Happy Thoughts."

And Abby includes among her rules for being popular: "KEEP A SMILE ON YOUR FACE."

Cheerfulness is a sort of moral duty for Americans, a signal to the outside world

that everything's okay. You don't have to feel happy, just look it. As the California girl explained, "For a single to admit unhappiness is to tell the world that she hasn't been invited to the party."

Everybody says I always look so happy
They all tell me you're so good for me
They never see the worry that I try to
hide

'Cause I keep it covered up so they

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can't see

Appearances can often be deceiving
And even though the truth one can
hide

But underneath it all, the truth is
hurting

And as long as I've got make-up, I've
got pride

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Smiling needn't have anything to do with feeling good. The problem with our indiscriminate, promiscuous demand for HAPPINESS is that it cares so little what a person is really experiencing. If I'm blue and someone tells me to smile, what they're really saying is how uninterested they are in what I'm actually feeling. Smiling won't make me feel better, only them.

One of the more liberating days of my life was the one in which a girl curled up in the back of a VW van flashed me a SMILE sign as we passed on the freeway, and I didn't. She got flustered, didn't know what to do, then flipped me her THANK YOU sign anyway.

The counter-culture, or whatever it's called these days, is no better than the other kind when it comes to coerced joy. Subscribing to an "alternative" way of life means you've presumably surmounted middle-class hang-ups, like anger at your brothers and sisters, or being down without a quick way to get up. Bringing somebody "down" is a fairly major sin in hip America, but much reward accrues to the person generating good vibrations. A woman I met recently, who works in the kitchen of a communal organic restaurant, tells me she finds their biggest problem is confronting honestly the range of things they feel about each other, particularly the bad feelings they're not "supposed" to be having.

The whole country's cheerfulness binge blows out every year around Christmastime. In this relic of a national ritual, those who feel good already may get happier, but those who don't get more depressed. With the usual pressure to "look joyful" intensified during this season to be jolly, casualties suffer that major modern malady—Holiday Blues. One of the worst kinds of depression is that which must be played out before a backdrop of manic yuletide grins.

What we don't face in our national compulsion to Cheer Up! is that there's no worse remedy for depression. When you're down to start with, nothing enhances the feeling more than being told you shouldn't feel that way, that you should:

Pretend you're happy when you're
blue
It isn't very hard to do
And you'll find happiness without an
end
Whenever you
pretend

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sion of the publisher.]

In fact, the reverse is more often true. When blue, the most horrible punishment one can suffer is to have to go around grinning. Yet so many of us feel we have no alternative, particularly those working in professions where happiness is part of the job description—receptionists for example, or entertainers, and politicians.

I've always thought it a pity that poor Richard Nixon feels the need to smile. He's so bad at it. Our President would obviously be more comfortable, and so would we, if he felt freer to frown.

Former Congressman Abner Mikva wrote just before his last, unsuccessful run for office of the frantic elected official, "always happy, always smiling, always friendly . . . who pays the piper with his personal relationships. His family are the first victims, then his friends and frequently his creditors."

What this country desperately needs is some signal that it's okay to frown, or at least not have to grin—if this is your honest feeling. Now that Oscar Levant

is gone, who tells us it's okay to be depressed? If Calvin Coolidge wasn't just an aberration, could we perhaps elect a President who feels no need to play Howdy Doody? And for God's sake, can't we find a lovelorn adviser whose advice is to display what you feel, not what you think you ought to feel?

I met a woman recently who smiled constantly, never displayed a frown. I asked her what that was like, to look happy all the time. Did she always feel that way? To the contrary, she replied. She'd just ended a miserable marriage of ten years' standing, during which time only one friend (not her husband) knew of her anguish underneath.

Somehow, at some time, our culture got obsessed with the no-

tion that grinning—the appearance of happiness—would make us feel as good as we looked. What it's mostly done is put an incredible strain on our facial muscles. Yet the pressure remains to be emotional hypocrites, to display only our "good" feelings.

"How are you?" in

this context is less an inquiry about how you are than an invitation to chant back a ritualistic "Fine."

One of the most flattering comments ever made to me was that of a friend, a woman older than me, who I once asked, "How are you?"

"Fine," she replied. Then, after a few seconds' pause, "Wait. I take that back. I'm not fine at all. I just forgot who I was talking to."

No one has ever given me a truer sign of friendship.

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