

December 15, 1986 (vol. 2, no. 10)

Dear Colleague:

Tolstoy desperately wanted to be unhappy and almost succeeded in being so toward the end of his life. Most of the time, however, the call of unhappiness eluded him. He belonged to the "healthy-minded" type (William James), and there was little he could do about it--poor guy. Tolstoy reasoned in his diary, "Unhappiness makes man virtuous--virtue makes him happy--happiness makes him vicious." In a late entry (December 13, 1904), he noted his "joyful, steadfast, serene, almost always loving state," and complained, "Where does it come from? Why, given my vile life, do I have so much happiness?"

You don't find many descriptions of family happiness in modern literature because, I suspect, most writers are afraid of Virginia Woolf. And yet Virginia herself, at least in the secrecy of her diary, was willing to confess that domestic bliss could be real. She observed it in her friends the Leafys. "Why all this pother about life? It can produce old Walter, bubbling & chubby; and old Lotta, stately and content; and handsome Charles, as loving & affectionate. Plunge deep into Walter's life and it is all sound and satisfactory. His son kisses him and says 'Bless you father.' He sinks back chuckling on his cushions. He chooses a macaroon. He tells a story. Lotta purrs, in her black velvet dress."

Poor Virginia was out of it. "Only I am exiled from this profound natural happiness. That is what I always feel; or often feel now--natural happiness is what I lack, in profusion" (Diary 1925-30, p. 73.)

But one can always find surrogates in "white plates and cups, clean-gleaming, ringed with blue lines; the strong crust of friendly bread, the cool kindness of sheets that soon smooth away trouble, and the rough male kiss of blankets..."

The benison of hot water; furs to touch;
The good smell of old clothes; and others such--
The comfortable smell of friendly fingers,
Hair's fragrance, and the musty reek that lingers
About dead leaves and last year's ferns....

(Rupert Brooke)

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

