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STYLE DESK

POSSESSED; Three Cheers for the Same Old Thing

By DAVID COLMAN (NYT) 648 words

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WE like to think of ourselves as walking face forward into the future, eyes on the prize, a reasonable parallel to how we walk to work. But really, is that reasonable at all? In figurative terms we are more precisely walking backward into the future. After all, we can really see clearly only the past that is behind us and only guess at the road that lies ahead.

Daniel Gilbert, a professor of psychology at Harvard, would like to outfit this metaphor with a side-view mirror, one reading: "Objects in future appear much larger than they are." A pioneer in the research of affective forecasting, Dr. Gilbert has illuminated a startling and fundamental mistake that both men and women make: they overestimate how future successes and failures will affect their happiness, for the better or worse.

Not that people are easily disappointed by a promotion or apathetic about being fired. Rather, as Dr. Gilbert has found in charting his subjects' lives and reactions, "the good isn't as good, and the bad isn't as bad as we think it's going to be."

A corollary finding is that a single big payoff -- a fat raise, an Hermès Kelly bag, a hot cha cha date -- affects people's essential happiness much less than a routine of small delights. And Dr. Gilbert, for one, is sold. He has found, for example, that one of the best things about being at Harvard is not the prestige of his position but that he can walk to work from his house in Cambridge.

Much as you might embrace a chance to rebut the assertion that you would be happier with daily foot rubs for life than with \$100 million, Dr. Gilbert, whose data is winningly compiled in "Stumbling On Happiness," due from Alfred A. Knopf in May, said his research clearly supported that message.

But wouldn't you get bored? Wrong again. Dr. Gilbert's research also indicates that people who indulge in "false variety seeking" -- that is, incessantly trying something new for variety's sake -- are generally less happy than people who stick to their tried-and-true favorites.

"The joys of variety are vastly overestimated in every domain of pleasure," he said.

So as dull as you might think it, Dr. Gilbert's greatest luxury is an utter lack of fashion imagination. It is expressed neatly in a great big load of cargo pants, bought 5 or 10 at a swipe, size 35 by 30, in different colors at Costco.

"My students all mock me," he said. "They think it's always the same pair." He is unruffled. "I never have to figure out what to wear," he said happily. "My life is full of decisions, and any time I can eliminate one, I feel that I have

scored a victory."

He added, "We haven't even begun to talk about the virtues of loose fit and big pockets." Is there a brand he prefers? He twisted around as far as he could. "Let me see," he said. "It says Union Bay."

It probably does not shock too many people that money is not the answer. But with a steady drumbeat from self-help books telling us to embrace change, it is a relief to hear that there is much to be said for staying right where we are, in our happy little ruts. Change, and the future, will arrive whether we chase them down or not, so why not make the most of today? It might sound dull, but at least we know what to expect.

Photos: LIVING IN THE PRESENT -- Daniel Gilbert, a happiness researcher, and his Costco cargo pants.
(Photographs by Jodi Hilton for The New York Times)

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