Caught This

So, turns out that what I have known intuitively to be true my whole life is now scientifically validated. A few days ago I caught the tail end of an interview about widows and widowers on NPR. I was about to change the station when I heard scientist Nicholas Christakis (professor at Harvard Medical School) say, “We find emotions are being spread like any other virus.” Oh yeah. You know it. Brilliant. But I’m not the only one who has experienced this. You have, too.

“Everyday interactions we have with other people are definitely contagious, in terms of happiness,” says Nicholas Christakis, a professor at Harvard Medical School and an author of the study.

It’s like this: you walk into a room and before anyone says a word, you immediately catch the vibe of the room. Maybe you feel comfortable. There’s a warm and welcome feel. Or you experience judgment, or catch a sense of worry. Maybe it’s not that clear for everyone, but haven’t you ever had that gut feeling before a meeting starts like, “Yes, this is place I want to be,” or “Hell no, how do I get outta here?”

If you haven’t seen it yet, check out the beyond amazing film called Flight of the Butterfly (if you are in the Minneapolis-Saint Paul metro area it is part of OmniFest at the Science Museum, a series of five large format films on until February 19th). In the film, there is shot of a single monarch butterfly, thousands of feet above the ground, migrating for the winter months. This fragile creature uses her antennae, a complex navigation device, to gauge and track the exact placement of the sun. She picks up signals from her environment and is so innately tuned in to what her antennae are telling her that they alone will guide her 2500 miles from where she was born to a single hilltop in Mexico where she will hibernate along with millions of other monarchs who all

made similar journeys.

In case you didn’t catch that, a butterfly, thousands of feet above the ground, uses subtle clues from the sun to make her way thousands of miles from her birthplace. So, that makes me wonder. If this tiny insect is picking up on signals, and these signals are what guide her, are we so different? What signals are we getting, and how do they affect us? What if we could spread happiness or laughter or peace? What if it passed between people just like a disease?

It turns out our vibes and signals are not only present in our interactions with friends and family members, but are also in our environment. We catch the signals from our greater community just like a monarch butterfly catches signals from the sun. If that is true, that we can catch these signals from our environment, then does that mean that they have form, like a virus, or energy, or the rays of the sun? What if happiness is a physical element that exists outside of our body? Is it made of atoms? Does it have a cellular structure? How does it pass between one person and another?

We don’t know how, just yet, but scientists are theorizing it has to do with mirror neurons. When you smile at someone their mirror neurons activate and they automatically smile back. Ta da! A smile infection. Dr. Emma Seppala, social connection genius, explores this process in her work as the Associate Director of the Center for Compassion at Stanford.

It turns out that we are built to catch other peoples’ vibes. Not just the sense of the room, but we are highly tuned into the five people we spend the most time around. This is not necessarily our five emotionally closest people, but the ones we are actually around the most. Think work environment! The health, attitude, financial stability of those five people are a strong predictor of our own health, weight, lifestyle, and wellbeing. Even our earning potential is related to the average income of those five people. Interesting, right? So,

could their influence on us (and our influence on them) be more than peer pressure? Could it be actual transmission?

Yes. And, it doesn't stop at transmission by proximity.

According to Christakis, this effect extends beyond people within that small radius; it reaches out into our network. "When one person becomes happy, the social network effect can spread up to 3 degrees – reaching friends of friends," he says. So, your happiness may, indeed, result in a ripple that puts a smile on the face of Kevin Bacon (you know, we're all only 6 degrees away from Kevin Bacon….or anyone else, for that matter!).

So what you are feeling and experiencing RIGHT NOW is not only affecting you, but your community and all those people's peeps, and those people's people's peeps as well. Whew.

Here is my question and challenge, for you. Do an experiment this week to see how your happiness or lack of it changes the people (and things) around you. Don't say anything or even tell anyone you are doing it. Whether you take on smiling at strangers, giving compliments, or talking positively about yourself and others, spread the love and let's see what happens. Keep asking yourself, "What vibe am I spreading?"