We all want the things that we're sure will make us happy: money, success, independence, love. But when we finally get them, we can find to our surprise that we are the same miserable, moody, or just neutral people we always were. Is that just the way things are? Luckily, no! We can teach ourselves to be happy and enjoy every day, and M.J. Ryan, bestselling author of *The Power of Patience* and *Attitudes of Gratitude*, shows us how.

The *Happiness Makeover* draws on Ryan’s wide-ranging knowledge and presents a plan that will help readers:

- clear away happiness hindrances like worry, fear, envy, and grudges
- discover happiness boosters
- literally rewire their brains to experience contentment—even joy
- learn to think optimistically (It really is possible!)

“...based on the wisdom of the ages... informative, upbeat, and a delight to read.”
—Hal Urban, author of *Life’s Greatest Lessons*

M. J. RYAN
Author of *Attitudes of Gratitude* and *The Power of Patience*
Praise for

The Happiness Makeover

“M.J. Ryan is a wonderful guide for helping people learn the art and science of being truly happy. She speaks from her experience, and her vulnerability and sincerity are infectious. After reading this inspiring and informative book, you’ll know the best ideas and methods for creating a delicious and delightful life.”

—Jonathan Robinson, author of Find Happiness Now and Communication Miracles for Couples

“This book is like happy electricity—connecting us all to our joy, which we continually forget how to access.”

—SARK, author/artist of Make Your Creative Dreams Real

“A wonderful blend of motivation, inspiration, and explanation, The Happiness Makeover is a recipe for enjoying today and all your tomorrows.”

—David Niven, PhD, author of The 100 Simple Secrets of Happy People
“Happiness is at the fingertips of every person on the planet. In *The Happiness Makeover*, M. J. Ryan provides example after example of people learning how to choose happiness. She offers wisdom from the ages and provides practical insights and advice on how you, too, can achieve happiness right now. A fun and enlightening book.”

—Barry Neil Kaufman, author of *Happiness Is a Choice* and co-founder of the Option Institute

“While we all want to be happy, we’re not always sure that we know what happiness is or how to have more if it. This wonderful book answers both questions. It’s based on the wisdom of the ages, and is informative, upbeat, and a delight to read. Keep it handy.”

—Hal Urban, author of *Life’s Greatest Lessons*
“What would happen to us if we really fell in love with life? How would our lives change if we really thought . . . that reality is fabulous . . . ? Would we be fools of whom other people take advantage, or would we find that life is exciting, joyful, and wonderful?”

—James A. Kitchens
It was a cold, dreary Saturday morning. My husband and I had plans to go out to dinner for a joint birthday celebration. Then Ana, our then three-year-old, woke up with a fever. She'd had recurring pneumonia since we adopted her at age one and fever was the warning sign. Cancel the sitter and hunker down to deal with one crabby child. For a sick Ana was not a pleasant experience—she'd cling to me and scream bloody murder if Don or anyone else came close.

Somehow we survived the day, but not without many tears and tantrums. As night fell, I had her in my lap in the rocking chair. “Hard day, huh Ana,” I said. “What was going on? What do you want?”

She looked up at me and wailed, “I just want to be happy.”

Don’t we all? No matter who we are or what our circumstances, isn’t that what we each long for? Happiness, the experience of the sheer joy of being alive. Indeed, it is such an important shared value that the Declaration of Independence identifies its pursuit as one of only three unalienable rights.

We all want it so badly, but like Ana on that December day, so many of us don’t seem to know how to experience it on a consistent basis. Maybe the problem is with the word “pursue.” Somehow we’ve gotten the message that happiness is out there, something to be sought after—in the right job, the mate who never annoys you, the $50,000
BMW—rather than inside ourselves. We’ve trained ourselves to think in “if onlys”—if only our spouse would come home from work earlier, we’d be happy; if only we’d make $20,000 more a year, we’d be happy; if only we could be a stay-at-home mom, we’d be happy. We spend our time trying to make our “if onlys” come true only to discover that even if we do achieve them, a new “if only” arises.

That was certainly true for me. For most of my first forty years, I was your average negative person. I would religiously catalog all that was wrong with my life and spend my time and energy trying to create a happier tomorrow. But when getting what I was sure would make me happy didn’t—independence, money, success—I realized that I’d been looking in all the wrong places. So I decided to do a happiness makeover. This twelve-year process has led me to write a series of books on the virtues of kindness, gratitude, generosity, patience, and self-trust as ways to be happy, and to now look at happiness head-on. I’ve studied happy people, read all the books, done a lot of soul-searching, worked hard on myself, and offered a helping hand to my clients.

This week, I got a bit of validation that I’m getting somewhere. We’ve been doing work in our backyard, and I invited the contractor and his wife to dinner as a thank-you. I’d spoken maybe twenty-five words to them beforehand. We had our normal family time, including after-dinner dancing in the living room with Ana. The next day, the man came to the door to thank me. “That was nice,” he said with a smile. “You’re really happy, aren’t you?”
I am, I thought, and it’s taken fifty years of work to get here. Maybe that’s why I’ve written this book—so that others won’t have to struggle so long, so that more of us can answer a resounding yes, so that happiness can blossom to its fullness for ourselves and for those we encounter on our path.

Happiness is its own reward, but it doesn’t stop there. Happy people are accepting of themselves, so they don’t spend precious time in regret. They accept others, too, so are free to love people as they are, rather than expending energy trying to do a repair job on everyone in sight. They look positively to the future so they don’t spend a lot of time in worry or fear. They are engaged with life as a wonderful adventure in which they are here to give their best. The zest with which they encounter life is contagious; people are drawn into their orbit and success seems to be attracted as well. They’re healthier too. A study reported recently in the *Journal of Neurology* found that happy older people are less likely to develop Alzheimer’s disease. Studies have also found that folks who are happy are less likely to die prematurely or even develop colds.

As I’ve thought, read, and practiced the art of happiness, I’ve come to understand a few things: first, that the search for happiness is at the root of all human activity throughout the ages; second, that happiness must be experienced in this moment or risk never being felt at all. While we can get nostalgic for the past—*oh, I used to be so happy*—or wistful about the future—*someday I will be happy*—it is now, in this very moment, that we must create the only happiness that we can count on.
Most important, I’ve learned that while scientists have recently discovered we each have a genetic happiness set point, a place on the emotional spectrum we tend to drift toward, it accounts for only 40–50 percent of our happiness (which they determined by studying twins raised apart). What that means is that we all can experience more contentment and joyfulness no matter who we are. For as of yet, no one has discovered an upward limit on good feelings.

In a very real sense, happiness is the ultimate makeover. Why else do we spend money and time on fixing our houses, our bodies, our relationships except that we want to be happier? Rather than trying to shore up baggy eyelids or redo mismatched furniture in an attempt to experience greater overall satisfaction and enjoyment, why not go directly to the source—cultivating the mental and emotional outlooks that will generate a sense of joyfulness independent of couch fabric or lipstick brand?

As I studied and practiced, I’ve come to understand that happiness is a feeling that arises as a result of thoughts we choose to hold and actions we choose to take to increase those good thoughts. In this way, we think our way to happiness.

At the heart of this book is the realization that the mind is a powerful thing and its power can be used to make us happy or miserable. We can concentrate on how the world has done us wrong or the ways it does us right. We can focus on where we’re stuck or how we’re free. We can take the opportunity to notice the ordinary miracles
around us. We can find ways to truly enjoy, even to relish, the moments of our lives.

While certain thinking creates happiness, happiness itself may also create better thinking: “[T]here is a growing body of evidence that people think more effectively and expansively when they are happy than when they are not,” noted Professor Barry Schwartz in a recent speech to Swarthmore graduates. For instance, doctors who were given bags of candy before seeing patients—a happiness booster—increased their accuracy and speed of diagnosis.

Before psychology got interested in happiness, about ten years ago, this topic was left to philosophers. Since Aristotle, philosophers have distinguished between hedonistic happiness, happiness as a feeling of pleasure or contentment, and eudaimonistic happiness, which arises out of satisfaction with one’s actions and character. Recently positive psychology has made a similar distinction between pleasure and gratification, noting that since pleasure is fleeting and gratification longer lasting, it is better to pursue gratification to experience “authentic” happiness. The distinction may be intellectually useful, but I think it fails to take into account the uniqueness of each person and therefore what each of us may need.

Take me, for instance. I knew a lot about the happiness that comes from living your strengths and values (what Martin Seligman calls the path of gratification). But until recently I knew precious little about enjoying my life moment to moment, the pleasure path. What I want to encourage you to do, dear reader, is understand
which of the paths to happiness you need to pursue in your own makeover and to cultivate the thinking that will lead you there.

There Are Many Paths to Happiness

“Happiness, that grand mistress of ceremonies in the dance of life, impels us through all its mazes and meanderings, but leads none of us by the same route.”

—Charles Caleb Colton

Fred, a harried marketing executive, contacted me because he wanted to be happier. We chatted about what he could do to make his life feel better, but I could tell we weren’t getting anywhere. He kept focusing on his problems—an unresponsive boss, children who were struggling in school. So I asked him to make a study of the happy people he knew—what was different between them and him?—and then report back on what he observed.

Two weeks later, Fred called. “People who are happy are more appreciative,” he told me. “They take action on the things they can in their lives, and don’t worry about the rest. And they smile more.” So Fred and I laid out a plan for him to learn to do these three things. On a daily basis, he began looking at what he could appreciate about his life—healthy children, a job, a solid marriage. Then he began taking action where he could—better training for his employees so he wouldn’t have to do so much himself, setting boundaries with the kids (making
it clear there were consequences for not doing assigned chores, for instance)—and letting go of the rest. Every time he found himself worrying about something he could not control, he would stop and refocus. He began to look each day for at least one “rosebush of happiness,” as I call those little pleasures of everyday life that bring us enjoyment and make us smile. And what do you know? He got happier.

Another client came to me, same issue. I gave her the same assignment and she came back saying, “Happy people have more fun. They take time to play.” So I helped her figure out how she could do more of that. A third person said that happy people are kinder and more generous than she. A fourth reported that happy people are passionately consumed by meaningful work.

I’ve given the happy people study to dozens of folks. And lo and behold, everyone discovers something different! What I’ve come to see is that each of us notices exactly what we need to learn—that’s why we notice it. So rather than giving too much credence to what the research says or taking anyone else’s word for what creates happiness, conduct a study for yourself and pay attention to what you discover. That will be the key to your own successful makeover.

This is not to say that there aren’t themes in what they found. No one said other people were happier because they have more stuff or fewer problems. No one said it was because others were rich or famous. In fact, the things they and others discovered form the basis of this book. But which things you need to concentrate on most
likely will be revealed in your study of happy people, as well as the ideas that resonate most strongly for you as you read along. Both are signals of the path that will yield the best results for you personally. So let your heart, mind, and spirit guide you to the practices and ideas that are just right for you.

*The Happiness Makeover* offers stories from my life and those I’ve worked with and read about, and a blend of emotional, spiritual, philosophical, and practical perspectives drawn from positive psychology, Eastern and Western wisdom traditions, and asset-focused coaching. Along the way, I try to suggest approaches that really work; at the bottom, I’m a fundamentally practical soul. I try to avoid offering pat or insipid solutions that are impossible to enact—a recent *Reader’s Digest*, for instance, citing research, advised readers that one of the keys to happiness was to be married; another was to have religious faith. What effect does that have on the millions of single people searching for love or those who struggle with faith? It leaves them standing outside the candy store window, unable to partake of the goodies inside. *The Happiness Makeover* is intended to help anyone, regardless of your race, religious affiliation, income level, gender, or marital status, to experience the joy, contentment, and satisfaction that are your human birthright.

At bottom, happiness is not an idea but a feeling—of lightness, of well-being, the “relaxed at-ease state of your being with existence” as spiritual teacher Osho describes it. As you begin the journey, it helps to understand that what you are engaging in is nothing more or less than
mind training, the creation of new habits of thought that in turn generate positive feelings.

**A Happiness Makeover Is Like Training a Puppy**

“The happiness of your life depends upon the quality of your thoughts, therefore guard accordingly; and take care that you entertain no notions unsuitable to virtue, and reasonable nature.”

—*Marcus Aurelius Antoninus*

Ana got a puppy for her seventh birthday. “I never knew it was so much work!” she exclaimed after the first week. As we struggled with the (seemingly endless) task of housebreaking little Mooky, I was struck by how similar it is to training your mind to happiness.

At first, the puppy just goes where she wants to, whenever the urge strikes. Your job as trainer is to keep putting her where you want her to go, namely outside, at the right time. Punishment doesn’t work so well; it’s better to keep putting her outside—no, not here, over here—and offering a lot of praise and rewards. Over time, she gets the point and it takes no effort on your part anymore. She’s done it so many times correctly that it becomes automatic.

That’s also the theory behind a happiness make-over. Right now, your mind is like an untrained puppy, wandering all over the place, often making you miserable. The more you become aware where your mind
automatically goes and place it where you want it to go, the more you create the neurological pathway to that better choice, and the more automatic that choice becomes. And the reward is found in how good you will feel.

In a sense, unlike a puppy, your mind is already trained—to go to thoughts of worry, negativity, gloom. Your job is to retrain it. Recent breakthroughs in the ability to see the brain function—through MRIs—reveal that we all have two prefrontal lobes in our neocortex. When the left is activated, we think thoughts of peace, happiness, joy, contentment, optimism. When the right is activated, we think thoughts of gloom, doom, worry, pessimism. It turns out that each of us has what they call a tilt—a tendency for whatever happens to stimulate one side or the other. That's what creates the difference between optimists and pessimists. Whether we're born that way or develop it very young is not clear. But by the time we're adults, we have a deeply grooved tendency to activate either the right (negative) or left (positive) no matter what's going on.

An illustrative story: My friend and I were lost on a mountaintop in Utah. I began instantly worrying. How will we ever get down? What if we freeze to death up here? My friend was looking around saying things like, “Look at this fabulous scenery! Isn't it breathtaking!” Same event, but she has a left prefrontal tilt and I have a right. Therefore, in precisely the same circumstance, she is happy and I am not.

Here's the great news for anyone whose mind goes to the gloomy right. With practice you can create a left tilt. First you have to catch yourself in your negative habitual
thinking. Then you have to choose to think about things in a peaceful, optimistic way. Over time, you'll be doing it without thinking about it. You do this just like training the puppy. When you find yourself going down the bad old road, you simply stop and, without beating yourself up, choose the other path. You’re not trying to get rid of the old habit—it's a deeply grooved neurological path. What you’re doing is building a pathway to a new habit, each time you stop and make a different choice.

Many people have gotten half of this message. With awareness, they’ve learned to stop when they notice themselves driving down the old negative road. *Don’t go there*! they say to themselves. But our minds want to go *somewhere*—it takes a lot of energy to stop thinking. You can’t just stop the negative; you have to give your mind somewhere good to go. This means practicing thinking thoughts of kindness, patience, generosity, or gratitude that may feel awkward initially. But with practice, such positive thoughts will become natural and you won’t have to work so much at happiness.

In a real way, this book is about choices for thinking to activate your left prefrontal cortex as much as possible. Because that’s where happiness resides.

As you enter into this training process, here are four things to keep in mind:

1. It takes practice to create the new pathway.

2. Shoulds only get in your way—one of the greatest tools for change is awareness without judgment. Just notice and choose the other option.
3. Learning is enhanced through reflection after an event (but not by beating yourself up).

4. Once you’ve created the new habit, it will be yours for life!

This approach of focusing on the positive is not a plea to ignore or deny the challenges, sorrows, and grief in our lives. They are real. And it doesn’t mean that we feel fabulous all the livelong day. But the possibility of experiencing the joy of being alive, of appreciating what we can in our circumstances, of letting go of unnecessary burdens, of giving to others—is also real. We have what we need to be happy. In every moment, we can choose where to focus our attention and therefore how we feel. The difficulties of our lives get a lot of our mental airtime and sap a great deal of our life force. How about giving equal time to happiness?
What’s Standing in Your Way?

“The ‘decision to be happy’ is actually the decision to stop being unhappy.”

—Barry Neil Kaufman
Each of us has particular mental habits that keep us from experiencing the maximum happiness we could feel at any given moment. Ch’an Buddhists call these “habit energies.” These are our unique ways of interfering with the natural ability we all possess to experience both the exhilaration and contentment that we call happiness. In this section, we examine how you might be blocking the joy available to you in your daily life, and I offer suggestions as to how to work with some of the most common interferences, including discontent, worry, regret, envy, disappointment, grudges, perfectionism, and conflict. By working with what’s standing in our way, we clear the road to discover the happiness hidden in our ordinary days.
“Don’t believe everything you think.”

—Bumper sticker

“I’m afraid to say I’m happy,” confessed Debra the other day. “Or at least I think I should say after it, in the words of my bubbe, ‘Kena hura, poo, poo, poo.’”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“It’s a way of keeping the bad spirits away,” she explained, “to ensure nothing ruins the existing happiness and that your current fortune continues. But it also has a sense of foreboding or superstition to it, as in ‘Don’t say you’re happy out loud—you’ll give yourself a kena hura.’”

That was a new one on me, but I recognize the sentiment. Each of us has particular family, religious, or societal traditions that teach us we’re not supposed to be happy or at least not acknowledge our happiness or...
something bad will happen. As if there is an evil being in the sky waiting to strike us down if it notices we are happy: I’m good, knock on wood, we say. And then we knock to keep the evil away.

What’s your happiness myth as passed down by your clan, church, or culture? That happiness on earth doesn’t exist? That people and life are just out to screw you, so you can never let your guard down? That if you ever feel happy, it will be snatched away? Were you taught to knock on wood? That only the “right” college or career would bring happiness?

Mine is straight out of Catholicism: Life is suffering and the more you suffer in silence, the better God likes it and the better chance you have to get into heaven, which is the only place lasting happiness is to be found. We used to have a steak dinner whenever anyone in our family died to celebrate that they were no longer suffering but were happy in heaven. (I once gave a talk on happiness at Old St. Patrick’s Cathedral in Chicago and a wry gentleman with an Irish brogue and his tongue firmly in his cheek commented after my talk, “I see the Dalai Lama has written a book called The Art of Happiness. We Irish Catholics have been writing the book of suffering for centuries.”) As a consequence of this training, I was very good at deferring happiness, although I had a bit more trouble with the suffering-in-silence part.

My husband Don’s myth is more personal. His father was afflicted with brain tumors in his late forties, just as he was on the verge of buying the car and house of his dreams. Don’s myth is if you get close to what will make
you happy, you’ll die. So he makes sure he always stays slightly discontent and unsure about what will bring him happiness.

A writer I know learned from her family that creative people are always tortured. So while she has found tremendous success and acclaim from her writing, she can’t allow herself to enjoy either the success or the process itself. In order for her writing to be good, she believes, she must be miserable.

Bringing these myths into the light can be liberating. Otherwise, without our knowing it, they may be keeping us from experiencing the joyfulness and pleasure our lives can offer. Enjoying and appreciating our lives does not make bad things happen. In fact, there is some indication from the new physics that it’s actually the opposite: You draw to you whatever you spend time thinking about.

My first awareness of the happiness that comes from letting go of old superstitions arose in therapy in my twenties, when I was talking about trying to find a “real” career. “Yes, I’m an editor,” I said dismissively, “but it comes so easily to me. I need to find something challenging to do.”

The therapist looked at me and replied, “Just because it’s easy doesn’t mean you shouldn’t do it.”

I was dumbstruck—could I really choose a path of ease and actually enjoy my work rather than using difficulty as my measure? And could I be happy here and now rather than waiting until death?

What is the myth that is holding you back from feeling the maximum happiness right in this moment? Give
it a title: I Can't Get No Satisfaction; Everyone but Me Can Be Happy; Screw Them Over Before They Do It to You. Is it serving you well? Or would you rather revise it in the light of adulthood so your capacity for satisfaction and fulfillment will increase?

2

Is Your Brain Wired to See Danger Everywhere?

“Most people would rather be certain they’re miserable, than risk being happy.”

—Robert Anthony

Sam had a terrible childhood, with a physically abusive father and emotionally absent mother. His early years were a battlefield. At eighteen, he finally escaped with his life. Sam is now forty, married, and hasn’t communicated with his parents in years. But he has a problem—while he escaped the war zone, he’s still fighting as if his very survival is at stake. He sees abusers everywhere—at work, at home, in the movies. Just making it through the day is a constant struggle.

Recent breakthroughs in brain science help shed light on why Sam, like so many of us, carries his misery with
him even as circumstances change for the better. Early in life, our emotional brain—the limbic system consisting of the amygdala and the brain stem—lays down the tracks of what constitutes danger and then is constantly scanning the environment for anything that might bring us harm. When harm is perceived, the body/mind goes into the state of hormonal emergency known as fight or flight, readying us to take actions for our very survival.

The problem is that the emotional brain is left over from our reptilian past and therefore is not very smart. It generalizes in an attempt to make us safe, which is fine if you are a lizard looking for movement in the grasses that might indicate a predator. But in complex human situations, the on and off switch can be too generalized, so that we end up seeing danger in every corner and can have the fight or flight switch on almost all the time, flooding our bodies with stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol.

That’s what’s going on with Sam. His emotional brain sees danger everywhere in an attempt to keep him safe. Unfortunately, it is making him miserable. Does he want to be miserable? Not really. In fact, he’s come to work with me because he wants to stop being so unhappy. But he’s afraid. He’s afraid that if he lets down his guard and experiences happiness, some terrible thing will sneak up on him while he’s not paying attention.

Sam is not alone. Many of us feel exactly the same way. I for one have found much liberation in understanding that it’s not personal. It’s not because I want to be unhappy and fearful. It’s the way our brains are structured.
The good news has to do with brain structure also: we also have thinking brains, made up primarily of the neocortex. When we find ourselves going into fear, we can ask ourselves, *Am I really in danger? What’s the best way to respond to this situation?* That puts our thinking brain into gear. From that place, we can evaluate whether we need to run or fight or are just being tricked by our amygdala. It doesn’t always work. Neuroscientists have discovered that the limbic system has a pathway that allows it to escape control of the cortex when it gets worked up enough about something. It’s called an amygdala hijack.

However, the more we practice engaging our thinking brain at highly charged emotional moments, the more freedom of choice we have. That’s what Sam learned to do. He practiced letting his guard down by questioning his automatic fear response and getting his neocortex going. And he learned that if his amygdala did get the best of him, it takes at least thirty minutes for the stress hormones to begin to dissipate. So he removed himself from others until he could be reasonable again.

The capacity for the neocortex to override our feeling brain is why we can, to a great extent, think ourselves happier. It doesn’t always work, but the more we understand that much of our unhappiness comes from old fear, the more we free ourselves to experience greater contentment and joy today.
Do You Motivate Yourself Through Discontent?

“You create problems so that you can feel that life is a great work, a growth, and you have to struggle hard.”

—Osho

When Don and I first started living together, it was so easy that I thought something was seriously wrong. I was used to relationships that were full of drama and struggle, where we “worked” on issues (not that the work got us anywhere, but we felt like we were trying), and I spent all of my mental energy on trying to fix the other person. What was I supposed to do all day, I asked my friend Daphne, if not work on or worry about my relationship? “Enjoy the peacefulness,” she advised, “and if you need something to fill the time, take up knitting.”

I never did learn to knit, but I have learned to be happy and content in love. And I can tell you it sure felt awkward at first.

I don’t think I’m alone. I believe that lots of us don’t experience the happiness available to us because we use our unhappiness to motivate ourselves. The fact that
there’s always a problem to be fixed keeps us going. Perhaps it comes from the Protestant work ethic that still permeates this culture, but many of us unconsciously suspect that if we’re happy, we’ll sit around and accomplish nothing. So we make sure there’s always a problem. If it isn’t love that has our knickers in a twist, it’s work. Or our parents or children.

This discontent is also fueled by the attention—of the media, the educational system, psychology, our families—on what’s wrong with us rather than what’s right. Rather than celebrating our strengths and gifts, we tend to focus on all our foibles and failings—and those around us—and therefore view life as a self-improvement project.

What if we changed our orientation? What would happen if we saw our life as something to be savored, rather than as a series of problems to be solved? Here’s how a friend, a working mother with two small kids, put it in a recent e-mail: “I’m embracing the fact that there will never be enough time for work, for children, for marriage, for me . . . for about 15 years. It’s just a fact of life, so I try to really enjoy all the moments—and there are many precious, wonderful moments these days.”

When we are motivated by happiness, it doesn’t mean that we ignore our difficulties. Rather, like my friend said, we embrace our lives wholeheartedly, the good and the not so good, and relax into it, not making the bad worse by denial or drama. Is my relationship with Don perfect? Of course not. I could give you a laundry list of all his faults and my faults and the imperfections of our mar-
riage. But I’ve learned the hard way that a relationship is not a fix-it project; what’s needed is much more acceptance of the way it is and enjoyment of what is wonderful rather than an attempt to fix every flaw. And when issues begin to truly get in our way, we do deal with them.

When we motivate ourselves through happiness, life gets easier. It flows. We’re not so busy fighting reality, but instead spend our time enjoying what we can about the way it is. Recently I was talking to a young friend who got married a while ago. She was having in-law problems. Her husband’s family had a looser sense of planning than she, and she was constantly frustrated by their impromptu behavior. “I doubt you are going to change this entire family system,” I commented. “But you could spend a lot of your life trying. Will that make you happy?”

“No,” she replied. “If I want to be happy, the best thing to do would be to volunteer to be the planner and then not get so caught up in their following my plans to the letter.”

Has being discontented gotten you what you want in your life? At what price? What if you rested in the easy, wonderful aspects of your life rather than trying to fix what was broken? What would happen if you tried, even for a week, to motivate yourself by asking, What would really bring me happiness now?