

# The Happiness Project

## Book Notes by Salvatore Saieva

These are the highlights made from my reading of The Happiness Project by Gretchen Rubin (<http://amzn.to/c3NZVP>).

Highlights are the text that I found interesting, important, or points that may be profound in some way. Therefore, the collection of highlights becomes my interpretation of the book. You may find the notes useful for deciding to read the book, perhaps as a quick method for rereading, or maybe just as useful information even if you decide not to read the book.

My Amazon review of the book is located here: <http://amzn.to/ctLHWG>.

Note, references to page numbers in the book are indicated by []'s.

*Sal.*

—

*Salvatore Saieva*

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### **Opening Pages**

There is no duty we so much underrate as the duty of being happy." -Robert Louis Stevenson.

### **Getting Started**

What a wonderful life I've had! I only wish I'd realized it sooner. [2]

I wasn't as happy as I could be, and my life wasn't going to change unless I made it change. [3]

They say that people teach what they need to learn. [4]

At dinner with friends, I found wisdom in a fortune cookie: "Look for happiness under your own roof."  
[5]

All men seek happiness. This is without exception. [6]

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I know when I feel happy. [7]

For example, everyone from Seneca to Martin Seligman agreed that friendship is a key to happiness, and sure, I wanted to strengthen my friendships. [8]

Eat not to Dullness. Drink not to Elevation. [9]

You can choose what you do; you can't choose what you like to do. [11]

If you're not failing, you're not trying hard enough. [11]

And more important, I didn't want to reject my life. I wanted to change my life without changing my life, by finding more happiness in my own kitchen. [12]

I complain too much, I get annoyed more than I should. I should be more grateful. I think if I felt happier, I'd behave better. [13]

## **Chapter 1, January**

I know that when I feel energetic, I find it much easier to behave in ways that make me happy. [18]

I'd tried all these steps myself, and I'd found the last one — keeping our bedroom dark — surprisingly difficult to accomplish. [20]

Regular exercise boosts energy levels. [21]

People who work out with weights maintain more muscle and gain less fat as they age. [23]

There's a Buddhist saying that I've found to be uncannily true: "When the student is ready, the teacher appears." [23]

Nietzsche wrote, "All truly great thoughts are conceived while walking." [25]

Light deprivation is one reason that people feel tired, and even five minutes of daylight stimulates production of serotonin and dopamine, brain chemicals that improve mood. [25]

Although people believe they like to have lots of choice, in fact, having too many choices can be discouraging. Instead of making people feel more satisfied, a wide range of options can paralyze them. [30]

It's a Secret of Adulthood: if you can't find something, clean up. [32]

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An important aspect of happiness is managing your moods, and studies show that one of the best ways to lift your mood is to engineer an easy success, such as tackling a long-delayed chore. [35]

Nevertheless, I was astonished by the charge of energy and satisfaction I got from creating order. [37]

"It is by studying little things," wrote Samuel Johnson, "that we attain the great art of having as little misery, and as much happiness as possible." [37]

## **Chapter 2, February**

Partly this reflects the fact that happy people find it easier to get and stay married than unhappy people do, because happy people make better dates and easier spouses. [39]

I had come to understand one critical fact about my happiness project: I couldn't change anyone else. [40]

"It is easy to be heavy: hard to be light" (or, as the saying goes, "Dying is easy; comedy is hard"). [41]

I was certainly guilty of "unconscious overclaiming," the phenomenon in which we unconsciously overestimate our contributions or skills relative to other people. (It's related to the Garrison Keillor-named "Lake Wobegon fallacy," which describes the fact that we all fancy ourselves to be above average.) [44]

We hugged — for at least six seconds, which, I happened to know from my research, is the minimum time necessary to promote the flow of oxytocin and serotonin, mood-boosting chemicals that promote bonding. [45]

In fact, in practically every language, there are more concepts to describe negative emotions than positive emotions. [48]

As Mark Twain observed, "An uneasy conscience is a hair in the mouth." [48]

Fight right — not just with your husband but with everyone. [51]

Although men and women agree that sharing activities and self-disclosure are important, women's idea of an intimate moment is a face-to-face conversation, while men feel close when they work or play sitting alongside someone. [52]

Oscar Wilde observed, "One is not always happy when one is good; but one is always good when one is happy." [54]

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Happiness has a particularly strong influence in marriage, because spouses pick up each other's moods so easily. [54]

I've never forgotten something I read in college, by Pierre Reverdy: "There is no love; there are only proofs of love." Whatever love I might feel in my heart, others will see only my actions. [55]

In one study, people assigned to give five hugs each day for a month, aiming to hug as many different people as they could, became happier. [56]

One of the great joys of falling in love is the feeling that the most extraordinary person in the entire world has chosen you. [60]

There's no evidence for the belief that "letting off steam" is healthy or constructive. In fact, studies show that aggressively expressing anger doesn't relieve anger but amplifies it. [64]

To be happy, I need to think about feeling good, feeling bad, and feeling right. [65]

"Feeling right" was a trickier concept: it was the feeling that I'm living the life I'm supposed to lead. [66]

Then I thought of a line from William Butler Yeats. "Happiness," wrote Yeats, "is neither virtue nor pleasure nor this thing nor that, but simply growth. We are happy when we are growing." [66]

As much as folks insist that money can't buy happiness, for example, it's awfully nice to have more money this year than you had last year. [67]

The First Splendid Truth: To be happy, I need to think about feeling good, feeling bad, and feeling right, in an atmosphere of growth. [67]

### **Chapter 3, March**

Happiness is a critical factor for work, and work is a critical factor for happiness. [69]

Happy people work more hours each week — and they work more in their free time too. [69]

Happier people also make more effective leaders. [70]

Being happy can make a big difference in your work life. [70]

Because work is so crucial to happiness, another person's happiness project might well focus on choosing the right work. [70]

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People who love their work bring an intensity and enthusiasm that's impossible to match through sheer diligence. [71]

Enthusiasm is more important to mastery than innate ability, it turns out, because the single most important element in developing an expertise is your willingness to practice. [71]

If you do new things — visit a museum for the first time, learn a new game, travel to a new place, meet new people — you're more apt to feel happy than people who stick to more familiar activities. [74]

One friend said that in his office, whenever crisis strikes, he tells everyone, "This is the fun part!" [80]

Benjamin Franklin, along with twelve friends, formed a club for mutual improvement that met weekly for forty years. [81]

It didn't take me long to see that I did better when I had less time. Not several hours but ninety minutes turned out to be the optimally efficient length of time — long enough for me to get some real work done but not so long that I started to goof off or lose concentration. [82]

Though I sometimes mocked the scented-candle-pushing brand of happiness building, I discovered that there is something nice about working in an office with a candle burning. [84]

The challenge, therefore, is to take pleasure in the "atmosphere of growth," in the gradual progress made toward a goal, in the present. [85]

But doing what you love is itself the reward. [85]

Many ambitious people I've known seem eager to claim that they aren't happy, almost as a way to emphasize their zeal, in echo of Andrew Carnegie's observation "Show me a contented man, and I'll show you a failure." [88]

#### **Chapter 4, April**

Nevertheless, despite these findings, I had to reject the experts' argument that children don't bring happiness. Because they do. Not always in a moment-to-moment way, perhaps, but in a more profound way. [91]

The fact is, life is more fun when I keep my resolutions. [93]

The days are long, but the years are short. [97]

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Experts say that denying bad feelings intensifies them; acknowledging bad feelings allows good feelings to return. [100]

When people reminisce, they focus on the positive memories, with the result that recalling the past amplifies the positive and minimizes the negative. [101]

Now when I'm done rocking Eleanor, I carry her to the window, and she says, "Good night, world." [102]

A "new tradition" may be a bit of an oxymoron, but that shouldn't stop me from inventing a tradition that I wished we had. [105]

But my research revealed that a key to happiness is squeezing out as much happiness as possible from a happy event. [108]

To eke out the most happiness from an experience, we must anticipate it, savor it as it unfolds, express happiness, and recall a happy memory. [108]

In fact, in what's known as "rosy prospection," anticipation of happiness is sometimes greater than the happiness actually experienced. All the more reason to revel in anticipation. [109]

After a two-hour meeting, I was back on the subway and headed home in a more cheerful mood (thus confirming happiness research that shows that people get a mood boost from contact with others). [110]

Each member of a family picks up and reflects everyone else's emotions — but of course I could change no one's actions except my own. [111]

## **Chapter 5, May**

Research shows that regularly having fun is a key factor in having a happy life; people who have fun are twenty times as likely to feel happy. [113]

As I saw in March, novelty is an important source of happiness; it's also an important element in creativity. [113]

Studies show that each common interest between people boosts the chances of a lasting relationship and also brings about a 2 percent increase in life satisfaction. [119]

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One day — I was about 34 years old — it dawned on me: I can DO ANYTHING I want, but I can't DO EVERYTHING I want. [123]

I just have to embrace what is. :) [124]

A happy atmosphere isn't created merely by the absence of nagging and yelling but also by jokes, games, and tomfoolery. [126]

Studies show that in a phenomenon called "emotional contagion," we unconsciously catch emotions from other people — whether good moods or bad ones. Taking the time to be silly means that we're infecting one another with good cheer, and people who enjoy silliness are one third more likely to be happy. [127]

I want to spend more time on the things that I already like. [128]

I started carrying a camera everywhere, to sharpen my eye. [129]

I intended to read a poem every night, but I never managed to make myself start that program. [130]

A collection provides a mission, a reason to visit new places, the excitement of the chase, a field of expertise (no matter how trivial), and, often, a bond with other people. [130]

I loved my workday. For me, that was fun. [136]

Now, I see that it's like saving money, you can't save for when you get laid off, after you get laid off; rather, you have to save while you have a job and the money is still coming in. Life is like that, you have to DO while you are able to think of what you want, what you like, what needs it will fill, how it will enhance your life, how it will help you to maintain you, so that you have some reserves when crunch time comes. [138]

## **Chapter 6, June**

"Of all the things that wisdom provides for living one's entire life in happiness, the greatest by far is the possession of friendship." [141]

You need close long-term relationships, you need to be able to confide in others, you need to belong. [142]

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In fact, researchers reported that out of fifteen daily activities, they found only one during which people were happier along rather than with other people — and that was praying. To my mind, that isn't an exception at all. The point of praying is that you're not talking to yourself. [142]

In a flash, they had a book contract, they wrote the book, and now Nancy Schulman and Ellen Birnbaum's Practical Wisdom for Parents: Demystifying the Preschool Years is on the shelves. Knowing that I played a small role in their achievement made me intensely happy. [147]

Or to put it another way, suitable for a Snoopy poster: "There is an 'I' in 'happiness.'" [148]

I looked for ways to connect people. [148]

I looked for other opportunities to give. [152]

Just as Woody Allen said that "eighty percent of success is showing up," a big part of friendship is showing up. [153]

The more often you see a person, the more intelligent and attractive you'll find that person. [154]

What I say about other people sticks to me — even when I talk to someone who already knows me. [158]

Give without limits, give without expectations. [162]

## **Chapter 7, July**

[Money] buys time — which can be spent on aimless drifting or purposeful action. [166]

One person's fortune is another person's misfortune. [169]

Both money and health contribute to happiness mostly in the negative; the lack of them brings much more unhappiness than possessing them brings happiness. [169]

Studies show that people's basic psychological needs include the need to feel secure, to feel good at what they do, to be loved, to feel connected to others, and to have a strong sense of control. [170]

It's such a joy to write with a good pen instead of making do with an underinked pharmaceutical promotional pen picked up from a doctor's office. [171]

Finely made tools help make work a pleasure. [172]



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Happiness theory suggests that if I move to a new apartment or buy a new pair of boots, I'll soon become accustomed to my new possession and be no happier than I was before. [173]

Scrimping, saving, imagining, planning, hoping — these stages enlarge the happiness we feel. [177]

We're very sensitive to change. We measure our present against our past, and we're made happy when we see change for the better. [178]

A sense of growth is so important to happiness that it's often preferable to be progressing to the summit rather than to be at the summit. [178]

"Why don't you play with your cars?" she asked. "You loved your blue car so much." "I can't love lots of cars," he answered. [179]

It's easy to make the mistake of thinking that if you have something you love or there's something you want, you'll be happier with more. [179]

"It's by spending oneself," the actress Sarah Bernhardt remarked, "that one becomes rich." [185]

## **Chapter 8, August**

There are some kinds of profound wisdom that I hope never to gain from my own experience. [196]

So often, it's only after some calamity strikes that we appreciate what we had. [198]

I'd had this thought before — but suddenly I grasped that this was my Third Splendid Truth: The days are long, but the years are short. [199]

Gratitude is important to happiness. [202]

Now, every day as part of my evening meditation I take some time to really become conscious of the things I am grateful for — and I intensify the emotion. [204]

Voilà! A complaint turned into thankfulness. [206]

Acting happy and, even more, being happy is challenging. [215]

It's more selfless to act happy. It takes energy, generosity, and discipline to be unfailingly lighthearted, yet, everyone takes the happy person for granted. [217]

If you don't believe you're happy, you're not happy. [219]

## **Chapter 9, September**

To keep this month's resolution to "Pursue a passion," first I had to recognize my passion. [222]

The satisfaction gained from the achievement of a large undertaking is one of the most substantial that life affords. [226]

I've always thought that the best reading is rereading. [228]

One thing that makes a passion enjoyable is that you don't have to worry about results. You can strive for triumph, or you can potter around, tinker, explore, without worrying about efficiency or outcomes. [230]

I needed to accept my own nature — yet I needed to push myself as well. [233]

But for me, asking myself whether I was happy had been a crucial step toward cultivating my happiness more wisely through my actions. Also, only through recognizing my happiness did I really appreciate it. [234]

... this was my Fourth Splendid Truth: You're not happy unless you think you're happy. Then it struck me that the Fourth Splendid Truth has a corollary: You're happy if you think you're happy. [234]

## **Chapter 10, October**

Everyone's happiness project is unique. [237]

A koan is a question or statement that can't be understood logically. Zen Buddhist monks meditate on koans as a way to abandon dependence on reason in their pursuit of enlightenment. The most famous koan is "Two hands clap and there is a sound. What is the sound of one hand?" [238]

... "Remember, it's one of the True Rules — if you're willing to take the blame, people will give you responsibility." [241]

Get some work done every day. [241]

Ubiquity is the new exclusivity. [241]

When making a choice about what to do, choose work. [241]

"The things that go wrong often make the best memories." [242]

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Flawed can be more perfect than perfection. [242]

Change is good. [242]

Choose the bigger life. [243]

Buy anything you want at the grocery store; cooking is always cheaper than eating out. [243]

... "People succeed in groups." [243]

For my next experiment, I decided to try laughter yoga. [247]

... New York City is so beautiful, so endlessly compelling. [250]

I've read repeatedly that it takes twenty-one days to form a habit, but in my experience, that just isn't true. [253]

Who would have thought that self-denial could be so agreeable? [254]

Once I stopped that habit, that relentless source of bad feeling vanished. [255]

## **Chapter 11, November**

Keeping "a heart to be contented," I expected, would help change my actions. [259]

Also, I wanted to stop being critical, so judgmental and finicky. [260]

"Nothing," wrote Tolstoy, "can make life, or the lives of other people, more beautiful than perpetual kindness. [266]

Enthusiasm is a form of social courage. [269]

We nonjoyous types suck energy and cheer from the joyous ones; we rely on them to buoy us with their good spirit and to cushion our agitation and anxiety. [270]

One fact of human nature is that people have a "negativity bias": we react to the bad more strongly and persistently than to the comparable good. [273]

## **Chapter 12, December**

You hit a goal, you keep a resolution. [288]

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Each day I try to live up to my resolutions. Sometimes I succeed, sometimes I fail, but every day is a clean slate and a fresh opportunity. [288]

I had to build my happiness on the foundation of my character; I had to acknowledge what really made me happy, not what I wished made me happy. One of the biggest surprises of the happiness project was just how hard it was to know myself. [288]

The feeling of control is an essential element of happiness — a better predictor of happiness than, say, income. [289]