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LIFE IS AN ADVENTURE

"THE HAPPINESS PROJECT"

BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

GRETCHEN RUBIN

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The thousands of ardent comments on her blog speak volumes. So do the countless downloads by fans eager to launch their own “happiness projects” based on her advice.

But if you really want to know how Gretchen Rubin’s readers feel about her, check her mailbox. They have sent her gold stars. Bluebird figurines. Homemade art. Her own words, elaborately printed. A beautiful, framed photograph of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, with whom Gretchen has a “mini-obsession.” They have sent, in short, the kinds of gifts you choose for a dear friend or sibling.

“I get that all the time—people will say, ‘You’re like my sister!’” Gretchen says during a Skype chat from her home office on New York’s Upper East Side. (Her office, as you might expect, is extremely happy-looking—salmon

walls, scant clutter, a brightly upholstered armchair—as is the animated, red-haired Gretchen herself.) Such reactions to her two books on happiness—*The Happiness Project* and its sequel, *Happier at Home*—never fail to delight her, she says. After all, when she began work on *The Happiness Project*, plenty of people wondered whether readers would relate to one woman’s search for greater wellbeing. Eight years and more than 24 months on the *New York Times* bestseller list later, with a third happiness-related book due out in 2015, Gretchen has her answer.

“I think part of my work’s appeal is that it’s very practical,” she says, echoing many critics. Other writings on happiness can make its pursuit seem “very abstract or complicated”—not to mention pricey. It’s doubtful many of Elizabeth Gilbert’s readers, for instance, are able to follow her *Eat, Pray, Love* example by seeking fulfillment in Rome, Mumbai and Bali.

Gretchen, by contrast, offers recipes for happiness you can follow at home, for little or no money. “Most people are like, ‘Yeah, I could make my bed, I could enjoy good smells,’” she says. “Then you get that

feeling of growth, that feeling of ‘I am feeling a little bit happier,’ and that tends to build on itself.” As Gretchen points out in her writing, small attempts to increase happiness often give you the energy to make big attempts—the sort that, unlike bed-making or rose-sniffing, may have deep, long-term payoffs.

Which brings us to what are probably even greater reasons for Gretchen’s devoted following: In her books, she chronicles her own happiness-boosting efforts, large and not, with such apparent candor that it’s easy to imagine she’s speaking right to you. And she tries so many things, it’s hard not to find some that mirror your own yearnings, making her seem like some kind of mind reader.

Though she still scores a seven-out-of-10 on a standard happiness test, just as she did before she made happiness her grail, Gretchen doesn’t think that’s the real story. “My experience of my day has changed enormously because I’ve done so much to add enthusiasm and fun and enjoyment to it, and get rid of anger and boredom and resentment,” she says. “In a way I’m the same person I always was, but on the other hand, my life is so much different, my experience is so much different, so I’m happier.”



From Malaise to Merriness

In *The Happiness Project*, Gretchen describes how she realized her life needed tweaking back in 2006: “As I stared out the rain-spattered window of a city bus, I saw that the years were slipping by. ‘What do I want from life, anyway?’ I asked myself. ‘Well...I want to be happy.’ But I had never thought about what made me happy or how I might be happier.”

Although she was grateful for her comfortable life in New York, she decided, she was “suffering from midlife malaise.”

So Gretchen, true to her past as a lawyer, began exhaustively researching happiness. She sought inspiration from psychologists, philosophers, memoirists, novelists, relatives, friends and, yes, saints. She made a now-famous resolutions chart for herself (downloadable on her website), plus 12 commandments (“Lighten up,” “Enjoy the process”), plus 21 Secrets of Adulthood (“It’s OK to ask for help”; “Do good, feel good”), and began test-driving strategies and posting about them on a happiness blog.

Some have suggested, at times a bit snarkily, that her resulting books paint Gretchen as more of an everywoman

than she is. And it’s true she doesn’t come right out and tell readers that her husband, Jamie, is quite the high-powered guy (now the head of New York Rising Communities Program, he was, when Gretchen began her happiness books, a senior partner at a major private-equity firm), or that “Bob,” her father-in-law, is former U.S. Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin. (“Bob is important to me because he’s my father-in-law, so that’s the way he’s relevant in the book,” she was quoted as explaining in *The New York Times*. “I wasn’t trying

to hide it.”) Nor does Gretchen mention that, as the successful author of four books before *The Happiness Project* (including *Power Money Fame Sex* and *Forty Ways to Look at Winston Churchill*) she could have sprung for a cab instead of that city bus.

Overall, though, she is disarmingly open in print about her life’s advantages.

She writes, for instance, that she went to Yale for college and law school, and that before her switch to a writing career, she clerked for Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor. She gives thanks for the “tall, dark



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and handsome” Jamie; their “two delightful young daughters,” Eliza and Eleanor, their supportive relatives, their nice apartment. She declares that money *can* buy happiness—to a point—as she illustrates with accounts of her own cheering splurges, from art lessons and fancy file boxes to a mountain-scene diorama she commissions for her kitchen.

But as we all know, wealth alone won't make you profoundly happy. Everyone has problems that cash can't cure, and Gretchen is no exception. She reveals, for instance, that she sometimes feels listless or guilty; that she's addicted to “gold stars” of recognition; that (most ominously) she and Jamie know that his Hepatitis C, acquired during a childhood blood transfusion, is likely to cause liver failure soon.

Assuming you're well-off enough that you have time to put in, Gretchen suggests that getting happier is often about diligent effort—effort that won't

necessarily make you feel great right away. Chapter by chapter, she shares goals—being in the moment, having more energy, improving family life—and the simple steps she took to bring them closer. Sure, some of her steps are nothing new: making the most of holidays; decluttering; hugging more. But Gretchen has a knack for presenting ideas memorably, paired with insights that, even if others have had them before, feel fresh.

In *The Happiness Project*, for example, she offers this twist on the classic notion of “reframing” your experience: “One sleepless morning, I was wide awake at 3:00 a.m., and at 4:00, instead of continuing to toss and fume, I told myself, ‘I feel grateful for being awake at 4:00.’ I got up, made myself some tea, and headed to my dark, quiet office... I started my day with a feeling of tranquility and accomplishment. Voilà! A complaint turned into thankfulness.”

“Permitting yourself treats helps offset feelings of being deprived or overwhelmed that might torpedo a healthy habit.”



A Habit-forming Read

For readers used to such Gretchen epiphanies, her next book may come as a surprise. *Before and After*, which is about making and breaking habits—crucial to happiness—will feature fewer of Gretchen's own experiences. This is because when it comes to habits, she is “pretty freaky.” In her own lexicon of personalities, she is an “upholder”—someone who responds readily both to other people's expectations (deadlines, say, or scheduled meetings) and to her own (New Year's resolutions). “Once upholders have decided to do something, it's fairly easy for them to stick with it,” she says. But the vast majority of us aren't upholders. So in much of *Before and After*, Gretchen shares the stories of other people, including her sister, who fit the three more common types:

Questioners: Before they'll form a habit, they want to know why they should—and will do it only if it makes sense.

Obligers: Though they have trouble living up to their own expectations (unlike upholders), they work hard to meet those of other people.

Rebels: “They hate habits!” Gretchen says. “They resent them!”

Personality by personality, *Before and After* will supply advice for fostering habits related to the “Big Four” habit challenges: eating and drinking healthfully, exercising regularly, getting “real, restorative” rest and relaxation, and ending procrastination in a given area.

If you're a questioner who wants to hit the gym more, say, you might read articles on the benefits of muscle strength. If you're an obliger, you could schedule gym dates with a buddy.

Is rebellion your style? You'll need to “choose” to exercise every time, Gretchen says, by tapping into the pleasure of a runner's high, or the joy of feeling the wind in your hair as you ride your bike.

Even upholders can use some help in the habit department, though, and *Before and After* will also include 16 strategies aimed at a wide variety of personalities. Among them:

Treats: Permitting yourself treats helps offset feelings of being deprived or overwhelmed that might torpedo a healthy habit, she says. Treats needn't be food (and if your new habit involves eating better, they probably shouldn't be). Some people might allow themselves a crossword puzzle, she suggests, or time to play a sport or musical instrument. “Perfume is a treat for me,” Gretchen says, sniffing her tobacco-vanilla-scented wrist. “I put on perfume several times a day.”

Pairing: Try combining your desired new behavior with something you crave or need to do. “Let's say you're a *Breaking Bad* fan,” Gretchen says. “You could say, ‘I'm only gonna watch that when I'm on the treadmill.’” Gretchen, an avowed couch potato at heart, says that in college, “I had a rule that I could only shower after I exercised.”

Monitoring: The more aware you are of a behavior, the more likely you are to keep it up. In her first two happiness books, Gretchen experimented with a food diary and pedometer. Now she sports a bracelet (UP by Jawbone) that tracks her steps, food intake and sleep. “But you don't need anything fancy. You could just keep a little notebook.”

Still Striving

Mindful of her own advice, Gretchen has post-Skype plans to walk with a friend: “It's a treat, it's pairing, it's scheduling!” But don't be *too* intimidated by her disciplined, upholder ways. Even after all these years of studying and seeking happiness, Gretchen shows every sign of remaining the not-too-perfect adopted sister her readers love:


She still finds it hard to follow her No. 1 commandment—“Be Gretchen”—instead of being what she or others think she *should* be, she says.


Despite the compelling case she makes in *The Happiness Project* for getting more sleep, “I'll stay up late doing nothing, rereading a magazine I've already read. I remind myself I'm happier, I'm healthier, when I go to sleep on time.”

And though she waxes eloquent in print about the need to “accept the reality of other people's feelings,” she continues to have trouble doing it—especially with Eliza and Eleanor, now 14 and 8, respectively. Take last summer. Eliza was signed up for a debate camp. Just before it began, she suddenly didn't want to go. Gretchen longed to tell her that she had nothing to be anxious about. But at last she forced herself to sympathize with Eliza, saying things like, “It seems like more work than you imagined.” Eliza went to camp. “If you asked her now if she was glad,” Gretchen says, “she'd say yes.” Gretchen, meanwhile, is grateful their last hours before the trip were filled with encouragement and understanding, not conflict and anger.

Such victories, she says, help keep her striving to uphold all her happiness resolutions from waking to bedtime.

Has she had any days like that yet?

“Oh, *no*,” Gretchen says, shaking her head and smiling. “But every day is a new opportunity.” 

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