

Happiness Lost, Happiness Found
An Excerpt from
FULL HEART LIVING:
CONVERSATIONS WITH THE HAPPIEST PEOPLE I KNOW

by
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Unhappiness can enter our lives in many ways. Sometimes the cause is obvious and dramatic, striking in one horrible moment when we learn that our life has been forever changed by an accident, death, illness, lay-off, divorce. Unhappiness can also seep in without notice. The only clue is a vague sensation that “something is off,” that we are not living our best life. “Did I miss a turn somewhere? Get off at the wrong exit?” you might find yourself asking.

Still another kind of unhappiness falls somewhere in between. This kind of unhappiness takes a while to announce itself, mostly because we are desperately trying to ward it off. In my case, it began the day my boss introduced me to my new colleague. As the psychologist at a small college, a job I loved enormously, I spent half my time meeting individually with smart, talented, creative young people, helping them solve their problems. The other half of my time involved collaborating with a colleague to create wellness promotion activities to help students live healthier lives. For the prior seven years, I enjoyed a fantastic relationship with my former coworker. She and I developed a campus-wide reputation for producing effective, memorable, fun events.

The first two weeks with my new colleague went well. He smiled, made eye contact, listened, and contributed. I was sure there would be no problems between us. This made the abrupt change I was about to face all the more baffling. By the third week, my new colleague started ignoring me. When we passed in the hallway, he stared straight ahead as though he didn't see me. While it struck me as odd, I decided to ignore the behavior. Maybe he's just highly focused, I told myself, brushing off the unsettled feeling. Trying to

foster a connection, I stopped by his office and made attempts at casual conversation. “How was your weekend?” I asked the next Monday. He stared at his computer screen. “It was good,” he said in a monotone. He did not elaborate. He didn’t ask me about my weekend. He continued typing as though I wasn’t there.

By the fifth week, he began to miss important planning meetings. When I mentioned this, he acknowledged it with only a slight nod of his head and walked away. He then began to fail to reply to time-sensitive emails. And later, though he was in charge of the budget, he didn’t pay key vendors on time. They contacted me, as I was the person they were familiar with. When I forwarded their complaints to him, my colleague emailed back a terse, one sentence reply: “I didn’t have their addresses.” This was puzzling, as I had provided their addresses to him weeks before, when we first agreed to host the event. (I had the email to prove it.) Nor did it explain why he didn’t ask for the addresses if he couldn’t find them. Hoping these were oversights of someone new to his job and not the beginning of a pattern, I chose not to mention these facts. Trying to be generous, I gave him the benefit of the doubt.

Happy people are big on giving others the benefit of the doubt. The problem is that our social generosity can make us easy marks. Worse, at weak moments, we start to doubt ourselves—am I doing something wrong? Why doesn’t he like me? His relentless unpleasantness left me feeling shocked, puzzled, and uncertain. His predecessor and I had enjoyed a magnificent relationship. Working well with colleagues, in fact, was often noted on my performance reviews. What was wrong with me? Had I changed? Was I eating too much garlic? Finally, I tried talking with my new colleague directly. “Is there something we need to talk about?” I asked. “Anything I’m doing that’s bothering you?” His head cocked to the side, his nose crinkled, and a puzzled expression covered his face. “No!” he replied, his tone implying I was crazy for asking. His utter dismissiveness left me so stunned that I failed to ask follow-up questions and quickly made up an excuse to leave. My confusion grew and eventually led to self-doubt. How much of this was him, and how much me?

Finally, I shared my list of concerns with our supervisor, who listened and sympathized but had little to suggest. More endlessly long weeks passed. Nothing changed. I returned to our supervisor. She sighed and said, “You’re going to have to work this out on your own.”

I got the message. I stopped asking my boss for help. Months went by. Things only got worse. I was left out of important meetings and events. When I was invited and it was my time to make a report, there was suddenly no room left on the agenda. Projects that were my colleague’s ideas—or that involved no one else—went without a hitch. When others or I were on the team, however, he always complained that something was wrong. And somehow these errors never had anything to do with him.

I realize now that when dealing with a prickly, passive-aggressive coworker whose memory seems to favor only his side of the story, it is not uncommon to either blame yourself or think you are crazy. Thus, to counteract that, it is wise to always have another colleague present during any official meetings or interactions. A witness to his bad behavior would have helped me to see that it wasn’t my fault and I wasn’t insane.

I couldn’t believe that after seven years of living my dream job and planning on working there until I retired, someone who had been there only half a year made me dread going to work. What was going on with me? How was it that one “toxic” co-worker could shake me up so badly?

I thought a lot about my history, trying to see if my reaction had its roots in my past. I found my eighth-grade English autobiography that I keep tucked away in a basement closet in a special bin full of childhood mementos. Its opening line reads, “I’m basically a happy person.” Thirteen years old and I knew at my core that I’m happy! I had friends and a stable family, school was easy, and teachers liked me. But what astounds me now is that I wrote that after spending much of the previous year being tormented by bullies.

The bullying started when I made the mistake of wearing a green T-shirt with “Nags

Head” printed in large white, block letters emblazoned across the chest. Nags Head is a beach community in North Carolina’s Outer Banks, where my family and I had been for summer vacation. “Fag’s head,” said Merrill, the first of many tormentors. “Fag’s head, fag’s head, fag’s head,” he hurled the words, his volume increasing with every utterance. Soon a crowd formed. Pointing at me, a wicked smirk spread across Merrill’s twisted features. I wanted to disappear.

The word “Fag” was scrawled across my locker more times than I can remember. I was also called “Queer,” “Wuss,” “Pansy,” “*Ladies’* man,” and many more. On the bus, in the hallway, on the street—a confrontation could happen anywhere, anytime. “Watch out. We’re gonna beat your gay ass,” they jeered. I never was beaten up, but the threat of physical harm or verbal harassment was ever-present. I never knew when or where it might happen. Paranoia and anxiety were my constant companions. Thinking back, I wonder if this experience might have some relevance to the anxiety I’m feeling around my so-less-than-pleasant coworker.

Back in school, it didn’t occur to me to tell the bullies off or ask an adult for help. Not only was I a fairly nonassertive kid, I had been taught both at home and in church that the best way to deal with such behavior is to ignore it. Responding in any way encourages and reinforces it, the theory goes. There’s a lot to be said for that approach; many wise prophets advise it. While I do believe there *is* a time and place for turning the other cheek, what I’ve realized since, however, is that there is also a time to stand up for oneself, to demand to be treated with respect. Furthermore, only from a place of strength and confidence can one ignore abuse without harming oneself. At that point, young and sensitive, I was anything but strong. I was humiliated and deeply ashamed.

A common response to humiliation and shame (key fallouts from any trauma) is paralysis; it’s the old fight, flight, or freeze response. I couldn’t fight. I had nowhere to run. The only option I could summon was to freeze, overlook it as best I could, and hope with all my might that it would stop. But such hopes were in vain. The bullying continued unabated for the next three years.

What saved me was theater. I was wild about performing. I loved the focus, the creativity, the teamwork, the artistic expression, the challenge of inhabiting another person's mannerisms and expressions. To me, it was all magic. There, in a world of creative, open, funny souls—many of them misfits like myself—I blossomed. I felt at home. I had fun. I was well liked for being who I was. From that first production of *The King and I*, I was almost constantly on stage. Having something I excelled at and a setting in which I made friends saved me.

I thought long and hard about bullies and the profound effect they can have on others. I was living proof that trauma has a long shelf life. But then I realized what saved me in junior high and high school just might help me now. I needed to get back to what truly made me happy: performing. I didn't know how I would do that, but it was a start. Just thinking about it lifted my mood. Meanwhile, I still had to deal with my horrendous work situation.

Deep down, I suspected there was no fixing this job. And so on one cold, grey Minnesota Sunday, my husband Greg and I were seated in the basement restaurant Hell's Kitchen in downtown Minneapolis. It was a rare moment for us to dine out without our young son in tow. While waiting for our food, I told Greg about the latest escapade at work. Once again, my nemesis coworker had misinterpreted something I'd said, and instead of coming to me, he went to our boss.

Greg interrupted my verbal ruminations. "Tom. This isn't working. You're miserable." (It occurred to me only later that, out of the kindness of his heart, Greg left out the part about how miserable I was making *him*.) "If you want to leave, just leave. This is not worth it."

I listened. When Greg had suggested this before, I wouldn't hear of it. I wasn't going to quit my dream job—at least not lightly. But then it began to dawn on me. My colleague

was *not* going to change. I thought I could wait him out and that he'd soon get a job elsewhere. But he was not going anywhere. About half my job (the part he's *not* involved in), where I worked individually doing psychotherapy with students, I still felt tremendous passion for. The other half, which used to bring me great joy, I now dreaded. With half my job enjoyable and half bringing frustration and misery, the two cancelled each other out. I could live with an 80:20, or perhaps even a 70:30, but a 50:50 ratio just doesn't cut it.

It's like a light bulb popped on. I need to prepare! With my husband's full support, I knew I could be happy in my work again. An idea started forming—why not go into private practice? With Greg's words fresh in my mind, I went from surviving day to day to planning my escape.

A big reason I became a psychologist in the first place was that I was so intrigued and jazzed to study the work of Abraham Maslow, one of the first psychologists to make the radical claim that we could benefit not only from examining mental dysfunctions, but also from studying those people who are functioning well. With his theory of self-actualization, Maslow emphasized the importance of focusing on the positive qualities in people, as opposed to treating them as a "bag of symptoms." When the Positive Psychology movement, spearheaded by Martin Seligman, made headlines years later, I was an early adapter. I naturally found myself actively doing all sorts of things to be happy. I got into exercise. I ate a mostly vegetarian diet. I studied with a Native American spiritual teacher, the Venerable Dhyani Ywahoo. I learned to meditate. To work through the craziness in my family and heal from the trauma of being bullied, I found myself a good therapist. I began to define myself as a survivor instead of as a victim. Why not see if I could help others focus on finding the positive in their lives?

When we make a shift to embrace our true selves, the universe often bestows gifts. Just before quitting my job, I stumbled upon a book that rocked my world. In *The Happiness Project*, author Gretchen Rubin writes about loving her work as a freelance journalist in New York City. She had a devoted husband and two adorable girls. Like many

Americans, Rubin was living the good life. But something was missing. She knew she could be happier. *The Happiness Project* tells the tale of the inspiring year she spent researching happiness, and the simple, straightforward steps she took applying what she learned.

Reading *The Happiness Project* propelled and galvanized me. It struck me that happiness entails areas I studied—and loved—for years: mindfulness, positive psychology, wellness, emotional intelligence, and resilience. In addition to performing, I realized that what would make me happy is to share all I'm learning and experiencing with others. Soon I found myself teaching classes on happiness, and I began wondering if there might be a way to fuse my two interests—the study and promotion of happiness and the performing arts.

After I quit my dream job, one thing I decided to do to make me happy was to get involved more in the arts—everything from performing to singing to video projects. And then it hit me; why not create a conversation about happiness? Nearly everyone says they want to be happy. But how many people can easily define what that even means to them? We seem to take it for granted, as though we'll just know when we get there. And who can't point to people who seem especially happy—but what specifically do we see in them? How do we know they're happy? And do they see the same things in themselves? What do happier people do that's different from the rest of us? Well, I became determined to find out.

I was studying with an on-camera acting coach, and one day, while leaving his studio, it occurred to me. I could produce a documentary on happiness—I could videotape interviews of happy people talking about being happy. I wanted to know how people obtain happiness and how they are able to maintain it. Had they always been happy? Did something happen in their life to wake them up to the need to be happy? How do they sustain happiness in tough times? I had a slew of questions.