



CAUGHT

IN THE

Headlights

10 LESSONS LEARNED
THE **HARD WAY**

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FOREWORD BY
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CONTENTS

FOREWORD

SETTING THE STAGE

PURSUIT 1: *Happiness*

PURSUIT 2: *Self-Esteem*

PURSUIT 3: *Pride*

PURSUIT 4: *Freedom*

PURSUIT 5: *Control*

PURSUIT 6: *Tolerance*

PURSUIT 7: *Forgiveness*

PURSUIT 8: *Success*

PURSUIT 9: *The Big Event*

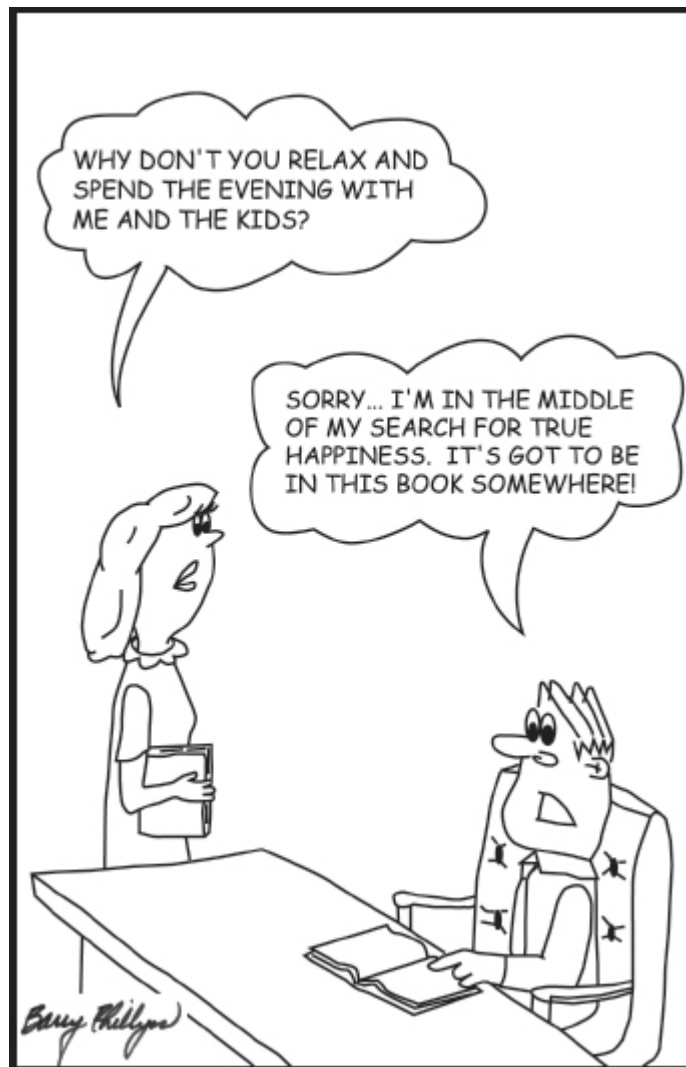
PURSUIT 10: *The Perfect Body*

BRINGING IT HOME

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

1

HAPPINESS



Pursuit 1

What I really wanted was happiness

I thought we'd better start with this subject because it is an underlying principle for everything else. Based on my premise of stuff I thought I wanted but learned better, you must think I don't want to be happy. Wrong. I do. But when I was younger, I didn't really understand what happiness was or how to get there from here. It took a great deal of time, and more trial and error than I would care to admit, but I've finally figured out how this whole happiness thing works. I didn't say I'm perfect at obtaining happiness all the time—far from it. But the formula works if I have the discipline to stick with it. So let's start with the basics. First let's look at the root word of happiness—happy. Webster's first definition is “favored by luck or fortune.”

By that definition, being happy has much more to do with luck than with anything you or I do to obtain a state of being happy. We have to rely on the luck of the draw, the roll of the dice—in short, pure dumb luck. If that's true, why do so many people spend the bulk of their lives trying to do things that will make them happy? Think about it: if you are married, why did you choose your spouse? I chose my wife because I thought being with her would make me *happy* (and the fact that she didn't get physically ill in my presence was a real plus, but that's another story). Silly me—why did I worry about being happy if it was all a matter of fate? Nope. I can't accept that definition for happiness.

So what about pleasure? That must bring the happiness we are all looking for, right? Las Vegas is filled with people night after night putting that one to the test. The truth is that pleasure and true happiness have very little in

common. Pleasure is short-term and rarely, if ever, leads to the long-term happiness that we're really after. Momentary pleasures more often lead to long-term misery and regret if they are done without the long-term plan in mind. Since I have brought up the subject of Las Vegas, have you seen their advertising campaign that says, "What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas"? There's your "get out of jail free" card for pleasure. No consequences because no one will tell, so no one will know. Except, of course, *you*. Oh, and *God*. Maybe a legal disclaimer for their ads would help. You know the type, like the ones at the end of pharmaceutical commercials where the potential side effects are worse than the disease you are trying to cure. It should read something like this:

Offer valid for persons with no conscience or moral character only. In the event there is actually a God, this offer is null and void. Persons being condemned at the judgment seat to a toasty place in hell may not use this offer as a legal and binding contract. While Satan was involved in the creation of this offer, he cannot be held responsible for your actions. After all, he IS Satan. Persons repenting later may experience a shortness of breath, deep sorrow, and excessive amounts of regret. Offer intended for the use of our regular, soulless clientele only. Offer not valid where prohibited, including all aspects of your life once you return home.

Now *there* would be some truth in advertising. But it's not likely to happen. Even without it, people seeking instant gratification soon find out they are left empty. Happiness is not found through pleasure.

A common cliché is that man (by "man" I mean the generic term for mankind—not that I'm excluding women, kids, or politicians. See how politically correct I can be if I try? Don't get used to it; that doesn't happen too often). Now where was I? Oh, the cliché is that man has two primary motivators: (1) to obtain pleasure and (2) to avoid pain. We have already discussed the pitfalls of the pleasure side, and I suspect that there must be more to life than just avoiding pain. I refuse to believe that if I simply avoid bad stuff that I will be deliriously happy. Life is more complex than that. Just because someone way-back-when came up with that concept and threw it over the wall to the rest of us, doesn't mean it's true. Some clichés are true, which is why they hang around so long. But many are not true. Their longevity may be

attributed to the fact that people want them to be true, or simply because it's an old saying and who am I to try to correct it?

There is certainly more to happiness than can be summed up in some trite saying. There is more to be discovered than that. I've seen a lot of people trying desperately to do whatever it takes to become happy. The interesting thing is that I've never seen anyone achieve happiness by pursuing it. To understand why that is the case, I first had to understand what the real goal is that we are all looking for.

Is the state of being happy the correct goal? It seems too fleeting and too hard to maintain for very long—at least when using the conventional definitions of the word. After searching for that pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, I discovered that my eyes were on the wrong prize. I'm really not looking for a euphoric high all the time. We've all seen people who've tried to keep that going. We usually call them alcoholics or drug addicts. Ultimately, they are also known as miserable, lonely, or dead. Not a pretty picture. I was not happy with the highs and lows of momentary euphoria. The older I became, the less palatable the roller coaster ride seemed to be. While the pleasure route has never been the road I've taken, looking for happiness in other ways has left me empty just the same.

The road I was on was tied too much to external events and tangible possessions. You know, things like accolades from others in business, a bigger house, or nicer cars. Then it hit me. What I was looking for was not happiness by standard conventions; what I really wanted can be summed up in one word—*peace*. Not just the absence of conflict, but true peace—a sense of comfort that all (or at least most) is going well in my world.

This kind of peace comes through many different ways that all tie in together. One of the most important things I found was that peace is largely determined by the relationships in my life. For example, when my relationship with my wife is going well (and, dear, it's always great, really), there is a peace that comes from that. The knot in the pit of my stomach brought on from the stresses of life seems to loosen. The funny thing is, that element of my life really has been great for me, but I didn't always fully appreciate it. I took it for granted. I kept looking for that brass ring, the next giant conquest, rather than

having the perspective that new challenges are important but less important than how my relationship is going with those I care about most.

Other relationships rank up there as well. While you may have others on your list, there are some common ones that we all share. These include family (spouse, children, extended family), God, and work (boss, peers, clients). If any of those relationships are out of whack, peace is difficult to find.

Okay, there are a few others you may want to add to that list. Anyone that is in your food chain matters—the pizza delivery guy, Chinese food delivery person—you know, the other essential people in your life. Plus, the people that keep your cable or satellite feeding that signal to your TV . . . and those Internet geeks. Let's face it, you may not want to hang out with them, but every now and then you really need to have them in your life. Just make sure your relationship with them is not on the rocks. I mean, your cable going out during the Super Bowl is bad, real bad—and these people can make that happen. The power they wield is awesome. Just don't mess with them. Enough said.

Now back to the first people on the list. When your relationships are all going well, your life is going well. There may not be giddy laughter and tingling thrills all the time, but that overall sense of peace makes life worth living. There is a balance that helps you make the right choices in all aspects of life. I should note that if you pay particular attention to your relationship with God, he will ensure that you put the proper focus on the other relationships. And believe me, you don't want to forget God in the process. There's this book I read about a guy named Jonah who didn't really like God's point of view. The Lord put him in "time out" in the belly of a fish (really . . . it wasn't a whale, it was a fish—read the book again) so he could rethink the choices he had made. Peace certainly didn't come for him until he got his priorities straight.

C. S. Lewis is one of my favorite authors and social commentators. He had great insight into what life is all about. Regarding peace and happiness, he had this to say: "God cannot give us happiness and peace apart from himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing."^[1]

He's right. Those who find true peace and happiness always have a strong relationship with their Creator. This book is not meant to be about religion, but facts are facts—you need God in your life to find peace. For those that

to listen and care. I know that's hard, because most of us male types want to fix things. Just be sure she *wants* your help before you jump in.

Okay, back to the relationship thing. When I say focus on relationships, I mean think about them and *do* something to strengthen them. If you are frustrated at work because your boss doesn't let you know how well you are or are not doing, you can actually ask him for feedback and *you* can offer up compliments on what *he* is doing. Everyone likes to know that their work is appreciated, and you can set the example for that.

2. *Spend less time on pleasure and more on things that bring peace.* I don't mean you have to give up watching sports or reading romance novels (okay, maybe giving up on the romance novels is not such a bad thing). Just don't let them be the dominant thing in your life. Keep them in balance. Add some things into your schedule like a daily walk with your spouse—no cell phones or iPods allowed. Schedule time to play with your kids. Get involved in church activities. Just make sure your free time has meaningful things scheduled as well as just fun things.

3. *Plan, plan, plan.* You may not be a daily planner type of a person. On the other hand, you may live too much by a schedule. Either way, force yourself to take some time each week (Sunday afternoons work best for me) and think about the relationships and important things that matter most to you and make sure you schedule at least one thing (if not more) for the coming week for each relationship that will help to strengthen the bond with that person—remember God is one of those relationships to work on. Your work and other play things will easily fill in the gaps, so put those peace-oriented things on the schedule first. Just imagine looking back on your past seven days and realizing that you had done something worthwhile in each relationship you care about. Now that's a peaceful feeling.

Also, plan some *peaceful* vacations that will allow quality time with those you love. My fondest memories are not of the thrills of an amusement park but of the time spent laughing, talking, and working with those I love. I'm willing to bet those are your fondest memories as well.

If your focus is on peace rather than "happiness," you will set your goals and priorities differently because you truly want something different—something long-lasting, something better. You want peace.

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