

Chapter One

Step 1

**Know specifically what makes you happy and
consciously build it into your life**

UNHAPPINESS AT 35,000 FEET

Mascara stained tears streamed down her red flushed cheeks. Biting her lip, she desperately choked backed sobs as she turned and looked out the window of the airplane. She was to be my seatmate on the nearly 4 hour flight from Los Angeles to Minneapolis.

Turning to face me, she said, “Sir, my name is Mary. I am sorry... but I have to talk to someone. I am so unhappy and just need to talk!”

I do a lot of airplane travel and it has been my experience that at times people will say things to strangers on an airplane that they would never say to anyone else – primarily because they will never see those strangers again.

Setting down my book, I gave her my full attention and asked, “Mary, what’s wrong?” It was to be my last sentence for 15 minutes.

With great emotion, she detailed specific people and situations that were causing her unhappiness: A co-worker who had taken credit for her idea and ended up getting promoted, a boss who underpaid and overworked her, children who didn’t understand the sacrifices she was making for them, a husband who had lost interest in her. As she was talking, I silently prayed, “God, please give me something of value to say to this woman who is hurting so deeply.”

Her pace quickened as she talked about friends who weren’t there when she

needed them, hypocrites in the church, people on welfare, having no time to keep herself physically fit, and others too numerous to mention.

With hands wringing in anxiety and heartfelt tears in her eyes, she finished her verbal tidal wave saying, “Some days I am so unhappy that I don’t even know if I want to keep on living.”

After a short pause, I said, “Mary, for nearly 15 minutes you have identified with great emotion and detail very specific things in your life that make you unhappy – and I know they are deeply painful to you. But could I ask you this?” I paused for a moment and then asked, “Is there anything in your life that makes you happy?”

For a number of seconds she stared blankly at me. Then, with a stunned look of bewilderment on her face, she said, “I really don’t know...I guess I haven’t spent much time thinking about that.”

At that moment, Olaf crossed my mind. I first heard his story during my college years. I loved it and shared it with many people over the years. Turning in my seat, I said, “Let me share a story with you.”

THE STORY OF OLAF – THE HAPPIEST MAN IN TOWN

“There was once a man named Olaf who was born in Norway, and moved to a small town in Minnesota.

“Olaf was known and loved in that town for his sunny disposition and contagious enthusiasm. In fact, people started referring to him as the happiest man in town – a label that was well earned and stuck with him for decades. “There goes Olaf,” they would say, ‘the happiest man in town!’

“Whenever Olaf entered a town restaurant, church or store, he almost always had a smile on his face, twinkle in his eye – and a joke or story ready to

brighten someone's day.

“If a person needed a hand, hand-out, or a word of encouragement, Olaf was there. When the community or his church needed volunteers for about anything, he rolled up his sleeves and did it with such fervor and joy that others joined in. He made it fun.

“As Olaf's 80th birthday approached, someone decided to find out and preserve his secret for happiness. When the interviewer talked to Olaf and pointed out that people had referred to him for years as the “happiest man in town,” he said, ‘Olaf, what's your secret to a happy life?’

“Immediately Olaf's face burst into a broad smile. He leaned forward and in a thick Scandinavian accent said, ‘Because long ago, I decided to take a vacation every day from the unhappiness of life!’

“When the interviewer expressed puzzlement, Olaf threw back his head in laughter and invited him into his brightly colored kitchen. There on the wall, across from his table, was a bulletin board with 2 sheets of paper side-by-side. On each sheet, Olaf had neatly typed 25 things that had made him happy (50 total).

“Of the things I can remember, his list included things like:

OLAF'S LIST

1. Get up early and watch the sun rise
2. Walk alone and pray by the river at sunset
3. Go fishing and swimming on a hot summer day
4. Drink a steaming, hot cup of coffee with rich cream and sugar on a cold winter day
5. Write a letter to an old friend
6. Listen to inspirational music
7. Visit the sick at the veteran's hospital

8. Play chess
9. Read a book about the old West
10. Read one of the Psalms as a prayer to God
11. Work in the garden
12. Go dancing
13. Watch a baseball, football or basketball game
14. Look at the stars on a clear night
15. Do something to help someone in need
16. Have friends over for a home cooked meal
17. Visit my children and grandchildren
18. Build a fire in the fireplace, pop popcorn, and have hot chocolate with a marshmallow on a cold winter night
19. Do something that is hard for me to do and master it
20. Slowly read a Bible verse and ask God to speak to me through it

“After the interviewer had read all 50, he turned to Olaf who said, ‘I do two or three things on that list each day – and there is not a day that goes by that I’m not in some way happy. Son, that is my secret to a happy life’

I paused for a moment and looked at the unhappy businesswoman seated next to me who was seemingly intent on what I had to say. “You see,” I continued, “Olaf did two key things: First, he identified specifically what made him happy and secondly, he built it into his life.”

“Happiness doesn’t just happen – you have to make it happen.”

“So, let me ask you again. What specifically makes you happy?”

She turned and looked out the window of the airplane. After a few moments of silence (thinking I had offended her), I picked up my book and began reading.

After 5 more minutes of silence, she turned and said, “Having lunch with my friend, Jane.”

“What?” I asked.

“It makes me happy to have lunch with my friend, Jane. Like Olaf, she is always so positive and brings out the best in me. She makes me laugh. When the two of us get together, sometimes we laugh so hard it’s difficult to breathe! “

It was the first time I saw a smile cross her face. “And, knitting makes me happy,” she continued. “I like to create things. I’m really good at stocking caps and making things for babies.” She thought for a moment and then said, “and making a gourmet meal for my family. I like every part of the preparation process, eating it with them, and having them enjoy it.”

She paused and said, “and bubble baths...they make me happy. I like drawing a hot tub of water, listening to soothing music and reading some mindless novel.”

She stopped at this point and asked, “how am I doing?”

“Just great,” I replied. “Let me ask you this now: How much time each month do you do any of those things that make you happy?”

“Each month?” she asked incredulously. “I haven’t done any of those things in a year. I haven’t had time....or maybe I haven’t made time.”

She paused for a moment and said, “you see, I have never thought of happiness as something you had to consciously build into your life. I just thought it either happened or it didn’t.”

“So how is that philosophy working out for you?” I asked.

She smiled, looked down and said, “obviously not well.”

Then, looking up, she said, “but maybe Olaf didn’t face the same level of problems and stress that I do.”

“Well,” I replied, “my guess is that he felt the stress of the first of the month bills, disagreements or all out arguments with spouse and children, and probably experienced a few unreasonable customers. He lived in the same world we do. But he made up his mind that even in the middle of stress-filled, gloomy days, he would build areas of happiness into his life – and focus on them.”

“But isn’t that a little selfish to those around you?” she asked. “I mean, it does take time to do virtually anything on Olaf’s list - that is time that could have been spent with others.”

I thought for a moment and said, “there is definitely a balance that needs to be maintained. Judging by his list, I don’t think Olaf took a hedonistic plunge into a life that was only focused on him. In many ways, I think he knew that life was like a cup. It’s difficult to positively overflow into the lives of others if your cup is empty. In fact, I think one of the reasons he focused on being happy was so he could bring happiness to others.”

“And, he did, didn’t he?” she said thoughtfully.

After a moment of reflection, she continued, “I know I’m not bringing happiness into the lives of others. I am so unhappy myself that all I talk about are negative things. People sure aren’t saying, ‘hey, there goes Mary, the happiest woman in town.’ In fact, probably just the opposite.”

“If I was truthful with myself,” I would have to say that most people avoid me, at work and at home. I am resentful because the sacrifices I keep making for their happiness aren’t understood or appreciated. I am unhappy and making those around me unhappy.”

“Are you going to change it?” I asked.

“You have been very nice,” she said, “I enjoyed the story about Olaf. I truthfully enjoyed thinking about things that make me happy. But meeting with my dear friend for a wonderful lunch or knitting or fixing a gourmet meal for my family isn’t going to change my greedy co-workers or my unfair boss, or my husband and kids who don’t understand me.”

“It may not change them, but it might change you as you deal with them,” I responded. “If you start building happiness into your life and stop resenting the sacrifices you are making, your increased happiness might overflow into their lives. It could affect others in the same way Olaf did. Ultimately, you can only start with you.”

The last time I saw her was in the airport baggage area. As I picked up my suitcase, she walked over to me and said, “I just talked to my best friend, Jane, and we’re having lunch next Friday.”

“That’s great!” I responded.

“And, tomorrow evening, I am making a gourmet meal for my family.”

“Wow,” I replied, “you’re on your way.”

“Hey, it’s a beginning,” she said with a brilliant smile, “because happiness doesn’t just happen, you know – you need to make it happen!”

FURTHER THOUGHTS ABOUT MARY

So, were all of Mary’s problems solved and she lived happily ever after? No, clearly she also needed to deal directly with the specific things that were making her unhappy, as we will discuss in Chapter two. She needed to build an on-going attitude of happiness, as we will delve into in Chapter three. Yet, as Mary herself said, “it’s a beginning.”

Knowing specifically what makes us happy and consciously building it into

our lives is actually a powerful beginning – as Olaf’s life illustrates.

WHAT WOULD MAKE YOU HAPPY?

Maybe it would make you happy to take some courses at the local college and finish your degree – or just take courses of real interest for pure enjoyment.

Maybe you are a busy business executive in a demanding job and it would build happiness into your life to dedicate one special evening per week to do something fun and meaningful with your family. Perhaps you want each member of the family to have the chance to plan that evening, knowing that you will definitely be there (or maybe on that special night you and your spouse alternate taking one of the kids out for a special night one-on-one).

Maybe you just need to block out time for yourself each week to walk in the woods, lay down in the soft grass by a rippling brook, or skip stones off the surface of a placid lake. Perhaps your time alone would include writing your thoughts in a journal, visiting an arboretum laden with the beauty of colorful flowers and trees, or just having time to read a good book.

Maybe you have wanted to visit senior citizens at a nursing home or patients recovering at a hospital. You know that using your good listening skills and ability to encourage people would build happiness into your life – and theirs.

Maybe you’re under a great deal of stress and it would build happiness into your life to play tennis, racquetball or golf once or twice a week.

Maybe you and your spouse have multiple children who you love dearly, but it would build happiness into your marriage to have consistent times where it’s just the two of you. Perhaps blocking out one night a week for a “date night” and/or one weekend a month for a “romantic get-away” would revitalize the happiness of your relationship.

Maybe you want to establish a daily time with God, getting a chance to deepen your relationship with Him through consistently reading His Word, talking with Him in prayer.

On the next page, write down the things that make you happy. This is not what others might think you should do to make you happy. Be honest with yourself as to what makes you happy.

If you're having trouble getting started, I'd suggest three things that might help:

1. Go back and review Olaf's list. Use it only as an example to stimulate ideas. Ultimately they must be your own.
2. Take 15 minutes and write down as many ideas as you can think of. Then place the list on your bathroom mirror, refrigerator door, bulletin board by your desk, or any place where it would be readily visible. Keep adding to it over the next few days.
3. Ask God for guidance. Remember that He says in James 1:5: *"If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault and it will be given him."* (NIV)

In John 10:10, Jesus said: *"My purpose is to give life in all its fullness."* (NLT)

Suggested prayer – "Dear Heavenly Father, I ask for Your wisdom in selecting those things that will bring happiness into my life. Guide my thoughts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that I will select only those things that will bring a good harvest of happiness and will hurt no one, including myself in the process. This I ask in Jesus' name. Amen"

WHATMAKESYOUHAPPY,

- 1.

HOWTOBUILDHAPPINESSINTOYOURLIFE

Recommendation #1: THINK BIG – START SMALL

Once you have your list, and you have identified the specific things that make you happy, the next task is to build it into your life!

The first recommendation as you do that is: Think Big – Start Small.

At times, people get excited and want to start by building four, five or six new happiness-producing things into their life immediately. When the “busy-ness” of life pushes back, they get discouraged and end up doing none.

It is far better to start with 1 or 2 “small happinesses” and get these underway successfully. We need to establish little successes. One, then another, then another, much like a locomotive engine picking up speed. Then we can move on to a larger happiness goal, be successful in that one, and then move on to the next and then the next – until momentum is on our side.

Think Big – Start Small. I like that concept because it really is the way of life. Little corn seeds, ½” in size, produce stalks 6-8 feet high and bear literally hundreds of kernels – yet it started small.

One-half inch sunflower seeds can reproduce a thousand seeds like itself and a stalk so sturdy (in some varieties) that it must be cut down with an axe! Yet, it started small. The Bible puts it this way: “Do not despise small beginnings.” (Zechariah 4:10 – NLT)

Recommendation #2 – GET IT ON YOUR CALENDAR AND PROTECT IT WITH “THE BLOCK OUT METHOD.”

If it’s on your calendar and you block it out – it will happen. If it’s not on your calendar or you are unwilling to block it out – most of the time it will not happen.

Sometimes the challenge is to get a happiness goal on your calendar and sometimes the battle is blocking out interruptions that could usurp the time.

GET IT ON YOUR CALENDAR!

Tim and Arlene – Negotiating the Time for Happiness Goals

Tim and Arlene had a problem. Arlene came home from one of my seminars, brimming with excitement about one happiness goal. She wanted to paint one evening a week, and block out Wednesday nights to do so.

“Tim,” she said to her husband, “I’ve had this desire to paint for so long. I know it’ll release such good feelings in me. Would you be a dear and take care of the kids so I can have some time alone to do it?”

Tim was “under the gun” at work – tired and tense. “I work all day long! I’m shot!” Tim retorted with anger rising in his voice. “I deserve time to relax. I know you work at home, but there’s not the same level of stress. You just don’t understand. I’m not going to baby-sit when I’m exhausted and stressed out so you can play Vincent Van Gogh.”

It was not the response she had hoped for or expected. She was hurt and angry. When she presented her case to me, she was also not expecting my response. “What’s in it for Tim?” I asked.

“What!?” She seemed surprised.

“What’s in it for Tim?” I repeated. “You told me he is highly stressed at work – in fact, to the breaking point. Then you come to him talking about a happiness goal for you that will create still further responsibility and stress for him.”

“You men sure do stick together!” She shot back. “I thought you were different – more sensitive and understanding.”

“Arlene, do you want me to commiserate with you about what an awful situation you have, or do you want to be able to spend one night a week painting?”

She thought for a moment and said, “what do you suggest?”

That night she said to her husband, “Tim, I’m sorry about the other night. I really do want to paint, but I was insensitive as to how much stress you’re under. What can I do to help you out? What, specifically, would make you happier?”

“To quit my job,” he laughed. “No, seriously, Arlene, I just need some non-stress time...like going to the library, walking in the park, or playing golf. If I could just have Saturday morning to myself, rather than doing all the household chores you keep coming up with for me, it would really help.”

“Tell you what, honey,” she said, “I have a way we both can win. If you can take care of the kids on Sunday night when you’re rested from the weekend, and give me that night to paint, I’ll do the household chores on Saturday morning myself so you can relax, go to the library, or whatever you choose.”

“Well...,” Tim said hesitantly.

“Let’s try it for a month and see how it works,” Arlene continued.

“OK,” Tim smiled, “It’s worth a try.”

That was the first of many win/win negotiation settlements for Arlene and Tim.

Two years later, Arlene had her first art show and Tim said Saturday morning had become his salvation.

As it has often been said, the best way to get what we want is to help others get what they want. Or, as the Bible says, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

THE BLOCK OUT METHOD

Like it sounds, the “block out” method blocks out disruptions or conflicts that could destroy those things we value in our schedules.

Most of us use it effectively (and often without even thinking about it) in key areas of our life such as work, church, or a doctor or dental appointment.

If someone asks if we can go with them to a ballgame and it conflicts with work, we simply say, “I’d love to, but I’m working that Saturday, how about the next Saturday?”

Or someone asks us to play tennis at noon on Sunday, we might say, “absolutely, I’d love to play tennis with you, but we go to church at 11 and then out for dinner with the family afterward. How about 2:30?” Or, “how about Saturday? Or, “join us for church and we’ll play afterwards.”

Or someone is going through a difficult time and wants your counsel and encouragement. They suggest Tuesday morning and you say, “Tom, I would very much like to meet with you, but I have a doctor’s appointment on Tuesday morning. Would Tuesday afternoon around 4 work?”

Most of us have no problem using the block out method if it deals with conflicts affecting work, school, church, or a doctor appointment. Yet, many people don’t use the block out method to protect their happiness goals. However, it is a highly effective tool.

PUTTING THE BLOCK OUT METHOD TO WORK

Don and Linda

Don and Linda were a young couple that decided to set their three top happiness goals together and listed:

1. Spend more time together
2. Take a course on personal finances
3. Learn ballroom dancing

After much discussion and research, they decided to take a course on personal finances offered at their church on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. They felt it would build their happiness by forcing them to resolve a number of nagging issues they kept arguing about and give them unbiased wisdom. With different jobs, hobbies and social interests, they had been finding less in common and had more difficulty in talking with and understanding each other.

As a by-product of taking the course, they were also accomplishing their goal of spending more time together. In fact, they also decided to go out for pizza before class to have time to talk and do any last minute preparation. Then, after class, they went out for coffee together to discuss what had been presented and how it applied to their lives.

POTENTIAL CONFLICT:

The 3rd week of class, they received a call from some friends. “How would you and Don like to come over for dinner on Thursday night?”

Linda responded, “we would love to, but we just can’t. Don and I are taking a personal finance class on Tuesday and Thursday evenings at our church. How about Saturday night?”

What do you think their friend’s response was? “No, if you can’t have dinner with us on Thursday, then we never want to have dinner with you again!?” Of

course not! In fact, their friends probably respected them more because they were “people with a purpose,” and simply worked out another time to go out for dinner.

We are so apt to sacrifice our prime goals because we’re afraid of hurting the feeling of others, or because of fear that they won’t like us anymore. As with Linda, we simply need to reassure them that we’d love to do what they are inviting us to do (if that’s true), and then simply suggest an alternative time. The result is nearly always positive for both them and us.

There’s another reason people let potential conflicts destroy their happiness goals: The goals they chose weren’t heart-felt or important to them. It’s so important to choose goals that you are inspired by rather than having goals others chose for you. If the happiness goal isn’t heart-felt, at the first sign of conflict, you won’t block it out – you’ll welcome it in!

As a final comment, you don’t have to go into great explanation of your reason for suggesting an alternative time. You can just say, “I have a conflict on Tuesday, how about Wednesday?”

For instance, if Mary wanted to block out time for knitting or taking a bubble bath and someone asked her to do something during that time, her saying, “sorry, but I’ll be knitting (or taking a bubble bath),” wouldn’t be as well received as saying, “sorry, I have a conflict. How about next week?”

Howard

Howard wanted to spend one night a week with the family doing whatever the family planned. It was a happiness goal he felt might really open up communication and create good feelings with his family.

One month they set aside Monday evenings and each family member planned the events of a particular night. No sooner had the family excitedly agreed on their plan, then Howard got a call from his best friend, Bill. “Hey, Howard! How ‘bout if we go to Bernie’s tomorrow night and catch the Monday night football game on the big screen? Boy, New England and Miami are going to settle the championship on this one!”

“I’d love to, Bill,” Howard heard himself say, “but this month Monday evening is family night and Timmy planned that night at the science museum. How about next Sunday’s game between Dallas and Washington?”

Howard was gracious – gave an alternative – but was polite and firm.

Did Bill say, “You wimp, who’s in charge of your family?” Maybe he did, but one would have to question the value of the friendship. Chances are they got together Sunday and watched Dallas play Washington on the big screen, with one big difference: Bill understood more about Howard’s values. Howard increased his self-esteem by maintaining his commitment to a goal that was bringing him happiness. His family (who overheard the conversation) understood more about his commitment to them and the strength of his resolve.

Commitment and strength of resolve are key to the success of the block out method.

SUMMARY

Step 1 – Know specifically what makes you happy and consciously build it into your life!

- Think big, but start small
- Get in on your calendar
- Protect it with “the block out method”

ACTION STEP – What is one small happiness you choose to build into your life in the week ahead?

MOTIVATIONAL STEP – Are there one or two other people you would like to team up with as you build happiness into your life – and they build it

into theirs?

Perhaps you can meet with them for lunch or coffee once a week to discuss how each of you is doing. It's a great way to stay motivated, accountable and successful.

You can add a deeper dimension by praying for each other's success.

Periodically, you can also add the next item that makes you happy.

Chapter Two

Step 2

**Know specifically what makes you unhappy and
consciously deal with it**

WEEDS

I was born and raised in Minnesota – a state with a reputation for stunningly beautiful summers and long, frigid winters. Its winter reputation is reinforced by people seeing national weather reports of the coldest places in the nation, with cities in Minnesota consistently identified as the “ice box of the nation.”

Yet, for those who live in the north country, winter can be filled with special times of cross country skiing through snow-laden parks and forests; sledding down snow-packed hills with bundled up children screaming with delight; friends huddled around a roaring fireplace with hot chocolate, popcorn and good conversation; ice skating, ice fishing, ice forts, snow men, snowshoeing, snowballs – and a whole array of winter festivals that make winter bearable if not, at times, thoroughly enjoyable.

But, by April, people begin to long for warmth and greenery. When the first consecutive warm days arrive in May, the hardware stores are jammed with people lined up to buy rakes, shovels, hoes and hoses. Spring fever is at its zenith with seed and garden stores overrun with gardeners (and would-be gardeners), all filled with dreams of growing the perfect flowers and vegetables that dazzle them from the covers of each seed packet.

After preparing the soil, the seeds are planted and watered. Soon, the earth brings forth sprouts of corn, lettuce, beans, peas, squash, or whatever was planted.

Unfortunately, something else sprouts as well: WEEDS! They are unwanted,

unwelcome and, unless they are uprooted, they will rob the young sprouts of the nourishment they need to reach their full potential.

For the successful gardener, it is an on-going process of identifying and pulling up these pesky weeds. If they don't, many varieties of weeds will completely overtake the garden, stunting the beauty of the flowers or the productivity of the vegetables.

Life is much the same. Like a successful gardener, we need to periodically identify the weeds in our life that rob us of our happiness, vitality and enthusiasm.

EXAMPLES OF WEEDS (little things that can make us unhappy):

1. A frequently used door that sticks or squeaks
2. Misplaced keys and/or glasses – especially when you need to leave for an appointment
3. A neighbor's barking dog that keeps you awake at night
4. Being irritated with yourself for being a little overweight – or a little out of shape
5. Lack of assertion in certain situations (or being too aggressive in others)
6. Small, but on-going disagreements with spouse, children, parents, neighbors or co-workers
7. Having no "rainy day" savings account so that any unexpected expense becomes a crisis (living paycheck to paycheck)
8. Haphazard personal habits such that clothes and dishes don't get washed and meals are not really planned
9. A leaking faucet
10. Junk that keeps accumulating in the house and garage
11. Car that is rarely washed or maintained (and has McDonald's bags from meals purchased and half-eaten the previous week)
12. No real goals or purpose – a feeling of drifting through life

AUTHOR'S EXAMPLES OF SMALL UNHAPPINESSES:

“Where are my keys?”

One of my small “unhappinesses” was misplacing my car keys and glasses. Was this a small thing? Yes, however, when it occurred just before leaving for church or a business appointment, it created significant stress and unhappiness.

This little personal disorganization created a whole series of minor crises for me year after year. It was a weed that I needed to identify and uproot because it was repeatedly bringing unhappiness into my life at critical times. Two things had to happen:

First, I had to identify it as a weed by admitting to myself that I was disorganized in this area of my life.

Secondly, I had to consciously deal with it.

One memorable day, the situation reached a turning point when a family member urgently needed a ride to the doctor and I spent 5 minutes frantically searching all the most likely locations for my car keys – fervently praying that God would show me where they were - and passionately promising to establish a spot to regularly hang them.

Miraculously, I found them in the least likely of places. The next day, it took me less than 5 minutes to install a hook in a very visible spot in our laundry room, where we enter our house from the garage. It took a week to teach myself the habit of putting my car keys on the hook the moment I entered the house.

At the same time, I began the habit of putting my glasses in a special glasses dish.

Does this system always work? It does when I use it – which is the vast majority of time. Identifying this small unhappiness and dealing with it has produced over thirty years of freedom from this pesky “chaos-producing”

weed.

“WHERE’S MY TO-DO LIST?”

From the age of twelve, I have faithfully utilized daily and weekly “to do” lists as well as monthly calendars.

If something is on my “to do” list, it virtually always gets done. It gives me a sense of accomplishment and momentum to cross off the tasks as I complete them (in fact, if I happen to do something that isn’t on my list, I put it on my list and cross it off!).

If an event is on my calendar, by the grace of God, I will be there. If it’s not on my calendar, I won’t be there.

As I said, this habit started early in my life. I was recently reminded of this when I came across a spiral notebook from my junior high years and one from my college years – both containing my “to do” lists and monthly calendars.

Simple as these time management tools are, they were a foundational part of my academic success – UNTIL I MISPLACED THEM! That didn’t happen often, but when it did, it was sheer bedlam! To say that misplacing my “to do” lists and calendars made me unhappy is to severely understate the situation.

Was it life threatening? No. Was it a daily situation that I had to deal with? No. So, I have to list it as a small unhappiness. However, it was a reoccurring unhappiness.

On one unforgettable occasion, at the beginning of a college term, I misplaced the notebook that had the only copy of my new class schedule and my new work schedule – as well as my “to do” lists and calendars.

People had told me for years that I was one of the most organized persons they had ever met. They saw me as having been in charge of building Teen

Corps of America as well as all of the logistics necessary to bring hundreds of young people from across the US to work in the poverty stricken mountains of Appalachia.

While that was true, it was also true that I was again in chaos because I misplaced my notebook and HAD NO BACKUP!

I finally had to admit that in this area of my life, I was disorganized and it was making me unhappy. Like a weed draining nourishment from a plant, it would continue to periodically drain my happiness unless I dealt with it.

At the depth of my despair, I went to the student union. After a period of moping around and bemoaning my situation, I looked up at the huge bulletin board that covered virtually the entire wall. For years, I had looked at the announcements and flyers tacked to the bulletin board – but never really saw the board itself.

Then it hit me. “That’s it,” I said, bounding out of my chair. Unfortunately, I said it out loud before I realized what I was doing and did draw momentary glances from other students. Frankly, I didn’t care. I now had the solution as to how to deal with this vexing irritant in my life.

Within a few days, I had installed a very large bulletin board on the wall directly over my desk. It contained my daily and weekly “to do” list as well as monthly calendars with class and work schedules.

I now had backup! If I ever again lost my notebook (which I did), I simply went to my bulletin board and quickly reconstructed what I needed. No chaos. No loss of happiness.

ADDITIONAL GAINS BY DEALING WITH SMALL UNHAPPINESSES:

My bulletin board was very large. Even with “to do” lists and calendars, there was a lot of empty space.

I put an exercise chart on the board listing all the stretching, strength and aerobic exercises that I wanted to do each day, or every other day. As I completed each one, I would check it off, much like crossing off the items on the “to do” list.

Just by having the exercise chart on the board, where I could constantly see it significantly increased my exercise frequency– and my fitness.

Out of sight, out of mind. In sight, in mind!

Next, I tried this with my prayer list and Bible memorization. When someone asked me to pray for them and I added them to my prayer list posted on the board, they got prayed for! If I didn’t put them on the list, my prayers for them were infrequent or haphazard.

I quickly learned to keep my prayer list updated on the board where I could constantly see it.

Then there were the Bible verses that I wanted to memorize. When the verses were on the board and continually before me, they got memorized.

In later years, when I was in sales, I would put a “Big 10 List” of my top 10 sales prospects on a board. With the list regularly in my sight, I would consistently pray over each potential client and strategically think about what I could do next to move the account closer to the sale. I also had a thermometer showing the progress in the amount of sales, much like the United Way does for its community drives. It was a significant source of motivation. Out of sight, out of mind. In sight, in mind.

When I was in management, I put each major project up on a board and tracked them on a consistent basis. It was great to have the projects all in a notebook -but out of sight, out of mind. On the bulletin board, it was constantly before me and consistently in my thought and prayer process.

I set out to deal with the small unhappiness of misplacing my “to do” list and calendars. I ended with a solution that greatly improved my physical and spiritual fitness and provided an organizational foundation for my future roles as a mayor, state senator, general manager and president of my own company.

Sometimes when we identify and deal with a small unhappiness, we end up with far greater gain than we could imagine.

WHAT SPECIFICALLY ARE THE LITTLE THINGS THAT MAKE YOU UNHAPPY (WHAT ARE YOUR WEEDS)?

What are the small unhappinesses in your life that, like weeds, are robbing you of the vitality and enthusiasm that you could have? Gardeners deal with weeds by first identifying them and then pulling them out by the roots. We can do the same with small unhappinesses.

You cannot remove a weed that you cannot see. So let’s take the first step!

UPROOTING THE WEEDS IN YOUR LIFE

***RECOMMENDATION #1* - THINK BIG, START SMALL**

As a reader, you may be asking, “Aren’t we also going to be identifying the big things in life that make us unhappy?” Absolutely!

As we discussed in Chapter 1, it’s great to think big, but it’s essential to start small. When a person decides to run a marathon, he or she doesn’t begin training by running the entire 26.2 mile race. Some start out by running a mile, others by running around the block, others by running to the next mailbox – and others glad to be able to just walk to the next mailbox.

We need to start with a goal that is easy to reach – one where we can gain a victory and “pat ourselves on the back.” We need to build confidence and momentum before tackling the bigger issues (occasionally, dealing with some

of the small issues positively impact the bigger ones).

Even when we take on the big things that make us unhappy, we break them down into smaller steps where victory is far more achievable.

MICHELE’S EXAMPLE

Michele was a person who took my seminar multiple times to “stay on track,” and was seriously committed to making positive changes in her life. In many ways, she reminded me of Mary in Chapter 1 because of the similarities of the challenges she faced.

After successfully building some “small happinesses” into her life, Michele said she was ready to deal with the things that made her unhappy. Her list looked like this:

BIG THINGS	LITTLE THINGS
Husband who had lost interest in her	Car that was getting old and occasionally wouldn’t start
Children who didn’t appreciate her	Teeth that needed straightening but no money to pay for it
Boss who overworked and underpaid her	Talking too much and not listening
Friends who avoided her	Not spending as much time with the kids as she would like
Drinking too much	No physical exercise
Too little money to live on	Neighbors who were unfriendly
Being 50 lbs. overweight	No recognition of a “job well done” at work

Michele decided to start with the little things that were making her unhappy. After reviewing her list, she chose to focus on “talking too much and not listening.”

Michele looked up a number of articles on effective listening and also took a 3-hour class where she role-played listening skills. Then, she thought about people who were the best listeners she knew and how they would handle various conversations.

At dinner one evening, she started to ask her son and daughter questions - then went silent and listened attentively. She asked follow-up questions and encouraged them to keep talking. When she found an area to positively reinforce or express enthusiasm about, she did so. Periodically, she repeated back what she heard them saying for the sake of clarification. Most of all, she resisted bringing the topic back to herself and she never spoke more than 3 consecutive sentences.

When she next talked to me, she was excited. “What an evening!” she exclaimed. “Aside from asking if I was feeling all right, the kids seemed to thoroughly enjoy it. We sat at the table for a full hour after the meal was over. It felt good – really good!”

Next, she tried actively listening to her husband. The first three nights were minor disasters because he was used to listening to her talk and couldn’t figure out what was going on. On the 4th night, she found him reading one of his favorite books on astronomy. After asking why he was so fascinated with the stars, and listening attentively, her husband started to really open up. Within a few moments, he had taken out his telescope and was enthusiastically showing her planets and stars all over the crystal clear night sky.

“We talked for over 2 hours,” she said excitedly. “It was the most enjoyable evening we have spent in years.”

“When I was knitting last night, he unexpectedly asked me why I enjoyed it so much. It turned into a half hour conversation! Then we took a long walk together, holding hands, like in the old days.”

As the weeks went by, Michele tried her listening skills at work. For a few weeks, she really didn’t get much feedback. Then, one morning her boss said to her, “Michele, there’s something different about you, and I like it.....” A

week later, she was assigned a project she had wanted for months.

Michele was gaining momentum, excitement and strength. Did she still have a car that kept breaking down? Did she still feel she was underpaid? Was she still overweight? Did she still have a drinking problem? Absolutely! But Michele was gaining small victories that gave her momentum and increased confidence that eventually allowed her to successfully challenge the big things that made her unhappy.

***RECOMMENDATION #2* - REALIZE THAT YOU ALWAYS
HAVE 3 ALTERNATIVES**

Once we select a “small unhappiness” to deal with, there are ALWAYS, ALWAYS, ALWAYS 3 alternatives:

1. **We can change the situation** (confronting, negotiating and solving it)
2. **We can change our attitude about the situation** (“It really isn’t that big a deal;” “It’s certainly not worth getting upset about;” “Maybe they do have a point, I’m going to take a second look at that.”)
3. **We can do nothing** and hope that things will just work out by themselves (they rarely do)

SLEEPLESS NIGHTS

John was in a class that I taught, and by all indications, was a highly reasonable, rational, human being. However, after nearly a week of sleep interrupted nights due to a neighbor’s barking dog, he was making statements like, “I’d think about that blasted dog all day long. I can’t believe our neighbor could be so insensitive. Every morning, my wife and I start out our day talking about what a lousy sleep we had, and wondering what we did to our neighbors to be treated like this. If I had a rifle, I don’t know if I’d aim it at the dog or the owners!”

Needless to say, the barking dog situation was blocking John’s happiness.

Like all of us, John had 3 options:

1. **Change the situation.** He could go to the neighbor's house and explain the situation. If that failed, he could call the police if the dog continued to bark.
2. **Change his attitude about the situation.** He could decide that the situation really wasn't that bad, that it wasn't worth risking the loss of a friendship with the neighbors. In that case, he and his wife might have purchased earplugs, turned on soft music, or run a fan that blocks out the noise.
3. **Do nothing.** If John takes no action other than grumbling, he would have to realize that his inaction would block his happiness and effectiveness for a long time to come. Not reaching a decision is a decision. It's a decision to do nothing.

John chose to **change the situation** (option #1) by talking to the neighbors. After a polite, but firm, half-hour discussion, the neighbors agreed to keep their dog inside at night. And, in fact, the evening ended amicably with John staying for a cup of coffee.

As a former city mayor, I know that all barking dog incidents don't end that nicely. However, I also know that whatever the negative situation – WE ARE NEVER STUCK! We always have 3 alternatives:

1. **Change the situation**
2. **Change our attitude about the situation**
3. **Do nothing (and remain unhappy)**

MOURNING “WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN”

Jim was another person I had in my class. He loved playing tennis, in fact, he had a passion for the game. One of the things that helped him through the week was the anticipation of a weekend of tennis. This included a highly competitive singles match on Saturday morning and a social doubles match on Sunday with his wife and another couple.

Jim's "little unhappiness" was that he felt he could have been a tennis professional, earning his living playing the game he loved. He said it was not a "big unhappiness" for him, but when he won (as he often did), there was always the gnawing question of "what might have been." It was definitely #1 on his list of little unhappinesses.

After thinking about his three alternatives, and talking them over with his wife, Jim decided to take his first step toward alternative #1: **change the situation**. To get more of a feel for the rigorous schedule of being a professional, he joined two tennis ladders and entered a series of tournaments.

Jim found himself playing tennis 3 evenings a week – plus week-ends. For the first month, he felt like he had "died and gone to heaven." He hadn't felt so exhilarated in years. He was winning often and, despite his highly competitive nature, he even enjoyed the thrill of the challenge when he lost.

By the second month, however, Jim had sustained a few minor but nagging injuries to his ankle and elbows. Without much rest between matches, he wasn't healing as quickly as he used to.

By the third month, he was getting physically tired, and even a bit resentful when people on the tennis ladder began to challenge him. Jim's reflexes were getting slower and he began to make mental errors that hadn't occurred when he was rested.

At the beginning of the fourth month, a new realism set in. What had once been an exhilarating experience was now drudgery. What was once his dream come true was now a minor night mare.

One night, Jim came home to his wife with a big smile. "Well, today I have adopted alternative 2." "Alternative 2?" she asked with a puzzled look.

"Remember the 3 alternatives about my passion to be a tennis pro?" Jim responded. "Well, today I found happiness in alternative #2 – **change your**

attitude about the situation. I now realize what a challenge it is to maintain the grueling schedule of a tennis pro.

“I’m going to keep doing a few tournaments now and then, but my tennis ladder days are over. I quit.”

“I’ll tell you what,” he said decisively. “That feeling of wondering what it would have been like to be a pro is gone. Let’s get back to our weekend games.”

Jim got it out of his system. He no longer mourned “what might have been.” Jim started out with alternative #1 to change the situation, but ended up with alternative #2 by changing his attitude about the situation.

In the process, he successfully up-rooted a weed that had definitely drained nourishment from his positive attitude of happiness.

WHERE WILL YOU BEGIN?

What small weed will you begin with? Remember, “think big, but start small” and begin with only one area. After that’s complete, move on to the next one on your list. Build momentum and confidence with each success.

Also, remind yourself that, with God’s help, you are never stuck! There are always, always, always three alternatives: