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How to Build the Life You Want

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In ancient Roman mythology, the month of January is named after the god Janus. He is the god not only of beginnings and endings, but also of the liminal spaces — the gates, transitions, and passages that are betwixt and between one chapter of our life ending and another one beginning. As a visual manifestation of this duality, Janus is said to have *two* faces, each looking in the opposite direction of the other. He is a perfect namesake for the first month of year, when we feel a natural inclination to look both *backward* at the year that has just ended and *forward* to the year that has barely begun.

At *this* beginning of *this* new year of 2024, in the spirit of Janus' two faces, I would like to invite us to reflect on a recently published book titled *Build the Life You Want: The Art and Science of Getting Happier* by Arthur C. Brooks and Oprah Winfrey.

Some of you will recall that back in 2022, I preached a sermon on Brooks' previous book, From Strength to Strength: Finding Success, Happiness, and Deep Purpose in the Second Half of Life. I liked that book so much that it made my list of "Top Ten Best Books I Read in 2022." I wasn't alone: *Oprah* liked it so much that she called Brooks and suggested that they co-write a book together. And what do you say when Oprah asks you to do something: Yes! You say yes!

Known as the "Queen of All Media," Oprah remains one of the most influential people in the world, one who has a long-standing interest in self-improvement

practices. Arthur C. Brooks is a professor at Harvard Business School where he teaches courses on happiness. Together they are quite the team.

I will share some highlights with you, but if this sermon leaves you curious to learn more, the book is short and accessible. And if you don't have time to read even a short book or listen to the audiobook, you can go to arthurbrooks.com/build, and there are quite a few free articles that will take you deeper.

As background for why this topic is important, it's notable that over the past decade in the U.S.:

- The percentage of people saying they are “*not* too happy” rose from 10 percent to 24 percent. And the percentage of people living with depression is increasing dramatically, especially among young adults.
- Meanwhile, the percentage saying that they are “very happy” has fallen from 36 percent to 19 percent.

Both of these trends are going in the opposite direction of what we might hope. Experts disagree as to the causes, but these patterns are also being seen globally (xxiv).

Where do we go from here? One key insight from the academic study of happiness is that typically, it is *impossible* to reach a permanent state of never-ending happiness. So, the bad news is that you can't *stay* happy in some simplistic unchanging way. The good news is that you *can* become happier (4). It turns out that happiness is a *direction*, not a destination. That means no matter our circumstances, there are strategies for becoming incrementally “*happier*, and then happier, and then happier still” (5).

This realization reminds me of a motto from meditation teacher Dan Harris, who says that his initial hope in learning to meditate was *not* to achieve permanent bliss; he felt that meditation would be worth pursuing if it made him even “10% happier.” (And if meditation isn't your thing? There are other related practices — from making art to exercising to even just spending more time outside. If you invest yourself in such journeys, your happiness can snowball positively from each new plateau — such that you can become not only ten percent happier, but then another ten percent happier

than that, to a new and even larger amount of happiness, and then to ten percent happier still.

It is important to insert the caveat that recommending trying harder to get happier (by emphasizing certain activities) does not always work with everyone. But for many or even most of us, Brooks and Oprah's suggestions, if applied, can be invaluable.

Also, none of this means that all our problems will go away, or that all our negative emotions will be eliminated — although we may find we have an increased capacity to relate differently to problems and to negative emotions. And of course, we don't want to eliminate unpleasant emotions altogether, because they can serve as important warning signals. So — the point is not toxic positivity, but to realize that the ambition the realization that it is often possible to be *happier* than you would have been otherwise in any given context (6).

So what does all this mean specifically? As *Build the Life You Want* details, three major ingredients of happiness are enjoyment, satisfaction, and purpose.

First, **enjoyment**. Here, social scientists mean more than merely pleasure — not that there's anything wrong with that. But pleasure alone tends to engage only the more basic, reptilian parts of our brain stem — which makes the feeling fleeting and solitary. Enjoyment, in the technical sense intended here, is not only about pleasure, but also about a *conscious connection* to other people, to the world, or to something larger than oneself, a connection which engages the more evolved prefrontal cortex of our brains (9).

Think about the difference between simply eating food (which in itself is usually pleasurable), and enjoying a good meal with loved ones — a ritual that can create warm memories. It's that slightly more involved practice — requiring more time and effort — that really helps to nudge us in the *direction* of being happier (*ibid*).

Satisfaction, a second major ingredient of happiness, also requires an investment of time and effort. In the sense meant here, satisfaction is the thrill that often accompanies accomplishing something difficult that we worked hard for. However, the feeling of satisfaction can be fleeting; it has more staying power when connected to the third ingredient of happiness, which is purpose (10).

Most humans have the capacity to forego enjoyment and satisfaction, at least for a while. We can “delay gratification,” as it were. What sometimes helps most to keep us going through hard times is a sense of the meaning and **purpose** motivating our efforts (11). The beginning of a new year is a prime time to reflect on where *you* find the most meaning and purpose.

So far, these insights have been a bit abstract. So let’s get more concrete about practices that can help us find that intersection of enjoyment, satisfaction, and purposes — to help you move incrementally in the direction of *happier*, and then happier, and then happier still. I’m only going to give you three examples, but there are many more in this book; See if any one particularly intrigues you, and consider experimenting with that one. Then consider trying others as you have time and interest.

As you experiment, you may decide to drop one or more practices that you have been experimenting with in favor of trying different ones. The secret to getting incrementally happier isn’t always addition; sometimes it is *subtraction* — doing *less!*

So with no further ado, here are three (among many) practices often helpful for becoming incrementally happier. You can even try these techniques silently right now, applying them to issues that may be impacting your current life.

The first practice, which some of you may have heard from me before, I chose mainly because it regularly contributes to my own happiness, but also because I find it a more effective example than the one in the book. Instead of saying “***I am* ____**” **[insert relevant emotion] try “*There is* ____.”** This innovative mindfulness practice was first created by the meditation teacher Kenneth Folk ([Buddhist Geeks](#)). It seems simple, but it can produce a powerful change.

Notice the experiential difference between saying “I am anxious” and “*There is anxiety*” — or the difference between saying “I am sad” and “*There is sadness.*” When we say “*I am* ____” we’re identifying with something in a fixed way. In contrast, saying “*There is* ____” can open up a less judgmental space from which to better witness and observe what is happening within ourselves.

When I use the “There is” formula, I often notice many more things that are happening within and around me than I would otherwise: “There is *worry.*” But there is also *wondering.* There is the *groundedness* of my feet on the floor, the feeling of my

breath coming in and going out, the beautiful *light* from the window, and so much more that is always happening within us in the full awareness of each present moment. So, see for yourself if this one practice leaves you a little freer, a little happier.(46).

Here's a second practice that often leads me to greater happiness: try **reframing judgements into observations**. On the one hand, there are times when when it serves us to make judgements serve our purposes. On the other hand, reframing some judgements into observations may allow us to move through the world in a more peaceful, easeful way.

Think about the difference between the judgement, "This coffee is *terrible*" and the observation, "This coffee is *bitter*." Either way you don't have to keep drinking the coffee. But mindfully *noticing* instead of judging can leave us with more inner peace.

Or notice the difference between saying, "This song is *stupid*" and "This song is *really loud and dissonant*" (80). Again, you don't have to keep listening or focusing on the song either way. But calling the song stupid plays into our typically human — and often habitual — negativity bias, while neutrally observing the song's characteristics leaves us less likely to get us emotionally hooked, and thus incrementally happier than we might have been otherwise.

And if you often find yourself getting hooked on something, a third practice may help you get more free. Ask yourself if whatever is preoccupying you will still matter in

- five *minutes*?
- five *days*?
- five *weeks*?
- five *months*?
- five *years*?

A conflict with someone important in your life can feel so earth-shattering at the time — and sometimes it is. But this practice can give you more *perspective* on how significant it really might be.

Imagine you have a heated phone conversation that results in someone important angrily hanging up on you at 3:00 p.m. In doing this practice, you are invited to briefly reflect on the perspectives of five different versions of your future self — and it can help to be quite specific:

- Will this matter **five minutes** from now at 3:05 p.m.? Probably so.
- Will this matter **five days** from now? Perhaps it will, because by Friday, you may still be in conflict.
- Will this matter **five weeks** from now? Get out a calendar if you need to, and notice that we're now talking about February 11. By then, this ordeal may all be in the rear-view mirror.
- How about **five months** from now? It would have to be pretty serious to still be a problem by *June*.
- Will this matter **five years** from now, in 2028? Hopefully, the drama won't last that long. Of course, some dramas do, but that's rare.

You can go through this practice in just a minute or two, and it can give you perspective on how seriously to take an upsetting incident, help you feel freer to move on with your life, and make your days incrementally happier than they would have been otherwise (48).

If you'd like to try the advanced version of this practice, make an actual note in your calendar at five days, weeks, months, and years from the date of your conflict. Write down your best guess as to how you will feel about this event when that date arrives, and then compare the feelings you predicted with how you *actually* feel about the conflict now, sometime down the road.. In most (but not all) cases, negative experiences end up mattering significantly less over time than we initially fear (48). But with this technique, we may waste less time and energy on suffering over them.

I wish I had more time to explore other helpful practices, but I want to begin transitioning toward Fire Communion in a way that will allow you to focus on the areas that feel most significant to you in this season of your life, ask yourself, **“On the edge of this new year, what do you feel called to *move toward* with a greater level of commitment?”**

Then, reflecting on how this past year went for you, is there a person, place, or habit that has consistently been a *hindrance* to your well-being? Is there something or someone that you feel called to let go of, or to say *no* to in the new year? **What have you found life-negating — leaving you regularly feeling drained of energy,**

alienated, or resentful? And what are you feeling led to *let go of*, that has been a distraction or a detriment in the passing year?”

To begin embodying a deeper response to these questions, I invite you to mentally set an intention around whatever you want to let go of. Of course, setting an intention and burning a slip of paper is just a beginning, but it is a meaningful first step in your process of saying *no* to a part of your life that has been life-negating for you.

Afterward, you are invited to light a candle to set your intention to affirm a person, place, or habit that you want to say yes to in the new year. **What has regularly left you feeling more energized, connected, grateful — more fully alive, that you feel led to say yes to in this new year?**