

# PRACTICAL WISDOM

## The Humanist Approach to Happiness

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## *The Pursuit of Happiness*

*“There is no duty we so underrate as the duty of being happy. By being happy we sow anonymous benefits upon the world.”*

*- Robert Louis Stevenson*

I was raised as a Humanist even though we didn't use the term. I was taught to be responsible, compassionate and ethical. I was taught that my actions have consequences and that happiness can be found and that ultimately what is important are our relationships to other people. I have my parents to thank for that.

When I finally realized that my personal piece-meal philosophy had a name, Humanism, I found myself in a community of like-minded individuals dedicated to making the world a better place. I eventually found work within this movement serving as the executive director for a state association of Humanists in Florida. Through that work I was privileged to get to know some amazing Humanists and was able to spend time exploring my understanding of the philosophy and how it can and should be applied to daily life.

I decided to write this book after a conversation I had with my neighbor's teenage daughter who had absolutely no clue how to be happy. She had no idea on how to live her life so that she would be happy, though it was clear she was desperate to be so. The choices she was making about her relationships, education, etc were just not well thought out and she seemed to be oblivious to the fact that her actions had consequences that were impacting her happiness. Specifically, her lack of understanding about what constitutes a romantic relationships was so far off it was frightening.

The central theme of Humanism is to be happy and to help others be happy too. In fact, if you wanted to sum of the Humanist mandate, seven words in the US Declaration of Independence do the job nicely. “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.”

### *What is Happiness?*

*“Happiness and the creative realization of human needs and desires, individually and in shared enjoyment, are continuous themes of humanism.”*

*– Humanist Manifesto II*

Happiness is obviously an emotional state and therefore, a bit vague in its definition. When Humanists talk about Happiness, we aren't just talking about the pursuit of idle pleasures, though we aren't opposed to that. We are talking about a deep sense of well-being. This is one of those things that you must feel to understand and that most people want but have no idea how to attain.

While most people consider happiness to be a selfish pursuit, Humanists realize that by being happy and by helping others to be happy; we can have a tremendous positive impact on the world. Humanists believe we have a moral responsibility to be happy.

## *Responsibility is not a 4-letter word.*

*“People think responsibility is hard to bear. It's not. I think that sometimes it is the absence of responsibility that is harder to bear.”*

*- Henry Kissinger*

One key on how to be happy is contained in this utilitarian description of happiness: people are happy when they are "in control", that is, when they feel competent to satisfy their needs and reach their goals. There can be no happiness without personal control. And this is why Humanists place such an important emphasis on personal responsibility.

People often treat *responsibility* as if it is a bad word. Something we should avoid if we want to be happy. But just the opposite is true. Freedom, and therefore happiness, can only be achieved through responsibility. When you accept responsibility for your life, you gain control over it in a way that is unparalleled. You are no longer a victim of fate. You can do something to improve your life and the lives of those around you, but only if you take responsibility for your actions.

If we take responsibility for our actions and their consequences, we can choose to act in ways that maximize our happiness and the happiness of the people around us.

## *Your Moral Compass*

*“Happiness comes when your work and words are of benefit to yourself and others.”*

*- The Buddha*

When it comes to happiness, being responsible will only lead to happiness if it is guided by compassion. Compassion is the most important value you can have, and studies on global ethics backs this up. Given the importance most humans place on compassion, it should come as no surprise to find that compassion is the basis for most moral codes on the planet.

There are 2 aspects of compassion that make it such an important ingredient to personal happiness. The first is that compassion is motivated by love – and that is a wonderful emotion to feel. Love and its public expression through compassion help make you feel happy.

Because compassion is such a wonderful emotion to feel is reason enough to practice compassion. The other reason for being compassionate is that it is impossible to be a good person without also being a compassionate person. And it really is hard to feel good about yourself if you aren't a good person.

## *Expanding our morality*

Being good is all about morality, and not just any morality, but a morality based on compassion for others. We know not to harm members of our family because we understand that they will hurt, just like we will. As we grow in our learning, we find that we expand our compassion from our immediate family to our tribe and from the tribe to increasingly wider groups of “others.”

For Humanists, this expansion of who we consider compassionately, includes all the human beings on the planet. This is the main reason why we call ourselves Humanists. We care about all members of the human family, and not just some smaller subset.

Humanist’s hold that we cannot transcend our current problems such as racism, genderism, and theocratic disputes plaguing our societies without transcending the tribalism that is at the root of those views. And that requires compassion.

## *Humanism*

*“People spend a lifetime searching for happiness; looking for peace. They chase idle dreams, addictions, religions, even other people, hoping to fill the emptiness that plagues them. The irony is the only place they ever needed to search was within.”*

*- Ramona Anderson*

People are searching for happiness. They search for it in religion and sometimes cults. They follow leaders they think will help them achieve happiness. Happiness is sold to us through commercials that tell us, if we just purchase some item, we will finally find happiness.

The Humanist approach to happiness rejects all of these claims to happiness as hollow. Happiness can only really be achieved through freedom. And freedom can only be achieved through responsibility. And responsibility is most effective at contributing to happiness when it is in the service of compassion. Freedom, responsibility and compassion: these are the keys to the Humanist approach to happiness.

## *Using this Book*

*“The purpose of morality is to teach you, not to suffer and die, but to enjoy yourself and live.”*

*-Ayn Rand*

This book explores the many ways in which the Humanist approach to happiness can be implemented in our daily lives. By tackling the big and the small problems we each encounter throughout our lives, from taking care of our bodies to dealing with others,

relationships and grief, the Humanist approach to happiness is laid out in its practical form.

The key to this approach is to take control over your destiny by taking responsibility for your actions and choosing to act in such a way that you maximize your happiness and the happiness of others.

