

# The True Livelihood Series



Reflections from...

Denise Bissonnette



Denise Bissonnette is an internationally renowned writer, trainer and keynote speaker. For over two decades, she has inspired people and organizations throughout North America to look beyond traditional concepts of career development and to craft livelihoods rooted in the individual "genius" of each person. Her work is a rich tapestry of her talents as a poet, writer, storyteller, teacher and career developer.

## Rethinking Happiness: How We Choose To Be Content

I recently had a great conversation with a veteran career counselor who has passionately provided career guidance for the past twenty years through a school district in Michigan. While a lot of what she said resonated with me, what really struck me was this: "Denise, I tell people that I am a career counselor, but really, I am in the "happiness business". Everyone just wants to be happy and if we can help people figure out how to be happy, the work stuff just kind of falls into place."

I have been playing with that notion ever since – how do we help people figure out how to be happy? Those who know me well are aware that, once a theme has nested in my brain, I will sit on the many questions accompanying it like a mother bird on her eggs. And so, thanks to a chance meeting with a spirited colleague over tuna fish sandwiches, the Happiness Theme has roosted and I suspect that this is the first in a series of articles to address the perennial, ever-recurrent queries that have haunted, perplexed and inspired people throughout the ages, regardless of time, place, spiritual or cultural tradition: What does it mean to be happy? Is it really happiness we should aspire to or some deeper level of well-being and contentment? How do we define happiness and how does our definition of it limit or confine our experience of joy? To what extent is it in our power to affect our own happiness, much less the happiness of other people? What are the choices we make that affect our experience of happiness? How does the way that we think and what we focus on affect our level of happiness?

Many of these are personal questions which we must answer for ourselves. So, if you are up for it, try an experiment. Grab a pen and paper and finish this sentence ten times: I would be happier if... (To get the most out of this article, take a few minutes to do this before reading on.)

Now, compare your list with the two lists below. How many of the items on your list resemble these

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responses: I would be happier if...

- I made more money.
- I had more time for myself, my family, and my friends.
- I lived in a better (prettier, warmer, less expensive) place.
- I was in a more truthful (honest, romantic, committed) relationship or marriage.
- I was healthier (thinner, younger, older, prettier, sexier, smarter, etc).
- I had a job with less stress (better boss, different co-workers, more pay, more independence, greater flexibility).
- I lived in a house that was more spacious (had a bigger yard, was in a nicer neighborhood, with better roommates).
- my life was less stressful (more exciting, more adventurous, more fun).
- I had a new car (a better computer, a sailboat, a timeshare in a beautiful place, more vacation time, a new house, less debt, a better sex life).
- I were retired (independently wealthy, a stay-at-home parent, self-employed).

Now, how many of the items on your list resemble these responses: I would be happier if...

- I lived more simply.
- I spent less money.
- I followed my heart.
- I had less need for new toys, clothes, jewelry, shoes, hair products, etc.
- I set clearer boundaries with those around me.
- I made better use of my time.
- I stopped comparing myself and my circumstances with others.
- I was more accepting of my body and my outward appearance.
- I communicated better with my partner/spouse.
- I brought more fun into my life.
- I engaged in creative endeavors.
- I stuck with my diet and exercise plan.
- I was less self-absorbed and found a way to help someone less fortunate.

If you are like most people in this consumer-driven, power-hungry, comparison-based, externally-motivated culture, your initial responses to the prompt, "I would be happier if..." fall more in line with the first list than with the second. Hey, who wouldn't be happier with more money, less stress, more time for the things we love, a new Jaguar, and the body of a supermodel? But here's the question; Happier than what? Happy for how long? Until you outgrow the bigger house? Until you realize that the raise you thought would be enough isn't adequate for the new lifestyle to which you have quickly grown accustomed? Until the new boat breaks down and requires you to spend less time having fun with the family than you had before you bought the boat? Until the retirement you dreamt of gives rise to the untapped dreams of work you've secretly longed to do?

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What we have all learned from the satisfaction of desires grounded in pleasure, immediate gratification, and/or external approval is that while they appeared to point in the direction of our happiness, they ultimately lead us back to the fork in the road in which we ask anew, "So what else is there? Now what do I want?" They bring a sensation of happiness based in "what is happening" – it is counterfeit coin. While at first glance the items on the second list appear far less exciting or enticing, there is a peace and a knowing as we read them that the kind of satisfaction they would bring is the real goods; happiness which would endure because it comes from the inside out, not dependent on outside circumstances.

In considering the differences between the two lists, I realized that the root of much discontent in our culture has to do with the way we think about happiness! Perhaps if we could rethink happiness – stop the habits of mind that block it, and cultivate the habits and choices that make way for it, we could get out of the way of the contentment that would already be ours if we could but recognize it, relax and enjoy it. The following suggestions are habits of mind or choices we can make to take greater responsibility for our own level of happiness and to increase our capacity for joy and contentment.

### 1. Know for yourself how you define happiness and what constitutes contentment!

Happiness will elude us if it is ill-defined because we will grasp for that which never fully satisfies. Without awareness of the source of our contentment, we may look for it in the wrong places, pursuing something that either scratches the wrong itch or is ours to begin with. It would behoove us to know for ourselves the difference between that which serves as mere diversion, amusement or immediate gratification and that which truly serves to delight, inspire and make us glad to be alive. Others may be searching for that which brings the ecstatic experience, some ultimate bliss, thrill, rapture or elation. How do you define happiness? How is it different from joy or contentment?

For me, the feeling of happiness is fleeting – something that can come and go with what is happening in the moment. Joy, however, is a deep sense of peace and gratitude about one's life, a feeling of well-being, wholeness and integrity that informs one's daily experience in fortunate and unfortunate circumstances. Joy is a profound and enduring feeling of contentment, capability, and centeredness. It is that voice inside that says, "While this moment is painful, it is not all there is ... there is a sun behind these clouds." Joy is a deep sense of engagement – living in the moment and enjoying life's bounty. From that point of view, the items on the first list would definitely feed the flames of my happiness – at least for a spell – but they wouldn't necessarily add to my true sense of contentment.

### 2. Beware the allure of external desires!

We have been acculturated to believe that we should look outside ourselves and into the world for the source of our happiness and the answer to our dreams. When

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we have a certain job or attain a particular degree, we will feel successful and then we will be happy. When we drive a particular car and live in a lovely neighborhood, we will feel as if we have made it, and then we will have reason to be joyful. But there is danger in placing our standards for happiness in events or circumstances in which we have little control. What happens if we lose the job, have to sell the car and downsize the apartment? Externally-driven desires are a two-sided coin – if it something outside ourselves that we can “get”, it is also something that we can lose. How much of our energy, worry and concern is wrapped up in not losing that which we have attained? To some extent, the things we own come to possess us rather than the other way around. This cycle of “want-attain-hold on to” does not lead to joy, in fact, it is crazy-making!

Of course we will always be drawn to external desires and rewards, and we should enjoy the pleasure that comes with earning, planning for and attaining them. The question is how do we ground ourselves and our sense of joy in things other than what we own, what we achieve, or how other people see us so that even if all is taken away, our joy remains? It is the difference between “wanting to look better” and “accepting your body as it is” or “desiring to win an award” and “appreciating your gifts without comparing them to others”. So if you get physically fit or win the competition, great! But even if you don’t, your joy is safe.

### 3. Rein in your standards for happiness by discerning what is “enough”.

So much of our discontent is rooted in not having enough, being enough, doing enough! If only we could manage our own expectations of what is enough!? What is rich enough? Smart enough? Successful enough? The source of all disappointment lies in our expectations. The job seeker gives up because her expectations of when the employer should call has not been met ... the employee quits because the company did not offer the raise she expected ... a woman is heartbroken because her partner doesn’t love her “enough” – but her partner has no idea what “enough love” is supposed to look like ... the aspiring actress surrenders her dream because she fears she is not “talented enough” – although she is holding herself to an impossible standard.

How do we rein in, keep in check, and control our own expectations of what our lives are supposed to look like so that we can be more easily pleased with what is? Buddhist tradition teaches, “Happiness does not come from getting what you want, but from wanting what you have.” If we were okay with who we are and where we are in life right now – if we could feel the satisfaction of being, having and doing enough – wouldn’t life be a feast? The classic question worth serious deliberation is this: If we aren’t happy with what we have now, what are the chances we will be happy with more?

### 4. Steer your focus in the direction of your joy.

I love the words of Langston Hughes, “Two men looked through bars, one saw mud, the other stars.” It is no news to us that how happy we are in any given situation

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has everything to do with what in that situation we focus on! This is no less true for our general experience of happiness or our capacity for joy. We can count our blessings or we can count our problems. We can focus on what is missing in our lives or we can focus on what we have in abundance at all times. We can compare ourselves to those who have more than we do, or we can use those same mental powers to compare ourselves to those who have less. We can concentrate on all that is going wrong in our lives, or we can focus on what is going right. We can complain about how things are not turning out as we had planned, or we can focus on alternate solutions to get us where we want to go. Obviously as we choose our focus, we are choosing the emotional and mental state that accompanies the object or subject of our attention.

The mind has been likened to the earth in that what we plant in it will grow. Are we planting seeds that would blossom into gratitude or self-pity, into feelings of abundance or lack, into seeing possibilities or limitations? As the gardeners of our lives, are we sowing that which leads to joy or discontent? Every day, in every situation, consciously or unconsciously, we choose.

### 5. View happiness more as a by-product than a goal to pursue.

Joy is not a mood that can be willed or forced. It is the ripple that follows the stone. It can only be felt after we immerse ourselves in life. To see what I mean, try another experiment. Finish the sentence "I am happy when ..." ten times or simply make a list of ten things/activities that make you happy. My own list includes: cooking, gardening, teaching, writing and reading poetry, designing workshops, holding gatherings of friends and family, walking at the ocean, working out, being at the lake, sharing quiet evenings with my husband, spending time with my daughter, hanging in out in bookstores, listening to music I love, feeding and watching the birds in my yard, etc.

Now, consider for how many of the items on your list your energy and attention is focused on the state of your happiness/unhappiness. Alternately, consider how many of the items on your list represent activities which meet one or more of the following criteria:

- Bring you a sense of meaning or purpose
- Engage you on a physical, mental, spiritual or emotional level
- Utilize your natural skills, talents and abilities
- Ground you in the present moment
- Allow you to immerse yourself with little sense of time or effort
- Focus your attention away from yourself and your circumstances

W. Beran Wolfe wisely reminds us, "If you observe a really happy man you will find him building a boat, writing a symphony, educating his son, growing double dahlias in his garden, or looking for dinosaur eggs in the Gobi desert. He will not be striving for it as a goal itself. He will have become aware that he is happy in the course of living life twenty-four crowded hours of the day."

6. Hold to the intent of happiness, treating it as a cause rather than an effect.

We often focus on how to create circumstances that will make us happy, but an equally important question is how to bring happiness to circumstances that we may not like. A great place to start is by bringing the intent to be happy wherever we go and to whatever we do! The myth is that happiness is the result of circumstances rather than a mindset or an attitude that we bring to circumstances. But happiness is more a way of traveling than it is a place of arrival. By intending to enjoy the conference, the new job, a move to a new city, the experience of being newly single or newly married, we color the experience with that intention and “Voila” – that is what we will most probably experience. Likewise, of course, with the expectation of not being satisfied, we will be equally effective in coloring our experience. Expect to be happy. As the Swedish proverb professes, “Those who wish to sing always find a song.”

7. Accept the bitter with the sweet in life without surrendering your joy.

I think people who know true and abiding contentment have a different relationship to challenges and hardship than those who do not. As human beings we struggle in an imperfect world where suffering and grace both abound. People centered in joy accept that life is at once frightful, beautiful, bitter and astonishing. Life is a package deal – there will always be much to celebrate and there will also be that for which we will grieve. There is a way, however, of surviving the bitter without surrendering our joy. It lies in great part in the willingness to adopt an attitude of opportunity in the face of trials and tribulations. Rather than arguing about the issues going on in our lives, what if we could sink deeper into the opportunities that lie beneath them, focusing more on solutions than concerns? While we deplete our energy with the question, “Why is this happening?”, we harness new energy with the question, “How do we proceed from here?”

Deeply contented people learn to anchor themselves in something larger and more hopeful than what they are struggling with at the moment – not identifying with the pain or problem as the central theme in their lives. We can allow our experiences to sound through us without becoming those experiences. It has been said that tragedy, heartbreak, or illness concentrate the mind wonderfully. No kidding. The point, of course, is not the misfortune, but the light that misfortune can shed upon our lives. When we have been ill, a respite from pain is a welcomed blessing. When we have lost a loved one, our appreciation of those remaining becomes acute. In the midst of struggle, we would be wise to anchor ourselves in that which has become that much more precious to us due in part to our angst... like friends who are with us in our grief, physical health in the midst of emotional turmoil, or the gift of imagination when we are physically incapacitated.

John R. Mabry suggests, “We must not despise the rough, the dark, the empty, the cowardly, the flawed or the crooked. It is a package deal. Everything has its

wonders, even darkness and silence, and I have learned, whatever state I may be in, therein to be content."

## 8. Make a commitment to your joy!

Committing to our joy means making the nonnegotiable choice to pursue the greatest passions of our minds and hearts, making that which pleases, nourishes and refreshes us central rather than peripheral to our life experience. By committing to do what energizes us and makes us sparkle, we commit to showing up in the world with the best we have to offer. There is a wisdom and a fierceness to making one's sense of joy a priority in one's life but it is not an easy thing to do. Take a look at the list of the things you identified as making you happy and ask yourself how often you engage in these activities. Are there any of these things you should commit to with equal fervor as you commit to the other priorities in your life? We need to be vigilant in not overlooking ourselves as life passes by. We are the only ones who can insist in living our days to the fullest, spending them doing the things we love, regardless of the many pressures on us to do otherwise.

I think the woman from Michigan is right – to some great extent career and employment professionals are in the "happiness business". I could have steered this article towards a discussion of what makes the people we serve happy and how we can help them see their choices that affect their level of happiness. What we know, however, is that until we answer these questions for ourselves, we are not equipped nor qualified to assist them in answering those questions for themselves. I promise, however, to pick up this discussion in a future article!

I am pleased to end this article with a wonderful quote with which I began the chapter on joy in my book, "The Wholehearted Journey". While its author is unknown, what we know is that this person has a keen and refreshing notion of what is "enough"...

*"Most of us miss out on life's big prizes. The Pulitzer. The Nobel. An Oscar. But we're all eligible for life's small pleasures. A pat on the back. A kiss behind the ear. A four-pound bass. A full moon. An empty parking space. A crackling fire. A great meal. A glorious sunset. Hot soup. Cold beer. Don't fret about copping life's grand awards. Enjoy its tiny delights. Know joy."*

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POETIC REFLECTION 

Joy

When I hear myself asking questions like:

Am I happy now?  
Is this the good life?  
Do I have what I want?  
What else do I need?  
Have I gotten my fair share?

my joy flies right out the window  
refusing to perch on any such branch.

However, when I am drawn in by inquiries such as:

Who do I love? What do I love?  
How am I indescribably, unutterably blessed?  
What are my gifts and where shall I give them?  
What purpose can I serve today?  
Where do I wish to devote my time and attention?

my joy flutters about the room,  
flapping her colorful wings with abandon,  
and at times, making a wild, wonderful nest in my hair.

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THOUGHTS TO CONSIDER



“While it is not easy to find happiness in ourselves,  
it is not possible to find it elsewhere.”

- Agnes Repplier

“Ordinary riches can be stolen; real riches cannot. In your soul are infinitely  
precious things that cannot be taken from you.”

- Oscar Wilde

“As a single footstep will not make a path on earth, so a single thought will  
not make a pathway in the mind. To make a deep physical path, we walk  
again and again. To make a deep mental path, we much think over and  
over the kind of thoughts we wish to dominate our lives.”

- Henry Thoreau

“Nothing is enough to a man for whom enough is too little.”

- Epicurus

“If you can bear a horribly mixed metaphor, I’d say that my capacity for  
happiness is in direct proportion to my capacity to step up to the plate, rise  
above the fray, and bite the bullet, at which point I seek out a new broom,  
and taking the bull by the horns, and play he cards I’m dealt -  
without crying over spilt milk.”

- Joan Hitlin

## PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

1. How do you define happiness? How does it differ from your definition of joy or contentment?
2. Look at your responses to the prompt, "I would be happier if..." and answer the following questions with regard to each of the conditions you identified:
  - Is this something that is within your control to achieve?
  - If your wish was granted, do you think it would bring temporary or lasting satisfaction?
  - For those items that reflect a "not enough" attitude, ask yourself what would be enough in each of those situations. (e.g. If you wrote, "I would like to be more successful", what does "successful enough" look like?)
  - If it is an externally-motivated desire, what is its internally-motivated counterpart? (e.g. The internal counterpart to "I would like to have more money" might be "I would like to spend less money and live more simply.")
3. Look at your responses to the prompt, "I am happy when ..." and consider the last time you engaged in each of these situations/activities. Consider how committed you are to your own joy by making each of these things more of a priority in your life.
4. In which direction do you think you most naturally steer your focus in most situations:
  - Gratitude for your blessings and abundance or angst for your scarcity and lack?
  - Comparing yourself to others who have more or comparing yourself to others who have less?
  - Seeing your possibilities or your limitations?
5. What implications do you see for the use of these questions with individuals who come to you for vocational guidance? To what extent do you see yourself in the "happiness business"?