

A PRESENT IS MEANT TO BE OPENED

*Have you ever felt rain through a tree,
Or wondered about the expanse of the sea?*

When I first created an outline for this book, I never contemplated a chapter devoted to the present. I felt the present was too short to affect one's happiness. Consider as you read this sentence, approximately five to ten seconds of the future are realized in the present and fade into the past. What can we hope to achieve with such fleeting moments? As I considered an answer to this question, it soon became clear that any order for happiness must be refilled in the present. **Whether we reflect on our past as the sponsor for our joy, or use our imagination to create dreams in the future, we start in the moment. The present initiates all action. It is the window to our future and the door to our past.**

I received one of my favorite quotes about the present in an email from a friend.

*"Yesterday is history. Tomorrow is a mystery. Today is
a gift. That's why it's called the present!"*

When we open the gift, we can uncover our happiness. Let's open ours now. We will begin with this chapter where I have

identified five things we can accomplish in a single moment. From there, and for the remainder of this book, we will examine other ways to refill our order that commence in the present but continue for a lifetime.

Look Up

There is so much beauty surrounding us each day, yet we are too preoccupied with the thoughts in our head to appreciate the elegance. Maybe we think about the problems in our lives or the tasks we must complete. Perhaps we prefer isolation to interaction. Either way, we fail to see those things in life that create warmth and serenity. Take a look at individuals as they walk down the street. What do you see? Probably you see people walking with their heads bowed, focused on the ground. Maybe they do this as a precautionary measure. By continuously looking down, they limit the possibility of tripping over something. But I would bet that is not the case. In fact, some of us walk with our heads so low we are only adding to the list of things we might trip over. Our thoughts are involved with an endless list of chores, tasks, problems, concerns, and dates. We cannot see the external world because our mind is in the way. Think of all of the things that you miss when you fail to take your eyes off of the ground.

*Tree swaying in the breeze . . . sun shining on a pool
of water . . . sleek black convertible . . . immense
height of a skyscraper . . . mysterious glow of a foggy
night . . . well dressed man/woman . . . historic land-
mark . . . colorful fall foliage . . . celebrity . . . field
of horses . . . afternoon soccer match . . . cascading
waterfall . . . elegant design of a building . . . warm
glow of a streetlight . . . vibrant smile . . . majestic
rainbow . . . crescent-shaped moon . . . beautiful
dog . . . snowman . . . hot air balloon . . . clever li-
cense plate . . . pedestrians whistling a tune . . . kids*

playing hopscotch . . . new friend . . . flowers in full bloom . . . a parent holding a child's hand . . . beauty in another's face . . . twinkle of a midnight star . . . passing exchange of laughter . . . waves crashing against the sand . . . person in need . . . beacon of light . . . funny billboard . . . mesmerizing landscape . . . bird's flying in a perfect "V" . . . your future spouse.

You say you do not see these things as you walk down the street? Perhaps you need to **look up**. When was the last time you took a moment to glance at the nighttime sky? As children we are fascinated by all that is new. We look toward the moon with wonder and are led to believe it is made of cheese. In high school, we apply an analytical slant, learning its phases and relative position in the sky. However, as we grow older, we begin to neglect this vision. We are no longer filled with awe. The moon holds less mystery and contributes nothing to solving our problems or enriching our lives.

I was walking to my car one night and I could not help but notice the brilliant glow cast from the nighttime sky. Looking up was unavoidable. High above was a full moon. It was extraordinary. The sight overwhelmed my senses and I stood in awe admiring its beauty. There was something magical in the moon that night. While I have seen the view many times before, I realized how infrequent the occurrence has been since my childhood. I felt as if I had forgotten its existence. For the next few nights I maintained my skyward glance while still managing to avoid any lurking dangers at ground level. I noticed the various phases of the moon as the weeks progressed. I was amazed by the contrast colors. It truly is a spectacle worth revisiting again and again.

There is a scene from the romantic teen comedy "Can't Buy Me Love" that portrays a similar occurrence. During the movie, Ronald Miller takes Cindy Mancini to an abandoned airplane lot, or graveyard as it is referred to in the movie. The lot is an

endless field of old military aircraft. In the scene, Ronald and Cindy are perched in the cockpit of one plane and are looking to the stars. She stares at the moon with wonder and comments on a world that she barely knew existed. He has always studied the heavens and realizes the practical implications of someday living and working on the moon. As he paints a vivid picture of what this would be like, her appreciation for the moon changes. She realizes the moon is more than a romantic centerpiece; it has the potential to host civilization. When we look at something from a fresh perspective, it is like looking at it for the first time.

It seems overly simplistic to equate happiness to the simple act of looking up. We have all experienced the views provided in the previous list, so how can seeing them again have any impact on our spirits? The only answer I can provide is to try again. Look up. When I did, I saw those birds flying in a perfect “V” formation. It changed my life. Maybe it will do the same for you.

Say Hello

How often do we walk along and pass someone without exchanging a greeting? When you think about it, it probably happens quite often especially since we have a tendency to always look at the ground. This is our barrier to keep us from making eye contact. When we do catch the gaze of another, we are thrust into the awkward position of choosing to say hello. I think you know the scenario. First, you watch their face. If they do not see you looking toward them, you quickly avert your eyes and continue along without incident. Or maybe their eyes are transfixed on the cracks in the sidewalk or the seams in the rug. Either way you are safe. You breathe a sigh of relief and vow to never look up again. The worst scenario occurs when you actually make eye contact with another person. You shudder as panic sets in and you realize your greatest fear. You might have to exchange pleasantries (oh the horror)! Let's study this classic in more detail.

You can easily write this scene into any western adventure. You glance over and they glance back. There is no time to avert your eyes. You wonder if you should make the first move. You hold back while studying their face. You wait for them to initiate the action. This is a showdown. “One of us is going to have to smile”, you say to yourself. Right about here, the broadcast would cut to a commercial. If I had to bet, it would resemble a Life cereal commercial. “I’m not going to say hi, you say it”. “I’m not going to say hi”. In this discourse however, there is no third party to ease the exchange. If you can wait but a moment, the crisis passes, but how do you feel? Part of you may be relieved because you were able to avoid an awkward situation. The other part feels uneasy. There is no reason why you could not say hello.

When others greet us, we tend to reciprocate. We enjoy when others initiate the action. Though it may catch us off guard, there is usually a feeling of warmth when one directs personal attention in our direction. Understanding the impact it has on us, it is easy to see how a simple hello can bring us instant joy. We were all taught to be polite and to exchange greetings. Refill that order by being the first to say hi. You have done so in the past, and you will feel great knowing the impact one simple word can have on another; the smile in return will rekindle your spirit.

Phone a Friend

The most popular game show of the day is *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* The show, hosted by Regis Philbin, takes contestants through a series of increasingly difficult questions as they grow their wealth toward a grand prize of one million dollars. To assist them in their quest, the contestants are given three lifelines. One is a 50/50 where two of the four multiple-choice answers are removed. Another involves asking the audience. They vote for one of the four answers and their responses are tabulated and provided to the contestant. The final lifeline is the ability to phone a friend. The contestant can call one person who they feel might

know the answer. They read the question and the four possible answers, and are then given thirty seconds to respond.

While the ability to phone a friend for the chance at one million dollars is worth the effort, how about calling to hear about their child's first steps, the promotion at work, or their new love? What about the long day at work, vacation plans, or the loss of a loved one? Do you not want to laugh with them, cry with them, and be with them? It is only a phone call away and it takes but the present moment to dial.

So why do we often neglect a task that is so simple? I believe we fail to phone our friends and loved ones for two reasons. Either we are too busy, or we expect them to contact us. Each of us would vow that family and friends come first in our lives but all too often we let our jobs and problems become our top priority. A phone call takes a moment to dial and another to say hello. Even if we are extremely busy and cannot extend ourselves beyond those two steps, the mere fact that we called increases the joy of two individuals (you and your friend).

The other situation centers on our need for a reciprocal relationship. While the old adage states "it is better to give than to receive", you cannot have one without the other. We need to feel appreciated. When others give to us, we see this as a sign of their caring. It is our nature to feel this way. Unconditional love is very difficult. Once we contact a friend, we sometimes feel it is on them to contact us the next time. We might be willing to stretch this as a two for one proposition, but we find it difficult to venture beyond this realm. To us, it is an unwritten code of friendship.

Why do we play this game? It is one we cannot win. In fact, we can only lose, and the price is often our friendship. We never truly understand the intentions of another unless we ask. Never assume. The truth may sometimes be further from our own interpretation. How many times do you see a driver do something careless on the road? Maybe they cut in front of you or someone else. Soon the horn starts blaring and you start swearing. Your

frustration increases over something that has already passed and is out of your control. Yes it was a dumb move on their part, but you cannot change the outcome. The person will make more mistakes in the future, but so will you!

Everyone tends to become angry in these situations. None of us are perfect, and we will make mistakes of our own on the road. Some will be dumb maneuvers, while others will be honest mistakes. If there is no harm, there is little reason to become upset and react in an outrageous manner. The driver that cut you off may have just learned their spouse was rushed to the hospital, or perhaps they are lost and slightly disoriented. If you knew this beforehand, would you be so quick to admonish them? This rationale should apply to our friends as well. Give them the benefit of the doubt. Maybe your call is what they really need.

Smile

They say it takes fewer muscles to smile than to frown. Back when life was one negative event, I used this line to my advantage. I would tell people that by frowning I would be much healthier since I was expending more energy, and using more muscles. Of course, we know that our health suffers when we are sad. Our vital organs do not function as efficiently and our emotions sap our strength. In addition, a frown, like a smile, is contagious. When we are sad or upset, others tend to worry about us and feel compassion. Although we may not actually become sad, our feelings of joy dampen.

Our ability to smile is something we do not learn. As infants we smile when we are content. Typically this means we have food, ample attention, and a dry diaper. Conversely, when we are sick, hungry, or in need of changing, we cry. Life is simple. We know only two emotions, and with our parents responding quickly to our tears, we spend the majority of our early years smiling. So what happens to us as adults? We no longer cry when

we are sick and the majority of us do not go hungry. We may cry about change, but it has nothing to do with a wet diaper.

As we grow older, we are exposed to more issues that challenge our emotions. They hit us when we are unsuspecting. Some are truly sorrowful and disappointing events such as the loss of a loved one, a breakup, personal injury, loss of a job, failure on a test or the athletic fields. In each case there is a proper period of mourning or sorrow where tears are shed. This is normal. This is being human. Yet all too often, we complicate our lives by extending our hardships or creating ones that should not exist. We might become depressed over a romantic breakup, and question our ability to love again. We can submerge ourselves in the difficulties of work, bringing them home to disrupt our personal lives. Sad events will occur, but in between we have the ability to be content. When we are content we can smile. In order to smile, continue reading.

Breathe

Recently, I started teaching a form of Tae Bo to fellow co-workers after hours. I called my class Taerobics. It incorporated elements of Tae Bo, aerobics, and Tai Chi. The latter is used during the cooldown session. It reflects slow, centered, and rhythmic movements to provide great balance, strength, and flexibility. For the final exercise in the routine, we perform a series of slow, deep breaths that focus the mind and relax the body. It is the perfect compliment to our aggressive exercise cycle. We open our eyes refreshed and spirited.

Breathing is something we take for granted until there are difficulties. It is something we never learned how to do. When we are born, we draw our first breath naturally. So why do we hear so much about proper breathing techniques? Everywhere we turn, we are encouraged to take a deep breath, inhaling through our nose and exhaling through our mouth. It is seen as the best

relief for stress and mental confidence. But can it actually lead to happiness?

I have always marveled over our ability to breathe. Since my normal breathing patterns are different than the majority of others in the world, it has always captured my attention. I do not breathe through my nose. To me it seems unnatural. When I try to breathe through my nose, I feel as though I am being deprived of air. In reality, my feelings are founded. It turns out I have a deviated septum. As a result, I have to make a conscious effort to smell the world around me. We often take it for granted, but when we breathe through our nose, we stimulate our sense of smell. To experience the full spectrum of sensations that are our gift, I must remind myself to smell the beautiful aromas and fragrances that abound in the world. I need to sniff the sweetness of fresh flowers, the light scent of a woman's perfume, and the morning dew. Then there is the wonderful odor of freshly baked bread or apple pie, the aroma of the sea, or the crispness of a winter morning. I realize we cannot take anything for granted in the world. In fact, it is the things we neglect that often show us the most promise.

When we draw a breath, we reaffirm we are alive. Take a moment now to breathe deeply. Inhale through your nose for five seconds and hold it for another five. Exhale long and slow. Repeat this process a few more times with your eyes closed and then come back to this chapter. **[I will even mark your spot here while you breathe.]** Welcome back. I am certain you feel refreshed. Your mind is clear. Any stress you had is most likely diminished. You have just done wonders for yourself and your body. Your heart is beating slower and healthier.

Breathing plays a vital role in keeping us alive and relaxing us when we are stressed. But it can also have a positive influence on our emotions. I have stated in past chapters how the heart needs to be our guide. When we breathe, we take some of the strain off of our heart. It will continue to pump blood throughout the body, but it does it in a more efficient manner when the body is

relaxed. We are not putting undue strain on it to pump faster to meet the demands of our schedule, anxiety, and fears. By taking a moment to breathe, we can borrow the heart to appreciate life and the wonders all around us. We side step our problems and entertain our joy. Use your heart to produce happiness. Take a moment to breathe.

Prescription

The prescription relevant for the moment can be summed up in these few well-known quotes.

Good things come to those that wait.

Rome wasn't built in a day.

Never put off until tomorrow what you can achieve today.

There is no time like the present.

They are all very good quotes, and words to live by. In fact, if this were your initial order, I would recommend you refill it continuously. We have to realize that some things do not happen overnight. This includes our happiness. We have to establish goals and take the necessary steps to accomplish them. However, this process needs to start in the present. In addition, there are things we can do in an instant to produce immediate happiness.

Refill

With all of the demands that face us in life, we often wish the present were longer than a moment. We lead busy lives that can include work or school, a spouse, children, chores, bills,

friends, outside contributions, and more. This leads very little time for our own interests, and the problems that surround us challenge our ability to experience a consistent level of joy in our lives. It seems rather absurd that we need to make time for happiness, but until we learn to make happiness our number one goal and incorporate it into every aspect of our lives, it will be just another thing we juggle in our busy schedule.

Fortunately, we can take steps to feel good in an instant. I have noted five things we can do that can be accomplished quickly to provide instant gratification. These are things we have done throughout our lives, some unconsciously. It is time to revisit them again. They will bring instant joy to ourselves and those around us. From there, we will be energized to set goals for increased happiness in other areas of our lives. That is the goal for the remainder of this book. So take a deep breath. Call a friend to say hello. Then before you go to sleep tonight, look toward the nighttime sky. Begin to feel the warmth of your surroundings as you see things with a renewed sense of mystery. Smile.