

Choosing Happiness by Linda Krenicky

It had been an incredible week for my family in San Pancho, Nayarit, Mexico. We stayed in a lovely home high up in the jungle, complete with swimming pool, and the ocean within walking distance; iguanas, yellow-winged black birds, and even an ill-fated scorpion that was quickly dispatched with husband Jim's size 15s. It was hard to leave that peaceful, idyllic time behind, and I cried quiet tears the entire way out of the sleepy little village that had become precious to me in such a short time.

As we arrived at the airport, a torrential downpour began. This was a storm to end all storms—lighting and thunder, huge gusts of wind. Our flight home to San Jose was cancelled, and we joined 140 other travelers stranded in the Puerto Vallarta airport. As we waited for word from the airline staff, I sat back to relax and take in what was happening around me. Doing so, a slight smile came to my lips. My very irritated 9-year-old son, Ben, asked, "Why are you smiling?!! How can you be happy in this situation?" I guess that's a fair question. Any my answer? "I have a List, and I have a Happy String".

Back in November, when I decided to be proactive in increasing my happiness, I just knew there had to be a "formula", a regimen, a "practice" I could follow. And it turns out, there is. I've used it for the last several months, and I'd like to share some ways we can all increase our joy, in good times and bad, making happiness a conscious choice well within our grasp.

One thing to note: some of us may be in the strangle-hold of a depression so deep, or have other medical conditions such that we aren't able to take the steps I'll mention here today. If that's the case, professional help is needed.

First, the List: Every morning when I awake, I sit up, grab the notebook and pen on my nightstand, and write 3 things I'm grateful for. Three things different from yesterday, different from the day before, and the day before that. I spend about 30 seconds reflecting on those 3 things, and then I get up and begin my day. That's it.

Easy, peasy, as Ben says. Simple, yet profound in its effect on my life. I'm grateful for a big umbrella that Ben and I can share; I'm grateful for my cozy flannel pajamas; I'm grateful for our encouraging Little League coach. Little things, and bigger things. The key is, this first-thing-in-the-morning exercise gets my day off to a positive beginning that colors how I see everything else that happens that day. It's what sends my thoughts in the direction of "I'm sure glad the cancelled flight happened at the END of our trip, rather than the beginning. . ." (This was part of my response to Ben's question about how I could smile about our "dire" situation).

The other thing that sends my thoughts in a positive direction is what author of *The Joy of Appreciative Living*, Jackie Kelm, calls the Constructionist Principle. The idea of the Constructionist Principle is that we continuously create stories about what is happening in our lives. Our reality is very personal, seen through our own lenses and filters. Here's an example: Two friends go out to dinner at a new restaurant in town. It's crowded; there's a 20-minute wait. One friend grouses, "The service here must be terrible. I hate waiting!", while the other friend is looking around in excitement, thinking, "Hey, this must be a great place—everyone wants to eat here!" The message? Change your story. A happier life comes from happier stories. We can find whatever we want in any situation—what we focus on will grow. You're stuck in a thunderstorm in a foreign country where you don't speak the language, you have no idea when you'll get on the plane to go home and everyone around you is cranking up for a fight? Be thankful you only have carry-on—at least you know your luggage will be there when you finally land at home!

Another way to get yourself to this place of positive perspective is to follow Marci Shimoff's advice. She wrote "Happy For No Reason" and urges us to ask ourselves, "If this [situation] were happening for a higher purpose, what would that be?"

I'm not sure what the "higher purpose" of our cancelled flight was, but my hunch is that it was so I could share this Moment [capital M] with Ben: When he asked me how I could be happy in this (to him) terrible situation, I responded "I **choose** to be happy, Ben. I could be upset and get all worked up but that doesn't feel good and then I couldn't take care of you in a good way, so I just decide to be happy instead"

He said, “Well, I’d like to be happy, too, but I just can’t. . .” “Start with what you’re grateful for” “Well, I’m grateful we’re inside during this bad storm; I’m grateful we have the iPhone. . .” He was soon occupied with finding things to be thankful for, and his discontent went down several notches.

And what’s the Happy String I mentioned earlier? It’s my inner experience—happiness. The things that happen in my life—the external experiences, are the “beads” I put on it. And no matter what those beads are, good, bad, or indifferent, this Happy String runs through them all, creating a Happy Life. Marci Shimoff explains that when we are Happy For No Reason, we bring happiness **to** our outer experience, rather than trying to extract happiness **from** it. Shimoff tells us, “Happy For No Reason means living in an inner state of peace and well-being; it isn’t dependent on what’s happening externally. And I’m not talking about being passive and complacent about what’s happening in the world or in your own life. It means not fighting or bemoaning what **has already happened** and can’t be changed.” It means making the conscious choice to look for the higher purpose. And that might not be clear to us for a long time. When my first marriage ended, it was the end of my world (all 26 years of it). I had been a very privileged and protected young woman, and was totally unprepared for the harsh realities that awaited me as a single mom of two young boys. At the time, it was all I could do to put one foot in front of the other and muddle through. Years later, I could see the good that came from that life experience. I became more self-reliant, more capable and confident. I became financially independent and have been so ever since. If I had had my Happy String then, I could have seen it sooner. I just took the long way, I figure.

In Puerto Vallarta, seats were found for us on the next plane bound for Phoenix. We would miss our original connection to San Jose, but there were later flights we could catch. After a slow crawl through Immigration and Customs in Phoenix, we exited on the other side to discover our flight to San Jose was leaving in 25 minutes, a mile away in another terminal. And we still had to go through security! Talk about an adrenaline rush! We ran, we hustled, we gasped for air, and we made the flight. I had moments to call our friend Steve to

tell him not to meet the earlier flight. I caught him just as he was leaving for the airport.

And Ben? He is on his way to finding his Happy String. I think it's a lifelong pursuit. And an important one. As Aristotle said, "**Happiness is the meaning and the purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence.**" And we know what we need to find that Holy Grail: A List and a Happy String. It's within our grasp, infinitely achievable, and definitely worth the effort! May you find it is so.