

CHAPTER 5

I'll Be Happy When . . . I Find the Right Job

Do you find your work no longer satisfying-or worse, unbearable? If so, recent surveys show that more Americans than ever before share your experience.²²⁴ You may be burned-out, bored, or weary of your job, or you may feel that professional success has decisively and irrevocably eluded you. What's more, the feeling that your work is no longer what it used to be can instigate a painful crisis point that pushes you to question your judgment, your skills, your industriousness, and your motivation. The heart of this chapter is about the happiness myth that stokes this crisis point-namely, that whatever happiness may have eluded you thus far will materialize after you acquire the "right" or perfect job. Grappling with this myth requires an understanding of the true sources and ubiquity of malaise about your job or your level of success. Only then will you be prepared to make the healthiest choices and to take next steps. A number of these steps are detailed here.

GETTING USED TO YOUR JOB

In chapter 1, I focused on the turning moment when you decide you are bored with your marriage. Might there be a parallel point when you acknowledge that you are bored with your job? Although love

and work may seem to have little in common with each other-why else would there be a need to "balance" them?-they are both, as Freud aptly recognized, mainsprings of our mental health.²²⁵ Furthermore, like interpersonal relationships, work is an aspect of your life to which you are prone to hedonically adapt and take for granted-a situation that gives rise to the apathy and ennui that fuel that painful feeling that your work has lost its pleasure and you'd be so much happier doing something else. One course of action, of course, is to find a new career path. Alternatively, you could try to identify how much of your ennui is due to your unique (and problematic) work situation and how much to the widespread and foreseeable process of hedonic adaptation, which is likely to repeat itself at your next job. If the latter, a number of empirically supported approaches exist that can ward off the feeling that your work is no longer satisfying and stop hedonic adaptation in its tracks. Before you make a drastic decision, give these strategies a trial run to determine whether they would succeed for you, or whether your job situation is beyond repair. Above all, know that when your work isn't fulfilling any longer, there is hope.

I have colleagues who change jobs often, moving their families from coast to coast every two to three years. They seem sincerely thrilled with every fresh opportunity and throw themselves artem into redesigning their work commitments and lifestyles. Then, inevitably, after a year or so, like second-year college students experiencing a "sophomore slump," they begin to feel a bit bored or antsy or develop justifiable complaints about their new supervisor, colleagues, obligations, or daily commute. Little by little, they begin to fantasize about something out there that's even better-a job with a more reasonable boss, perhaps, or a lighter commute, more helpful colleagues, and less burdensome obligations.

Of course, not everyone has the option of routinely relocating

and shifting jobs, which suggests that many more only dream of doing what some people are fortunate enough to be able to do. Yet are these professional roamers truly lucky? Are they genuinely happier with each new position and, if so, does this benefit outweigh the costs of severed friendships, dislocation from roots and neighborhoods, and transfers to unfamiliar school districts? Although each of us must balance the personal pros and cons ourselves, we would benefit from considering the research illuminating why all of us are prone to become spoiled by perfectly decent jobs and whether there is anything that can be done about it.

A seminal study on this topic followed high-level managers for five years to track their job satisfaction before and after a voluntary job change, such as a promotion or a relocation within the same company to a more attractive city.²²⁶ The managers were mostly male, mostly white, and averaged forty-five years of age and a \$135,000 annual salary. They were doing well. What the researchers found, however, was that these managers experienced a burst of satisfaction—a honeymoon period, in essence—immediately after the job change, but their satisfaction plummeted within a year, returning to their original pre-move level. In other words, they experienced a sort of hangover effect. By contrast, managers who chose not to change jobs during the same five-year time period experienced negligible changes in how much satisfaction they felt about their jobs. So, while I (for example) remain at the same position and am no more or less happy with it year after year, my itinerant colleagues experience repeated slumps and surges.

The so-called hangover effect is persuasive evidence of hedonic adaptation to our jobs. Human beings are capable of adapting to almost everything about their work life, and especially anything that stays the same. One of my former students wrote me recently to confess that when she first arrived at her new job in San Francisco

. . . I was so enamored by the view across the bay I snapped photos of it. Now I am amused every time the double-decker red bus comes by my [office] window and everyone on board scrambles to snap a picture. I know the view is amazing because people come by and tell me so, but I have already experienced 100 percent adaptation-actually, I would say I've fully adapted to the entire lifestyle here, and I'm back to baseline.

We get used to the cities where we live, to our favorite ice cream, our favorite artwork, and our favorite songs; to new houses and new cars, to pay raises (more on that later), and, as I detailed in chapter 1, to relationships and even to sex.²²⁷ When we have reached one goal, we are content for only a short while before we begin to feel that we won't be satisfied until we reach even higher. In this way, we continually escalate our expectations and desires. Generally, this is not a bad thing. A ceaseless striving for more is surely evolutionarily adaptive; if realizing our goals left us all feeling entirely complacent and content, our society wouldn't witness much progress. If we were always content with the status quo, we'd never strive to accomplish more, like building better cabinets, publishing more books, learning more languages, finding new sources of nourishment, and making more scientific discoveries. If we remained in a self-satisfied euphoria about our latest triumph, we would not be able to compete effectively with others and we might fail to recognize dangers and opportunities in our environments.

Before we survey possible ways to combat, prevent, or slow down the process of becoming satiated with our jobs, it's important to learn exactly what happens to us during the process of adaptation, and why. There are really two chief explanations at work—we experience less and less pleasure over time and our aspirations rise.

When we commence working in an enviable new position, we get a big boost of well-being, even euphoria. We think about the new job (and what we love about it) often, and we experience lots of positive emotions as a result of the chain of positive events set into motion by the job- by the newfound opportunities for new connections, challenges, learning, and adventures. However, in the words of one of my graduate students, those puddles of pleasure slowly dry up and eventually evaporate completely. The thrill of our new work responsibilities continues to decay after the tenth and twentieth time we experience them, and so on. The excitement, happiness, and pride we used to feel happens less and less, as we focus less and less on the novelty of the job and turn our minds toward the countless daily hassles, uplifts, and distractions of life.²²⁸ After a while in the office or at the job site, we don't even notice the things that used to make us smile.

At the same time, as we obtain less and less pleasure from our new position, another critical thing occurs-our expectations rise. Indeed, this is something that can undermine our happiness *even* if we are blessed to have a job that brings us the same quantity of joy today as it did in 2011 or in 2001. So, the job that used to be special now becomes our right and privilege. Whether it's the boost in our compensation, authority, flexibility, or control over our time, we begin to feel that we deserve no less. We begin to feel that our novel and stimulating work experiences have simply become part of our new life-our "new normal"-and we come to expect the happiness that we now have. This new (and extremely common) development has the unfortunate consequence not just of dampening our happiness- causing us to go back to whatever we felt before we even moved-but pushes us to up the ante, to want more and more, so that we are almost never content with what we have, even when we are fortunate to have plenty. In an extreme example, after *Thriller*

became the best-selling album of all time, Michael Jackson declared that he would not be satisfied unless his next album sold twice as many copies. In fact, it sold 70 percent fewer. Most musicians would have killed for sales of thirty million, but for Jackson the contrast with his earlier success was stinging.

So, for much the same reasons that we adapt to our relationships, we adapt readily and rapidly to our jobs. Knowing this should give us pause and, perhaps, force us to hesitate a bit before we resolve to jump ship. But just because hedonic adaptation is natural and evolutionarily adaptive—the way hunger for sweets, sexual jealousy, and a fear of angry beasts all are natural and evolutionarily adaptive—doesn't mean that we can't tamper with it..

REINING IN YOUR ASPIRATIONS

Immoderate aspirations are toxic to happiness. On the one hand, the more we attain, the happier we become. But, at the same time, the more we attain, the more we want, which negates the increased happiness. A nice example comes from the finding that people who are more highly educated are (surprisingly) less satisfied with their lives.²²⁹ In other words, the enhanced life satisfaction that I might derive from my Michigan MBA (e.g., from the accompanying friendships, business connections, and prestige) is outweighed by my increased aspirations and their attendant risk of disappointment and regret ("I got an MBA at a highly ranked school—why can't I land a lucrative position on Wall Street?"). A new job that is more highly compensated, more stimulating, and more gratifying than our old one will make us happy, but, before we know it, we begin to *require* high compensation, stimulation, and gratification to declare ourselves happy.

How do we prevent ourselves from taking our jobs for granted? One of the most effective-and the most difficult-strategies is to ratchet down our desires and curb the inflation of our expectations.²³⁰ I don't mean that we should expect less from our jobs. We should simply not allow our desires to continue escalating to the point where we end up feeling entitled and convinced that we would *only* be happy if we got more and more of this or that. Given the inherent challenges involved in reining in our aspirations, we will need a full arsenal of psychological tools at our disposal to accomplish it. I suggest trying, then fine-tuning multiple approaches (often at the same time) and not easily giving up. Five such psychological tools are described below.

CONCRETELY REEXPERIENCE

Remind yourself on a regular basis and in a tangible way what your former (less satisfying) work life was like.²³¹ If you were paid less, set certain time periods (say, one week per month) to limit your spending to match your earlier consumption habits. If you used to have unfriendly colleagues, have lunch by yourself once in a while. If you regularly worked nights, periodically force yourself to stay late again. Such reexperiencing will encourage you to appreciate your current job and to obtain more pleasure from it by simply remembering or mentally transporting yourself to (less fortunate) times past.

CONCRETELY OBSERVE

I visited one of Google's offices once to give a talk about happiness, and we ended up discussing how easily people adapt to the good things in life. A group of employees gave me a tour and told me how

they love their jobs but that they are totally spoiled by working at Google and feel that they can never work anywhere else. They have free hot lunch and dinner every day, an abundance of snacks, guest authors visiting, and plenty of games and toys (including a drum and guitar room). They can even bring their pets to work. They said that these perks seemed awesome when they first began their jobs but that they lost no time becoming accustomed to them and even found things to complain about (e.g., "Not the crab cakes again!"). My recommendation was that they should make an effort to observe other workplaces-maybe even their own former offices, if they could.

Make occasional visits to your friends', acquaintances', or former colleagues' places of business and unobtrusively compare them to yours. Such observations will leave a more lasting impression on you and help you feel a sense of privilege in your own work life.

BE GENUINELY GRATEFUL

Keep a gratitude journal- a list in your head, on paper, or in your smartphone²³²-that regularly helps you contemplate the positive aspects of your job. Nothing undermines gratitude like too-high expectations, and the higher your expectations, the less gratitude you will feel. If you expect to go home at five p.m. tomorrow, and then you do, it's highly unlikely that you'll be grateful for it. The problem with the practice of gratitude, however, is that it's extremely challenging to maintain and carry out in a sincere, genuine way. But so is maintaining a rigorous fitness program or a healthy diet or self-imposed daily practice on a musical instrument. The key is to muster effort and commitment-two attributes that are available to all of us.²³³

SHIFT YOUR REFERENCE POINT

When you think about your dream job, what is your reference point? For many of us, it's a higher-paying, less stressful, more engaging, more cushy, and more fulfilling one. Perhaps it's the job that our high school friend now has or the job featured in the article we read or in the movie we saw. More likely, our reference point is a fantasy job that may not really exist. Do you dream about being a pro football player, film director, senator, homicide detective, investigative journalist, neurosurgeon, best-selling author, or marine biologist? If you do, you are likely overlooking the fact that even such fabulous-sounding jobs have periods of high stress, monotony, possibly unpleasant colleagues, thankless tasks, exasperating outcomes, and long commutes. For example, the job of video game tester, ranked in the top twenty of "incredible dream jobs,"²³⁴ requires long stretches of concentration, which can be stressful and exhausting. As one such tester described her first full day of video game testing: "The last two hours, I feel nauseous. Severely so."²³⁵ Former international spies tell a similar story. According to Lindsay Moran, the author of *Blowing My Cover*: "You know, certainly I didn't expect it to be James Bond to a T, but at the end of the day, the CIA is a lot of people in sensible shoes sitting in cubicles, and that's kind of a reality that's probably a shock to a lot of people like me who come into the agency expecting something more glamorous."²³⁶

My point is that the dream job is a poor reference point. Change it to a more appropriate or gratitude-inducing one-like the similar but somewhat less rewarding position you once applied for, or the job you had before your promotion, or the completely dissimilar job in the nearby school, hospital, mall, farm, factory, or office park. Also important is to shift your reference point from time to

time, to exercise your ability to visualize alternative types of jobs and situations.

MAKE THIS DAY AT WORK YOUR "LAST"

I'm currently conducting a one-month-long "happiness intervention" in which participants are instructed to live the month as if it's their last month. Their instructions are not to pretend that they have a terminal disease but rather to imagine as fully and faithfully as possible that they are about to move a very long way from their jobs, schools, friends, and families for an indefinite period of time. Previous research hints that this exercise should prompt us to appreciate in a profound way what we are preparing to give up. When we believe that we are seeing (or hearing, doing, or experiencing) things for the last time, we will see (or hear, do, or experience) them as though it's the first time.²³⁷ Thus, the Google employees might appreciate afresh their crab cakes, the intellectual stimulation, and their pets under their desks; and we might appreciate our fair-minded manager, flexible schedule, and opportunities to travel.

FINAL THOUGHTS

You may have noticed that many of the foregoing techniques have the consequence of heightening our appreciation for our current jobs. This is no coincidence, as appreciation may be one of the most effective ways to rein in expectations. An authentic sense of gratitude for our career is simply incompatible with an addiction to ever-increasing levels of satisfaction.

An Indian student approached me at a conference once to tell me that her parents had had an arranged marriage and that she had al-

ways wondered how they made it work. When she asked, they told her that their secret—at least in their first years together—was having *no expectations at all!* "That way," her father said, "when my wife did anything wonderful— or nice or even ordinary—I was happy." It's truly remarkable to me how this couple managed to rein in their expectations. It must require talent, or at least very hard work. The lesson to the rest of us, however, is that if this couple can hold zero expectations, then we can at least succeed in restraining ours.

Nonetheless, a minor stumbling block remains. A great deal of research has shown that high goals and high expectations are critical in the domain of human performance.²³⁸ If we aim and expect to do well on a job interview, the medical boards, or a first date, we are more likely to succeed. Ambitious goals can foster self-confidence, fuel greater effort, combat anxiety, and create self-fulfilling prophecies. So, how do we reconcile these findings with the recommendation to *lower* our aspirations? The answer lies in considering, first, our history, and second, the domain in question.

First, do we have a history of flitting from job to job (or relationship to relationship and home to home)? If our position is truly unsatisfying or stagnant, then it's worth our efforts to aim in a different direction or to aim higher. But if, by most people's standards, we have a perfectly good job, then our expectations are overbalancing our reality and robbing us of all but the most fleeting pleasures.

Second, when I advise ratcheting down our aspirations about our jobs, I am referring to aspirations regarding our career, position, and work life in general ("Is this job good enough for me or do I deserve something better"), not to our specific work performance ("Am I confident about my PowerPoint presentation tomorrow?"). When it comes to our performance and specific accomplishments at work, we should always aim high.

BEATING THE ULTRADIAN DIP

On August 9, 2010, a JetBlue Airways jet arrived at John F. Kennedy International airport in New York from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. As it was taxiing down the runway, an altercation occurred between a passenger and a flight attendant. The flight attendant, Steven Slater, apparently decided that he couldn't take it anymore, directed several profanities at the passengers through the intercom ("Go f*** yourselves!"), grabbed two Blue Moon beers from the beverage cart ("I'm outta here!"), and deployed the emergency evacuation chute, sliding down and disappearing into popular history. Although the reckless deployment of the slide endangered individuals on the tarmac and cost the airline \$10,000, Slater became an instant working-class hero, striking a nerve with disgruntled employees everywhere who wished that they, too, could tell their bosses to take their job and shove it.

Yet we don't feel disaffected by our jobs all of the time. More likely, we experience the malaise or exasperation on a periodic basis. Would you be surprised to learn that these low points—the moments when you yearn to walk out or slide down the chute in brilliant fashion—occur every ninety minutes? If we understood this fact, we could anticipate those moments and head them off. The fed-up flight attendants and wage-earners of this world would think twice.

Most of us have heard of circadian rhythms—daily cycles that regulate when we feel sleepy (close to bedtime and throughout the night) and when we feel alert and awake (upon waking and throughout the day). The word *circadian* means "about a day," so a circadian rhythm occurs once in a twenty-four-hour period. The circadian rhythm is essentially our internal biological clock, which is sensitive to light and dark.

Few of us, however, have heard of another type of bodily cycle, called the ultradian rhythm. We cycle through ultradian stages every 90 minutes or so (but no longer than 120 minutes) during sleep. What's more, we continue to experience these 90- to 120-minute cycles while we are awake as well. Practically, this means that for about an hour and a half to two hours after rising in the morning, we feel particularly vigorous and focused-able to sustain concentration and energy throughout our activities. At the end of that interval, however, we experience a twenty-minute period of fatigue, lethargy, and difficulty concentrating. This is the "ultradian dip."

Business gurus have shrewdly commandeered these ideas to serve as the foundation for practical advice when they coach executives and leaders. Their message is that all employees should be aware of their ultradian rhythms and when they feel the twenty-minute period of flagging focus coming on, instead of pushing through it (thus risking inefficiency and errors), eating a candy bar, or smoking a cigarette, they should take a break that brings about revitalization and renewal. At these times we need to relax or switch our activity to something completely different—for example, take a twenty-minute power nap (the length shown to give us the most "bang for the buck"²³⁹), take a walk outdoors, meditate, listen to music, read a chapter of a novel, or gossip with colleagues (but not about work).²⁴⁰ In a study conducted with employees of twelve Wachovia banks in New Jersey, those who were prompted to renew their energies in these ways reported being more engaged and satisfied with their work, showed improved relationships with customers, and produced 13 percent more revenue from loans and 20 percent more revenue from deposits than did a control group.²⁴¹

Think back to the last time you felt particularly dissatisfied or stressed at work. It's highly probable that you were weathering one of those twenty-minute ultradian dips. This doesn't mean, of course,

that those feelings of disaffection or vexation aren't symptomatic of a real problem, but it means that we should be cautious about overinterpreting them. Many of us have moments when we feel powerfully that we've "had it"-with our careers, spouses, children, and even our lives. With hindsight, we recognize that these thoughts are typically ill-considered and short-lived. A sound tip is to be mindful that the ultradian rhythm recurs throughout the day and that the times when our bodies move from a high-energy peak to a low, lethargic trough are opportunities for our most pessimistic thoughts to occur. Before acting on any hasty decisions, neutralize your ultradian dips by taking relaxing, channel-switching breaks. If the thoughts persist and persist, then it's time to take them seriously.

EDITING THE MOVIE REEL OF YOUR LIFE AND VISUALIZING A BRIGHTER FUTURE

The feeling that our work is just not satisfying anymore may wash over us one day, and when it does, it may be so powerful that we won't be able to see past it. Any of the job's virtues from the past or possibilities for growth in the future will pale next to the force and vividness of that day's emotions. Before we allow the feeling to dictate our actions and decisions, we must step back and impartially review our past experiences and our future possibilities.

YOUR PAST

In the memoir Christopher Reeve published five years before he died, the actor who was, to many people, Superman before a riding

accident left him a quadriplegic, wrote the following: "It took me quite a while to learn that the movie reel and real life were two different things. This continues to be helpful to me today when I remember that the stories of my life, my interpretations of events, are like a movie reel and that I can change those reels."²⁴² This is a profound insight, suggesting that our past is neither a completely blank slate nor a fixed set of circumstances, experiences, and events. Rather, we have a degree of control over our story, because we have control over which experiences we emphasize and which we minimize, which events we selectively remember and which we forget, which circumstances are vivid in our minds and which are faint or distorted. Do we truly believe that the last eight years of our careers have been a misspent, unproductive, and unrewarding slog? If yes, how biased and invested are we in culling the evidence from our work history to support this view? Might an objective observer reach an entirely different conclusion? To choose the best course of action for yourself, these questions-and their implications-should be considered honestly. Writing out the evidence for both the pessimistic and optimistic view of our work experiences may help illuminate the facts and clear our vision.

YOUR FUTURE

Although we have a great deal of control over how we view and experience our past, we possess many times that amount of control over how we view our future. The reason is obvious: The future has not yet come to pass and thus is rife with possibilities, opportunities, and unexplored vistas. Unfortunately, instead of envisioning an attractive future landscape for our current work life, many of us fixate on the mountains of obstacles along the way. Instead, it's far easier

(and more enjoyable) for us to indulge in "escape fantasies," which allow us to imagine an alternate dream job that has all the positives we currently lack and, of course, none of the negatives.

Before we pack it in to track down that dream job, I think it's critical to reexamine our predictions about what may happen in our current one. For example, in the same way that cognitive therapists teach their depressed patients to combat their negative thoughts ("My manager has it in for me") by finding evidence that disconfirms them ("She complimented my work last week in front of the whole department"), we can learn to rethink and dispute our pessimistic predictions. As I previously discussed, I don't propose that we should persuade ourselves to believe that everything will be forever rosy. Positive future-thinking can simply mean saying to ourselves, "Look, this project is going to be hard, but I'll get through it" or "My past few assignments have been mind-numbing, but if history's any guide, there'll be a big challenge coming soon." The bottom line is that we train ourselves to construe the periods of stress or monotony in our work as short-lived and contained, as opposed to long-lasting and with far-reaching implications. This new perspective will provide clarity about how truly miserable-or reasonable- our current job really is.

I'M NOT GETTING POWERFUL OR FAMOUS OR WINNING A NOBEL PRIZE

We had grand ambitions. We worked hard. We did many of the right things. Yet, despite our efforts and accomplishments and some turns of luck, we are struck one day with the idea that our success has stalled and fizzled. We see friends, friends of friends, and former

colleagues outdistance us, leaving us in the dust. While our career has flatlined, they are celebrating prosperous businesses, buying second (and third) homes, appearing as talking heads on television, and being lionized at awards ceremonies. What has gone wrong? Why aren't we among the 2.1 million Americans considered top executives?²⁴³ Why haven't our talents been recognized?

When we find ourselves dwelling on such questions, it's time to step back and reexamine our priorities, our goals, and our reference points. Like the feeling that our work is no longer fulfilling, this crossroads is fueled by the happiness myth that "I'll only be happy when . . . I am successful" and thereby has the potential to create false feelings of dissatisfaction. However, the sense that we have failed to achieve our professional dreams calls for new recommendations. Following the suggestions I describe below will help us weigh our accomplishments more realistically and more forgivingly and prevent these nagging questions from arising in the first place.

THROWING OFF PERNICIOUS COMPARISONS WITH OTHERS

Much of the time, it's impossible *not* to compare ourselves with others. Whenever we have dinner at a friend's house or ask our neighbors or spouses how their day is going or turn on the television set, we are inundated with information about other people's victories and tragedies, opinions, lifestyles, personalities, and marriages. We are bombarded by images of Hollywood mansions versus garden apartments, beautiful faces versus overfed bodies, violin virtuosos versus inept has-beens. We are confronted with individuals whose successes seem to magnify the degree of our own squandered potential-people whose careers seem to exist solely as a rebuke to our own.

Social comparisons arise naturally, automatically, and effortlessly. Not surprisingly, studies have shown that comparing ourselves with others-whether it is a child noticing that his classmate has a cooler backpack or an executive finding out that she is making a higher salary than her colleague-has a profound effect not only on our evaluations of ourselves, but on our moods and our emotional well-being.²⁴⁴ Indeed, it's comparisons to other people that are primarily to blame for our feelings of inadequacy and discontent. For most of us, feelings of deficiency or not living up to some lofty standard stem from observing others' successes, real or imagined. Instead of asking ourselves, "Does my career (or productivity or income) meet my needs?" we ask "How good is my career, my productivity, and my income compared with my neighbor's?" Instead of feeling personally richer and richer, we instead feel that we are attaining new levels of relative poverty.²⁴⁵

Yet we cannot simply close our eyes to all comparisons or pay no heed to other people. Mindful of this fact, during my third year of graduate school, I began investigating the question of what can be done about the comparisons we make. This line of research, as we shall see shortly, revealed that the secret to being satisfied with our achievements lies not in ignoring other people's strengths and accomplishments, but in not suffering the negative consequences of those observations. In other words, don't let the social comparisons get to you.

I conducted a series of studies to test whether those of us who have the capacity to shrug off the sting of unfavorable comparisons with our peers are indeed happier about ourselves and our lives in general than those who do not.²⁴⁶ For example, in one experiment, I brought in two volunteers at the same time and asked each of them to use two hand puppets- Chipmunk and Otter-to teach a lesson about friendship to an imaginary audience of first-graders.²⁴⁷ The

two volunteers took turns doing this in front of a one-way screen while being ostensibly evaluated and videotaped. After they were finished, we created a small deception by leading each volunteer to believe that he or she had performed very poorly on this task (that is, that they received an average rating from judges of 2 out of 7), but also to believe that the second volunteer had performed even worse than they had (receiving a disappointing rating of only 1). By contrast, a second group of volunteers were led to believe that they had performed extremely well (having obtained an average score from judges of 6 out of 7), but that their peer had performed even better (receiving an outstanding score of 7). I also had some participants do the task alone-without a peer-and receive either "excellent" or "poor" feedback without learning anything about how another participant might have performed.

Years later, I'm still somewhat taken aback by the results. To analyze the data, I divided my participants into those who, before performing, reported being very happy and those who reported being relatively unhappy. When I examined the "before" and "after" data of my very happy participants, I found that those who learned that they had performed very poorly reported feeling less positive, less confident, and more sad after the study was over. Their reaction to ostensible failure was perfectly natural and not at all surprising. By contrast, the very happy participants who learned that they had performed extremely well (a 6 out of 7) subsequently felt better on all dimensions, and, notably, learning that someone did *even better* did not dilute the pleasure of their ostensible success.

The results for my unhappiest participants, however, were dramatic. Their reactions, it appears, were governed more by the reviews they heard given to their peer than by their own feedback. Indeed, the study paints a stark and quite unpleasant portrait of an unhappy person. My unhappiest volunteers reported feeling happier and more

secure when they had received a poor evaluation (but heard that their peer did even worse) than when they had received an excellent evaluation (but heard that their peer did even better). It appears that unhappy individuals have bought into the sardonic maxim attributed to Gore Vidal: "For true happiness, it is not enough to be successful oneself . . . One's friends must fail."

My conclusion from this study, as well as half a dozen other studies I have conducted on this topic, is that when we ask ourselves the question, "How good (successful, smart, affable, prosperous, ethical) am I?" those of us who typically rely on our own internal, objective standards are happiest. Such habits render us less likely to be buffeted by the winds of external judgments and outside realities (e.g., discovering that our neighbor is directing a television pilot or that our former classmate is on the cover of *California Lawyer*). By contrast, those of us who base our self-evaluations on comparisons with others are the unhappy ones, and the practice turns out to be rather unwise. Think about it: Feeling glum or personally deflated as a result of other people's successes, accomplishments, and triumphs, and feeling relieved rather than disappointed or sympathetic in the face of other people's failures and undoings is a poor prescription for happiness.

The habit of social comparison begins early in life. In childhood, we learn that good performance is most frequently measured in relative terms. We're often being compared with the good manners of our siblings, the talents of our classmates, and even with the As and trophies that our parents earned as children. Consequently, we have been conditioned to want to learn how we stand relative to others, and preferably, learn that we are better off. As a result of this early conditioning, making social comparisons is unavoidable and inevitable. The habit is so deeply ingrained that, like humans, even capuchin monkeys have been found to be sensitive to comparisons with

their simian peers.²⁴⁸ However, because there is always someone better off-wealthier, more talented, more popular, or slimmer-those comparisons will make us feel bad more often than they will make us feel good.²⁴⁹ The goal, as my studies show, is to rely a little less on others when determining our self-worth and to rely a little more on our personal standards.

If you conclude one day that you haven't "made it," is that conclusion based on your personal goals or on some norm or standard set by others? Are your feelings about your past triumphs (or lack thereof) dictated by what other people think? If your answer is yes, my research suggests that you should strive to ignore such invidious social comparisons whenever possible- for example, by crying "stop" or distracting yourself immediately with a pleasant task when you catch yourself doing it. And when it's not possible to turn a blind eye, you should strive to experience *schlep naches* (Yiddish for "deriving pleasure from the achievement of others") rather than *schadenfreude* (German for "deriving pleasure from the misfortune of others"). When "there is no expense, no feeling of impoverishment, no hints of anxiety connected with discovering that somebody else is much better than you are in a particular field,"²⁵⁰ you will have achieved greater maturity-and hence, happiness-than the average person. Instead of bemoaning your lack of achievements, you will recognize your efforts up to now and take action to reach the next step.

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS AND THE HAPPINESS OF PURSUIT

Perhaps your worries about not having attained what you wanted to attain at this point in your life are not entirely unfounded. If so, then

your priority would be to remedy the situation—to identify what you are passionate about and to take action to pursue it. A great deal of research—some old and classic, some new and leading-edge—suggests the optimal ways for us to inspire ourselves, find meaningful goals, and strive toward them. Applying these findings to our own lives will increase the likelihood that we will be happier and more successful. Yet we must always bear in mind that the realization of our dream is not the magic formula for happiness; as I explain below, the striving's the thing,

When scientists study "goal pursuit," they are essentially studying the infinite variety of projects, schemes, plans, tasks, endeavors, ventures, missions, and ambitions (both large and small) that we undertake in our daily lives. When it comes to our vocations and avocations, numerous investigations have shown that those of us who are merely *striving* (and not necessarily achieving) are happier, especially when our goals with respect to work and hobbies are realistic, flexible, valued by our cultures, authentic, not materialistic, and not impinging negatively on other aspects of our lives.²⁵¹

However, the research exposes an irony. The crisis point at the heart of this section concerns our anxiety about not having yet achieved our dreams, yet the empirical evidence reveals that the critical factor in whether goal pursuit makes us happy lies in enjoying the journey and *not* in realizing the end-goal (dream). This finding, of course, contradicts many people's strong beliefs and intuitions that goal achievement is the gold standard. Indeed, it contradicts one of the primary myths of happiness, which tells us to wait for happiness until we realize our dreams. Yet when we finally land that part in a Broadway play or that promotion or that award, we feel an immediate thrill, but that thrill is often followed by satiety, increased expectations, and even letdown.²⁵² After economist and *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman learned that he had won the

long-coveted Nobel Prize, "His wife Robin's reaction, once the initial thrill wore off, was 'Paul, you don't have time for this.'"²⁵³ In similar fashion, one of my colleagues won his field's highest honor, the American Psychological Association Distinguished Scientist Award. When asked how long the happiness boost lasted, he replied, "One day."

By contrast, if we enjoy the struggle along the way, we will derive pleasure and satisfaction by simply pursuing or working on our goal. We will ideally stretch our skills, discover novel opportunities, grow, strive, learn, and become more capable and expert. Whether in our chosen fields or hobbies, our gradually added knowledge and expertise will afford progressively increased opportunities for appreciation and delight, as well as the satisfaction (according to some scientists) of our innate need for being challenged and using our potentials to the fullest. Whether our valued goal is inventing something special or finishing school, it will give us something to work for and to look forward to.

Furthermore, goal pursuit in and of itself imparts structure and meaning to our daily lives, creating obligations, deadlines, and timetables, as well as opportunities for mastering new skills and for interacting with others. Hence, in the course of our pursuits, we may attain a sense of purpose in our lives, feelings of efficacy over our progress, and mastery over our time. All of these things make people happy. And once we accomplish a step along the way (e.g., completing an internship or an article), we would do well to savor that accomplished step or subgoal (which should deservedly give us a small emotional and ego boost), before moving on from the accomplished goal to a new one.²⁵⁴ In sum, instead of focusing too much on the finish line in the first place, we should focus on-and enjoy as much as possible-carrying out the multiple steps necessary to make progress.

THE BILLION-DOLLAR QUESTION

Numerous writers and researchers, from Malcolm Gladwell (author of *The Tipping Point* and *Outliers*) to Dean Simonton (creativity scholar at the University of California, Davis), have explored the question of what makes people successful.²⁵⁵ Is it innate intelligence or hard work? Is it conscientiousness or talent? Many have concluded that the simple answer is diligence—namely, that we need to put in approximately ten thousand hours of a particular kind of effort, or deliberate practice, before we can expect to become a true expert or success in any field, whether it's playing the violin, writing novels, pitching baseballs, or performing brain surgery. I have found these arguments extremely interesting and persuasive,²⁵⁶ but I have always believed that a critical piece was missing from the discussion. That piece is really the billion-dollar question: How do we compel ourselves to complete those ten thousand hours?²⁵⁷ Where does one get the spark or motivation to force oneself to practice the violin for five hours a day or, as Benjamin Franklin did, to laboriously copy out and rewrite entire published essays (from prose to verse and back again)? Where does one come by the drive to get up at five a.m. every morning to accomplish these things? If the answer is either inborn temperament (that some are naturally more driven and conscientious than others) or the presence of a draconian parent, spouse, or trainer,²⁵⁸ then many people's hopes for achieving some semblance of greatness are likely fruitless.

The research doesn't bear out this pessimistic conclusion, however. We now know a great deal about that spark or motivation we need to give our all; we know what undermines it and we have some good ideas about what might stimulate it. Essentially, whether we want to be a small-business owner, filmmaker, policy analyst, insurance broker, or food blogger, we are much more likely to sue-

ceed and to be happy trying if we are working toward these goals because they are inherently interesting and enjoyable to us, or if working toward them conveys our most important values—in other words, if our motivation is intrinsic.²⁵⁹

Although any goal—even a misguided or malicious one—can potentially be intrinsic, generally speaking, the ideal goals are ones that nourish our basic drives to grow, feel competent and self-sufficient, connect with others, and contribute to our communities. It makes us unhappy—and less likely to succeed—when we are pursuing goals that are not truly our own and when we are doing so simply to obtain approval (say, from our parents or colleagues) or to avoid guilt. Such "extrinsic" goals include striving to become rich, beautiful, popular, powerful, or famous.²⁶⁰

When you pursue a career or undertaking for its own sake, you are more likely to experience intense concentration, engagement, flow, curiosity, and persistence. But how do you acquire that kind of spirit and motivation? You have to begin at the beginning. That is, the most important pivot point is the one from which you initially make your choice of what it is you really want. Ask yourself the following questions about your so-far unrealized ambition or dream.

Is your goal—say, to start your own business—attainable?

Who is the owner of the goal—you or someone else?

- Does it conflict with a long-held plan (e.g., to spend a lot of time with family or travel around the world)?

Do you truly feel "yourself" when you are pursuing your ambition or fantasizing about it?

Do you expect to grow in the process or to develop lasting relationships?

Would you still do it if the compensation were much more modest?

You don't have to agree with these sentiments *all* the time. I have a passion for my work yet I'm still peeved when it encroaches too much on my family/leisure time or when it is a grind. But if your answer is a broad no to at least two of these questions, it will be extremely challenging, if not impossible, to will an intrinsic motivation that isn't there. In that case, you will want to shift your priorities and goals—for example, from running a bank to running a nonprofit, from wealth to philanthropy, from teaching to writing, or from writing to teaching. Alternatively, it is sometimes possible to reframe your work. Perhaps there is a noble purpose behind it that you have not considered. Perhaps you have a talent—writing, public speaking, networking, organization—that has gone unnoticed and that you can bring to bear in your current position.

Finally, if there are repetitive or dead spells in your work, perhaps you can take advantage of them by growing in some way. Many jobs involve periods of time in which you are waiting for something to happen. A sales associate may be idle waiting for the next sale and a cabbie waiting for the next ride. Other occupations involve manual tasks—typing letters, clicking through online ads, machine work, house painting—that leave the mind to wander. Why not use that time to learn or grow? For example, long-haul truckers, data entry clerks, and halibut fishermen report discovering new ideas and enjoying their days more when they spend their work time listening to podcast courses from universities all over the world on such diverse topics as existential philosophy, world classics, and theoretical physics.²⁶¹

Once we have chosen or reframed our goals in such a way that they become personally meaningful, need-satisfying, and compel-

ling, we can draw on several other lines of research to sustain our commitment and drive. First, studies show that we are many times more likely to succeed when we make a public resolution to accomplish something, whether it's to apply for that long-delayed certification or to begin a full-time job search.²⁶² Second, we should make great efforts to win over those who are closest to us about the value of our pursuits and then engage and cultivate their aid and comfort. We will be much more successful at keeping our motivation alive if our partners or best friends not only support our dreams, but if they inspire us by treating us as though we already possess the expertise, authority, accomplishment, or title that we seek.²⁶³

Finally, we would do well to follow psychologist Abraham Maslow's recommendation to choose growth over security—in other words, to take potentially worthwhile risks instead of choosing to do what is known, comfortable, and familiar. Consider your pursuit of that elusive dream—the one you are distressed over not having accomplished yet—and ask yourself whether taking a risk might bring a potentially large payoff. Writing out two columns—one for a list of the anticipated benefits and one for the likely costs—will help you to reveal the answer. I'm not partial to the expression "moving out of our comfort zone," but that is essentially what I am suggesting we attempt—that is, do something to advance our dreams that we have wanted to reach but have been reluctant to follow. People who have tried this exercise find it extremely challenging, yet also expanding, empowering, and inspiring.²⁶⁴

THE PREPARED MIND

If we have lived our life with the belief that winning the perfect job will bring a lifetime of happiness, it can be deeply distressing to learn

that once that job is ours, the resulting happiness is not as great, or as enduring, as we imagined it to be. In other words, at the root of this happiness myth is the misconception that, although we're not happy now, we'll surely be happy when we make partner at our firm, when we're managing our own projects, when we land our first gallery exhibition, when we sell our screenplay, when we're running our own store, or when we win the Nobel Prize. We encounter a problem, however, when acquiring that seemingly perfect job doesn't make us as happy as we expected and when that happiness is ever so brief. What explains this unwelcome experience is the inexorable process of hedonic adaptation. Hence, a critical first step is to understand that everyone becomes habituated to the novelty, excitement, and challenges of a new job or venture. This new awareness will suggest to us an alternative explanation for our occupational malaise. To wit, there may be nothing wrong with the job or with our motivation or with our work ethic. The fact may be that we are simply experiencing a naturally occurring, all-too-human process.

The second step is to understand what it is that we can proactively do to slow down or even reverse the process of getting progressively bored with our jobs, and to start practicing the relevant strategies as soon as possible. If such efforts are ultimately futile, if the job is truly substandard, or if the work is a poor fit for our preferences and abilities, then we'll be more confident that moving on is a decision we have made with a prepared mind—that is, one based on reasoned analysis and effort, not on emotion-based gut instinct.

Alternatively, we may find ourselves deeply discontented because we are not at the point in our professional lives today that we thought we would be. Yet the message of this chapter is that if we want success-recognition, authority, rewards—because we think our happiness depends on it, we are limiting our happiness now and jeopardizing it in the future. The reason comes from a storm of re-

search, which fortunately (or unfortunately) can be summarized with a cliché: "Happiness does not come from outside of us; it dwells within." As trite as this statement might seem, sometimes a truth is disguised as a truism. We may genuinely bemoan the fact that we have not yet attained this or that (while our friends have), and this bemoaning genuinely makes us unhappy, but the attainment of this or that is not the answer to our unhappiness. Distracting ourselves from toxic comparisons, concentrating on our own internal standards, and focusing on the journey in pursuit of our dreams, rather than on the end result, will redirect our attention and energies from the "I'll be happy *when* " mentality and toward more fruitful horizons.