

*The Art and Science  
of Getting Happier*

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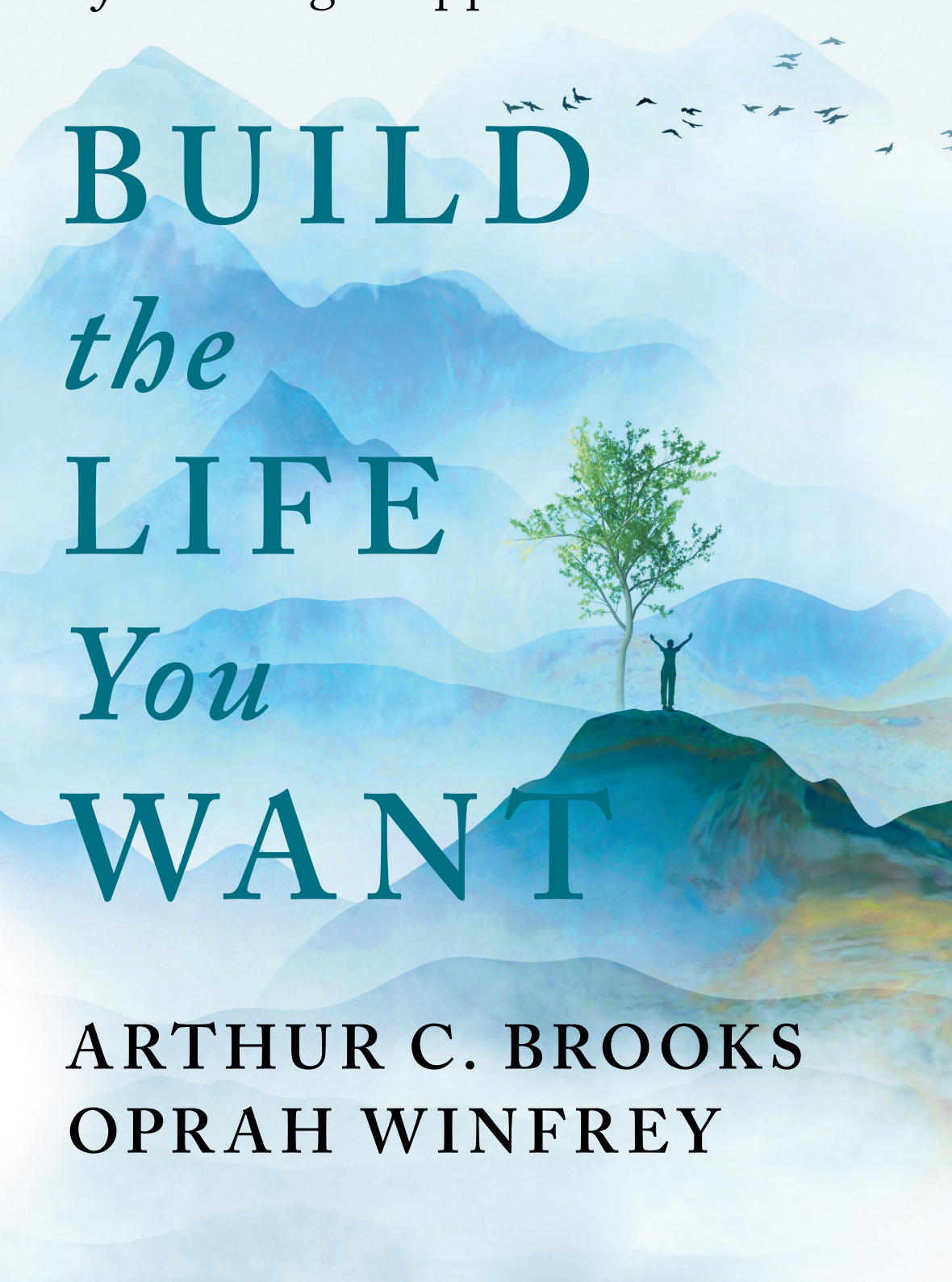
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**LIFE**

*You*

**WANT**

**ARTHUR C. BROOKS  
OPRAH WINFREY**



# Build the Life You Want

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Build  
the Life  
You Want



*The Art and Science of  
Getting Happier*

Arthur C. Brooks  
*and*  
Oprah Winfrey



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Rider, an imprint of Ebury Publishing  
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road  
London SW1V 2SA

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Book Design by Meighan Cavanaugh

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First published in Great Britain in 2023 by Rider  
First published in the United States in 2023 by Portfolio / Penguin,  
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC

[www.penguin.co.uk](http://www.penguin.co.uk)

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 9781846047824  
Trade paperback ISBN 9781846047831

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,  
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

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*We dedicate this book to you on your life's journey.*

*May you get happier, year after year, and  
bring greater happiness to others.*

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## A Note from Oprah

One of the many things I got from doing *The Oprah Winfrey Show* for twenty-five years was a front-row seat to unhappiness. Of every, and I mean every, kind. My guests included people devastated by tragedy, or betrayal, or deep disappointment. Angry people and people who held grudges. People full of regret and guilt, shame and fear. People doing everything in their power to numb their unhappiness but waking up each day unhappy anyway.

I also witnessed abundant happiness. People who had found love and friendship. People using their talents and abilities to do good things. People who reaped the rewards of selflessness and giving, including one person who'd even donated a kidney to a stranger he'd recently met. People with a spiritual side that brought richer meaning to their lives. People who'd been given a second chance.

Where the audience was concerned, the unhappy guests generally provoked empathy; the happy ones, admiration (and maybe a

twinge of wistful envy). And then there was a third category of guest that audiences didn't know *what* to make of but were genuinely inspired by: people who had every reason to be unhappy and yet were not. The lemonade-making, silver-linings-finding, bright-side-looking-glass-half-fullers. The Mattie Stepaneks, is how I came to think of them—Mattie Stepanek being the boy who had a rare and fatal form of muscular dystrophy called dysautonomic mitochondrial myopathy, yet managed to find peace in all things and play after every storm. He wrote lovely poetry, was wise beyond his years, and was the first guest I ever befriended beyond the show. I used to call him my angel guy.

How could a boy with a fatal disease be as happy as Mattie was? Same with the mother who was full of peace and purpose and actual joy even as she was preparing to die, recording hundreds of voice tapes for her then-six-year-old daughter about how to live. And the Zimbabwean woman who was married at age eleven, beaten daily, yet instead of giving in to despair, maintained hope, set secret goals, and eventually achieved them—including earning a PhD.

How could these people even get out of bed in the morning, let alone be such rays of light? How did they do it? Were they born that way? Was there a secret or pattern of development the rest of the world should know? Because trust me, if there *was* such a thing, the world would definitely want to know. In my twenty-five years of doing the show, if there was one thing almost everyone in every audience had in common, it was the desire to be happy. As I've said before, after every show I'd chat with the audience, and I always asked what they most wanted in life. To be happy, they'd say. Just to be happy. Just happiness.

Except, as I've also said before, when I asked what happiness was,

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people suddenly weren't sure. They'd hem and haw and finally say "losing X number of pounds" or "having enough money to pay my bills" or "my kids—I just want my kids to be happy." So they had *goals*, or *wishes*, but they couldn't articulate what happiness looked like. Seldom did anyone have a real answer.

This book has the answer, because Arthur Brooks has studied and researched and lived the answer.

I first came across Arthur through his column in *The Atlantic*, "How to Build a Life." I started reading it during the pandemic and it quickly became something I looked forward to every week because it was all about what I've always cared most about: living a life with purpose and meaning. Then I read his book *From Strength to Strength*, a remarkable guide to becoming happier as you age. This man was singing my song.

Clearly, I had to talk to him. And when I did, I instantly realized that if I'd still been doing *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, I would have been calling on him all the time—he would have had something relevant and revealing to contribute to almost every topic we discussed. Arthur exudes a kind of confidence and certainty about the meaning of happiness that's both comforting and galvanizing. He's able to talk both broadly and very specifically about the very same things I've been talking about for years: how to grow into your best self, how to become a better human being. So I knew from the start that I would somehow end up working with him. That somehow is this book.

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## A Note from Arthur

**Y**ou must naturally be a very happy person.”

I hear this all the time. It makes sense, after all: I teach courses on happiness at Harvard University. I write a regular happiness column for *The Atlantic*. I speak about the science of happiness all around the world. So, people assume, I must have natural gifts for happiness, like a professional basketball player must be a naturally gifted athlete. Lucky me, right?

But happiness isn't like basketball. You don't have a leg up on becoming a happiness specialist by being blessed with natural well-being. On the contrary, naturally happy people almost never study happiness, because to them, it doesn't seem like something one needs to study, or even think much about. It would be like studying air.

The truth is that I write, speak, and teach about happiness precisely because it's naturally hard for me, and I want more of it. My

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baseline well-being level—the level where I would sit if I didn't study it and work on it every day—is significantly lower than average. It's not as if I have had huge trauma or unusual suffering. No one should feel sorry for me. It just runs in the family: my grandfather was gloomy; my father was anxious; left to my own devices, I am gloomy and anxious. Just ask my wife of thirty-two years, Ester. (She's nodding *yes* as she reads this.) So my work as a social scientist isn't research—it's *me*-search.

If you are coming to this book because you are not as happy as you want to be—whether because you are suffering from something in particular, or you have a good life “on paper” but always find yourself struggling—you are the kind of person I relate to best. We are kindred spirits.

When I started studying happiness twenty-five years ago as a PhD student, I didn't know if academic knowledge would help. I feared that happiness wasn't something you could change in a meaningful way. Maybe it was like astronomy, I thought. You can learn about the stars, but you can't change them. And in fact, for a long time, my knowledge didn't help me very much. I knew a lot, but it wasn't practical in any way. It was just observations about who the happiest people were—and the unhappiest.

A decade ago during a particularly dark and stormy time in my life, Ester asked a question that changed my thinking. “Why don't you use all that complicated research to see if there are ways you can change your own habits?” Obvious, right? For some reason, it wasn't obvious to me at all, but I was willing to try. I started spending more time observing my well-being levels to pick out patterns. I studied the nature of my suffering and the benefits I likely derived

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from it. I set up a series of experiments based on the data, trying things like making a gratitude list, praying more, and pursuing the opposite behavior of my inclination when I was sad and angry (which was pretty often).

And I saw results. As a matter of fact, it worked so well that in my spare time from my job running a large nonprofit organization, I started writing about happiness and real-life applications in *The New York Times* to share them with others. People began to get in touch to say the science of happiness—translated into practical advice—was helping them, too. And I found that teaching ideas in this way solidified the knowledge in my mind and made me even happier.

Obviously, I wanted more. So I changed careers. At the age of fifty-five, I quit my chief executive job, with a plan to write, speak, and teach about the science of happiness. I started by creating a simple personal mission statement for myself.

I dedicate my work to lifting people up and bringing them together, in bonds of love and happiness, using science and ideas.

I accepted a professorship at Harvard University and created a class on the science of happiness, which quickly became oversubscribed. Then I started a regular column on the subject at *The Atlantic* that found a readership of hundreds of thousands a week. I investigated a new happiness topic every week by using my background as a quantitative researcher to read the cutting-edge psychology, neuroscience, economics, and philosophy. Then I turned

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the learnings into real-life experiments on myself. When it worked, I would teach my students what I learned, and publish it publicly for a mass audience.

As the years turned over, I saw more and more progress in my life. I observed how my brain was processing negative emotions and learned how to manage these emotions without trying to get rid of them. I began to see relationships as an interplay between hearts and brains, and not some inscrutable mystery. I started adopting the habits of the happiest people that I saw in the data, and whom I knew in my real life (including someone very special, whom you will meet in the Introduction that comes next). At the same time, I began to hear from people all around the world—some I had never heard of, others very famous—who were learning with me that they could raise their own happiness levels if they did the work to learn and apply their knowledge.

In the years since I made this life change, my own well-being has risen *a lot*. People notice and remark that I smile more, and I look like I'm having more fun in my work. My relationships are better than they were. And I have seen improvements like this in students, business leaders, and ordinary people who learn the principles. Many of them have experienced pain and loss beyond anything I have ever faced, and found joy even amid their suffering.

I still have plenty of bad days, and I have a long way to go, but today I am comfortable with my bad days, and I know how to grow from them. I know rough times will come, but I'm not afraid of them. And I am confident that there is a lot of progress in my future.

Sometimes I think back to myself at thirty-five or forty-five years old, when I was so rarely joyful and looked to the future with

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a sense of resignation. If fifty-nine-year-old me went back in time and said, “You are going to learn to be happier, and teach the secrets to others,” I probably would have said that future me had gone insane. But it’s true (the getting happier part—not the going insane part).

And now I am privileged to team up in my work with someone I have admired since I was a young man—a person who herself has lifted up millions of people in bonds of love and happiness all over the world: Oprah Winfrey. When we first met, we quickly realized that we shared a mission, even though we pursued it in different ways—I in academia, and Oprah in mass media.

Our mission in this book is to tie together the two strands of our work, to open up the amazing science of happiness to people in all walks of life, who can use it to live better and lift up others. In plain language, we seek to help you see that you are not helpless against the tides of life, but that with a greater understanding of how your mind and brain work, you can build the life you want, starting inside with your emotions, and then turning outward to your family, friendships, work, and spiritual life.

It worked for us, and it can work for you, too.

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## Introduction

# Albina's Secret

**F**rom Arthur: *Albina Quevedo, my mother-in-law, whom I loved like my own mother, lay in her bed in the small Barcelona apartment she had occupied for the past seventy years. The bedroom's austere decor had never changed: a picture on one wall of her native Canary Islands; a simple crucifix on another. This was what she saw nearly twenty-four hours a day, since a fall two years earlier had left her in pain and unable to get up or walk by herself. At ninety-three, she knew she was in her last months.*

*Her body was weak, but her mind was still sharp and her memories vivid. She talked about decades past, times when she was youthful, healthy, newly married, and starting her beloved family. She reminisced about parties and days at the beach with close friends, now long dead. She laughed as she remembered those good times.*

*"Such a difference with my life now," she said. She turned her head*

*on the pillow and looked out the window for a long time, lost in thought. Turning back, she said, "I am much happier than I was back then."*

*She looked over at my surprised face, and explained. "I know it sounds strange because my life now seems bleak, but it's true," she said with a smile. "As I've aged, I have learned the secret to getting happier."*

*I was all ears now.*

*As I sat at her bedside, Albina recounted the trials of her life. As a little girl in the 1930s, she had lived through the brutal Spanish Civil War, some of it in hiding, often going hungry and seeing death and suffering all around her. Her father was arrested and spent years in prison for serving on the losing side of that conflict as a battlefield surgeon. Despite that, she always saw her childhood as a happy one, because her parents loved her and loved each other, and this love was the memory that endured most clearly. And speaking of love, the man in the prison cell next to her father's introduced her to her future husband.*

*So far, so good. But that's when trouble started for Albina. After a few good years and the births of three children, her husband turned out to be less than stellar, abandoning her without child support and plunging them into poverty. Her sadness over being deserted was compounded by the pressures of raising kids alone, while sometimes wondering if she could keep the lights on.*

*For several years, she felt stuck and miserable, concluding that a happier life was unavailable as long as the world dealt her this very bad hand. Almost every day, she would look out the front window of her small apartment and cry.*

*Who could blame her? Her poverty and loneliness, which made her miserable, were not of her doing—they had been imposed on her, and she couldn't see a way to change them. As long as her circumstances*

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*didn't change, her unhappiness would persist, and a better life seemed impossible.*

*One day, when Albina was forty-five, something changed for her. For reasons that were not clear to her friends and family, her outlook on life seemed to shift. It's not that she was suddenly less lonely, or that she mysteriously came into money, but for some reason, she stopped waiting for the world to change and took control of her life.*

*The most obvious change she made was to enroll in college to become a teacher. It wasn't easy. Studying day and night alongside students half her age, while raising a family, was completely exhausting, but it was a life-changing success. At the end of three years Albina finished college at the top of her class.*

*She now embarked on a new career she loved, teaching in an economically marginalized neighborhood where she served children and families in poverty. She truly became her own person, was able to support her own kids with her own money, and made friends she would cherish and who would be by her side until her last days—and who would openly weep at her funeral.*

*More than a decade later, Albina's wayward husband wanted to return; they had never formally divorced. She considered it and took him back—not because she needed to, but because she wanted to. Her husband found Albina completely changed in his fourteen years away: she was stronger and, well, happier. They never separated again, and in their later years, he was a different person as well, caring for her lovingly. He had died three years earlier.*

*"We were happily married for fifty-four years," she said. Then, clarifying with a smile: "Technically, that's sixty-eight years married, minus the fourteen unhappy ones."*

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*Now here she was at age ninety-three, with her circumstances once again limiting her, but her joy undiminished—and even increasing. I wasn't the only one who noticed; everyone marveled at the way her happiness grew as she aged.*

*What was her secret to turning the corner at forty-five toward a better life—and getting happier for nearly five decades after that?*

## THE SECRET

Some people might dismiss Albina's story by saying that she was a rare person with a natural gift for making lemonade out of lemons. But her perspective on life wasn't innate; it was learned and cultivated. She wasn't just "naturally happy." On the contrary, by her own account, she was quite unhappy for a long time before her big change.

Or one might say she was just really good at "whistling past the graveyard"—ignoring the bad things in life. But that's not true, either. She never denied that bad things had happened, or pretended she wasn't suffering now. She knew full well that getting old was going to be hard; that losing friends and loved ones was going to be sad; that being sick would be scary and painful. She didn't get happier by blocking out those realities.

Something happened that changed Albina and set her free. Three things, actually.

First, one day in her midforties, a simple thought occurred to her. She had always believed that getting happier required the outside world to change. After all, her problems came from outside—from bad luck and the behavior of others. This was comfortable in a way, but it left her in a kind of suspended animation.

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Just maybe, she thought, even if she couldn't change her circumstances, she could change her own *reaction* to those circumstances. She couldn't decide how the world would treat her, but maybe she had some say in how she would feel about it. Maybe she didn't have to wait for the difficulty or suffering in her life to diminish to start getting on with business.

She began to look for decisions in her life where once there were only impositions. The despairing hopelessness of feeling herself to be at the mercy of her estranged husband, of the economy, of the needs of her children, began to subside. Her circumstances weren't the boss of how she felt about life—she was.

Up to that point, Albina said, she had felt like she was stuck in a bad job at a terrible company. Now she had awakened to realize that she had been the CEO all along. That didn't mean she could snap her fingers and make everything perfect—CEOs suffer in bad times, too—but it did mean she had a lot of power over her own life, and it could lead to all sorts of good things down the line.

Further, Albina took action based on that realization. She switched from wishing others were different to working on the one person she could control: herself. She felt negative emotions just like anyone else, but she set about making more conscious choices about how to react to them. The decisions she made—not her primal feelings—led her to try to transform less productive emotions into positive ones such as gratitude, hope, compassion, and humor. She also worked to focus more on the world around her and less on her own problems. None of this was easy, but she got better at it with practice, and it felt more and more natural as the weeks and months went by.

Finally, managing herself freed Albina to focus on the pillars

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on which she could construct a much better life: her family, her friendships, her work, and her faith. Successfully managing herself, Albina was no longer distracted by life's constant crises. No longer managed by her feelings, she chose a relationship with her husband that didn't deny the past, but that worked. She built a loving bond with her children. She cultivated deep personal friendships. She found a career that gave her a sense of service and earned success. She walked her own spiritual path. And she taught others how to live this way, too.

In these three steps, Albina built the life she wanted.

## THE ROAD AHEAD

If you can relate to Albina's plight, or if you feel a need to improve your happiness for other reasons, you are not alone. America is in a happiness slump. Just over the past decade, the percentage of Americans saying they are "not too happy" rose from 10 percent to 24 percent.<sup>1</sup> The percentage of Americans suffering from depression is increasing dramatically, especially among young adults.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, the percentage saying they are "very happy" has fallen from 36 percent to 19 percent.<sup>3</sup> These patterns are seen all over the globe, too, and the trend existed even before the COVID-19 pandemic started.<sup>4</sup> People disagree about why this slump is happening on such a mass scale—blaming technology, or a polarized culture, or culture change, or the economy, or even politics—but we all know that it is happening.

Most of us don't have the ambition of pulling the whole world out of the slump; we'd be content to help just ourselves. But how,

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when our problems come from the outside? If we're angry or sad or lonely, we need people to treat us better; we need our finances to improve; we need our luck to change. Until then, we wait, unhappily, and can only distract ourselves from discomfort.

This book is about showing you how to break out of this pattern, like Albina did. You, too, can become the boss of your own life, not an observer. You can learn to choose how you react to negative circumstances and select emotions that make you happier even when you get a bad hand. You can focus your energy not on trivial distractions, but on the basic pillars of happiness that bring enduring satisfaction and meaning.

You will learn how to manage your life in new ways. However, unlike other books you may have read (we've read them, too), this one is not going to exhort you to pull yourself up by your bootstraps. This isn't a book about willpower—it's about knowledge, and how to use it. If you couldn't figure out something about your car, you wouldn't solve the problem with extreme willpower—you'd look at an owner's manual. Similarly, when something isn't right in your happiness, you need clear, science-based information about how your happiness works before anything else, and then instructions on how to use this information in your life. That's what this book is.

This also isn't another book about minimizing or eliminating pain—yours or anyone else's. Life can be hard—much harder for some people than for others, through no fault of their own. If you're in pain, this book won't tell you to wait it out or extinguish it. Rather, it will show you how to decide to deal with it, learn from it, and grow through it.

Finally, this book isn't any kind of quick fix for your life. For

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Albina, getting happier took effort and patience, and it will for you, too. Reading this book is just the start. Practicing the skills requires, well, practice. Some progress will be immediate, and most likely, people around you will notice positive changes (and ask your advice). Other lessons will take months or years to become internal and automatic. That's not bad news at all, because the process of managing yourself and making progress is a fun adventure. Getting happier becomes a new way of life.

Building the life you want takes time and effort. To delay means waiting for no good reason, missing more time being happier, and making others happier as well. Albina was unwilling to do that—she was unwilling to miss the life she wanted while waiting for the universe to change.

If you, too, are done waiting, let's get started.