

# CHAPTER 1

## The Wall and your Stairway

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*Blame yourself if you have no branches or leaves;  
don't accuse the sun of partiality.*

—Chinese proverb

You exist. That's all you really know for sure. If you ever heard tales of concentration camp survivors, you know what I mean. When stripped to the bones, we have nothing but ourselves.

Psychologist Viktor Frankl describes the desolation of a concentration camp: "We really had nothing now except our bare bodies—even minus hair; all we possessed, literally, was our naked existence." He retained only his glasses and his belt. The belt he traded for a piece of bread.

Imagine owning no shoes, no socks, no shirt, no underwear. You have just yourself.

You have yourself...but is your self happy? Most people today appear satisfied with their lives. Surprisingly, even Viktor Frankel was. Maybe you are one of the happy people. In a 1998 Gallup poll, 91 percent of Americans said they are satisfied with their family life, 86 percent with

their housing and their health, 85 percent with their transportation, and 84 percent with their opportunities to succeed. Yay!

How *you* answer depends largely on your vision of happiness. Everybody wants happiness, but few people seem sure of what it is. What you get out of this book depends on how you define happiness.

Happiness researcher (honest, there is such a thing) Ed Diener, Ph.D., of the University of Illinois, lists three concepts of happiness.

1. Virtue or holiness: This is the happiness of the Greek stoics. You are happy if you possess desirable qualities. Aristotle called this “*eudaimonia*” or the ideal state of being.
2. Life satisfaction: This is the positive evaluation of your life. If you feel satisfied with your life, you are happy. You are content. You relax in the green pastures.
3. Pleasant emotional experience: This is how you feel at the moment—joy, fun, elation. You experience pleasure. You feel good.

Let’s not quibble over definitions. Two statues stood in the city park for as long as anyone could remember. One was David, the other was Venus. One man, one woman, both naked. One day, the fairy godmother of statues appeared, waved her wand, and **POOF!**—the statues came to life. “You have one hour before you return to stone, one hour to do what you’ve always wanted to do,” she offered with a wink.

The statues jumped for joy and scurried off into the park. From behind a bush, the fairy godmother heard sounds of glee and physical exertion. “Oh, yes! That was wonderful,” the Venus statue cried. “More, more, I want more.”

“Just a minute,” snapped the David statue. “It’s my turn to mess up a pigeon.”

The colors of happiness are different for each of us, but they usually include all of the above (the three concepts, that is, not attacks on

### **What’s in a name?**

How appropriate that Hope College is home to one of America’s foremost happiness researchers, David Myers.

wildlife)—what David Myers, Ph.D., another happiness researcher, calls “an enduring sense of positive wellbeing.”

🌀 **Welcome stonemason you** 🌀

*Life is hell. There are few moments of happiness.  
I feel that when one experiences one of them  
it is right to enjoy it. Cheers, everybody.*

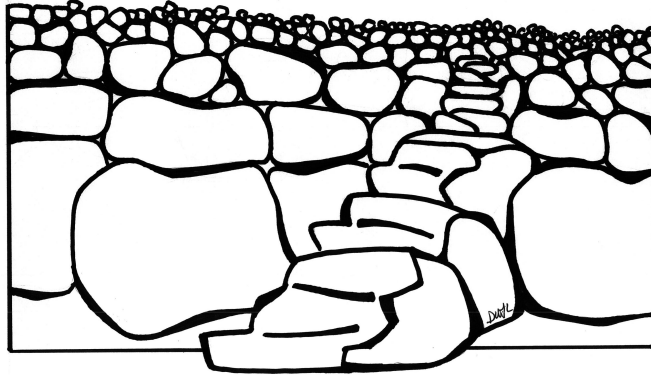
—English playwright Harold Pinter in a toast at his stepson’s wedding

Faced with adversity, some people recite this prayer: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” This chapter helps us develop that wisdom. After all, why try to change what is already etched in stone? We gain happiness by improving those things we can change.

The Great Wall of Misery surrounds us, a barricade between us and the Green Pastures of Cloud Nine. You might even have bumped into the Wall once or twice. **OOOF!** But if we could stand atop the Wall, we would reach heaven on earth. That’s where your Stairway to Heaven helps. It leads you over the Wall. You are both the climber and the stonemason. This is a self-help, do-it-yourself type book, you know.

In the chapters ahead, we’ll assemble the tools you’ll need—the nine habits of maximum happiness. These tools will help you move stones from the Great Wall of Misery to your Stairway to Heaven—to lower the Wall as you build up your Stairway.

The metaphor of the Wall and your Stairway helps us understand how various elements of life influence our happiness, how we can infuse our life with joy, and how we can avoid unnecessary misery. Put on your explorer’s cap. It’s time to inspect the Wall.



The Wall is tall. It towers above us. On closer inspection, notice the four distinct layers, each one built from stones of a different size:

**Layer 1:** Foundation stones so big they resemble planets

**Layer 2:** Habitat stones heavy enough to give a strong man a hernia

**Layer 3:** Barely liftable dew stones

**Layer 4:** Pocket-sized multiple-choice stones

Let's start climbing your Stairway to take a sneak peek at these four layers.

### 🌀 **Layer 1: Foundation stones** 🌀

*There are no rules. Just follow your heart.*

—comedian Robin Williams

Both the Great Wall of Misery and your Stairway to Heaven are built on a row of mighty foundation stones. Each stone weighs several tons and is as permanent as the terra firma on which it rests.

Foundation stones are your genes, your childhood, your past experiences—everything that is complete, finished, unchangeable. These

stones really cannot be moved. They are part of you and your past. Now if only you had a time machine...

You might wish to move or improve some of the unhappy foundation stones. You might want to blow some to smithereens. When Ben Stevenson became artistic director of the Houston Ballet, he said, "I wanted to build the company from the bottom up." You might feel that way about your life. But if you're old enough to read this book (you are, right?), it's already too late. You can rebuild, but not from the bottom.

The Wall's very first stones are your genes. You inherited them. Your parents might spend the rest of your inheritance, but your genes are yours for keeps. Since 1924, the "nature versus nurture" debate has raged: are we more the products of nature (our genes) or nurture (our environment)?

**POP QUIZ:** .....

How much of your happiness do you control?

**ANSWER:** Today, most researchers say that genes determine about half of our character. That leaves the other half in your hands. Great news! The unmovable foundation stones form only half of the Great Wall of Misery.

More great news. Unlike other mammals, whose brains are 98 percent developed at birth, ours are just 38 percent developed. That leaves 62 percent for us to mold. Now that's empowerment!

Other foundation stones formed when you were young. University of Kentucky researchers put seven types of childhood trauma to the test: death of a parent or sibling, unhappily married parents, family breakup, alcohol or drug addiction in the home, emotional problems, child abuse or neglect, and serious illness. Do any of these sound familiar? They found that every one, except illness, dampens an adult's happiness. People who suffered more than one childhood trauma are even

less happy and earn lower income as adults. These are Layer 1 foundation stones in the Wall—they can't be moved.

Just as some childhood experiences might have scraped you with trauma, some bathed you with warmth, love, security. Those are the foundation stones of your Stairway.

Why do I highlight the nature versus nurture debate? So you don't waste precious time struggling to change those things you cannot. This book focuses on what you can change. So let's leave the Layer 1 foundation stones alone.

## **Layer 2: Habitat stones**

*I have the good fortune to have had a pain problem,  
which has given me more insight into my patients.*

—Dr. Paul Kelly, pain specialist

Set atop the immense foundation stones are the Layer 2 habitat stones: our environment, our surroundings, our situation. Some of these we choose, some we do not. For instance, if you are born into the slums of Bangladesh, your habitat stones might be tough to move.

Most Americans choose their habitat stones, whether they know it or not. If you have the means to read this book, you control most of your habitat stones. You might relocate your career to earthquake-prone San Francisco or cultivate your hometown Iowa roots. You may study languages that could open the door to a life abroad or focus on bonding with your Missouri family.

My mother made a tough choice when she was just 17. The daughter of a prominent Budapest dentist, she was an easy target for the invading Russians. When the Communists stormed into Hungary, she sneaked out on the underground railroad. Way to go, Mom! (Please forgive my excitement. If she had not moved her habitat stones, I would never have been born.)

One person relocates from Chicago to Alaska to escape the rat race. Another moves from Alaska to Chicago to feel connected. Where do you want to go? As Napoleon Bonaparte said, “Circumstances—what circumstances? I *make* circumstances.”

You can’t avoid some situations: the loss of a child, a spouse, a limb. Months after his wife died, Thomas Jefferson told a friend that he had emerged from a “stupor of mind” which had rendered him “as dead to the world as she was whose loss occasioned it.”

Other Layer 2 habitat stones you treasure: the forest behind your house, your fulfilling career or a caring, loving family. These are the habitat stones of your Stairway to Heaven.

Although some Layer 2 habitat stones are moveable, it takes much more than a book to guide you through that process. Let’s leave the habitat stones alone...for now. You might want to revisit them once you’ve mastered the habits in this book.

### **Layer 3: Dew stones**

*When one door of happiness closes, another opens;  
but often we look so long at the closed door  
that we do not see the one which has been opened for us.*

—Helen Keller

Like morning dew on the grass, you feel the Layer 3 dew stones. Some might even dampen your spirit, but they don’t last. They are the events that pass through your days.

Some dew stones can be moved. You choose not to trip over something tomorrow by picking it up today. You choose not to develop food poisoning by handling raw chicken with care. You choose to enjoy this book (I hope) by reading it.

Some dew stones cannot be moved. Becky Farrar was at a loss for words. What do you say when a pumpkin crashes through your roof

and smashes your kitchen table to bits? It seems two Illinois skydivers were playing a friendly little game of pass-the-big-orange-thing-around when “Oops!” Good thing nobody was sitting at the table just then.

In a less fortunate incident, Kimberly Petrella will never forget the look of horror on the subway driver’s face. A man had just jumped in front of the train and smashed into it...not once, but twice. That same man seemed so serene on the bus just minutes earlier. She wished she had not witnessed that event. But the choice was not hers to make.

Although in the Great Wall of Misery they distress you, in your Stairway to Heaven the dew stones are joyous events like the really, really big hug your daughter gives you for no particular reason. Or the flowers your spouse sends you for your birthday.

Events tend to lose their impact on happiness in less than three months, and most major events no longer affect happiness after six months. The best way to deal with the dew stones is to embrace those in your Stairway while they last and just ignore those in your Wall until they fade away. Choose to be happy, step over Layer 3 of the Wall, and focus on Layer 4, where the nine habits of maximum happiness come into play.

#### **Layer 4: Multiple-choice stones**

*One simple stone placed on another  
is the work that builds a cathedral!*

—*Good News Network* coordinator Geraldine Weis-Corbley

High up on the Wall sit the multiple-choice stones—so high they seem out of reach. They sit on the Wall, but not on the Stairway. The only way to climb your Stairway, to scale the Wall, to reach the Green Pastures of Cloud Nine is to move those Layer 4 multiple-choice stones from the Wall to your Stairway. And, you guessed it—the multiple-choice stones



test you daily. They are hundreds, maybe thousands, of choices you make each day. Those choices are your reactions.

Our reactions deliver a simple verdict: happy or unhappy. An 87-year-old jazz saxophone player in New Orleans endured a stroke. Did he moan about it? No. He rejoiced that, no longer able to play the saxophone, he would finally sing with his band. He moved his stones and lowered the Great Wall of Misery.

**POP QUIZ:** .....

You're enjoying a relaxing honeymoon on a Florida beach when a pelican flies into you. How do you react?

1. Shake your fist and shout, "Watch where you're flying!"
2. Pull out a semi-automatic rifle and start a new trend: pelican rage.
3. Report the incident to the FAA and demand pelican regulations.
4. Figure this is one tale none of your friends will ever top.

**ANSWER:** Option four is the happy choice. Besides, have you ever *seen* how a pelican flies? Better to find a positive way to react. That's how to move the Layer 4 multiple-choice stones off the Wall.

Pain is inevitable; suffering is not. Pain happens *to* us, but we choose whether we suffer from it. For years, the cover of my résumé began with a quote from Aldous Huxley: "Experience is not what happens to a man. It is what he does with what happens to him." With every year, I believe that more strongly. Keep moving those stones.

That's just what Sarah Sheep does. Remember in the Prologue how Sarah Sheep and Bray Goat were pelted with stones and how the stones are piling up around them. They could be buried alive in that old well. But Sarah Sheep is clumsy, not stupid. She shakes the stones off her back, lifts one foot at a time, and steps up onto the pile at her feet. Bray Goat follows

her example, moves the stones, and stands on top of them. In their own unique way, the sheep and the goat build their Stairway to Heaven.

How do you move the multiple-choice stones? By choosing to be happy. That's the first step. Remember, they are *multiple-choice* stones. When the world deals your cards, you can choose to be happy. You can also choose to be sad. Or angry. Or frustrated. It's your choice. As British novelist Phyllis Bottome said, "There are two ways of meeting difficulties. You alter the difficulties or you alter yourself to meet them."

Remember, even if the Wall seems to tower above you and your Stairway passes for a footstool, you can build up your Stairway and lower the Wall. The Carthaginian General Hannibal sacked ancient Rome when he attacked it not by sea, as the Romans expected, but by land. Hannibal led an army of tropical elephants over the snow-covered Alps to crush Rome. As Hannibal said, "We will either find a way, or make one." Talk about scaling a wall!

 **Choose happiness** 

*If you choose not to decide, you still have made a choice.*

—rock band Rush in "Free Will"

Chantal burst into the room. "The dishwasher's *really* leaking now! Not just a cup of water this time, but suds, soap bubbles. We'd better call someone about it." Then, after a brief pause, "On the plus side, it gave me plenty of water and soap to wash the floor." By her reaction, she moved her stones from the Great Wall of Misery to her Stairway to Heaven. (I didn't have the heart to tell her I had washed the floor just a few hours earlier.)

**Exercise:** .....

Think about everything that affects your happiness. Write them down. To which layer in the Wall or in your Stairway does each belong? Which ones do you want to change? Which ones *can* you change?

So much happens around us, to us, at us, with us, in us, on us. Whoa! So many stones to move. So many to keep track of. How can we control them all? How can we even keep track of them all? The answer is to develop habits, so reactions that inspire happiness become second nature. And when happiness comes naturally, we can enjoy it more than when we force it.

In the chapters ahead, we will learn the nine habits of maximum happiness. But first, let's look at some of the racketeers who can sabotage our every effort to boost our happiness. In Chapter 2, we'll stand face to face with the Merchants of Misery (for we can defeat only the enemy we know).

If you don't really, really want to be happy, don't bother reading any further. Hey, this book could make a great paperweight. But if you are determined to be happy, read on.