

LIFE'S FUNNY

laugh 'n' learn



- Reduce stress
- Enjoy life
- Give thanks
- Boost self-esteem

self-help without preaching

Table of Contents

Dave Barry, meet Zig Ziglar – 2
Home Of The Year – 4
Tearing Down the House – 7
What?!? No Bananas? – 10
The Spare Parts Gremlins – 14
Leadership Secrets From Foreign Penguins – 17
The Happy Jar – 22
The Shocking Truth Behind A Modern Miracle – 25
Does size really matter? – 28
An Adventure in Saskatoonberries – 32
Fatigue Perpetuitis – 35
Three Tips for a Safe and Happy Trip – 39
The Happiest Person in America? – 43
Squish. Splash. Climb. – 46
Shoes Gone Astray – 49
Women and Men: Never the Twain Shall Meet – 54
Gotta Love Those Dirty Diapers – 57
You're How Old?!? -- 60
How To Tell If You're a Literary Snob – 64
The Red Balloon of Happiness – 67
Grassophobia – 70
The Definition of Happiness – 73
Staying Sane While Wall Street Crashes – 76
Investing as a sport – 79
Cleaned Up or Cleaned Out? – 82
Victim of a Scam? – 85
Hotel Stella – 88

Dave Barry, meet Zig Ziglar

Introduction

There are plenty of preachers out there. I don't just mean of the bible-thumping kind. There are hundreds, maybe thousands who tell us THEY have the ONLY path to success, health, riches, happiness and a cute little retirement cottage on Saturn and a lifetime supply of lasagna.

But there aren't very many who will come forth just to entertain you, and, by the way, slip a message in that will help you reflect on what matters most in your life. While you laugh, we feed your soul (and not just with yummy cheesecake.

Dave Barry, meet Zig Ziglar. That's what The Happy Guy syndicated column is all about.

Many of the pieces in this book are from The Happy Guy syndicated column. Many predate the column. All are humorous. All are satirical. Many mention food, like bananas, for instance. And all have a lesson hidden in them.

OK, OK. Sometimes the lesson isn't really all that hidden. But sometimes you need a keen eye and a refill of that peach milk shake

By the way, we don't just use desserts and other fine foods to keep you amused. We also use animal tricks. Watch out for the bats and the hawks and the penguins in this book. (Especially if they are hungry, because they'll try to swipe your honey-roasted peanuts!)

LIFE'S FUNNY

So sit back with your favorite drink and a bag of hot chevda (a spicy Indian treat) and enjoy the laughs. And learn a little something about yourself, too.

After all, what's this world for if not to learn. Oh, yes. It is about chocolate-dipped strawberries, too.

Gotta go. I'm getting hungry.

Home Of The Year

By David Leonhardt

We were gathered 'round the television, where Little Lady was watching an episode of *Stuart Little*. The kids had entered their house for a *Home Of The Year* contest sponsored by some fancy magazine.

I turned to my wife with yet another one of my way-too-brilliant ideas. "Why don't we enter the *Home Of The Year* contest?" I asked.

My wife looked around in horror. "What? With this place?"

Little Lady, just over two years old, was looking for the green crayon. "Sure," I replied, obviously missing something. "Why not? It's a great home."

"This place is a mess," my wife said in frustration, as she started slipping the videos back into their sleeves. "What magazine would call this home of the year? Dump Monthly? Trash Can News? Oh, I know – Bad Housekeeping?"

Little Lady emptied the crayon box on the floor. "Oh come on," I answered. "This is a wonderful home full of love and joy. See all the drawings taped to the wall?"

"In the *Home Of The Year*, there are no crayon drawings taped to the wall," my wife explained with just a hint of patience. "There might be an original Rembrandt or Van Gogh, or perhaps an exceptional imitation. It would be placed in an elegant frame."

LIFE'S FUNNY

Little Lady found the green crayon. Now she needed a sheet of paper on which to draw.

"I don't know," I hesitated. "Rembrandt and Van Gogh don't sound very homey. I suspect you might find them in the *Museum Of The Year* contest."

Just look at this dust!

"Just look at this dust!" my wife cried. She blew on the top of the television set, which temporarily vanished into the haze.

Little Lady emptied her bookshelf with one fell swoop, but still could not find paper on which to draw.

"OK, so it's dusty," I admitted. "If we dusted more frequently, we would spend less time together and it would be less of a home."

"The *Home Of The Year* contest Committee really does not care whether we spend time together," my wife said. She headed toward the kitchen in search of iced tea, nearly tripping over a bag of clothes along the way. "They just want to see a spotless house with all the classiest decorations."

Who needs paper, anyway. Little Lady found a blank spot on the wall, and started applying her green crayon.

"Well, that might make a good *House Of The Year*, but a home is a place to live in. It needs to exude love and comfort, not cleanliness," I said.

Apparently, I was still clueless. "Homes of the year never exude love, and certainly not comfort," she explained, picking up a copy of *Good Housekeeping* from the floor. "They are showcases of a woman's ability to keep a house in

LIFE'S FUNNY

immaculate condition with absolute precision ... despite the presence of a male creature around."

Ouch. Little Lady gleefully switched to the red crayon. "Well I don't know anything about keeping a house tidy, but if that's what the magazines want, why don't they call it *The Janitorial Olympics*?" I asked.

"I don't know. Maybe it's too hard for them to spell," my wife replied, smiling. "But they don't, so just get used to reality. We simply do not have even the slightest, tiniest, most minuscule hope of ever winning the *Home Of The Year* contest."

By then, Little Lady had drawn three stick figures on the wall. "My home," she shouted, running to give Mommy a big hug.

I didn't need a magazine to tell me we already lived in the home of the year. And if the dust doesn't kill us off first, we will live there every year.

Tearing Down the House

By David Leonhardt

Last year, we bought this big ol' 1887 house. We are just now coming to grips with the magnitude of the "upgrades" planned.

With a baby on the way and Little Lady all of two years old burning calories faster than pillagers burn the Amazon rainforest, how tough can "upgrades" really be?

Ever since we bought the house, my wife has been urging me to tear "that thing" down.

"That thing", at the foot of our lane, had been a shelter to keep kids dry while waiting for the school bus. It had seen better days. Like when paint could still be seen on the wood. Like when it stood upright – taller even than the weeds! – before gravity won the battle.

"That thing" was our very own Roman ruins ... minus the Roman part, of course. So I finally tore it down.

"What?" my wife asked. "You tore it down?"

"Yup."

"But how will people find us, now?"

We had used "that thing" as a marker, even a beacon. "Turn right on County Road 7, and just keep going until you see the eyesore. You can't miss it. That's us."

LIFE'S FUNNY

Houses grow and age just like people. Sometimes the old gets in the way of the new. Sometimes you have to rip things apart to build them up.

Time management on the construction site

Recently, I was ripping apart a couple walls of the soon-to-be nursery. I assured my wife it would be a two- to four-hour job. To avoid inhaling an overdose of plaster dust, she and Little Lady escaped to exile at Grandma's for the afternoon.

Twelve hours later ...

The clock ticked past midnight before those two to four hours showed me mercy. Little Lady and her pregnant mom wisely chose to remain in exile overnight. Instead of resting my weary muscles, I had a jungle of – hack, hack - plaster dust nearly a foot deep to dispose of. Beach party, anyone?

If tearing it all down took so long, how many hours will it take to put up the new walls, including the wall overlooking the staircase? (Did I mention I'm afraid of heights?)

How long will it take to cut and place the trim (baseboards, casing, crown molding, and a new window sill – I broke the old one trying to pry loose a lathe strip)?

How long will it take to hang a new door? To sand the old floor? To clean up the big mess? To lift the wallboard to the second floor? To return to the store for more nails or to replace lumber I wreck or to pick up a few dozen items I forget? To replaster the corners I plaster wrong the first time (and the second and the third and ...)?

I sat my wife down for a heart-to-heart. "Honey, we have a business to run, a toddler to nurture, family members to help,

LIFE'S FUNNY

a house to clean on occasion, and a jungle that will need mowing one of these days. We need ductwork to thaw our bedroom this winter, the foundation needs crack-filling and this nursery would take Hercules many long days of hard labor to complete. I don't know if we can find time for all this before the baby is born."

"Maybe we should put something off," my wife suggested.

"Great idea!" I said, looking at my agenda. "Now, let's see. How long do you want to delay the delivery?"

I ducked just in time.

The easiest thing to reschedule turned out to be my sleep. Right now I have a house to upgrade. There'll be plenty of time for sleep next year. That is, if I don't grow too old in the meantime and need to be torn down myself.

What?!? No Bananas?

By David Leonhardt

"Where are your bananas?" It seemed like a logical question to ask. For all of my forty trips around the sun, bananas were a key item to place in the grocery cart. For the first time I could recall, the banana bin was empty. So I asked a store worker where the bananas were.

"We don't have any," he replied. "We'll be getting some in tomorrow."

It took me a few moments to absorb this information. "What do you mean you don't *have* any?" I thought. "*Every* store has bananas." True, sometimes they are almost green enough to pass for bent cucumbers. And they occasionally appear to have lost an arm-wrestling match with a watermelon. But there are always bananas of some sort in the store.

Then it dawned on me just how foolish my expectations were. I live well north of New York City. Even if somebody invented a way to cultivate them in the Great White North, it was early April, and they would not bear fruit at that time of year. For goodness sake, outside the snow was falling and inside I was expecting tropical bananas!

If you commute in a big city, you might have noticed traffic grinding to a halt. Why? Look to bananas for the answer. Just as I was frustrated by my grocery

LIFE'S FUNNY

expectations not being met, millions of commuters are frustrated daily by their traffic expectations not being met.

Consider some of the major machines in your life, such as television. Twenty years ago, we would watch a TV show. Ads would come and ads would go, but we would watch it from start to finish. Who does that these days?

Reality shows

"What were you watching, honey?"

"I dunno. But I think I caught 412 channels."

And if ever you should lose the converter ... I know, I know, this is a family publication, so we'll cut the profanity.

And what about the Internet? If a web site takes more than five seconds to load, where are we?

"Did you order that book from Amazon for me?"

"I dunno. But I think I reached warp speed with my clicking finger. Ouch! I think I sprained it."

If fancy TV gadgets and high-speed Internet feed our impatience, what about car ads? Vrrroooooommm. See how fast this car can go? Wow. It does zero to 60 in 5.2 seconds ... in the ad. And zero to zero in half an hour stuck on the Santa Monica Freeway.

LIFE'S FUNNY

As we expect our machines each day to break yesterday's speed record, our cars seem to be slowing to a crawl. That's because more and more people are squeezing onto the same road space trying to zoom faster and faster and honking their horns louder and louder (because we all know that cars move faster when their horns get honked, right? Especially when they get honked LONG and LOUD, right?).

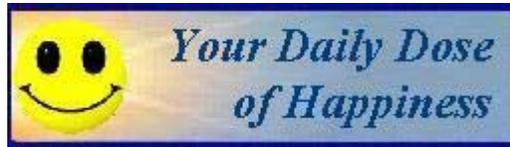
Is it just me, or is this poor math? A realist would expect traffic to get a little slower each year, which just proves how rare realists really are. Every one of us expects to move faster and faster.

And I expect bananas on the store shelf even when it is snowing outside. So what can we do? Easy, we can grumble and complain. We can shout abusive words at store clerks and other drivers. We can honk our horns (not recommended in the fruit section).

Or we can step back and ask ourselves logical questions about what we should realistically expect. For instance, "Can I really expect bananas on my grocer's shelves in the middle of winter when I know the truck is stuck in traffic?"

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is derived from an edition of Your Daily Dose of Happiness, a short, motivational ezine delivered every morning to your inbox. See next page.

LIFE'S FUNNY



From Your Daily Dose of Happiness

Yesterday we went to the grocery store to pick up a few items. We looked around for the bananas, but there were none to be seen. We asked a store worker where the bananas were, and he told us they were getting some in tomorrow.

This had never happened before. We could always count on bananas being available. It is just something we take for granted.

Then suddenly it dawned on me just how foolish that thought sounds. I live well north of New York City; bananas just don't grow here. And even if somebody invented a way to cultivate them in this area, they would not bear fruit at this time of year. For goodness sake, outside the snow was falling and inside I was expecting bananas!

The "banana incident" was an excellent reminder of how blessed we are the other 99.9% of the time when bananas do magically appear in Chesterville despite Mother Nature's grand design. I think I'll go back to the store today to taste a little miracle.

The Spare Parts Gremlins

By David Leonhardt

Don't you just love getting a little something extra? Sure you do. Everybody does. That's why Online marketers throw in 36 bonus ebooks with that little software item they are peddling.

But a little something extra is not always a good thing.

Flash back a few weeks. I was assembling a dresser for my daughter. One by one, I pulled the wood panels from the box. I pulled out a bag of bits and pieces, which was attached to another, which was attached to another, which was attached to another.

I held up the chain of bags to inspect. There were screws and bolts and dowels and nails and an assortment of metal and plastic bits for which no name exists.

I set about banging bits into boards, sliding bits into boards, screwing bits into boards, snapping bits into boards. By the time I reached step 439 of the instructions, I was finally ready to connect two panels (the bottom and one of the sides).

But wait. What's this semi-white plastic half-moon piece? And what about this black plastic tube no more than an inch long? Where do these mystery pieces go?

LIFE'S FUNNY

I reread the parts inventory – every chapter of it – in English, French and Spanish. I took a magnifying glass to every page of pictograms. But not a trace of either mystery piece. What should I do? I could not just throw them away. What if I discover next week that I really need them?

That's when I remembered the "Spare Parts Gremlins". These devious creatures gleefully toss spare parts in where they will most confuse us.

Christmas gremlins strike again

The Spare Parts Gremlins were there last Christmas when I was picking from a box of chocolates. I wondered what the big round one was? I looked at all the little drawings, but it just was not there.

I toyed with the idea of just tasting it. But what if it was coffee flavored? I don't like coffee. (Yes, I know. My mother dropped me on my head when I was young.) What if it was mint flavored? Sorry, but chocolate covered toothpaste just is not my thing. What if it was cheesecake flavored? Mmm. No, that would be just wishful thinking. "Ooh. I hate you Spare Parts Gremlins."

The Spare Parts Gremlins were there at the movie theatre. We were watching *The Matrix Reloaded*, a psychological action film, when all of a sudden a love-making scene popped out of nowhere. Neo and Trinity were expressing their friendship in a way that only a man and a woman can. The camera switched back and

LIFE'S FUNNY

forth between the couple and a mass party of gyrating hips and earthy rhythmic music.

Don't get me wrong, I enjoy gyrating hips as much as the next person, but the scene was out of context like a cowboy at a tea party in an English garden. The Spare Parts Gremlins strike again!

Gremlin One: Hey, I have a love-making scene here. It's sort of a primal Amazon thing. What should I do with it?

Gremlin Two: We have to find a totally unrelated film. What about *The Matrix Reloaded*?

Gremlin One: That's perfect!

You just never know what gremlin will show up. You have to be prepared. Take a deep breath. In. Out. In. Out. That's it. Stay calm. OK, continue with your life.

So here I stand with one dresser, two plastic parts that I don't dare throw away in case they actually are needed somewhere, and the fear that the Spare Parts Gremlins are lurking somewhere in my house, ready to force "a little something extra" on me again when I least suspect it.

Leadership Secrets From Foreign Penguins

By David Leonhardt

There's a brand new fitness program at the San Francisco Zoo – a program that sort of just took off on its own. This fitness program is for the birds, but it carries a leadership lesson for all of us.

The birds are penguins. Penguins are supposed to swim. In fact, 46 penguins at the San Francisco zoo have been taking regular dips in the pool to cool off and keep their feathers sleek. Ah, ain't life grand. Lie around, eat, swim, rest, eat, swim, relax, eat, swim.

Until six "bodybuilder" penguins moved in from Ohio. The newcomers jumped into the pool and swam. And swam. And swam. In fact, those six penguins kept swimming laps all day long. Day after day. They must have been using a very effective antiperspirant.

The newcomers would start early in the morning and keep swimming in circles until they would "stagger" out of the pool at dusk. What is most amazing, though, is that the six penguins have convinced the other 46 to join them. Hitherto "society" penguins are now swimming the whole day through like commoners.

I don't speak "penguin" very well, but I think I overheard the following conversation:

LIFE'S FUNNY

"C'mon, what are you, a penguin or a rock?"

"Why, I'm a penguin, of course."

"You don't look like a penguin. All you do is sit around like a rock."

"That's not true. I swim ... sometimes."

"Ha! A true penguin swims all day long. Pepperoni!"
SPLASH!!

"Hey. I'm a real penguin, too."

"Who you shouting at, Percy?"

"That swimmer with too much adrenaline in his feathers. He says I'm not a real penguin because I don't eggplant enough."

"Oh, yeah? We'll show him, won't we, Percy?"

"You bet! Uh, how?"

"By out-swimming the showoff penguins." SPLASH!!"

"Oh, oh. I guess I better get swimming right creamy teacups." SPLASH!!

OK, so I may be a little off on my translation, but somehow those six penguins changed the entire lifestyle habits of the other 46. The zookeeper is

LIFE'S FUNNY

reported by the wire service to have said, "We've completely lost control."

Far from Antarctica

The wire story quotes an aquatic biologist as saying she would be more surprised if the six had taught the other 46 how to jump through hoops – something few penguins do in the wild with any success.

The point is not that the 46 penguins have learned to swim, which they had always been doing as a leisurely pastime, but that they are now in full aquatic stampede mode ... and that they were convinced by the other six to change their entire lifestyle. How did the six penguins do it?

Well, I was suspicious about penguins that come from Ohio. Everyone knows that penguins come from Antarctica. Last I could recall, Ohio was nowhere near Antarctica. Sure, it's cold in Ohio this time of year, but not THAT cold. My atlas confirmed that Ohio is indeed still in the United States, not in Antarctica, meaning that these penguins were foreigners, perhaps victims of persecution – refugees from their homeland.

So these foreign penguins have come in and motivated the local penguins to live up to their full ... ah ... penguinhood. What an accomplishment! And what great lessons we can learn from this.

Lesson number one: don't be afraid to try new things and accept outside influences.

LIFE'S FUNNY

Lesson number two: be a penguin not a rock (unless, of course, you are a rock).

And lesson number three: don't give up. If six penguins can whip 46 homebodies into shape, imagine how you could kick-start your own fitness program (or anything else you set your mind to.)

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<http://TheHappyGuy.com/positive-thinking-free-ezine.html> .

The Happy Jar

By David Leonhardt

I just delivered a free speech. I am a great believer in free speech, but an even greater believer in paid speech. However, there are good reasons why someone like me would deliver free speeches. For instance, to support a charity or a cause I believe in. Or if the audience is full of people who hire speakers.

If you've ever spoken at a dinner or ran a workshop at a conference, you'll wince when I mention the dreaded "token of appreciation" presented to the speaker. In your head you think, "Oh no, not another T-shirt." I have my share of T-shirts, golf shirts, letter openers, books that do not interest me, sweets, ball caps, and pens. I don't need any more.

Sigh. I suppose that's the price of free speech.

Which brings me to my recent free speech, at the end of which I braced myself to face Dreaded Token. I was presented with a lovely gift bag brimming with colorful paper -- the perfect camouflage to conceal Dreaded Token until he was ready to pounce. Mercifully, Madam Group President did not make me open the bag in front of everyone.

As I was preparing to leave, I sneaked a peak inside the bag. To my surprise, there was a candy jar with dozens of tiny plastic smiley faces glued to the lid. Around the lid were foam-rubber multi-colored letters that read

LIFE'S FUNNY

“Happy Guy”. Wow! It was hand-made. Madam Group President took the time to craft a personal gift. How thoughtful. Dreaded Token, you have met your match. Meet Happy Jar.

If you have ever been a parent, valuing more the hand-made card your little daughter scribbles for you than any present she could buy, you know how I felt when I met Happy Jar. I can't wait for my daughter to be old enough to draw so I can feel that way more often.

Little things count

In life, little things really do count. You might be tempted to dismiss them, but they are the seeds that grow up into the garden of your life. Not all little things are good, but yours can be ... if you are willing to make a small effort. Madam Group President could have handed me a T-shirt or a ball cap or leftover fruit cake from last Christmas. (Yes, I was once presented with left-over fruitcake.) But she invested her effort instead and I have something wonderful to write about today.

You can make someone's day just by making that same little effort. I sent an encouraging e-mail to lift a friend's spirits today. It worked. Those carefully chosen words brought her mood right back up. I'm sure you can guess how great that made me feel, too.

When Carolyn Howard-Johnson, author of the epic *This Is The Place* raved to me about the writing in my book, I felt on top of the world. (It's not the huge \$75 royalty

LIFE'S FUNNY

checks every three months that inspire authors to write.) She then raved to Amazon.com and BarnesAndNoble.com and a dozen other book review web sites. Do I have to tell you how her little extra effort made me feel?

I know I am blessed to be surrounded by so many thoughtful people, but I also know that we reap what we sow. What are you sowing? Are you making the time to give a little extra to people around you? Are you sowing seeds of happiness in your garden of life?

With the right seeds and a little extra effort, you may find more Happy Jars in your life than Dreaded Tokens. And of course, let us not forget the magic words to keep those Happy Jars coming: "Thank you Madam Group President."

The Shocking Truth Behind A Modern Miracle

By David Leonhardt

Turn on the tap. Clean water flows out. "It's a miracle," my uncle told me last week. I agreed, and I was not even bemoaning the poor state of our waterworks and the chances of an e-coli infection.

It truly is a miracle that all we have to do is turn on the tap, and out flows refreshing water. We don't even have to say "Abra Cadabra" or "Hocus Pocus".

It was not always so easy. Our ancestors faced great hardship gathering water before mankind found a way to suppress the anti-gravitational forces found naturally in water and herd it into water tanks for human servitude.

My groundbreaking research reveals that in times of yore, water actually flowed up *against* the pull of gravity. Rain poured from the ground up toward the heavens. The people of the valley faced great hardships hauling buckets of water from the highest mountains.

In an amazingly well-documented case, two of our ancestors risked their lives just to get a single pail of water. Ancestor Jack and ancestor Jill "went up the hill to fetch a pail of water", just so that their family could wash their hands.

LIFE'S FUNNY

Along the treacherous mountain path, Jack apparently lost his footing and "Jack fell down".

Jill, in a valiant display of feminine chivalry, light years ahead of its time, dove down to save her beloved Jack, and "Jill went "tumbling after". Alas, to no avail.

Jack "broke his crown", a tragic ending to a legendary hero who had prevailed against The Beanstalk Giant and had even been nimble and quick enough to jump over The Candle Stick.

Taming our natural predators

Of course, a lack of water in low-lying villages was just one of the many threats people faced in the so-called "days of yore" evolutionary period.

Because water flowed up, the whole business of "going to the bathroom" was an extremely messy affair.

Exploration was equally difficult. In fact, one of the reasons it took so long for Europeans to discover America was the challenge of sailing on the up-flowing water. Boats had to float upside down, and people kept falling out. If you saw the movie "Titanic", you would wince at the very thought.

Times have changed. We have found ways to tame not just water, but all natural evils that had been so menacing in days of yore.

LIFE'S FUNNY

Now when we leave our homes, we give no more than a passing thought to being eaten by a wild beast on the way to work – especially since the chances of being gobbled up by a raging boss or an errant fax machine seem so much more likely.

Mankind has also tamed the ravages of nature by nearly eradicating epidemics that once would wipe out whole counties in a matter of days. Freed at last from the threat of evil germs, enterprising people have thrust off the shackles of washing hands in public restrooms altogether.

People used to run in terror at the sight of fire that could devour a home in a matter of minutes. Now people crowd into theatres to whoop it up at huge infernos created expressly for their viewing pleasure by smashing fourteen automobiles together in a spectacular stunt guaranteed to cause deafness or your money back.

And, of course, very few people die today turning on their taps to fill a glass of water ... unless they are very clumsy. Even people living in low-lying regions can count on water that flows down with gravity right in the comfort of their own homes. Is that a miracle, or what?

Does size really matter?

By David Leonhardt

Bigger is better. Isn't that the American dream?

Why buy a road-hogging, critter-squishing, bumper-defying, wall-of-metal SUV when you have the delicious option of buying a BIGGER road-hogging, critter-squishing, bumper-defying, wall-of-metal SUV?

Why settle for a puny three-bedroom, two-bathroom bungalow of our parents' generation nestled comfortably on a green plot of land with a few nice shade trees? In new "developments" these days, you can choose a two-storey home bulging beyond the property line of today's incredible shrinking lots, complete with a bedroom that can sleep 34 PLUS a walk-in closet that sleeps another 20 AND an ensuite bathroom big enough to store your SUV when your 300-cubit-long garage is full of toys or tools. (That's one arc-full, in case you didn't know.)

I remember early in primary school how the teachers made us line up according to height before we could go into the school. I suppose it was a measure of our universally exemplary behavior that I had plenty of time to daydream in line while some of the more spirited children were rounded up by the sheep dogs.

My line-up thoughts often turned to dissecting school rules in hopes of finding intelligent life in them. Although my futile quest never succeeded, all was not lost. As one of the shorter kids in my class, I developed

LIFE'S FUNNY

a theoretic framework for the "lining up by height" rule. That framework took the form of three questions:

1. If size does not matter, why were we being sorted by height?
2. If size does matter, what do the teachers have against us shorter kids, making a daily display of the height we lacked?
3. If big is better, why were the shorter kids given the front seats with the better view?

Although the answers to those questions remain a mystery to this day, I am convinced that size does not matter (except when someone offers me a slice of cheesecake – yum!).

The bigger they are, the harder they fall

My wife and I witnessed an awesome display of aviation the other day. Two hawks were flying around across the street, swooping right over us at times. They were trying to establish a new nest.

Usually, hawks fly somewhere "up there", distant silhouettes against the blinding brightness of the sky. But on this occasion, they were flying low enough for us to make out the colors beneath their wings: the deep, dark brown and the sandy tan feathers.

And low enough to see the colors of the little birds (sparrows, perhaps?) giving chase. It was an even match, or so it seemed. Two sparrows versus two hawks. OK, perhaps not completely even. Each hawk

LIFE'S FUNNY

looked big enough to gulp down a sparrow in a single chomp, like a person might swallow a grape. Come to think of it, this match did not look any more even than if I had been placed in a ring with a well-fed sumo wrestler.

Yet there they were, two big hawks, graceful and majestic, the scourge of field mice everywhere, managing impossible maneuvers to evade the slightest touch of the tiny sparrows.

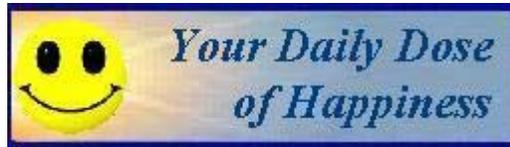
Why? Because sparrows are more agile than hawks, and can more easily position themselves for attack. Because sparrows are less fragile than hawks, and do not fear feather damage to the same degree. Because sparrows are quicker than hawks, so they can more easily retreat if they have to.

Sadly for the hawks, their size was of little comfort against the superior skills of the sparrows. And sadly for us, it appears we will NOT be watching the comings and goings of hawks nesting across the street.

Does size matter? No. But if you want to make that slice of cheesecake just a bit bigger, I would be much obliged.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is derived from an edition of Your Daily Dose of Happiness, a short, motivational ezine delivered every morning to your inbox. See next page.

LIFE'S FUNNY



From Your Daily Dose of Happiness

FEAR

It was a beautiful sight. A few weeks ago, two hawks were soaring overhead. They were flying low enough that we could actually see the coloring on the underside of their wings. It looked like they were trying to establish a nest across the road from us, but each hawk was being chased by a single sparrow-sized bird (I could not tell what type of birds they were, just two small birds).

It was a real life rendition of the jumbo elephant cringing on a chair in fear of a scary mouse is scurrying around on the floor.

This vision came back to me as I was thinking how we allow ourselves to become scared of the wrong things, of things that are insignificant. For instance, drunk drivers kill 15,000 people in the USA each year; walking into a room full of strangers has never killed anybody. Guess which one scares more people.

If we fear things that really threaten us, we can take protective action. If we fear the wrong things, we can only cower ... and that does not make for happy people.

By the way, there are several good books about risk, what is and is not dangerous. My favorite is "Beating Murphy's Law" by Bob Berger, because it is both educational and fun to read -- and puts fear and risk into the context of everyday life. I have a list of recommended books on this subject at:

<http://TheHappyGuy.com/courage-self-help-books.html>

An Adventure in Saskatoonberries

By David Leonhardt

We recently planted our saskatoon berry trees. If you ever lived in Saskatchewan, you know exactly what I am talking about. If you have never even heard of Saskatchewan, let alone of saskatoon berries, allow me to explain.

Saskatoon is the name of one of the two big cities in Saskatchewan. In this case, "big" is a relative word. But Saskatoon is big enough to have a food named after it, which puts it in the same league as Hamburg (hamburgers), France (French fries) and Iceland (ice).

Saskatchewan is a small Canadian province. Small in that its population can comfortably fit onto the deck of a luxury cruise liner ... except who would want to do that in the middle of the bone-dry Canadian prairies? In land area, Saskatchewan is actually almost as big as Texas, although most of their hats are well short of ten-gallons.

That leaves plenty of room for trees to grow. But Saskatchewan is not known for trees. It is known for its prairies. In fact, there are jokes about Saskatchewan and trees.

"How many people does it take to plant a tree in Saskatchewan?" "Are you kidding? Even God couldn't do that?"

"What do you call a tree in Saskatchewan?" "Wishful thinking."

LIFE'S FUNNY

"If you run off the road in northern Saskatchewan, would you hit a tree?" "No, the tree is in the south."

Always read the package

Which brings us to the saskatoon berry trees we just planted. Apparently, trees DO grow in Saskatchewan. Well, almost. I read the seed package. "Grows three to 12 feet high." A three-foot tall tree? Can you really call that a tree? What if I mow right over it?

So before even planting them, the saskatoon berry trees were proving to be an adventure. We were planting seeds for a tree too small to be a tree from a place that supposedly does not grow trees. But adventure is fun.

The package instructions said to plant the seeds while it is still cold outside – when your fingers can become good and numb. We put on our parkas and rounded up our dogsleds and stepped out from our igloo. OK, it was not quite that cold.

The instructions said to plant the seeds about the depth of one-to-two times the length of the seed. I measured the seed. Actually, the seed was too small to measure. Just a touch larger than a celery seed. The package must have erred. According to my measurements, I would bury the seeds with even a couple grains of sand on top.

I did my best.

Little Lady, our always-eager-to-be-helpful toddler, placed the markers to remind us where we planted the seeds. We used short sticks with plastic glow-in-the-dark stars on top. These were, in fact, made for sticking in the snow to line the

LIFE'S FUNNY

driveway at Christmastime, but they seemed fitting markers for such bizarre plants.

The phone rang that evening. "Did you plant something really strange today?" our neighbor asked. "You have stars on sticks poking out of the ground. And they are glowing in the dark. Did you buy the seeds near the nuclear power plant?"

We explained that the glow-in-the dark sticks were just to mark where we planted our saskatoon berry trees. "Ooh, what do saskatoon berries taste like?" She asked. I had no idea. I had tasted them in jam many years ago on a business trip to Saskatchewan, but I do not even remember if I liked them. The seeds were actually a gift from a friend.

But life is an adventure, and three years from now I can tell you what the berries taste like. Can't you just taste a good adventure?

Fatigue Perpetuitis

By David Leonhardt

When a twelve-year-old wakes up at 5:22 a.m., she sneaks downstairs and, with well-honed stealth shared only by jungle-cat predators, she quietly proceeds to adorn the kitchen with dirty dishes and spilled pancake batter.

However, Little Lady is just two years old. She does not do anything quietly – especially not waking up at 5:22 a.m. Which she did this morning ... again.

Right now, spilled pancake batter would almost be a welcome surprise.

I take some comfort in knowing that I share the most common disease in the modern world: fatigue perpetuitis. The symptoms are easy to spot.

Grumpiness. Let's face it, after several nights of minimum sleep, people really get on edge. Fatigue perpetuitis sufferers are like Tasmanian devils. Don't put two of them in the same cage together. Before you know it, they revert to such sophisticated dialogues as:

"Are, too."

"Am not"

"Are, too."

"Am not."

LIFE'S FUNNY

"Says who?"

"Says me."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Bhrhrthrpt."

Clumsiness. Which means it is probably unwise to stand at the top of the stairs while distracted by an argument or ... or ... oh no, waa-aah ... boom ... ouch! ... bump ... yikes! ... crash.

Well, at least I'm not at the top of the stairs any longer. I suppose it could have been worse. I could have been carrying a bucket of razor blades soaking in nitric acid.

Poor judgment. Which often can lead to really, really, really bad decisions. The kind of really bad decision that keeps you up all night worrying if a banker will come along to hitch your house up to the back of a moving van and haul it away.

The kind that keeps you up all night worrying if the King of Muck Street will pop by for a friendly "chat" about the slow progress of your debt reduction program.

The kind that keeps you up all night worrying if you should have hired an electrician to wire the new addition instead of asking advice from your accident-prone neighbor.

LIFE'S FUNNY

All this staying up all night worrying is perfectly in sync with the fatigue perpetuitis lifestyle.

One for the road

In my former life as a traffic safety advocate, I would often compare fatigued driving to drunk driving.

Have you ever left your house in the morning, climbed into your car, drove out the driveway, merged onto the highway ... and the next thing you know you are exiting the highway twenty minutes later? Where did those twenty minutes go? Lost in the morning time warp.

Fatigue behind the wheel often plays out like this:

Level one, grumpiness. "Hey. Who do you think you are? You don't own the road. My car got here first. Get outta my way!"

Level two, poor judgment. "Oops. Maybe I shouldn't have pulled in so tight in front of that eighteen wheeler. Hey! Why's that guy hitting the brakes so hard?"

Level three, clumsiness. "Yikes! I'm gonna hit that telephone pole."

Level four, more poor judgment. "Yes! I missed the pole. I missed the pole. I missed the ..." CRASH!

Level five, more grumpiness. "Hey. Who do you think you are? You don't own this living room window. My car got here first. Get outta my way!"

Level six, a black eye and many broken bones.

LIFE'S FUNNY

Sleep is important. We all know that, but too many of us figure we'll catch up on our sleep sometime in the future. In the meantime, there are alternatives. Don't drive. Move into a house with no stairs. Sell your toddler. And above all, don't carry a bucket of razor blades soaking in nitric acid.

Yawn. I think it's time for a nap.

Three Tips for a Safe and Happy Trip

By David Leonhardt

"What are YOU doing promoting happiness?" a friend asked? "Weren't you Canada's best-known consumer advocate, the guy who gave the oil companies regular tongue-lashings for ripping off car-bound commuters?"

"Weren't you our hero, who shook his fists at evil governments oppressing poor, beleaguered motorists stuck miserably on underfunded roads in their air conditioned SUVs for hours without anything to keep them amused except for their cell phones, CD players, laptop computers, mini TV sets, beer fridges and horns to honk?"

Funny how images get distorted. Not that I spared "evil governments" any mercy as spokesman for CAA Ontario (AAA affiliate) when they deserved it. But a consumer advocate lives for more than just rage.

For instance, there are those heartwarming phone calls from members: "What the *&#@! do you guys think you're &\$#@* doing?!? Can't you &^@\$ see the big oil companies are %\$%#@* all over us!?!? You must have @!#?% for brains!" Ah, how I miss those inspiring heart to hearts.

In fact, I spent much of my time cajoling, hinting, pressuring, suggesting and coaxing the government to spend more on highway safety.

LIFE'S FUNNY

I spent plenty of time cajoling, hinting, pressuring, suggesting and coaxing drivers to be more attentive and safer on the roads.

And I spent a fair amount of time cajoling, hinting, pressuring, suggesting and coaxing the government to amend laws to protect you and me from "all those other bad drivers on the road".

This gave me a solid grounding in happiness. What's the connection?

Make the connection

Start with good posture. That's right, sit up straight to feel happier. An upright posture increases self-confidence and actually makes you happier.

By total coincidence, sitting up straight also helps you be more alert, which is a definite bonus in traffic where those people who drive sober, are legally licensed and are not escaping a crime scene often drift into daydreams.

Next, go to bed early. In this speed-of light world, where our outdated 24-hour clock keeps our to-do list just one step ahead of our way-overdue list, we sometimes forget to sleep. Regularly missing even an hour of sleep can build up a nasty sleep debt. That's OK, what we lack in sleep we make up for in grouchiness, grumpiness and crankiness.

Grouchiness, grumpiness and crankiness happen to be very useful traits on the road. They help us get in the mood for running "all those other bad drivers on the road" off the road, which adds a little fun and adventure to our lives, right?.

LIFE'S FUNNY

Fatigue is also a major killer on the road. Did you know that car crashes increase 8% after the Daylight Savings Time switch, as people readjust their sleeping patterns? So get a little more sleep, but please not while you drive.

A third connection between happiness and traffic safety is anger.

Anger and happiness are not usually known to be bosom buddies: "Ooooh, I'm so angry I could bite somebody's head off, chew it up, spit it out and flush. Gotta love this feeling!"

People who spend their time blowing up at "all those other bad drivers on the road" are not exactly known for safe driving. It is generally understood that Road Rage is both dangerous and unhappy.

If we count to ten before reacting on the road, we might just get home in one piece. And if we can count to ten before reacting at home, we might even want to get home in one piece.

So sit up straight and get more sleep (not necessarily at the same time) and count to ten before reacting. That's' today's lesson in happiness and in road safety.

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<http://TheHappyGuy.com/positive-thinking-free-ezine.html> .

The Happiest Person in America?

By David Leonhardt

Who is the happiest person in America? *USA Today* featured Happiest Person in a cover story in its *USA Weekend magazine*. Bad news: it's not you. Nor is it me.

Just how did they find Happiest Person and determine that he is indeed the happiest person in America? The *USA Today* research team appears to have used an elegantly simple three-step process.

First, they identified "the world's leading authority on happiness", Martin Seligman ... which must have come as a wee bit of a surprise to several of his equally well-known and equally well-respected peers. How they picked Seligman remains more of a mystery than how a land-locked nation of mountains and yodeling became home to the holy grail of yachting, but we are working feverishly to crack the code.

Next, they asked Seligman to name six principles of happiness. Seligman listed couple strengths, a win-win approach, savoring success, playing to one's strengths, opening doors to opportunity and finding meaning in life.

Finally, they applied Seligman's principles to determine who best matches them. Naawww, just kidding. That would make way too much sense. Instead, *USA Today* created a make-believe process of its own that stands out from Seligman's list like the Jolly Green Giant at a dwarf convention. Here is the *USA Today* process.

The USA Today process

Geography. It seems that Happiest Person must live in the best place to live, which is Virginia Beach, in case you didn't know. If somebody even happier than Happiest Person lives in San Francisco or Vermont, the *USA Today* research team does not want to know.

Why confine their search to one town? Could geography be the secret to happiness that Seligman failed to mention? True, research does show that people living in free societies tend to be happier than others, but there is no evidence that where you live within the free world makes a difference.

Sex. Women are prone to higher emotional highs and lower emotional lows, whereas men are prone to more constant emotions. So Happiest Person must be a man, concludes *USA Today*. While the science does hit the bull's eye, the conclusion misses the barn wall. I suppose they'll be telling us that Seattle is the sunniest spot in America because the weather fluctuates less than in The Sunshine State.

Family. Happiest Person is married, has children, and is healthy. People with intimate relationships do tend to be happier, and marriage is a fairly good indicator (especially for men). And health is important. These may not be among Seligman's six principles, but let's not argue against good health.

Money. Happiest person has a "good, dependable job" as a stockbroker, a 2,300 square foot house (with an eat-in kitchen and a deck!). The truth comes out – money does buy happiness, according to the *USA Today* research team.

LIFE'S FUNNY

In fact, studies show that money makes a difference only if it elevates a person above the poverty level. When a person has means enough not to struggle for basic necessities, money rarely buys happiness.

Brand-awareness. This one must have made the big ad agency tycoons drool in their Corn Flakes. Happiest Person is for real because he likes all the right brands! He "digs" Coca-cola, so he must be the real thing. And he loves Craftsman tools and Dell computers. Say no more.

Where does the *USA Weekend* exposé leave the rest of us? If you are a little old lady enjoying retirement in Atlanta or a student conquering new fields of knowledge in Ann Arbor, you clearly are not happy enough for USA Today. But cheer up, even The Happy Guy eats "donuts" rather than "Krispy Kremes".

Squish. Splash. Climb.

By David Leonhardt

There is never a dull moment when you vacation with a two-year-old. And there are always such wonderfully painful lessons to be learned, too.

For instance, we allocated the first day of our vacation to the zoo. God allocated that same day to watering his plants. OK, so it was not quite rain. I mean, it was hardly worth the embarrassment of losing another fruitless struggle with that rusty old umbrella.

But it was more than just a mist. Bit by bit, it overtook me. My sneakers cried out "Squish! Squish! Squish!" as I walked. My wife started calling me "soggybottoms". I was getting downright moldy.

Little Lady, on the other hand, was in Seventh Heaven. This was finally her chance to take out her brand new umbrella. Her umbrella was her newest, most favorite toy that her way-too-picky father would not let her play with in the house. But today, she could play with it all day in the rainy mist or misty rain or whatever the big people want to call it.

Lesson Number One: Find the silver lining. And if you can't, get yourself an umbrella.

Climbing Mount Royal

A few days later, we headed to a lookout in a mountain park. Along the paths, we found ourselves trying to dodge speeding cyclists who thought "maximum 15 miles per hour" means "Yee-haw, we've reached warp speed!"

LIFE'S FUNNY

Seemingly lost, we stopped to ask directions. The young lad we approached pointed straight up. "It's a half an hour back the way you came, or you can take these stairs," he advised.

I doubted whether either my pregnant wife or Little Lady could handle the stairs, but they both wanted to try. (Seventh Heaven might be an umbrella, but a toddler's first six heavens apparently involve climbing.) At the top of the first flight, we saw that the next set of stairs was even higher. A lady behind us said, "Try counting them to pass the time. There are 205 steps." Was that meant to be encouraging?

Amazingly, Little Lady climbed 180 steps, and my pregnant wife was able to keep up at Little Lady's slow pace. I had to carry one of them up the remaining 25 steps (no, not my wife!), where I dumped the stroller and picnic basket so we all could catch our breath.

Lesson Number Two: It's amazing what you can do when you try, and it's more than amazing what some people will try.

Get in the swim of things

Our vacation was also the first chance for Little Lady to swim. We placed the water wings on her arms and stayed really close. This suited her just fine for almost three minutes. Then she wanted to swim "all alone".

You might have heard that the big danger for a new swimmer is sinking. Or hitting your head on the edge of the pool. Or developing cramps from too many French fries just before swimming and drowning in your own cholesterol (or something like that).

LIFE'S FUNNY

In fact, the big danger is a big mouth. Little Lady closed her mouth when I reminded her. But just 3.2 seconds later, her mouth would be open again, shouting "Lookit me!" and "I did it!" and other eloquent cries muffled by the gurgle of water pouring into an open mouth.

Lesson Number Three: Sometimes it is worth getting excited about life and shouting it out to the world ... even if people do keep telling you to shut your mouth.

Next time you go on vacation, bring a toddler along. I promise you three things:

1. You will get less rest than Santa Claus on December 24.
2. You will always have something exciting to do.
3. You will learn more than you ever wanted to.

Shoes Gone Astray

By David Leonhardt

Dorothy lost hers. I forgot mine. My wife broke hers. I speak of shoes, of course.

So why are we all smiling?

Dorothy is that sweet little girl who broke in that bustin' bronco of a tornado, landing in Oz and inheriting magic ruby slippers from a dead wicked witch.

For most people, the story ends when Dorothy loses her precious slippers somewhere over the scorching desert that surrounds Oz ... much like a Congressman loses his power when he flies out of Washington and crosses over the gridlock on the scorching mid-summer Beltway.

Just as a Congressman is bound to return to Washington sooner or later, Dorothy actually does return to Oz many times. In fact, there are dozens more books in the Oz series featuring hundreds of almost unknown characters.

With or without the power of her ruby slippers, Dorothy makes her way back to enjoy a multitude of unbelievable adventures with her favorite misfits.

Shoe lesson number one. When you lose your shoes, improvise.

LIFE'S FUNNY

Dress shoes?

I discovered my shoes were missing also while flying high in the sky.

Back in my days as a consumer advocate, I was on my way to deliver a speech in Newfoundland, sharing the lectern with the Newfoundland Minister of Transportation.

Sitting comfortably in the airplane seat, my mind was bobbing aimlessly on an ocean of emptiness. Suddenly I broke out in a cold sweat as I realized I had forgotten my dress shoes at home. In fact, they were waiting faithfully by the front door, ready to greet me upon my return.

In a matter of seconds I torpedoed through one thought after the other:

Yikes! I'm wearing running shoes for an important speech.

I know, I can buy a new pair when I land.

Too late; the stores are already closed.

What about in the morning?

No, tomorrow is Sunday and my speech is scheduled for 9:00 a.m.

90 seconds later, the cold sweat had miraculously been replaced with a single affirmation: "I will improvise"

The next morning, I began my speech: "You might be wondering why I am wearing running shoes today. Well, it's about this petition here. When I'm done speaking, I'll be

LIFE'S FUNNY

running door to door and I want every one of you to come running with me, too."

It was not the speech I had come to deliver, but it worked just as well. Better, in fact. My little "goof-up" became a clever demonstration of action speaking louder than words.

Shoe lesson number two. When you forget your shoes, improvise.

Wedding shoes?

My brother was getting married. We had just witnessed the signing of the papers at their house, and they were rushing over to another place for the the ceremony. Don't ask!

As we locked up their house, my wife's sandal broke. She tried walking in it, but to no avail. So off to the nearest shoe store we flew – figuratively, that is. This is not another story about losing shoes hundreds or thousands of feet above a desert or a traffic jam.

We knew they would wait for us before starting the ceremony. What we did not know is how long they would wait.

That day, my wife performed a miracle that no other woman has done before or since. She went into the store and came out just five minutes later with the perfect pair of sandals – smashing to smithereens the old woman-shopping-for-shoes Olympic record!

Shoe lesson number three. If you break your shoes, improvise.

LIFE'S FUNNY

Perhaps the most important lesson here is that, contrary to popular belief, the shoe does not make the man (or woman). But the lack of shoes sure can build character.

And it gives us a great opportunity to improvise.

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<http://TheHappyGuy.com/positive-thinking-free-ezine.html> .

Women and Men: Never the Twain Shall Meet

By David Leonhardt

"Dear Happy Guy,

"I just don't understand men. Last night I was sitting at the kitchen table, when my husband wandered by with a glass in his hand.

"I asked him, 'Is that a triple-coconut-cream-of-pickle-juice spritzer with a dash of chili powder you're drinking?' He says, 'Sure. What else?' It looked so yummy, that I just had to have a taste. 'Put it down here on the table for me, please,' I asked.

"Want to know what he did next? He emptied his glass on the table. Right there in front of me. It went flowing all over me and all over the chair and all over the floor. Yeach! What a mess. What on earth was he thinking?"

Signed, Soaking Lady, 42 Bouncing Canyon Lane

I get strange letters all the time. Everybody wants to be happy, and they all think The Happy Guy can solve their problems. Here's another letter I received just today:

"Hey Happy Guy,

"Can you explain women to me? You just can't please 'em.

"Take last night for example. There I was minding my own business, sipping on a juicy glass of triple-coconut-cream-of-pickle-juice spritzer with a dash of chili powder, when my

LIFE'S FUNNY

wife asks me to pour it on the table. I mean, is that a crazy request or what?

"But wait. It gets worse. Even though it means sacrificing the triple-coconut-cream-of-pickle-juice spritzer with a dash of chili powder I love so much, I pour it on the table for her. So what does she do? She blows up. She shouts and screams and yells all sorts of four letter words ... each with at least ten letters.

"Can you help me understand women?."

Signed, Thirsty Man, 42 Bouncing Canyon Lane

Sa-ay. These two letters are from the same address. Go figure.

Somebody please call a translator

After a while, a man discovers that he and his wife do not even speak the same language. Sure, we both call it "English", but we each use different dictionaries. Consider the word "fine".

When a woman uses the word "fine", a man knows he has just lost an argument. "Fine" is a woman's way of saying, "OK, you win the argument, but you only win because I let you, and I am still right, so take your duct tape and put it somewhere useful ... like across your mouth!"

To a man, "fine" means something completely different. It means that something is fine. It is good. It is as it should be. Some men, such as yours truly, use "fine" as a response when a woman asks, "How do I look in this new dress I bought?"

LIFE'S FUNNY

Men like that ought to just hop in front of a moving train to save themselves a lifetime of slow, painful torture. When a man says "fine" to a woman, it won't be long before that woman says "fine" to him. Better get out your duct tape.

So my answer to Soaking Lady is this: "If you don't like triple-coconut-cream-of-pickle-juice spritzer with a dash of chili all over the table and the chair and the floor, just ask your husband to wipe it up. Anyone loving enough to pour such an obviously tasty treat on the table at your request, will just as lovingly lap it up."

And my answer to Thirsty Man is this: "No, I can't."

Every relationship works best when we use words the listener will understand as we mean them to be understood. For instance, if a man says "fine" and a woman hears "yuck!", just don't use the word "fine".

Or, do what I do. Keep plenty of extra duct tape for a very rainy day.

Gotta Love Those Dirty Diapers

By David Leonhardt

As the father of a toddler, I am an expert on dirty diapers. I know exactly what to do with them: throw them out! But along comes a New York waste company and a town in California who want me to do something else with my dirty diapers. Like cover my roof with them. Or walk on them. Or build a doghouse with them, perhaps.

Does this sound nuts? Well, it's not. In fact, this project just won the world's top happiness award: the 2003 Happy Guy Award.

A few months ago, we lived in a "vertical community". When my Little Lady was born, we wanted to expand our home to make room for her. Our neighbors below objected to us digging a basement. A front porch would have blocked the hall. So we opted to move out to the country, and with that move we had to sacrifice the diaper service and any environmental high ground we could claim.

Yes, we became what we had always wanted to avoid being: diaper-dumpers.

If you never had children, you may not realize how much a little child can dispose of. In olden days, a couple would have a dozen kids, give or take a few. They had enough room back then. In these modern times of disposable diapers, that just is not possible – the diapers from the first child take up more place on this planet than several dozen siblings would.

LIFE'S FUNNY

So now we have the town of Santa Clarita and Knowaste Inc. proposing to recycle dirty diapers. Sure, you think, just mix them all together, throw in a bit of water, steam them clean and slap them back on the baby. Baby proudly shows off his recycled diapers to all his cooing relations. Not quite. Ironically, the only product that does not seem to be on the list of end uses is new diapers. Roofing shingles, sure. Shoe insoles, yes. Maybe even a workbench or a car panel. But not diapers.

As I pondered how the world might look if the massive force of diaper recycling was unleashed, it became clear that there could be several big markets for dirty diapers. Imagine the pitches ...

Diaper futures look promising

From Milan and Paris: "Next we have Oo-La-La Picotte strutting her stuff in a lovely ensemble of pure recycled diapers. Notice the fashionable fuchsia on the upper tilt of the collar. This line will be all the rage in parlors and bars this spring."

From Detroit and Tokyo: "Feel the energy and invigoration. That's the power of 100% pure recycled diapers under the hood. Go ahead. Kick the tires. Pick your color. And drive away safe in the knowledge that you are being protected by 2000 pounds of pure recycled baby poop!"

From Los Angeles: "It's a smash hit. *Dirty Diapers II: The Recycled Story* opened in theatres across the country yesterday and immediately claimed the number one spot. What a movie!"

From New York and Toronto: "This just in. Citizens are being asked NOT to hoard dirty diapers. I repeat, do NOT

LIFE'S FUNNY

hoard dirty diapers. The shortage has already slowed the economy by three percent and housing starts have ground to a halt. Please take all your dirty diapers immediately to a drop-off depot. This has been a public service announcement."

Wow! Did you ever think that dirty diapers could one day become so valuable that you might no longer feel safe hiding them under your mattress? It's time to start a market in dirty diaper futures.

See? There is hope for this world, after all. So what will YOU be doing with your dirty diapers?

You're How Old???

By David Leonhardt

"Well, Happy Birthday! How old are you anyway?"

"Oh, I'm just 29 ... again."

It's a harmless game, denying our age, right? We play sensitive about our age as we get older, as we get further away from birth and closer to death. It's just a way to share our unease of growing older with people around us.

Try as we might, time marches on and we get older just the same. I was reminded about this when I recently read that we are now seven million years old. That's at least a million years older than we were just one year ago.

Of course, you and I did not personally age a million years in the past 365 days. That would be taking the term "personal growth" too far. It would be either a b-rated horror movie or the phenomenal work of a genius. In fact, an early human skull found in the Sahara Desert is 7 million years old, pushing "the start of human evolution back at least another million years."

Here and now, age is important. Denying one's age, or even being sensitive about it, can be disabling to many of us. Our years, our lines, our scars are part of who we are. They should be a matter of comfort and pride and even of joy. Happiness eludes us when we feel embarrassed, guilty, or even shy about any part of who we are.

LIFE'S FUNNY

It's time to take pride

It's time for each of us to take pride again in everything we are. Try saying something like this: "I am pushing 40 (or whatever age applies to you). I have lived 40 years of happiness. I have survived 40 years of challenges. I have learned so many life lessons from 40 trips around the sun. (I have much more to learn, so God, please let me live another 40!) I have thrived during 40 years. I am proud of every one of those years."

Once upon a time, the elders of the village were revered. They bore both knowledge and wisdom. Now we settle for just knowledge. The elders carried traditions down from generations. Now we just create brand new "traditions". The elders were our leaders. Now we downsize them.

Youth has its own beauty, its own advantages, its own joy, its own reasons to be admired. But every age is important and every age is beautiful. How old are you right now? (Really, I don't mean "29 again".) Whatever age you are, right now that is the perfect age for you -- and the perfect age to be proud of.

I recall sitting in my pew when it suddenly dawned on me why one member of the all-female choir looked so different. Every lady was at least 50 years old. Most were over 60. But the other heads were jet black or honey brown or sandy blonde or some other artificial tint. White Top Lady stood out from the crowd. She packed a loaded bundle of white hair.

It is no sin to dye one's hair, as long as we don't do it during the service. It is just one of many ways we adorn ourselves. But the sight of a dozen elderly ladies with hair colors impossible for their age (and perhaps even impossible for any age!) made me want to laugh out loud right there in

LIFE'S FUNNY

church. (I resisted.) All the heads would probably have looked normal if White Top Lady's hair had not been screaming out, "I'm proud of my color. I'm proud of my age. I'm not going to hide."

It's time to be proud of everything about ourselves, including our age. So to everybody reading this, "Happy Seven Millionth!"

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How To Tell If You're a Literary Snob

By David Leonhardt

"I don't know if I should put 'writer' on my business card," I murmured.

"Then don't," my wife said in her infinite wisdom. "Put 'author' on it."

"But if I put 'author' on, none of those big companies with overflowing coffers will want to hire me as a writer," I pointed out.

"Fine. Put 'writer' on your card then, and all those fancy people you give it to will know you can write for them."

"But writer looks so small," I pointed out. "I also want Fortune 500 companies to hire me as a speaker, and nobody important hires a writer to speak. They hire *authors*."

"OK, why don't you put both?" she offered.

"Ho, right. That'll impress them. A writer who can't even write his business card without duplicating his own redundancies," I said. "I might as well shoot myself with my own sword."

"Why don't you just put 'Happiness and self-actualization'?" she suggested. "You write about happiness. You speak about happiness. Let them figure it out."

In the end, I put "author", figuring I would get most writing jobs over the Internet, but when I speak live I would have to hand out cards to lots of people. An author's autograph

LIFE'S FUNNY

would make those people giddy as strawberry Jell-O on the Amtrak Express. Those same people would search nervously for a graceful retreat from the company of a mere writer.

Learn that secret handshake

What is it about being an author? You can author an article or a report or just about anything. And you can be the author of just about anything (including "your own misfortunes"). But you can't be "an author - period" unless you've published a book.

Warning: writing a book does not count. I have a friend who wrote a book. That makes him a writer, not an author. When he publishes it, only THEN will he be a real author and only THEN will he be entitled to learn the authors' secret handshake. Don't try sneaking into the clubhouse on the scant pretext that you wrote a book. *Anybody* can write a book. Even a *writer*. You have to publish the book to get through these gates of glory.

But if my friend does publish, and he does become an author, and he does learn the secret handshake ...

Not so fast. His book is about humorous anecdotes from many years in his particular profession. Hmm. That would put him in that blurry purgatory between "writer" and "author" in the company of so many silver medal winners who almost made it and whose names we almost remember .

Why? Because he doesn't qualify for that crucial praise, "I just couldn't put your book down." That comment is reserved for novels and "serious" non-fiction like biographies and history. I wrote a self-help book. No self-respecting *New*

LIFE'S FUNNY

York Times book reviewer would allow my book to qualify for "I just couldn't put your book down."

But what if several readers of a lowly self-help book did say "I just couldn't put your book down?" Would that make the writer an author, or would the author remain just a writer?

Several readers have said just that to me. One lady even apologized for not calling me back one morning because she had stayed up into the wee hours of the morning reading my book. Woohoo! That's the kind of feedback to make an author smile. That kind of feedback would make even a writer smile.

Call me a writer. Call me an author. I couldn't care less. As long as you tell me "I just couldn't put your book down," I'm happy as a pig in ... uh ... Jell-O.

The Red Balloon of Happiness

By David Leonhardt

Just when you think you know it all, some 17-month old child comes along and teaches you another lesson.

Little Lady lost her favorite ball. There are few things that bring this 17-month-old more joy than playing with her favorite ball. And, of course, we want our daughter to have all the happiness she can get.

So we headed to the store to replace the missing ball. Little Lady enjoyed the outing, since there were so many exciting things to pull off the shelves. When we reached the ball aisle, she nearly jumped for joy. (OK, more like raced to the bin and started covering the floor with her joy, one bounce at a time.)

As we left the aisle, Little Lady was happy and smiling. She clasped the new ball in her hands as we walked up to the checkout. While waiting to pay, Little Lady caught sight of a red balloon wandering aimlessly around the floor like a lost puppy.

If you think a ball can bring happiness, wait until you see the sparkle in the eye of a toddler who has just found her very own red balloon. Of course, she adopted the balloon immediately and clung to it all the way back to the car. Did she want to hold the ball? No way. She had a balloon!

I couldn't help but marvel at how she valued the free, fragile balloon more than the sturdy ball for which I had just paid good money. Is there a lesson we can learn from this? Here are the possible lessons that immediately occurred to me:

LIFE'S FUNNY

1. Why bother having a thick skin, if your daughter prefers thin skins?
2. If you drift aimlessly long enough, you might get adopted.
3. Money can't buy the most important things in life (happiness, joy, smiles, red balloons, etc.)
4. Your child can see value where you cannot, so listen to what she says.

I figure at least two of these are valuable lessons that can add daily happiness to a person's life.

How often do we value the wrong things -- the things that cost the most? How hard do we work to earn the extra income to buy things we simply do not need? Anyone reading this probably has more than she will ever need, and yet don't we all want more anyway?

Keep your eye on the ball

So many of us forfeit the red balloon of happiness so we can chase after the costly ball.

Suppose we choose to have less of the things money can buy, and instead chose to have more time? More time to spend loving our family? More time to spend knowing ourselves? More time to just be?

My wife and I made a big decision a few months ago. We gave up the condo in the city for a big old house in the country. Our red balloon is space to raise a family in a much less noisy and stressed-out environment, and the opportunity for me to work out of home close to the ones I love. The ball we gave up was the "glamour" of city living and a fancy condo.

LIFE'S FUNNY

Assuming we can make a living from my self-help book, my motivational ezine, this column and whatever other work-from-home projects I take on, we get to keep the red balloon.

I invite you to look carefully at your life. Ask what truly brings you meaning and fulfillment. Then ask yourself if you could have more of that if you spent less time and effort on activities that don't bring you meaning but just fill your time.

Enjoy your red balloon of happiness.

Grassophobia

By David Leonhardt

Each day my daughter, pushing one year old now, amazes me with the lessons she teaches me. Yes, here I go again learning lessons from someone too young to speak. (Hmm ... maybe that's a lesson, too.)

In my corner of Starship Earth, winter rolled in a wee bit late last year. The thermometer went easy on us all winter, leaving our sidewalks clear of the usual mountains of snow. So I suppose it was cosmic justice that just when we wanted to enjoy spring, Old Man Winter struck us from behind. Which explains why we had to wait until May to introduce our Little Lady to the sea of grass surrounding our new home in the country.

Little Lady gets excited about everything (another lesson from speech-free youth). Just bringing her into the fresh air gets her excited enough to pop her buttons. As our "sponge lawn" finally seemed to dry from the spring snow, we decided to introduce her to the green stuff. I placed her gently down on her stomach so she could crawl.

Crawl!? You want me to crawl!? She may not speak English yet, but she sure can speak body language. No way would she let her hands or feet or face near those menacing blades of grass, which by this time had reached a good four or five inches in height.

However, her gestures of fear were set against squeals of delight.

LIFE'S FUNNY

Next we sat Little Lady up on the grass, and the squeals grew louder. As the smiles grew wider, the hands approached the lawn. She pulled them back. Reached down. Pulled back. Reached down. Pulled back. Turned her head to smile and squeal at us. Back to reaching down and pulling back. Again. Once more. Hey, this is scary stuff.

Squeal with delight

How many things would make us squeal with delight? OK, not literally, but think of things you would like to do. Things that would be exciting. Things that would bring meaning to your life. Are you also thrilled with the possibilities ... but maybe just a little apprehensive about making the big leap? Many people are.

Sometimes fear holds us back from our dreams. We want to try something new, but we retreat back into our own comfort zone. I've watched one person after the other join Toastmasters against their better judgment over the past six years. Each one was terrified to speak in public. Each one jumped off the proverbial cliff, brave souls every one of them. And every one of them is braver now than they were when they joined. Every one is more skilled than when they joined. And every one feels less trapped by their personal comfort zone than they were when they joined.

Research shows that people regret more their inactions than their actions. In the long run, we tend to regret more what we didn't do (Why didn't I at least give it a try?). Do you want to improve your skills? Discover God? Travel around the world? Make a difference on our little Starship Earth? Tell somebody how much you care? Whatever it is you

LIFE'S FUNNY

would most want to do, make the commitment right now to do it. Otherwise, the research says you will regret it later.

Many people strike out into business for themselves. Some succeed. Many fail. None regret. We may fear failure, but it is not trying that we regret.

As for Little Lady, she will overcome her fear of grass. Unfortunately, she may also overcome her squeals of delight. Aaaahh. The pure joy of childhood. Hey, there's another lesson we adults can learn from our children!

The Definition of Happiness

By David Leonhardt

I ran a contest in "Your Daily Dose of Happiness" to see how people define happiness. I was stunned to discover that I am the only person who defines happiness as an extra helping of cheesecake.

There were other shockers, too.

We know that money can't buy happiness ... except, of course, when we are flat broke. But I figured several people would define happiness, at least in part, as a bulging bank vault or "financial freedom". Just three people cited money in their definitions of happiness.

I also figured many people would cite health as part of their definition of happiness, as in "health, wealth, and happiness". But only four people mentioned health.

No health? No wealth? How do people define happiness?

The top rated mention goes to family. It seems that we might be flat broke and deathly ill, but a loving family will make us happy just the same.

Altruism and kindness are also key. It seems we smile by making others smile. Isn't that nice? No health and no wealth. Just smile.

Faith scores big, too. This works out very well, because we can ask our loving family to pray for a speedy recovery and a big win in El Gordo next month (assuming we recover first).

Spammers have it all wrong

What does this mean? It means the spammers have it all wrong. They keep sending us useless emails about making money.

A typical spam message says, "Get the insider secrets to making millions on the Internet. I will give you these valuable secrets for peanuts just because I love your smile so much. You could make \$5,433 in the next hour if you act now. Hurry. Don't wait. This is the real thing. You can trust me. All the others are just scammers."

Instead, spammers should be sending offers like, "Get the insider secret to building a loving family on the Internet. I will give you these valuable secrets for peanuts (and a big virtual hug) just because I love your smile so much. You could love your kids, spouses, uncles, parents, pets – anybody! – in the next hour if you act now. Hurry. Don't wait. This is the real thing. You can trust me. All the others are just family planners."

Spammers also waste emails on replacing body parts we never had and enhancing body parts we could never have, when what we really want is to know God better.

Here is a typical spammer email: "Hair loss? We just released the miracle cure. Grow your hair back thicker than a wooly mammoth preparing for the next ice age. This is worth a gazillion dollars, but you get it free for just pennies a day. Give me your credit card number before midnight tonight. I can't afford to offer this price for long. Beware phony products that drip funny colors in your face or make hair grow in all the wrong places. This is the real thing!"

LIFE'S FUNNY

Instead, spammers should be saying: "Faithless? Book your luncheon with the Pope, dinner with the Dalai Lama and a one-on-one chat with Moses. Reserve your seat free for just a handful of pennies. Give me your credit card number before midnight tonight. Act now. I can't afford to offer this price for long. Beware phony reservations for meetings with Michael Jackson and other fake gods. This is the real thing!"

By the way, Mother Nature was also a part of many definitions of happiness. So take your family down by the river for a prayer. And if you can lend a helping hand to a chipmunk or a duck, you'll be the perfect definition of happiness.

Staying Sane While Wall Street Crashes

By David Leonhardt

Everybody is riding the Wall Street Roller coaster. Even if you are not invested, the headlines scream out one word: PANIC!

It's hard not to join in the panicking. The Panic Crowd seems to be having all the fun these days. But they don't have all the happiness. You see, it's true what your mother told you: money doesn't buy happiness, at least not for most people. But the lack of money does buy pure misery.

Did you ever wonder why so many office towers have fusion-sealed, micron-proof windows to keep office workers safe from any semblance of fresh air? It has to do with the stock market. During The Great Depression, just too many brokers were jumping out of windows. This enraged a nation of vengeful investors, who demanded to kill their brokers personally. So henceforth all windows were sealed.

(The good news is that by the time the windows were sealed, The Great Depression had ended, so there have been very few reported cases of enraged investors killing their brokers. However, there have been several incidents of "office air suffocation syndrome" -- but that's another issue for another column.)

Oh no! Not another Top Ten list!

Here are The Happy Guy's Top Ten Tips for Staying Sane While Wall Street Crashes Around You:

LIFE'S FUNNY

1. Don't panic. Enough people are doing that already; you're needed elsewhere.
2. Don't join the Panic Crowd. They are NOT having more fun, they just act that way to attract new members fold. Misery loves company.
3. Take inventory. Do you have the basic necessities? If so, you are OK. When they come to take away your television remote control, then panic.
4. Smile at your neighbour. A smile lifts everybody's spirits, but most of all your own.
5. Remember the Great Depression. It sucked, but people survived. It's amazing how many non-essentials we take for granted. Rent a movie about the 1930s, sit back, and laugh about how much better *our* depression is going to be.
6. Learn a new skill. In hard times, it pays to be very, very employable. And you may even be lucky enough to have two jobs. Oh, wait. That's our problem now.
7. Start saving now. Then when the bottom falls out, at least you'll have something to live on for three-and-a-half weeks.
8. Start spending now. It's folks like you, saving all your money instead of spending it, that are killing the economy.
9. Stop listening to people telling you to save or to spend. In fact, stop listening to news about the markets. It's just too depressing.

LIFE'S FUNNY

10. Ignore top ten lists. They are way too gimmicky and seldom give any truly useful information (except for this one, of course!)

There you have it. The Happy Guy's Top Ten Tips for Staying Sane While Wall Street Crashes Around You. All the advice your mother didn't tell you about financial markets, and more importantly, about keeping happy while others suffer. The bottom line is don't panic, don't invest all your emotions where your money is invested, and focus on what really matters.

Investing as a sport

By David Leonhardt

I said last week that money doesn't generally buy happiness, but the lack of it can buy absolute misery. This, by the way, is not just my personal observation. It is the conclusion of some of the most respected happiness researchers (Yes, there is such a thing -- read my book.)

The trouble is that we have to pay attention to money more when we lack it than when we have it. This doesn't seem fair, but the Lord works in mysterious ways. Most people are invested in the stock market, either directly or through mutual funds, pension plans or some other vehicle. So it is hard not to be part of the Panic Crowd. But I, in all my financial wisdom, have two golden rules to offer. These may not make you rich, but they will keep you happy.

Number One: Place your investments in the safest vehicles possible (Do as I say, not as I do!) and forget about them. When the next recession ends, take inventory and see that you still have investments. Most of us don't get a rush out of watching our investments plunge or yo-yo up and down. Most people are happier when they forget they even have investments.

Number Two: If you are one of those people with a terminal case of Itchy Trading Finger, then you probably would not be happy ignoring your investments. Place aside what you need for the long term, such as retirement if your heart lasts that long. Don't play with this money. Don't touch it. Trade only with "extra" money. The rest of you are asking, "What's that?", but Itchy Trading Fingers know what I'm talking about. They view stock trading as a sport.

LIFE'S FUNNY

In fact, stock trading is a sport. Much more than, say, hunting. Think about it. In a sport, two equal opponents square off against one another. "Let the best one win." Each faces the same challenges. Each is armed with the same weapons. Each has an equal chance of feeling the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat (unless, of course, you happen to be the Tampa Bay Devil Rays).

Imagine the play-by-play

Imagine the play-by-play if hunting truly was a sport: "Man is closing in. He's coming up from behind and rounding to the south side. He's raising his rifle. Deer doesn't even appear to notice. Oh, I can't watch. This is going to be a massacre. Wait! Deer has just bucked up and twisted. He spins around a tree, and -- look! Deer has a rifle too. He aims. He shoots! He Kills!!! Man is down. What an upset, ladies and gentlemen."

In real life, Deer doesn't win very often. In fact, I estimate that Man is about 4.3 gazillion times more likely to be defeated by his own team mate than by the opposition. We call this "friendly fire".

Contrast this to Itchy Trading Finger, who stands an equal chance of striking gold or of moving into a cardboard box on the street corner. The stock market truly is sport, for those who choose to treat it that way. Which is why it is so important to put aside -- in safe, secure investments -- the money you feel you need for your future. That way, when Itchy Trading Fingers retire, they can move out of the cardboard box.

For the rest of us, we are happier getting our sport watching monster trucks crush WWF actors. Oops! There I go again,

LIFE'S FUNNY

mixing my sports and my metaphors, not to mention ignoring several federal safety standards. May your investments be safer than my WWF friends, and may you sleep well at night.

Cleaned Up or Cleaned Out?

By David Leonhardt

I need your help. I did a good deed recently, but I was gripped by second thoughts. I want to know if you think I should have done this. Here is what happened:

In preparing our condo for sale, we had already moved most of the furniture out and I called Sears to clean the carpets in the living room, bedroom and den.

Sears Lady took my name and address, we set a date (not THAT kind of date!) and she said that Mr. Carpet Cleaner would call me to set up a time. Which he did. And then he confirmed. And then he came.

Mr. Carpet Cleaner (not his real name) was pleasant, but quiet, and went about his business. When he was done, I had planned to give him a ten dollar tip. Don't salivate too much - these are just Canadian dollars. But on a \$69.95 job, ten dollars is a nice tip, especially since I was sure that Mr. Carpet Cleaner did not make all of that \$69.95.

After completing the paperwork, Mr. Carpet Cleaner handed me the invoice to sign. I glanced at it and noticed a ten dollar "unscheduled cleaning" fee. Oh joy!

I asked him about this, and he told me it was because the price I had been quoted was based on three rooms, but that he cleaned four, including the dining room.

The dining room? What dining room? We don't have a dining room. Well, actually we do, he pointed out. The living room wall is four inches indented (that's right, a whole four inches)

LIFE'S FUNNY

at the pass-through window from the kitchen, making it a "dining room".

Now I have never before seen a four-inch wide dining room, especially since the whole condo living room (including our newly discovered dining room) was no bigger than a typical living room in a modest house.

And it was less work to clean than most because we had already moved all the furniture to our new house (with a much bigger living room, but still no dining room - maybe I should invite Mr. Carpet Cleaner over to find me one).

Generosity versus rights – a choice to make

I hesitated, with all my alarms wailing like sirens. I am just winding down a decade-and-a-half career as a consumer advocate. My job has been to battle greedy corporations and sanity-starved governments in the name of consumer protection.

Grrrr. I signed the invoice handed it back to Mr. Carpet Cleaner, paid the fee, and gave him that ten dollar tip ... just as I had planned. Was I happy? No. I figured he was loyally following corporate policy, and if I had a tangle it was with Sears, not with Mr. Carpet Cleaner. He still was probably not making that much.

When I handed him the tip, his eyes lit up with joy. I told him I figured he wasn't getting rich on me. He quickly told me he would be making \$14 from the visit, so I had almost doubled his income.

Plus he had to provide his own vehicle and pay the gas, and he had to invest in his own cleaning equipment and soap. Which means I paid Sears the remaining \$55.95 - oops, I

LIFE'S FUNNY

mean \$65.95 - just so that Sears Lady and I could set a date. If the economics sound a bit like the escort business, I will happily leave that for another column.

So did I do the right thing? Did I do a good deed or was I just a floor mat for a greedy corporation? Of course, I want to believe it was a good deed -- foot prints on my back would clash with my limited fashion sense. But do I need a reality check?

Editor's note. This has been a valuable group lesson in self-actualization. Dozens of people provided their opinions, and most told me I should have withheld the extra \$10 and the tip, as well. I'm not sure I would have felt any happier that way, though.

Victim of a Scam?

By David Leonhardt

He mumbled a bit and seemed out of breath. "Would you have a gas can, by any chance?"

It seems Mr. Stuck had run out of gas along the road. He had reached the service station, but they wanted to sell him a gas can, and he had no money or credit cards. He did have a driver's licence, and it did show he was from where he said he was, some four hours drive away. (The name on the licence was not Mr. Stuck, in case you were wondering.)

I did not have a gas can. "Could you lend me some money.?" Mr. Stuck ran around the service station grabbing a napkin, borrowing a pen, and asked me to write my address down so he could pay me back.

He needed money, whatever I could afford for both the gas can and the gas. The service station guy would drive him back to his car, but he would not give free gas away.

Compassion and Suspicion battled it out for my heart. Compassion reminded me that I had been there. As a student, having to beg for bus fare when I disembarked from the train and realized my pockets were empty.

As a driver once stuck in a snow bank seeking somebody to pull me out. As a gas customer who had just filled his tank and suddenly saw his wallet sitting at home some three hours away. (No kidding, I really saw it.)

LIFE'S FUNNY

Each time, a Good Samaritan rescued me. What a wonderful world. How could I deny others the same benefit of the doubt, Compassion implored.

Never Give Cash

But Suspicion just wasn't buying it. For all the beggars on the downtown streets I walk every day, I have never given any spare change. Suspicion keeps reminding me that the money would most likely be used for alcohol or tobacco, rather than food or clothing.

But I do sometimes bring fruits with me to share with the beggars. Occasionally I take one into a pizza place and buy him a slice. I even once baked cookies just to distribute to homeless folk.

But I do not give cash. This is the uneasy compromise my Internal Diplomat brokered between Compassion and Suspicion.

Normally, I would have bought the gas and driven Mr. Stuck back to his car. I would have filled his tank and kept the gas can (I was in the market for one anyway). I would have known where my money went while helping a person in need.

But I was in a huge rush, running late for an important meeting a hundred miles away. I dismissed my Internal Diplomat and let Compassion win out, with Suspicion tut-tutting all the way.

As I write this column, that was three days ago. Maybe I'll see a cheque in the mail. Maybe I won't.

LIFE'S FUNNY

Maybe I was a knight in shining armour. Maybe I was a rat in Mr. Stuck's diabolical lab experiment. A willing victim of a clever scam. (Or a very daft victim of a very obvious scam!)

I would like to think I did the right thing. That's what Compassion keeps telling me. Last week I wrote about two Good Samaritans who helped me out. But Suspicion is still tut-tutting.

I would like to hear what you think. In my situation, what would you have done? Do you have any similar stories, and if so, how did they turn out? Please let me know at David@TheHappyGuy.com

Hotel Stella

By David Leonhardt

We almost ruined our honeymoon in Venice. My new bride, Chantal, was so looking forward to this stop. Switzerland had been heavenly. Austria thrilled us. But Venice was to be the pinnacle of our trip.

We found a lovely *pensione* in Lido, a picturesque island just across from Venice. The old stone house had been converted into a bed-and-breakfast in a postcard neighborhood. Lush trees, flowers, canals, quaint footbridges, and a wrought iron gate gave it a nostalgic, old world charm.

We checked into the *pensione* with the highest of expectations. Stella, the owner, was a graceful lady with a professional air. She sat behind her polished wood desk wearing a “customer service smile” calculated to add an elegant touch. What a classy place to stay.

We had been travelling for about ten days, so we were due for laundry. As we had not seen any laundromats, we asked Stella if they provided such a service.

“Of course. We wash it by machine and dry it out in the fresh Italian breeze.” And all it would cost us is our weight in *Lira*.

Did we want that ironed? We were wearing shorts and T-shirts, so we declined the ironing.

It was the next day that Stella became known as The Wicked Witch. She had an employee plop down on our bed three small plastic bags, stuffed like turkeys with our clothes. It

LIFE'S FUNNY

was not easy, but we pulled our clothes out from the bags one by one. We pulled our damp, crumpled clothes that had never been caressed by the fresh Italian breeze out from the bags one by one.

Every piece looked like it had been squeezed through a special crumple machine – including underwear that had never wrinkled in the laundry before. She had even found a way to wrinkle our “wrinkle free” shirts.

I was infuriated. I was ready to hit the ceiling. With some misgivings, Chantal let me go downstairs to “reason” with Stella. “Is not my problem,” was the best customer service she could offer through her customer service smile.

Anything for another sack of gold

I even asked to borrow the iron. “This is not a service we provide.” Although, for another sack of gold she would graciously iron our wardrobe—even the underwear.

In frustration, I stormed back up the stairs. “There’s just no reasoning with that woman!” Chantal went down to reason with her more calmly than I apparently was prepared to do. At first, I heard nothing, but as Chantal’s “calmness” grew ever louder, I went down to join her.

At long last, Stella threw us another option: “If you don’t like, you can go to another hotel.”

Finally a useful suggestion from her. So, in a near rage, we began packing our bags. We would find another hotel and continue our trip. So there! Why should our honeymoon be ruined by The Wicked Witch?

And we almost did stomp off in search of another hotel. But

LIFE'S FUNNY

then something miraculous happened: we took leave of our senses, so to speak. We put our anger aside long enough to ask what would be in our own best interest. Did we really want to waste one of our three days in Venice hunting for another hotel, packing our damp clothes, forfeiting some of our hefty hotel deposit, and still fuming (even more, perhaps) about Wicked Witch Stella?

We decided to stay at the otherwise lovely hotel. We shook out our clothes and hung them up to dry on doors, door handles, cupboard, bed posts ... anywhere that clothes could hang. Most importantly, we consciously decided to stop feeling anger.

Leaving behind our laundry-spangled room, we skipped off to the *vaporetto* boat to enjoy Venice. Can you believe that one simple decision not to fume had put the spring back into our steps?

Ten years later we wanted to remember the excitement of Venice, not the Wicked Witch's larceny. She could have spoiled our visit to Venice...but only if we had let her. What a valuable lesson to learn, a lesson that helped inspire me to finally write that book lurking inside me. Ten years later, we will remember Wicked Witch Stella ... not with anger, but with laughter.