



BOOK REVIEW: **Your Ultimate Life Plan**

By Dr. Jennifer Howard

Book Reviewer: RABBI RAMI SHAPIRO, PH.D., award winning poet, essayist and author of numerous books including, *Recovery--the Sacred Art: The Twelve Steps As Spiritual Practice (Art of Spiritual Living)* and *Amazing Chesed: Living a Grace-Filled Judaism*, adjunct professor Dept. of Philosophy, Middle Tennessee State University

We Americans are obsessed with happiness. But when asked to define happiness most of us draw a blank. “We’ll know it when we have it,” we say, but is that really so? If we have no idea what happiness is how will we know it?

We won’t. All we know is that we are not happy now. So we set out to make ourselves happy by consuming whatever it is that we believe will make us happy. We purchase gym memberships, Botox injections, grooming products, numerous digital devices, consume mounds of empty calorie foodstuffs, and a never-ending library of self-help books. And nothing works.

Why? Because we have no idea what happiness is, so how can we possibly buy our way into it?

Dr. Jennifer Howard in her new book *Your Ultimate Life Plan* (yes, another self-help book, but perhaps one that just might help you) begins by offering us a definition of happiness. For her, happiness is a mindset that underlies every other aspect of your life. Happiness isn’t something you pursue and attain; happiness is the pursuit itself.

Think about that for a moment. Thomas Jefferson wrote that human beings have three inalienable rights: the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Life and liberty are measurable things that one can say one has or doesn’t have. But pursuit of happiness is something else. Why not provide us with the right to be happy? Why only guarantee us the right to race after happiness?

Lots of people who grapple with this question answer it by affirming that happiness itself isn’t a fixed state. Sometimes you’re happy and sometimes you’re not.

And whether or not you're happy is often linked, as Dr. Howard writes, to the circumstances surrounding your life. External forces over which you have no control determine your feeling. If things are going well, you're happy. If things are going poorly, you're not happy.

But Dr. Jennifer offers a different take on all this. For her, the pursuit of happiness is what makes us happy. There is nothing to attain. The play is the thing. Winning and losing are irrelevant if the game—life—is well played.

Your Ultimate Life Plan isn't about winning the game, but about playing it more effectively. Rather than imagine one can win at life, and then equate winning with some tangible thing like wealth, realize that all life ends in death, and whatever it is you've won up to that point is lost. This realization, if taken seriously, should free you from the notion that you ever be happy once and for all. Happiness is not a steady-state condition.

It is, as Dr. Howard says, a mindset.

The mindset she offers to help you develop is all about process—pursuit to use Jefferson's words—rather than results. It is a mindset that finds happiness not in the results of your actions but in the quality of your actions. By acting mindfully, gratefully, with a sense of presence and purpose tied to the present moment rather than the future, you will find an intrinsic happiness in simply being regardless of the state of your becoming. She is talking not about outer change but inner transformation. This is how

Dr. Howard puts it:

As I see it, unless you do your psychological work you may not be as open to your spiritual exploration as you'd like. For in the same way that your psychological issues and unconscious programming can get in the way of your relationships, business success, and happiness, they can also prevent you from fully embracing and experiencing the depth, breadth, and beauty of your chosen spiritual path. That's why *Your Ultimate Life Plan* is so effective and powerful. When you combine psychological work with spiritual practice (from whatever spiritual path you choose), you move forward with greater ease.

That's why we leave no stone unturned.

You need to be willing to face and embrace yourself fully and let go of your desire to avoid emotional work with a quick fix, relationship, teacher, philosophy, or book. What you read can't heal you, but it can open the door to a multitude of possibilities. Put into practice, it can potentially transform you if it takes you deep enough and is based on sound psychological and spiritual principles.

This may scare away lots of readers. After all this sounds like hard work, and it is. But this work is part of the pursuit, and it is the pursuit that will make you happy.

This is key: unlike most self-help books that put the prize at the end of the process, Dr. Howard's book makes the process the prize. Happiness grows as you grow.

You are not pursuing happiness; you are discovering happiness in the pursuit of a richer and more meaningful life. You will die happy--not because you grasped the prize, but because you lived it.