

Authentic Happiness

By Martin Seligman

Reviewed by Jerry J. Wellik and John H. Hoover

In *Authentic Happiness* (2002), author Martin Seligman proposes a positive psychology focusing on mental health rather than mental illness. He suggests that we can develop unprecedented levels of happiness by nurturing existing strengths such as optimism, kindness, generosity, originality, and/or humor. He calls these inherent traits “signature strengths” and argues that by exercising them frequently and wisely, we transform our lives to a higher more positive plane. “I do not believe that you should devote overly-much effort to correcting weaknesses. Rather, I believe that the highest success in living and the deepest emotional satisfaction comes from building and using your signature strengths” (p. 13).

Clearly, readers will recognize the similarities between Seligman's ideas and Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) notion of flow (well worth Reclaiming readers' time) and Maslow's “peak experiences.” Seligman makes specific suggestions about getting to such “peak” psychological experiences; in fact Seligman mentions flow specifically noting [about Csikszentmihalyi], “His books on flow describe who has flow and who does not, but nowhere does he directly tell his readers how to acquire more flow” (p. 121). Seligman's project is to help us enter such joyous states more often.

Authentic Happiness is organized into three parts: Positive Emotion, Strength and Virtue, and “In the Mansions of Life.” Seligman intersperses surveys throughout the book, so that readers can self-check their orientation toward various life events. For example, the instrument starting on page 141 deals with (among other topics) “Wisdom and Knowledge.” Collectively, the questionnaires are designed to help the reader identify his or her signa-

ture strengths. Again, hearkening back to Csikszentmihalyi's work, wherein research participants were asked to “check in” at intervals during the day, Seligman argues that we would all benefit if we, on a regular basis, self evaluated our levels of positivity.

In the first part of the book, Seligman focuses on positive emotions and how the reader can increase them. He calls strong bonds of love that exist between individuals “secure attachment.” Following Bowlby's (1969) ideas, Seligman writes that “...feeling positive emotion and expressing it well is at the heart of not only the love between a mother and an infant, but of almost all love and friendship.”

In the second part of the book, Seligman discusses the development of an authoritative classification and measurement systems for human virtue. This taxonomy is built upon the Signature Strengths Survey and is comparable (in the sense of being its mirror image) to the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. The human virtues, to be capitalized on in attaining authentic happiness include wisdom and knowledge; courage, love and humanity; justice, temperance, and spirituality-transcendence (p. 133). Which one is your greatest asset – upon which your bliss is to be constructed?

In Part III, “In the Mansions of Life,” Seligman explains how to use one's signature strengths in work, love, and parenting. He makes an interesting and significant distinction between pleasure and gratification. He draws on the work of Aristotle and of the notion of “eudemonia,” a concept akin to gratification. The state of happiness or gratification (eudemonia) is attainable only by activity consistent

with noble purposes. In a nutshell, when we focus on causes outside ourselves that benefit humankind and utilize our unique signature strengths, we transcend to higher and higher planes of authentic happiness. To understand the quality or feeling of this blissful state, one might read Csikszentmihalyi's *Flow* (1990). Reclaiming readers are particularly directed to Chapter 7 of Seligman's book for a lucid discussion of the distinction between gratification (deep, meaningful, and a social virtue) and pleasure (shallow and temporary). We highly recommend Seligman's *Authentic Happiness* and see it as fitting the Reclaiming philosophy of building on strengths as opposed to always finding weaknesses in the clients and students with whom we work.

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Seligman, M. E. P. (2002). *Authentic happiness: Using the new positive psychology to realize your potential for lasting fulfillment*. New York: Free Press. ISBN: 0743222970. 336 pages. Available from the publisher.

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Hannah Neil World of Children Awards Presented at Annual Event

Packed with magic from beginning to end, the 2003 Hannah Neil World of Children Awards celebration was held on November 20, in Columbus, Ohio. Billy Gilman, a 15-year-old singing sensation, opened the show by performing with the World of Children (WOC) choir. Although WOC co-chair, Muhammad Ali, was unable to attend, he requested that President David W. Lippy make a special presentation to the new co-chair, Greg Smith. On behalf of Ali, Smith received a pair of boxing gloves signed by the great boxer himself.

Together with Leon Harris, Smith announced the Founder's Award winner, Ryan Hreljac. Passionately restating his mission to bring clean water and proper sanitation to people all over the world, Hreljac then asked the Founder's Award Honoree Dayro Reyes Acosta to join him on stage. There, Hreljac announced that he would be splitting his \$15,000 scholarship with Reyes, ensuring that Reyes also would be able to continue his work on behalf of mentally challenged children in Colombia.

Before presenting the Cardinal Health Children's Care Award, Bob Walter, CEO of Cardinal Health, announced that Cardinal would supplement Founder's Award Honoree Reyes with a \$15,000 scholarship, requesting that Hreljac retain the entirety of his own scholarship for his work with children. Walter then presented the Children's Care Award to Dr. Martin Eichelberger, founder of SAFE KIDS and a variety of other programs created exclusively to preventing unintentional childhood injuries.

Kellogg's CEO, Carlos Gutierrez, presented the Kellogg's Child Development Award to Fani Lerner of Brazil, recognizing her work to establish programs for underprivileged children and adolescents in Brazil.

WOC chairman, William Gillam, presented the first Chairman's Award to Honoree Mahendra Mehta, in honor of Hannah Neil, who gave of her own resources to help children. Gillam said, "While the work of our winners and all the Honorees is incredible, the World of Children Board of Directors felt that Mahendra Mehta's contributions to helping the children of India and around the world deserves separate and distinct recognition." The evening closed with a final song by Gilman and a true thankfulness for all the work of the WOC Recipients and Honorees.

For more information see: www.WorldofChildren.org