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Book Reviews -- Monographic Musings

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Book Reviews — Monographic Musings

Column Editor: **Debbie Vaughn** (College of Charleston) <vaughnd@cofc.edu>

Column Editor's Note: Around this time of year, many of us are thinking about New Year's resolutions. It is amazing the kinds of statistics that can be found relating to these goals: how many people set resolutions, how many people have kept them after one month, and even how many people have kept them after six months. Resolution themes are also easy to find, whether they deal with eating habits, financial tendencies, or general attitude. If you consider it, though, most New Year's resolutions, if kept, result in happiness. Resolve to eat more healthily? If you follow your diet then you feel and look great, which makes you happy. Resolve to save an extra \$100 every month? At the end of the year,

you've collected \$1200 to do with as you choose, which makes you happy. Resolve to improve your work-life balance? If you improve your time management skills, you'll decrease your stress, which (you guessed it) makes you happy. If New Year's resolutions aren't for you, though, then perhaps you'll be interested in another tool that might help make you happy: **Tal Ben-Shahar's Happier: Learn the Secrets to Daily Joy and Lasting Fulfillment**. Veteran reviewer **Rachel Augello Erb**, who recently became the Systems Librarian at **University of Nebraska – Omaha**, offers her take on this new book in the field of positive psychology. Happy reading, everyone! — **DV**

Ben-Shahar, Tal. *Happier: Learn the Secrets to Daily Joy and Lasting Fulfillment*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007.

Reviewed by **Rachel Augello Erb** (Systems Librarian, Criss Library, University of Nebraska – Omaha) <rerb@mail.unomaha.edu>

The proliferation of meretricious self-help materials offering the usual simplistic solutions to complex problems might compel many selectors to overlook this work. That is, until one learns a little bit about the author, self-categorized introvert and psychology professor **Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar** who enjoys pedagogical success at **Harvard University**. In the span of a few years, his positive psychology course has grown from a small seminar to one of the largest, most popular lecture courses at **Harvard**. Why? As countless surveys of college students repeatedly point to higher rates of depression than subsequent generations, it is logical this course would generate a lot of interest among undergraduates. Also, because positive psychology teaches the scientific study of optimal human functioning, it is well-equipped to address issues of general malaise. Throughout the course students are thoroughly engaged in discovering ways to lead happier lives using traditionally rigorous methods of pedagogy such as reading articles and learning about research in the field. After becoming familiar with the literature, students must apply the material to their own lives through a series of exercises that require careful thought and reflection. Even though his course is the most popular offering at **Harvard**, it is far from the usual popular psychology fare peddled by **Dr. Phil** and his ilk. What distinguishes popular psychology from positive psychology is that, unlike popular psychology, positive psychology's theories are subjected to the scientific method and are based on empirical research. In contrast, the often baseless platitudes of the self-help genre are generally unsubstantiated by research and relieve the reader of active participation in his or her own progress. **Happier: Learn the Secrets to Daily Joy and Lasting Fulfillment** has grown out of **Ben-Shahar's** academic efforts.

Ben-Shahar's book does require active participation from the reader—it is reminiscent of a workbook. For example, there are sections dispersed throughout the text labeled “Time In.” These are opportunities for the reader to reflect on the previous passages in the text. The author points out, however, it is not essential to complete all exercises as some will resonate with the reader more than others. The exercises are an amalgam of the author's research and practices elucidated in the formal literature of positive psychology.

The initial chapter is largely the author's personal account of his quest for happiness. After becoming the Israeli squash national champion, he was confounded by feelings of emptiness. He did not understand why he suffered from constant despair. These profound feelings compelled the author to embark on trying to figure out how to find sustainable happiness. To satisfy this end, he studied philosophy and psychology. His studies led him to the overarching conclusion the binary approach to happiness — one is either happy or unhappy — is simply not constructive for optimal living. Better to view happiness as a lifelong process and not a finite destination. Furthermore, everyone can improve their standing along the continuum of happiness. (That should already make us happier!)

The following chapter illustrates the relationship between present and future benefit demonstrated by the beliefs and actions of the four happiness archetypes. Three are erroneous approaches to happiness. Hedonists focus on enjoying the present while blithely ignoring future negative consequences. Rat racers are willing to suffer in the present in exchange for possible future gain. The nihilist neither enjoys the present nor anticipates the future. In contrast to these, the happiness archetype pairs the enjoyment of present activities with the

simultaneous belief these activities will create a fulfilling future. Most people embody these archetypes to varying degrees and the relative dominance of each of these approaches is often realized throughout the course of one's life. One of the more crucial exercises for understanding his premise concludes this chapter: the author invites the reader to describe how the archetypes are reflected in his or her past actions, thoughts, etc. The reader is also asked to assess to what extent was he or she happy when each archetype characterizes one's actions.

It is not until the third chapter that the author presents a succinct definition of happiness: “the overall experience of pleasure and meaning” (33). A happy person experiences positive emotions while perceiving his or her life as meaningful. Supported by positive psychology research, the author posits while no one is immune to life's difficulties, people can still be happy despite hardships.

In subsequent chapters, other preliminaries include the author debunking the myth that wealth is associated with happiness; he cites studies that demonstrate the contrary. We are all quite familiar with the adage that money does not buy happiness. Folk wisdom, however, is largely based on anecdotal evidence. **Ben-Shahar** supports this notion with psychological research and explains why this is often the case. A psychologist not mentioned in **Ben-Shahar's** book, **Richard Easterlin**, further clarifies this notion. Easterlin asserts that while people are not happier with acquiring more pecuniary goods, they are unhappy precisely because personal free time is severely compromised. He believes those who use surplus money to secure “non-pecuniary ends,” such as family life, hobbies, and health, are happier once basic financial needs are satisfied. This means it is possible for a wealthy individual to be happy if wealth is devoted to “non-pecuniary ends.” **Ben-Shahar** briefly touches upon this idea in a few sentences, but is not as thorough as **Easterlin**.

The author also discusses goal setting, purporting this in itself is not enough for a happy existence. The nature of the goal affects one's happiness. From the onset of goal setting, goals must have intrinsic value. Specifically, goals must be meaningful to the individual and the journey must be pleasurable to bring about enduring happiness. Goals that are deleterious to optimal living are those established by external forces.

The second part of the book, entitled “Happiness Applied,” is when the author begins to apply theory to various aspects of life: learning and education, fulfillment at work,

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and relationships. One of the more useful prescriptions is the integration of “flow” with the learning environment. Introduced in the early 1990’s by **Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi**, “flow” is defined as “a state in which one is immersed in an experience that is rewarding in and of itself, a state in which we feel we are one with the experience” (86). When in a state of flow, we attain peak experience and performance. To be happier, have as many flow experiences as possible. Better yet, have these flow experiences at work to ensure greater job satisfaction. I would also advise the reader to refer to **Martin Seligman’s Authentic Happiness** for a more substantial treatment of this issue and then re-read **Ben-Shahar’s** chapter. Both authors assert one should marry interests to talents. **Ben-Shahar** explains how to create a “life map” to achieve this end. **Seligman** offers a more formalized way to discover one’s “signature strengths.” He created a detailed assessment tool to discover one’s “signature strengths.” **Ben-Shahar’s** treatment of interpersonal relationships, however, redeems the previous chapter. He offers several attainable elements that comprise a happy relationship. In an argument against seeking validation in relationships, he offers a compelling idea: it is better to be truly known than simply validated.

Akin to appendices, several meditations conclude the work. These meditations vary from challenging the notion that happiness is predetermined by our genetic make up to disclosing several happiness boosters. The closing statement of the final meditation

explains how to begin optimal living in the present: “we must first accept that ‘this is it’ — that all there is to life is the day-to-day, the ordinary, the details of the mosaic” (168). If we continue to remind ourselves that the sum total of our lives is not only the transcendental experiences but also the mundane, we can begin our quest for a happier life devoid of unrealistic expectations.

This highly recommended work is one of several evidence-based treatments of positive psychology that surpasses the typically trivial offerings of self-help pop psychologists. His bibliography also provides a sound introduction to the field of positive psychology and

all monographs cited are recommended for academic and public libraries.

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Easterlin, Richard A. “Explaining Happiness.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 16 Sept. 2003, 11176-11183.

Seligman, Martin E.P. *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment*. New York: Free Press, 2002.

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