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The Happiness Project

A writer sets out on a year-long quest to find happiness.

By Terry Hong

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Before I even finished the book, I had already preordered multiple copies of Gretchen Rubin's latest title, **The Happiness Project: Or, Why I Spent a Year Trying to Sing in the Morning, Clean My Closets, Fight Right, Read Aristotle, and Generally Have More Fun**. Which means if you're looking for an enlightening, laugh-aloud read, get the book and forget the rest of this review. If you need more convincing, let me count the monthly ways....

Gretchen Rubin already had a pretty good life. She's married to the man of her dreams, has two "delightful" daughters, is a bestselling author with a Yale law degree, is healthy, and lives in her favorite city surrounded by supportive family and friends. But she's also prone to misbehavior that undermines her well-being: she loses her temper over trivial things, and fights melancholy and insecurity, not to mention that unshakable guilt.

One morning on a city bus, Rubin had a startling epiphany: "I was suffering from midlife malaise – a recurrent sense of discontent and almost a feeling of disbelief ... 'Is this really it?'" Asking herself what she really wanted, her answer seemed simple: "I want to be happy." Like most of us, she "had never thought about what made [her] happy or how [she] might be happier." But unlike most of us, she actually figured out how: "I decided to dedicate a year to trying to be happier." And she gives the rest of us great hope because she did so without making radical changes like running off to Indonesia. Rubin assures us, "I wanted to change my life without changing my life, by finding more happiness in my own kitchen."

First she planned and prepared. She compiled her own "Twelve Commandments," which begins with the all-important "Be Gretchen," and her "goofier list" of "Secrets of Adulthood," which includes tried-and-tested gems like, "By doing a little bit each day, you can get a lot accomplished," and Luddite-loving zingers like, "Turning the computer on and off a few times often fixes glitches."

Armed and ready, Rubin set off on her year-long journey. Superbly organized into amusing step-by-step months, "Happiness Project" is a definite success – just reading it will make you happier. Rubin manages to offer plausible, solid suggestions for what worked for her; she's great at navigating that delicate line between "just do this," and "you might want to try that."

As self-help books go, Rubin's works because it's filled with open, honest glimpses into her real life, woven together with constant doses of humor. She begins the year boosting her energy to be better prepared for the next 11 months: In January, she sleeps more, exercises better, and cleans out her closets. February is spent working on her marriage: She vows to nag less, fight right, and "not to eat a half pound of M&Ms on an empty stomach."

In March, Rubin focuses on work: She launches what becomes a highly successful blog [www.happiness-project.com], directly e-mails a critical reviewer of one of her books (later having a "very nice conversation" with him at a cocktail party!), and writes her own bad (but so funny) reviews for this very title. April is spent enjoying parenthood's "fog happiness" – "the kind of happiness you get from activities that, closely examined, don't really seem to bring much happiness at all – yet somehow they do."

In May, Rubin learns to have more fun; in June, she nurtures friendships new and old; in July, she decides money spent wisely can buy a little happiness after all; and in August, she empathizes with other people's catastrophes and finds a spiritual master

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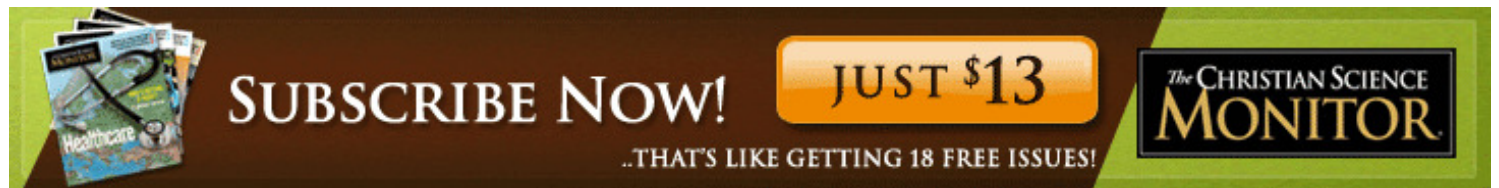
in Saint Thérèse of Lisieux (after whom I was named!).

In September, she writes a whole novel; October has her trying hypnosis, laughter yoga, and drawing as part of her quest for mindfulness; and in November, she adjusts her attitude to laugh more (small children laugh 400 times per day, but adults just 17 times). By December, she goes all out for "Boot Camp Perfect," fails every single day, but proudly, happily resolves to keep trying.

So is Rubin happier by the year's end? Absolutely. She has Four Splendid Truths and her Resolutions Chart, not to mention those Twelve Commandments and Secrets to Adulthood that guarantee she'll live happily ever after.

By the way, as Rubin explains, goals and resolutions are different: "You hit a goal, you keep a resolution." You complete the goal of reading this book, you keep your resolution to sing every morning to set the goofy tone that will happily permeate throughout your day. Now that's the kind of New Year's resolution we can all keep!

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