

happier now

How to Stop Chasing Perfection
and Embrace Everyday Moments
(Even the Difficult Ones)

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part 1

The Journey to Happier

1

I'll Be Happy When . . .

We work so hard to get somewhere, to realize a dream, to arrive at some destination, that we often forget that though some satisfaction may be waiting at the end of our endurance and effort, there is great and irreplaceable aliveness in the steps along the way.

MARK NEPO

In late 2016, I had just finished giving a speech when a woman in a pink leather jacket and a spunky, super-short haircut ran up to me. We were at the New Hampshire Conference for Women, and I was giving the keynote speech about my tumultuous journey to finding genuine happiness and the lessons I learned along way.

“I wanted to make sure I was first in line to talk to you,” she smiled. “I’d love to ask you a question about something I’m struggling with at work.”

We chatted for a few minutes. I suggested an approach for her work issue, and then with a warm hug we said goodbye. A few days later I got an email from someone named Joy, asking if we had corporate training programs at Happier.

“I was the woman in the pink jacket,” she said. Joy turned out to be one of the senior executives at Pure Encapsulations, a company based outside of Boston that makes hypoallergenic, research-based dietary supplements. “I’d love to bring your

message about gratitude, kindness, and giving yourself permission to not always be okay to our team here. What I learned from your talk could help a lot of our employees.” I told Joy about the Happier at Work training program that I had developed, and several months after we spoke we kicked off the training for all three of her company’s offices.

On the first day of the training Joy introduced me to her team. I didn’t expect to hear what she had to say.

“After I heard Nataly’s talk,” she said, nervously looking at her notes, “something changed in me. I had actually taken a personal day because I was feeling so burned-out. I needed to do something just for myself. So I went to this conference in New Hampshire.

“For the past few years I’ve believed that once our company had its best year ever, once we achieved that amazing milestone, then I would feel really happy. So I just poured all my energy into helping make that happen. And we did. Last year we had our best year ever—by a lot! It was a great accomplishment. But I didn’t feel happy. I was exhausted from working nonstop. I was stressed out trying to juggle my work, my travel, and my kids. I wasn’t feeling grateful about anything and I wasn’t very kind to myself, or, to be honest, to many people around me.”

Joy had tears in her eyes. She had worked at this company for twenty years, her entire career after college. For her, the company’s success wasn’t just a big professional achievement but something deeply personal. She wasn’t chasing money, she wasn’t after fame or recognition. She wanted the company, the people who worked there, and the products she was passionate about to shine as brightly as they could. She wanted to help more people live healthier lives, and she believed that the supplements her company made could help them do it.

As she spoke, I felt as if I was listening to myself several years earlier. I heard echoes of so much of my own story and feelings.

How hard both of us had tried, I thought. I, too, had tears in my eyes.

For most of my life, starting when I was a teenager, I had been invested in the idea that hard work would allow me to accomplish great things, and once I did I would never feel unhappy again. I clung to it as if my life depended on it. As a teenage immigrant in the United States, I was convinced that if only I could learn to speak English without an accent, like a real American, *then* I would be happy. As a thirty-seven-year-old entrepreneur, I was certain that if we could launch Happier and help people improve their lives, then I would, of course, feel happy and nothing else. “I’ll be happy when . . .” became my life mantra.

If only I worked hard enough, achieved enough, *then* I would get to this promised land of happiness. Both Joy and I had created this expectation that once our beloved projects or we reached certain milestones *then* we would feel contented forever, and our all-too-real daily human struggles would melt away.

Does this sound familiar to you? When I give talks to companies or at conferences, I ask this question and then pause to look around the room. It’s rare to see someone who isn’t nodding or who doesn’t have that “Oh, I’ve been there” look on their face. “*I’ll be happy when . . .*” is the happiness trap that many of us have fallen into. My circumstances might have been unique, but the conclusion I came to, the idea that I could achieve my way into perfect happiness, is shared by many of us.

On the surface, it makes sense to think that when we achieve something important to us we’ll feel happy for a long time. Yet, in reality, it doesn’t always work that way; it doesn’t allow for the complexity of life, for all the circumstances outside of our control. It doesn’t honor the many dimensions of our human experience and our feelings. It’s not wrong to hope that something we do will make us happy. But while the goal

we're working toward might come true, other things in our lives might go sideways *at the same time*. Or we may quickly get used to our achievement and the euphoria of it will fade. Soon it will just seem ordinary and normal.

The first time I learned this lesson was after I achieved my dream of speaking English without an accent, like a real American.

journal
practice

I'll Be Happy When . . .

Take out your journal and turn to a fresh page. At the top, write "I'll be happy when . . ." Now list all the things you feel you need to achieve and have in your life to feel happy. Don't judge or edit as you write. Just allow whatever thoughts come to mind to land on your list. These can be really small things or really big life things; there is no right or wrong.

Keep this list in your journal. We'll come back to it later.

The Dream of Perfect English

When I was thirteen years old, my "I'll be happy when . . ." goal was very specific: I was certain beyond any doubt that I would feel amazing if I could be like Samantha, the main character on the TV show *Who's the Boss?* Sam, played by Alyssa Milano, was a carefree teenager who had a best friend, a pink bedroom, and high-top sneakers with pink shoelaces. I coveted all three with every ounce of my being.

What I wanted the most was to *sound* like Sam, to speak English just as she did. I was certain that when words rolled off my tongue with the same ease as they rolled off hers, my life would change dramatically for the better. After weeks of

watching Sam—while stuffing myself with bowl after bowl of Rice Krispies cereal, boxes of which appeared every week in our food donation delivery—I felt a strange sense of relief to be able to define my happiness target so clearly. It became this beautiful image I could escape into, away from whatever I was feeling or whatever was going on.

The best thing about the way Sam spoke English was that everyone understood her and no one made fun of her. This was not the case when I spoke. My English vocabulary didn't amount to much. We had started to learn some English at my school back in Russia, but it was a more bookish, formal English that wasn't especially useful for navigating eighth grade in America. A few months after we arrived in the United States, a boy in my class asked me to go steady, which basically made him a saint since most of my eighth-grade classmates either avoided me or chuckled at me. But I had no idea what he meant. My parents and I tried to look up the words in the dictionary once I got home, but the definitions we found made no sense either. "Move firmly?" It took the poor boy two more tries. He eventually just asked if I would go to the movies with him. *That* I could understand! (I think I said yes.)

I literally didn't know how to express the most basic ideas, such as asking about my class schedule or explaining to the guidance counselor that I didn't have a learning disability but simply didn't know enough English to understand the questions on a test. But worse than my limited vocabulary was my horrible accent. I dreaded saying anything. It usually led to one of two things: utter confusion or smirks and all-out laughter. My eighth-grade teachers favored the former and my classmates the latter.

Several months earlier, with just a few hundred dollars in our pockets, my parents and I had left our home in the former

Soviet Union. I had been shielded from a lot of the difficulties, but even as a child I knew that our life wasn't easy. Often there wasn't enough food or clothes, and everyone, including my parents, spent a lot of time hunting for necessities and standing in line to get them. Lines were a nonnegotiable part of life; there wasn't a line you skipped. You might even get in line without knowing what it was for. You just knew that if there was a line, something very useful and necessary was at the end of it—like toilet paper or milk. One time my dad and grandma took turns standing in line for almost the entire day for boots that my mom and I needed for winter. By the time they got to the end of the line there were no boots in our size, but they bought two pairs anyway and then traded for the right size with people who had also purchased sizes they didn't need.

Being Jewish made our lives even more precarious. The government officially sanctioned persecuting Jews, which meant everything from being barred from certain universities that enforced Jewish quotas to running the risk of being jailed if you were caught following Jewish traditions at home. (We didn't take that risk.) My worst memory of anti-Semitism was not being allowed to travel with my dance group when it went on tour, even when I was a lead in several dances. When applying to come to America as refugees, my parents filled out a thick affidavit with the many, many details of the persecution we had faced.

Our first stop after leaving Russia was Vienna, Austria, where we lived for two weeks in a tiny room in an old building that housed dozens of other Russian Jewish immigrant families. Then we were taken by train to Italy. My parents found us a place to stay in Ladispoli, a small town forty minutes outside of Rome that was already home to thousands of other Russian Jewish refugees. We were all hoping to make it

to the United States. My parents and I shared a small apartment with another family whose mom often took over the kitchen to make soup. I had no idea if her food was any good, and none of us knew where she was getting all the ingredients, but the smell made me super hungry. I was hungry all the time, partly because I was a teenager and partly because we didn't have much food. I tried to stay out of the apartment when she was cooking, which was most of the day.

We were allowed to take just two suitcases and \$200 per person out of Russia, but my parents had brought some Russian souvenirs after hearing via the refugee grapevine that we could sell them and make a little extra money. Every lira made a difference. Our monthly rent consumed 90 percent of the stipend we received to help us make our journey, leaving us with almost nothing for food. The few extra lira we made selling Russian souvenirs at the makeshift market in the center of Ladispoli helped my mom buy chicken or vegetables with which she made our meals—and each meal had to last. My mom had always been an amazing cook but she became a miracle worker with her determination to feed us on so little.

After two months of waiting, worrying, and battling hunger, we were granted permission to start our lives over in America. Our dream had come true. We got in! A few weeks later, together with several hundred other Russian Jewish refugees, we boarded a chartered plane and flew from Rome to New York. The passengers on the plane erupted into loud applause as we landed. I kissed the ground once we were outside. From there we took another plane to Detroit. We had distant relatives who had immigrated to the United States from Russia a decade earlier, and they lived in Ann Arbor, forty minutes outside Detroit. So we headed there, grateful to know someone would meet us at the airport and help us get around once we arrived.

Coming to America

Our American dream started off pretty rough. We lived in the projects in Ypsilanti, a small town outside of Detroit, and since we had almost no money, we were set up with welfare, food stamps, and donated furniture. My parents focused on getting jobs, but it was tough because none of us spoke decent English.

I was freaked out. At thirteen, my insides were a soup of hormone-infused adolescent confusion, and immigrating made that soup boil much faster. Everything was unfamiliar, including the simplest things like opening my locker at school—what cruel person came up with the whole once to the right, once to the left, once to the right ordeal? I had no friends, and in a space of three months I had gone from being a top student in my school in Russia to feeling like a mumbling idiot who couldn't figure out the smallest things such as what we had to do for homework. (The teachers would say the assignment too quickly for me to understand.)

That is not to say that there weren't bright spots. Mostly they involved food. When our distant relatives took me to Baskin-Robbins and bought me a banana split, I almost exploded from joy. I couldn't think anything except that *this whole amazing thing is for me!* Domino's Pizza and Lender's Bagels with cream cheese quickly became some of my favorite things to eat—ever. And gum! There was so much bubblegum. When American tourists had visited my school in Russia, we dreamed and schemed of ways to get gum from them. It was the most coveted American treasure. (Twice I had been the lucky recipient, and one of those times I got an entire pack of Bazooka! I cut each piece into quarters and the pack lasted me almost a month. By the end, it was stale but no less wonderful.)

But these food-infused moments of joy were short breaks in the darkness of those early months. Not many of us know who we are at thirteen. Losing the parts of my identity that

I felt defined me, like being smart and doing great at school, left me with a hollowness inside. It quickly filled with worry, anxiety, self-doubt, and this other feeling I've only recently come to understand: fear. I feared everything, from whether we would ever have enough money to move out of the projects, to whether anyone would like me enough to be my friend, to whether I would ever again be able to speak without bracing for the awful confusion or laughter that would come back at me.

I was this petrified for months and months, but I then found Sam on *Who's the Boss?* and she became my hope. I worked my butt off to speak English like she did. Television is a perfect language teacher because you see the way the characters' mouths move when they make certain sounds. I would listen to Sam's character say something and then walk over to the mirror in the hallway and try to imitate the way her mouth moved. I practiced English nonstop, repeating difficult words hundreds of times in a row until I felt I'd improved. (It would take several years of relentless practice and a lot of TV to eliminate my Russian accent, but by the time I got to college one of my classmates asked if I was from New Jersey because I *sounded* like I was from New Jersey. She had no idea that she had paid me the greatest compliment!)

The Curse of the Moving Baseline

Life definitely got easier and more manageable once I learned to speak English more fluently. And with the help of my parents I also got to imitate a little bit of Sam's American life. For my fifteenth birthday they took me to Payless for high-top sneakers with pink shoelaces—just like Sam's. And for my sixteenth birthday they surprised me by painting my bedroom pink—just like Sam's.