



Live
each
Day

A Surprisingly Simple Guide to Happiness

JIM McCARTHY

“A wake-up call to living your life to the absolute fullest. This book shows you how.”

- **Randy Taran** Founder of Project Happiness and author of *Emotional Advantage*



Chapter One: Live Like You Have Cancer

“Hello?”

“Mr. McCarthy?”

“Yes?”

It’s 12:40 p.m. on Tuesday, February 5, 2013. My doctor calls me up and tells me that I have cancer.

I’m in a strip mall parking lot in Mountain View, California, in the heart of Silicon Valley. Google’s headquarters is a mile away. To my right is a Starbucks. To my left is a burrito joint. I’ve just picked up my dry cleaning. I’m sitting in my shiny blue BMW convertible. And I hear the voice at the other end of my iPhone talking about surgery, radiation, and survival rates.

I drive home, lie down in bed, and cry for a couple of hours. This is the first time in my life that I truly feel my own mortality. I mean, we all know that we’re going to die, on an intellectual level. But this is the first time that I realize — on a visceral level — that my skin will someday be as cold as my bathroom’s granite countertop.

I call my mom and dad in Omaha, Nebraska. I call my brother Mike in New Jersey. Then my sister Kathy in Omaha. Then my brother Dan in Virginia. It’s hard to get out the words. I feel horrible for myself, but even worse for them. They’re all really shocked. The

conversations are short.

Then, I drink almost an entire bottle of cheap chardonnay wine. I don't normally drink that much, but this time I feel justified.

Next, I do what I almost always do in times of crisis — I start writing in my journal. And out of me flow all sorts of questions I have about my relationships, my career, my legacy, and my regrets.

“How much time do I still have?”

“What do I still want to do?”

“What do I need to repair?”

“What, after all, would make me happy?”

There is never a good moment to get a cancer diagnosis, but the timing of this seemed especially bad. You see, most people would say that I've been very fortunate: I grow up in Omaha, supported by a loving family. I study political science at the University of Iowa. I spend my junior year in Vienna, then win a Fulbright Scholarship to study in Tübingen, Germany. After teaching English to bankers in Frankfurt for two years, I move to Madrid, where I work as a business journalist. I don't have much money, but I have a lot of fun.

In 1991, I move to the San Francisco Bay Area to be with a woman I had fallen in love with. After a few years struggling in sales jobs, I'm lucky enough to get into Stanford for business school, and I earn my MBA there in 1996. Then, I'm fortunate enough to be hired at Yahoo in 1997, as employee number 258. Being part of the Dot-Com Boom is fascinating, exhausting, competitive, and lucrative.

In 2000 I get married and have a daughter. I'm a stay-at-home dad for a year. I have another daughter, and then go on to work at other successful internet companies.

So it's fair to say that I'm an ambitious Silicon Valley business guy. My life has been built on privilege, hard work, good timing, risk-taking ... and a lot of luck.

In late 2012, I leave the start-up I'm at, and start doing leadership

consulting — teaching companies how to hire great people and build high-performance teams. At age 49, I am really excited to jumpstart this next phase of my career, playing to my strengths.

And then I get the cancer diagnosis.

About a week after getting the call from my doctor at Kaiser Permanente, I go to their cancer treatment center, in nearby Santa Clara. Part of the health provider's protocol is that I speak with various doctors to get their opinions.

I am accompanied by my friend, Gerald, who's there to give me emotional support. I figure that the stress of the situation will make it hard for me to listen accurately.

It turns out I have very early stage prostate cancer. The disease kills about 29,000 men in the United States every year.¹

My original urologist — the one who called me on February 5 — has already urged me to have surgery.

But today a different urologist explains that this surgery has a 40–50 percent chance of making me impotent for the rest of my life. I've always liked sex. And I don't like those odds at all.

A different doctor — this time a radiation oncologist — mentions that they can place small "radiation seeds" inside my prostate gland. The good news: it should kill the cancer. The bad news: it might trigger a different cancer in my internal organs.

Fortunately, both of these doctors agree that I can do what's called "active surveillance," which means no surgery or radiation yet — just regular blood tests and biopsies to make sure the cancer is not spreading quickly.

We have caught the cancer early. It turns out that I'm lucky, yet again.

Now, you can say, "Hang on, Jim. You have a common form of cancer. You've caught it so early on that you haven't even had to treat it yet. Why all the drama? Why all the talk about life and death?"

These are good questions.

A couple of weeks after I get my cancer diagnosis, I meet with a friend, Diane. Diane was the first head of public relations at Yahoo in the late '90s. She's a very nice, smart, successful Silicon Valley executive.

She also has advanced lung cancer that has spread to the walls of her chest. Sitting in the sunshine around an outdoor table, at an Italian restaurant in Los Gatos, I say, "Diane, I don't even feel like I'm in the same league with you. You've had a lot of chemotherapy. You've lost all of your hair. You have a very serious situation."

Diane looks me in the eye and says, "Jim, it's not about whether you have two months to live, or 20 years. When you get a cancer diagnosis, it changes your life. But when I go to my son's lacrosse games, and I see the blue in the sky, the green in the leaves, and I hear the laughter of the boys running, there are tears running down my face. Tears are streaming down my face, because I'm just savoring the pure simple beauty of the moment ...

"And I wish we all could live like we have cancer."

Now, when Diane says, "I wish we all could live like we have cancer," clearly she doesn't wish on any of us the pain of having cancer. The fear from having cancer. The many losses of having cancer.

But she wishes that each of us *cherish* today. Not hung up on something that happened a week ago, which we can't change. And not freaked out about something that may or may not happen tomorrow. But living as deeply and richly as possible ... *right now*.

Diane taught me the importance of practicing mindfulness, facing life's biggest challenges with courage, and still enjoying the journey. When every moment was precious, that's how she chose to live each day.

I'm sorry to say that Diane passed away, right before Christmas, in 2016. But she lives on in all the lucky people who knew her, as

well as in this book and in the workshops that I conduct.

So let me ask you this:

How would *you* live if you had cancer?

Every time I lead a master class, no matter how small the group, there is someone in the room who is a cancer survivor, or who has been touched by cancer in their family, or by some other disease, or some other tragedy. In doing my work, I've realized that you don't have to look far to find real heartbreak in this world. Look out your window. Look around your office. Look around your home.

Maybe you, too, have been driven to think about what life is all about — and how short it can be. Were your reflections prompted by similar events, or something else? Did you ask yourself some big questions, or did you try to put those thoughts out of your mind? My experience inspired me to develop my workshops and this book. I passionately believe that embracing life's impermanence and facing certain questions will help you live each day more fully.

So how would *you* live ... if you had cancer?

How would *you* live ... if you had a terminal illness?

How would *you* live ... if you really felt your mortality — in your gut — the way that I did for the first time on February 5, 2013?

On that day, California wine surging in my blood, I wrote out a lot of questions for myself. And I'm going to ask you many of those same questions throughout this book. I know this topic can be pretty heavy. I mean, this is supposed to be a book on happiness — why are we talking about death?

I understand that the prospect of your mortality may seem dark. But out of darkness comes light. So I'd like to share with you what cancer taught me about happiness, and how I've changed my life as a result:

First of all, I decided to reduce my stress through meditation, affirmations, yoga, exercise, eating well, taking supplements, working less, and getting enough sleep. I get regular blood tests

and biopsies, and so far it does not seem like the cancer has spread. So that's great news.

Second, I found the courage to do the things that I'd always wanted to do but had never made happen. I had long dreamt of being a motivational speaker and author. Facing my mortality, I suddenly found the confidence to talk publicly about my diagnosis and the lessons I've learned from it. I hope I can touch your life in a positive way. That's why I wrote this book.

And finally, I gave myself permission to start enjoying my life more. At the time of my diagnosis, I was divorced and living by myself in Mountain View. I had been in the Bay Area for almost 22 years, always dreaming of the opportunity to live in beautiful San Francisco. Within weeks of my diagnosis, I resolved to move to S.F., bought a condo there, and made the move. Six weeks later I met a lovely woman named Stacy, who is today my wife. As a result, I'm investing in family, friends, and community more than ever.

Over the years I've learned a variety of techniques to reduce my stress, boost my confidence, and create my happiness. These are all skills *you* can develop, too. I promise that in the process of reading this book, doing the writing, and implementing these simple practices, you will feel great about yourself and your life. Let's get started ...

Imagine Your Death Day

Writing Activity 1:

Please imagine your death.

When is the exact day, month, and year?

What is your cause of death?

What are your last thoughts, emotions, and sensations?

Who will be with you?

Workshop. I hand out the question on an otherwise blank piece of paper, and I give the participants about seven minutes to write their answers. No time to overthink. No time for writer's block. Just hurry up and start writing, now.

I know it's a tough question. As in the workshop, I urge you to just do the best you can. You can manifest whatever you want — if you think you'll live until you're 150, go ahead and write that. If you think you'll die in an earthquake in the next hour, write that.

Why do I pose this question? To shock you into facing your mortality, the way that I had to face mine when I learned of my cancer diagnosis.

Many of us don't want to face the fact that we will die someday — and that avoidance can stand in the way of having a happy, fulfilling, pleasurable life. We are often in denial that — just as you have a birthday — you will also have a death day. Merely writing down a date challenges that denial and helps you grasp your mortality in a way that can start breaking down those barriers to a fuller life.

Will it be
October 6, 2063?
February 17, 2105?
July 4, 2034?

What does that begin to tell you? Powerful, isn't it?

In my master classes, almost all people struggle with this question for the first 30 seconds, and then they start writing. Some are really stuck after a couple of minutes, and then they have a breakthrough. And on rare occasions, a person's fear or denial is so strong that they simply refuse to write anything at all. For those people, I am respectful of their emotions and their struggle. But I think they'll start living a whole lot better when they realize that

they don't have forever.

After all, you don't want to be the sort of person who fits the description in the old saying, "Some people die at 25 and aren't buried until 75."

Is the question "morbid"? Well, it's reality:

- You do *not* have forever to live your life.
- You do not have forever to start that business or do the work that you've always wanted to do.
- You do *not* have forever to love others, create a family, or be a compassionate father, mother, spouse, son, brother, sister, child, or friend.
- You do *not* have forever to take care of your health. Or do that trip to Italy that you've always wanted to do. Or go to that fancy restaurant that you've been saving for a special day.

In my happiness workshops, it's not uncommon that at least one person in the room starts crying as they respond to this question — because they *are* feeling their mortality, they *are* realizing that their time is precious, they *are* seeing that they need to make some changes to their life, and they need to do so *now*.

Once in San Francisco, I did a workshop for the local Harvard University alumni club. A woman said she visualized dying with her children and grandchildren beside her — and then she realized that she didn't have any kids in the first place! She later told me that she went home that night and decided with her husband to start a family. I'm happy to say they now have a son.

In another workshop, there was a lovely couple from Brazil. He thought he would only live to age 70. She thought she would live to 96. When they discussed this, she started crying because she loves

Let's assume your life is not perfect. So in doing Writing Activity 1, you probably identified a few things you'd like to improve. Maybe they're huge. Maybe they're pretty trivial. In any case, in Writing Activity 2, get as specific as you can with your Action Plan. Remind yourself *why* you are making these changes. Imagine the better life you can have as a result. Then share your answers with a loved one or a friend. Ask them what they think. Refine your answers, based on an in-depth conversation.

After that, make a public commitment by sharing your new goals or resolutions on social media. Shout it from the rooftops! Research indicates that if you write out a goal, and then give a weekly status report to a friend, you increase the likelihood of accomplishing this goal by a whopping 76 percent! ²In fact, I'd love it if you sent me an email and told me what you came up with. Just send your thoughts to jim@jimccarthy.com.

Engage others who can and will support you in your quest. Have the courage to live a much better life, knowing that you will not live forever.

In the following chapters, we are going to use mortality as a catalyst for you to think about the legacy you are creating through your relationships and work.