



Transcript: Wake Up Happy with Darrin McMahon

HOST

Kym Yancey

SPEAKER

Darrin McMahon

PRESENTATION

Kym Hi, good morning. You are at the right place; this is *Wake Up Happy with Live Happy*. I'm Kym Yancey. I'm the co-founder and CEO of Live Happy.

Joining me, here, at what we call *Wake Up Happy Central* is Emily Miller, and she's working on tweets and messages and those kinds of things around this. In addition to that, we have a whole team back at the office – it's really an incredible time. Also, Britney is here with us, and she's managing the chat lines and those kinds of things. So feel free, at any time, just to chime in and share with us your thoughts and what you're thinking, what you're feeling about this.

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In addition to the *Wake Up Happy* call, if this is your first time, *Live Happy* is also a magazine. We are on newsstands, we are at Barnes and Noble, we are at airports; so you can see us on all the major newsstands, but also you can subscribe to us and be a part of us. Now we have our new digital version that's out and available. Just want to make sure that you're aware of all of that.

Also, I want to invite you to get social with us. Our Twitter handle is @mylivehappy, or you can find us on Facebook by searching "My Live Happy." You know, we want to hear from you.

Also, just want to give this to you so you have it, at any time during this session, you can also email us at wakeuphappy@livehappy.com. So you can plug in and get connected that way.

We have got a fantastic expert joining us this morning, a tremendous individual. His name is Darrin McMahon. He is a professor of history at Dartmouth College. He is the author of *Enemies of Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity and Happiness*, a history which has been translated into twelve languages and was awarded Best Books of the Year honors for 2006 by *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Liberty Journal*, and *Slate Magazine*. He just completed a history of the idea of genius and the genius figure, *Divine Fury: A History of Genius*, and his writings have appeared in such publications as *New York*

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Times, The Boston Globe, The New York Times Book Review, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal.

His latest book is *Divine Fury: A History of Genius*. Just extremely prolific. Darrin, it's so great to have you a part of *Wake Up Happy*. Welcome to our show.

Darrin Thank you, Kym. It's wonderful to be here.

Kym Darrin, tell me, why did you decide to study happiness? What motivated you to write a book about this?

Darrin Well, I did a dissertation in the 1990s, and ended up publishing a book out of it which about, I don't know, maybe 10, 15 people in the world were interested in. I thought to myself the next one around I want to do something that has a [indiscernible] resonance.

I had a post-doctoral fellowship at Columbia University in the 1990s, and Columbia makes all undergraduate students take a course called "Contemporary Civilization." The students call it "Plato to Nato [ph]," it's all the kind of great thinkers. I was reading these books that I had claimed to have read for many years and, you know, actually hadn't and was sort of going through them one-by-one, and it really struck

me that happiness is the central theme in Western intellectual tradition, in all intellectual traditions, really.

So that was going on, and at the same time, this was what I call the roaring 1990s. There was a kind of exuberance, the economy was good, and the Berlin Wall had fallen, and Clinique had a marketing campaign, they were selling Happy perfume, you just sprayed it on yourself, and “Don’t Worry; Be Happy” was on the radio. It was very much in the air, and I thought, you know what, this is a great subject, because happiness is something at once very serious, and at the same time is a subject of interest to absolutely everyone. Everyone, when it comes to happiness, is a philosopher of sorts, and we’re all searching for this. So that was what led to the book.

Kym Did you also – was happiness something that you struggled with yourself, on a personal level? Just trying to figure it out?

Darrin Sure, I think everybody does. That was also part of the appeal of working on a project like this, that it had a deep, human interest. It’s funny, because when I started the project, I wasn’t aware of the fact that at that very same moment, a lot of people were working on happiness in economics and psychology, and now I’m very much in touch with all those folks. But at the beginning, it seemed to many people like a kind of strange subject to be doing. They would look at me curiously, oh,

you're writing a history of happiness? How does that work? Now it, maybe, makes more sense.

Kym Yes. Can you describe some of the main ways in which the ideas of happiness have changed over time?

Darrin Sure. I work mainly on the Western traditional, although I bring in other traditions, as well. But one of the things I love to point out is that in every Indo-European language, the word for happiness is cognate with luck, and that's true going all the way back to the Ancient Greek and the Latin. Our modern languages come into being in the late Middle Ages, so you take a word like happiness in English that comes from an old Norse and old English term, "hap," H-A-P, which you still find in words like happenstance or perhaps, and it really just means luck. And that's true, as I say, all the way down the board, in French and German and Italian, so on and so forth.

That points to something really, very interesting; it points to an older notion of happiness, which is very distant from us, today. That the idea is that happiness is not something that we can control. Happiness is not in our hands. Happiness is something that happens to you, and that the world is controlled by the gods or by fate or by fortune, and we don't really have a whole lot of control over that. I think that's a notion of happiness that's shared by many, many developing societies who

haven't yet, kind of, developed the capacity to think about life as something you can control.

So that's a very different notion of happiness. It's challenged – in Western tradition, it's challenged beginning with the Ancient Greeks. Socrates is a critical figure, here, in Athens, sort of the father of modern philosophy. Socrates poses the question, we all want happiness; how to get it? That ends of becoming the goal of Greek and then Roman philosophy.

It also ends up becoming the goal of almost every major religious tradition. Every major religious tradition is, on some level, a way of thinking about how to live a flourishing and fulfilling life. But the thing that I like to point out about both the philosophical tradition, the Greek and Roman philosophical tradition, and the various wisdom traditions is that happiness, in these conceptions, is always thought of as a special attainment for, effectively, the privileged. For people who have great virtue or have God's favor, who are of the chosen.

So you take Buddhism, for example. The Buddha tells that everyone has the capacity to be happy, and yet very few are. Why? Because they live lives of ignorance.

At the end of the day, those who attain a kind of happiness are really a special elite, as it were. Aristotle calls them the happy few. That is so far from our notion of happiness, today. Our notion of happiness today gets challenged beginning in the late 17th and the 18th century. We, I think, increasingly think of happiness as a privilege or a special attainment, but something that we're supposed to have. Something that is natural to human beings and that has consequences that we can talk about, if you'd like.

Kym I would like to talk about that. You have a very unique perspective on this because of the history of this, and it's very intriguing. You mentioned the Greeks; I love the Greeks' definition of happiness, the joy you feel while striving toward your potential, is the definition I've heard from the Greeks. Share more.

Darrin Sure. I think you're probably referring to Aristotle.

Kym Yes.

Darrin Aristotle actually thinks of happiness, or human flourishing, the word he uses is *eudaimonia*, and we translate that as happiness, but it's critical to make the distinction that happiness, for the ancients, is not about feeling. It's not about joy, even, it's not about something that puts a smile on your face. It's rather about living a complete life well.

That's actually another critical shift. I think, increasingly, from the 18th century forward, we've tended to think of happiness as something that makes us feel good, right, that gives us a kind of positive affect. But for the ancients, that wasn't really the case. Happiness was about living a complete and full life. Aristotle said that one of the ways you do that is, as you say, striving for excellence. Striving for a kind of human perfection. This is what he called virtue, and he had certain ideas about what constitutes a virtuous life, but there is an emphasis on action, on activity, on working towards something. We've inherited that with this idea of pursuing happiness.

Kym What do you, today, with all the latest research, with all the science behind happiness, how is that – I mean, obviously, we see the rewriting of history as it relates to happiness and how it's defined by people today.

Darrin Sure. Well, let me say a couple things. I, in my book on happiness, on the history of happiness, I talk about this critical revolution that happens beginning in the latter part of the 17th and into the 18th century; I call it a revolution in human expectations. It's in that period, in Western Europe and in North America, as well, in which human beings are presented with what is, really, a novel proposition, and that is that they ought to be happy, that they're intended to be happy, that God or the Creator wants us to be happy in this life, not just in the next.

That's actually, really, a radical notion. There are reasons for why that occurs in the 18th century that are interesting in their own right, but it has the consequence of leading people to come – and it doesn't happen all at once, of course. If you're an African American slave or a Jew in [indiscernible], or what have you, the idea that you should just be happy may have seemed like a cruel joke.

Kym Yes.

Darrin Yet, increasingly, to ever wider facets of the population, the idea that we have a right to happiness, and people start to talk about rights to happiness in the 18th century, becomes a wider and wider belief.

Now, I think this is incredibly liberating, and a good thing, but one of the consequences is that if you think of happiness as something that you're just sort of naturally owed, right, or that you should just naturally have, it doesn't do a very good job of explaining why one might not be happy.

Kym Right, right.

Darrin I think one of the consequences of that revolution in human expectations is that human beings have been left, sometimes, to wonder well, gosh, I'm not happy; is that my fault? Or has somebody else prevented me from being happy?

Another one of the consequences is that I think we've tended to think of happiness, increasingly, as something that's fairly easy to have. It's natural, right; we can just pursue it and get it. Unlike those ancients I referred to earlier, unlike the many wisdom traditions in which happiness is thought of as a really prized possession, something that you have to strive and work for, that you have to train for, that you almost have to be an athlete to develop the capacity for happiness.

So in getting away from that, I think – and I think, actually, our culture today reinforces that message. Happiness is something easy. You just open a Coke, right, and you can have happiness. It's there everywhere; pursue it and get it. I think that's actually a kind of misleading message. You refer to the new science of happiness and the psychology of happiness and the kind of things that people read about in *Live Happy*. I think this is tremendously exciting because one of the things that the new science of happiness is doing, that positive psychologists are doing, is going back and looking at some of this older wisdom and giving it a kind of scientific validation.

You take, for example, the idea of optimism. Every religious tradition in the world has known that having hope is good for us right now. This is something that positive psychologists talk about all the time, that we can learn to think more optimistically,

and by thinking optimistically, we can actually increase our happiness in the here and now.

Or you take gratitude. Every religious tradition in the world gives thanks for what we have, and they focus on that, on our blessings. Well, turns out that being grateful and expressing gratitude regularly, as your readers will probably know, is good for us in the here and now.

Those are just two examples of many of the ways in which contemporary scientists of happiness are sort of going back and uncovering and recovering some of this ancient wisdom that thought of happiness as a skill, as something that you have to work on.

I always like to point out that we live in a culture in which people spend hundreds, if not thousands, of hours working on their golf swing or practicing this that or another skill. Yet they still think well, happiness is just something that's supposed to happen. You know, it doesn't really work that way. Actually, happiness is a life skill, it's about crafting a well-lived life, and that's something that's worth time and attention, and time and attention can repay your efforts.

Kym That is, really, the greatest point, here, and I think, for many of us, the big ah-ha. That is that it is a skill; it is something you can cultivate. It is something that you can

expand on. That is really – I mean, you tell me, that sounds like it has come a complete 180° from where it started with the history of it in the 17th and 18th century as to where it is today.

Darrin Exactly. Again, it goes back to this ancient idea. You mentioned Aristotle and the idea of cultivating a well-lived life, that that's a skill that one can learn and acquire and perfect. I think there's some real truth to that. I think we began to get away from that a little bit in the 18th century, when we thought of happiness increasingly as feeling and as pleasure and as also something you can just go pursue.

I like to point out that we use the phrase "the pursuit of happiness" all the time, and we usually focus on the word "happiness," but the word "pursuit," in the 18th century, at least, meant to follow in hostility. So, if you pursue something, you're following it with a kind of anxiety. The French have an even better word; they talk about [foreign language], the hunt for happiness, hunting or stalking happiness. You think about well, what do you do when you find it? If you're hunting it, do you have to kill it when you get there?

So I think that tended to get us away from, as you say, thinking of happiness as a skill that one can cultivate. Now, of course, there are limits to that. People have different set levels. Some people are cheerier in the morning than others. There may not be a whole lot we can do about our, sort of, genetic inheritance. Yet, that still leaves a

good deal, psychologists who talk about 40% to 45%, of our capacity for happiness, or subjective wellbeing, in our hands, and focusing on what we can do, I think, is the critical part of all this.

Kym Yes, you know, it's interesting; I'll hear the comment around someone saying this is just how I am. I'm just not a morning person. I wonder, to what degree, that you're programming yourself to believe that as opposed to developing the skills and developing the new ideas and trying new things. The fact that you have self-diagnosed, let's say, and proclaimed that this is how I am, it's real easy to feed into that notion just because you've established that that's just how it's going to be for you, instead of what the possibilities—

Darrin Well, I'm not a morning person, I can tell you. I guess one of the things is sort of learning how to structure a life in which that is possible. Of course, that would hold true for all kinds of things. But I absolutely take your point that it's easy, sometimes, to say well, this is just how I am and this is how it's going to be.

Of course, no one wants to make light for a second of the real pain that people suffer with mental health issues and so forth. This is real and people have to deal with that and it's a good thing that they do. But nonetheless, even when one wrestles with anxiety and depression and other things, there's still a great deal that one can do to enhance the quality of one's experience in life. There just is. And

believing that is, in some ways, the first step. Having that kind of optimism to say, you know what, actually I can make changes. Actually, I'm not simply the slave of my fate. We have a good deal of room for agency within our own lives.

Kym How has this new science of happiness impacted you as a historian and looking at the future?

Darrin Sure. You know, I have a colleague and friend, John Haidt, whose work you're probably familiar with and readers will be, too. He wrote a wonderful book called *The Happiness Hypothesis*. He's a positive psychologist. The subtitle of *The Happiness Hypothesis* is *Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*. When I came out with my book – I published *The Happiness of History* in 2006 – positive psychology was really emerging on the scene. I was immediately put in touch with a lot of folks – in fact, John's book and mine came out the same year; they were reviewed together in numerous places.

I began seeing all these connections, and John's book is perfect this way. Just like positive psychology, more generally, I think, is recovering this ancient wisdom, I, in kind of putting together the past with the present – now, that's not to say that everything that positive psychologists are figuring out today has been discovered before, but a good deal of it is out there in the inherited wisdom of humanity. I think

to say that what contemporary social scientists are doing is bringing some of that back, and I'm on board with that, as a historian.

Kym Is there anything, as you think about the future and our listeners – we have people who are very, very engaged in happiness. I call them our Happy People. They love happiness, they embrace happiness, they move into happiness, they approach things very optimistically. But even, with all of that, still you have those times where you just have your struggles. We're human; we're just going to go through that.

But as you look at the future, do you think that we're really on the cusp of just a whole new reality, as it continues to build, as we continue to learn about happiness? From a discovery standpoint, do you think there's a lot that's coming down the pike, through the research that's taking place, that you think is going to really change more old ideas about it?

Darrin Sure. As a historian, I take a long view of things, so I'm often a little bit inherently skeptical about massive breakthroughs and massive revolutions. I think that human beings will stumble along and they'll stub their toes and fall down and that's going to continue happening. I don't know that, you know, anytime soon we're going to discover the secret to human happiness and that it will be all clarified. I think human happiness is always going to be a struggle and a problematic endeavor.

Yet, that said, I do think that we are making serious breakthroughs in both the kind of physiology of happiness, and what governs a human mood, and then the kind of behaviors that are most conducive to human flourishing. I think this holds all kinds of really exciting possibilities, as you well know and as your readers and listeners will know, there's a lot of movement, now, in public policy and economics to think about ways of organizing human behavior or ways allowing human beings to organize themselves that are more conducive to happiness.

We're learning a great deal about this. I think that's exciting, and we'll, I think, going forward continue to do so.

Kym Let me ask you – you write in your book about the revolution in human expectations beginning in the 18th century. Can you kind of describe what you mean by that and describe some of the consequences?

Darrin Sure. Well, again, as I say, the period from the late 17th century forward is really unique in human history in that increasingly large numbers of people are presented with this idea that, you know what, we are intended to be happy. That happiness is, in effect, our due. And that if we're not happy on earth, there's something wrong. There is injustice or false belief or prejudice or whatnot, and if we remove those things, human beings' natural tendency will be towards happiness.

That seems perfectly reasonable today, to us, and yet it's a novel idea. You think about the Christian tradition; I'm simplifying a complex tradition, and there are different valences and tendencies in it, but on one level, the Christian tradition holds that we have sinned, and as a consequence of our sin, in this life we're not supposed to be happy in this world. We'll always suffer a certain degree of dissatisfaction until we are made whole again and rejoin our maker. On this strain of Christianity, true happiness is death, right, or the everlasting life of recovery with God.

So, to be presented with the idea, and Christians are making this claim in the 18th century, as well, that God wants us to be happy in this life and in the next, that we're supposed to be happy here, is really a novel prospect. As I say, it's progressive and liberating. Human beings are taught, increasingly in the 18th century, that pleasure is not something they should have to apologize for or feel guilty about. That working to make life better, more prosperous in this world, is not something that stinks of greed and covetousness and so forth. That human beings have the capacity to make themselves better. That they should pursue happiness and that governments ought to respond to that. Those are all progressive and liberating notions.

And yet, as I try to point out in my book, the dark side of this is that when human beings are told that they're supposed to be happy, it raises, as I said before, this troubling question of what if I'm not? I think that one begins to see in the 18th century, and this continues in the 19th and 20th and I think is very much a part of our

world today, this novel feeling – I call it the unhappiness of not being happy. The idea that okay, I'm supposed to be happy, I open the magazines, I see smiling people everywhere, and everyone seems to be happy – I'm not happy, what's wrong with me? Have I failed, or have others failed me?

You begin to see, in American history, for example, already in the 19th century, people bringing lawsuits to state and federal governments because they claim that their happiness has been denied. Some of the people in the 18th century talk about not only a right to pursue happiness, but to obtain happiness, and this is in several state constitutions, in the preambles. So you get a jurisprudence that develops in the 19th century where people are literally complaining I've been denied my natural due.

I think that's an indication of this darker side of the modern notion of pursuit of happiness that attends it from the very beginning.

Kym What would your answer be to someone asking you for a prescription, a happiness prescription for themselves? Based on all your research and studies, what would you tell someone?

Darrin As you well know, and as some of the people listening will know, that there's a positive psychology literature on this that actually provides some formulas that

happiness equals your set point plus the kind of things that you can control and your circumstances and what have you. My own little bit of wisdom, or the thing that I learned, at least personally when I was working on this book, is that – and I always love to quote John Stuart Mill, who was a great English philosopher who spent his whole life searching for happiness. He has a kind of breakdown in the middle of his life, and he comes to the view, and he puts it, he says, “Those are only happy who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness; on the happiness of others, on the improvement of mankind, even on some art or pursuit, followed not as a means, but as in itself an ideal end.”

What Mill is saying, there, is that, for him, the way to happiness is to focus on something else. I think that has actually been a kind of liberating insight for me. I wrote this book for five or six years and really wrestled with it, and it was only when I sort of let go a little bit and allowed happiness to come to me rather than just go, consciously, after it, that I felt like I was doing something.

Now, that almost sounds at odds with what I was saying earlier that happiness is a skill that one has to cultivate—

Kym But don't you think – I just want to add – don't you think even the decision you made to let go, lighten up, that is also a skill. I think the ability to do that, to say to yourself, in the moment, I want to lighten up a little bit. It's interesting that you said

that because yesterday we were talking about self compassion and how you would speak to yourself like you were helping a friend, to be more compassionate with yourself. Anyway, I just wanted to point that out. I think that even when you said to yourself I need to lighten up, here, is bringing consciousness to it. Go ahead; continue.

Darrin No, I think that's really an important point. Another point I would add, and again, I think you all will be familiar with this, but the positive psychologist Mike Csikszentmihalyi and others talk about flow. Flow is that kind of feeling of being in the zone when you're doing something that really draws on your strengths, on your skills; playing the piano or playing a sport or what have you. And if you've had that kind of experience, you'll know that you actually kind of let go. You start thinking about something else, and yet what is a consequence of that is a kind of feeling of real worth, of gratification, of happiness.

I think that's something similar. That's a skill that can be perfected and learned, but it allows you to let go and not to focus on – to focus only on what's really drawing your signature strength.

Kym Yes. Okay, so Darrin, this is great; we're coming to the end of this, and I want you to just take a minute to think about what you want everyone to do today. Based on the things that you've shared, I want you to have a minute just to think about telling the

audience, we have thousands of people registered who are part of this whole *Wake Up Happy* series, and just today, if you only get one thing from what I'm talking about or what I'm sharing, here's what I want you to do. I want you to give them a task or something to do today.

I'll give you just a few minutes to think about that. I also – I've got a great quote from Darrin. It says, "Happiness was once widely conceived as a privilege, enjoyed only by the happy few. Today, we tend to think of it as a universal right, within the grasp of all of us. I'm interested in explaining the gradual evolution and shift and to pointing out not only the tremendous possibilities it opened up, but also the potential pitfalls." You've really intrigued us, Darrin. I've got to tell you, it's really great information. Thank you for that.

I also want to point out to you all we have a spotlight event – one of our sponsors is the incredible George Mason University, and they came to us with this incredible event they have. It's their sixth annual conference in the Washington D.C. area, March 26th through the 27th. Now, I'll tell you, you've got to go to the website. For all of you that are into the positive psychology and wellbeing, this is an incredible event that you can attend if this hits your hot buttons. Just go to wellbeing.onmason.com. That's wellbeing.onmason.com.

We only talk about events that we really think are excellent, and this is one from *Live Happy* that we've endorsed and it's what we call our Spotlight Event. I just wanted to tell you about that. They've got incredible speakers – Dan Pink, and psychologist author Todd Kashdan. Again, it's wellbeing.onmason.com. I just wanted you to be aware of that.

Tomorrow, with *Wake Up Happy*, we have Shani Robins to learn more about wisdom and happiness. He will be with us tomorrow for our third day in our five-day series.

Then, a couple of other key points that you brought up, Darrin, that I just want to mention to everybody that I thought were just great. In many languages, the word happiness comes from the root of luck. I never knew that, never thought of it. So happiness comes from the root of luck.

Another key point is happiness is about living a complete, well life. That's from the Ancient Greeks. Happiness now is viewed as a skill that one can learn and acquire. We often say that happiness is the precursor to success. There is so much to this that is just liberating. Just very, very liberating.

Okay, Darrin. What do you want us to do – from this great conversation today, what would be your call to action of the item that you want people to do moving forward today?

Darrin Well, after everything you just said, I would say stay tuned. You've got lots of great things coming up. You know what, the message, I think, that I like to give students when I teach courses on happiness is that you know what, living and pursuing happiness doesn't mean that you won't experience pain and suffering. Pain and suffering are natural to human life, and when one is experiencing it, it's a double insult to think oh gosh, I'm experiencing this and I'm not happy. I've failed. Pursuing happiness will involve pain, and one can actually, sometimes, embrace the pain and use it creatively in pursuit of a greater and more fulfilling life.

Kym That's great. Wonderful, wonderful, wonderful information. Darrin, so appreciate this. You can, on Twitter, communicate with Darrin @darrin_mcmahon, M-C-M-A-H-O-N. Darrin is D-A-R-R-I-N, for those of you just listening.

Also, I want to ask you, if you're not already part of the Live Happy movement, please become a part of us. Just go to livehappy.com, subscribe to *Live Happy* magazine, check us out. Everything we do is based on the science. Everything we write about, we discuss research, academic proof, working with positive psychologists. Just incredible content. We have the privilege of having Darrin, who is a part of us, and what we do online with our communication and our digital magazine.

I just want to tell you we are here to serve, we are here to make a difference, we are here to make this world a happier place. That's what Live Happy is all about. I hope you feel that and feel our sincerity behind wanting to do everything we can to move our planet forward. We all know there's enough horrible information out in the marketplace and, as you said Darrin, we are human, things are not going to always go our way, there are going to be challenges for us. But guess what? We have a choice about what we think about and how we approach things, and more importantly, how we treat each other. We have a choice, and we can choose to treat each other with a big smile, with a wonderful welcome with our eyes and tell people they matter and they're unique and to embrace their specialness.

With that, I look forward to seeing you tomorrow. Remember, you can email me at wakeuphappy@livehappy.com. I'd love to hear your comments, your feedback, to make sure we're on the right course with serving you. Have a fabulous day.

Darrin, thank you so much for your wisdom, we deeply appreciate it. Bye-bye for now, everybody. Bye-bye for now.

Darrin Thank you, Kym.