

The Two Most Important Days

How to Find Your Purpose and Live a Happier, Healthier Life

JANET MENDELSON **writer**

sanjiv chopra likes to tell this story about the late Beatle, John Lennon.

“When John was five years old, his teacher gave the class a writing assignment on what they want to be when they grow up. John wrote: ‘Happy.’

His teacher said, ‘John, you didn’t understand the assignment.’ To which John replied, ‘And you don’t understand life.’”

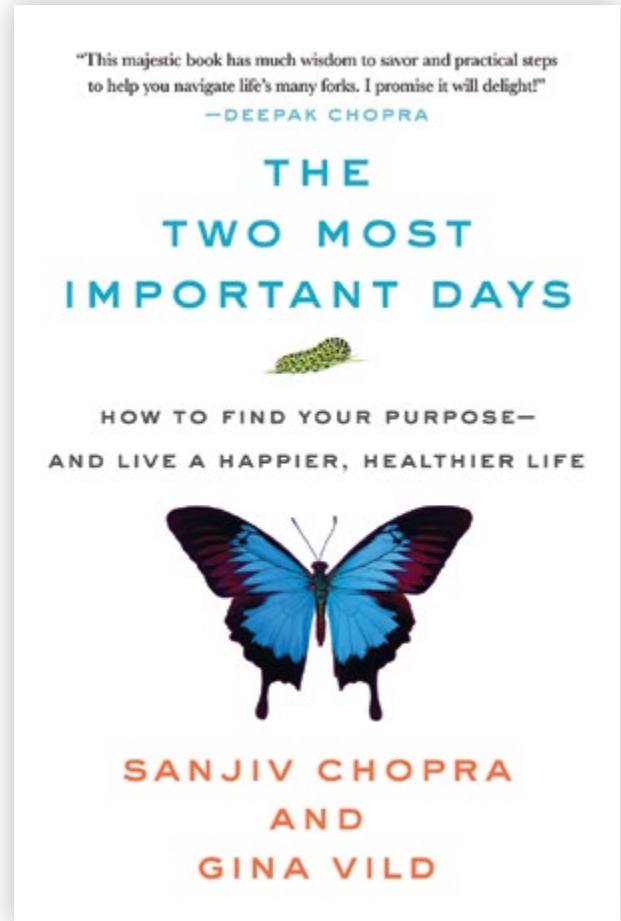
Regardless of living conditions, health, or income, all human beings want to be happy, says Chopra. “We can learn much from children.”

But with age, that clarity seems to muddle. Many people spend their adult lives searching for happiness, looking in the wrong places, finding temporary answers. Sanjiv Chopra, of Weston, and Gina Vild, of Wellesley, co-authors of *The Two Most Important Days: How to Find Your Purpose and Live a Happier, Healthier Life*, believe the desire to enjoy sustained happiness is hardwired into everyone’s DNA.

“The yearning is universal, transcending age, gender, geography, vocation, and personal circumstances,” they write, and yet everyone has the ability to find long-term happiness if they make the right choices.

Their new book offers motivation, research, and resources to help. Tellingly, the book takes its title from Mark Twain, who wrote, “The two most important days are the day you were born and the day you find out why.”

Sanjiv Chopra, professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School and James Tullis Firm Chief, Department of Medicine, at Beth Israel Deaconess Hospital, is a former faculty dean for Continuing Medical Education at Harvard Medical School. He is the author of several books



COURTESY OF THOMAS DUNNE BOOKS, SANJIV CHOPRA, AND GINA VILD

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on health and leadership, and co-author with his brother, Deepak Chopra, of their joint memoir. Sanjiv Chopra and his wife, Amita Chopra, a pediatrician and meditation teacher, have lived in Weston for more than 32 years. Their son and two daughters graduated from Weston High School.

Gina Vild is associate dean and chief communications officer at Harvard Medical School. After moving to Wellesley 29 years ago, she was active in the local schools while raising her son and daughter. For nine years, she wrote a column in *The Wellesley Townsman* on education and children.

On a cold winter evening, the co-authors and I met at the Chopras’ home. Enticing aromas from the large open kitchen filled the adjacent living room where we spoke. Photographs of family and friends and mementos of their travels abroad leant a feeling of warmth and welcome. Vild and Chopra sat in a pair of marvelous golden armchairs whose arms are sculpted swans. The intricately carved chairs, like other pieces in the room, were designed by Amita’s sister in Delhi.

“A recent search on Amazon turned up 256,000 books on happiness,” began Vild, “So why did we write this one? What makes it different?”

It is the blending of genres, she said. Ancient wisdom. The words of great poets and the Buddha. Inspiring stories about real people who changed their own lives and the lives of those around them. Scientific and academic studies that support the teachings of ancient Greeks and modern thinkers alike. And finally, practical tools and resources that anyone can use to increase their own happiness.

Among the benefits can be longevity and better health.

They cite a formula developed by the psychologist Martin Seligman: $H = S + C + V$. Happiness equals the “set point” we inherit, plus the “conditions of living,” plus “voluntary actions” or choices we make.



Sanjiv Chopra



Gina Vild

According to the formula, 50 percent of your happiness is determined by your genetically determined set point—the happiness level you are born with. Only 10 percent is based on how satisfied you are with your living conditions. A Beverly Hills mansion, a slum, or suburbia can be equally satisfying as long as one’s basic needs—food, water, a place to sleep—are taken care of.

But 40 percent of your happiness quotient comes from choices that are within each person’s control.

Mega lottery winners illustrate this point. Chopra said evidence shows that big winners in the lottery are euphoric for a fairly short period, as brief as three months. But within a year, many, if not most, return to their baseline level of happiness—their set point. Some are even less happy than they were before. Only those who donate some of their newfound wealth to charity or help others become happier than they were.

What, then, can you do to boost your happiness quotient long term?

They encourage us to spend time with family and friends, practice

books “happiness grows from choosing to help others”

forgiveness, find compassion for others, and learn from failure. Express gratitude every day in large and small ways. They urge us to live in the moment, and not hide behind a smart phone or screen. To meditate daily, read poetry, and reflect.

Finding and nurturing deep friendships is central to good health, but, they acknowledge, it's not always easy to do. Among other benefits, regular exercise, pet ownership, and religion can lead to joining a community of kindred spirits.

Above all, happiness grows from choosing to help others in ways that interest you. Consciously embrace your life's unique purpose through self-awareness, service, and kindness.

“Having a purpose in life reduces stress, which, in turn, reduces substance abuse, anxiety, and depression,” says Chopra, a gastroenterologist and specialist in liver disease. “A sense of meaningfulness can even help manage pain.” He cited research that indicates expressing gratitude and serving others correlates to a better mood, more restful sleep, and improved cardiac health.

Chopra lectures at conferences and medical programs around the world. On his travels, he has met some extraordinary people who say their lives changed for the better when they witnessed an event or conditions that moved them to help others. Among them is Papá Jaime, who watched in horror as a truck accident killed a homeless child, one of the thousands who live in the streets of Bogotá, Colombia. In that moment, Papá Jaime found his life's purpose, said Chopra. Since then, he has devoted himself to housing, feeding, clothing, and schooling children in need. He has educated more than 32,000 Colombian orphans, many of whom have become professional athletes, doctors, teachers, and computer scientists; and he runs a leadership organization that teaches compassion, service, and peace building.

Chopra and Vild do not expect all of us to change our lives as profoundly as Papá Jaime or others whose stories are in the book. But volunteering locally, helping neighbors, or working with others toward a particular goal can be tremendously rewarding.

Because it's hard to break habits and identify a personal path to happiness, they compiled resources readers can use—activities, books, movies, websites, apps, and worksheets—to get started.

Asked whether writing the book opened any windows for them, both said as they worked together, writing on weekends and evenings, their circle of friends expanded to include people important in each other's life. At the same time, Vild said when they embarked on the project, she unexpectedly found herself experiencing the unhappiest time in her life.

“Writing the book was a balm and a cushion for me,” she said. “It put things in perspective and helped me access forgiveness. I was learning as I wrote. The Buddha says ‘Every life has a measure of sorrow. Sometimes it is this that awakens us.’” 