

A SHORT GUIDE  
TO A  
HAPPY LIFE

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Anna Quindlen



R A N D O M   H O U S E

A  
*Short Guide*  
*to a*  
*Happy Life*

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*For Janet Maslin*



I'm not particularly qualified by profession or education to give advice and counsel. It's widely known in a small circle that I make a mean tomato sauce, and I know many inventive ways to hold a baby while nursing, although I haven't had the opportunity to use any of them in years. I have a good eye for a nice swatch and a surprising paint chip, and I have had a checkered but occasionally successful sideline in matchmaking.

But I've never earned a doctorate, or even a master's degree. I'm not an ethicist, or a philosopher, or an expert in any particular field. Each time I give a commencement speech I feel like a bit of a fraud. Yogi Berra's advice seems as good as any: When you come to a fork in the road, take it!

I can't talk about the economy, or the universe, or academe, as academicians like to call where they work when they're feeling kind of grand. I'm a novelist. My work is human nature. Real life is really all I know.

Don't ever confuse the two, your life and your work. That's what I have to say. The second is only a part of the first. Don't ever forget what a friend once wrote to Senator Paul Tsongas when the senator had decided not to run for reelection because he'd been diagnosed with cancer: "No man ever said on his deathbed I wish I had spent more time at the office."



Don't ever forget the words on a postcard that my father sent me last year: "If you win the rat race, you're still a rat."

Or what John Lennon wrote before he was gunned down in the driveway of the Dakota: "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans."

That's the only advice I can give. After all, when you look at the faces of a class of graduating seniors, you realize that each student has only one

thing that no one else has. When you leave college, there are thousands of people out there with the same degree you have; when you get a job, there will be thousands of people doing what you want to do for a living.



But you are the only person alive who has sole custody of your life. Your particular life. Your entire life. Not just your life at a desk, or your life on the bus, or in the car, or at the computer. Not just the life of your mind, but the life of your heart. Not just your bank account, but your soul.

People don't talk about the soul very much anymore. It's so much easier to write a résumé than to craft a spirit. But a résumé is cold comfort on a winter night, or when you're sad, or broke, or lonely, or when you've gotten back the chest X ray and it doesn't look so good, or when the doctor writes "prognosis, poor."





Here is my résumé. It's not what my professional bio says, proud as I am of all that:

I am a good mother to three good children. I have tried never to let my profession stand in the way of being a good parent. I no longer consider myself the center of the universe. I show up. I listen. I try to laugh.

I am a good friend to my husband. I have tried to make my marriage vows mean what they say. I show up. I listen. I try to laugh.

I am a good friend to my friends, and they to me. Without them I would have nothing of interest to say to anyone, because I would be a cardboard cutout. But I call them on the phone, and I meet them for lunch. I show up. I listen. I try to laugh.

I would be rotten, or at best mediocre, at my job if those other things were not true. You cannot be really first-rate at your work if your work is all you are.

So I suppose the best piece of advice I could give anyone is pretty simple: get a life. A real life, not a manic pursuit of the next promotion, the bigger paycheck, the larger house. Do you think you'd care so very much about those things if you developed an aneurysm one afternoon, or found a lump in your breast while in the shower?

Get a life in which you notice the smell of salt water pushing itself on a breeze over the dunes, a life in which you stop and watch how a red-tailed hawk circles over a pond and a stand of pines. Get a life in which you pay

attention to the baby as she scowls with concentration when she tries to pick up a Cheerio with her thumb and first finger.



Turn off your cell phone. Turn off your regular phone, for that matter. Keep still. Be present.

Get a life in which you are not alone. Find people you love, and who love you. And remember that love is not leisure, it is work. Each time I look at my diploma, I remember that I am still a student, still learning every day how to be human. Send an e-mail. Write a letter. Kiss your mom. Hug your dad.