

## Chapter 13

*"I found happiness because I had to."*



**MARIELLEN WARD**

Have you ever met someone who simply exudes the essence of serenity – an unruffled tranquility that just meanders around you like a calming country stream reaching out to soothe unease and promote well-being?

I have. Her name is Mariellen Ward and as she tells me a devastating story of her early life, I'm not only transfixed by the challenges she's faced but relieved by the remedy she's self-activated in order to find happiness.

"I found happiness because I had to," she tells me. "I had a great beginning to life but then the rug was pulled out from under me. I had a pretty normal upbringing: my Dad was a successful marketing exec, my Mom and I enjoyed a really close relationship, we had a nice home, a cottage... and then 'poof', just like that, it all fell apart. My parents got divorced when I was a teenager. I fell between the cracks. I went from being the princess in the tower to nowhere to live when I was 18. From that time to today I have found life to be a bit of a struggle. I had become clinically depressed from my family disintegration. My best friend killed herself. I had ongoing issues with anxiety and depression. I became addicted to anti-anxiety pills. Financial troubles dogged me as I tried to pursue a writing career. Once, I even found myself on welfare, visiting a food bank."

As she talks, this 52 year old – whose serene manner and unlined face makes her appear 10 years younger – is relaxing in the afternoon sun on a close, muggy day. As we chat, fat robins chirp from electrical wires as sleek squirrels dart about on the roof of a backyard garage. She shares this garden with other tenants in the house where she rents a flat, but Mariellen reveals that she's the only one who spends time here. "To me, it's the ideal urban location: I feel like I live in a small town in the center of a city."

"Your story sounds traumatic," I tell her. "How did you cope?"

“Somewhere along the line I decided it would be better for me to build a strong internal world rather than an external realm. As I hit my 30s, I started a rigorous course of therapy and bodywork at the same time and turned my life inside out for a few years. Things started to look up a bit but then everything started to go wrong again. Dad went bankrupt. We lost the family cottage. Two months later my Mom died suddenly at 67 and I found her body, a huge shock. I wasn’t ready. A year or two after that my fiancé left me (with a wedding dress in the closet!). Then my Dad got terminal cancer and died. It just seemed I couldn’t get up from one event before I got knocked down again by another. I even broke my elbow in a bike accident! By the time I’d turned 40, I had no husband, no kids, no savings, no mom or dad; I was very deeply, clinically depressed for quite a few years.”

“And yet, as I sit here talking with you today Mariellen,” I say, “I’m amazed: you seem calm, happy, at peace.”

“I am,” she responds. “Happiness is an important topic to me. I’ve spent a good portion of my life trying to find it rather than focusing on a career, family or nest egg: I don’t have any of those things. And it’s because I made a decision to devote a big part of my adult life to doing therapy and following a spiritual path instead of building up my career or investments.”

Mariellen has also spent a lot of time building her India-inspired travel blog, [Breathedreamgo.com](http://Breathedreamgo.com). There you’ll discover a comment from one reader that says, “I’d like to add one word to how you describe yourself: Brave.” I agree.

“OK, life seemed to smack you down at regular intervals, leaving you clinically depressed... how did you find the courage to pull yourself out of that malaise? How did you get to this stage of life where you’re happy?”

“Well, I made two crucial decisions,” she tells me. “First, I decided to throw my faith into yoga. I found a wonderful teacher, and made a decision to go to her class three times a week, no matter what happened, no matter how I felt. I made a commitment to myself to embrace this physical, mental and spiritual discipline that originated in ancient India. And Peter, I have to tell you, on many days I just dragged myself in. Sometimes I’d lie down with a blanket over me and just cry and cry. But I continued with it and that started to change my life.”

“And the second decision?” I ask.

“I decided to go after my dreams. First was to become a yoga teacher. It’s funny: I was the oldest and the stiffest person taking the one-year training course. But I went for it. Then I had a cathartic, really emotional experience. It was a ‘release’ brought about by a teacher who had just returned from India. The best way I can describe it is that it seemed almost like a psychic vision. I had

never had one before. I literally saw myself in India. It was like I was there! And it was so profound, so moving, I just said, 'OK, I'm going to India'."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that," Mariellen confirms. "I was scared, but felt I had to do it. Understand, this wasn't a decision: it was a compulsion; it gripped me. It involved a year of planning and saving and giving up my apartment for a small room. I tuned my life upside down to go on that trip. And eventually, I was off to India for 6 months. I'd never been there, never done anything like that. But this was the turning point: it was in India where I learned how to be happy."

Mariellen pauses and looks off, as though seeing herself back in India. "That trip changed my life in so many ways. India turned out to be my muse and I started to pursue my passion for writing.," she tells me. "That's how I spend my time now: I'm a full-time writer and editor."

"You know, that's an amazing story," I state. "You're obviously a very strong woman."

"I didn't have any choice!" she says. "I was sick of my self pity so I gave myself zero tolerance. I had been very involved in Gestalt Therapy, first as a client and then after years of training, as a therapist. But over time, yoga and spirituality replaced Gestalt. I had a paradigm shift in my thinking. I now know that to be truly happy, you need to be on a spiritual journey."

"When you say 'spiritual journey', what do you mean?"

"Spirituality to me is having a connection with something bigger than yourself. I find it hard to believe someone is happy without feeling that they are part of something bigger than themselves. When I say 'happy', I mean having a deep contentment, not just fleeting... you know, the more profound version of happiness which is a deep kind of contentment, having more to do with a philosophical approach to life. I'm not talking about religion and I know a lot of people won't entertain the idea they are on a spiritual path. To me, spirituality can be as simple as noticing the beauty of nature, breathing it in and realizing that you are part of nature - not separate from nature"

"That's a belief that's more common in Asia," I offer.

"Yes," she agrees. "In eastern spirituality, the world is seen as one. God is seen as life force energy, or consciousness; god is not personal. Everything that's living: that's what God is. Feeling part of that is a major source of my personal happiness. What I've learned is, if you want to be happy, just be happy. Cut to the chase. What I found in yoga is, if you're feeling angry or depressed, change it! Change your thinking from negative to positive."

As we talk on this lovely sunny afternoon, Mariellen and I agree there should be two different words for happiness: one to reflect the feeling of elation that accompanies a cheerful time in your life, and one that expresses the deep contentment of profound inner joy that can guide your life. “Of the two different types of happiness,” she says, “only one has to do with your temporary, sensual experience of life. That’s not the happiness that’s worth writing a book about, is it Peter?”

“Not my book,” I agree. “So tell me Mariellen, are you happy overall, or just with parts of your life?”

“To achieve lasting, deep contentment, I believe you need to be on a spiritual path. You need to find your wellspring – that original and bountiful source of something – because that’s your spiritual path. When you find that, it doesn’t matter what’s going on or what your bank balance is or what the weather’s like or whether you’re sick or whether your cat died... you just feel grateful to be alive and you still feel that life is a gift. Life is a privilege, it’s not a right. The teachings of yoga and Hindu philosophy have been better at leading me to happiness than anything I ever learned growing up in the west.”

“Tell me more about your trip to India. Did it expand your capacity for happiness?”

“Travel in India is crazy,” she laughs. “You have to take a deep breath, go with the flow of energy, go with the cycles of nature, where life is taking you, don’t fight, don’t try to hang on and be and do what you’re not; learn to let go of control. We in the west are such control freaks, but you can’t control anything in India... you won’t last two days if you try! The best attitude to cultivate is to accept everything that happens as a gift, a blessing, it’s what’s meant to happen: embrace it. That’s how you’ll possess happiness. I actually find it easier to be in India than here; it’s easier physically here but you’re always expected to ‘do’ something.”

“Are there things you do here that get in your way of being happy?” I ask.

“The only thing that can get in your way is yourself,” she tells me. “What I’ve learned through Gestalt, yoga and my own life experiences is that everything begins and ends in your own mind. It’s too easy to blame the external world, the buck stops here! I may have my dark moments, that’s for sure. But on a deeper level, I’ve found my wellspring and I’m truly grateful to be alive and see life as a gift. I’ve been to the edge and pulled myself back and there’s great strength in that – when you have to sink or swim. Frankly, I’m wondering if I’ll be able to make the rent payment next month. Ten years ago, that would have been a crisis. Now, it’s such a small thing. I have a better perspective on life that I never used to have.”

“Any thoughts on what causes happiness in some people, not others?” I ask.

Her response is immediate and forceful. “It’s all about whether you’re taking responsibility for your life or not. You’re happy because you choose to be. You have the power. You have to believe you have the power. You need to make that shift. Then you realize, ‘I’m in charge of my happiness’. Yogis teach the ability to master your mind so you can experience the truth of your being, which is that you are one with the universe. I just say ‘choose happiness’. I could easily be unhappy, but I decide to be happy, let the joy of happiness wash over me, the energy of it...”

“Did you find it any easier to be happy in India than here?”

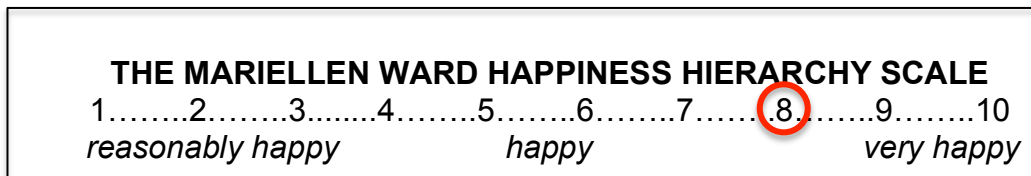
“Being around happy, content people can help make it easier to feel happy and content. People in North America don’t tend to be content because nothing in our society wants you to be content: advertisers, politicians... nobody wants us to be content. They want us to strive, to work, make money, spend money. The whole religious system is all about making yourself ready for the next life. What about being lovable and valuable as you are, right here, right now?”

“You mentioned earlier that you’ve turned your back on financial success,” I say. “Any regrets?”

“Once you obtain subsistence level,” she explains, “there’s no correlation between money and happiness. The happiest I’ve ever been in life was at the ashram in India leading an incredibly simple life: simple room, simple food... And today, spending time with my young niece makes me feel rich.”

And indeed, it’s been my privilege spending a delightful afternoon in conversation with this calming, serene lady who’s found happiness because she had to.

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*“I can see the top of the mountain and I’m not there;  
but I know there is a mountain, so I’d say I’m at least an 8.”*