

Worry and Be Happy!

Like most everyone else in the free world, I was devastated to learn of actor Leslie Jordan's death in a car accident in October 2022. Such a positive life force. Such a fearless talent. Such a funny man.

The news of his death threatened to send me spiraling into despair because I was dealing with some scary family drama at the time, as well as overdosing on predictions of mid-term gloom and doom on MSNBC.¹

I also found his death to be triggering because he had long reminded me of my good friend Jeffrey Hartgraves, a similarly talented man who was also taken from us too soon.

But just as I was falling into a bottomless depression, I stumbled upon the following quote from Mr. Jordan on social media:

“Happiness is a choice. Happiness is a habit. And happiness is something you have to work hard at. It does not just happen.”

Now, I've heard variations on this philosophy before. My hubby is a devotee of the late Louise Hay, whose message, in a nutshell, boils down to “the thoughts we think, and the words we speak, create our reality.”

She didn't lie. Alas, Ms. Hay always struck me as a little too *la-de-da, airy-fairy* to take seriously. After all, it's hard (for me) to take that kind of advice from the head of a multi-million-dollar publishing outfit.

But seeing that quote from Mr. Jordan hit me differently, and hard. He had had a difficult life. Growing up gay and effeminate in the Deep South. Addiction to booze and drugs. Multiple arrests.

Often, very funny people become very funny as the result of very painful anguish. (See Robin Williams.)

¹ Which, fortunately, turned out to be a false alarm – this time!

So coming from Mr. Jordan, this advice had real power.

It's easy to assume that, once an actor is successful, he or she (or they) waves goodbye to personal pain and sends their demons packing. But that is not the case. And let's be honest, even if you're successful, there are easier things to be in the gay world than short, old, and nelly!

To be sure, Mr. Jordan must have had private moments of doubt, fear, anger, regret. We all do. The challenge – the “hard work” – is finding your happiness despite all the negative emotions, all the bad news, all the challenges of real life.

I needed to receive his message. For far too long, I've let my life be defined by the things that piss me off, or problems I needed to fix, or goals I hadn't reached. I'd let a negative comment on Facebook stick in my craw and ruin my mood for hours. I'd watch reports of how MAGA Republicans are trying to murder democracy, and I would fly into a rage – and stay there all day.

How do we acknowledge the bad news, the hard knocks life throws our way, yet still manage to be happy? Is it “living in denial” to find joy when there's so much to feel unhappy about? Do we have to become unthinking Pollyannas to pull it off?

No. That's where the “hard work” from Mr. Jordan's quote comes in.

The truth is, we all can and do feel more than one emotion at the same time. But we have to make the effort.

I write in my journal every morning. Many mornings, I also scribbled out a quick “gratitude list” of things in my life that I appreciated.

I no longer list my sources of gratitude. That's a passive exercise. Yes, I would acknowledge the good, write it down – but then I would forget about it. And often, I found myself writing down the same items each morning by rote. (“My parents. Laurence. Our cat Toby. *Old Dogs & New Tricks*.”) I felt gratitude in the moment, but it never stuck.

These days, after I've made my diary entry, I sometimes write a list of moments that made me feel *happy*, instead of things for which I'm grateful. The good things in my life that bring a smile, or warm my heart, or make me laugh.

It's a much more active exercise.

For example, I'd write “Our cat Toby” on my gratitude list. Okay. But what about that little guy makes me happy? The way he wails when he hears us at the front door!

The way he cuddles in bed for belly rubs before the sun comes up! The way he arches his back and does his “scary kitty dance” when he gets really excited!

Having created and starred in a hit streaming TV series doesn’t really make me happy anymore – especially since it was almost a decade ago. It’s becoming a distant memory. So now I list “that lovely note from the new viewer” or “laughing over brunch with Amanda,” (whom I cast as my loyal assistant “Lydia”) or “getting a small royalty payment from Amazon Prime.”

“Laurence” has been replaced on the list by items like, “Laurence’s homemade chocolate milkshakes,” for example, or “when Laurence and I laugh together at a good joke.”

Instead of just writing “my parents,” I list the times we’ve shared – specific moments – that make me happy. “Making Dad laugh.” “Holding Mom’s hand.”

Thinking of those actions actually *ignites* happiness within me – much more happiness than simply acknowledging that these people and things merely exist. These are moving images and active memories that I can pull up like flashcards when I’m feeling less than joyous.

Those flashcards don’t eliminate fear and anxiety. They don’t change what’s happening in the “outside world.” But it’s good to remind myself that there’s more to life than just negative emotions and bad news. There’s more to do in life than just *react*.

Another tool I’m utilizing these days to consistently brighten my mood is music. To quote William Congreve, “Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast. To soften rocks or bend the knotted oak.” It certainly has the power to lighten my spirits!

These days, if I’m in my car – and as I live in LA, I’m in my car a lot – I have music blasting instead of news. Soundtracks, Prince, Bowie, Blondie, Harry Styles, disco. Whatever it takes to get me humming a tune as I reach my destination.

Some days, I just feel too damned sour to pick music to play. It’s those days when I need it the most, so I’ll force myself to open Spotify despite my mood. And within minutes, I’ve gone from sour to sweet. Or at least to sweeter than sour!

Mr. Jordan was right. Unless you’re really lucky, or slightly brain damaged, happiness does not just happen. Not in today’s crazy world.

Instead of expecting the world to make us happy, and being miserable when it fails to deliver, we need to take the reins to our moods. Staying positive and upbeat is a DIY gig.

It's a lesson I needed to learn. As I face the physical challenges of getting older, as my family ages, and as we watch America lurch dangerously close to fascism, I'm still struggling against turning into a grumpy old queen.

But who knows? If I'm able to keep this up, maybe my *next* book will be *less* grumpy!

Thank you, Mr. Jordan.

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