

## **Living an Intelligent Life** Julian Short

If you live intelligently, you leave as little of your happiness to chance as possible. You know life doesn't always work out and sometimes the world can be a tough place. You do your best to control the things you can control and you try hard to win, but you also know being happy doesn't depend on being the best or winning all the time.

Happiness depends on having the skills to develop intimate, equal relationships, balancing your need to be loved and to give love against standing up for yourself and asserting your individuality. To do this well you need to combine as much self understanding as you can muster with as great a sensitivity to others as you can manage. Ultimately the secret of happiness is no secret at all; it's dead obvious. To be happy you need to like yourself and to like yourself, which means having a good self esteem, you are dependent on the quality of your relationships.

'An Intelligent Life. A Practical Guide to Relationships, Intimacy and Self-Esteem.' was published by Random House Australia in 2005 and is now in its second edition. It has enjoyed considerable success in this country, having sold more than twenty thousand copies. It has been published in the UK as "A Model for Living" and translated into Japanese, Russian and Indonesian. Hopefully, its success reflects its genuine value as a guidebook for living with as much happiness as possible.

Here is the final chapter:

You and your fellow humans are part of a natural order, in which once only the fittest survived. The forces of evolution that tuned us physically also shaped and continue to shape our emotions. To live intelligently we need a degree of self understanding which I propose begins with an understanding of the biology of survival.

To stay alive, our bodies obviously need food, water, shelter and oxygen. Less immediately obvious, but just as necessary for survival, are the safety from predators that our ancestors found in belonging to the herd and the opportunities to feed and mate that depended on their power to hold territory. In the twenty-first century, our

lives are not so immediately on the line, but we still feel the need to belong to a group and we are driven by the same primitive urging to have some power and to take control.

*I suggest human beings still hunger for secure belonging, because this is warmth, peace, security and love, while pride, dignity and a sense of creativity spring from what was once the strength to hold territory and sometimes conquer more.*

Unfortunately, the same forces pushing us toward the behaviours of survival can prod us viciously when we miss out. Our ancestors undoubtedly suffered the fear of death if they faced rejection from their tribe and a terrible fury if their hunting and mating grounds were invaded. You can be certain that if they failed in all their efforts to get back to the herd, or if their anger didn't fuel the strength to fight successfully for territory, they slipped into their version of despair, abandoning themselves to certain death.

As an adult member of a civilised society, you should not die if you are rejected or belittled, but your paleocortex, the ancient part of your brain that governs your responses to threat, has no idea of the context in which you live. The possibility of forgetting what you are supposed to say while speaking in public or even thinking about asking someone attractive to have dinner with you, can trigger the same emotion as your ancestor would have felt if his whole tribe rejected him and left him to the tigers. Having someone take your parking place or steal your ideas can provoke the same murderous fury as your ancestor probably felt when another ape moved into his patch or looked lustfully at your hairy, knuckle-dragging ancestral mother.

*Assuming we are not under physical threat, all our emotional problems are variations on our response to rejection or belittlement. There are really only three negative emotions; anxiety, anger and despair, driving the three behavioural responses to threat; flight, flight or freeze. These emotions spring from the fear of death, because once upon a time, to be unloved and powerless was to die. Now we are anxious if we feel we might be rejected, despairing if it finally happens and angry if we are*

belittled. Sometimes, if we're rejected, we may try to use anger to escape our anxiety and despair.

Happiness is achievable, but not absolute happiness. There is no possibility that you will live your life without pain. The best you can hope is to make sure you cause as little of your own pain as possible. *If you live intelligently, you practise effective damage control, so when life is being particularly outrageous, you will still hate what is happening, but not hate yourself.*

Living intelligently is no more than trying to simultaneously find as much love as possible and at the same time as much control as possible. Care of yourself is care of your relationships. The better you do this, the better your self esteem. The greatest happiness comes from being individually creative in the setting of love given and received. A good self esteem and happiness are inseparable.

Everybody wants to be liked and loved. People are attracted to the people with whom they feel they belong, because the forces of love and liking hold a tribe together. Self interest motivates everybody to want to like everybody else, because that increases their sense of belonging and security. This means *everybody you meet will want to like you*, unless you belong to a different, totally unacceptable group or you behave in a way that makes you impossible to like. In everyday encounters with enlightened people, it is quite hard to get rejected for who you are. You are most likely to earn rejection or belittlement for the things you do in expectation of rejection or belittlement that was never coming, or at least wasn't coming until you set it up.

If you want to feel good, you have to choose your actions well. If you want to feel like a self respecting, equal adult, you need to behave as one. If you manage to look as if you like yourself, you will appear to have enough self love to have love to spare for others. Therefore you are attractive, because everybody wants to be loved and you have some to give.

Unfortunately, being nice is not enough; it has to be done with strength. To lean over backwards for other people is both generous and wise, but to fall over backwards is

foolish. If you give more than you can afford, you will be looking for payback and resentful when you don't get it. This will inevitably make you unattractive to others, especially to yourself.

Life is really quite simple to understand, even if a little difficult to do at times. *Every single waking act that is not looking after your physical survival, is devoted in one way or another to the ultimate goals of getting as much love and belonging as possible, while simultaneously securing a robust sense of individuality, strength and control. Your self esteem is determined by how clearly defined as an individual you feel and how valued you feel for being that individual.* If you can get the balance right and if circumstances allow, you will probably have a happy life.

You cannot help wanting to be attractive to other people. This desire for the good opinion of others was originally for the safety of belonging to the herd, but now, as modern Homo sapiens with a sense of self, you want to like yourself as well. Your self esteem is your judgement of yourself, as if you were another person looking at you. When you look at yourself and when other people look at you, you and others are judging you by the way you conduct yourself. If you and other people can respect you for the way in which you behave, you will feel as good about yourself as you possibly can.

The greater your understanding of human emotional structure, the more intelligently self interested your behavioural choices are likely to be. What you do is what you are. The way others see you is more truly who you are than what may be your negative and prejudiced self image. It's behaviour, behaviour, behaviour that decides the quality of your relationships, your self esteem and therefore your happiness. You see yourself in the mirror of other people's reactions.

It may be heretical for me to propose this, but true independence is not possible for healthy people. We can be individualistic, but our individuality is only in the setting of others. A happy individual feels safe to be himself. He enjoys this freedom because he has a belief, reinforced by experience, that his differences will be valued by those whose approval he needs and a confidence that even if he is not always approved, the disapproval is a long way short of rejection.

To live intelligently, you must recognise that it doesn't matter what you are feeling at the moment; it's what you do that is the major decider of the emotional outcome. Other people don't read minds; again, to them what you do is what you are. Thus the recipe for living intelligently is a recipe for positive action, not just positive thinking. Actively trying to develop a healthy self esteem depends on the principle that the only way to change feelings is through well chosen behaviour within your relationships.

If you were willing to forgive my heretical position on our lack of independence, you may be open to something we all know but sometimes avoid admitting: we will be happiest if people like us. If you will accept this, it follows that it would be handy to have some idea of the rules for winning friends and influencing people.

Our first attraction to another and our judgement of his value is usually decided by his status, but this can be very short-lived. *Our final and lasting judgement of human worth is determined by an individual's capacity for kindness and dignity. These are the only true measures of human worth.* If you do not display sufficient of these characteristics, even if your beauty, wealth and talent offer the attractiveness of status, your only friends will be toadies and hangers-on.

I suggest it is no accident that worth is universally measured in this way, because *kindness and dignity are the behaviours of love and power*, the modern equivalent of the survival behaviours of our ancestors. Your ancestors lived long enough to become ancestors because they were liked enough to belong to the herd, while strong enough to control territory.

So what can you do? In this book I have tried to offer some practical ideas, but sometimes these concepts can be hard to explain in a few words. I have attempted to get around this by explaining the same concept in different ways, which you will definitely find repetitive, but there is no avoiding this, because I can't know which approach will make best sense to you the individual.

To be at greatest peace with yourself, you need an active, reliable and reproducible system for finding your self-liking through other people. You need to pit intelligently planned action and the positive responses of others against your capacity for self doubt. Once you appreciate that the ultimate criteria of human worth are kindness and dignity, you can script and choreograph behaviour that is attractive to both yourself and to others. If you have had to struggle to maintain your self esteem, by consistently choosing to act with kindness and dignity, you can set up a conflict between an established, anti-self prejudice and your active construction of the positive, but this needs further explanation.

In practical terms, there are four parts to your sense of yourself; that feeling of who you are that is far more than your awareness of your physical existence as a living body. The first three components of self are self evident, even if you hadn't considered it before. You are the sum of your *feelings*, your *thoughts* and your *actions*. You have a reasonable potential for controlling your thoughts and through your thoughts, controlling your actions, but *feelings are not in your direct control and have a life of their own*, potentially driving self destructive behaviour. It is our bad feelings we need to learn to manage, accepting the approach will always be indirect..

Many people believe in the power of positive thinking; in essence saying to themselves (using their thoughts) that they feel great when they don't at all (trying to control feelings) This system of self affirmation works for many, but some of us need more. Fortunately, we can make use of the fact that inconsistency is disturbing to human beings. Having two simultaneously incompatible experiences automatically provokes an attempt to correct the inconsistency. In other words, if two sign posts to the same place point in opposite directions, you have an uncomfortable dilemma; you don't know which way to turn, so you are likely to search for more information.

If it makes sense to you, (using your thoughts) that acting as if you like yourself (using your actions) could make you feel better, it is possible to feel terrible about your looks, luck, brains or circumstances, but still manage to play the role of a self respecting adult. By acting with kindness and dignity, your behaviour can elicit signals of respect and liking, both from others and from the people in your head; the 'they and them' who are always watching you and whom I choose to call your

Observing Self. Your natural discomfort with inconsistency means an automatic pressure on your feelings to join your chosen behaviour of self respect and the positive responses of other people. Your feelings may point one way, but three signposts (thoughts, actions and the responses of others) point in a different direction, making it three against one and your distaste for inconsistency might just lead to your going with the view that you are worthwhile.

To summarise; you can set up what I choose to call the Gang of Three from your thoughts, actions and the reactions of others to your actions. By massing these three positive forces against negative, self critical feelings, you can rationally hope to drag your feelings into consistency with the other parts of your sense of who you are.

You are always going to care what others think of you and sadly you may not have movie star good looks. If you act as if you are beautiful, you could make a real fool of yourself. If you act as if you are ugly, you will be either over-apologetic, avoidant or irritable. Choose to act with kindness and dignity and your feelings of self worth will increase, both because your Observing Self will like what you see yourself doing and, because the signals of healthy self love are built into kind and dignified behaviour, you will be attractive to others. Neither you nor others will be any more thrilled by your looks, but remember the saying....."the sexiest thing a girl can have is confidence" .... which works for boys too. In short, others will like you better and wasn't it your concern as to what people might think of you the reason you worried about your looks in the first place?

To live intelligently doesn't mean that you must suddenly dispense with negative emotion, which is quite fortunate, because you can't anyway. Not only have you no chance of getting rid of an unwanted emotion at will, you may not be able to prevent yourself from acting like a person who feels terrible. Awful you may feel, but you still need to act as a person who likes himself. At that moment, you may be simulating self liking, but you are not trying to fake that you feel good, merely that you feel good about yourself. This is not quite so hard if you have managed to act with kindness and dignity in the face of adversity.

If you live intelligently, you are not living in a blindly positive way. You do not pretend to be happy when you are sad, or calm when you are anxious. Managing your emotions is managing your relationships, choosing to treat people around you with kindness and to conduct yourself with dignity, even when you are anxious, angry or sad. *Intelligent living is not a denial of feelings, but a choice of conduct when you feel bad that will make you feel less bad or at least not make matters worse.* Your public front becomes the behaviour of a self respecting person who appears to like himself enough to believe his human worth is not diminished by the fact he feels awful.

To repeat, when his world is falling apart, a person who lives intelligently may be angry, anxious and profoundly sad and his feelings may be visible, but he still tries to treat people around with kindness and dignity. When he feels totally disgusting, he cuddles his partner and sits down to play with the kids. In short, he knows that if he wants to feel as good as he can when he feels bad, he has to be particularly careful to act the role of a good friend, reliable colleague, supportive partner and above all, a loving parent. His vanities and fears will often cause him to fall short of the mark, but by making this his basic game plan, he'll feel as good as possible and can reasonably hope to respect himself in the process, even if the circumstances are horrible.

Unfortunately love won't fix everything. We want power as well, which can very definitely get in the way of love, if territorial protection is permitted to degenerate into aggressive invasion. In the jungle or on the savannah, the aggressive and the violent win. In a civilised society, aggression is recognised as vulnerability; a fear of weakness and violence is forbidden, leaving assertion as the only intelligent option. Dignity demands effective self assertion, but no matter how well you assert yourself, it is hugely important to remember it doesn't mean you will win.

You will have disputes and disagreements, which may be struggles over possession but are more often over the territory of conflicting or incompatible truths. You could always hit someone foolish enough to disagree with you, but hitting him only proves you're stronger, not cleverer. Beating up Einstein doesn't disprove his theories. If you have the good sense not to be aggressive or violent, you can never dominate

another person unless he submits. All you can do is assert yourself, which is putting yourself in your place, not him in his.

An emotionally healthy person will want power with people, but not over them. You should respect the rights of others ahead of your wishes, but never put their wishes before your rights, which is buying love at huge expense. There will be times when you meet people who see their wishes as being more important than your rights. Then you will need to deal with them as necessary, which, of course, must ultimately and sadly include the option of aggression or even violence.

Fortunately people who really want to tread on you are fairly rare and much less common than people whose wishes merely compete with your wishes. In these encounters, if you are armed with effective arguing techniques, you increase the chances of getting what you want. However, when you do argue, it is prudent to remember you will rarely win and you may have to settle for equality and merely not losing. If you also bear in mind that you will always want to be liked, it will help guide your arguing strategy.

Because everybody wants to like everybody else if they can, there is a golden rule for happiness. *Treat every other person as if you believe he likes you.* Do this and you will never lose. Even if you have accurately identified rejection or put down, you will be much more comfortable if you are slow to respond. To lose a friend because you have treated him as an enemy is a disaster, while failing to see a genuine attack or ignoring it, frustrates someone who wants to put you down and gives you a measure of control, because you have taken the power from his attack.

That's all there is. Almost everything about living intelligently is blindingly obvious, but people don't always see it. They may vaguely understand that they see themselves in the mirror of other people, but don't know how to change their self image. They don't always appreciate that hoping for their feelings to change before they change their behaviour will never work, irrespective of how positively they try to think. They don't grasp that all the wisdom and self knowledge in the world won't make anyone feel better if it doesn't lead to an improvement in the way they behave in their relationships.

Relationships are everything. As I proposed originally, there is no emotional problem that is not a function of rejection or belittlement, real or imagined. If you understand that every contact you have with another person is driven and shaped by your needs for love and individuality and if you manage this balancing act with kindness and dignity, you will do very well.

I wish you good luck, but if you live intelligently, luck becomes less important.