

Wednesday, Feb. 4, 2009

Lists are life coach's route to happiness

by Brooke Kenny | Staff Writer

"Creating Your Best Life: The Ultimate Life List Guide" is not another stuffy, holier-than-thou self-help book scribbled by a clinician seeking publication credits. Instead, Bethesda life coach Caroline Adams Miller and clinical psychologist and Baylor University professor Dr. Michael B. Frisch have written a practical guide intended to serve as a continuing reference for real people seeking real change.

Packed with exercises to help the reader set priorities, it is infused with words of wisdom from everyone from Mother Teresa to Muhammad Ali.

"We want you to use this book often and with passion," Miller writes in the book's introduction. "Carry it with you, write in it, and use our sample life lists as guides for your own dreams. Our goal is for you to create a life of engagement, meaning, and pleasure by using the tools and research you find here so that your life list is a vibrant reality and not a distant dream."

Ever considered what you'd do if you had only 30 days left to live? Meditated by repeating the words "judge" and "not" with each inhale and exhale, respectively? Written down three ways you were blessed during the day before going to bed? Thought about how you would want to be remembered after you die? According to Miller and Frisch, it's time you did.

The book focuses on the importance of creating a list of top life goals. Through the practice of writing down these goals, Miller says, people begin to realize some are in direct conflict with others, and that they must ultimately choose which is more important.

The process of writing the list, Miller says, "takes something out of your head and turns it into a road map for your life."

And having the list makes you more accountable to yourself and to others.

"You have to have a plan of action that is challenging and specific," she observes.

Research shows that writing a list makes people feel more hopeful, and "When people are hopeful," Miller says, "they think very, very differently."

Miller earned a Master's in Applied Positive Psychology from the University of Pennsylvania. The capstone project of her degree was writing two chapters of this book.

She began searching through self-help books and discovered that most were woefully lacking in scientific research to support the advice they doled out. So she hit the university library in search of published studies about the science of happiness.

What she found was significant evidence noting the importance of goal setting in achieving happiness.

To people who may feel overwhelmed by lists, Miller says it is critical to remember that a life list is not a to-do list.

"There's a difference between goals and tasks," she points out, citing the examples of going to the drycleaners as to-do list material, and determining your legacy as a life-list item.

One critical trait shared by happy people, Miller says, is the feeling of self-efficacy. Creating change is difficult, but overcoming obstacles is the only way to build authentic self-esteem.

Persistence, or grit, as Miller calls it in the book, is the characteristic that ultimately determines who will be able to make a better life.

"Hard work doesn't have to be distasteful. Hard work can feel great," she says.

The key, however, is to work hard for what you want, not for what someone else wants for you.

"Goals should never be designed to punish us, and they should never be goals that we adopt because someone else feels they would be good for us," Miller writes.

Miller describes herself as a survivor. She is forthcoming about her own struggles and how she has used the methods she writes about to effect change in her life.

She has worked as a life coach for a decade, a career she opted to pursue after recovering from bulimia.

"I literally clawed my way back to life," she recalls. "My passion became 'how do you come back alive?'"

After training and becoming certified, Miller set about helping people who felt stuck in their situation. She acknowledges that therapy has its place, life coaching is based more on action than talk.

Sterling Publishing approached her after reading her comments in an August 2007 New York Times story about the movie "The Bucket List," about two terminally ill men who set out to fulfill their dreams before they die.

Sterling wanted her to finish the research-heavy book in only three months.

"I didn't know if I could do it, but I wanted to say I'd tried," Miller says.

To complete the book on schedule, she temporarily shut down her coaching practice, headed to Bethany Beach and wrote for 18 hours a day.

"It brought me an enormous amount of joy, and it still does," she says.

This is Miller's fifth published book, among them "Feeding the Soul: Daily Meditations for Recovering from Eating Disorders" (1991) and "Bright Words for Dark Days" (1994).

A sixth book is scheduled for release in the fall. "I'm Still Caroline" is the sequel to "My Name is Caroline," the memoir she wrote 20 years ago about living with bulimia.

The most important thing she hopes "Creating Your Best Life" accomplishes is asking the reader, "Are you living the life you want to live, and if not, what are you willing to do to get it?"

"Creating Your Best Life: The Ultimate Life List Guide" is available for purchase at major booksellers and online retailers. For more information about the book, visit www.creatingyourbestlifelist.com.

creatingyourbestlifelist.com or her blog www.psychologytoday.com.