

Advice for a Happy Life by Charles Murray

Consider marrying young. Be wary of grand passions. Watch 'Groundhog Day' (again).

By Charles Murray

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The transition from college to adult life is treacherous, and this is nowhere more visible than among new college graduates in their first real jobs. A few years ago, I took it upon myself to start writing tips for the young staff where I work about how to avoid doing things that would make their supervisors write them off. It began as a lark as I wrote tips with titles such as, "Excise the word 'like' from your spoken English."

But eventually, I found myself getting into the deeper waters of how to go about living a good life. At that point, I had to deal with a reality: When it comes to a life filled with deep and lasting satisfactions, most of the clichés are true. How could I make them sound fresh to a new generation? Here's how I tried.

1. Consider Marrying Young

The age of marriage for college graduates has been increasing for decades, and this cultural shift has been a good thing. Many 22-year-olds are saved from bad marriages because they go into relationships at that age assuming that marriage is still out of the question.

But should you assume that marriage is still out of the question when you're 25? Twenty-seven? I'm not suggesting that you decide ahead of time that you will get married in your 20s. You've got to wait until the right person comes along. I'm just pointing out that you shouldn't exclude the possibility. If you wait until your 30s, your marriage is likely to be a merger. If you get married in your 20s, it is likely to be a startup.

Merger marriages are what you tend to see on the weddings pages of the Sunday New York Times: highly educated couples in their 30s, both people well on their way to success. Lots of things can be said in favor of merger marriages. The bride and groom may be more mature, less likely to outgrow each other or to feel impelled, 10 years into the marriage, to make up for their lost youth.

But let me put in a word for startup marriages, in which the success of the partners isn't yet assured. The groom with his new architecture degree is still designing stairwells, and the bride is starting her third year of medical school. Their income doesn't leave them impoverished, but they have to watch every penny.

5 RULES FOR A HAPPY LIFE



Charles Murray offers some tips on how to live to the fullest, adapted from his new book, 'The Curmudgeon's Guide to Getting Ahead.' LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

What are the advantages of a startup marriage? For one thing, you will both have memories of your life together when it was all still up in the air. You'll have fun remembering the years when you went from being scared newcomers to the point at which you realized you were going to make it.

Even more important, you and your spouse will have made your way together. Whatever happens, you will have shared the experience. And each of you will know that you wouldn't have become the person you are without the other.

Many merger marriages are happy, but a certain kind of symbiosis, where two people become more than the sum of the individuals, is perhaps more common in startups.

2. Learn How to Recognize Your Soul Mate

Ready for some clichés about marriage? Here they come. Because they're true.

Marry someone with similar tastes and preferences. Which tastes and preferences? The ones that will affect life almost every day.

It is OK if you like the ballet and your spouse doesn't. Reasonable people can accommodate each other on such differences. But if you dislike each other's friends, or don't get each other's senses of humor or—especially—if you have different ethical impulses, break it off and find someone else.

Personal habits that you find objectionable are probably deal-breakers. Jacques Barzun identified the top three as punctuality, orderliness and thriftiness. It doesn't make any difference which point of the spectrum you're on, he observed: "Some couples are very happy living always in debt, always being late, and finding leftover pizza under a sofa cushion." You just have to be at the same point on the spectrum. Intractable differences will become, over time, a fingernail dragged across the blackboard of a marriage.

What you see is what you're going to get. If something about your prospective spouse bothers you but you think that you can change your beloved after you're married, you're wrong. Be prepared to live with whatever bothers you—or forget it. Your spouse will undoubtedly change during a long marriage but not in ways you can predict or control.

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It is absolutely crucial that you really, really like your spouse. You hear it all the time from people who are in great marriages: "I'm married to my best friend." They are being literal. A good working definition of "soul mate" is "your closest friend, to whom you are also sexually attracted."

Here are two things to worry about as you look for that person: Do you sometimes pick at each other's sore spots? You like the same things, have fun together, the sex is great, but one of you is controlling, or nags the other, or won't let a difference of opinion go or knowingly says things that will hurt you. Break it off.

Another cause for worry is the grand passion. You know a relationship is a grand passion if you find yourself behaving like an adolescent long after adolescence has passed—you are obsessed and a more than a little crazy. Not to worry. Everyone should experience at least one grand passion. Just don't act on it while the storm is raging.

A good marriage is the best thing that can ever happen to you. Above all else, realize that this cliché is true. The downside risks of marrying—and they are real—are nothing compared with what you will gain from a good one.

3. Eventually Stop Fretting About Fame and Fortune

One of my assumptions about you is that you are ambitious—meaning that you hope to become famous, rich or both, and intend to devote intense energy over the next few decades to pursuing those dreams. That is as it should be. I look with suspicion on any talented 20-something who doesn't feel that way. I wish you luck.

But suppose you arrive at age 40, and you enjoy your work, have found your soul mate, are raising a couple of terrific kids—and recognize that you will probably never become either rich or famous. At that point, it is important to supplement your youthful ambition with mature understanding.

Years ago, I was watching a television profile of David Geffen, the billionaire music and film producer. At some point, he said, "Show me someone who thinks that money buys happiness, and I'll show you someone who has never had a lot of money." The remark was accompanied by an ineffably sad smile on Mr. Geffen's face, which said that he had been there, done that and knew what he was talking about. The whole vignette struck me in a way that "money can't buy happiness" never had, and my visceral reaction was reinforced by one especially memorable shot during the profile, taken down the length of Mr. Geffen's private jet, along the rows of empty leather seats and sofas, to where he sat all alone in the rear.

The problem that you face in your 20s and 30s is that you are gnawed by anxiety that you won't be a big success. It is an inevitable side effect of ambition. My little story about David Geffen won't help—now. Pull it out again in 20 years.

Fame and wealth do accomplish something: They cure ambition anxiety. But that's all. It isn't much.

4. Take Religion Seriously

Don't bother to read this one if you're already satisfyingly engaged with a religious tradition.

Now that we're alone, here's where a lot of you stand when it comes to religion: It isn't for you. You don't mind if other people are devout, but you don't get it. Smart people don't believe that stuff anymore.

I can be sure that is what many of you think because your generation of high-IQ, college-educated young people, like mine 50 years ago, has been as thoroughly socialized to be secular as your counterparts in preceding generations were socialized to be devout. Some of you grew up with parents who weren't religious, and you've never given religion a thought. Others of you followed the religion of your parents as children but left religion behind as you were socialized by college.

By socialized, I don't mean that you studied theology under professors who persuaded you that Thomas Aquinas was wrong. You didn't study theology at all. None of the professors you admired were religious. When the topic of religion came up, they treated it dismissively or as a subject of humor. You went along with the zeitgeist.

I am describing my own religious life from the time I went to Harvard until my late 40s. At that point, my wife, prompted by the birth of our first child, had found a religious tradition in which she was comfortable, Quakerism, and had been attending Quaker meetings for several years. I began keeping her company and started reading on religion. I still describe myself as an agnostic, but my unbelief is getting shaky.

Taking religion seriously means work. If you're waiting for a road-to-Damascus experience, you're kidding yourself. Getting inside the wisdom of the great religions doesn't happen by sitting on beaches, watching sunsets and waiting for enlightenment. It can easily require as much intellectual effort as a law degree.

Even dabbling at the edges has demonstrated to me the depths of Judaism, Buddhism and Taoism. I assume that I would find similar depths in Islam and Hinduism as well. I certainly have developed a far greater appreciation for Christianity, the tradition with which I'm most familiar. The Sunday school stories I learned as a child bear no resemblance to Christianity taken seriously. You've got to grapple with the real thing.

Start by jarring yourself out of unreflective atheism or agnosticism. A good way to do that is to read about contemporary cosmology. The universe isn't only stranger than we knew; it is stranger and vastly more unlikely than we could have imagined, and we aren't even close to discovering its last mysteries. That reading won't lead you to religion, but it may stop you from being unreflective.

Find ways to put yourself around people who are profoundly religious. You will encounter individuals whose intelligence, judgment and critical faculties are as impressive as those of your smartest atheist friends—and who also possess a disquieting confidence in an underlying reality behind the many religious dogmas.

They have learned to reconcile faith and reason, yes, but beyond that, they persuasively convey ways of knowing that transcend intellectual understanding. They exhibit in their own personae a kind of wisdom that goes beyond just having intelligence and good judgment.

Start reading religious literature. You don't have to go back to Aquinas (though that wouldn't be a bad idea). The past hundred years have produced excellent and accessible work, much of it written by people who came to adulthood as uninvolved in religion as you are.

5. Watch 'Groundhog Day' Repeatedly

The movie "Groundhog Day" was made more than two decades ago, but it is still smart and funny. It is also a brilliant moral fable that deals with the most fundamental issues of virtue and happiness, done with such subtlety that you really need to watch it several times.



By the end of 'Groundhog Day,' Bill Murray's character has discovered the secrets of human happiness.

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An egocentric TV weatherman played by Bill Murray is sent to Punxsutawney, Pa., to cover Groundhog Day. He hates the assignment, disdains the town and its people, and can't wait to get back to Pittsburgh. But a snowstorm strikes, he's stuck in Punxsutawney, and when he wakes up the next morning, it is Groundhog Day again. And again and again and again.

The director and co-writer Harold Ramis, whose death last month was mourned by his many fans, estimated that the movie has to represent at least 30 or 40 years' worth of days. We see only a few dozen of them, ending when Bill Murray's character has discovered the secrets of human happiness.

Without the slightest bit of preaching, the movie shows the bumpy, unplanned evolution of his protagonist from a jerk to a fully realized human being—a person who has learned to experience deep, lasting and justified satisfaction with life even though he has only one day to work with.

You could learn the same truths by studying Aristotle's "Ethics" carefully, but watching "Groundhog Day" repeatedly is a lot more fun.

This essay is adapted from Mr. Murray's new book, "The Curmudgeon's Guide to Getting Ahead: Dos and Don'ts of Right Behavior, Tough Thinking, Clear Writing, and Living a Good Life," which will be published April 8 by Random House. He is the W.H. Brady Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute.