

THE
HAPPY
CLASS

Russ Morrison's Keys to Happiness

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I

Introduction

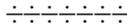
This is a story of events that took place six years ago and was written not as a guide to happiness, but just a story. Since this book was first made publicly available, it quickly created an intense following with other people using it to make their own lives happier.

If you are simply interested in a summary of the book's lessons, it is available for free as a 20-page booklet "The Happy Class Keys". You can get the booklet at www.the-happy-class.com. You can read it on the site or print it from the PDF that is there.

An additional copy of "The Happy Class Keys" is included at the end of this book to use as a reference to utilize this story to better your life.

2

I am older now. I know that some things in life start out great and turn out terrible and other things start out terrible and turn out great. 2008 was like that to me. It is when I learned these keys to happiness.



January 1, 2008 --- My year started out as pretty much of a disaster. On New Year's Day, I broke up with my long-time girlfriend, Rachel. Well... actually, she was more than just a girlfriend, Rachel was my fiancée. And... to be honest, she broke up with me rather than the other way around.

On that New Year's Eve, Rachel and I had been engaged for nine months with only another six months before our scheduled June wedding. We had met while I was in law school, moved in with each other after graduation, and soon starting planning our lives together permanently. Then, at our company's New Year's Eve party, I found out she was having an affair with my boss. Let's just say this discovery was not a good moment for me.

The whole experience was a surreal, zombie-like experience. It was more like something I would read in a novel than an event that was actually happening. The first 48 hours remain a blur. I know I was breathing, and I even ate, but I really do not remember much except going home, packing a suitcase, and ending up at a Marriot hotel six blocks away.

As it turned out, I not only lost my planned future wife that night, I also lost my job. I was working as a second-year lawyer in a large law firm in Chicago. I wasn't fired, but despite a typical lawyer's ability to ignore the facts of a case to advocate for a client, I could not ignore the facts of my fiancé and my boss. One week after finding out these facts, I resigned.

So very quickly, I found myself with no apartment (it was hers), no money (courtesy of no job), and no one to talk to ('my' friends were 'our friends' and I just couldn't figure out how to talk to them about all that had happened). The week after I resigned, I moved back home. I was twenty-seven years old and back living in my mother's house.

I moved back to Racine, Wisconsin, just seventy-five miles north from Chicago. But to me, the two places have little in common. Chicago has career opportunities, happening bars and all sorts of temptations (basically brighter lights and darker alleys). Racine has almost none of either.

Racine has a small town feel even with its 75,000 residents. With only three public high schools, everyone sort of knows everyone else (or at least someone in every family in town).

Still for me, Racine has always been special. It contains my childhood friends and memories of little league games, high school poker nights, and first kisses... all the potential healing ingredients that my newly hired therapist recommended.

Above all, Racine is where my mother still lives. My dad died when I was four. I was an only child and she was a single mom... that situation usually leads to a strong bond, and it did with us.

For the first two weeks home, my mother treated me like a convalescent patient recovering from major surgery. I just watched numbing television while she went to work – as a pediatric nurse at the local hospital. I picked up some books to read, but I could not concentrate enough to enjoy them. Only the mindlessness of television game shows or old reruns seemed to work to dull everything I was feeling.

When this process had stretched to the third and fourth week, the therapy started. My mother handed me a card with three names and phone numbers on it. She said I should pick one. I picked Lois Smith. The other two were men, and I just couldn't picture myself telling another man how low I felt about what had happened.

I knew nothing about therapy except what I had seen in the movies – and I was a bit apprehensive about the first appointment. I was even nervous that a friend might see me going into the therapy office. In the last month, I had seen a couple of old high school friends, but I had confided in no one about what had happened to me in Chicago. So 'explaining' a therapy appointment was not something I wanted to deal with at the moment.

The first session was sort of okay... just Lois asking me about my life. We talked about my growing up in Racine, my friends, my

girlfriends, the loss of my father, and even the end of my relationship with Rachel.

Lois was good enough to get me through the break-up as more of a factual history lesson than the ‘touchy/feely and angst’ stuff I was expecting. I thought she would ask me how I felt about all these things the next time. For the first appointment, she pretty much left me to tell her the ‘just what happened’.

For the next few days, I wondered how I would handle everything when she starting asking the tough questions – I was dreading it and frankly tried not to think about it. Of course, the more I tried not to think about what she would ask, the more I imagined the questions and my answers. I even dreamt about her asking, “Jay, what did you really feel?” I would answer as best I could, and she would ask again and again and – then I woke up.

That session with Lois never happened.

A much different course intervened. My next session with Lois was a discussion of an unusual offer I had received.

It was an offer to spend three months in California with my father’s uncle (my dad’s mother’s brother to be exact). A great-uncle I had met only once at my father’s funeral when I was just four. A great-uncle my mother rarely mentioned, except if someone asked who all of our relatives were. A great-uncle who called my mother to ask if I might be available to help him out with some legal work for a couple of months. A great-uncle who now gave me an ‘out’ from ‘out of the blue’ in more ways than one.

I was not home when he called, so my mother talked to him. He told her what he had in mind, but not really why he had called me and not someone else. I was to call him back with questions the next night. My second therapy session was scheduled that afternoon, so... that is how a strange offer became the only topic of conversation at my second therapy session.

“So what are you going to tell him tonight?” Lois asked it so simply and directly after I had told her about the offer that it jolted me a bit. I guess I had been working at not thinking about actually making a decision.

“Ah... I think I will turn it down. I mean... well, ah... I’m not sure I’m ready right now to leave here. And... ah... I guess I have therapy with you and ah... my mom and....”

“I see,” Lois paused for a couple of seconds and then continued. “There is a saying I heard one of my professors offer in a lecture a long time ago – ‘Don’t let therapy get in the way of real life.’ I have always tried to follow his suggestion. I am sure there is at least one good therapist for you to see in California...”

She paused again, then added, “Are you afraid the legal work will be too hard or perhaps too easy?”

“No, it’s not that. He told my mother the work was basically dealing with the law firms he’s hired to help with some contracts. I think I could do the work just fine. It is more that I have had so much change recently, I’m not sure I need any more.”

Lois responded, “Or maybe more change is just what you need. Something new and absorbing so you can get your feet on the ground again... just a thought.”

We talked more on how to make the decision, and then she spoke the words used in almost all therapy sessions... ‘Our time is up’ and I was out the door.

I don’t know what made me say “yes”. Maybe it was his tone of voice. Maybe it was his disarming words – ‘Just call me Russ’, which was almost the first thing he said. But mostly, there was something captivating in his words and the passion he had for ‘your adventure’ as he called his offer to me.

Somehow I said yes before I knew it... I agreed to drive out and be there in a week. After I hung up, I immediately wanted to change what I had said. I wanted to call him back and say I made a mistake. But I didn’t. When I told my mother that I had said ‘yes’, she just smiled and said that she agreed. ‘It seems like a good plan for you’. I even thought I saw a bit of a twinkle in her eye as she said it. It was then that she told me ‘Uncle Russ’ was a bit like my father and that was why she thought it was a good idea. And she left it at that.

The next two days I kept busy getting my car serviced for the long drive and picking out what to take with me. Packing was easy – I had a whole car to put my stuff in and I really didn’t own much more than clothes. ‘Uncle Russ’ said I would be living in the guest cottage at his home, so I didn’t need anything major.

I spent one night out with two friends from high school who were still in Racine and one night out with my mom. She wanted to cook me a home meal, and I wanted to treat her to her favorite, a T-bone steak, to thank her for letting me back in my room for a month. For such a petite woman, my mom can devour a pretty big steak and baked potato dinner. It was a nice evening.

3

The next morning, I was off.

In the passenger seat, I had a basket full of snacks and a cooler full of water and some artificial ice. With my iPod full of music hooked up to the car stereo, I was as ready as I would ever be for what was to come.

I was planning on leaving at seven and getting to somewhere in the middle of Nebraska before I stopped for the night. But Mom's pancakes and goodbyes slowed me down. On the other hand, Racine has no 'rush hour' traffic, so it really made little difference when I left. I waved good-bye to Mom in the driveway and 'bye' to Lake Michigan, as I drove away from the house. 'My adventure', as Uncle Russ had called it, had now begun.

I had settled on 'Uncle Russ' for what I would call my father's uncle and my new employer. I decided I was just too young to call him "Russ" as he suggested, and I really didn't know him well enough to use that name. I am not sure why I felt that way, but I just did.

I had driven west about 5 miles to the highway out of town when it first 'hit' me, and it 'hit' me like a ton of bricks. My life as I had envisioned it ever since I was 15 was over. I knew my life was not

over. But my carefully arranged ‘plan’ was over. Until the last 60 days, most everything in my life had gone ‘according to plan’.

My plan had been simple. Go to school, study, play basketball, meet girls, go to college, study harder, meet more girls, go to law school, studier even harder, meet my future wife, move to the big city, get great job, get engaged, get married.... or not. Then there came the reality – lose girl, quit job, move back home, be unemployed, be unmotivated, be a loser.

A loud honking sound that broke my thoughts. The stoplight I was waiting for had turned green. I quickly stepped on the accelerator. A bit too fast, and my tires squealed as I shot forward. I felt even more embarrassed.

That scenario was pretty much my whole trip. I tried to listen to my IPod, but constantly my thoughts came back to how much loss I had suffered since New Year’s Eve. I was pretty sure that for the rest of my life I would hate that celebration....

Of course, there was one obvious question I had not figured out an answer to yet.

Why did Uncle Russ make his offer to me? And why now?

I had wanted to ask Russ, but the right moment never came up in our call. I tried to ask my Mom, but she just dodged the question with a ‘How would I know?’ type answer. It was mysterious and a bit discomfoting to me. I figured I would find out when I got to California, and if I did not like the answer I could always just turn around drive

back to Racine. Despite my positive attitude to that question, it still came back to me every few hours.

As I drove, I realized I was in no mood to ‘see the country’. So, I got on Interstate 80 and drove straight west. Basically the drive was flat, then the drive was mountains, then flat, then mountains and then on the fourth day, I was there, crossing the Bay Bridge from Oakland into San Francisco.

As it turned out, Uncle Russ lived just south of San Francisco in the hills above what is known as Silicon Valley. Uncle Russ later told me that he originally bought his farm on the foggy side of the mountain ridge as a weekend retreat when he was in his early thirties. That was when land in the San Francisco area was still affordable. After his kids went to college, he moved to his ‘Farm’ full time.

I pulled up to the Farm’s gate a little before six in the evening. The sun was close to setting, but I could still see everything really well. Just before getting to the driveway into the Farm, in the far distance, I saw the Pacific Ocean between the trees with the sun gleaming on the water.

The gate was solid wood, simple but sturdy. It was the kind of gate that swings open with a motor when someone ‘buzzes you in’. There was a fairly high wooden fence running along the road on both sides of the gate. With bushes and trees on both sides of the fence, it was ascetically pleasing, yet very private at the same time.

The gate itself was indented off the road, so I turned off and stopped my car in front of it. I looked around for how to get in. I then

noticed one of those typical code panel boxes on a pole a few feet to my left. Rather than back up and try to pull closer, I decided to just open the car door, get out, and walk over. I had been driving for days and stretching even briefly felt good.

Along with the keypad, there was a big green button with a note above it saying 'Press to talk'. So I did. I heard quick telephone dialing tones and then some ringing. After about 5 rings, a woman answered the phone.

“Hello?”

I leaned over to the box. “Hi, this is Jay Knight. Ah... I'm here at the gate.” One second after I said that, I thought. *Duh, of course she knows I am at the gate, how else could I have rung the buzzer?*

Thankfully, she ignored my stupidity.

“I'll open the gate. Just take the paved road all the way up to the front of the house, and someone will meet you there.”

The gate was already starting to open, so I quickly said, “Okay. Thanks.” I got back in my car and hurried to get my seatbelt fastened so the gate would not close back. I had no idea how long it would stay open.

As it turned out, the gate swung very wide, and I had plenty of time to drive through. On the other side, the paved road went straight, and about 50 feet ahead, two dirt/hard packed gravel roads headed off in opposite directions, creating an intersection. I could see a couple of muddy tire tracks that other vehicles had made coming off the dirt roads and turning onto the paved one.

I was starting to get a bit nervous. I really did not know what to expect of the next couple of months, but now I was certainly about to find out. Ready or not.

Once past the intersection, two things occurred, the road curved to the right and headed down a small hill. It headed into a short stretch of giant redwood trees, towering to me what looked like 100 feet or more. Past that spot, the road continued further a bit and the landscape opened up with some big oak trees and then the house.

I do not know what I was expecting, but it wasn't this view. The driveway went toward the right side of the house and then in front of the house, it made a complete circle.

The house was long, single story in the front and quite modern. From the front door in the middle of the house, the right side had a wing that headed away at an angle and continued about 80 to 100 feet. The land dropped away, and at some point the house became two stories with an additional story appearing underneath. To the left of the front door, the house continued even farther than on the right, probably another 120 to 150 feet when again the land dropped away and at the far end of the left wing another level appeared under the first.

After looking left and right, I got the impression that probably the whole hill dropped away behind the house, and thus on the backside, the whole house was probably two stories. The modern style was a bit reminiscent of the Frank Lloyd Wright houses I had seen growing up in Wisconsin. It had the flair and dramatic look of his flowing indoor-outdoor wood beams.

The entry was large, and the door looked at least 12 feet tall. The door was open, and a woman was standing in front of it. I pulled to a stop, and she walked behind the car to greet me. I opened my door and pulled myself out of the car.

She put out her hand, as I stood up. I shook it as she said. “Hi Jay. I’m Diana, Russ’s assistant. He apologizes for not greeting you after your long drive. A long call just came in and he asked if I could show you around and get you settled.”

“That would be great. Thanks. Should I get a bag?”

“No, you are staying in one of cottages on the other side of the house. You can just drive your car up to it. It will be much easier.”

“Okay. Great.” I followed her toward the front door. She was tall, at least 5’ 10”. As I am 6 feet tall, she pretty much looked at me eye to eye. She was thin, in a sporty sort of way, with long brown hair, wearing jeans and a white, men’s style button-up shirt. I guessed she was about my age, twenty–six or twenty-seven.

As we walked in, I was blown away. I had been right. The house was two stories all along the back with an additional level below the one we had entered. We walked about 20 feet into the house to a railing. Beyond the railing, the floor below appeared, and the room grew to 20 foot ceilings with floor-to-ceiling windows. The view out the windows was the one I had seen from the road, only better. The hills rolled down, and while the ocean was still 6 to 7 miles away, you had an unobstructed view of nearly 20 miles of coastline.

The room below expanded in both directions with a wall of windows 50 to 60 feet long. We stood on a balcony, and the room seemed to continue under us, which I later found out was true. To the right was a pool table, a fireplace with a very large flat screen TV above it and chairs and sofas in a half circle around it. To the left, was a large simple, wooden dining table and then further left a very large kitchen with an eating counter and hoods and stuff. The whole area was open to 20 feet high and decorated in a simple and inviting manner.

I hadn't moved or said a word yet. Then I heard Diana's voice.

"Yeah... Pretty special the first time you see this view. I have learned to let most new visitors take a second before moving on."

"Thanks," I said. "This may be the most spectacular room I have ever been in."

"Me too. One of the perks of working here. Although you need to know that fog causes a sunset view like this one today to be less than common." She motioned me toward the hallway to the right. We walked a few steps.

"Down this hallway are a couple of offices. There's mine, one I set up for you. and then Russ's. Past his office is Russ's bedroom which, like this room, is two stories, but in a different way."

We did not go that way. Instead, Diana spun us around, and we headed the other way past the big room and toward the much bigger wing. As we passed the big room, Diana, turned and said. "By the way, everyone calls this room 'the kitchen'. So if someone says 'they will meet you in the kitchen', they mean somewhere down there."

We continued down the hallway with Diana pointing out what must have been 6 or 7 bedrooms which she described as the family guest rooms. They were most often used by Russ's children or grandchildren.

At this point, I had been with Diana for about 15 minutes or so and I was trying to figure out more about her. But I had no clue. She was obviously totally at ease in the house, and at the same time, it was obvious she was not part of the family. She was professional and yet warm and friendly.

We reached the end of the hall and Diana swung open the double doors. We stepped onto a small balcony that overlooked a very large room below.

"The game room." She waved her arm as a way of showing grandeur. Although with the big smile on her face, I knew it was mock grandeur. "It really is quite the room." She continued, as we stood there peering down.

I tried hard to gather it all in. It was spread out sort of everywhere. There was a ping pong table, foosball, and air hockey, three of my teenage favorites. Then as I looked more, there was also a large basketball area and along the far wall two full-sized bowling lanes fully equipped just like a real bowling alley. This array was in addition to tables for games, drawing, a crafts area, and plenty of just run-around room for little kid stuff. A couple of arcade-sized video games gave the whole room the feel of a kid's fantasyland.

“Come on. Let’s go down this way. We can head back to the kitchen and check in with Anna.”

Anna...? I wondered who Anna was?

As we came down to the floor level, I realized how cool this room really was. I followed Diana through a path to a wide hallway leading out of the room.

While you were down among all the games and other stuff, the room seemed to want you to turn one on and play.

“I’ll bet Russ’s kids loved this room,” I said.

Diana stopped and said, “As I understand it, this room was added after Katlin went off to college, so they never really lived with it. I have been told that the real kid in the family is Russ. As far as I can tell that is very true.”

The hallway we headed down was on the outside, so on one side there were large windows still letting in light from the now almost set sun. We stopped. Diana opened a door to another room and quickly turned on the lights.

“This is the theatre. We live so far from a movie theatre that this is a great place to see movies.”

I looked in. There were 5 rows of extra-large plush movie seats. The floor sloped down quite a bit with a nice large screen at the other end. On one side, I saw a small soda fountain and a movie theater style popcorn popper.

“Very cool,” I said. I had about run out of words after the game room. “Must be hard to figure out what to do first here.”

“I think you will find that most of this stuff is used quite a bit. Russ has eight grandchildren and most nights here are too cold and foggy to be outside. I think he built all this, so they would want to visit him often. We are pretty remote, but this and the farm work well... Let’s head to the kitchen. But just so you know, the laundry and storage and supply rooms are on the other side of the kitchen directly underneath the offices we first saw.”

“Great. I’m sure I will be able to find them when I need to.”

We walked into the kitchen section of ‘the kitchen’ and there was a woman whom I presumed was Anna stirring a couple of pots on the stove. “Spaghetti at seven.” The woman said without turning around.

“Anna, it’s me. Diana. I really wanted to introduce you to Jay.”

Anna turned around quickly looking a bit embarrassed. “Oh. Sorry. I thought you were one of kids. Nine times out of ten all they want is ‘what and when’...” She wiped her right hand on a towel and reached out to me.

“Jay was it? I’m Anna. Nice to meet you.”

I shook her hand. “Nice to meet you Anna. Smells wonderful.” I wasn’t just making that up either. I was either starving, or this was going to be a great spaghetti dinner... or both.

“Why thank you, I hope you will be staying.”

Diana answered before I could. “Yes Jay will be here for dinner. Actually, he will be helping Russ over the next couple of months. He is staying in Cottage Six.”

Anna looked back at me. “Welcome to Casa Russ.” Then she turned to stir the spaghetti sauce some more.

Diana motioned for me to follow her. “I’m taking Jay out to his cottage now. He needs time to unpack.”

We headed out of the cooking area of the kitchen, past the big dining table, and to a set of stairs under the balcony from where I had first viewed this giant space. As we climbed the stairs, Diana said, “By the way, Russ does not care if you are late for dinner, but Anna does. So...”

And then we both said the words at the same time, “Best not be late.” Diana stopped and smiled at me and gave me a quick ‘thumbs up’.

Once out the front door and next to my car, Diana pointed to a small branch off the main driveway that went past the house on the left-hand side.

“Take this little path. Just past the house, the cottages will start on the left. You are in number 6. Can’t miss it. There is a big lighted 6 on the door. Just park your car next to the cottage. The door is unlocked, and the keys are inside.”

She paused, so I reassured her. “I think I can do that. Sounds easy.”

“It is... You have almost an hour before dinner which should be plenty of time to unpack while it is still light out. When you are ready, there is a small lighted footpath that will take you from the cottages right to the kitchen. I’ll see you there.”

“Thanks.” And with that I got in my car and started it.

The cottages began right after the road curved past the main house, and very quickly I was at number six. I pulled up in a little parking space next to it and got out to look at what would be new home for the next three months. Since the road had been heading downhill quite a bit, the hill behind the cottages was rising. I saw there were lots of redwood trees on the hill just behind the cottage.

All the cottages looked pretty much alike even if they were different shapes. They were built mainly of big stones with wood-framed windows. All of them had little porches across the front and a fairly steep roof made of what looked like slate.

I grabbed my small cooler from the passenger seat, carried it to the front door and let myself in. It was bit darker than I was expecting, but then the sunlight was really starting to fade. I flipped the lights on to find a nice small living area with an open counter to the kitchen behind. I set my cooler on the counter and walked over to the bedroom.

I turned the light on and found a simple, but big, room with a large bed and what looked like a big closet. Last was the bathroom. Another nice surprise, the bathroom was big with a spa tub and a walk-in shower. I was starting to think that my ‘adventure’ at my Uncle Russ’s may have been a really wise decision.

When I had first heard that I was ‘banished’ to the cottages from the main house, I was a bit disappointed. I now saw it was a bonus given to me. The privacy offered here and the niceness of the space made it a much better place for me than the main house.

I went back to the car. and in three more trips, I had all my bags and boxes in the living room. In no time, I had it all put away. I noticed a few supplies in the kitchen including snacks like microwave popcorn, chips and soda. I guessed these cottages were often used by visitors to the Farm... I found out later that it was a good guess.

I took a quick shower, put on a clean shirt and my jeans, and got ready to head back up to the main house. I found myself humming an old tune as I finished up.

I'm humming. I must be feeling better about coming out here. I remember thinking at the time.

The nervousness from my first arrival had given way to more of an excitement in the moment. I had only met Diana and Anna, and yet I already liked being here. *Interesting...*

Then that 'mystery' question returned. It was the one that had kept popping into my brain on the drive out. *'Why me? Why now?'*
Maybe I will find out at dinner... maybe not...

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