

# SECRETS OF ADULTHOOD



**SIMPLE  
TRUTHS**  
FOR OUR  
**COMPLEX  
LIVES**

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF  
*THE HAPPINESS PROJECT*

**GRETCHEN RUBIN**

**ALSO BY GRETCHEN RUBIN**

*Life in Five Senses*

*Outer Order, Inner Calm*

*The Four Tendencies*

*Better Than Before*

*Happier at Home*

*The Happiness Project*

*Forty Ways to Look at JFK*

*Forty Ways to Look at Winston Churchill*

*Power Money Fame Sex: A User's Guide*

*Profane Waste (with Dana Hoey)*



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Simple Truths for  
Our Complex Lives

**GRETCHEN RUBIN**



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*To Eliza and Eleanor...everyday life in Utopia*



**BIG IDEAS IN A  
FEW WORDS**



**W**ith time and experience, life teaches us lessons—usually the hard way. As my two daughters were growing up, I wanted to share the “Secrets of Adulthood” I’d learned, to save them from repeating the mistakes I had made. Some of these insights I’d gained through my own experiences, others I’d gleaned from reflecting on the experiences of others.

But even more than sharing my knowledge with my daughters, I wanted to remind myself of what I’d learned. All too often, I found myself rediscovering the same lessons, over and over. How many times have I thought, “Gretchen, *remember*, working is one of the most dangerous forms of procrastination.”

I realized that I needed a collection of these secrets just as much as my daughters did, and I began to keep a list. What Secrets of Adulthood did I use to help me tackle a difficult decision? Or to fight temptation, or calm down, or know myself better? Or to change myself, when I wanted to change?

As this list began to grow, I challenged myself to shape these secrets into the form of the aphorism.

For my whole life, I’ve loved the literary form of the aphorism. An *aphorism* is a concise statement that contains an expansive truth. Unlike the folk wisdom of proverbs—“A stumble may prevent a fall” or “You can’t push a rope”—aphorisms can be attributed to a particular person.

Brief and sharp, aphorisms distill big ideas into few words; by saying little, they manage to suggest more. The clarity of their language promotes the clarity of our thinking.

As a child, I collected aphorisms in my “blank books”—books with blank pages that I filled with quotations illustrated by magazine cuttings. Once I became a writer exploring human nature, my admiration for the form grew, because human nature is the chief subject of the greatest aphorists. In my own work, I explore how we can make our lives happier, healthier, more productive, and more creative, and all the great aphorists tackle those questions. (My first book was *Power Money Fame Sex*, and the aphorists certainly cover those subjects!)

Over and over, I’ve found that the right aphorism, invoked at the right time, can help me manage the complexities of life. For instance, when I was trying to decide whether my family should get a dog, the pros and cons lists seemed to be equally balanced, and I couldn’t make up my mind. Finally I remembered, “Choose the bigger life”—and the decision became easy. We got a dog.

Because of my respect for aphorisms, I’m always searching for more. My bookshelves are crowded with masterpieces of philosophy and literature that are largely collections of aphorisms, such as Confucius’s *Analects*, Lao-tzu’s *Tao-te Ching*, Marcus Aurelius’s *Meditations*, Blaise Pascal’s *Pensées*, and Georg Christoph Lichtenberg’s *The Waste Books*. Some of my favorite writers who excel in aphorisms include Michel de Montaigne, Joseph Joubert, James Baldwin, Heraclitus, Jules Renard, Nicolas Chamfort, William Edward Hartpole Lecky, Oscar Wilde, Warren Buffett, G. K. Chesterton, William Hazlitt, Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and George Orwell. Over the years, I’ve collected hundreds of my favorite aphorisms.

Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach is one of the aphorists I admire most: “You can sink so fast that you think you’re flying.” Another is François de La Rochefoucauld: “It is much easier to stifle a first desire than to gratify all those that follow it.” Samuel Johnson’s aphoristic style is one reason that I read and re-read his essays: “All severity that does not tend to increase good, or prevent evil, is idle.” People might not expect fiction to be a particularly rich source of aphorisms, but many of my favorites come from novels.

Consider Iris Murdoch's "Curiosity is not the same thing as a thirst for knowledge." Andy Warhol's art doesn't interest me much, but I collect his surprising, gnomic observations: "Nobody really looks at anything; it's too hard." My favorite contemporary aphorist is Sarah Manguso: "Failure is good preparation for success, which comes as a pleasant surprise, but success is poor preparation for failure." And, of course, there's Winston Churchill: "To be really happy and really safe, one ought to have at least two or three hobbies, and they must all be real."

These days, the aphorism is a mostly neglected art—though sometimes it pops up in its lesser forms, like the self-improvement cliché on social media or the office poster's reminder about the value of teamwork. This ancient discipline, however, still has tremendous power to communicate.

Because aphorisms are short and well-expressed, they're easy to remember and have more vigor in the mind.

Because we must decide whether we agree or disagree, aphorisms provoke our reflection. We can also compare how different aphorists express a similar idea, as they often do, or contemplate how they contradict each other. For instance, Publilius Syrus observed, "No man is happy who does not think himself so," while Vauvenargues wrote, "There are men who are happy without knowing it."

The discipline of the aphorism forces precision of thinking. In my own writing, I've found that I can express a big idea in a few words only if I truly understand what I'm trying to say. And, as demonstrated by the haiku, the sonnet, and the thirty-minute sitcom, imagination is often better served by constraint than by freedom.

For the reader, then, fewer words supply greater wisdom; for the aphorist, brevity sparks creativity. So, the more I study happiness and human nature, and the longer I live, the more I challenge myself to distill what I learn into brief, memorable aphorisms: "Accept yourself, and expect more from yourself," "No tool fits every hand," "We care for many people we don't particularly care for."

After years of adding, subtracting, and polishing, I've written my own giant trove, from which this collection has been selected. For *Secrets of Adulthood*, I've weeded out any aphorism that is a mere observation, such as "The tulip is an empty flower" or "The Periodic Table of the Elements is an ingredient list of the universe." (Well, I have to admit, I couldn't resist including a *few* of these observations.) I've also omitted my large set of bleak aphorisms, which make for discouraging reading. Here, I've included those secrets that I hope will help others navigate adulthood—both people who are just entering adulthood and also people who, like me, are often surprised to realize, "Yikes, I'm a grown-up. What now?" Sometimes, a single sentence can provide all the insight we need.

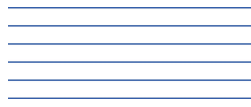
A few notes: While the mic-drop quality is a big part of the aphorism's appeal, some do benefit from more discussion. So here, alongside the formal aphorisms, I've sometimes added a few brief illustrative stories.

Also, as I was writing my *Secrets of Adulthood*, I kept adding to a different list—practical hacks that, I've discovered, make day-to-day life easier. Does "If you can't find something, clean up" express a deep truth about human nature? Maybe not. But it's still a useful thing to remember, so in the final section, "Simple Secrets of Adulthood," I've included a collection of those minor secrets.

What a joy it has been to work on my *Secrets of Adulthood*, to distill my observations and experiences into general truths! After all, work is the play of adulthood.



**CULTIVATING  
OURSELVES**



**B**ecause I write about human nature, people sometimes say to me, “Give me the short answer. What’s the best, the most scientifically proven way to become happier?” (Or healthier, or more productive, or more creative.)

“Well, there’s no one best way,” I respond. “We each have to figure it out for ourselves.”

“Sure, sure,” they agree. “Just tell me the *best* way.”

For a long time, this question stumped me, but now when people ask, “What’s the best way to create a happy life?” I respond, “What’s the best way to cook an egg?” Puzzled, they respond, “Well, it depends on how you like your eggs.” I answer, “Exactly! We each have the answer that’s right for *us*.”

Because we’re all different, there can’t be a one-size-fits-all answer to tell us how to achieve our aims. Other people can suggest possibilities, but they can’t figure it out for us—and we can’t figure it out for them. Self-knowledge is key, because we can build a happy life only on the foundation of our own values, interests, strengths, and temperament.

And yet it’s hard to know ourselves. It’s easy to assume, “Of course I know myself, I just hang out with myself all day long.” In fact, distracted by the way we *wish* we were, or by what we *think* we ought to be, or by what others *assume* we are, we lose sight of what’s actually true. But when we know ourselves, we can shape our lives to reflect our own nature and values.

Here are some Secrets of Adulthood that I learned the hard way.







**THE PROJECT  
OF HAPPINESS**



Happiness doesn't always make us feel happy.

Living up to our values, challenging ourselves, facing our mistakes, depriving ourselves...these aims make our lives happier, but they don't always make us feel happy in the moment.



One of the best ways to make *yourself* happy is to make *others* happy.



One of the best ways to make *others* happy is to be happy *yourself*.



There is no right way to create a happier life, just as there is no best way to cook an egg.



Be selfish, if only for selfless reasons; be selfless, if only for selfish reasons.



Nothing takes us out of ourselves more than being of use.



It's hard to be happy if we're not happy at home; it's hard to be happy if we're not happy at work.



Sometimes we can minister to the body through the spirit; sometimes we can minister to the spirit through the body.