

Reviews and reflections

David A. Bennhaum, MD, and Jack Coulehan, MD, Book Review Editors



Exploring Happiness: From Aristotle to Brain Science

Sissela Bok
Yale University Press, New Haven, CT,
2010

Reviewed by Stephen G. Post, PhD

In 1978 while I was at the University of Chicago, Martin E. Marty placed a hardback copy of Sissela Bok's then new book, *Lying*, in my hand and said, "Read it!" Fortunately, his intention was non-remedial. In reading *Lying*, I discovered what it means to write masterful philosophical history for a wide audience while articulating a clear normative position that is balanced, not overbearing, and of value for the wider culture. Many remarkable books from Sissela Bok have followed, all of them



making real conceptual progress on carefully selected topics that beg to be addressed across many sectors of society. But this newest book, *Exploring Happiness*, is Bok's best ever. Why?

Methodologically, Bok has now positioned herself at the new interface between moral thought and the sciences, both social and biological. Here she glides with astonishing clarity through the works of philosophical, and even some theological, luminaries, picking and choosing her key figures with innovative diligence. But she is equally adept in her familiarity with key scientific findings on happiness as she engages with national and international happiness surveys, the genetics of "set point" happiness, evolutionary psychology, economic investigations of money in relation to happiness, game theory, neuroscience, pro-social behavior, social capital theory, positive psychology, and so forth. Those of us who believe that meaningful progress can best be made on big topics such as happiness only at such a dialogical interface with the sciences are of course delighted to see an eminent philosopher like Bok turning in this direction.

The astonishing thing about *Exploring Happiness* is that the clear and probing exegesis of the great philosophers is matched in quality by the penetrating analysis of major scientific investigations. Bok weaves these two strands together with precision and

an ability to make the connections between domains of knowledge that would otherwise remain apart in separate academic silos, making real progress unlikely. She provides what is, in my view, the best example of integrative scholarship on happiness to date. This is therefore a book that any neo-Aristotelian, utilitarian, or Kantian philosopher will have to grapple with, and that any scientist interested in a deeper conceptual understanding of the "happiness" that they are investigating will have to read before focusing on methodological technocracies. Both the philosophy and the science are presented in a way that most lay readers will easily handle, and in her skillful, almost pastoral, style, Bok is able to make all this relevant to the reader on an existential level. It is possible to read this book and be transformed to some degree.

Bok is always an innovative thinker by virtue of her ability to pick important and timely topics, often ones that have not been handled before with much clarity. What do we mean by happiness? How much of it can be had in this life? How can it be measured? Is our happiness something for which we are responsible as individuals at some level, despite genetically shaped predispositions and personality types? How can we nurture it? Can happiness ever be lasting, or is it always fleeting and unstable? Do we always fear its loss? Is there any one view of happiness that

trumps others, or should we be very cautious about such assertions? How does my “pursuit” of happiness pertain morally to your pursuit? Whose happiness are we ultimately responsible for, or can we be responsible for?

Exploring Happiness is great expository writing. Bok warns that the topic is extremely complex, and that we should not seek premature closure. She is clear in her conclusion that the pursuit of happiness needs to be morally circumscribed. After all, there are those who, like the al-Qaeda pilots who flew into the World Trade Towers, do great damage while pursuing their own visions of a promised eternal bliss. In other words, at some level, we do need to relate our individual pursuits of happiness to the notion of a shared or a common humanity rather than to some small fragment thereof, and we must be careful of arrogance.

In humility, Bok does not wish to prescribe any one vision of happiness, or to set out a method for achieving it. As she writes,

I have argued for the greatest possible freedom and leeway in the pursuit of happiness, subject to moral limits. There is no one view of happiness that should exclude all others, much less be imposed on the recalcitrant. But the pursuit cannot merely involve “choosing happiness” as many advice manuals propose. Pursuits of happiness that abide by fundamental moral values differ crucially from those that call for deceit, violence, betrayal.¹⁷⁶

One wonders, though, if this retreat from much objectivity in the pursuit of happiness really suffices. It is of course important that our pursuits of happiness be limited by some foundational and minimalist moral restraints. But are we not rightly tempted to encourage a view of happiness comprised by some set of goods pursued over the course of a lifetime, such as contributing to the lives of others, moral integrity, and nobility

of purpose? The neo-Aristotelians and eudaemonists will no doubt engage in some critique of *Exploring Happiness* because it clearly constitutes the finest liberal (minimally prescriptive) analysis of happiness to date, and as such deserves very high praise indeed. It is normative not in asserting what happiness is, but in articulating procedural and minimalist contractarian moral restraints on its pursuit. Perhaps this is enough, for as they say, “hard lessons are learned hard,” and perhaps we can only teach ourselves how to pursue happiness well in all our idiosyncratic error. This book is highly recommended as the best liberal contractarian statement to date. But the neo-Aristotelians who are coming into dominance in many American universities will wish for a treatment of happiness that is in fact a little more prescriptive than what Bok offers. Perhaps they have met their match.

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Match Day: One Day and One Dramatic Year in the Lives of Three New Doctors

Brian Eule
St. Martin's Griffin, New York, 2010, 272 pages

Reviewed by R. MacDonell-Yilmaz, MPH

When I approached Brian Eule's *Match Day*, I imagined it might make an apt birthday gift for a good friend, a fellow third-year medical student. Given its focus on “a ritual that



had grown more intense and anticipated than graduation itself,” as experienced by three young women—Eule's girlfriend Stephanie, and friends Rakhi and Michele—I anticipated that it might offer a glimpse into our own fast-approaching futures.

The prologue depicts the tension of Match Day morning, leading up to the moment when envelopes across the country will be opened. It then leaves us hanging, stepping back to orient readers to the Match, complete with its origins and modifications. This history is truly enlightening; I had no idea that the Match computer resides in Washington, DC, and runs its annual algorithm to completion in less than ten minutes.

Subsequent chapters examine the application process and the nuances of applying to specific residencies, especially those offering more flexible lifestyles without a sacrifice in pay: the “R.O.A.D. (radiology, ophthalmology, anesthesiology, dermatology) to Happiness.” It also provides an honest look at what influences applicants' decisions about where to apply and how to rank programs. One particularly compelling scene depicts Rakhi's struggle to finalize her rank list hours before the deadline. She must weigh the program she has dreamed of for years against one at another university where her husband—who moved across the country, worked unfulfilling jobs, and weathered rejections from

graduate schools while she studied medicine—has just gained admission. This glimpse of a couple sorting through complex if-this-then-that scenarios, attempting to reconcile disparate personal goals with an entwined future, poignantly illustrates how this profession's training taxes many lives beyond that of the trainee.

We arrive back at Match Day to learn the contents of the women's envelopes and then set out with the newly-minted physicians as they navigate the challenges of internship. Along the way, Eule explains the controversies surrounding legal work-hour restrictions.

He also explores the difficulties of "finding time for a life," especially for Stephanie, a surgical intern. In a rare moment of expressing his own feelings, Eule confesses how the strain of interns' lives extends to their loved ones:

The problem with Stephanie's schedule, in addition to the long hours, was the lack of predictability. . . . I could never tell what time she would get home from the hospital. And she never knew the four individual days she would get off in a month until that month's rotation began. . . .

It was impossible to make plans to see friends or family. . . . My resentment grew.^{pp135-36}

Happily, we learn, she does find at least a smidgeon of free time—enough for their wedding at year's end.

Throughout the book, Eule's tone varies between journalistic and narrative. Using the former, he explains the Match and its permutations, including the Couple's Match and the transitional year. His account of the infamous Zion case and the resulting Bell Commission are excellent as well; his words flow smoothly and authoritatively, easily capturing and maintaining the reader's attention.

Much of the actual storytelling, however, is not handled as deftly. His narration of the women's experiences lacks the spark of his journalism. It feels as

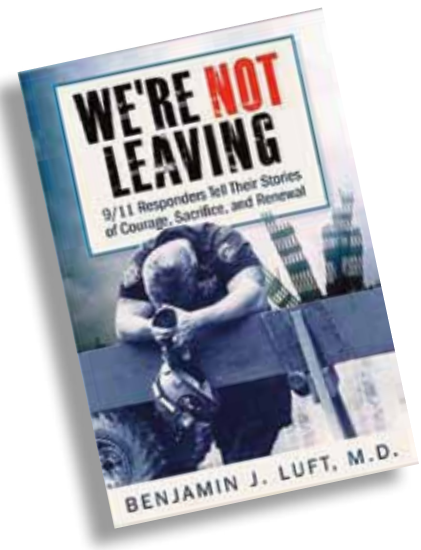
if Eule is trying to convince us that his subjects are likeable and their stories moving, but the details are often forced and generic rather than unique and defining. He notes, for example, that Michele's "keen awareness of fashion often led her to opt for a trendy hat, knit scarf, or big sunglasses"^{p32} and that an end-of-year party is "sure to include drinking and celebrations."^{p234}

This tendency is especially frustrating in his depictions of the women's medical experiences. For a practitioner, the incidents he highlights and his descriptions of them are neither earth-shattering nor revelatory—a medical student nervous about practicing blood draws with classmates, a surgeon snapping at an intern, a cancer patient refusing further treatment. I wanted to pull him aside and whisper, *You think this is bad? You don't know the half of it.*

Admittedly, my irritation at his wordiness might simply stem from my own impatience, a trait Stephanie also possesses: "After hours of moving fast, of talking quickly and efficiently, she sometimes expected the same at home. If I answered a question in a roundabout way, I could see aggravation in her eyes."^{p210} Slower sections of writing inspired similar aggravation as I waded along, eager to reach the next example of his journalistic prowess.

Overall, *Match Day* offers a fascinating history and fresh perspective on medical training from an author who, though neither practitioner nor patient, finds his life deeply affected by the process. Just as *House of God* serves as an unofficial handbook for medical students and residents, *Match Day* is an excellent guide for family and friends. Ultimately, I bought my friend a bouquet of flowers and passed the book along to my mother.

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We're NOT Leaving: 9/11 Responders Tell Their Stories of Courage, Sacrifice, and Renewal

Benjamin J. Luft, MD
Greenport Press, New York, 2011

Reviewed by Richard Bronson, MD
(AQA, New York University, 1965)

Williamsburg Bridge, sun hits the train
As it rises over the city again.
Nobody speaks, everyone stares
Remembering all that used to be there.

"Brooklyn Train," Lucy Kaplansky

My waiting room had a television attached to the wall. In the middle of morning hours, a nurse cried, "Come, look at this." Against a blue, cloudless sky, I saw the tail of an airplane sticking out of the upper stories of one of the Twin Towers, surrounded by flames! Then the second jet, the realization that this was not an accident, the unexpected collapse of both towers, the horror and fear as the day went on and the magnitude of the attack became clear. It was a time of candlelight vigils, firemen and policemen marching to bagpipes at funerals, and photos of missing husbands, wives, sons, and daughters stapled to telegraph poles. Twin searchlights rose

into the night for months, a reminder of what had been there. But the invasion of Baghdad, two lengthy wars, the economic crisis, and a major recession intervened. We largely lost track of the responders who were imprinted with the trauma of those days and have continued to lead their lives, altered by that experience. *We're NOT Leaving* restores our emotional connection with that event, and the people who played a heroic role in the initial response to the attack and the subsequent clean up and reclamation. This is their oral history.

Created by Dr. Benjamin Luft, the Edward D. Pellegrino Professor of Medicine at Stony Brook University Medical Center and Director of the Long Island Medical Monitoring and Treatment Program, *We're NOT Leaving* contains a selection of first-person narratives from more than 125 videotaped interviews. Many of these men and women are still recovering from the disaster. As Dr. Luft notes, "They suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, nightmares, sleep apnea, anxiety, asthma, persistent cough, and in many cases, anger and disillusionment about how they were treated by a society that dragged its feet in responding to their needs when they became ill as a result of responding to the disaster."¹⁴ He has recognized the necessity of remembering.

The book consists of thirty-two chapters (each an individual's personal narrative), divided into five sections, and an epilogue. These sections, titled "Caught in the Collapse," "Looking for Survivors," "Recover, Recovery, Recovery," "The Responders Need Help," and "Renewal," take us from the initial moments of the attack, before and following the collapse of the Towers, the experiences of early responders, the realization that there were few survivors, the search for bodies or portions of bodies, the work of dismantling the wreckage, and, finally, efforts to support those who worked on "The Pile" and minister to their needs.

Dr. Luft best describes these testimonies. "The stories are powerful . . . Their

language is simple, frank, and descriptive . . . Although they speak of sorrow and pain, to me they are a source of celebration of the human spirit's ability to transcend unimaginable hardships, and still maintain its humanity."⁸ There is no better way of conveying what he means than to quote a few representative stories:

I was actually inside the building, near the escalators, when the Tower collapsed. . . . And I was able to hold onto the doorway with my left arm. People blew by me and under me and through me. Only with one arm, did I hold on. . . . there was utter terror. . . .

. . . As we crawled out we saw people and we tried to help them and they were dead. . . .

. . . Our radios didn't work. . . . I couldn't call my command.^{pp24-27}

In the beginning, the first few days, it was very hard to get around. There were makeshift morgues around the place, and you could see people picking up body parts and putting them in bags and people crying. It was very sad and scary, I actually felt like I was in a war zone.

. . . We were working twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. We were sleeping on the floor at 60 Hudson Street. We just take a nap, get up, and . . . It was taking its toll. A couple days without showering, everyone smelling, stinking.^{pp39-41}

I'm a psychiatrist . . . volunteer responder. . . .

. . . We're learning about all these physiological interactions between stress, depression, PTSD and heart disease and the immune system and other things that shorten lives

. . . I think the press and the public look at it as though it was one event

. . . But it was hundreds of events

to any one person who responded. . . .

. . . There were fires, there were explosions, there were tons of steel and debris falling. There were jumpers, there were bodies falling. . . . It's etched in their brains, in their minds, in their memory and their spirit.^{pp317-21}

I am very proud that in time of crisis, 9/11, that our church showed up and we stood there . . . We were there every day, 24/7, for eight and a half months. We served over half a million meals

. . . and many days I would do blessings and last rites on body bags, and it meant the world to the workers to have the clergy in the site with them

. . . They wore respirators instead of neckties and Kevlar suits instead of Brooks Brothers suits. So this was a community that was brought together out of love, through love and compassion and service. I like to describe it as a season of love.^{pp380-82}

When I started to read *We're NOT Leaving*, I was concerned that much might be lost in transcription. This was not the case. There were times when I could not continue reading. It was too emotionally difficult, and I had to put the book down. There is a deep truth in these voices of people who placed their duty above their own personal health and gave everything they could give at a time when our country was attacked.

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