

EPISODE 196

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:02.6] PF: Welcome to Episode 196 of Live Happy Now. This is your host, Paula Felps, thanking you for joining us and letting you know, I think you're going to like what we have in store for you this week. We have an incredible guest named Mary Pipher and you probably know that name because she broke ground 25 years ago with her book, *Reviving Ophelia*.

Now, with her 10th book, she's reframing the way that we look at aging and what this journey means as we get older? Her latest book, *Women Rowing North: Navigating Life's Current and Flourishing As We Age*, provides a fresh roadmap for aging and as you're about to hear, it's even going to make you look forward to the journey.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:41.4] PF: Mary, welcome to the show, it is truly an honor to have you talking to us on Live Happy Now.

[0:00:47.0] MP: Thank you so much, I'm happy to be here.

[0:00:48.4] PF: You know, you've done some incredible work through your time as an author and as a therapist but *Women Rowing North* is just such a wise and important book for women who are moving into that later stage of life and I wondered what prompted you to write this and why you wrote it now?

[0:01:07.4] MP: Well, it's my 10th book and every book I've written, Paula, I've written because I had a really deep felt need to understand something and a curiosity about it. Now, I don't mean the curiosity like, "Well, why isn't Pluto a planet?" I mean, a need emotionally to understand issue that was important to me. That's why I've written all my books. This particular book is a lot like *Reviving Ophelia*, my first book in that, what first interested me about this life stage was the experience of myself and my friends was so totally different than the cultural scripts were for older women.

In fact, when I would tell my women friends, “I’m writing a book about older women,” they without exception, reacted by saying, either, “I’m not old,” or, “You’re not old.” But the idea that anyone would admit they were old was just really frightening to them. I realized, what they mean is, they don’t see themselves as matching our cultural stories about who old women are. So that really interested me. So I started interviewing women and thinking about the women I knew and reading about women and doing a lot of introspective about well, what is this aged about anyway? That’s what became *Women Rowing North*.

You know, to me, the most interesting thing, Paula, about this life stage is it’s the stage when we have the absolute most challenges. We’re likely to get ill and die, our partners are likely get ill and die. So are our siblings and friends, we’ll all say goodbye to people we love in this life stage. Yet, at the same time, it’s the life stage that people are happy to sit back — American women my age are the happiest people in the world in terms of universal demographic, gala poll data. So that’s a really interesting thing.

The other thing that seems to happen is that as more is lost, there’s a kind of a calculus, as more is lost in terms of functioning and friends and so on, more is appreciated and deeply savored. There’s some kind of balance between sorrow and loss and challenge and bliss and authenticity and joy. It’s just a really catalytic life stage for growth.

[0:03:47.1] PF: That made me so curious because I had an aunt who died at the age of 98 and she had lost all her siblings and she had lost her husband, you know, so many people that she had lost and she really had this joy for living. As I get older and I think about like, “Wow, if I lost all these relationships, I don’t know how I would weather that.” So what is it that we’re equipped with that makes that happen? Because I’ve seen that she’s just one example of the people that we’ve seen that in.

[0:04:18.3] PF: Right. Well, one adverse strong argument of this new book, *Women Rowing North*, is that happiness is a skill and a choice and that attitude isn’t everything but it’s almost everything. By the time — I’m 71, by the time a person is 71 years old, they’ve had seven decades to cultivate the ability to respond to life in an intelligent and resilient way. So we may have the most challenges of any life stage, but we also have the most experience meeting challenges. The most time to develop all these skills that we need to be happy people.

The other thing that happens is we start having animations of mortality. We know at 70 that we don't have an endless number left of vacations and opportunities to be with our friends and families and so on. So one of the things that happens when the runway is short is there's just a deeper appreciation for the gift of being alive. Most people my age really have mastered the skill of gratitude. Now, I don't mean to say that all of us are wise, happy people. In fact, none of us are wise, happy people all the time. Most of us struggle every day to be our best selves.

On the other hand, I also believe that we all suffer but we don't all grow and certainly, everyone knows someone who is older, who has not chosen to grow and develop the skills and attitudes they need to be happy. But one thing I say in the book, Paula, is that it's never too late to begin. Even if you're not a naturally sunny person, even if you haven't thus far been able to start feeling resilient and that you can cope with life and find things to be savoring and appreciative, it's not too late to begin.

[0:06:23.3] MP: You give us some really great survival skills that you saw universally that women use that made them happier. Can you talk – you mentioned gratitude, but can you talk about some of the other survival skills that you saw helping women be happy?

[0:06:37.9] PF: Well, one survival skill is reasonable expectation. As my aunt Grace said, "I get what I want but I know what to want." You know, when you're young or if you have really bought in to the culture of consumption and all the advertising about being the most important person in the universe, you're programmed for misery.

If, as you age, you realize that the secret of happiness is just having pretty reasonable expectations about what you can expect, then you're likely to be happy and content most of the time. You know, one of the things that really surprised me is the happiest people that I wrote about in that and interviewed in this book were not the people who had suffered the least. On the contrary, they often were people who had sort of objectively, the worst life. But that very fact of having had very hard, difficult lives is what propelled them into the kind of deep social and emotional and spiritual growth they needed to be happy.

You know, another great skill that a lot of women my age have is humor. My favorite story about that is, this friend of mine told me about her mother's death. Her mother was in her late 90s and she had never been to the doctor. She'd gone to the hospital for one night to have a baby. She

didn't take prescription pills, she didn't take over the counter pills, she never went to the doctor. But as she had cancer or a variant, she was in the doctor and then she went to the hospital but she never took drugs during this whole process.

Well, she was just on her death bed and she was in so much pain, she was just you know, just tensed up and really, really miserable. The nurse came in and offered her some morphine and she started to say no and shake her head no and her daughter said, "She'll take the morphine." This nurse looked at her and she nodded and took this morphine. Then of course her body immediately relaxed and she felt so good. She said to her daughter, "I have made a terrible mistake with my life. I should have been taking drugs all along." Well, that's a good joke to make on your death bed, you know –

[0:08:52.9] MP: That's a fabulous joke.

[0:08:55.6] PF: There's a lot of people that can joke around like that. There's also a lot of people that have the ability to deflect the sadness in their lives into something greater. When your problems are too big for you, the solution is to get bigger. For example, I know this artist here in Lincoln named Ann and she's got a lot of serious health problems. She actually has a building she owned where she rents studios to other artist and she spends all her time there.

Last time I went to an art show down there, I said, "Well Ann, how is your health?" She laughed and she goes, "Well, my health is just a wreck. But come look at the new paintings I've been doing."

[0:09:42.2] MP: Oh my gosh.

[0:09:43.3] PF: That is the kind of deflection that older people tend to get very good at. They don't want to talk necessarily on and on about the arthritis in their knees. They want to say, "Look at that beautiful sky," or, "Let's go get a cinnamon roll somewhere and sit and have a cup of coffee and hear what's been going on in your life."

So that makes older people – first of all, another myth about older women is they're crabby, they're nags, they're useless, they're in the way. One of the things I found out is that actually, most older women I know are deeply engaged with the world and their families want them

around, they're involved in a lot of volunteer work in the community, they have a lot of friends. They have a lot of skills, everything from cooking to knowing how to be good listeners. So that's another thing that's really helpful to older women is they tend to have a lot of social resources and they have inner resources that give them opportunities to do real well with the difficult circumstances.

[0:10:48.3] MP: That seems to be something that has really evolved in the last few decades because you know, as a child, I remember grandparents and older relatives and the women were not as active and vibrant as women today are.

[0:11:00.7] PF: Well, I think one of the major reasons that's happening now is people live a lot longer and they retire so they have, in many cases 20, 30 years of leisure time and they have more money. People are healthier, they live longer, and then also, I think my generation, the baby boomers, we just are a generation who has been pretty good at figuring out what we want and we've been trend breakers since we were in our teens.

[0:11:27.4] MP: I did want to find out too, when you were working on this book, was there anything that surprised you? Because I know as a therapist, you've seen a lot of different circumstances and have a lot of insight. But was there anything new that was an unexpected result for you?

[0:11:43.6] PF: You know, I always had thought off gratitude as like the virtue. Well, it's really good to be grateful, you know, it's really – but what I realized writing this book was it's a survival skill. You know, that the people who go through the worst of it, eventually learn to walk out of the funeral and enjoy the wild geese overhead and the taste of snow on their tongue. They have figured this out that if you want to be happy as an older person, you really dig deep and learn how to be grateful for a cup of tea or a phone call or a good book on a cold night. So that's one thing that was surprising me.

The other thing that was surprising me. The other thing that I thought about a lot when I wrote this book. First of all, this is I think the best life stage for growth there is and I think it's because emergencies call for emergent behavior. There's a real pressure as we face these end game issues to grow and develop our spirituality, our empathy, our honesty, our ability to accept ourselves who we truly are and to not mind so much about making other people happy, not

mind so much about being ambitious. So there's some freedom that comes that I don't think people anticipate. I certainly didn't anticipate it and then the other thing that I've really experienced so much of and other older people talk to me about this a lot, is bliss.

Now I had bliss when I was young when I climbed the mountain top or I could feel blissful when I was wildly in love with someone. But this is a bliss that can come if I walk out to my garden and see a pretty butterfly on a flower. I mean, it is a bliss that can just come almost every day over and over and that is one thing that happens with older people is they're on the lookout for these moments when they feel just so happy to be a part of the universe. So it is really every book I write, Paula, is a voyage of discovery. I am trying to understand something I didn't really understand.

And I think one of the reasons this book is just out one day and it is doing very well and I think one of the reasons *Women Rowing North* is doing well is what I struggled to understand in this book is what a great big generation of boomers are struggling to understand. It is not that I have all these brilliant answers, but I have a question that's a question that's of great interest to a lot of people my age.

[0:14:32.6] PF: It is a tremendous question and a huge audience but what I also like about this is this is a wonderful map for people who aren't quite in that stage yet. It's to me very encouraging, it's very uplifting and it gives you the sense of excitement like this is a journey that I am going to enjoy instead of, "Oh my God, what am I in for?" and I think that's what I really loved about it. You don't have to be in that stage of life to read and appreciate this book.

To me it's like reading *What to Expect When You're Expecting* before you get pregnant, you know? It really tells you how you can approach this and really makes you look forward to that journey.

[0:15:15.3] MP: Well, thank you for saying that.

[0:15:17.1] PF: You know, there is one thing more I wanted to ask you about. There is so much wisdom in this book but what really struck me was the importance of practicing mercy on ourselves and I don't see this very often and I wondered if you could take our last few minutes to talk about that, of what that means and why it's so important?

[0:15:37.0] MP: Well I am someone and I think many women my age are who we were raised to take good care of other people. We were raised to be good little girls, to be helpers, to be nice, to be polite and I learned those lessons very well. I had a mother and a grandmother who instilled in me a great sense of moral responsibility and I think many of us were raised with people instilling that in us but nobody taught us to take care of ourselves.

And there's something about America that makes people uniquely self-punishing. I don't know if this is because we see a lot of advertising that tells us we're inadequate? I don't know if it is the media saturated country where people around TV that looked prettier and happier and smarter than us? I don't know if it comes from our Judea-Christian background? I have no authority to speak to that, but what I do know is that many women have inside them a voice telling them, "You are not adequate, you are not enough, you are not as good as you should be. You should try harder, you should have done that better," those kind of self-castigations.

So one of the things that is really, really wonderful about this life's stage is that voice in your head that is telling you really loudly, "You are not sufficient," often starts to lower its volume and it keeps lowering its volume and it's not that any of us I think or a very few of us are lucky enough to go to our death bed feeling like, "Well, I'm just okay. I am fine. I don't really have anything to feel guilty about or inadequate about." I don't think many people achieve that. But we do achieve a certain level of mercy for ourselves where we can turn that volume down, where we learn to say before we go to bed, "What are some things I did today that I feel good about? What am I grateful for that's happened to me today? What did I appreciate today? What are my personal victories today?"

Michael Pollan calls it "default load functioning". This ruminating most of us do where we're going, "Oh I shouldn't have done that better. I should be moving faster, I am going to be late," and one of the things that a lot of older women learn to do is to sort of hear that rumination and go, "Okay, I hear you little naggy voice in my head, but what I really want to pay attention to is," — well in my case for example, one thing I really like to do is walk around the world looking for evidence of love in the universe.

I truly believe that we find what we're looking for and if you walk around the world expecting people to be grumpy, you are going to find all of those grumpy people. If you walk around the

world expecting to be cheated, you are going to find a world full of cheaters. But I personally am a heat seeking mammal. I really like and need evidence of love. That is very important to me that I see love in people around me, that I see other people loving their environments and their work and so on.

And so when I am walking around, I try to take special note of, “You know, that cashier in the grocery store was really kind to me and really made an effort to connect beyond just ringing out my groceries and saying the formulaic things the store taught him to say.” Or I’ll see you know an old couple holding hand on a bench or I will see a mother buying a child ice cream and the two of them laughing. Or one thing that happens to me a lot is I’ll be travelling and some young guy will say, “Can I carry your suitcase for you up this stairs?” Or, “Can I help you put your carry on overhead?” In an airplane and to me, that is evidence of love of the universe and I really seek out that.

So that is another – it is a life skill and it’s a great source of happiness to be able to set an intention. You know if you think of happiness it is setting an intention, “This is what I want my day to be like, this is the kind of day I want to create for myself,” and then it’s having an attitude of, “I have everything I need to be happy right between my ears and I am going to figure out ways to create and look for those things that made me happy,” you know?

[0:20:20.1] PF: It is an incredible skill to develop and clearly, it changes the way you look at the world and the way the world presents itself to you. That is really beautifully said.

[0:20:30.5] MP: You know one thing I want to say about that too because some people might think, “Well, she is a privilege middle class white woman,” and actually they’d be right. That’s what I am. I have enough money, I am a middle class white woman. On the other hand, I did a lot of interviews in this book with people who are not privileged and people who are not white and these skills are the gift for everyone.

Being happy is not reserved for privileged middle class white people in fact, arguably as far as I can tell, they’re no happier than anyone else and people who struggle work very hard to develop this skills because they need them badly. People from other marginalized groups work very hard to develop community and they develop ways to be happy in spite of the difficulties they have in a culture that is hard to navigate. So I think it is true that I am writing as a middle class white

woman but I also think it's true that everyone is entitled to be happy and everyone has the possibility to be happy.

[0:21:39.5] PF: Yeah and that really comes through that this is a universal theme and like we said, it doesn't matter what your race is. You don't have to be this certain age. We don't have to wait to get there to experience this and develop these skills and I did wonder, as we sign off, I wonder, what it is that you hope people get out of this book?

[0:21:59.3] MP: Well, I wrote it because I wanted to understand the life stage I was in and I also wrote it as cultural education because I think America consistently miss educates us about the nature of happiness and I wanted to share what I knew about happiness from being alive seventy years and being a therapist. So that is really my goal. If this book helps people have more empathy, if it helps them appreciate life, if it gives them a few ideas of how to build a good day for themselves, if it makes them feel more aware of their own goodness, all of those things would make me just absolutely delighted, Paula.

[0:22:42.8] PF: Terrific, well it does have the ability to do all those things. It really is a wise, phenomenal read and I am really happy that you wrote this book and excited that you were able to talk to us about it.

[0:22:56.2] MP: Thank you so much. This was a good interview.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:23:03.3] PF: That was Mary Pipher, author of *Women Rowing North: Navigating Life's Currents and Flourishing As We Age*. You can find out more about Mary and her new book by visiting us at livehappynow.com.

If you are not already a subscriber to Live Happy Now, you can find us on Pandora Podcast Network, Spotify, iHeartRadio, iTunes and Google Play. Just look for us in your favorite platform and then subscribe so you never miss an episode.

That is all we have time for this week. So we'll meet you back here again next week for an all new episode. But until then, this is Paula Felps reminding you to make every day a happy one.

[END]