

The search for meaning

Guides to finding your place in the world

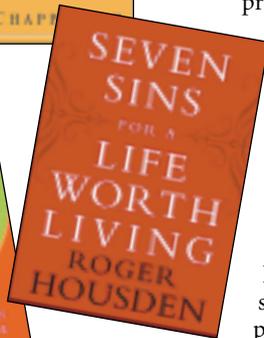
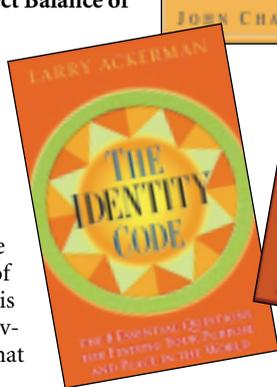
BY ALISON HOOD

January's advent often inspires resolutions for self-improvement, many of which we forget—or transgress—by month's end. Still, we tend to agree with writer George Sand, who opined that “One is happy by the results of one's own efforts.” So, for those optimistic enough to make the effort, we offer previews of six new books devoted to realizing the good life.

Finding a balance

In 1991, John Chappellear's life fell apart. Within days, he went from being CEO of a multimillion dollar company to financial—and emotional—ruin. This catastrophic fall, which he dubbed “my gift of desperation,” woke him mightily. Now a successful life coach, Chappellear discovered that meaning in life comes not from achievements or wealth, but from “something that is slowly entwined into life through your daily experiences, personal beliefs, and the way you interact with those around you.”

Enter **The Daily Six: Six Simple Steps to Find the Perfect Balance of Prosperity and Purpose** (Putnam, \$19.95, 144 pages, ISBN 0399153020), a commonsense bible based on short, powerful maxims. This is Chappellear's road map to well-being, his contribution to bettering private and business lives, inspired by mentors who helped him back to wholeness. Dedicated to fostering “success with significance,” his six-point plan emphasizes the daily practices of willingness, contemplation, love and forgiveness, service, gratitude and action. Chappellear's approach to change is gentle, almost humble; he uses heartening case studies of others who have met and managed change, but he uses his own life as the primary lesson. This self-proclaimed recovering big shot realizes that “My life quest is no longer ‘what can I get?’ but ‘what can I give?’”



current complexities of psychological theory with clarity and humor (“The mind is . . . like the rider on the back of an elephant,” he writes). He explains how our minds work and how we socialize, grow and develop, while explicating ancient religious, literary and philosophical texts on human happiness, citing authors from Plato, Jesus Christ and the Buddha, to Benjamin Franklin, Proust and Kant. Haidt's is an open-minded, robust look at philosophy, psychological fact and spiritual mystery, of scientific rationalism and the unknowable ephemeral—an honest inquiry that concludes that the best life is, perhaps, one lived in the balance of opposites.

Knocking on heaven's door

Roger Housden wants you to consider sin in a whole new light—a means toward enlightenment! In **Seven Sins for a Life Worth Living** (Harmony, \$18.95, 208 pages, ISBN 0307336719) Housden presents erudite, witty essays on seven so-called “transgressions”—sensuality, foolishness, ignorance, imperfection, uselessness, ordinariness and prodigality. Touting a pleasure principle over a punitive path to happiness, Housden argues that joy can lead to “the upwelling of the human spirit, which always lives and breathes beyond the confines of right and wrong.”

There are no case studies, success stories or how-to exercises in **Seven Sins**. Instead, we get the author's personal reflections on modern life, sprinkled throughout with apt, wide-ranging references and quotes from philosophers and poets, scientists, political figures, artists and literary greats. This book is a subjective prescription for happiness, an utter delight, filled with Housden's trademark self-deprecatory humor and slightly offbeat insight. You probably won't see hell if you read this book, but you just might catch a glimpse of heaven. ☺

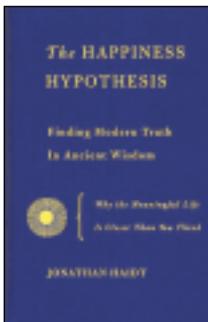
Alison Hood writes from San Rafael, California.

Who am I?

Our identity—if we're not verifying it, we're worried about someone stealing it. But what is this mysterious and elusive “It”? **The Identity Code: The 8 Essential Questions for Finding Your Purpose and Place in the World** (Random House, \$21.95, 208 pages, ISBN 1400064171) is a guide to discovering the core self, written by a man who's very sure of his own identity: “I am Larry Ackerman and I am driven by the need to help people to see.”

Ackerman, an identity management consultant, believes that “identity is beautiful and it is powerful.” Decipher its secret code, which is embedded in us from birth along with our biological constructs, and we will understand the “why” of our lives. His introductory essay debunks a currently popular identity theory: “The myth of personal freedom—the idea that you are at liberty to pick whatever path in life you want—is the unspoken agony of the modern person.” This myth, Ackerman argues, ignores an inherent order already present in life, a complex system of natural law wherein lie the seeds of identity.

Ackerman clearly presents his finely distilled Laws of Identity and their eight corresponding questions, which lead, like a well-signed path, toward self-knowledge and personal responsibility. First tackling basic queries such as, “Who am I, and what makes me special?” **The Identity Code** then turns to questions about life patterns, directions, gifts, relationships and abundance. With instructions on using an Identity Mapping Process, case studies and exercises, this commonsense workbook shines with Ackerman's compassionate desire for each individual to discover his or her precious jewel of identity and “be at peace with yourself.”



Past and present

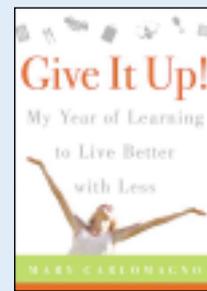
“Wisdom is now so cheap and abundant that it floods over us from calendar pages, tea bags, bottle caps, and mass e-mail messages” asserts social psychologist Jonathan Haidt in **The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom** (Basic, \$26, 288 pages, ISBN 0465028012). Does access to endless streams of information really help with man's search for life meaning and purpose? Haidt takes a rational approach to “too much wisdom” by identifying 10 “Great Ideas,” insights about man, purpose and happiness celebrated through the ages by ancient civilizations. He weaves a story of opposites, of what causes humans to thrive—or to wither—by exploring ancient wisdom and contrasting it with modern-day psychological research.

Haidt is a fine guide on this journey between past and present, discussing the

Less is more

We face dizzying displays of abundance in modern American life. Our stores are packed with plenty, and we're continually bombarded with ads that exploit our every desire. Does this excess ultimately affect our happiness? In new books, two authors explore this question and examine alternatives to the richly lived life.

Give It Up! My Year of Learning to Live Better with Less (Morrow, \$14.95, 208 pages ISBN 0060789808) is Mary Carlomagno's diary of deprivation, of the “intention to eliminate unnecessary facets of life.” For one year, she eliminated one thing monthly: in January, alcohol; in February, shopping; in March, elevator rides. Over the year, newspapers, cell phones, restaurants, television, taxis, coffee, cursing, chocolate and multitasking all got tossed. Chronicling her reflections on doing without, Carlomagno discovered the richness of simplicity and “an awareness and enjoyment of the things in life that I was blessed to have.” Anyone resolving to live a less cluttered



life this year will appreciate her wry, honest account of doing without some of the things we have come to regard as indispensable.



For motivational speaker and self-help guru Judith Wright, creating a luxuriant life depends on something far more important than conspicuous material consumption. In **The One Decision: Make the Single Choice that Will Lead to a Life of MORE** (Tarcher, \$23.95, 336 pages, ISBN 1585424811) Wright outlines a plan for realizing your heart's deepest desires, which she describes as the “greater MORE.” To find more in life, she says, people must make a single commitment—a life stand or One Decision. She leads readers through a 10-faceted prism, looking at the key qualities of adventure, desire, decision, truth, heart, presence, quest, keys to the kingdom, allies and the good fight—then follows up with a 30-day plan to guide readers toward making the One Decision to lead a more meaningful life. Wright makes a compelling case that a life of “more” is about “being alive, conscious, engaged. It's not about being perfect. . . . It is a constant state of becoming more me.” ☺

—ALISON HOOD