Happiness is fine. However, achieving your goals is more important than being happy. Enduring some discomfort and anxiety is worth living life with positive accomplishment. Living constructively, living a meaningful life, making a contribution to your world are more satisfying than just feeling good temporarily. If what you just read makes sense to you, then read on; this guidebook for sustaining a worthwhile life will be useful to you.

You can’t be happy all the time. You can’t feel comfortable all the time. You can’t have the feelings you want when you want them for as long as you want them. Life just doesn’t work that way. Maybe you have tried counseling, therapy, diets, meditation, chemicals, or some sort of esoteric magic to work on your feelings, to fix your life or make it perfect. Nothing has worked as well as you had hoped. Reading this book won’t solve your life problems either. But it will give you some sensible, practical, and doable suggestions—suggestions about how to work on your life. The key word here is work. Sitting and talking with someone is not enough. Venting your feelings is not enough. Putting your mind in some quiet inner place is not enough. Working on your life involves moving your body, living your life purposefully and constructively. This book offers you concrete assignments for such activity.

I call this approach to life “Constructive Living” (CL). CL is about building your life on purpose and behavior. It was borrowed from
two Japanese thinkers but redesigned to respond to two unrealistic elements of modern Western culture. The first is its exclusive focus on feelings, as though feelings were the only aspect of life with meaning. Some simple-minded westerners believe that feelings must be repaired before undertaking any project. The second unrealistic element is the mistaken belief that one can succeed only through one's own efforts, that, for example, despite the deficiencies of one's parents and their improper childrearing, one can struggle and overcome such handicaps and “make it to the top” on one's own. One can become a “self-made” person.

The first fallacy ignores the element of purposeful action, which is possible to take even when feelings are unsupportive or even painful. And the second fallacy ignores the reality of the importance of the essential support of other people and things to achieving success. I suggest that you look at your past—your whole past—and put any traumatic experiences in perspective by looking at all the supportive and positive experiences that we encounter on a daily basis. Too many Americans just don’t consider that right-before-your-nose reality.

We are taught that the ideal is to work hard to overcome the handicaps our parents (or others) may have laid upon us by over-protection, sexual or physical or mental abuse, lack of love, and the like. Who asks us to think about all the diapers someone changed for us as babies? Who asks us to consider all the meals cooked and dishes washed and clothes laundered for us? Who insists that we reflect on the kindness of the people who taught us and hired us and listened to our complaints about the unkindness of our world? Well, I do. And I have been insisting on looking at the larger picture of past and present for more than thirty years now, since the time I began to understand some Japanese psychotherapies that were not burdened by the narrow perspective of Western values and therapies. For years I have been asking Western clients why they persist in hanging all the clothes in the closets of their past on just one hanger—one traumatic event, one terrible experience, one destructive person. Do you know how helpless human infants are? Do you know what effort it takes
to feed, cuddle, change, and keep them warm whether the parent or parent-surrogate feels like it all the time or not? Do you realize the amount of effort it takes on the part of people you’ve never met to get your train or plane or bus to your destination? Have you reflected on what sort of complex set of activities by countless strangers results in putting the food on your table, the clothes in your wardrobe, the newspaper or news program in your home, the car in your driveway?

You may have had one or more terrible experiences in your past. I’ve had some, too. But those traumas do not define your past or cripple you psychologically. Sure, you can use those experiences to give up on yourself. In America many people will console, treat you sympathetically, and forgive you almost anything if you cite the disasters of your past. It’s about time Americans grew up and looked at more of reality than the simple self-serving caricatures of traumas. Life is sometimes very tough. But life in this country is much more often filled with favors received, unacknowledged, and unappreciated. When you grow tired of complaining and catharsis, check out a wider view of who you are and where you have been, what you need to do, and what has been done for you. Check out Constructive Living.

Have you ever been worried that you couldn’t find anything to worry about? Have you ever worried about what to worry about next? Have you ever worried that you worry too much? Have you ever worried that you don’t worry enough? Have you ever worried that worrying isn’t good for your health? Worries, worries—there are endless supplies of them to the mind that can’t find something better to contemplate at the moment. Anyone who advises that you just stop worrying, that you turn off your worries, has no sense of the sheer impossibility of that advice. So, while worrying, let’s work on getting along with our lives.