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Mr. Morality

* Radio personality Dennis Prager believes it's our duty to one another and to God to be happy. And he's written a book on the subject.

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It's a picture-perfect Sunday in the backyard of Dennis Prager's spacious West Valley home. Water cascades into the pool. Kids jump on a trampoline and climb a knotted rope. Chickens and horses issue the occasional cluck and whinny from pens up the hill. The radio talk show host, essayist and theologian leans into his patio chair, draws smoke from his pipe and says, "Isn't this heaven?"

Indeed. Dennis Prager is happy and should be. At 49, he's just written a book on the subject--"Happiness Is a Serious Problem" (HarperCollins). And based on his formula, he should be among the happiest people alive. "That's a good chance," admits this large, lumbering man, with a big, deep voice to match his thinking.

A book on happiness seems paradoxical from this man who, from 12 to 3 p.m. each weekday on KABC-AM (790) radio discusses the often depressing issues in the news. It also seems trite from a man whose other books deal with Judaism and world problems. But Prager argues, "Happiness is of first-rank importance. We owe it to those around us to be happy. It's a moral obligation, so society will be less cruel. We also need to be happy for religious reasons. Unhappy people are an insult to God."

Prager is an unlikely talk show host, whose serious message and demeanor defy the hip and obstreperous hosts that dominate the airwaves. His appeal, says KABC Program Director David Cook, lies in his offering "a perspective that is always unique and thought provoking."

Or, for some, just plain provoking.

"Dennis has a calcified view of the universe based on sitcoms from the '50s of the way it's supposed to be, and he seems very befuddled by why it's not that way," says radio host Robin Abcarian, whose columns in The Times used to serve as fodder for his shows. "As wrongheaded as I think

he is much of the time, what I like about him is his thoughtfulness. He's very sincere, and he's respectful of people."

The complaints don't surprise him.

"I'm too liberal for the religious right and too conservative for the secular left. I defend men reading Playboy, and I'm lambasted by the religious right. I believe that heterosexual love should be society's ideal, and I'm lambasted by the secular left." Though a self-described centrist, Prager cites as his present-day heroes columnist William F. Buckley Jr. and the late Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, because they have been "intellectually honest and morally earnest." He also never votes Democrat: "It's a dangerous party." But in the final analysis, he claims to care a lot more about right and wrong than right and left.

Subtitled "A Human Nature Repair Manual," Prager's latest book challenges readers to realize that they--not any outside force--are the greatest obstacle to happiness.

"Most unhappiness comes from within, but we blame society, poverty, racism, sexism, ageism, you name it," he says. He offers as proof his observation that people's circumstances aren't connected with their levels of happiness. "How many biographies of the rich and famous do we have to read to learn that most are not happy?"

While much of the chatty, essayistic book fosters a "Why, of course" response, the reminder--that happiness is not a divine right, nor even an entitlement, but a reward for sacrifice, discipline and hard work--seems timely in a society addicted to fast fun and the elusive free lunch.

After setting up his operating premise--that happiness is an obligation, that it takes work and that outlook is everything--Prager then, chapter by chapter, takes on the misery makers: comparing ourselves with others, believing that success, wealth and fun equal happiness; harboring unrealistic expectations; focusing on not what's in hand, but what's missing; being a victim; and, ironically, avoiding pain.

A word for hedonists: Avoid what's fun and pursue pain.

"Everything that leads to happiness involves pain," writes Prager. "As a result, many people avoid the very things that would bring the deepest happiness, such as marriage, children, intellectually challenging pursuits, religious commitment and volunteer work."

His advice doesn't mean you'll avoid distress.

"A person can be happy and miserable, just as someone can be essentially healthy and sick with flu," he says. Happiness is not what you feel at any given moment, but an ongoing attitude toward life. I run into the same obstacles as everyone: family problems, kid problems, marital tension, sickness among relatives, job frustrations, a society in which I'm not optimistic about its future. I don't walk around on a cloud. But I'm happy."

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On the radio, Prager introduces a new topic for each of his three hours and invites callers to discuss them. Topics range from international affairs to cheating on tests, from child abuse to Barbie. He churns each subject through his highly developed filters of morality and logic, adding cerebral certitude and sometimes perturbing pragmatism.

Listeners know that calling his show to differ is like asking Mike Tyson to arm wrestle. Enter his ring and you encounter a mental heavyweight who works out.

"If someone offers me a better argument, I'll change my mind in a second," he says. "I'm not wedded to any of my positions except to the belief that there is a God who wants us to do good and that we must always tell the truth."

Pitted against the equally opinionated Dr. Laura Schlessinger on KFI-AM (640), Prager reaches 320,000 individual listeners a week to Schlessinger's 560,000, according to Arbitron ratings. Though both discuss morals and ethics, they serve different audiences, says KABC's Cook. Schlessinger's mandate is to discuss individuals' problems, Prager's to discuss topics in the news.

"My first purpose is to elevate my audience; the station's primary interest is ratings. Sometimes those interests are identical, sometimes not," he concedes.

Prager was one of few media personalities who did not discuss the O.J. Simpson trial. He did discuss the verdict, however, because "the decision was of supreme importance to the country." He also refused to discuss actor Eddie Murphy's encounter with a transvestite prostitute "because it was of singular unimportance and violated my religious law against gossip."

As for the Clinton debacle, he concedes that the president's alleged affair is ugly but says the media's preoccupation with sex is more dangerous to the country.

"Had the media kept the sexual details as an aside and focused on the cover-up and the lying, issues of greater concern, that would have been more respectable," he says.

So he takes the moral high road. But what, some demand to know, makes him the moral authority?

"You're born with certain traits," replies Prager. "It was put in me. They asked Schubert once how he came up with his melodies, and he said, 'They just come into my head.' This is what I'm here for."

What he sees as a calling, others see as arrogance. While his moral judgments are extreme, so is his tolerance for those who fall short.

"I believe heterosexual love is the ideal, but I can speak with compassion to a gay caller seeking love advice. I believe most abortions are immoral but support a woman's right to choose in the first trimester. I don't find these stands contradictory, and I don't want society to lose its ideals."

To save them, he wants the country to come back from leftism and secularism.

"Too many religious people regard religion as a form of social work, to bring comfort to people. In fact, the primary purpose of religion is to bring standards to people."

Prager gets these views across not only through his radio show, which he hopes to syndicate, but also through his books; his twice-monthly newsletter, the Prager Perspective; lectures, which often take him abroad; and his academic affiliation with the University of Judaism in West Los Angeles, where he teaches the Torah, verse by verse.

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Prager, born in Brooklyn, to an accountant and a nursing home director, says he was never a kid.

"I was born an adult. I couldn't bear parental coercion. I've always been in love with freedom."

Though this led him to graduate 92nd in a class of 120, what he did do on his own was learn Russian and read symphonic scores. The former led to his work briefly as a spy in Russia when he was 19 and to championing many causes for Soviet Jewry. The latter has led to his conducting

orchestras, including the West Los Angeles Symphonic Orchestra and the Pasadena Lyric Opera.

He began his radio career 15 years ago on KABC with "Religion on the Line." To this day, his religion remains his core interest, and his happiest hours of the week begin at sundown on Friday, the beginning of the Jewish Sabbath.

"I would not be a happy person if it weren't for my religion," he says, a black yarmulke perched on his thick silver hair.

He prides himself on being involved in all aspects of the Jewish faith.

"I have one son who goes to Orthodox Jewish school, another to a Conservative Jewish school, and we are active in a Reform synagogue. I am happy to participate in all denominations and don't belong solely to any one."

His wife, Fran, who was raised Lutheran, now shares his faith. She was in the process of converting when he knocked on her door 12 years ago in search of the landlord to her apartment.

"I kept her talking for 20 minutes until she finally invited me in," Prager recalls of their first meeting.

They married two years later, a second marriage for both. His first marriage ended after five years and one son, David, 14. Fran has one daughter, Anya, 21, and together they have a 5-year-old son, Aaron.

Here David interrupts the conversation to ask for a loan. Prager doles out a 20 and says, "Of course, you'll bring me the change."

"I will."

"Love you, dude," he says as his son leaves. "We have the same conflicts with our kids that every family has, which is why I believe almost everyone should have a child. It's very humbling."

Fifteen minutes later, David's back for a credit card.

"What did I tell you?" Prager asks.

To be married to the man who claims to have the corner on morality, one would have to be either very strong or very weak.

"I'm one of the lucky ones who can change his mind," says Fran Prager. "I'm relentless in getting him to look at emotional issues in terms of what he's feeling, not thinking. I think I've helped him get out of his head more and into his heart."

Prager claims he's easy to live with.

"I'm very even-tempered. My wife doesn't lose me to sports or drink. I'm kind to her, but I do have all the quintessential male attributes that drive women crazy, including not remembering every conversation, and not yearning, quite as much as most wives do, to confront all emotional issues."

He dismisses these concerns as essentially male-female differences.

"It's par for the human course," he says.

But this cavalier attitude is precisely what infuriates, not just his wife, but other women. When he observes, for example, that women are more interested in micro issues and men in macro, he doesn't get what the ensuing fuss is about.

"People who are secure in their gender don't have a problem with this. Ironically I, Mr. Macho, prefer female issues. At a dinner party, I'd rather talk to women. The men are either talking about politics, the economy or sports, which bores the daylights out of me. I'd rather talk about babies' feeding habits. Women think that's a put-down, and I'm blown away by that. Why is what my baby likes less elevated than how the Lakers are doing?"

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PHOTO: DENNIS PRAGER, At home with his chickens
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