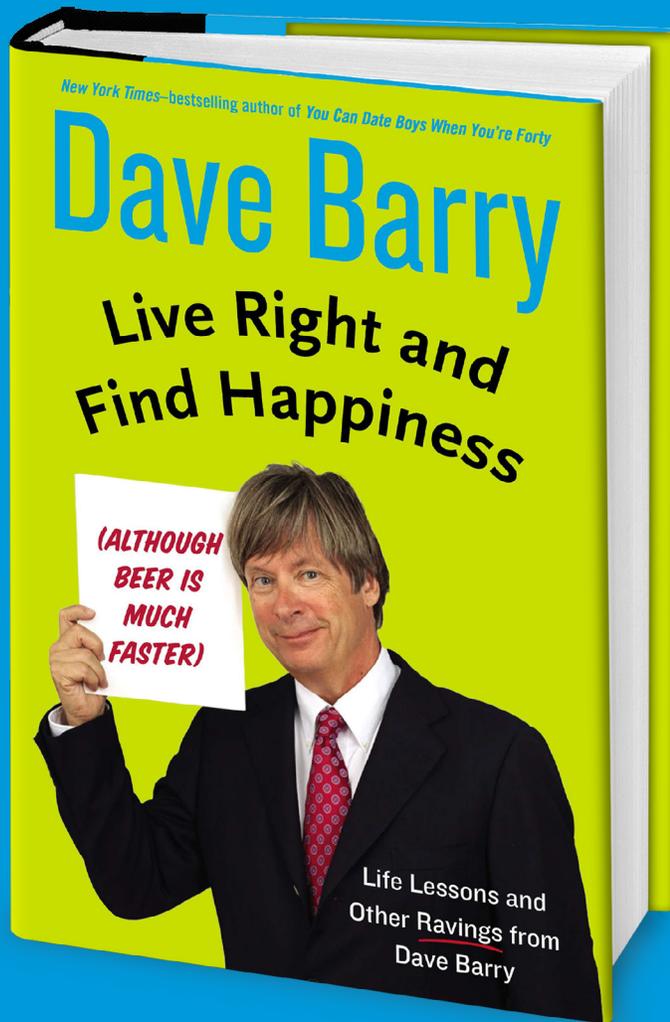


Dave Barry

Live Right and Find Happiness
(ALTHOUGH BEER IS MUCH FASTER)



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THE REAL MAD MEN





Looking back, I think my parents had more fun than I did.

That's not how it was supposed to be. My parents belonged to the Greatest Generation; they grew up in hard times. My mom was born in Colorado in an actual sod hut, which is the kind of structure you see in old black-and-white photographs featuring poor, gaunt, prairie-dwelling people standing in front of what is either a small house or a large cow pie, staring grimly at the camera with the look of people who are thinking that their only hope of survival might be to eat the photographer. A sod hut is basically a house made out of compressed dirt. If you were to thoroughly vacuum one, it would cease to exist.

My mom, like my dad, and millions of other members of

the Greatest Generation, had to contend with real adversity: the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl, hunger, poverty, disease, World War II, extremely low-fi 78 rpm records and telephones that—incredible as it sounds today—*could not even shoot video*.

They managed to overcome those hardships and take America to unprecedented levels of productivity and power, which is why they truly are a great generation. But they aren't generally considered to be a *fun* generation. That was supposed to be their children—my generation, the Baby Boomers.

We grew up in a far easier time, a time when sod was strictly for lawns. We came of age in the sixties and seventies, the era of sex, drugs and rock and roll. We were cool, we were hip, we were *groovy*, man. We mocked the suit-wearing Establishment squares grubbing for money in their 9-to-5 jobs. That was not for us. We did our *own thing*, you dig? We raised our consciousness. We tuned in, turned on and dropped out. We lived in communes. We went to Woodstock. We had strobe lights and lava lamps. We wore bell-bottom trousers, and *we did not wear them ironically*.

And we had fun. At least I did. I am thinking here of my college and immediate post-college years, when my main goal in life—a much higher priority than academics, or a

career—was to have fun. I’m not talking about “fun” in the sense of playing charades, or canoeing. I’m talking about a more hard-core kind of fun, the kind where you might end your night under arrest in an entirely different area code from your underwear. I’m talking about *partying*.

I am also of course talking about alcohol and recreational drugs. So to avoid creating the impression that I am condoning the abuse of these substances, let me clarify, right up front, my views on alcohol and recreational drugs: They are a *lot* of fun.

No! I’m kidding!

Sort of.

What I mean is: Yes, alcohol (which I still consume) (in moderation) (usually) and recreational drugs (which I don’t) (although I used to) (but I did not inhale) can be very bad. But they can also, under certain circumstances, be enjoyable, and even sometimes result in high-quality entertainment.

I am not going to name any names here, but back in the seventies, at the wedding reception for Rob and Helene Stavis, I saw my attorney and oldest friend, Joe DiGiacinto, wearing a suit and dress shoes, wade into a large outdoor decorative fountain and attack a statue of the Virgin Mary. It wasn’t clear—it still isn’t clear—what the statue had done to provoke Joe, but he was really, *really* pissed off at it. The result

was a highly entertaining battle, Joe vs. the Blessed Virgin (Joe lost), which remains my fondest memory of any wedding I have ever attended, including my own. It goes without saying that it would never have happened without alcohol.

I myself have been involved in more than a few memorable situations as a result of alcohol consumption. Granted, I have also done some things I now regret. For example, I owe an apology to former vice president Dick Cheney for my behavior at a social function I attended at the *Washington Post* back during the administration of George H. W. Bush, back when Dick was U.S. Secretary of Defense. It was a small affair, maybe two dozen people, and Dick was the guest of honor. After several trips to the bar I somehow got it into my head that it would be hilarious to repeatedly re-introduce myself to him. Every time he turned around—this was in a smallish room—there I was, sticking out my hand and saying, “Hi, Dick! Dave Barry!” Then we would have this awkward handshake, because when somebody sticks his hand out to you, your automatic reaction, even if you are Secretary of Defense, is to stick *your* hand out, only to realize that the person is an intoxicated moron you have already shaken hands with. So that’s what I did to Dick. It might have been funny the first four times, but the last two or three were definitely overkill.

I am not proud of my behavior that night. Nor am I proud of those times—there were several—when, as a guest at a party in somebody’s home, I set off bottle rockets indoors (although, in my defense, some of those were return fire). I also now regret that I once was involved in an evening that began with drinks called “Singapore slings” and ended with an innocent horse being painted red. Granted, we used a water-based paint. But still.

There are other alcohol- or drug-related things I regret doing, things that I prefer not to elaborate on here other than to apologize to all the people who, over the years, for one reason or another, I have thrown up on. But for the most part, I look back fondly on the era when I partied hearty, at least what I remember of it.

That era was basically my twenties. When I got into my thirties, and especially when I became a parent, my concept of “fun” changed, becoming less likely to involve people getting high or hammered or naked, and more likely to involve balloon animals. It was still *fun*, but it was a far more sedate brand of fun.

In time I came to accept it as a normal part of growing up. I hate to generalize,* but I think this is the pattern for

*Not really. I love to generalize.

most people of my generation and those following us: You party hard into your twenties, maybe a little later. But then, as the burdens of age and career and—above all—parenthood press down on you, you put your bong collection on craigslist and settle down. By your mid-thirties your hard-partying days are over. You get serious about the job of parenting. It's the inevitable course of adulthood. It has always been that way.

Or so I used to think.

What changed my mind was *Mad Men*, the widely acclaimed TV series about Madison Avenue in the sixties. One of the things the show is acclaimed for is its authenticity, which is significant because, if the show really is authentic, then people in the advertising industry back then spent roughly 90 percent of their time smoking, drinking or having extramarital sex. Here's a typical *Mad Men* scene:

Don Draper walks into the Madison Avenue advertising agency where he is an executive. He approaches his office. An attractive secretary sits at the desk outside.

SECRETARY:

Good morning, Mr. Draper.

DRAPER:

Good morning.

They have extramarital sex.

DRAPER:

Hold my calls.

He goes into his office, lights a cigarette, pours himself a glass of whiskey. The intercom buzzes.

DRAPER:

Yes?

SECRETARY (*on intercom*):

Mr. Draper, there's an attractive woman here to see you.

DRAPER:

Is it my wife?

SECRETARY:

No.

DRAPER:

Send her in.

An attractive woman enters the office.

WOMAN:

Hello, Don.

DRAPER:

Hello.

They have extramarital sex.

WOMAN:

Good-bye, Don.

DRAPER:

Good-bye.

*She leaves. Draper lights another cigarette
and pours himself another glass of whiskey.*

SECRETARY (*on intercom*):

Mr. Draper, some of your fellow executives are here to talk to you.

DRAPER:

About what?

SECRETARY:

Advertising.

DRAPER:

Advertising?

SECRETARY:

Yes. You're an advertising executive.

DRAPER:

Oh right, I forgot. Send them in.

Several executives enter. Draper pours them drinks. They all light cigarettes.

EXECUTIVE:

Don, we need to sell some
advertising.

DRAPER:

OK. Hey, one of you is a woman.

They have extramarital sex.

And so on. If *Mad Men* really is authentic, it explains much about the TV commercials of my childhood, which, in terms of intellectual content, make the commercials of today look like *Citizen Kane*. Back then many commercials featured a Male Authority Figure in the form of an actor pretending to be a doctor or scientist. Sometimes, to indicate how authoritative he was, he wore a white lab coat. The Male Authority Figure usually spoke directly to the camera, sometimes using charts or diagrams to explain important scientific facts, such as that certain brands of cigarettes could actually soothe your throat, or that Anacin could stop *all three* known medical causes of headaches:

1. Electrical bolts inside your head.
2. A big coiled spring inside your head.
3. A hammer pounding inside your head.

Another standard character in those old commercials, providing contrast to the Male Authority Figure, was the Desperately Insecure Housewife, who was portrayed by an actress in a dress. The Desperately Insecure Housewife was always close to suicide because she had some hideous inadequacy as a homemaker—her coffee was bitter, her laundry detergent was ineffective against stains, her meat loaf failed to excite her family, she had odors emanating from her carpet, etc. She was under tremendous stress. She couldn't even escape to the bathroom without being lectured on commode sanitation by a tiny man rowing a rowboat around inside her toilet tank.

Even back then, everybody thought these commercials were stupid. But it wasn't until years later, when I started watching *Mad Men*, that I realized *why* they were so stupid: The people making them were so drunk they had the brain functionality of road salt.

FIRST AD EXECUTIVE: I got it! We put a tiny man in a rowboat in the toilet tank.

SECOND AD EXECUTIVE: Perfect! Pass the whiskey.

But here's the thing: Despite all the drinking and sex on *Mad Men*, nobody ever seems to have any fun. The characters are almost universally miserable. And that, to me, does not seem authentic.

I grew up during the *Mad Men* era; my family, like many of the *Mad Men* characters, lived in Westchester County, N.Y.—in our case, the village of Armonk. Most of the moms of Armonk back then were housewives; many of the dads—mine was one—rode the train to work in New York City. Some of those dads, including friends of my parents, were advertising executives.

So during my childhood I got to watch a sliver of the *Mad Men* generation as they went through their late twenties, into their thirties and forties, raising their kids, pursuing their careers and, in some cases, becoming very successful. Like the *Mad Men* characters, they smoked a lot and drank a lot, including at work. I don't know how much extramarital sex went on, and I don't want to know.

But I do know this: Unlike the *Mad Men* characters, the grown-ups back then had fun. A *lot* of fun. And it didn't stop

just because they had kids. My parents had a large circle of friends, and just about every weekend, throughout my childhood, they had cocktail parties, which rotated from house to house. I *loved* it when the party was at our house. Dozens of cars filled our driveway and lined the narrow dirt road we lived on, and dozens of couples poured into the house—the men in suits and ties, the women in dresses and heels, everybody talking, shouting, laughing, eating hors d'oeuvres, smoking, heading to the lineup of bottles on the kitchen counter to pour another drink.

My sister and brothers and I would lurk on the edges of the party, watching the show, until we got noticed and sent off to bed. But we didn't go to sleep; we'd sneak back and peek into the smoke-clouded living room to watch as the party got more boisterous, the sound rising to a joyous roar. Sometimes the partiers sang, pounding on our upright piano and belting out popular songs, or parody songs they wrote, sometimes on the spot, to celebrate somebody's birthday or some other occasion. They'd give each other elaborate gag gifts, and sometimes put on skits or little musical shows, complete with costumes. They held theme parties—charades parties, talent show parties, parties involving scavenger hunts. They'd hire a dancing instructor to teach them the

mambo, the cha-cha, the twist, whatever was popular. The parties would go late into the night; the next morning, the living room would be littered with empty drink glasses, loaded ashtrays and, occasionally, a partier or two snoring on the sofa.

One morning, after my parents had hosted a scavenger hunt party, my little brother, Phil, came into my bedroom and woke me up, shouting, “There’s two giant *Bs* in the living room!”

“Giant bees?” I said.

These turned out to be two four-foot-high letter *Bs*, made of wood and painted gold. They came from IBM signs that had been erected on property owned by the IBM Corp., which was building its world headquarters in Armonk. How, exactly, the giant *Bs* ended up in our living room, and whether IBM was aware of their new location, I do not know. What I do know is that it was a hell of a party.

My parents’ big-party era continued until about the time I headed off to college. As they got into their fifties, they still had parties, but these were generally smaller, quieter affairs. By then it was the Boomers’ time to have fun. And as I said earlier, we *did* have fun.

But not as much fun as the Greatest Generation. And for nowhere near as many years.

Now, before I get to my point,* I need to stipulate some things:

- Smoking cigarettes is bad for you.
- Drinking too much alcohol is bad for you.
- Driving under the influence of alcohol is very wrong and you should never, ever do it.
- It is also wrong to steal private property from corporations, *even for a scavenger hunt*.
- My parents and their friends probably would have lived longer if their lifestyle choices had been healthier.

So I am conceding that by the standards of today, my parents' behavior would be considered irresponsible. Actually, "irresponsible" is not a strong enough word. By the standards of today, my parents and their friends were crazy. A great many activities they considered to be perfectly OK—hitchhiking, for example; or driving without seat belts; or letting a child go trick-or-treating without a watchful parent hovering within eight feet, ready to pounce if the child is given a potentially lethal item such as an apple; or engaging

*You're thinking, "There's a *point*?"

in any form of recreation more strenuous than belching without wearing a helmet—are now considered to be insanely dangerous. By the standards of today, the main purpose of human life is to eliminate all risk so that human life will last as long as humanly possible, no matter how tedious it gets.

And the list of things we're not supposed to do anymore gets longer all the time. Just today, as I was researching this essay,* I encountered an article on the Internet headlined:

IS YOUR HANDSHAKE AS DANGEROUS AS SMOKING?

The answer, in case you are a complete idiot, is: Of *course* your handshake is as dangerous as smoking. The article explains that handshakes transmit germs, which cause diseases such as MERS. MERS stands for “Middle East Respiratory Syndrome,” a fatal disease that may have originated in camels. This is yet another argument, as if we needed one, against shaking hands with camels. But the article suggests that we should consider not shaking hands

*I am using the phrase “researching this essay” in the sense of “farting around on the Internet to avoid actually writing this essay.”

with *anybody*. (Again, Dick Cheney, if you're reading this: I am truly sorry.)

If you could travel back in time to one of my parents' parties and interrupt the singing to announce to the guests that shaking hands could transmit germs and therefore they should stop doing it, they would laugh so hard they'd drop their cigarettes into their drinks. They were just not as into *worrying* as we are today.

And it wasn't just cigarettes and alcohol they didn't worry about. They also didn't worry that there might be harmful chemicals in the water that they drank *right from the tap*. If they wanted to order a dish at a restaurant—chicken, for example—they didn't interrogate the waiter about what ingredients it was prepared with, or whether the chicken contained steroids or was allowed to range freely or was executed humanely; they just ordered the damn chicken. They didn't worry that if they threw their trash into the wrong receptacle, they were killing baby polar bears and hastening the extinction of the human race. They didn't worry about consuming trans fats, gluten, fructose, and all the other food components now considered so dangerous they could be used to rob a bank (“Give him the money! He's got gluten!”).

Above all, they did not worry about providing a perfect,

risk-free environment for their children. They loved us, sure. But they didn't feel obligated to spend every waking minute running interference between us and the world. They were parents, but they were not engaged 24/7 in what we now call "parenting," this all-consuming job we have created, featuring many crucial child-rearing requirements that my parents' generation was blissfully unaware of.

They didn't go to prenatal classes, so they didn't find out all the things that can go wrong when a person has a baby, so they didn't spend months worrying about those things. They just had their babies, and usually it worked out, the way it has for millions of years. They didn't have car seats, so they didn't worry that the car seat they just paid \$249 for might lack some feature that the car seat their friends just paid \$312 for *does* have. They didn't form "play groups" where they sat around with other new parents watching their babies drool and worrying that their drooling baby was behind some other drooling baby in reaching whatever critical childhood development stage they read about in their thirty-seven parenting handbooks written by experts, each listing hundreds, if not thousands, of things they should worry about.

It would never have occurred to members of my parents'

generation to try to teach a two-year-old to read; they figured that was what school was for. And they didn't obsess for years over *which* school their kids should attend, because pretty much everybody's kids went to the local schools, which pretty much everybody considered to be good enough. They didn't scheme and connive and nag the school administrators to make sure their kids got certain teachers; their kids got who they got, and if they didn't get the best teacher, hey, that was part of life. The parents didn't hover around the school keeping an eye on their kids and interfering whenever they felt their child was not getting the absolute best whatever. They didn't know every grade their child got on every test. They found out how their child was doing when the child brought home a report card. If the grades were bad, they didn't march into the school and complain that the school had failed their child. They told their child to shape up, and they maybe even—prepare to be horrified—gave their child a smack on the back of the head. They didn't worry that this would scar the child psychologically for life.

They didn't worry that their children would get bored, so they didn't schedule endless after-school activities and drive their kids to the activities and stand around with other parents watching their kids engage in the activities. Instead,

they sent their kids out to play. They didn't worry about how or where they played as long as they got home for dinner, which was very likely to involve gluten.

If a kid played a sport, the parents *might* go to the games. But they didn't complain to the coach that their kid wasn't playing enough, or make fools of themselves by getting into fights with other parents or screaming at the referee. It just wasn't that big a deal to them. It was kids playing games.

I'm not saying my parents' generation didn't give a crap. I'm saying they gave a crap mainly about big things, like providing food and shelter, and avoiding nuclear war. They'd made it through some rough times, and now, heading into middle age, building careers and raising families, they figured they had it pretty good. Not *perfect*, but pretty good. So at the end of the workweek, they allowed themselves to cut loose—to celebrate their lives, their friendships, their success. They sent the kids off to bed, and they partied. They drank, laughed, danced, sang, maybe stole a piece of an IBM sign. They had fun, *grown-up* fun, and they didn't feel guilty about it.

Whereas we modern parents, living in the era of Death by Handshake, rarely pause to celebrate the way our parents did because we're too busy parenting. We never *stop* parenting. We are *all over* our kids' lives—making sure they get

whatever they want, removing obstacles from their path, solving their problems and—above all—worrying about what else will go wrong, so we can fix it for them. We're in permanent trick-or-treat mode, always hovering eight feet away from our children, always ready to pounce on the apple.

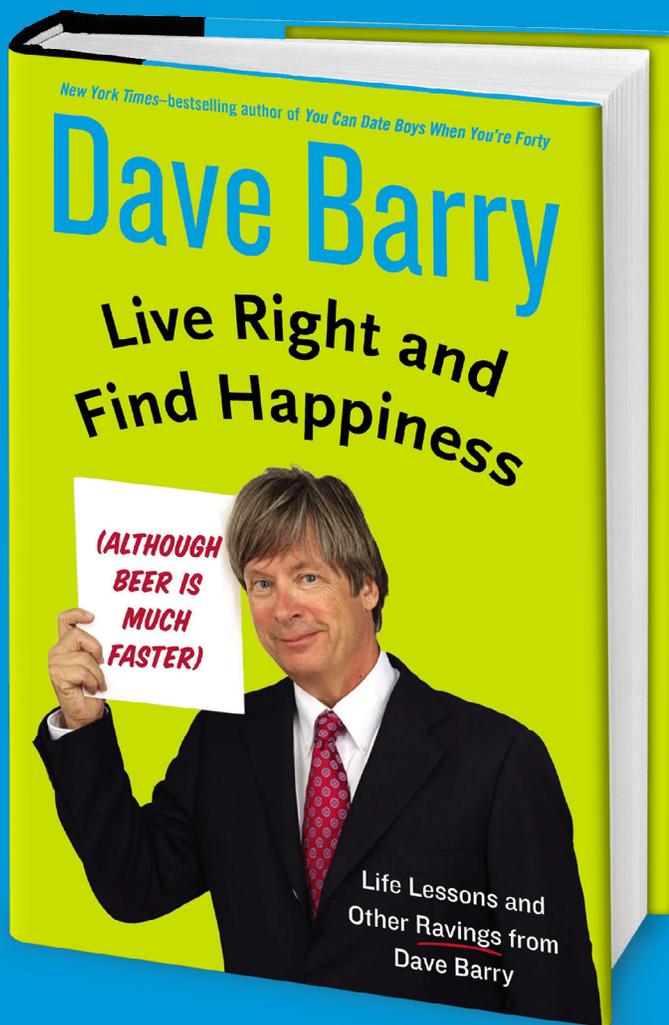
Yes, we've gotten really, really good at parenting, we Boomers. This is fortunate, because for some inexplicable reason a lot of our kids seem to have trouble getting a foothold in adult life, which is why so many of them are still living with us at age thirty-seven.

They're lucky they have us around.

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