

Volume 1

BREAKING AGE

Observations of an Octogenarian



Pat Whitty

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Breaking Age

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Dedication

*To my two muses, my wife, Debbie and dear friend Laura
who relentlessly pushed me with love to finish this project.*

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Introduction

“There is a time in every person’s education when he or she arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till. The power which resides in her is new in nature, and none but she knows what that is which she can do, nor does she know until she has tried.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

“Breaking Age” is an invitation to join me in a heartfelt conversation as I observe my own life and the lives of others. As an octogenarian, I have reached a point where the mirror reflects a face that has weathered the passage of time. The mirror does not reflect my inner state that is much younger than my outer state, but still grappling with the challenges of aging, societal expectations, and the desire to continue making a meaningful contribution.

In the beginning, time and culture are our friends. We have all the time in the world, and our culture loves young people. At one point, usually around 40 for most

of us, we become aware that time is a finite resource and our culture is starting to work against us. We're expected to slow down, suffer health problems, retire, and limit our contributions to our small circle of family and friends. Too many of us are running out the clock thinking of all the things we could have done. Time takes its toll on our bodies, while culture takes its toll on our souls.

Do you have unfinished business in your life? Unfulfilled dreams? Creative ideas that haven't been expressed? Are there people in your life who need to be forgiven, including yourself? Do you sometimes feel like you've "missed the bus"? Does it seem like the world is moving ahead at a dizzying pace, and you feel left behind? Do you hear a voice saying, "I'm too old" or "I don't have enough time left?" The clock seems to run faster as we get older, doesn't it? I ask these questions because I have answered "Yes" to all of them, and as I open this conversation with others, "Yes" seems to be a common answer.

I first became aware of entering a new phase of life when a man asked me if I was retired instead of the usual question, "What do you do?" This experience exposed me to the discrimination that many people face in our culture every day based solely on their appearance. It made me realize that in order to stay relevant and engaged in the world, I needed to outsmart the culture that categorizes and stereotypes individuals based on age. I couldn't change the culture, as ageism is deeply embedded in our society, but I could navigate my way through it by rejecting my own internal ageism and reframing my

conversation around aging.

When I told a friend that it wasn't the right time to write a book, she responded, "What do you mean it's not the right time? You're f#\$%ing 81 years old, Pat!" Her words made me realize that it was time to stop talking and start taking action. Despite my inner critic telling me that I didn't have anything worthy to say in a book, I had to silence the background conversation holding me back.

"I can't write the book I want to write, but I can and will write the book I am capable of writing... I will forgive myself." These words from Anne Patchett, an accomplished author of nine novels, resonated with me. This is the book I am capable of writing. It may not be a scholarly and extensively researched work, but rather a collection of my thoughts as I witness my own life and the lives of others. It is a compilation of the lessons I've learned while pursuing my purpose of helping others thrive in the second half of life. *Breaking Age* is about breaking through those mindsets that hold us back. It's about asking beautiful questions that point us in the direction of the life we want.

It is often said that we shape our lives through the questions we ask. In Mary Oliver's poem, "A Summer's Day," she poses a haunting question: "*So tell me, what is that you plan to do with your one wild and precious life.*" This question both inspired and annoyed me. It reminded me that even in my eighth decade, I still have the ability to make something meaningful out of the rest of my life. It annoyed me because I didn't have a clear answer to that question. I realized that the best questions do not

have clear answers; instead, they open us up to the messages the universe is trying to convey.

As Joseph Campbell said in “The Hero’s Journey”, the first step is the call to adventure. I believe we are all hearing the call. For some of us it is so loud that we can’t ignore it. For others it is a faint voice in the distance, but it is there. According to Campbell, the second step is to refuse the call. It is in our nature to resist that which is not familiar or outside our comfort zone. Some of us will heed the call and cross the threshold into the unfamiliar world where we will encounter mentors, helpers, or signposts that guide us on our journey.

This book is for those who are hearing the call, while standing in front of the mirror questioning their place in a society that often overlooks their potential. It is for individuals who refuse to accept the notion that their best years are behind them, and who seek to navigate the challenges and seize the opportunities that lie ahead.

If you’re in the second half of your life, feeling left behind, and wondering what’s next, this book might be for you. It is not a self-help book filled with empty clichés and worn-out bromides. There are no formulas for success or happiness. It is a collection of “snackable” thoughts that I have compiled as I ponder what I am going to do with the rest of my wild and precious life. It’s a book that you can open to a random page and find a two or three-minute article that might start a conversation within yourself or one that you could share with others. You might even keep it in the bathroom. Doesn’t everyone have a bathroom book? It is an honest and practical

exploration of the skills, perspectives, and mindsets necessary to flourish during the second half of life.

Drawing from personal experiences and the wisdom gained from those who have embarked on this journey before us, I offer insights on finding purpose, adapting to change, nurturing relationships, and embracing continuous growth.

Regardless of where you find yourself on the timeline of life, this book encourages you to reject society's limited expectations and discover the vibrant possibilities that await. It is a reminder that aging is not a reason to give up, but rather an opportunity to uncover new passions, deepen connections, and continue contributing to the world around us.

Neil deGrasse Tyson, American astrophysicist, author, and science communicator speculated that the moon landing might have had a significant influence on the creativity and success of Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, who were young teens at the time. It expanded their consciousness and allowed them to see what is possible. It is my hope that this book will also introduce new ideas into your consciousness and spark an inner conversation about what is possible in your own life.

I hope you will find a place for this book on your desk or bookshelf, where you can easily pick it up, open it to a random page, and find inspiration.

1

Dancing in the Rain

It was raining. My 9-year-old granddaughter said, “Hey Pop Pop, let’s dance in the rain.” I responded with, “No, Parker. We’ll get soaking wet.” She responded, “Please, Pop Pop.” In my 79-year-old wisdom, I said, “No, Parker. You’ll catch your death of cold.”

We went into the garage, pulled up a couple of chairs and watched the rain. She got up and put her hand under a stream of water coming off the roof. “I love the rain” she said wistfully. “Look at the raindrops on the driveway. It looks like little diamonds.”

I suddenly felt like the grumpy old man I had been trying so hard to avoid. Why couldn’t I dance in the rain?

I said, “Parker, the next time it rains, I’ll dance in the rain with you,” thinking that I could somehow extract myself from the embarrassment of denying her the pleasure of dancing in the rain.

A few months later, she was staying with us, and it rained. She said, “Pop Pop, remember when you promised me that you would dance in the rain with me?” I

smiled reluctantly, and said, “Yes.”

We danced in the rain, and it was joyful. We chased each other, playing tag in the rain, dancing, laughing, and feeling this connection with each other that bridged the generations. We got soaking wet. We didn’t catch cold.

If you’re looking for God, open your door, go outside and dance in the rain with a child. You’ll find him/her in every drop of rain, the spontaneous smile and laughter of a child, and maybe in yourself.

2

How Does Your Garden Grow?

*Mary, Mary quite contrary
How does your garden grow?
All the flowers, all the colors
All in a perfect row
First the seeds
And then the water
Keeping a little space
Daisies here, roses there
Each one has their place*

How does your garden grow? Are you tired of being labelled into a generational category? Millennial, Gen X, Y, Z? Or, in my case, The Silent Generation? These categories imply that people of my age are mere spectators instead of active participants in our culture. To add insult to injury, training programs are designed to educate us about these categories and how to navigate them.

Why not brand yourself as a Perennial?

In the world of plants, perennials are known for their enduring nature, returning year after year with resilience and beauty. Adopting a perennial mindset can lead to fulfilling and lasting personal growth. Here are a few principles to help you embrace the essence of being a perennial in your own life.

Root Yourself in Values: Perennials have deep roots, providing stability and nourishment. Similarly, anchor yourself in your core values. Knowing what truly matters to you will serve as a compass, guiding your decisions and actions in a meaningful direction.

Adaptability is Key: Perennials weather changing seasons effortlessly. Embrace adaptability in your life; learn to navigate challenges and uncertainties with flexibility. Adapting doesn't mean compromising your values; it involves finding new ways to stay true to them in different circumstances.

Continuous Learning and Growth: Perennials continuously evolve, adapting to their environment. Foster a mindset of lifelong learning. Seek out new knowledge, experiences, and perspectives. Embrace challenges as opportunities for growth, knowing that learning is a lifelong journey.

Nurture Relationships: Perennials often thrive in symbiotic relationships with other organisms. Similarly, prioritize and nurture your relationships. Surround yourself with people who support your growth and inspire you to be your best self. Cultivate connections that stand

the test of time.

Practice Resilience: Perennials endure harsh conditions and bounce back. Develop resilience by viewing setbacks as opportunities to learn and grow. Rather than seeing challenges as roadblocks, consider them stepping stones to becoming a better, stronger individual.

Live Mindfully in the Present: Perennials don't rush their growth; they bloom in their own time. Practice mindfulness by being fully present in the moment. Enjoy the journey of personal development without fixating on the destination. Celebrate small victories and savor the beauty of each season in your life.

Contribute to Your Ecosystem: Perennials often play a role in supporting their ecosystems. Likewise, find ways to contribute positively to your community and the world around you. Your actions, no matter how small, can have a lasting impact. Can you still smile? Share that with the world. A lot of people need it.

Being a perennial is about embracing the cyclical nature of growth, learning, and adaptation. By cultivating these qualities, you can navigate the seasons of life with grace and resilience, ensuring that your personal journey is as enduring and beautiful as the most steadfast perennial garden.

3

Languishing or Flourishing

“**F**lourishing” and “languishing” are two beautiful words, with a pleasant “ish” in the middle and an “ing” at the end. Both words roll off the tongue effortlessly. However, one carries a beautiful meaning while the other does not. They both describe states of being that we might find ourselves in. Let’s take a closer look at each one.

Languishing is a state where everything is seemingly fine, but there is a lingering sense that there could be more. The pain of unhappiness may have dissipated, but a feeling of incompleteness remains. Our life isn’t deteriorating, but it’s also not improving. We find ourselves stuck and hesitant to make a change because the potential discomfort of change does not yet outweigh the discomfort of remaining the same.

Flourishing is a state of being where a person lives a good, fulfilling life with a sense of purpose. It is a state of well-being encompassing physical and mental health

and social and emotional well-being. We're not getting older. We're getting better.

There are many different definitions of flourishing, but some of the common elements include:

- **Positive emotions:** Flourishing people experience many positive emotions, such as happiness, joy, love, and gratitude.
- **Meaning and purpose:** Flourishing people have a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives. They know what they value and are working towards something they believe in.
- **Positive relationships:** Flourishing people have strong and supportive relationships with family, friends, and loved ones.
- **Self-acceptance:** Flourishing people accept themselves for who they are, with their strengths and weaknesses. They are not constantly striving to be someone they are not.
- **Resilience:** Flourishing people can bounce back from setbacks and challenges. They do not let difficult experiences define them.

Flourishing is not a destination; it is a journey. We can all work towards it, no matter where we are in our lives. There are many things that we can do to increase our own flourishing, such as:

- **Practicing gratitude:** Taking the time to appreciate the good things in our lives can help us to focus on the positive and to feel more content.

- **Connecting with others:** Spending time with loved ones and building strong relationships can help us to feel supported and loved.
- **Helping others:** Helping others is a great way to find meaning and purpose in our lives. It can also make us feel good about ourselves and connect us to our community.
- **Taking care of ourselves:** Taking care of our physical, mental, and emotional health is essential for flourishing. This includes eating healthy, getting enough sleep, and exercising regularly.
- **Setting goals:** Having goals gives us something to strive for and helps us feel a sense of accomplishment. When we achieve our goals, it can boost our self-esteem and make us feel more confident.

Flourishing is not an instant process. It requires time, effort, and dedication. However, the rewards are worth it. Flourishing is a state of being that can bring us immense joy, satisfaction, and fulfilment in our lives...If we desire it and are willing to pursue it.

On a recent Zoom call, a woman in her sixties confided in us that she had spent her entire life in the same small town, surrounded by the same people. While some might view this as an idyllic life, it wasn't fulfilling for her. She wanted to travel, explore different parts of the world, and experience other cultures. Her life felt limited, but she was hesitant to make it bigger. However, she had two requirements to break free from her current situation and move towards a more fulfilling life. She

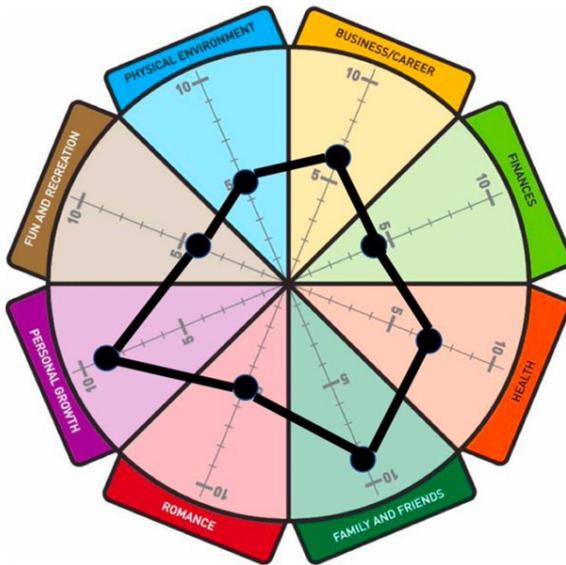
knew where she was and where she wanted to go. Life is comparable to Google Maps in many ways. It cannot guide us unless it knows our current location and our desired destination.

Getting from here to there - from languishing to flourishing

Getting from here to there is easy if we're going to the grocery store. It can be more challenging if we're trying to get to a better place in our lives. When we set out to go to the grocery store, we know where we're going and usually know what we want when we get there. It's not always that clear in our life. It requires a little more thought.

“A journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step.”—Lao Tzu

Here's a first step that might help focus our attention on what we want. The graphic below represents eight broad categories that are important to our well-being and happiness. Each category has a scale that measures our satisfaction on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being very unsatisfied and 10 being very satisfied. Take some time and consider each category. Ask yourself, “How satisfied am I with this area of my life?” Put a dot on the scale that represents your level of satisfaction with that area of your life. Now, connect the dots. Your wheel might look something like this.



Let's stop briefly and use a metaphor to see what we have here. Imagine this was a wheel on your vehicle to get through life. It would be a bumpy and unpleasant ride. If your ride through life isn't as smooth and rewarding as you'd like it to be, this wheel might point out some opportunities to bring things into balance.

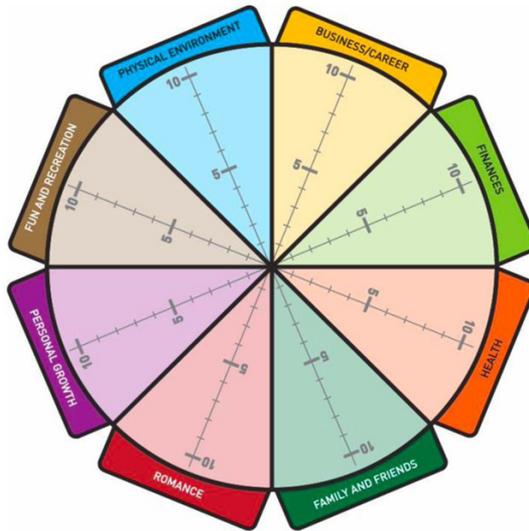
If you've made it this far, it's time for you to take a close look at the different areas of your life and ask yourself,

"How satisfied am I with this area of my life?" Here is a blank wheel waiting for you to mark it up.

This is a personal and private exercise. Nobody needs to see it but you. As you carefully consider the current state of your life in each area, tell the truth. This is for your eyes only right now. Ask yourself, "Is this the life I truly want for myself?" Are you really being the person

you want to be in your relationships, your health, and the way you go through every day of your life? Be brutally honest with yourself. Nobody is watching.

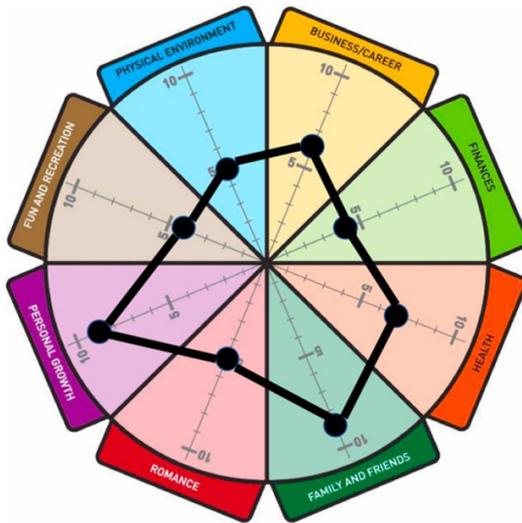
Here's your blank wheel. Get a pencil and think about your level of satisfaction in each of these areas. Mark a dot, then connect the lines.



Your finished wheel might be a variation on one of the three themes below. Going from left to right, the first wheel represents a balanced but unsatisfactory life. This person has settled for a lot less than life is willing to offer. The middle wheel represents a balanced and moderately satisfied life. This person is at a critical stage in the process of creating the life they want. We'll come back to that later. I asked a group recently what the third wheel might indicate. Someone quickly replied, "She's lying." That was a good answer because none of us are as good as we think we are or as bad as we think we are.



Your wheel probably looks closer to this one, which happens to be the wheel that I did before I started writing this post.



Despite all the work I've done, all the books I've read, all the seminars I've attended, and all the successes I've had on my journey, I'm still a work in progress. At the ripe old age of eighty-one and a half, I often think about a scenario at the funeral home when my family makes the arrangements, and the funeral director asks who would like to deliver the eulogy. I imagine an awkward moment when everyone looks around nervously at each other because nobody knows what they would say.

You think about things like that when you get older. If I create my life as art, I want to leave something behind that might hang in the virtual museum of life that would inspire others to create their masterpiece.

If you're still reading and you're interested in creating your masterpiece, let's go to the next step.

Where do I begin?

“Your vision will become clear only when you look into your own heart. Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside, awakes.” —Carl Jung

The artist begins with a sketch. The sketch roughly estimates what's in their mind, but it's not the finished product. The sketch points them in the direction of their vision. Once they begin the work, they continuously revise and improvise.

Let's begin like an artist—with a sketch. Deciding exactly what we want in each of these areas might be overwhelming, and we might not know. If you don't know exactly what you want, think about how you want to feel in each area and the qualities and conditions that must exist for you to be more satisfied in that area of your life. Jot down notes as the ideas come to you. Don't worry about grammar, spelling, or neatness. Your page might look messy, but that's the way sketches are. Some huge projects in history started with a sketch on a napkin at lunch.

Here's your homework:

- Make an agreement with yourself to devote 30 to 60 minutes to doing this exercise.
- Find a quiet space where you will not be interrupted.
- Get into a contemplative/creative state of mind. (Play soft quiet instrumental (only) music.)
- Give yourself permission to dream.
- Focus principally on your health to begin. Without health, none of the other things are possible. How do you want to feel? How do you want to look? What do you want to weigh?

Ask yourself...

- What do I want?
- Who do I want to become?
- Where do I want to go?
- Who do I want to help?
- What kind of health do I want?
- How do I want to feel?

Or ask:

- What would I accomplish if I knew I couldn't fail?
- How would my life change if I didn't have to worry about time or money? What would I do differently?
- What important things would I do if I only had one more year to live?
- How do I want to be remembered?

These questions will generate ideas. Some of these ideas will be small, some modest, some big, and some may be outrageous. Write them all down. You may have

literally hundreds of wishes, wants, and needs written down. That's what should happen. We create our lives by the questions we ask.

You may not know what you want in each of these areas, and that's alright. That's why we start with a sketch. However, you probably know how you want to feel in these areas. Start there. Stephen Covey said, "Begin with the end in mind." Make the feeling the end, then back into the concrete things that will bring about that feeling.

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower

—Dylan Thomas

There is a force in all of us that is trying to drive the flower of our lives, but we all too often block that force with our negative and self-limiting mindsets. That force is the source of our flourishing. We can unblock that force by thinking more about what we want and less about what we don't want. After all, we're going to get whatever we think about . . . whether we want it or not.

4

Do You Have Rizz?

Oxford University Press, the world's second-oldest academic press and the publisher of the Oxford English Dictionary, has named "Rizz" the 2023 Word of the Year.

How did I miss that? I've never heard the word until now. Rizz is Gen Z slang for charisma . . . or is it chaRIZZma? It means having style, charm or attractiveness, or the ability to attract a romantic or sexual partner. It beat out contenders like situationship, prompt, de-influencing and (yes) Swiftie.

If you're a Quadragenarian, Quinquagenarian, Sexagenarian, Septuagenarian, Octogenarian, or Nonagenarian (look them up), you may feel left out. But wait, there's more. Taylor Swift was named Person of the Year by Time Magazine.

What are we to do amid all this popular culture and Rizz oozing out of every pore of the beautiful people we see celebrated in the media? Is Rizz unattainable for us in midlife, or do we even care?

Taylor Swift is a role model for a whole generation. Who are the role models for us in the second half of life?

Here are a few second-half-of-life role models with a special kind of Rizz that makes Taylor Swift look shallow. (no disrespect to Taylor and her huge talent)

Harrison Ford. At 81, he has just completed another Indiana Jones movie. He exudes the kind of Rizz that comes from a life of experience and being comfortable in his own skin. In the second half of life, Rizz is wisdom. When asked recently about the special face cream he uses to maintain his youthful appearance, he answered, “Soap and water.”

Helen Mirren: At 77, she has a special kind of Rizz that comes not only from her physical beauty but from a person who has aged beautifully. Inner beauty will always overpower external beauty.

Judi Dench: At 88, she lights up the screen with a gravitas from someone who knows who she is.

Robert Deniro: At 79, he just completed a major movie with Martin Scorsese, who has his own special brand of Rizz. Deniro has so much Rizz that he hardly needs to talk when he appears on the late-night shows.

What about those “ordinary” people in our life who are “Rizzy?” (I just made up that word.)

Do you have some second-half-of-life role models?

5

Pro Tips for Pro-Aging

Chip Conley, the founder of the Modern Elder Academy (MEA), has initiated a conversation about a phrase that deserves more air time in our culture - pro-aging. There is much talk about anti-aging, an unattainable goal despite our efforts. The anti-aging market is valued at 70 billion dollars and is expected to reach 90 billion by 2028. This suggests that many people are running away from something that will eventually catch up to them.

MEA is the only place I know that is promoting pro-aging, helping people get over that mid-life barrier that shows up around 40-50 and enables them to continue an upward trajectory in the second half of life.

I want to jump on the bandwagon of this pro-aging conversation and do my part to counteract the narrative that our life begins to decline in the second half.

Here are nine pro tips for pro-aging from Dan Buettner, author of *The Blue Zones*, which has found its way into the mainstream culture as a topic of conversation if not yet a change in behavior.

You've probably heard about the Blue Zones, areas in which people live exceptionally long lives: Okinawa, Japan; Sardinia, Italy; Nicoya, Costa Rica; Ikaria, Greece, and Loma Linda, California.

Buettner interviewed 263 people ages 100 or older and found that the world's longevity champions conduct themselves based on what he calls the "Power 9."

Here are nine non-negotiables that help add years to their lives and could do the same for you:

1. Move naturally

The world's longest-lived people don't pump iron, run marathons, or join gyms. Instead, they live in environments that constantly nudge them into moving.

They grow gardens and don't have mechanical conveniences for house and yard work. Every trip to work, a friend's house, or church starts with a joyful walk.

2. Purpose

The Okinawans in Japan call it "ikigai," and the Nicoyans in Costa Rica call it "plan de vida." Both translate to "why I wake up in the morning."

Residents in every Blue Zone had something to live for beyond just work. Research even shows that knowing your sense of purpose can add up to seven years to your life.

3. Downshift

Even people in the Blue Zones experience stress, which can lead to chronic inflammation and has been associated with every major age-related disease.

But they have routines that shed stress: Okinawans take a few moments each day to remember their ancestors, Adventists pray, Ikarians take a nap, and Sardinians have happy hour.

4. The 80% rule

“Hara hachi bu” — the 2,500-year-old Confucian mantra that Okinawans say before meals — reminds people to stop eating when their stomachs are 80% full.

People in the Blue Zones eat their smallest meal in the late afternoon or early evening, and they don’t eat any more the rest of the day.

5. Plant slant

Beans, including fava, black, soy, and lentils, are the cornerstone of most Blue Zones diets. Meat is eaten an average of only five times per month and in a serving of three to four ounces, about the size of a deck of cards.

6. Wine at 5 p.m.

People in Blue Zones, even some Adventists, drink alcohol moderately and regularly. Moderate drinkers outlive non-drinkers.

The trick is drinking one to two glasses daily with

friends and/or with food. And no, you can't save up all week and have 14 drinks on Saturday.

7. Belong

All but five of the 263 centenarians belonged to a faith-based community. Denomination doesn't seem to matter. Research shows that attending faith-based services four times per month can add four to 14 years of life expectancy.

8. Put loved ones first

Centenarians in the Blue Zones keep aging parents and grandparents nearby or in the home, which studies show can lower the disease and mortality rates of their children.

They commit to a life partner (this can add up to three years of life expectancy), and they give their children plenty of time and love (this makes the kids more likely to be caretakers when the time comes).

9. Find the right tribe

The world's longest-lived people choose (or were born into) social circles that support healthy behaviors.

Okinawans create “moais” — groups of five friends that commit to each other for life. Research shows that smoking, obesity, happiness, and even loneliness are contagious. By contrast, the social networks of long-lived people favorably shape their health behaviors.

Which one of these behaviors could you incorporate into your life today that would make a difference in your overall well-being and happiness?

6

I'm not wierd. I'm gifted.

My old friend, Bill Zaner, who passed away at 86 while remaining active and creative, always said, “Getting old is fun. Being old really sucks... unless you do it right.” Bill knew how to do it right. He was an artist and raconteur, charming people until his last day. He taught me how to do it right and has inspired me to stay productive, active, and curious at 81. He was my role model.

Every year, we would visit Big Bend National Park. He would paint, and I would photograph and record videos. I created this video during one of our trips.

Bill didn't just get older; he grew older, improving every year until the end. Instead of fighting or resenting his age, he embraced it and utilized his experience and wisdom to consistently enhance his skills, bringing joy to all those who sought to learn from him.

I hope you have a role model like Bill who can guide you as you navigate the second half of your life.

7

Aging is Cool. Everybody's Doing It.

I was sitting next to Chip Conley at MEA Baja with 16 other people in a circle when he turned to me and asked, “How many of your adult years do you think you have left?” I was puzzled by the question and replied, “I don’t know. I’m 75 now, so I don’t think I have many left.”

This question was significant for me then because I was grappling with the reality of aging and not having accomplished all the things I had wanted to do nor lived the life I had desired. I didn’t realize then how it would reframe my whole concept of aging.

He helped me realize I had more time remaining than I originally thought. This was based on a mathematical formula that considered my expected lifespan. I assumed a lifespan of 98 years and discovered that I still had 23 years of my adult life ahead of me.

A short time later, a second question came into my life in the last line of Mary Oliver’s beautiful poem, *The*

Summer Day: *“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”*

That question haunted me and paired well with Chip’s question about how many years I had left. We create our lives by the questions we ask, and those questions started me on a journey to create the life that I wanted for myself. Since then, I’ve attended a MEA event at least once a year for the last 6 years. I believe it has been a major factor in reaching the age of 81 in good physical and mental health.

I’m excited to announce that Chip Conley’s new book, *Learning to Love Midlife: 12 Reasons Why Life Gets Better With Age*, is about to be released in January. The first chapter is all about the question that started me on my journey.

If you’re crossing that threshold into the second half of life and are unsure if life will get better, you’ll want to get this book. Here’s a preview of the twelve chapters:

THE PHYSICAL LIFE

“I Have More Life Left Than I Thought”

“I’m Relieved My Body No Longer Defines Me”

THE EMOTIONAL LIFE

“I’m Making Friends With My Emotions”

“I Invest in My Social Wellness”

“I Have No More ‘Fucks’ Left to Give”

THE MENTAL LIFE

“I’m Marveling at My Wisdom”

“I Understand How My Story Serves Me”

“I’ve Learned How to Edit My Life”

THE VOCATIONAL LIFE

“I’m Joyously Stepping off the Treadmill”

“I’m Starting to Experience Time Affluence”

THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

“I’ve Discovered My Soul”

“I Feel Like I’m Growing Whole”

Have some fun with a Midlife Check-up that helps you understand which of the 12 Reasons Why Life Gets Better With Age most and least resonates with you. Each question in this exercise could point you toward the next chapter of your life.

8

What Version Are You?

Our journey through life bears a striking resemblance to the evolution of software. From the moment of conception, we embark on a series of updates, each one contributing to the development of our unique ‘code.’ If we can acquire better versions of our software, maybe we can become better versions of ourselves. Let’s explore this analogy as we delve into the major upgrades and transformative experiences that shape our human existence.

0.001: The Conception Stage

In the world of software, this would be the equivalent of the development stage—a raw, initial version with the potential for greatness. Similarly, the first moments of life, the gestation period, set the foundation for the entire human experience. Just as code is written and refined during the development phase, our genetic code is established, laying the groundwork for the adventure that lies ahead.

1.0: Birth - The Release Version

Birth marks the release of the first stable version of the human software. With it, we enter the world as a fully functional ‘1.0’ release. I held my granddaughter in my arms shortly after she was born, and as I looked down at her perfect and beautiful face, I realized that her 1.0 operating system was initially limited to the essential task of keeping her alive. At that moment, I understood that life was programming her, writing the code that would largely determine her future. Thankfully, her parents are skilled programmers, and she has grown into a happy, intelligent, and affectionate girl who brings immense joy to those around her. However, not everyone is as fortunate. Some of us have been affected by flawed code, and we struggle with it throughout our lives.

According to the Enneagram, when it comes to human nature, we are born with at least 9 inherent flaws, often referred to as “original sin”: sloth, anger, pride, deceit, envy, avarice, fear, gluttony, and lust. Throughout our lives, we have the potential to experience all of these flaws, but each individual has a tendency towards one of them that persists throughout their life.

1.1, 1.2, 1.3, etc: The Schooling Updates

As we advance through school, we encounter minor updates, similar to software patches. Each grade level introduces us to new knowledge, skills, and experiences, gradually improving our understanding of the world. For example, Grade 1.1 might cover basic arithmetic, while

1.2 introduces the joy of reading. During this phase, we rarely experience profound learning that fundamentally transforms us. Even after completing our formal education, we often remain in version 1, albeit version 1.16 or higher.

There comes a time when software becomes outdated. Technology is advancing beyond the capacity of the software to handle it. That happens to us if we choose to remain at version 1. Updates, which merely fix bugs or add minor new features, are insufficient to keep up with the changing world. We need an upgrade that makes a leap to a new version, leaving the old one behind. Some upgrades are chosen voluntarily, while others are imposed on us by life experiences.

There comes a time when we must let go of the person we've always been and take the Hero's Journey to the person we're becoming.

2.0: Transformative Life Experiences

Life is peppered with experiences, which can be compared to the notification on our computer that asks us if we want to upgrade to the new version. Positive or negative, these experiences can shape us into a new and improved version of ourselves if we choose to upgrade to the new version. We all know people who have remained stuck in an outdated version of themselves after being emotionally or physically injured by a life experience. Graduating from college, starting a career, falling in love, divorce, facing adversity, retirement, failure—

each of these is a milestone update opportunity that can propel us forward if we allow them to be our teacher.

Much like software updates bring new features and improved functionality, transformative life experiences contribute to our personal growth, expanding our capacities and understanding. These moments challenge our existing ‘code,’ forcing us to adapt and evolve.

2.1, 2.2, 2.3, etc: Continued Iterations

Following a major upgrade, life continues to offer incremental updates. These iterations, whether small victories or lessons learned from failures, contribute to the ongoing refinement of our personal software. We may not always notice these changes day-to-day, but they accumulate, shaping us into more robust and resilient individuals.

In the grand symphony of existence, our journey through life mirrors the continuous development and refinement seen in software. From the initial conception and development to the stable release and through countless updates and upgrades, our experiences and the lessons we learn contribute to the ongoing evolution of our unique ‘code.’ Embracing the analogy between human and software development, we can appreciate the beauty of growth and the constant pursuit of becoming the best versions of ourselves.

What version are you? When was your last upgrade?

9

I'm thankful for people who are smarter than me.

It's the night before Thanksgiving, and I'm reflecting on the things I'm grateful for as I prepare for the customary dinner table tradition of sharing the blessings we've received. As someone who doesn't easily express emotions, I've always found this ritual uncomfortable. However, it's becoming easier as I grow older.

I'm thankful for all the people in my life who are smarter, more creative, more motivated, kinder, and more spiritually connected than I am. Without these exceptional individuals, I wouldn't be the person I am today. They have shown me what it means to be fully human and motivated me to continue striving toward that goal.

As someone once said, if you're the smartest person in the room, you need to find another room.

"Every person I meet is my superior in some way, and in that I can learn from them" —Ralph Waldo Emerson

One of the biggest rooms for me has been MEA, a midlife wisdom school that has connected me to so many people whom I never would have met if I had not found a bigger room. MEA is definitely one of the things on my list that I am thankful for. I include a link here in hopes that you would take a look at this opportunity and one day you might have an MEA experience.

I'm grateful for my subscribers to this blog. The list is growing. You're helping me overcome my fear of writing which is why I started this blog. I didn't think anyone would subscribe. Much to my surprise, I'm getting new subscriptions almost every day. You'll be in my heart tomorrow as we give thanks.

I wish you all a happy Thanksgiving day surrounded by people you love.

10

Diminisher or Illuminator?

One of my earliest childhood memories is lying in the middle of the kitchen floor, reading the dictionary. My parents would simply step over me without scolding me or sending me out of the kitchen. I believe they may have unconsciously, or perhaps consciously, nurtured my love for reading. Even after 75 years, I still haven't finished the dictionary, but I've completed many other books that have greatly enriched my life. It's difficult for me to imagine living this long without ever having read a book, although many people do.

*A book is an axe for the frozen sea inside us —Franz
Kafka*

The latest book I'm reading, *How to Know a Person*, by David Brooks, has been chipping away at that frozen sea inside me.

Chip Conley, the founder of MEA, a mid-life wisdom school, has said that our purpose in life is to find our

gifts, and then give them away. I think I've been given the gift of reading, and maybe I can give that away by sharing with you what I'm learning.

Brooks breaks through the surface of our thinking and takes us to the deeper levels. After teaching Dale Carnegie Courses for many years and practically memorizing *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, I thought I knew a lot about social intelligence. This book is taking an axe to that notion. I'm just a novice.

For example, he puts people in two categories: Diminishers and Illuminators: *"Diminishers make people feel small and unseen. They see other people as things to be used, not as persons to be befriended. They stereotype and ignore. They are so involved with themselves that other people are just not on their radar screen. Illuminators, on the other hand, have a persistent curiosity about other people. They have been trained or have trained themselves in the craft of understanding others. They know what to look for and how to ask the right questions at the right time. They shine the brightness of their care on people and make them feel bigger, deeper, respected, lit up."*

How do you see yourself? A Diminisher or Illuminator? Of course, none of us want to be a Diminisher. On second thought, I can think of some people in the public eye who seem to take great joy in diminishing others. But, most of us would prefer to be Illuminators. Brooks helps us see how easy it is to diminish others without even realizing it.

A few months ago, I was going through the Starbucks drive-thru to get a cup of coffee on my way to a meeting. The young lady at the window greeted me with a bright smile and cheerfully said, “Good morning, it’s a beautiful day today, isn’t it?” I replied, “Yes, except for all the traffic.” Why did I have to say that? This cheerful girl, who probably serves Diminishers all day long, gave me a gift of her enthusiasm and cheerfulness, which is rarely seen among people who serve the public, and I returned it with a comment that sucked the life out of it.

It could have been a moment that brightened up both of our days if I had enough self-awareness to consider a different response.

Brooks tells the story of Jennie Jerome, who later became Winston Churchill’s mother. It’s said that when she was young, she dined with the British statesman William Gladstone and left thinking he was the cleverest person in England. Later she dined with Gladstone’s great rival, Benjamin Disraeli, and left that dinner thinking she was the cleverest person in England. It’s nice to be like Gladstone, but it’s better to be like Disraeli.

Who are the Illuminators in your life?

11

A Lesson in Leadership ... from a dog

I've been facing some challenges with Willie, our three-month-old AussieDoodle puppy. Like many dogs, he doesn't like the leash. Whenever I take him out for a walk, he sits down after a short distance and refuses to continue walking. I would then go back to where he is sitting and try to persuade him with harsh commands and treats, but it doesn't work. This is disheartening for me because I got Willie with the intention of having a dog I could walk with, and it seems like Willie has different ideas.

I started watching Cesar Millan's videos on YouTube and learned some amazing things, mostly about myself and a little bit about dogs. I discovered that Willie was actually training me, and I was unintentionally responding to his commands instead of the other way around. I realized the importance of showing leadership with Willie. Millan emphasizes that dogs are pack animals and search for a strong leader.

According to Millan, dogs respond strongly to the energy and body language of their owners. He encourages owners to be aware of their own emotional states and to project calm and assertive energy when interacting with their dogs. I learned that I was projecting negative energy to Willie. I also came to understand that Willie is a dog, and I had been treating him more like a person, avoiding actions that might hurt his feelings or make him angry. My main focus was gaining Willie's approval and love.

Today, I decided to try a different approach with Willie. I put the leash on him, took a deep breath, and told myself, "I'm in charge here." I stood up tall, emulating the confident leader that Cesar had described. Then, I began to walk. After a few steps, Willie sat down. Despite feeling the leash tighten, I didn't let it deter me. I continued walking purposefully and confidently. To my surprise, Willie followed me. This pattern was repeated three more times, and each time, I responded in the same manner. Eventually, Willie started walking right alongside me with a relaxed leash. It was the best 30-minute walk we've ever had and a rewarding experience for both of us.

Could dogs teach us about leadership? Cesar Millan says he rehabilitates dogs and trains humans. Most of the "problem dogs" that are brought to him are the result of human behavior. The dog is just being a dog. Maybe we create problem children and employees.

All I know is that we had a great walk together, and I'm looking forward to many more.

12

Get out of the pot . . . now!

You have probably heard of the Parable of the Boiled Frog. According to the parable, if you put a frog in a pot of water at room temperature and gradually increase the heat, the frog will adapt to the gradual changes until it eventually becomes frog soup. While the truth of this parable is uncertain, the concept of adapting to gradual change is real and relevant. Although frog soup may not be appetizing, the idea is important.

About three years ago, I discovered that I was fifty-five pounds overweight. It was a shock to me when I plotted my height and weight on a body mass index chart and realized that I fell into the obese category. I never thought that the word “obese” would describe me. However, the weight gain happened gradually, without me fully realizing it, like the frog in the pot. If I had suddenly woken up one morning fifty pounds overweight, it would have been a wake-up call for me to take action. The body mass index chart was a wake-up call that motivated me to get back to a healthy weight. It would have

been easier if I had not adapted to every pound along the way.

As we age, the frog shows up. The external culture undergoes a gradual shift from a culture of acceptance to a culture of rejection. Simultaneously, the internal culture of our body and mind also undergoes certain inevitable changes.

Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.. —Reinhold Niebuhr

We cannot change the process of aging itself, but we can change our perspective and approach to aging. As the serenity prayer reminds us, there are certain aspects of aging that are beyond our control, while there are others that we can influence and modify. We don't have to adapt to all of the challenges of aging.

Here are a few that we can influence in a positive way:

1. **Happiness:** The u-curve of happiness tells us that we can be happier as we age . . . if we do it right. Happiness is a skill that can be learned. If we are surrounded by unhappy people, there is a good chance that, like the frog, we will adapt to that culture and also be unhappy.
2. **Weight gain:** We live in an obesogenic culture. Like the frog, we adapt to our surroundings. If we lived in one of the Blue Zones, we would probably maintain a healthy weight well into old

age. I grew up believing the myth that people naturally gain weight as they get older. Of course, we will put on a few pounds as we age, but obesity should not be an option.

3. **Muscle loss and weakness.** We lose some strength as we age, and we adapt to the weakness and balance challenges by moving more slowly and adopting a hesitant and unsteady gait. If we lived in a culture that valued exercise, we could maintain strength and walk energetically into the later years of our lives.
4. **Cognitive ability.** Notwithstanding the onset of dementia or Alzheimer's, we think differently as we age. Arthur Brooks, a social scientist and author, has written extensively about the two types of intelligence: fluid and crystallized.

Fluid intelligence is the ability to think abstractly, solve problems, and learn new things. It is often associated with speed of thought and processing power. Fluid intelligence typically peaks in early adulthood and declines with age.

Crystallized intelligence is the accumulation of knowledge and skills over time. It is often associated with wisdom, experience, and judgment. Crystallized intelligence continues to grow throughout life.

In his book *From Strength to Strength*, Brooks argues that people should focus on developing their crystallized intelligence in the second half of life. He believes that crystallized intelligence is more important for happiness

and success in later years than fluid intelligence.

We hang on to fluid intelligence as we age instead of jumping onto the crystallized intelligence curve.

In the hit series, Ted Lasso, Roy Kent, the star soccer player, continued to play despite his age and recurring injuries. Eventually, he was compelled to retire, and he found himself wandering in unhappiness and anger. However, he realized he could utilize his crystallized intelligence and wisdom as a coach. Returning to the field, he played a different game. He rejected the notion that retired individuals were no longer valuable to the world and should fade away quietly.

Maybe we could rephrase the Serenity Prayer: Give me the serenity to accept that I can no longer play the game that I have played throughout my life, the courage to discover a new game, and the wisdom to recognize the right time.

The default state for all of us as we age is to gradually decline into decrepitude as we adapt, like the frog, to our culture. When we were children, we were asked what we wanted to be when we grew up. Maybe it's worth asking how we want to be when we grow old. Getting old is easy, everybody is doing it. Growing old requires the growth mindset of a lifelong learner who is going against the prevailing culture and creating the life they want. The life-long learner jumps out of the pot of water before it is too late.

We need a lighthouse to guide us through the turbulent seas of aging. That lighthouse is a clear vision of

how we want to be as we grow older. We get what we think about whether we want it or not.

“Some men see things as they are and say, ‘Why?’ I dream of things that never were and say, ‘Why not?’ —
Robert Kennedy

Can we navigate the latter half of our lives with creativity, energy, and optimism, utilizing our talents to benefit others? I believe we can if we shift our attention away from the present circumstances and instead focus on our personal lighthouse, which can illuminate the path to what is possible.

By default, we simply get older. By keeping our focus on our lighthouse, we can actively grow older.

How do you want to be in your later years?

13

Your Wild and Precious Life

*“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild
and precious life.” —Mary Oliver*

Mary Oliver’s question, in the last stanza of her beautiful poem “A Summer’s Day,” haunts many of us as we journey deeper into the second half of our lives. For Diana Nyad, it became an obsession. At the age of 28, she failed in her attempt to swim more than 100 miles from Cuba to Florida.

Facing her mortality at the age of 60, as we all do, she was determined to do something with her wild and precious life - to finish what she had started at 28. Four years later, after four more failed attempts, she became the first person ever to swim the 100 miles unassisted from Cuba to Key West, Florida. She did that at age 64.

So I ask you, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

Most of us won’t answer that question with a super-

human feat like Diana Nyad's, but too many people don't ask it as they watch each day of their wild and precious life slip away.

When I was 78 (I hope you live long enough to say that), I sat in a circle with Chip Conley and sixteen other people. Chip asked me how much of my adult life was left. I replied, "I don't know, but probably not a lot." He smiled as if he was thinking, "Yeah, that's what everybody thinks."

He then proceeded to help us all see how much time we had left. He asked me how long I expected to live. I thought about it for a moment and speculated that I would probably live to be 98. He calculated that if my adult life began at age 18, and I lived to be 98, I had 80 years of my adult life available to me. At age 78, I had already used 60 of those years, but still had 25%, or 20 years, of my one wild and precious life ahead of me.

Neil deGrasse Tyson, an American Astrophysicist and writer, once suggested that the moon landing might have played a critical role in the creative development of Steve Jobs and Bill Gates. In their early teens, it planted an idea about the power of technology in their minds that had not been there previously. Once an idea has entered our consciousness, it expands our internal universe, even if we reject it. Chip Conley planted a thought-provoking idea in my head, but it also created a dilemma.

They say that we change when the pain of staying the same becomes greater than the pain of change. My life of sameness wasn't satisfying, but it wasn't painful enough

to push me towards making changes. I didn't want to go back to that mode of striving, surviving, and competing, but I was content with a modest income and had most of the things I truly needed in my life.

Mary Oliver's question was starting to irritate me. Did I have to do anything with the rest of my life? Why couldn't I simply pass the time satisfying my five senses? It seemed like that was what most people my age were doing.

Once an idea enters our consciousness, our internal universe expands even if we reject the idea. My internal universe was expanding, and I started living with that question.

*"We create our lives by the questions we ask" —Nancy
Kline*

Mary Oliver's question combined with Chip Conley's revelation that I still had 25% of my life ahead of me started me on a journey to write the next chapter of my life. I took an inventory of the times in my life when I felt most alive, engaged, useful, and purposeful. I discovered some gifts that I had that could be used in the service of other people even at my age, and maybe because of my age. "I'm too old" was no longer an excuse not to do the things I was still capable of doing.

We all want to be useful, but the culture pushes us out of the game and into the stands to be spectators. There's nothing wrong with being a spectator unless there's some vague feeling that you could be doing more to share your

gifts with others. Do you have an imaginary page in your mind with two columns, one with a heading that says, “I’m glad I did” and the other with a heading that says, “I wish I had?” If your “I wish I had” column is longer than your “I’m glad I did” column, maybe it’s time to ask yourself, “What is it I plan to do with my one wild and precious life?”

14

Mid-Life and Beyond: Discovering Your Relevance

Devote the back half of your life to serving others with your wisdom. Get old sharing the things you believe are most important. Excellence is always its own reward, and this is how you can be most excellent as you age. — Arthur C. Brooks

Remember the days of the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal when people were pondering whether Clinton was still relevant? For anyone, that's a disheartening question to face because it implies a loss of purpose. Whether you hold the highest office in the land or are the unsung hero at the bottom of the corporate ladder, your role carries a sense of significance as you fulfill a vital function. If you were to step down, rest assured, you'd be replaced.

However, many individuals in their later years grapple with a poignant struggle - the feeling of dwindling relevance. They find themselves no longer indispensable

to their workplace, and sometimes even within their own families. What's more, their absence doesn't prompt anyone to fill the void left behind.

Renowned author Richard Leider, in his insightful book "Who Do You Want to Be When You Grow Old?" highlights two critical phases in our lives: the mid-life crisis and the late-life crisis.

The mid-life crisis is marked by a sense of missed opportunities. There's a persistent feeling that life hasn't unfolded as we hoped, and time is rapidly slipping away. Life's trajectory doesn't align with our expectations. The typical remedies, like purchasing a new car or finding a new spouse, often fail to provide long-term satisfaction.

The late-life crisis, on the other hand, is about losing relevance and identity. It's a feeling of hopelessness, a conviction that life is on a downward slope from this point onward. Studies reveal that one out of every three people experiences this crisis. These are the individuals you likely encounter, perhaps even your own parents, and it might include you in the years ahead if you don't transition gracefully into growing old.

As we shift into retirement and advance deeper into the second half of our lives, it becomes evident that this is the ideal time to relinquish our ego-driven operating system. It's time to embark on a spiritual journey, one not necessarily tied to religion, to uncover our true selves and the unique gifts we possess, gifts that can still contribute to the world.

In the latter part of life, it's important to understand

that, unlike in your earlier years, no one will hand you relevance on a silver platter in our culture. You must seize it for yourself. Recognize your talents and wisdom, and use them to assist others on a path you have already traversed. Your relevance persists; you simply need to embrace it wholeheartedly.

15

Meditation is Portable

It's easy to think of meditation as a special ritual that requires a time, place, and equipment such as a bell, pad, incense, silence, and even a guru to lead us through the process. It's nice to have all those things, but not necessary.

When we have a regular meditation ritual of only five minutes a day, we open that space that Viktor Frankl described when he said, "Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space lies our freedom to choose our response."

But, I'm too busy to meditate, you say. Are you too busy to brush your teeth? Of course not, We've established a habit of brushing our teeth. We were taught at an early age that brushing our teeth was an important activity of personal maintenance. We also learned the consequences of not brushing our teeth. My dentist has a sign in his office that says, "Only floss the teeth you want to keep."

Meditation is a habit of mental maintenance that keeps our minds healthy and calm in the midst of the cha-

os of our lives. We know the consequences of a cluttered and stressed mind. We might put a sign in our room that says, “Only meditate with the mind you want to keep.”

Once we discover that space between stimulus and response and get acquainted with it, we realize that it is always with us, and we can access it at any time, even in the midst of chaos.

Too busy to meditate? I would suggest that we’re always meditating. If we’re fixated on a thought such as fear, anxiety, resentment, revenge, envy, unworthiness, lack of purpose, or any of the other afflictive emotions that take us over, we’re meditating, but on the wrong things. We get what we think about whether we want it or not.

*Ours is not the work of
seeking You here or there
Where we think You might be
but of opening the heart’s door,
and when we do this
You cannot resist coming in.
since our opening and You’re
entering are one: You
knock and wait, and
when we open we
find that
You were there all along*

and will not leave us.

— *Meister Eckhart*

As you read this meditation by Meister Eckhart, you can interpret the capitalized “You” any way you want depending on your beliefs. It can be God, the Source, the Universe, or anything else. It doesn’t matter what it’s called.

What matters is knowing that we carry a quiet place within us that holds the answers to many of our life’s challenges, and we can access that place even in the midst of chaos.

16

Why Do We Love Puppies?

If there's one thing that can bring us together in this age of anger and polarization, maybe it's a puppy.

We just got a 9-week-old Aussiedoodle, a cross between an Australian Shepherd and a Poodle. His name is Willie. We took him to the grocery store with us in the shopping cart. People who would ordinarily pass us in the aisle without a second glance would stop and ooh and ahh over him. Conversations would begin, smiles exchanged, and connections made.

What is it about puppies that have this universal appeal?

I asked ChatGPT and got this informative but rather clinical response:

People's love for puppies is a well-documented and widely explored topic, often attributed to a combination of evolutionary, psychological, and emotional factors. Here are some of the reasons that have been discussed

and written about regarding why people love puppies:

5. **Evolutionary Biology:** Some experts suggest that the human tendency to love puppies and other baby animals is rooted in evolutionary biology. The “baby schema” or “cuteness factor” refers to the physical features of infants, both human and animal, that trigger caregiving and protective instincts. These features include large eyes, a round face, and a small nose.
6. **Bonding and Attachment:** The bond between humans and puppies often begins as early as when a person first sees or interacts with a puppy. This attachment is fueled by oxytocin, a hormone associated with bonding and maternal behaviors. The presence of a puppy can increase oxytocin levels in humans, leading to strong emotional connections.
7. **Innocence and Vulnerability:** Puppies are perceived as innocent and vulnerable creatures. Their helplessness and reliance on human care can evoke feelings of compassion, empathy, and a desire to protect and nurture them.
8. **Unconditional Love:** Puppies provide a source of unconditional love and companionship. They are non-judgmental, always eager to be with their owners, and often bring joy and happiness through their playful and affectionate behavior.
9. **Stress Relief:** Interacting with puppies has been shown to reduce stress, anxiety, and even pain.

The act of petting a puppy can release endorphins and lower cortisol levels, making people feel happier and more relaxed.

10. **Social Connection:** Puppies often serve as a conversation starter and social lubricant. People are drawn to puppies and enjoy sharing stories and experiences with others who love them. This social aspect can strengthen bonds among individuals.
11. **Sense of Purpose:** Owning a puppy gives people a sense of purpose and responsibility. Caring for a puppy provides a daily routine, encourages physical activity, and fosters a sense of accomplishment.
12. **Joy and Playfulness:** Puppies are inherently playful and exuberant. Their enthusiasm for life and their boundless energy can bring joy and laughter to the lives of their owners.
13. **Nonverbal Communication:** Puppies communicate primarily through body language and nonverbal cues. This form of communication can be deeply satisfying for humans, as it allows for a unique connection that goes beyond spoken language.
14. **Emotional Support:** Puppies are known to provide emotional support and comfort during difficult times. They are often used as therapy animals to help people cope with various emotional and mental health issues.

We would do well as a species to adopt some of these puppy qualities, don't you think?

17

Breaking Out of the Emotional Prison

Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space lies our freedom to choose our response. — Viktor Frankl

Have you ever had an unpleasant or unwelcome thought appear in your mind, much like an uninvited guest at your door? Thoughts usually don't travel alone. They show up with emotions, and we respond to those emotions in a way that keeps us trapped in a prison of our own making.

As Charles Dickens said, "We forge the chains we wear in life."

Meditation is a powerful tool that can help us break out of that emotional prison and respond to our emotions in a more helpful way. One particularly effective meditation process for emotional healing is called R.A.I.N. This technique, developed by Tara Brach, offers a structured approach to address and work through challenging

emotions. We will explore the R.A.I.N. meditation process and how it can benefit our emotional well-being.

R.A.I.N. is an acronym that stands for Recognize, Allow, Investigate, and Nurture. Each of these steps is integral to the process of mindful self-compassion and healing.

15. **Recognize:** The first step involves acknowledging our emotions. This means identifying and naming what we are feeling without judgment. Often, simply recognizing and labeling an emotion can diminish its intensity and help us gain perspective.
16. **Allow:** After recognizing our emotions, it's essential to allow them to be present without resistance. This step emphasizes accepting our emotions, even the challenging ones, as a natural part of the human experience. We allow ourselves to feel what we feel without self-criticism.
17. **Investigate:** The "I" in R.A.I.N. prompts us to delve deeper into our emotions. We try to understand the source of these feelings. We ask ourselves why we're feeling this way and explore the thoughts, memories, or triggers that might be contributing to the emotion. Investigating our emotions with curiosity can often reveal valuable insights. Our worst emotions can be our best teachers.
18. **Nurture:** The final step is about showing kind-

ness and self-compassion towards ourselves. We might offer comforting words or gestures, much like we would to a friend going through a tough time. Recognizing our common humanity and being gentle with ourselves is essential for emotional healing.

The R.A.I.N. meditation process opens that space between stimulus and response. It offers several significant benefits for emotional well-being:

19. **Emotional Awareness:** R.A.I.N. promotes emotional awareness, helping us become more attuned to our inner world. By recognizing and investigating our emotions, we can gain insights into our thought patterns and behaviors.
20. **Emotional Regulation:** Allowing ourselves to experience emotions without judgment can lead to improved emotional regulation. When we accept our feelings, we can respond to them in healthier ways, rather than reacting impulsively.
21. **Self-Compassion:** The nurturing aspect of R.A.I.N. encourages self-compassion, which is essential for self-growth and healing. Treating ourselves with kindness and understanding can foster a greater sense of self-worth.
22. **Reduced Stress and Anxiety:** Regular practice of R.A.I.N. can reduce stress and anxiety levels. By addressing and processing difficult emotions, we can find relief and develop coping strategies.

23. **Enhanced Problem Solving:** Investigating our emotions can help us better understand the root causes of our challenges. This insight can lead to improved problem-solving and decision-making abilities.

The R.A.I.N. meditation process is a valuable tool for emotional healing and personal growth. By recognizing, allowing, investigating, and nurturing our emotions, we can develop greater emotional awareness, self-compassion, and resilience. This structured approach to meditation empowers us to navigate life's ups and downs with more grace and self-understanding. Whether we're new to meditation or a seasoned practitioner, R.A.I.N. is a technique worth exploring on our journey toward emotional well-being.

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Council of Selves

The Council of Selves is a creative and introspective exercise where you imagine walking into a room and encountering different versions of yourself at various stages of life sitting around a table. Each of these versions represents a different age or point in your future.

One of these versions is glowing. This version of yourself symbolizes the wisest or most enlightened version of you. This version is often seen as having valuable insights or advice to share with your current self.

The exercise can be used for self-reflection, goal-setting, and decision-making. It allows you to explore your aspirations, fears, and potential life paths. By interacting with these different versions of yourself, you can gain insight into your hopes, dreams, and the choices you might make in the future.

To try this thought exercise:

Find a quiet and comfortable place to sit or lie down.

Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths to relax.

Imagine walking into a room. In this room, there is a table, and sitting around this table are different versions of you at various ages or stages of life. You can visualize yourself at different points, such as childhood, adolescence, middle age, and old age.

Focus on one of the images, and imagine yourself approaching that version of yourself. Feel the emotions and thoughts that arise as you encounter these different versions.

After observing some of these versions, turn your attention to the glowing version of yourself. Approach this glowing figure, and ask if they have any wisdom or advice to share with you.

Listen and pay attention to what this glowing self has to say. Their words may provide you with insights, guidance, or encouragement for your present life.

Take your time with this exercise, and feel free to interact with multiple versions and the glowing self if you wish.

When you're finished, you can open your eyes and reflect on the insights and emotions that arose during the exercise. This thought exercise can be a powerful tool for self-discovery and personal growth.

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Reaching Across Generations

United States Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy released a new Surgeon General Advisory calling attention to the public health crisis of loneliness, isolation, and lack of connection in our country. Even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately half of U.S. adults reported experiencing measurable levels of loneliness. Disconnection fundamentally affects our mental, physical, and societal health. In fact, loneliness and isolation increase the risk for individuals to develop mental health challenges in their lives, and lacking connection can increase the risk for premature death to levels comparable to smoking daily.

The physical health consequences of poor or insufficient connection include a 29% increased risk of heart disease, a 32% increased risk of stroke, and a 50% increased risk of developing dementia for older adults. Additionally, a lack of social connection increases the risk of premature death by more than 60%.

This Surgeon General's Advisory lays out a framework for the United States to establish a National Strategy to Advance Social Connection based on six foundational pillars. One of the pillars relates directly to our current project, Generations Over Dinner.

- **Cultivate a Culture of Connection:** The informal practices of everyday life (the norms and culture of how we engage one another) significantly influence the relationships we have in our lives. We cannot be successful in the other pillars without a culture of connection.
- Generations Over Dinner is a unique solution designed to cultivate a culture of connection between different age groups and foster connections that transcend generations. We are excited to bring this initiative to the San Antonio community and beyond.
- **Our vision is simple yet powerful:** we bring together 8 to 10 individuals from various generations, each representing a diverse spectrum of experiences and viewpoints. These individuals gather around a table for a moderated discussion on current topics while sharing a meal. The magic of Generations Over Dinner lies in the safe and respectful environment we create, where every voice is heard, appreciated, and valued. This initiative enables people from various backgrounds to learn from each other, gain new perspectives, and break down barriers that often divide us.

To give you a glimpse of this heartwarming experience, I invite you to watch our one-minute video:

and a short video of some of the participants in our recent G.O.D. event in October

Our goal is to take this event to all of the Senior Centers in San Antonio impacting over 100 people over the next year. We're financing it with donations to my nonprofit organization, Breaking Age. If you would like to help us with this important initiative, we would be grateful for a small donation. Just \$15 will cover one meal. If you're in San Antonio and would like to attend a dinner, we would be honored to have you at the table.

<https://gofund.me/b02b8d6a>

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What Did He Say?

Neil deGrasse Tyson, an American astrophysicist, author, and science communicator, suggested that the moon landing might have had a developmental effect on Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, who were in their early teens at the time. The landing introduced an idea into their consciousness that hadn't existed before. Regardless of their prior interest in the moon or space, witnessing the impossible becoming possible likely expanded their vision and spurred their creativity.

When a new idea emerges, it becomes possible, even if we initially reject it. For instance, the concept of responding to a violent act with non-violence wasn't widely considered until Jesus introduced the radical idea of "turn the other cheek" in his Sermon on the Mount. He said, "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also."

Can you imagine the response to that radical idea 2000 years ago. "What? What did he say? We can't do

that. That can't be what he said. Let's get closer so we can hear better."

This reminds me of a humorous comedy sketch by Monty Python. In the sketch, a large crowd gathers to listen to the Sermon on the Mount, but due to the lack of sound systems at that time, some people at the bottom of the hill turn to those behind them and ask, "What did he say?" The reply they receive is, "He said blessed are the cheesemakers."

But, the idea had entered human consciousness and was available for contemplation and became a possibility. While it is still being rejected 2000 years later, we have seen examples that begin to overrule the primitive side of our nature that sees no other way to respond to violence than an equivalent or greater degree of violence.

What does it mean to turn the other cheek? Is it just an inspirational metaphor or is it to be taken literally? If someone hits me, should I passively let them hit me again? The context of this statement is that Jesus is emphasizing a non-retaliatory and non-violent approach to dealing with offenses. Instead of seeking revenge or responding with violence, he teaches his followers to respond to aggression with grace, forgiveness, and humility. This teaching promotes the idea of not escalating conflicts and seeking reconciliation and peace instead. It is often interpreted as a call to practice non-violence and to respond to hatred and harm with love and understanding.

An eye for an eye seems to be winning over turn the

other cheek. We have a presidential candidate in the modern day who is making revenge and retribution a central theme of his campaign. However, there are some inspiring examples that show us the potential of our humanity:

- In 1996, Nelson Mandela met with Christo Brand, a former prison guard at Robben Island, where Mandela had been incarcerated. Mandela forgave Brand, and the two became friends. This gesture demonstrated Mandela's genuine commitment to reconciliation and his belief in the power of forgiveness to unite a divided nation.
- On May 13, 1981, Pope John Paul II, was shot four times by a would-be assassin named Mehmet Ali Ağca in St. Peter's Square in Vatican City. Ağca was a Turkish national with a history of political extremism. On December 27, 1983, Pope John Paul II visited Mehmet Ali Ağca in Rome's Rebibbia prison. The Pope's visit was seen as a symbol of his commitment to forgiveness and reconciliation. It sent a powerful message to the world about the importance of forgiveness, even in the face of a violent and heinous act.

- South Africa - Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC): The TRC was established in the aftermath of the terrible atrocities committed during apartheid to address the human rights abuses committed during that era. Led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the TRC provided a platform for victims and perpetrators to share their stories and give and receive forgiveness.

- During the Tibetan uprising against Chinese rule in 1959, as the Chinese military moved into Tibet and took control, the Dalai Lama was faced with a difficult situation. He had to escape to India to ensure his safety and to continue his efforts to advocate for Tibetan autonomy and culture. While escaping, the Dalai Lama and his followers were pursued by Chinese troops. At one point, the Dalai Lama's party encountered a group of Tibetan monks who had been captured and were being brutally interrogated by the Chinese soldiers. Despite the danger and the violence surrounding them, the Dalai Lama stopped and demonstrated great compassion. He approached the Chinese soldiers and negotiated for the release of the captured monks. He pleaded with the soldiers to spare the monks and treat them with kindness. Remarkably, the soldiers, whether out of respect for the Dalai Lama or other reasons, ultimately released the monks. This story illustrates the Dalai Lama's unwavering commitment to the principles of non-violence, compassion, and forgiveness. Even in the face of immense suffering and adversity, he advocated for peace and showed compassion not only to his own people but also to those who were perceived as oppressors. The Dalai Lama's approach is deeply rooted in Tibetan Buddhist teachings, emphasizing the importance of compassion, even for one's captors and enemies.

While these examples are inspiring, in the light of recent events in Israel they are like Facebook inspirational posters that we quickly scroll past on our way something we can “like.” We have not yet evolved to a higher state of consciousness where we can respond to such horrific acts of violence with anything but an equivalent or greater act of violence. Is there any other way to respond? I think that’s a question to contemplate.

We give some token consideration to the message of Jesus when we consider proportionality in the planning of war. I must hurt you as you have hurt me, but I will not hurt you more than you hurt me. That’s a small glimmer of hope that we might be overcoming our primitive programming, but it rarely works out that way. If my enemy kills my babies, must I kill their babies in return? Are we brought down to the same level of inhumanity when we respond in kind to violence? Do we bring the universe back into balance with equivalent violence? I don’t think so. We’re pulled back toward our primitive beginnings.

Viktor Frankl famously said, “Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space lies our freedom to choose our response.”

Is it possible for Israel to choose another response? I don’t have a good answer for that, but I’m contemplating it without judgment. I hope you are too.

21

Welcome, Welcome, Welcome

Einstein's thought experiments allowed him to develop his revolutionary theories of relativity, which have had a profound impact on our understanding of space, time, and gravity. Let's do a thought experiment with something not quite so weighty as space, time, and gravity.

Father Thomas Keating, a Trappist monk and a prominent figure in the Christian contemplative prayer movement, wrote the following "Welcome Prayer" as a way to greet the day.

Welcome, welcome, welcome.

I welcome everything that comes to me today, because I know it's for my healing.

I welcome all thoughts, feelings, emotions, persons, situations, and conditions.

I let go of my desire for power and control.

I let go of my desire for affection, esteem, approval, and pleasure.

I let go of my desire for survival and security.

I let go of my desire to change any situation, condition, person or myself.

I open to the love and presence of God and God's action within. Amen.

One might say, "That sounds so nice, but I'm not a Monk. I have to deal with the realities of my life which include unpleasant thoughts, feelings, and a lot of unpleasant people. Let go of my desire for survival and security? Are you kidding? It's a dog-eat-dog world. It's all about survival of the fittest. All I have to do is look around and see that people with power and control have it all. That's what I want. This is a nice little inspirational read, but it's just not realistic, and I'm not sure what I think about God anyway."

That's why this is a Thought Experiment. It's not about doing or believing. It's about thinking and imagining . . . like Einstein.

Imagine a person (not you) who started each day with this Welcome Prayer, and actually did those things throughout the day. What would that look like? How would he or she interact with their environment and other people? How would this person function in our culture of accumulation and ego gratification without being a Monk?

This blog allows interaction in the comments section.

I would love to hear the conclusions of your thought experiment.

22

Getting Old or Growing Old?

Chip Conley, the founder of the Modern Elder Academy, encourages us to “Grow whole, not old.” But what does it mean to grow whole? Many of the people I see at the Senior Center, where I teach technology classes every week, appear to be falling apart rather than growing whole. However, occasionally I encounter individuals who seem to have it all together. They enter the room with bright eyes, a spring in their step, and a genuine eagerness to learn something new. You could say they have aged well, like fine wine. Let’s use wine as a metaphor for the aging process of humans.

Curious about the aging process of wine, I asked ChatGPT for information. It provided me with 10 key factors and changes that occur during the aging of wine. One factor stood out as particularly relevant to the aging of humans: flavor integration. Over time, the different elements of the wine, such as the fruit, oak, and other flavor compounds, can blend together more harmoniously,

resulting in a balanced and well-rounded wine.

A person who has grown whole has integrated the three centers of their being. These centers represent different aspects of human experience and self-awareness:

24. **Head Center (Thinking Center):** This center is associated with intellectual and cognitive functions. It's where thoughts, analysis, and rationality are prominent. People who predominantly operate from their head center may be characterized as analytical, logical, and cerebral. They tend to rely on reason and intellect to make decisions and understand the world around them.
25. **Heart Center (Feeling Center):** The heart center represents emotions, feelings, and interpersonal connections. It's where empathy, compassion, love, and a sense of emotional well-being reside. People who are centered in their heart tend to be in touch with their emotions and prioritize empathy and compassion in their interactions with others.
26. **Gut Center (Instinctual or Body Center):** The gut center is associated with instincts, intuition, and physical sensations. It's where our primal instincts and gut feelings originate. People who operate from their gut center may rely on intuition and instinctual responses to navigate the world. They tend to be attuned to their bodily sensations and may have a strong sense of self-preservation.

Most of us have a home base in one of those centers. It's not that we never visit the other centers, we just rely on our home base for many of our decisions and actions. I'm a head person. I've lived in my head most of my life, analyzing and overthinking everything, unable or unwilling to take action on a project or simply saying spontaneously, "I love you." I'm so grateful for the people I've met in my life who have helped me open these other centers, especially my heart center. Thinking is cool, but feeling is better.

One way to work on yourself is by being present in the body. Another way is by expanding the heart. A third way is by quieting the mind. A balanced, well-rounded, and whole person finds a way to work on all three at the same time.

23

Ageism Awareness Day

Saturday is Ageism Awareness Day. Too bad that we have to dedicate a day to becoming aware of the many ways we insult, embarrass, ignore, and discriminate against older people. But, it's better than nothing.

Ageism is a type of discrimination that involves prejudice against people based on their age. Ageism can operate both consciously (explicitly) and unconsciously (implicitly), and it can be expressed at three different levels: micro-level (individual), meso-level (social networks), and macro-level (institutional and cultural).

The cover of the current issue of *The New Yorker* is an example of macro-level ageism. We hear a lot about institutional racism, but not so much about institutional ageism. We hear about the negative effects of aging every day on the news in today's politics with no mention of the many positive aspects of aging. There are many.

I'm a part of the Silent generation, and I can tell you that there's not a lot of demand for folks in my tribe. In addition, we face as much discrimination as any other "protected" group. The only difference is that it's social-

ly acceptable to discriminate against us. It starts at the lower end of Generation X. Just ask any 40-50-year-old who has lost his/her job how it feels to be left behind. In honor of Ageism Awareness Day, let's take a look at some of the ways jokes. In our politically correct society, it's not OK to make jokes about gays, lesbians, blacks, Latinos, Jews, et al. But everybody loves a good "old Joke". Especially those jokes about old people having sex . . . or not having sex. Stephen Colbert is one of the funniest late-night talk show hosts on the air today, but almost every night he makes a joke about older people, usually the president.

40th birthdays. Aren't those over the hill birthday cards a hoot? And the black balloons. That's when we get the first inkling that we're being left behind.

Stereotyping. I knew I was getting old, but I hoped nobody would notice. Then people started asking me if I was retired when they met me. When I got a senior discount without asking for it, I knew I had entered another world.

The job market. Forget about it. Yes, we're a protected class. The reason we have protected classes is because people want to discriminate based on a variety of factors and age is one of them. Even though it's illegal to discriminate on the basis of age, it's tough to get a job past a certain age. I have two degrees and a wealth of experience with organizational development in large and small corporations, but I feel like a homeless person on the street corner with a sign when I go into the job market. That's unfortunate because the other generations

could learn a lot from me. And, I could learn a lot from them as well.

Coming out. We hear a lot about the feeling of liberation that Gays feel when they can finally be who they are without fear of exclusion. Many of us get to that point with our age. We're embarrassed to tell people our age. It's a liberating feeling to say, "I'm 81, and I'm proud of it."

Old is an adjective that makes any noun worse. Let's take one of the favorite expressions used to describe old people – old fart. let's break that down. A fart is bad enough by itself because we all know what one of those things can do in a room, elevator, or under the sheets. But, old? Let's imagine what it's like after it's fermented in there for a while. This thing that would make any space uninhabitable is used as a metaphor to describe what Tom Brokaw called The Greatest Generation. We can do better.

What do we do? Maybe we can get Woke about aging. Woke is an adjective that means being aware of social inequalities. All change, social or cultural, starts with awareness.

Let's get Woke about ageism.

24

The Dead Zone has Off-Ramps

We have all experienced unhappiness. We are aware when we are unhappy and feel motivated to escape that state. It is said that when the discomfort of remaining the same is greater than the discomfort of change, we are compelled to take action. The anguish of staying unhappy is overwhelming for the majority of us. We take the necessary steps to alleviate emotional or physical pain. At times, these steps are healthy, and other times they are not, but we eventually reach a state that can be described as “not unhappy.”

When we say we are “not unhappy,” we are referring to a state between unhappiness and happiness. We may be comfortable, but some of us have a vague feeling that there is something more for us in life. We may not know exactly what it is or how to achieve it, but we sense its presence.

This feeling aligns with what Joseph Campbell described as “The call to adventure” in his influential work

on The Hero's Journey. Campbell noted that the second step of the Hero's Journey is refusing the call. When we ignore that inner voice urging us toward something greater, we enter what I call "The Dead Zone."

We choose to remain in our ordinary world, anchored to the familiar routines and comfort zones we've always known. Our life unfolds predictably, characterized by a sense of safety and stability. We maintain a steady job, surrounded by the same circle of friends and family, and perhaps even nurture a long-term relationship. However, our existence becomes marked by a subtle longing or a feeling of unfulfillment, as we suppress the inner yearning for something more. We might find solace in the predictable nature of our lives, but deep down, there's a lingeri



Robert Frost said this beautifully in the last stanza of his poem, *The Road Not Taken*.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

After experiencing the loss of my business and going through a divorce, I found myself at a crossroads. I chose the path that seemed familiar - the one that I believed would provide me with security and perhaps even help me recover from the biggest failure in my life. My “good job” as the Dean of the School of Business at a small university turned out to be a dead end, leading to boredom, irrelevance, and a constant state of “not unhappy.” I could hear the call for change, but I ignored it like a telemarketer’s call, sending it straight to voicemail. I was too scared and damaged to take the less traveled path, and I didn’t believe that flourishing was ever possible for me. I’m not even sure if I truly understood what the word meant.

Fortunately, I learned that the road to The Dead Zone has off-ramps that lead to the “road less traveled” There’s a lot less traffic on that road, and it will take you to a much better place if you happen to be a person like me hearing that classic song by Peggy Lee, Is That All There Is?

How did I discover the off-ramps? Let me count the ways:

I developed relationships with people who were obviously flourishing in their lives and learned from their stories

I read books, lots of books, about life transitions.

I took courses, online and in person. I’ve invested thousands of dollars in my personal growth over the last five years.

Meditation has helped me quiet the negative noise in my head so I could hear the call. Forming the habit of sitting still for a few minutes every day and focusing on my breath brought greater clarity to my thinking and brought into focus that fuzzy and difficult question: “What am I supposed to be doing with the rest of my life.”

If you hear Peggy Lee in the background every day singing, *Is That All There Is*, read some books, meet some outstanding people, invest in your education regardless of your age, and sit still once a day and listen for the call. You’ll quickly realize that this is not all there is.

25

A Perfectly Good Verb

It was a good verb. It had a single use with a clear meaning that described a most pleasurable act. It was like a sacred word that could never be uttered aloud in public. God forbid that it would ever be used by a teenager in front of parents. Then it all changed. Somehow this verb morphed into a Noun, Pronoun, Verb, Adjective, Adverb, Preposition, Conjunction, and Interjection that breaks all of the rules of grammar. It became the Swiss Army Knife of words. Another good word to describe this verb is ubiquitous. It's everywhere. So popular that it has its own abbreviation that is immediately recognized. WTF is happening to our language?

While I haven't given in to the frequent, indiscriminate, and public use of the word, it doesn't annoy that part of me that was shaped in a generation that viewed that word as an obscenity. In fact, I've even used it occasionally. We have to make some compromises with the future, don't we?

In a recent conversation with a dear friend, I was making excuses for not starting an important project. I

said it wasn't the right time. She replied, "What do you mean it's not the right time? You're fucking 80 years old!" I'll have to admit that the statement would have lost some of its impact without the ubiquitous "F" word.

That statement has become my silent mantra. It appears silently and privately every now and then to remind me that time is running out. It appeared in full force at my weekend Writer's Room Retreat in Santa Fe last week. A Black woman made a stirring speech about reaching a point in her life where she was no longer apologizing for being Black. That resonated with me because I struggled with being ashamed of my age.

The next speaker asked us to take our name tag that was attached to a lanyard. On the back of the tag, at the top, were the words, "I am a." At the bottom, was the word, "writer." There were three blank spaces between, and we were asked to fill in those spaces with three words that would describe us as a writer. There was a silent work period as we all struggled to find our words.

Then, we were asked to come up on the stage, one at a time, and share our statement in front of 500 people. Yes, it took a long time, and those of us toward the end had a long time to stress about it. When my time came, I stepped on the stage, took the microphone, and said, "I am a fearless, curious, and empathetic writer. Similar to what the others had said. I paused for a moment and said, "I'm fucking 81 1/2 years old. I'm proud of it, and I'm not apologizing for it." All 500 people broke into a loud cheer and applause. Quite a breakthrough for an old guy stuck in the traditional use of language.

I've come to realize that language, like life itself, evolves and adapts with time. While I once held that certain words were sacred and best left unspoken in public, I've learned that language, like ourselves, must make room for change. The transformation of that once-taboo verb into a versatile and ubiquitous presence in our speech is a testament to the fluidity of our linguistic landscape. It serves as a reminder that, as we age, we must also adapt and embrace the shifting tides of the world around us.

26

Lana Turner Syndrome

In 1936, 16-year-old Lana Turner was skipping school and hanging out at a Hollywood drugstore called the Top Hat Malt Shop on Sunset Boulevard. According to legend, a talent agent named William R. Wilkerson spotted her sitting at the counter. Struck by her beauty, he approached her and asked if she was interested in becoming an actress. Supposedly, she was given a screen test and signed to a contract with Warner Bros. shortly after.

We may dream of being discovered or rescued by a benevolent benefactor who sees something in us that we may not see in ourselves. The idea of someone recognizing our potential is enticing, like winning the lottery. However, it's not likely to happen. As a friend once said, "I read *Think and Grow Rich* and thought for two years. Nothing happened."

We might point out that Lana Turner was in the right place at the right time. She was also breaking some rules. However, Lana Turner was stunningly beautiful, a gift she had through no effort on her part. Most of us don't have that gift.

I've learned that my childhood fairy tales are not going to come true without specific intention and action on my part. I have to create the circumstances I want in my life. Nobody is going to do it for me.

During a recent workshop, someone asked, "What is it that you are pretending to not know about yourself?" This question led me to explore an issue that I had been avoiding. I have "father issues." My father passed away suddenly when I was a young teenager, and even before that, we didn't have a close relationship. I always envied people who talked about their loving fathers, who took them fishing or taught them practical skills like changing the oil in a car. In Texas, and maybe everywhere, the stories always start with "My Daddy." I've always thought that it's so nice to hear a grown man refer to his father as "My Daddy."

Sometimes it's not so nice. Living in Texas, I often hear stories about fathers rooted in toxic masculinity. Stories like, "My Daddy beat the shit out of me." It's disturbing to hear that statement said with pride. It breaks my heart to think about their children who suffer because of their father's refusal to recognize the shadow that has been passed down to them.

For many years, I searched for a "father" figure who would adopt me and mentor me to greatness. I had a case of the Lana Turner Syndrome, waiting for someone to see potential in me that I couldn't see in myself. However, that person never showed up, and instead, I attached myself to men whom I admired as father figures. Unfortunately, they never seemed as attached to me as I was

to them.

At 81 years old, that feeling still lingers within me, but bringing it into clear awareness has weakened its hold considerably. In psychology, this is known as our shadow, the unconscious factors that influence our lives. Shadows thrive in darkness and don't like the light.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, who died in 1882, knew the importance of doing our own work to find out who we are:

“There is a time in every person’s education when he or she arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till. The power which resides in her is new in nature, and none but she knows what that is which she can do, nor does she know until she has tried.”

— Ralph Waldo Emerson

Socrates, who died in 399 BC had it figured out long before Ralph Waldo Emerson. Socrates is famously associated with the dictum “Know thyself.” The concept of “Know thyself” was central to Socratic philosophy and can be understood in a few key ways:

27. **Self-Examination:** Socrates believed that a person should engage in self-examination and introspection to gain a better understanding of
-

themselves. This involves questioning one's beliefs, values, and actions to discover the true nature of the self.

28. **Humility and Ignorance:** Socrates emphasized the idea that true wisdom comes from recognizing one's own ignorance. By acknowledging what one does not know, a person can begin the process of learning and self-improvement.
29. **Moral and Ethical Reflection:** Socrates was particularly interested in moral and ethical matters. He believed that by knowing oneself, individuals could better understand their own moral principles and the right course of action in various situations.
30. **Questioning Assumptions:** Socrates was known for his method of questioning, often referred to as the Socratic method. Through a series of probing questions, he encouraged individuals to critically examine their beliefs and assumptions, leading to a deeper understanding of themselves and their beliefs.

Socrates' "Know thyself" is a call to engage in self-reflection, to question one's beliefs, and to strive for self-improvement through the pursuit of wisdom and knowledge.

I'm grateful for all of the "fathers" that I have met in my life who have shared their wisdom with me and served as role models. I hope you have someone in your life who is your mentor on your Hero's Journey.

What is it that you are pretending to not know about yourself?

27

Brown Shoes in a Roomful of Tuxedos

It's Friday afternoon, and I've arrived at the El Dorado Hotel & Spa in Santa Fe, NM to attend the Writer's Room Retreat. I've had some misgivings about attending this event because I thought I would be surrounded by professional, published writers, and I would feel like George Goebel on the Tonight Show in 1969, as he sat with Johnny Carson, Bob Hope, and Dean Martin. He said, "Did you ever get the feeling that the world was a tuxedo and you were a pair of brown shoes?"

I felt like a pair of brown shoes in a roomful of tuxedos at first. I seemed to be older than everyone else, and not nearly as pretty. I was one of the few men in a roomful of 500 women. They were all so intelligent and self-assured with the look of women who have stepped into their place in the world and claimed it. Warrior women.

Then, Anne Lamotte, our first speaker came on stage. A middle-aged woman casually dressed with hair

pulled back like she did it just before stepping on stage. She said, “You’re here to be and discover who you truly are.” Then, I understood why there were so few men here. Guys just aren’t into that stuff, especially in a room full of women.

I thought I was there to discover the mechanics of putting words on a page. After listening to her talk, I realized that writing isn’t about the mechanics of putting words on a page, it’s about the emotions and psychology of putting ourselves on the page. That’s harder than the mechanics.

She said if we’re serious about writing, we have to stop not writing. There was a sigh of recognition in the room as we all knew she was talking to us. Even though she’s reached the pinnacle of success as a writer, she shared that she still struggles to sit down and write. That’s a good lesson for life as well as writing. If we’re serious about life, we need to stop not doing the things we know we need to do.

Most of our lives are staying one step ahead of the abyss. We think we don’t have time for creative or inner work. We do have the time. We just have to carve it out of our day. She told us not to wait for inspiration. Form the habit of putting your butt in the chair every day and write. Inspiration will show up.

She did get into some mechanics of writing. She said it’s the details that make people human. When we write about a person, describe them with as much detail as possible. I saw another lesson in life here. People are

more interesting when we pay attention to them and really see them.

She said that writing is like driving in the dark with our headlights on. We can only see a short distance in front of us. As we move forward with our writing, we can see what's next. Another lesson for life.

At the end of her talk, she said, "I write to find meaning. I write to find out where I'm headed."

I found meaning in this weekend, and I'm more curious about what I can't see beyond the headlights.

28

Be Yourself

“Your time is limited, don’t waste it living someone else’s life. Don’t be trapped by dogma, which is living the result of other people’s thinking. Don’t let the noise of other’s opinion drown your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition, they somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary.” - Steve Jobs

The quote from Steve Jobs might be an example of enlightenment. Some people find it early in life, some later, and some never. As Richard Rohr has said, some find it in the last five minutes on their deathbed in a hospice. He calls it enlightenment at gunpoint.

I am grateful for the people in my life who have helped me in my journey toward enlightenment so I can experience it before the last five minutes. Writing these short articles is part of my journey toward enlightenment because when I sit down to write I become painfully aware of what I know and don’t know.

One thing I do know is how hard it is to follow that

overused advice to be yourself. How do I be myself if I don't know who I am? All I can do is play the role that other people have given me.

*All the world's a stage, And all the men and women
merely players;*

They have their exits and their entrances;

And one man in his time plays many parts,

His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,

Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms;

And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel

And shining morning face, creeping like snail

Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,

Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad

Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,

Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,

Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,

Seeking the bubble reputation

Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,

In fair round belly with good capon lin'd,

With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,

Full of wise saws and modern instances;

And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts

Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,

With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;

*His youthful hose, well sav'd, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion;
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.*

—Shakespeare

Who am I to question the wisdom of Shakespeare, but maybe we should stop playing the roles that other people have given us and discover the true self behind those roles before we are “sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything. There will be a time when people ask, “Who was he?” That question will only be answered by the footprints we leave behind.

At 81, I am past Shakespeare’s seven ages, and I still wonder who I am or who I will be when I reach the state of, “sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.” You would think that a person my age would have all that figured out by now, but it’s common if we still want to do meaningful work and make a difference in the world. It’s a journey.

Joseph Campbell, in his landmark work on *The Hero’s Journey*, describes the first step of the journey - the call to adventure. We’re all hearing that call, but we treat it like a telemarketer and ignore it or send it to voice mail. The second step is refusing the call. The word “adventure” conjures up slaying dragons. It’s too big for us.

We step back into comfort.

The Hero's journey is about discovering who we really are. The code of who we are is already in us. It's in the call that we hear faintly from behind all the noise. It really is about slaying dragons; our personal dragons that have been holding us back all our life. A person in our Writing Room Workshop today called those dragons "life-sucking leeches."

Have you allowed the noise of other people's opinions, and those life-sucking leeches, to overpower your own inner voice? I have. It was all made up. I was merely speculating on what others might think. The noise resembled static on an old-fashioned radio, as we adjusted the dial to find the sweet spot of the right frequency. We all have that sweet spot in our lives where we wake up every morning to make a difference in the world regardless of our age.

One of the best pieces of advice I've ever read about the second half of life is from Arthur Brooks, author of *Strength to Strength: Finding Success, Happiness, and Deep Purpose in the Second Half of Life*

Devote the back half of your life to serving others with your wisdom. Get old sharing the things you believe are most important. Excellence is always its own reward, and this is how you can be most excellent as you age. — Arthur C.

Brooks

I hope you are already doing that. If not, I hope you will hear the call and take the Hero's Journey.

29

Why do I Meditate?

Have you ever felt like you weren't doing what you were supposed to be doing with your life, but you didn't know what you were supposed to do?

For years, I felt like I was living someone else's life and doing what I thought I was supposed to do. At 75, I had a nice job as the Dean of the business school at a small university. It was the last job I was going to have at my age, and it paid well. I had my own VIP parking spot. But, I was unhappy. Every morning I would sit in that parking spot for a few minutes and dread the day ahead of me. It felt like I was selling the rest of my life for a paycheck that barely covered my basic needs. But I was too scared to leave that paycheck because I didn't believe I could replace it. Was that going to be my legacy? This guy who just showed up every morning and answered emails?

I was stuck between not wanting to do what I was doing and not knowing what I wanted to do.

Meditation was the key that helped me silence the noise in my head and figure out what I was meant to do

with the rest of my life. I learned that meditation was more than just a relaxation technique. I learned how it could give me insight into who I was and allow me the space to hear what I was being called to do. I had been ignoring that call like a telemarketing call for most of my life.

I'll never forget the day when I handed in my resignation and left my VIP parking spot for the last time. Now, at 81, I'm living my best life and starting a non-profit organization to help others find their purpose and flourish, not just survive, in the second half of their life.

If I could find my purpose at 81 and start a whole new chapter in my life, then you can too if you want to.

Joseph Campbell said it beautifully in this excerpt from his book, *Reflections on the Art of Living*.

We must be willing to get rid of the life we've planned, so as to have the life that is waiting for us.

The old skin has to be shed before the new one can come.

If we fix on the old, we get stuck. When we hang onto any form, we are in danger of putrefaction.

Hell is life drying up.

The Hoarder, the one in us that wants to keep, to hold on, must be killed.

If we are hanging onto the form now, we're not going to have the form next.

You can't make an omelet without breaking eggs.

Destruction before creation.

Hardly a new idea. Here's what Jesus had to say about it:

Matthew 9:17 (NIV): "Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved."

We'll never hear the call with so much noise in our heads. Sit still, breathe, and listen.

30

Who am I?

*“To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.” —
Ralph Waldo Emerson*

I learned some new words today: Sine Cera, which is Latin for “without wax.”

Now that I have your attention and hopefully piqued your curiosity, let me explain. During Roman times, marble sculptures were highly valued as status symbols, but they were challenging to create. Sculptors had to ensure that every strike of the chisel was perfect. However, mistakes occasionally occurred, leaving unsightly marks on the marble. To hide these imperfections, the sculptor would fill them with a soft wax that matched the color of the marble. The average person couldn’t distinguish the difference.

The statues without wax, known as “Sine (without) Cera (wax),” commanded a much higher price than those with wax.

You may have already noticed that this is the origin

of the word “sincere,” meaning without wax.

I learned this from The Gaping Void Culture Design Group which publishes a fascinating newsletter with informative and inspirational messages cleverly illustrated with a graphic.

As I read this short piece, I wondered how much “wax” I’ve used in my life trying to conceal my flaws. Who would I be if the “wax” of my possessions melted away, and I stood alone and naked in the world without even my name and all my flaws visible . . . as if my flaws aren’t already visible? I just like to think I’m clever enough to conceal them.

Who am I when I am stripped down to the bare essentials of life?

Viktor Frankl, an Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist, faced this existential question during his five years in a Nazi concentration camp. In his book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, he described his arrival at a Nazi concentration camp where he was stripped of his possessions, including the manuscript of his life’s work. He was separated from his family, stripped naked, and even had the hair on his body removed. His name was replaced with a number. Many people in the camps experienced a profound sense of dehumanization and loss of identity that they could not overcome, but Frankl managed to find meaning amidst the suffering and went on to become a famous and influential author and speaker.

He discovered that even with all of his “wax” re-

moved the Nazis could not take away his ability to find meaning in his suffering. His manuscript was still in his head, safe from his captors as long as he was alive. He observed that this initial experience of dehumanization was a crucial moment. He realized that he could not control his external circumstances, but he could control his response to them. His experience was the source of this famous quotation:

“Between the stimulus and response, there is a space. And in that space lies our freedom and power to choose our responses. In our response lies our growth and our freedom”

He describes how he imagined the lectures he would give when he was free, using the ideas from the manuscript that was taken from him. He stayed focused on a future state in the midst of his intense suffering. The people he saw dying around him were largely those who weren't able to find meaning in their suffering and had nothing to hope for in the future.

“He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.” — Friedrich Nietzsche

Age has a way of removing the “wax.” I suppose it gets worn off by too much handling. Or maybe we just take it off because we're tired of trying to be somebody that we're not. Like my old friend, Bill Zaner used to say, “One of the best things about getting old is that you don't give a damn what other people think about you anymore.” I'm not sure I've reached that level of enlightenment yet, but I'm a lot better than I was when i was

younger.

Who am I when I am stripped down to the bare essentials of life?

Viktor Frankl was stripped down to the bare essentials of life, and he discovered the answers to four existential questions:

- Who am I?
- Why am I here? What is life asking of me?
- What's most important in my life?
- What is non-negotiable?

I can't compare myself or my circumstances to Viktor Frankl, but I find that I am thinking a lot about those questions at age 81. I hope I have a good answer before other people answer it with, "Who was he?"

Thanks for reading *Breaking Age*! Subscribe for free to receive new posts and support my work.

31

Are you Cool?

Kermit the Frog said, “It’s not easy being green.” It’s not easy being 80 either, and it’s really not easy being cool at 80. Our culture defines us as definitely not cool.

I asked ChatGPT what it meant to be cool, and here’s what it gave me:

The concept of “cool” can be subjective and vary based on individual perspectives and cultural norms. However, in general, being “cool” can refer to a person or thing that is perceived as fashionable, stylish, confident, calm, and collected. Coolness can also involve a sense of rebellion, nonchalance, and detachment from societal expectations and pressures. A cool person might be seen as someone who exudes a certain aura of charisma, attractiveness, and ease, and who is admired and respected by others for their unique qualities and interests. Ultimately, being cool is about having a certain level of self-assuredness and a willingness to express oneself in a way that feels authentic and true to one’s personality.

That’s a pretty good definition from AI, but not how

most people view “old people.”

Here’s an excerpt from an article in *Bustle* by Carolyn Steber that describes 15 ways to be cool at any age. After all, being cool is just about being OK with who we are. You can be cool, even at 80.

1. Cool People Put Everyone At Ease

You know you’re in the presence of a cool person when you feel at ease. The reason? “Cool people are present, focused, and interested in those around them,” Romanoff says. They listen, they try to understand — and as a result, they help everyone feel seen and understood.

To steal these vibes for yourself, Romanoff suggests being fully present in the moment and appreciating the fact you get to share it with the people around you. They’ll remember forever that you made them feel valued and important.

2. They Bring Their Own Energy

While it’s often necessary to change just a *little* bit to fit a situation — you might be extra serious around your boss, for instance — cool people typically bring their own unique energy everywhere they go.

According to Romanoff, these people have realized there’s a middle ground between changing their emotional temperature to mimic those around them and only being their true self in isolation.

“The truth is there is much more nuance between these options and it is possible to be attuned to others while still bringing in your own energy that might not match others,” she says. “The core of this trait is that the person is able to be confident in themselves and risk being different.”

3. They Don’t Apologize For Being Themselves

Cool people also don’t feel the need to apologize for their unique energy. While that doesn’t mean they’re confident 100% of the time, Romanoff says cool folks are always trying to radically accept themselves.

“Being yourself and taking risks means exposing parts of who you are without knowing how others will receive you,” Romanoff says. “The alternative is subtly asking for permission from others to reveal who you are and what you like. This will change how you experience situations and how others experience you, and will ultimately lead to a more liberating outlook.”

4. They’re Independent

Effortlessly cool peeps tend to give off independent vibes. “For the most part, people admire them for doing their own thing, even if that ‘thing’ is unique and different,” certified counselor David Bennett tells Bustle. “We perceive this as cool because we admire people who have the confidence to boldly pursue the life they want.” By learning more about yourself, and doing things to grad-

ually build your self-esteem, you can start to be more independent, too.

5. They're Rarely Fazed

Even when life throws curveballs their way, the coolest of the cool tend to roll with the punches. And it's not to say that they don't have insecurities or anxieties, or that they don't care. They do, however, maintain a laid-back attitude that allows them to see the world with clarity.

"They aren't uptight or worried about everything," Bennett says. "They see the big picture and know that most things don't matter." Or, at least, that getting upset doesn't change anything. It all goes back to that confident, collected energy that's so nice to be around.

6. They Aren't Afraid To Try New Things

Because cool people take the time to assess situations before overreacting or giving up, they tend to seem more capable than everyone else — even if they aren't. In other words: "They make things seem effortless," Jose Ramirez, LMHC, a licensed mental health counselor, tells Bustle.

Whether it's changing a tire, playing the drums for the first time, or attempting a complex recipe, they take a deep breath and figure it out. "They represent the things we are afraid to do or try for ourselves," Ramirez says. "It tends to be this strong, almost blind confidence that makes people seem cool to others."

7. They Don't Try To Impress Anyone

Another key component to coolness is a lack of desire to impress, board-certified life coach Esther Gonzalez-Freeman, BCC tells Bustle. Instead, cool people have a more casual approach: They do things because they're genuinely interested, *not* because they think "omg, this will make me look cool." It's a vibe that makes a big difference in how they're perceived.

8. They Have A Natural Swagger

Just to really drive the point home, let's talk about confidence again. "When someone is rocking confidence, they seem cool to others," author and confidence expert Heather Monahan tells Bustle. "They don't seem concerned with what anyone's saying or thinking. Not only is that cool, but it's also incredibly attractive."

As you practice building up your confidence, you'll stand differently, enter rooms differently, hold yourself differently at parties. (Remember, it's all about faking it 'til you make it.) Or, you'll own the fact that you have zero chill, and everyone will find it endearing.

9. They Have Hobbies They Care About

It doesn't matter what it is — drawing, running marathons, knitting, collecting too many plants — most cool people have fun interests and hobbies, Ritu Reimer, LPC, a licensed therapist and coach, tells Bustle. Oh, and they're passionate about them.

The reason having a hobby is “cool” is because passion is intriguing. Cool people are interesting because they’re always learning something new, and thus always have something to talk about.

10. They Aren’t Judgmental

Since cool people try to embrace their quirks — whatever they may be — they tend to have an easier time embracing the quirks and shortcomings of others. As a result, they’re incredibly open-minded and nonjudgmental, which goes back to the idea of putting others at ease.

“People like to be around those they do not feel judged by and who make them feel good about themselves,” Reimer says. “‘Cool’ people have a contagious, positive energy.” And that’s something we can all put forth into the world by practicing self-acceptance.

11. They Make Even The Most Mundane Moments Fun

When you’re hanging out with someone who you think is cool, it’s pretty hard to feel bored. And that’s because they can make even the most mundane moments feel special. “We are intrigued by them because they can turn a not-so-rare or unusual experience into something engaging,” Dr. Ramani Durvasula, a licensed clinical psychologist, tells Bustle. “Cool people are quite good at finding meaning and purpose in life.”

This is why your coolest friend is always jumping into lakes, pulling you into bookstores, and general-

ly cracking jokes or making interesting observations. While coolness isn't always about having energy, it is about taking an interest in life and — again — being willing to try something new.

12. They're Down For Deep Convos

These kinds of people tend to be open books, too — they don't keep things to themselves. “The prevailing belief is that to be cool, you have to be distant, remote, mysterious, and impossible to fathom,” says author Dr. Susan Shumsky, who notes that cool people are instead usually willing to talk about what's on their mind and dive deeper than surface-level conversation. To steal this trait for yourself, try opening up more about the inner workings of your mind. It helps build intimacy with everyone around you, and that bond will always seem cool.

13. They're Always Learning

Cool people never stop learning, and often put effort not only into getting to know others but in improving themselves as well. “The most fascinating people are those who are fascinated,” Shumsky says. “They are people who are curious and interested in other people and in things they are learning and discovering. To be cool, be engaged.”

14. They Look For Ways To Connect

Movies and books often portray cool people as part of

an exclusive group, but nothing could be further from the truth. “Cool people genuinely want to know everyone in the room and authentically connect with those people,” life coach and therapist Christina Hathaway, MAS, MFT tells Bustle. Whether it’s their neighbor, coworker, or a stranger on a bus, they want to learn from them and form a genuine connection.

They also look for ways to help, Hathaway says. Cool people genuinely want to improve the lives of those around them, whether it’s by volunteering, cleaning up after a get-together, or simply watching a friend’s dog. You’ll catch them doing it all.

15. They’re Authentic

Perhaps the biggest takeaway of coolness is its foundation in authenticity. “People that are effortlessly cool do not try to be anyone but exactly who they are,” Katie Pankonin, LMSW, a licensed mental health therapist, tells Bustle. “It doesn’t matter if their qualities are traditionally quirky, weird, or different — they simply radiate their natural personalities, no matter how unconventional.”

The best part? These qualities are available, in some way, shape, or form, to everyone. By learning more about yourself, projecting confidence, and accepting those around you, you’ll have an “it” factor that’s hard to deny.

How would you rate on the coolness scale. Give yourself 1 if you’re about as cool as you can get in that area, 0 if you’re totally not cool at all, .25, .50, or .75 if

you're somewhere in between. If your total score is 15, you're cooler than Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Beyonce, and Richard Feynman combined. If you don't know who that last one is, you're not cool. Look it up.

32

We Move in the Direction of Our Questions

By posing the unanswerable questions of meaning, men establish themselves as question-asking beings. Behind all the cognitive questions for which men find answers, there lurk the unanswerable ones that seem entirely idle and have always been denounced as such. It is more than likely that men, if they were ever to lose the appetite for meaning we call thinking and cease to ask unanswerable questions, would lose not only the ability to produce those thought-things that we call works of art but also the capacity to ask all the answerable questions upon which every civilization is founded.

—Hannah Arendt

What would our life be like if we never asked high-quality questions that didn't have easy answers but required us to hold them until the answer appeared from our intuition instead of our intellect? Holding a question isn't something that comes naturally to us; we want to

answer them. The best questions are the ones that want to be held, not answered, until the answer finds us.

We tend to move in the direction of the questions we ask ourselves. If we ask Mitigating Misery questions, we only address the immediate problems causing us discomfort. While these questions may alleviate our misery, they only bring us back to our previous level of comfort. On the other hand, if we ask Optimizing Opportunity questions that come from our aspirations, rather than problems, we can move towards a better future. To achieve this, we need to ask high-quality questions that challenge us. Let's not ruin a good question with an answer.

Below is a long list of questions compiled by our Know Your Neighbor Cohort, which brings groups of San Antonians together for a 15-month series of learning sessions. Participants engage with San Antonio's history, as well as the current realities of social, racial, and economic inequity, through various means such as learning resources, immersion experiences, roundtable discussions, reflective workshops, walking tours, and meals together. Each quarter, following a weekend of being immersed in the lives and cultures of neighborhoods in San Antonio, we compile a list of questions that we want to explore further.

With permission from the leadership of Know Your Neighbor, I'm sharing this list of questions with you in hopes that you will scan it and perhaps find a question that you want to hold. The list is far too long to read in one sitting. Scan it until your eye falls on a question that

is calling you, and stay there for a while. Take the question with you and live with it until the answer finds you. If you choose a question, the chances are pretty good that the answer is looking for you.

- Do you regularly notice, identify, and reflect on the inequalities and movements toward equity in our community and our country's daily news?
- Do you allow yourself to slow down to sit in the beauty of the nature you have around you and silently think or just be?
- Do you notice and as a result grieve the absence of who is not in the room?
- Do you consider how your choices and individual freedoms impact your community and those who do not have access to the same?
- Do you choose words to the benefit of the needs of the listener?
- Do you consider the impact of your words on others?
- What is the nature of God?
- How can you continue to live your life with energy and purpose?
- How can you be more open with your feelings?
- How can you write a book that will help others and not be an exercise in ego gratification?
- What is the path to transformation?
- What is your purpose in life?
- How can you be better at giving and receiving love?

- How can you create an organization that combines public service and personal growth?
- How can you be more selfless?
- How can you use my gifts for social justice?
- What constitutes a community?
- How can you organize your knowledge, understanding, and experience so you can easily access it to be of greater service to others?
- What armor are you wearing and what layers can you begin to shed?
- Are you softening your presence to welcome expansion and abundance?
- Are you pausing your internal dialogue to be present with and process the dialogue of others?
- How are you expressing gratitude for the many blessings in your life?
- How will your interactions with others be perceived? Positive, negative, nondescript?
- How will the time invested into this cohort be put to use?
- Can you identify the different communities you are part of and can you understand any relationship with each one?
- How can you be a bridge to the communities around you?
- Will you turn away from inequity or work to lessen it?
- How will you share your experiences this weekend and will you be able to create a spark of interest?

- Do you allow yourself to just exist?
- Do you experience reflective gratitude for the gifts of those around you?
- Do you allow yourself to experience the beauty that surrounds you?
- Do you celebrate the small moments in your life?
- Do you live comfortably with your weaknesses?
- How do the names you carry help or hinder your daily navigation?
- In which ways are you creating spaces for pause in your daily rhythms?
- In what ways are you letting joy and laughter saturate your life?
- Can you, as an introvert, find ways to provide radical hospitality to others while still meeting my own needs for solitude?
- What does loving the suppressor look like? Can you do it? Should you do it? Does loving the suppressor harm the suppressed?
- Does advocating for one group mean you're "off the hook" in helping others? Should you go deep/wide in one area? Or narrow/shallow in all types of inequity?
- How can you use the gift of stability and love you were given to provide a sense of the same to others who come from different places?
- Can you use the pain of times you were treated inequitably to help provide equity for those coming behind you?

- How might we continue incorporating levity and laughter as we engage in hard conversations and confront heavy realities?
- What makes a place or structure feel like home?
- What did you learn about neighbors and neighboring from your family of origin? What do you want to carry forward?
- How can you be a good steward of your privilege, your money, your time, your gifts, and the earth?
- Who are you inviting to share in the joy of the experience?
- What voices are you inviting to speak?
- What story are you sharing?
- What are you doing to pause and reflect? Pause and process?
- How are you creating space to welcome the gift of others' presence and story?
- What do you need to learn from this?
- How are you defining unity? The absence of disagreement? Our commitment to continue collaborating?
- Do you take intentional time to stop and appreciate the beauty of the natural world around you?
- Do you take time to pause and really listen to the silence?
- When you walk along paths, do you consider the footsteps of those who walked the same path before you?

- Do you spend the same amount of time supporting yourself and your needs as you do for those around you?
- Do you recognize the choice you make every morning to lead with integrity, kindness, and love?
- Are you conscious in the moment that others may need to be loved and supported differently than you?
- Do you allow the sounds around you to distract you or center you in a place of mindfulness?
- Do you take the time at the end of each day to pause and give gratitude?
- How often do you fall asleep with the food ache of a day well lived?
- How do you wish to be remembered, and does your life reflect that desire now?
- Where are the hurt places that you react to with harshness rather than tenderness?
- How are you showing up today?
- Who is it hard for you to learn from?
- Who are you representing?
- Who isn't here? Who is not in the room or who is missing?
- Are you holding space for yourself and others?
- Who needs your proximity?
- Are you listening?
- How would your mother, father, or grandmother exist in this space?
- Who needs your voice?

- Where is home?
- What shared experience are we striving towards?
- What is required of you to contribute to spaces of consensus?
- Who do you need to come alongside in the building of a beloved community?
- What pushes and pulls you to and from the creation of home?
- How can your curiosity be used to care for those around you?
- How can you be part of cultivating space for the necessary sharing of stories?
- Who is to your right and your left?
- Are the systems you're thriving in keeping you from seeing the whole picture?
- Are you allowing others to point out what you don't see?
- Who built the walls of your city?
- Are you listening for a new name?
- What are the essential ingredients of change?
- How might we change hearts and minds so people are valued over profits? How might I change my own?
- How might I become better informed? What resources are available?
- Who do I need to know? How might I connect with them?
- What other groups/organizations are out there in this work/space?

- Do you have the courage to combat an unjust system?
- Do you allow yourself to view history through another's lens?
- Do you create your own stories?
- How do I incorporate a look at evil systems in my ministry, individuals, and communities more effectively?
- How do I resist injustice with rest and yet not check out?
- When is anger sacred and when is it degenerative?
- Where will I have the most impact?
- Do I focus on providing tools for the spiritual, mental, and emotional wholeness of individuals caught in the harms of the society we've built or call out the issues of that society? Is it even a question of either or?
- Do you recognize the positive action that can result from your emotions?
- Do you carry the weight of your past with the reverence it deserves?
- Do you hold yourself accountable every day?
- Do you seek first to understand rather than judge or assume?
- Do you allow yourself to have uncomfortable conversations?
- Do you create a space that welcomes others to have hard/uncomfortable conversations with you?

- Do you recognize the power your own privilege can have to create positive change?
- Do you manifest success for others as strongly as you do for yourself?
- What are the unseen systems that function around you and what value do they create? In what ways do they harm?
- Do you have a hard conversation with yourself and those you are close to?
- What ideas are you letting “go to seed” so that you can let them grow in new hearts and minds?
- How can this generation atone for and repair the harm caused by the sins of those who came before us?
- How does rest factor into breaking down and rebuilding systems?
- What is an activist?
- Can you build wealth without harming another being?
- Where are the spaces I need to lead conversations, and where do I need to listen?
- How can I learn about, connect with, and honor my ancestors?
- By romanticizing far-off places and exciting travel, what have I missed in my own neighborhood?
- Are my “red line” and “blue line” in balance? And what “yellow line” is contributing to or preventing wholeness?

- Knowing what I know now, how do I make decisions about where I live, and eventually where I buy a home?
- Who is this space designed for?
- In what ways have faith and the church been used to oppress? And how have I used faith to oppress?
- What actions can I take today to co-create the city that I'm for?
- Do you read the signs around you and wonder who was in the room when they were written?
- Do you consider the life and layers beneath your feet as you stand your ground?
- Do you allow yourself to slumber in a field of flowers and awake to a rainbow?
- Do I have the courage to speak up about inequities in housing and to correct those who seek to mislead?
- Can giving up our place at the table be more effective than using our seat at the table to effect change? Or can we do both?
- Do I seek to know the real truth about people who are different from me?
- Can I be intentional about leaving my neighborhood to experience the rich cultures in San Antonio's other neighborhoods?
- How can I be more tolerant of different points of view?
- How can I learn more about the history of San Antonio?

- How can I quiet the negative voices in my mind?
- How can I use my gifts to make a positive impact in the world?
- How can I get outside of my own neighborhood bubble more often?
- How can I get my ego out of the way?
- How can I confront the hatred in the world with love and not more hatred?
- How can I love more freely and indiscriminately?
- How can I create a space where others can reveal their true selves through their stories?
- How can I discover more of my true self?
- Once I discover my true self, how can I prevent my false self from reclaiming that territory?
- Who would benefit from this good news?
- What will motivate someone to listen?
- Whose story needs to be retold?
- What are the neighborhoods in SA I haven't explored? Why not?
- What does migration mean within your family tree?
- What are the stories you choose NOT to share?
- Where can you show grace and compassion, where you may normally show anger?
- What are the food traditions that define your family?
- What experience has delighted you recently?
- How often do you look up at the sky?

- How can I ask better questions and listen to understand what motivates the other person's feelings and actions?
- How do I move from thought to action?
- How do I impact others around me, that allows them to be more aware of community?
- How can I lead a more aware life that allows me to be a positive force for change in my community?
- Am I aware of the invisible systems around me and am I willing to make them visible?
- Am I considering the ethics of what I put in my body?
- Where else do slippery slopes exist in our community?
- What can I do to be aware of the origin stories of others?
- What can I do to limit the harmful aspects of my family's history and its harm in my life?
- Do you think about the journey behind the person, place, or thing as you engage with it?
- Are you looking at the horizon for movement or the life nesting in the trees?
- Are you relishing the moments when you are wholly at home?
- Do you invite others to come and see before you tell them what's in your line of sight?
- How can we ask where others define home?
- How can we have differences and move towards the goal of love?

- How do we share tables, pools, and hospitals without fear of loss of resources?
- How can we create safety and love for others seeking asylum and those living here documented?
- How can we keep people's spectrums in mind?
- Who let 'dem dogs out?
- Am I doing enough?
- Is there a way that I can be doing too much?
- Am I moving my eyes slowly as I observe my community?
- Am I paying attention to the importance of what I put into my body?
- Am I regulating what I am spending my finite energy on?
- Am I challenging my narrative?
- Am I giving myself enough opportunities to feel uncomfortable?
- Do I truly understand the importance of PATIENCE when I am feeling frustrated?
- Am I truly valuing the feeling of home?
- Do I find a way to be humbled daily?
- How might we change minds and hearts?
- How might I begin to change my heart and mind?
- Am I attentive to the invisible systems around me and their impact?
- What bird song might I sing to heal another's trauma?

- Have I warmed up my palette and digestive system?
- Who is the next “BIRD” (bird by bird) to connect with?
- How might I let in the light?
- How can you create environments of love and safety?
- What has to change in me to ask better questions?
- What systems do I too easily ignore? What could change if I noticed?
- What tools do you need to see more fully?
- What do I need to connect with to learn my family’s migration stories?
- How can I cultivate a space that feels like home to newcomers?
- Where is the human issue in this political issue?
- Who do I need to invite to “come and see”?
- How can I cast out fear in this conversation?
- What do I miss when I rush and what will I notice if I slow down?
- What tools do I need to see better?
- How can I discern the difference between safety and comfort, knowing that discomfort leads to growth?
- How can I use my personal histories— actual and received – to guide my actions?

33

Moto Meditations

“Study nature, love nature, stay close to nature. It will never fail you.” - Frank Lloyd Wright

Have we insulated ourselves from nature so much with our modern conveniences that we have even forgotten our own true nature?

Statistics show that rainfall will reduce voter turnout, the most precious gift we have in our culture. God forbid that we should get wet or get outside of our technologically produced 72-degree bubble. Nature is not our enemy. It may be the only way we can find a connection to God, whatever we perceive God to be.

Robert Pirsig introduced me to the joy of nature in 1975 when his landmark book, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* was published. When I read this passage in the first chapter of the book, I knew this was what I had to do.

You see things vacationing on a motorcycle in a way that is completely different from any other. In a car you're always in a compartment, and because you're

used to it you don't realize that through that car window everything you see is just more TV. You're a passive observer and it is all moving by you boringly in a frame. On a cycle the frame is gone. You're completely in contact with it all. You're in the scene, not just watching it anymore, and the sense of presence is overwhelming. That concrete whizzing by five inches below your foot is the real thing, the same stuff you walk on, it's right there, so blurred you can't focus on it, yet you can put your foot down and touch it anytime, and the whole thing, the whole experience, is never removed from immediate consciousness.

Since then, I've logged over 150,000 miles on a motorcycle in the rain, cold, intense heat, and even snow. Fortunately, I've never touched that concrete whizzing by under my feet. It's been wonderful. I feel alive on a motorcycle. Maybe I connect with God more on a motorcycle than in a church.

In a recent Atlantic article, *This is No Way to Be Human*, by Alan Lightman, he refers to research by social psychologists Stephan Mayer and Cindy McPherson Frantz, at Oberlin College, who developed something called the "connectedness to nature scale" (CNS), a set of statements that could be used to determine a person's degree of affinity for nature. After answering "strongly disagree," "disagree," "neutral," "agree," or "strongly agree" to each statement, each participant would have an overall score computed. Some of the statements of the CNS test are:

- I often feel a sense of oneness with the natural world around me.
- I think of the natural world as a community to which I belong.
- When I think of my life, I imagine myself to be part of a larger cyclical process of living.
- I feel as though I belong to the Earth as equally as it belongs to me.
- I feel that all inhabitants of Earth, human and nonhuman, share a common “life force.”

What’s your CNS score? After my recent experience at the Modern Elder Academy with Father Richard Rohr, I think I scored higher on this scale than I would have scored before. I didn’t think much about God or talk much about God before meeting Father Richard Rohr and reading his books.

If you’re looking for God, open your door, go outside, dance in the rain with a child, or maybe even ride a motorcycle. It’s a lot like going to church without the air conditioning.

P.S. I have a YouTube channel called MotoMeditations, Stuff I Think About While I’m Riding. Check it out.

34

How Do I Sit?

How do I sit? Let me count the ways.

I end my daily walks at a peaceful spot on the grounds of St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church about 2 blocks from my house. I'm not a member of the church, but I find it to be a place of peace and calm that is perfect for my morning sit. Sit is a noun as I use it here.

I have noticed that I engage in four different kinds of sits. One way I sit is in conversation with myself. It sounds something like this: "This bench is really uncomfortable. They could have done a better job with bench selection. The foliage is dying. They need to water it more. The statue of the Virgin Mary needs to be tidied up a bit. One of the devotional candles is out. Why doesn't someone re-light it?"

I'm guessing that you identify with that because that's the normal way of thinking for most of us. Our minds are wired to categorize and evaluate everything. That sit doesn't do me much good. In fact, I can feel worse after my morning sit. But, that's what happens without intentional effort.

Another way to sit is to sit in prayer. Generally, prayer is asking for something for ourselves or for someone else. It can be making deals with God.

Yet another way to sit, and closely related to prayer, is to sit in meditation. While prayer is generally asking for something, meditation is listening for something. It's allowing the mind to settle and the noise to subside so we can hear what needs to be heard. I believe we're all being called. We just can't hear the call because of the noise of our lives.

Finally, we can sit in contemplation. Contemplation is often called prayer without words, a form of contemplative or meditative prayer where individuals seek to connect with a higher power, inner self, or spiritual realm through silence and stillness, rather than using spoken or written words. This type of prayer emphasizes a direct and nonverbal communion with the divine or a deeper aspect of one's own consciousness.

Contemplation is sitting with God like you would sit in silence and comfort with an old friend without asking for anything or even feeling the need for conversation.

In this practice, individuals might focus on their breath, a specific image, a feeling of love or gratitude, or simply maintain a receptive and open state of mind. The goal is to create a space for inner reflection, spiritual connection, and a sense of presence, without relying on language or specific thoughts.

Prayer without words is common in various religious and spiritual traditions, including contemplative branch-

es of Christianity, Buddhism, and Sufism, among others. It's often seen as a way to transcend the limitations of language and concepts and to access a more direct and intuitive experience of the divine or the sacred.

You may have heard the admonition, "Don't just sit there, do something." Try not doing something and just sitting there, and see what happens.

35

The Road Less Traveled

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference. —Robert Frost

As we enter the second half of our lives, typically around ages 40-50, we are faced with a range of options. It's not as simple as choosing between two roads.

One option is the “Midlife Crisis” road, where we cling desperately to the person we used to be or the person we always wished we could be. This is a treacherous path, filled with twists and turns and an unclear destination.

Another option is the “Keeping Things the Same” road. We may believe that our best years are behind us, that life is reasonably good, and that we should maintain the status quo as we coast through the rest of our days. This is a straightforward, flat road with predictable stops along the way.

A third option is the “Over the Hill” road, where we accept the notion that life is a slow decline after age 40.

We resign ourselves to this fate and try to make the best of it. This is a downhill road where virtually everything deteriorates over time.

The fourth option is the “New Beginnings” road, where we see a new chapter of our lives unfolding with opportunities for creativity, learning, and finding new meaning and purpose.

Robert Frost once faced a dilemma: choosing the road that everyone else had traveled or taking a risk by choosing the less-traveled path. But we have many choices available to us. If we don’t make a choice, life will choose for us, often leading us down one of the default roads: Midlife Crisis Road, Keeping Things the Same Road, or the Over the Hill Road.

If we choose the New Beginnings Road, however, we enter what I like to call the Third Half of Life. I know that’s not mathematically correct, but the idea is to create a new life on top of the default life that pulls us toward the well-trodden path. This is a time to get to know ourselves, to understand why we’re here, what’s truly important in our lives, and what we cannot compromise on. Once we have this figured out, everything else seems to fall into place.

When you reach that 40-50 mark, you’re not over the hill just yet. There are still a lot of mountains left to climb. So take the road less traveled, and see where it leads.

36

In the Moment

“The present moment is the only time that exists. The past is gone, the future is not yet here, and if we do not go back to ourselves in the present moment, we cannot be in touch with life.” —Eckhart Tolle

With so much to do, what’s the point of sitting still and doing nothing? The point of sitting still and doing nothing is because there’s so much to do.

Let’s take a step back and objectively examine our collective lives. Our frantic activity is directed towards a future state that promises happiness and fulfillment but doesn’t always deliver. We spend our lives pursuing the carrot at the end of the stick, which is always just out of reach. This phenomenon is called the Hedonic Treadmill.

It’s much easier to see this clearly and be critical of it when you’re my age. In the first half of my life, I was mainly concerned with the quantity of my life. Now, in the second half of my life, I’m more concerned with the quality of my life. I’m discovering that I can improve the quality of my life by doing something that was unthink-

able in the first half of my life: sitting still and doing nothing but breathing and listening to what my thoughts and the universe is telling me.

According to Eckhart Tolle, life exists in the present moment. However, the present can be elusive and somewhat fickle, as it is always at odds with the powerful forces of the past and the future. While it is true that we cannot remain in the present moment all the time, as we must anticipate the future and learn from the past, it is important to recognize the value of being present in the moment whenever possible.

We've all experienced the present moment - those times when we were in "flow." Time seemed to stand still, and we were so engrossed in what we were doing or seeing that we lost all sense of time. Maybe it was watching puffy clouds from an airplane window, standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon, or listening to a beautiful piece of music. It's not an overstatement to say that during those times, we were alive.

The good news is that we can call up those moments on demand. They are as close as our breath. We take about 20,000 breaths a day, and we're not aware of most of them. Each breath happens in the present moment. All we have to do is pay attention to each breath for 1-2 minutes. Experience the miracle as each breath gives you life. Honor each breath.

Most of our problems and worries aren't happening in the moment. They're happening in the past or being made up while anticipating the future.

When the stress is building up and the Hedonic Treadmill seems to be running faster every day, take a few minutes to do nothing. Just breathe . . . and listen.

37

I Am

I subscribe to Richard Rohr's Daily Meditations. I wake up every morning to a short read that sets my mind for the day and crowds out the negative thoughts that I'm capable of carrying with me throughout the day. You can get subscribe too, for free, by going to cac.org and signing up.

I want to share a previous post for my new subscribers who may have missed this. This beautiful poem reminds us of Richard's theme: Nothing Stands Alone.

I Am

I am old and wise as the night. I am as beautiful as a bird in flight.

I am the moon and the sea. I am the robin and the bee. I am the soil and I am the tree.

I'm the lion and the gazelle. I am heaven and I am hell. I am the ring and I am the bell.

I am the joy and I am the tear. I am the brave and I am the fear.

I am the blistering desert. I'm the freezing snow.

I'm the cringing coward and the gentle hero.

I'm the aged and I am the young. I am the weak and
I am the strong.

I am the smile and I am the frown. I am the pauper
and I am the crown.

I am the wrong and I am the right. I am the day and
I am the night.

I am now and I am never. I am yesterday and I am
forever.

I am the bitter and I am the sweet. I live on the hill
and I live on the street.

I am the top and I am the bottom. I am Martin, Hitler,
Gandhi, and Saddam.

I am red, black, yellow, brown, and white. I love,
hate, laugh, cry, and fight.

All the universe is reflected in me. I am all that ever
was and ever will be.

When I lose, it's the lesson that I win. Judging others
is my sin.

38

Enlightenment at Gunpoint

“To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you.” —Lewis B. Smedes

Are you holding a grudge? Let it go, just as you would remove a cancerous tumor that is slowly draining the life out of you. Grudges and resentment are like psychological tumors that drain our emotional and spiritual well-being.

Richard Rohr writes about his 14 years working in a hospice. He observed that most people eventually come to a realization of the important things in life, but often it happens very late, sometimes in the last year, last month, or even the last five minutes. He called this phenomenon “enlightenment at gunpoint.”

Isn't it a shame to live a long life only to discover what it was all about in the last five minutes? Holding grudges and refusing to forgive is like living this wonderful life trying to create a better past.

Let's not wait until we're standing at the gravesite or lying in a hospice to forgive, apologize, or to love

39

Hate, Revenge, Retribution

We have entered a time in our country where disagreements over government policies have deteriorated into hatred, revenge, and retribution toward those with differing opinions. This leads me to ponder the Christian command to love one's enemies.

What does this mean? How can I show love towards someone who, in my view, is harming the country and behaves in ways that are contrary to almost every one of my personal values?

In 2016, I was consumed with negative emotions about the election and the candidate. After a few weeks, I realized the harm I was doing to myself by harboring these negative, destructive thoughts while not affecting the candidate in any way. This led me to an exploration of my own spiritual development, something over which I had complete control.

Maybe loving your enemy doesn't mean liking your enemy or approving of their behavior. Maybe it means

ridding yourself of destructive emotions like revenge and retribution. is it possible that loving your enemy is a “selfish” act like forgiveness that cleanses our soul with no regard for the behavior of the person we “hate?”

This brings me to ponder the idea of *schadenfreude*, or taking pleasure in the pain and suffering of others. On social media, I see many comments echoing the 2016 call to “Lock her up. “Those of us on the other side of the aisle were horrified to hear those primitive chants at the time. They weren’t consistent with the principles on which this country was founded. Yet now, we’re seeing chants of “Lock him up.” on social media. Do we move ourselves and our country forward by responding to bad behavior with more bad behavior?

There’s a beautiful scene in the movie *Camelot* where the young King Arthur, who was having political challenges in his life, asked the wise Merlin a question: “Tell me Merlin, what do you do for sadness.” Merlin responded with, “Learn something.”

I decided to consult ChatGPT much like I would consult Merlin, to see what I could learn. I asked it, “How can I use the current atmosphere of hate, revenge, and retribution into an opportunity for learning and spiritual growth?”

Here’s what “Merlin” told me:

Transforming the current atmosphere of hate, revenge, and retribution into an opportunity for personal and spiritual growth requires a conscious and intentional effort. Here are some steps you can consider taking:

1. **Self-Awareness:** Start by examining your own feelings and attitudes. Are there any areas where you might be harboring negative emotions or a desire for revenge? Acknowledging these feelings is the first step toward addressing them.
2. **Cultivate Empathy:** Work on developing a deeper understanding of others' perspectives, even if you disagree with them. Practice empathetic listening and strive to see the humanity in those who hold differing views.
3. **Practice Mindfulness:** Engage in mindfulness meditation or other mindfulness practices that help you stay present in the moment. This can help you manage your reactions to negative emotions and develop a greater sense of inner peace.
4. **Choose Compassion:** Intentionally choose compassion over hate. When faced with negativity, remind yourself of the value of responding with understanding and empathy rather than perpetuating the cycle of hatred.
5. **Limit Exposure:** While staying informed is important, constantly exposing yourself to hate-filled content can take a toll on your well-being. Consider limiting your exposure to negative news and social media, and focus on sources that promote understanding and positivity.
6. **Educate Yourself:** Seek to understand the root causes of hate and retribution. Educate your-

- self on the social, psychological, and historical factors that contribute to these attitudes. This knowledge can help you develop a more informed and compassionate perspective.
7. **Promote Dialogue:** Engage in respectful conversations with people who have different viewpoints. Create a safe space for open discussion where both sides can express their thoughts without fear of judgment or retribution.
 8. **Set Boundaries:** It's important to set healthy boundaries with individuals or situations that consistently spread hate or negativity. Protect your own well-being while still advocating for positive change.
 9. **Engage in Acts of Kindness:** Counter negativity with acts of kindness. Engage in small acts of generosity and compassion in your community. This can help shift the focus from hate to positive actions.
 10. **Seek Guidance:** If you're on a spiritual journey, consult your spiritual teachings for guidance on dealing with negativity and fostering personal growth. Many spiritual traditions emphasize forgiveness, compassion, and inner transformation.
 11. **Forgiveness:** Consider the power of forgiveness. While this doesn't mean condoning harmful behavior, forgiving others can free you from the burden of carrying hatred and resentment.
 12. **Self-Reflection:** Regularly reflect on your

progress. Keep a journal to track your emotional responses, your growth, and the challenges you face. This self-awareness can guide your ongoing efforts.

Remember that personal and spiritual growth is a continuous process, and transformation takes time. Be patient with yourself and celebrate even small steps toward a more compassionate and empathetic mindset. Your individual efforts contribute to a collective shift towards a more positive and harmonious world.

Merlin wasn't real in the movie. He was a vision, a memory in King Arthur's mind. We are surrounded by the collective wisdom of the world around us if we choose to pay attention. ChatGPT, or AI, taps into that collective wisdom.

40

Don't Ruin a Good Question with an Answer

I recently had a conversation with a middle-aged woman about her aspirations for the future. While not wealthy, she was comfortable, and she expressed a desire to pursue multiple interests without sacrificing her freedom. Unfortunately, this created an “either/or” dilemma that lingered as low-level anxiety.

We discussed how to transform this anxiety into a productive question, and came up with: “How can I find a purpose that energizes and fulfills me while still maintaining my freedom?” However, we realized that this question was too narrow, and could lead to pressure to find a single, perfect answer.

We adjusted it to: “How might I find a purpose that energizes and fulfills me while still maintaining my freedom?” This change allowed for more contemplation and exploration.

Alternatively, we could phrase this as an IWWCI (In What Ways Could I) question: “In what ways could I find a purpose that energizes and fulfills me while still maintaining my freedom?”

Ultimately, some questions are best left open-ended, as we create our lives through the questions we ask. Don’t rush to find an answer and risk losing the potential for growth and discovery.

41

The Silent “Ism”

I grew up in a generation where racism was a silent “ism”. It operated in the background and pervaded the culture without conscious awareness or even a label. It was considered the norm.

Now, it has become more vocal and taken to the streets, forcing its way into our consciousness. Racism is no longer a silent issue, and our country is better for it.

There is another “ism” operating silently in the background that is just as insidious and dangerous as racism: ageism. Ageism refers to stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel), and discrimination (how we act) toward others or oneself based on age. There are many forms of ageism, including:

- **Internalized ageism:** How we feel about ourselves as aging people; and ageism in which older adults marginalize and discriminate against other older people.

- **Cultural ageism:** The everyday, invisible, profoundly ingrained, and normalized negative messages about aging and old people embedded in movies, TV, songs, jokes, etc.
- **Implicit ageism:** The unconscious bias that includes attitudes, feelings, and behaviors toward people of other age groups that operates without conscious awareness or intention.
- **Benevolent ageism:** Patronizing, paternalistic beliefs or behaviors that older people need to be protected and taken care of by younger people because they are no longer able to make decisions for themselves. *Ex. Elderspeak* When an older adult is addressed as if they are much younger and can't make decisions on their own—the voice may rise to a higher pitch, and simple words are used and spoken more slowly as if speaking to a child. (Appreciation to The American Society on Aging for the above four categories.)

In today's society, nobody wants to be labeled as a Racist. Similarly, we should strive to avoid being identified as Ageist by being aware of how we may be manifesting any of these aspects of ageism in our daily activities and conversations.

It was Awareness that brought racism into the spotlight, and the same can be done for ageism.

42

Get Beneath Your Thoughts

Imagine looking forward to a relaxing day at the pool. When you arrive, the water is calm and inviting. You're floating peacefully when suddenly, the kids arrive. Chaos ensues as you hear "Marco Polo" being shouted from all sides. Just as you think things can't get any worse, you hear a voice saying, "Hey Mom, watch this!" You know what's about to happen. A 200-pound kid is about to do a cannonball from the diving board. As he hits the water, a tidal wave tosses you around like a piece of driftwood in the surf.

That's a metaphor for our mind. We anticipate a peaceful day, and suddenly an uninvited 200-pound cannonball of a thought disrupts our tranquility. We are tossed around in the turbulent waters of our minds.

What are we to do? We could leave the pool, but we can't easily leave our thoughts. They are wild and unruly things with a mind of their own.

What if we dip under the water where it is quieter

and less turbulent? We can look up at the surface of the water and still see the action, but now we're observers and not participants. When we meditate, we metaphorically get beneath our thoughts so we can observe them without participating with them.

We can't stop the activity in our mind, just like we can't stop the activity in the pool. One of the biggest misconceptions about meditation is the belief that we must empty our minds. It doesn't take long to realize the impossibility of that task, so many people give up.

Try to sit still at least once a day and get beneath your thoughts so you can observe them and get curious about them. Don't worry about letting go of them. They will still be there when you return.

If you do this often enough, stay down long enough, and go deep enough, you will experience one of the most profound benefits of meditation. You will get acquainted with your true self, that part of you that has been covered up by the false self that we all create to get us through this life. The Hero's Journey begins here.

43

Questions are Harvesters of Wisdom

I have the honor of being part of the H. E. B. Foundation's Narrative Change cohort, a 15-month program consisting of about 15 people. Through learning resources, immersion experiences, roundtable discussions, reflective workshops, walking tours, and meals together, we engage with San Antonio's history and current realities of social, racial, and economic inequity.

At one of our first meetings, we were asked a different kind of question in a world where we are against so much: what kind of city are we for? This Appreciative Inquiry question focused our thoughts on what needs to be created instead of what needs to be fixed. The purpose of an Appreciative Inquiry question is to uncover and bring out the best in a person, situation, or organization.

Our responses were collected and compiled into a beautifully printed and formatted document that is both inspirational and informative.

The formatting of this document makes it difficult,

if not impossible, to read as we would read an essay. Instead, it encourages the practice of bibliomancy, a form of divination where guidance is sought by selecting a random passage from a sacred text, such as the Bible, and interpreting its meaning in relation to a specific question or situation. We may wonder, why did our eye fall on that one sentence?

Each sentence can be meditated upon. The entire document can become a meditation, as the text is embossed in a way that allows us to sit quietly, with closed eyes, and feel each sentence instead of just reading it.

The document was created at no small expense of time and money by the generosity of the H.E.B. Foundation. I'm sure the document will occupy a special place in all of our homes as a reminder of the transformational experience of the narrative Change Cohort.

The wisdom in this document was harvested from a well-crafted question. We create our lives by the questions we ask. Maybe we should be more thoughtful about the questions we ask.

44

20,000 Breaths

Do you realize that we take about 20,000 breaths every 24 hours? That's 7,300,000 breaths a year. At 81, I've taken about 591,300,000 breaths since I took my first life-giving breath at birth on July 5, 1942. That was in the middle of World War II when many people were taking their last breath.

Each one of those breaths has given me life, and I wasn't aware of most of them. They just happened automatically without any effort on my part. What a miracle!

There are only about 50-60 breaths between me and death. When you do the math, it seems like we are living on the edge.

Can you sit still for 1-2 minutes and honor those breaths? Find a comfortable place to sit and put aside your worries, fears, and problems. Trust me . . . they'll still be there in 1-2 minutes.

Focus on your breath. On each in-breath, think "I'm breathing in." On each out-breath, think "I'm breathing out."

When those worries, fears, and problems intrude on your time with your breath, just tell them that you'll be with them in a couple of minutes just like you would tell a person who was interrupting you. Go back to the next breath.

If you do that for 1-2 minutes, you will have experienced meditation. It's that simple.

You may even feel more relaxed, and you might be able to have a more productive conversation with those worries, fears, and problems.

45

Stuck Between Unhappy and Flourishing

“The force that through the green fuse drives the flower”

— *Dylan Thomas*

There are three states of being that we might find ourselves in: Unhappy, Not Unhappy, and Flourishing. Let’s take a closer look at each one.

We all know when we’re **unhappy**. That doesn’t require a lot of explanation.

Not unhappy is that state where everything is OK, but we still have the feeling that we could be more. The pain of unhappiness is gone, but we still feel incomplete. I would suggest that most people fall into that state.

Flourishing refers to a state of optimal growth, well-being, and fulfillment in various aspects of life. It encompasses a sense of purpose, positive emotions, strong social connections, and a deep engagement with meaningful activities. When an individual or a community is flourishing, they experience a profound sense of

satisfaction and contentment, while also exhibiting resilience in the face of challenges.

Flourishing extends beyond mere happiness or material success; it encompasses a holistic and sustainable state of thriving, where individuals can reach their full potential and contribute positively to their own lives and the world around them.

Are you stuck between unhappy and flourishing? Do you hear Peggy Lee singing, “Is that all there is” in your mind?

I always wanted the manifestations of flourishing long before I knew the word. I thought it was “out there” and being denied to me for reasons I didn’t understand. I read all the self-help books, listened to the success gurus, and basked in the momentary good feeling of Facebook inspirational posters. But, it was all fleeting. To paraphrase Jon Kabat-Zinn, wherever I went, there I was. I was asking the wrong questions. Instead of asking, “What do I want to do?” I needed to ask, “How do I want to be?” Doing would flow naturally from being.

It’s taken me a long time to learn that it’s “in here.” If I want my “flower” to bloom, I have to deal with what’s flowing through my “green fuse.”

The only way I’ve found to get into the mystery of that green fuse is through meditation. When we’re lost, we tend to turn the radio off as we’re navigating through the twists and turns that lead to our destination. Meditation turns off the noise in our minds as we try to find our way in life.

Meditation is more than a relaxation technique. It's a way to find the answers to four questions that have always been with us: Who am I? Why am I here? What's most important to me? What's non-negotiable in my life?

Start out by sitting still for 1-2 minutes while focusing on your breath. It's that simple. You can get a lot done by doing nothing.

46

Feel the Burn

During my leg workout today, (that's not me in the pic) I experienced a painful burn and wanted to stop. I usually avoid pain, but I remembered Jon Kabat-Zinn's teachings on mindfulness and pain. In his Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program (MBSR), he emphasizes the importance of acknowledging pain without suppressing or avoiding it. By approaching pain with openness and curiosity, we can observe it more skillfully and respond effectively.

"Wherever you go, there you are. Your pain follows you. But so do joy and peace, if you are willing to notice." - Jon Kabat-Zinn

Instead of trying to push the pain away, which is really impossible without stopping the exercise, I welcomed it in. I stopped fighting it and got curious about it. I contemplated the biological process that was causing this sensation. What is pain anyway? This was totally counter-intuitive and the opposite of what I wanted to do.

I'm not sure if the pain subsided, but I do know that

I felt more comfortable with it. I was reminded of something that Justin Michael Williams said in our recent meditation class: “Instead of slaying your dragons, make friends with them.”

What if we responded to our emotional pain in the same way? What if we made friends with the varying degrees of emotional pain we feel, from being stuck in a traffic jam, to losing a loved one?

47

We're all Roy Kent

Roy Kent, one of the most popular characters on the hit TV series, *Ted Lasso*, was a superstar soccer player. Soccer was his life. When he walked into the arena, he received a standing ovation. That's all he ever did and all he wanted to do until age and an injury forced him into retirement.

Feeling trapped between his former identity and uncertain future, he wandered through a personal wilderness. One day, he gave a performance tip to a former teammate. Seeing the player benefit from his advice, he realized his calling in the second half of his life.

Returning to a stadium during a game, Coach Lasso greeted him with "Hello Coach" followed by his usual positive comments. Roy interrupted, exclaiming "Shut up. You had me at coach."

We all experience life transitions, whether through retirement, divorce, job loss, or illness. Some of these transitions are voluntary, while others are not. We can relate to Roy Kent, feeling lost when what once gave us meaning and purpose is no longer present. We may wan-

der aimlessly, sometimes for the rest of our lives waiting for that lightning bolt to strike us with a new purpose as it did for Roy Kent. It doesn't happen that way for most of us. We only see a momentary flash of lightning in the distance that gives us a hint about what we're supposed to do with the rest of our life.

Get curious about that flash of lightning. It may be calling you to a new purpose in the next chapter of your life. When you hear that call, be prepared, like a trapeze artist, to let go of where you are and who you used to be, and hang there in mid-air trusting that your new purpose will catch you and carry you on to the next chapter of your life.

48

Weathered Souls

“The force that through the green fuse drives the flower”

— *Dylan Thomas*

I am sitting at a table with four lovely young women in a trendy gathering place called Weathered Souls Brewing Company. Despite feeling weathered by the 105-degree weather outside, I am invigorated by the youthful energy in the room. My 81-year-old soul has been weathered in a good way, like leather that gets better with age and wear, because I seek out opportunities like this one - to be with people who energize and inspire me - and to resist generational isolation.

The individuals seated at the table with me are not weathered by age. Despite the approximately 50-year age gap between me and these women, I feel a sense of belonging among them. Fueled by feminine energy, they are like flowers at the end of a green fuse. They listen attentively, smiling genuinely while making eye contact, responding with joy, curiosity, and genuine interest. No competitiveness or one-upmanship.

We are not old friends who have known each other for years. We are all part of a Know Your Neighbor project designed to build bridges across zip codes in our community and bring people together. I watch with admiration as they build bridges at this table making connections with new friends.

I'm contrasting it with the many meetings like this with my male acquaintances where some degree of competitiveness, not connection, often drives the tone of the meeting. They feed their addiction to being right and their egos. Of course, this is a broad generality. There are many men who are unashamedly in touch with their feminine side.

That force or energy, feminine and masculine, "that through the green fuse drives the flower" that Dylan Thomas writes about, is divided into two channels at an early stage of life. These energies do not recognize gender and flow freely through us, regardless of gender, until they are directed into either the "male or female" channel. This might be due to nature, but it is more likely a result of nurture.

Despite the immense human suffering that we witness in our society today, we are debating gender. We marginalize men who are "too feminine" and women who are "too masculine." The argument often boils down to, "If someone has a penis, they must be male, and this is how males should behave. End of discussion."

We are all like flowers at the end of the green fuse. A flower can bloom more brightly when it has access to all

the nutrients in the soil. Maybe we can all bloom more brightly if we allow ourselves and others to access all of the energies available to us.

49

Looking for Jesus

I've only recently started to become curious about Jesus. To some, that may sound heretical, but as a young boy working in a Catholic retreat center, I rejected formal religion after a priest told me that anyone who wasn't Catholic was going to Hell. I realize now that I cut myself off from many of the good things about religion. I am grateful to have met Father Richard Rohr, spent time with him, and read his books. He has connected me to the idea of Jesus more than the story of Jesus.

The idea of Jesus can be summed up in one word: Love. Love is a singularity, something that cannot be reduced to anything more. Forgiveness, for instance, is a manifestation of love.

If Jesus were to return, or depending on your beliefs, when Jesus returns, where would we look for him? I don't think we would find him in corporate boardrooms, on Wall Street, in either political party, or in some churches. Instead, I believe we would find him in what we call the worst parts of town, with people who are suffering and have been excluded from the mainstream of our cul-

ture. Exclusion wasn't part of Jesus's "business model." I choose to believe that he would create a website for a same-sex marriage.

We don't have to wait for Jesus to return. The idea of Jesus is working in many parts of our community. We can see this idea in action by observing the many people who are working selflessly to help others, regardless of the color of their skin, income, sexual orientation, gender identity, nationality, or any other characteristics that make them "different" from the rest of us.

Do you remember the bracelets that had WWJD printed on them? It stood for "What would Jesus do?" As I watched the news today and saw razor wire stretched across the border, heard stories of water being refused to people trying to cross the border, including children, and people being physically pushed back into the Rio Grande, I thought of that acronym, what would Jesus do?

50

Resistance

The resistance that you fight physically in the gym and the resistance that you fight in life can only build a strong character.” - Arnold Schwarzenegger

Today, I am reflecting on resistance. As an 81-year-old, I have started to give in to the path of least resistance. I have a personal trainer to help me push through that resistance. I encounter physical resistance during my exercises, but I know that it will build my muscles, not like Arnold, but better than my current state.

However, I also encounter mental resistance before I even get to the gym. I do not want to do it. It is 105 degrees outside, and the temptation of my big leather chair in my air-conditioned room with a TV and a refrigerator full of snacks is hard to resist. But I know that facing this mental resistance will build my character, just as the physical resistance builds my muscles.

Human nature seems to be programmed to follow the path of least resistance. Look at how often you see the word “easy” in advertisements. As a health coach trying

to help people lose weight, I was always frustrated when we got past the talking and into the doing. My clients would get emotional when they started talking about why they wanted to lose weight. I remember one woman saying she wanted to be able to get down on the floor and play with her grandchildren and get back up again without help.

When we got to the action plan, so many would say, “I don’t like...” I wanted to say (I never did), “That’s the reason you’re 100 pounds overweight. You’ve only done the things you like to do all your life.”

Healthy people have formed the habit of doing things that unhealthy people do not like to do.

Nature also takes the path of least resistance, sometimes with spectacular results. A trickle of water started flowing from Lee’s Ferry in Arizona millions of years ago, and it followed the path of least resistance for 1,450 miles to the Gulf of California in Mexico. On the way, it created the Grand Canyon, one of the most beautiful sights in nature. It carved a pathway and followed that pathway for millions of years.

We are carving pathways in our minds. They are called neural pathways. Every time I choose my comfortable leather chair and the television over the gym, I carve a neural pathway that becomes deeper every time I choose it. A neural pathway is simply a habit. As that pathway gets deeper, it becomes harder to escape. It is called a habit. The results are not as beautiful as the Grand Canyon unless you find an overweight, tired, and

grumpy old man beautiful.

The only way to get out of that pathway is by facing resistance and believing that something better is on the other side of it.

That sounds easier than it is. The only way I have found in my 81 years is to want something more than I want what my habit is giving me. When I lost 55 pounds, I wanted that vision of my future self more than I wanted the unhealthy foods that I was eating.

It's that simple . . . and it's that hard.

51

How Bad Are You Willing to Be?

“The only way to do great work is to love what you do and be willing to do it poorly at first.” - Steve Jobs

While watching a video of Anne Lamott giving a speech at last year’s Writer’s Room, I was reminded that everyone has to start somewhere. Lamott said that nobody dreams of playing “Farmer in the Dell” on the piano, but that’s where you have to begin if you want to learn to play. We all have to be bad at something before we can be good at it. Remember learning how to walk? We were probably really bad at it, but we had to start somewhere.

Lamott’s words made me think of all the opportunities I’ve given up because I didn’t want to be bad at something, especially in front of others. Writing is a good example. I’ve held back from writing because I wanted to wait until I could write really well before I shared it with anyone. But how am I going to learn to write if I

don't write... and write badly?

I never wanted to dance because I didn't want to look like an awkward klutz on the dance floor. I secretly wanted to listen to someone talk about how to dance and then magically step onto the dance floor like Fred Astaire. But I didn't learn to dance until I was willing to dance badly... with a woman... in front of other people. The story has a happy ending because I met my wife on the dance floor. If I hadn't been willing to dance badly in the beginning, I might still be a lonely eighty-year-old man. We can't learn to dance without dancing... badly.

For five years, I passed up an opportunity to surf in Baja with friends until I finally decided to do it and do it badly. I was really bad at it, but I had a lot of fun, and nobody expected me to catch the big wave and ride it gracefully. We can't learn to surf without surfing... badly.

I'm going to continue practicing "Being Bad" (a play on "Breaking Bad," if you didn't recognize it). I won't start cooking Meth. Instead, I'm enrolling in a Writer's Room weekend retreat in Santa Fe, NM where Anne Lamott and Julia Cameron will be among the teachers.

I'll be among many accomplished and published writers, and I will probably have to share my work at some point, but I'm willing to go through the bad to get to the good.

52

What Comes First? Thought or Action?

A friend once told me that he read “Think and Grow Rich” and thought about it for two years, but nothing happened. This brings up the question, “What comes first, thought or action?”

There’s probably no definitive answer to that question. After all, you can’t take action unless you think it, but it’s possible to think and not act.

Our thoughts are not under the direct control of our will. They come and go like uninvited guests, often overstaying their welcome and exerting too much influence on our lives.

For example, “I don’t feel like it” is a thought that stops many of us from taking action toward what’s really important to us.

While our thoughts aren’t directly controllable, our actions are. We can will ourselves to do something even if we “don’t feel like it.” We’ve all experienced willing an action despite a feeling that was pushing us in the op-

posite direction. We usually find that the feeling follows that action.

During my years teaching Dale Carnegie courses, we had a corny phrase that many people today might dismiss as being too corny to have any practical benefit: “Act enthusiastic and you’ll be enthusiastic.”

The idea behind this quote is that our actions and behaviors can influence our emotions and mindset. By outwardly displaying enthusiasm, we can start to internalize and experience that enthusiasm more genuinely. This concept aligns with the principles of cognitive-behavioral therapy, which suggests that changing our behavior can lead to changes in our thoughts and emotions.

The next time you’re “not feeling like it,” ask yourself how you would act if you were feeling like it, and start acting that way. See what happens.

53

Roll Call. Are You Here?

Do you remember when they called Roll at school? Maybe they still do, but it's been a long time since I've had to respond to a roll call. The response was usually "Here" or "Present." Actually, we were neither. We usually wanted to be somewhere else.

Viktor Frankl spent 5 years of his life in a Nazi concentration camp. He surely wanted to be somewhere else. He lost his family and his life's work. He saw and experienced things that no human should ever experience. If anyone had a reason to harbor hatred and revenge, it was him. But, he didn't. He spent his time in the camps ministering to his fellow prisoners and giving them hope. He survived and went on to write *Man's Search for Meaning*, the story of his time in the death camps. He coined one of the most memorable and meaningful phrases ever written:

“Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space lies our freedom and our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our happiness.”

In that space lies our freedom. When we are responding outside of that space, we aren't free because those responses are mostly conditioned responses learned early on in defense of our ego.

That all sounds good, but the question always arises, “How do I do that.”

I got more insight into that question during my week with Russ Hudson, the expert on the Enneagram. I learned about the three centers of intelligence in all of us: Body, Head, and Heart. We have all three of those operating in us, but we choose to live primarily in one of them. I'm a head person. I live in my thoughts, sometimes to the exclusion of my heart and body. I can overthink everything, missing out on some of the subtleties and joys of life. Where is your home base?

I learned that to be truly present, we have to bring all three centers into alignment. Be here now in our head, heart, and body. When that happens, we're able to see and experience reality more clearly.

Back to the “how” question. It's simply a matter of paying attention. Pay attention to your body. What's going on right now? Pay attention to your mind. What kind of thoughts are whirling through your mind right now? Pay attention to your heart. What are you feeling right now? By cultivating awareness, we become more attuned to the present moment experience.

Let's not forget that the present moment is where it's happening. We're making up the future, and even the past to suit our beliefs.

54

Don't be a Conversation Thief

Here's your assignment for this week: observe conversations and identify how many conversation thieves you encounter. What's a conversation thief? It's someone who exhibits the following characteristics:

- They finish your sentences (which is perhaps the most annoying thing about a conversation thief).
- They interrupt you with a “Yes, but.”
- You get the feeling they're having a conversation with themselves instead of listening to you, as you can see in their eyes and body language that they're formulating their response.
- They respond to your story by telling their own.
- You feel diminished in their presence.
- They look at some place over your right or left shoulder if you're in a crowded room.
- They respond with a rebuttal to feed their addiction to being right and, in the worst case, make you wrong.
- It feels more like a debate than a conversation.

If you've ever been around a really good conversationalist, you know they do the opposite of these things.

As Karl A. Menninger said, "Listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force. The friends who listen to us are the ones we move toward. When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand."

Let's help others unfold and expand. Let the other person finish their thought, and then ask a question that shows genuine curiosity and interest.

55

Live Long and Prosper

As a young man in my twenties, I thought the key to my success and happiness was making a lot of money. I became intensively focused on that one thing. That's what I thought I was supposed to do. I neglected most of the things that have been shown to contribute to happiness and well-being. The unhappy ending to this story is that I never made a lot of money and lost a lot of the really important things along the way. I didn't know what it meant to really prosper in life.

We live in a hierarchical, ego-driven culture that celebrates success, beauty, and fame. They all look so happy with their fancy cars, houses, and adoring male and female companions. While that might look like the road to prosperity for a young person just starting out, the research shows the opposite.

The Harvard Study of Adult Development is a longitudinal study that began in 1938 and is still ongoing. It is the longest study of adult development in the world. The study began with 724 male sophomores at Harvard University and has followed them throughout their lives,

tracking their physical and mental health, as well as their relationships, careers, and lifestyles.

The study has found that the single most important factor in predicting longevity and well-being is the quality of one's relationships. People who have strong social connections, particularly close relationships with family and friends, tend to live longer, healthier, and happier lives than those who are more isolated.

The study has also found that other factors that contribute to longevity and well-being include:

- **Physical health:** People who take care of their physical health, such as eating a healthy diet, exercising regularly, and not smoking, tend to live longer and healthier lives.
- **Mental health:** People who have good mental health, such as feeling happy and optimistic, tend to live longer and healthier lives.
- **Purpose in life:** People who have a sense of purpose in life, such as a job they enjoy or a cause they are passionate about, tend to live longer and healthier lives.

Here are some of the key takeaways from the study:

- **Loneliness kills:** People who are more isolated are more likely to die prematurely, even after controlling for other factors such as smoking, drinking, and physical health.

- **Close relationships matter:** People who have strong social connections, particularly close relationships with family and friends, tend to live longer, healthier, and happier lives.
- **Quality matters more than quantity:** The number of social connections you have is not as important as the quality of those connections.
- **Marry well:** Having a stable, supportive marriage is one of the best predictors of a long and happy life.
- **Forgive others:** Holding onto grudges can take a toll on your physical and mental health.
- **Give back:** Helping others is good for your health and happiness.
- **Take care of your health:** Eating a healthy diet, exercising regularly, and getting enough sleep are all important for longevity and well-being.
- **Find meaning and purpose in life:** Having a sense of purpose can help you cope with stress and adversity, and it can also give your life meaning and direction.

It turns out that it's not that hard to live long and prosper.

56

Meditation on a Flower

Every morning, as I left my room in Baja to attend the day's meeting, I was welcomed by a beautiful flower that seemed to greet the day in a better way than I did. Look at how open and welcoming it is, reaching out to embrace as much of the day as it can.

In the evening, when I returned to my room, the flower was preparing for sleep, just like me.

The flower became a reminder of the interconnect-
edness between nature and humanity. It showed me that, despite our differences, we are all part of a greater whole, sharing the same cycle of life.

57

Surfing the Waves of our Life

“There’s a part of every living thing that wants to become itself, the tadpole into the frog, the chrysalis into the butterfly, a damaged human being into a whole one. That is spirituality.”— Ellen Bass

I’m walking along the beach in Baja today thinking about the quote from Ellen Bass and watching the waves rise and fall. They seem to come out of nowhere and rise up with great energy, then fold over on themselves and dissolve into chaos.

That seems like my life. I pursue my dreams with energy only to have them come crashing down. I forget that there is always another wave coming, sometimes a bigger one.

Then I see people here in Baja surfing those waves and wonder if I could surf the waves of my life. Actually, I’ve been doing that all my life, and so have you. We’ve fallen off the surfboard of our life many times, but we’re

getting better.

Carl Jung said, “*Man needs difficulties. They are necessary for health.*” That’s hard to believe when the last wave has thrown us to the ground and is pulling us out to sea. But, do we really want an effortless life in a calm sea?

Fyodor Dostoevsky, in his book *Notes from the Underground*, said, “*Shower on him every blessing, drown him in a sea of happiness, give him economic prosperity such that he should have nothing else to do but sleep, eat cakes, and busy himself with the continuation of the species, and even then, out of sheer ingratitude, sheer spite, man would play you some nasty trick.*”

What would our life be like if we were like those surfers who paddle into the ocean in search of the big wave? They wait patiently, then it lifts them up and carries them away to a spiritual experience for those who ride the waves all the way in. They don’t fight the wave. They don’t try to control it. They use the energy of the wave.

How can we use the energy of our life’s challenges to create something beautiful? We’re not going to change the waves. All we can do is get better at surfing them.

58

Breaking the Age Obsession

During a conversation tonight, phones were brought out, as they always are, to show off pictures. This time, the pictures weren't of children or grandchildren, but of our youth. Everyone proudly displayed images of themselves from years ago, when they still had hair and weighed many pounds less. Not wanting to be left out, I searched my phone for a picture that was taken over sixty years ago and showed it to the group.

I was happy that they recognized me, but I could see their thinly disguised thoughts: as they looked at the photo and back at me: "OMG, age really sucks!" In fact, I was thinking the same thing.

Then, I asked myself why I was lamenting the fact that I didn't look like I did sixty years ago. In that narrow, culturally defined way of thinking, I was focusing only on what I had lost - my superficial appearance, which I was never that happy with when I had it. What have I gained sixty years later?

- I'm a lot smarter.
- I'm a lot wiser.
- I have a loving wife.
- I have grandchildren who love me.
- I have two sons who have forgiven me for my mistakes as a father.
- I have been gifted with reaching 81, still alive and healthy - a gift that many people never receive.
- I'm happy. Much happier than I was when that picture was taken. Back then, I didn't know who I was, why I was here, what was really important, or what was non-negotiable in my life.

Would I trade any of that to be that guy in the sailor cap again? No! Then, why am I wasting a minute of my time wishing I could look like that again?

Let's try to break the pattern of running away from age. Yes, we leave some things behind as we age, but let's not lose sight of all the things we gain.

59

Aging in Place

Today, “aging in place” is a popular concept, meaning that people want to stay in their own homes as they grow older. This is a positive thing. However, staying in the same mental place, clinging to the person we used to be, and recycling old ideas and mindsets is not so positive.

Perhaps we should consider aging from a new perspective. Instead of running away from it, why not run towards it? After all, we can’t stop it or outrun it.

This concept of “running towards aging” may seem revolutionary. However, we are not advocating for hastening the aging process; rather, we suggest embracing it. If we do it right, we can expect life to improve as we grow older.

Imagine if we were convinced that every year would surpass the previous one and that each birthday would open up new possibilities in our lives. What if we firmly believed that we would become happier with each passing year? Rather than seeing our 40th birthday as crossing a threshold of decline, we could view it as the start of

an exciting and adventurous phase of our lives.

A lot of people are running away from aging in our county. The anti-aging market in the US is estimated to be worth \$18.34 billion in 2023 and is expected to grow to \$23.67 billion by 2028. The US is the largest market for anti-aging products in the world, accounting for over 30% of the global market.

At 81, I've gone through my anti-aging stage of life. I have bought some of those products hoping in vain that I could hang on to my youth. I lost that battle, as we all will. I've learned that the best "pro-aging" products are free: curiosity, life-long learning, and a growth mindset.

Simone de Beauvoir's quote summarizes everything we need to know about growing old and doing it right.

Growing, ripening, aging, dying — the passing of time is predestined, inevitable. There is only one solution if old age is not to be an absurd parody of our former life, and that is to go on pursuing ends that give our existence a meaning — devotion to individuals, to groups or to causes, social, political, intellectual or creative work... In old age we should wish still to have passions strong enough to prevent us turning in on ourselves. One's life has value so long as one attributes value to the life of others, by means of love, friendship, indignation, compassion. —Simone de Bouvier

As we get older and the world starts to turn its back on us, we can easily turn our back on ourselves and ruminate on "I wish i had . . ." instead of finding new passions that give our life meaning.

It's never too late to try something new.

60

What Happened to Christianity?

During a meeting at the university where I worked, we were discussing a problematic student. He was undisciplined, ruled by his emotions, and generally obnoxious. There was a lot of judgment and animosity around the table. The university president listened carefully, then said, “I agree with all of you, but I’ve been commanded to love him, so I’m going to do what I can to help him.”

I was struck by his use of the word “commanded.” It implied that he was doing something that part of him probably didn’t want to do, but he was acting on an authority higher than himself and his emotions. Who or what was that authority? He was a Christian, but not the overbearing, holier-than-thou type. He was a kind, gentle man who appeared to be happy. It was obvious from his comment that he had committed himself to guiding principles that transcended his fragile ego. He was anchored to something bigger than himself. This was a refreshing moment in a world where so many people are

only anchored to their emotions.

Commitment is doing what you said you would do long after the mood has left you. The mood always leaves us. Where do we go when we “don’t feel like it?” Do we make up our own guiding principles and beliefs to fit the moment, or do we turn to a higher power to keep us anchored to something more stable than our own ego?

What is that “higher power”? It’s not a pastor, guru, or president. It’s an idea that lies at the root of all the world’s religions, including Christianity: love your neighbor as yourself. That’s the “command” that the university president was obeying.

The word “Namaste,” which ends all yoga sessions, literally translates to “the divine within me bows to the same divine within you.” This is the essential teaching of Hinduism. How can you argue with that? Yet, many people reject teachings from religions that are not their own.

What happened to Christianity? I’m far from being a Christian scholar, but I know enough about it to recognize that the foundational guiding principles of Christianity are beautiful. If all of us who claim to be Christians actually lived by those guiding principles, the world would be a better place, and we would be happier.

A few years ago, Debbie volunteered to raise money for the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society. She told me that we were going to stand on one of the busiest intersections in San Antonio with buckets to ask for donations. I didn’t want to do it. I asked her if I could just give her \$100 and stay home. She rejected that idea, so I dutifully donned

my orange vest, and we walked to the island in the middle of the intersection where we were met by an intimidating woman selling newspapers to the cars stopped at the light. She had a cigarette hanging out of her mouth, and her skin was like leather aged by too many hours in the sun. When she saw us walking toward her, she got up and said loudly, “You can’t work on this corner. This is my corner, and I won’t be able to sell papers if you’re here.” We decided to avoid an escalated confrontation and went to the other side of the intersection. After about 15 minutes, I saw her walking toward us and braced myself for more unpleasantness. She walked up to me and said, “That’s not the way God wanted me to handle that. Please come over and share my corner with me.”

Here was a woman who had been rejected by most of society and who was anchored to some guiding principles that were greater than her ego or the scorn of her fellow citizens.

It’s not the guiding principles of Christianity that are driving people away from the church, it’s the practice . . . or lack of it. With so much beauty in the world, why do so many people choose ugliness? With so much love and forgiveness available to us, why do we choose hatred and retribution?

An 87-year-old woman in my technology class shared her wisdom with us the other day. Octogenarians have a habit of doing that. Someone who’s observed the world for eight decades has earned the right to tell others what they see. She said that policies or presidents won’t save us. Only love will save us, and she didn’t hold out

much hope for that happening anytime soon based on the current state of our country.

Love is a singularity. When we have dissected all of the solutions, policies, and debates, demonized our enemies, and listened to all of those who say they can save us, there is only one thing left that cannot be divided any further - love.

Just as a singularity in physics represents an infinitely small and dense point in space-time, love can be seen as a force that transcends political boundaries and unites people in a profound and transformative way. Love has the potential to create a sense of oneness, where individual identities and differences dissolve, and a deep connection is formed.

We're going to face some difficult choices in the coming months. Let's choose love over hate and forgiveness over retribution.

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What Happened?

What happens to those beautiful babies with innocent, loving natures who turn into angry old men? Is it nature or nurture? Perhaps it's a bit of both. Do we make ourselves this way, or does life mold us like the man on the right?

This transformation is a product of both time and culture. Time ravages our bodies, while culture ravages our souls . . . if we let it. We don't have much choice about time, but we do have a lot of choices about how we allow our culture to influence us.

There's a lot of time and culture between the pure soul of the baby and the dark soul of the old man. Without intentional effort, our default state will likely be more like the man on the right.

What do I mean by intentional effort? I mean the action that we take within ourselves to counteract the negative effects of our culture. It means making the effort to choose beauty over ugliness, joy over anger, and love over hate. Yes, it takes effort.

How can we grow up to be kind, loving, and thoughtful people when we're immersed in a culture of win-lose, ego-driven competition, and political hatred? A culture that implies that nothing below the satisfaction of the five senses is important, and is unmoored from any spiritual (not religious) center. There's a saying in the business world: "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." Our culture is eating us for breakfast.

With so much beauty in the world, why do so many people choose ugliness? In my opinion, it's because we've lost our spiritual center. I hasten to say that I'm not talking about religion because that stirs up all kinds of hostility and leads to the "My religion is better than yours" argument. Our spiritual center is our soul, something that we all have. In that soul is a place of love, compassion, and joy. It's wide open and on display in some and covered over by years of suffering in others.

The Buddha said that all life is suffering. It's how we deal with our suffering and the stories we tell others and ourselves about it that make the difference. Shakespeare said, "Nothing is good or bad, but thinking makes it so."

There is a place in our souls that is love, compassion, and joy. Richard Rohr learned, during his work in hospice, that everybody finds it sooner or later - some in the last five minutes. He calls it enlightenment at gunpoint.

Let's not wait for the gun to be pointed at our heads to discover and nurture that place in our soul that is love.

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The Squirrels in my Head

Have you ever observed the remarkable agility of squirrels? These captivating creatures possess a level of athleticism that surpasses even the most skilled athletes in the world. With lightning speed, they effortlessly scale trees and navigate precarious branches as if traversing a well-paved highway.

However, squirrels are often in a state of heightened alertness, their amygdalas constantly active. I never see a relaxed squirrel, except for the flat ones that lie motionless on the road. Their amygdalas presented them with three choices: fight, flight, or freeze. Regrettably, when faced with an oncoming car, they chose to freeze.

Constantly scanning their surroundings for potential threats, squirrels are vigilant in the face of dangers such as dogs on the ground or hawks in the sky. Even during moments of enjoying a tasty acorn, their nervousness and attentiveness persist. This is why we colloquially refer to certain individuals as “squirrely”—they possess an

excessive level of anxiety and tension.

At times, I find myself resonating with the squirrels' disposition. As I sit here, engrossed in one of the cable news channels, my mind consumes a steady diet of bleakness and pessimism. Reports of shootings, natural disasters, and the impending presidential election bombard me, igniting my amygdala's activity. I feel uncertain—should I fight, flee, or freeze? I've seriously considered all three. Should I run for office, leave the country, or just continue to do nothing and be miserable?

The world's current state fails to bring me joy, but that is my own misguided expectation. Instead of relying on external circumstances to dictate my happiness, I realize the importance of cultivating internal contentment. This is why I have turned to mindfulness and meditation, scientifically proven methods for managing the whirlwind of thoughts in my mind—the squirrels.

Mindfulness entails acknowledging how the television stirs up the squirrels in my mind this morning. Meditation is how I calm them down. I'm going on a walk in the present moment, attuning myself to the rhythm of my breath, the sensation of my feet touching the ground, and the harmonious melodies of birds. In just 30 minutes, those squirrels will find tranquility, lulled into a peaceful slumber.

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Shadow

The term “shadow” can have different meanings depending on the context in which it is used. In psychology, the concept of the shadow was popularized by Carl Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst. According to Jung, the shadow refers to the unconscious or repressed aspects of an individual’s personality.

The shadow represents the parts of ourselves that we deny, ignore, or reject because they are considered undesirable or unacceptable. It consists of thoughts, feelings, impulses, and traits that we disown and project onto others. These may include qualities such as anger, jealousy, selfishness, or other aspects that society or our upbringing deem as negative.

Jung believed that integrating and understanding the shadow is essential for personal growth and individuation. By acknowledging and accepting our shadow aspects, we can achieve a more balanced and integrated sense of self.

Our country has a shadow, and it is dealing with it in the same way a dysfunctional person deals with his/her

shadow - denying or ignoring it. When we ban books, or even burn them, we're ignoring or denying something that we don't want others to know.

This is an issue that should transcend politics. This should be of concern to both Republicans and Democrats, but sadly it is sweeping the country. Below is a list of some of the books that have been banned in the last year. Note that some of these books are written by our country's greatest writers. John Steinbeck, Harper Lee, and Toni Morrison.

As an individual, how much of my past should I be prevented from knowing? If my grandfather was an alcoholic who beat my grandmother when he got drunk, am I better off not knowing this?

Would a young child, growing up in today's world, be better off not knowing the history of slavery in our country or the history of the systemic racism that persisted in the country long after "slavery" ended?

These are questions asked in the honest spirit of inquiry, not debate. I'm trying to understand why so much of our country's history is being erased or rewritten.

Missing from this list is Amanda Gorman's beautiful poem which she read at President Biden's inauguration. It was just recently added to the list in Florida.

I've copied the full text after the book list. Please read it and let me know what you find in there that would justify it being banned . . . if anything would justify a book being banned (five-minute read). I'm open to a respectful discussion about why any of these books, or

Amanda Gorman's poem, should be banned.

- All American Boys by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely
- American Born Chinese by Gene Luen Yang
- Beloved by Toni Morrison
- Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out by Susan Kuklin
- The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison
- Call Me by Your Name by André Aciman
- Gender Queer: A Memoir by Maia Kobabe
- George by Alex Gino
- The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas
- Lawn Boy by Jonathan Evison
- Maus by Art Spiegelman
- Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck
- The Perks of Being a Wallflower by Stephen Chbosky
- Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You by Ibram X. Kendi and Jason Reynolds
- To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee
- The 1619 Project: A New History of America by Nikole Hannah-Jones

Amanda Gorman - The Hill We Climb

When day comes we ask ourselves,

where can we find light in this never-ending shade?

The loss we carry,

a sea we must wade

We've braved the belly of the beast

*We've learned that quiet isn't always peace
And the norms and notions
of what just is
Isn't always just-ice
And yet the dawn is ours
before we knew it
Somehow we do it
Somehow we've weathered and witnessed
a nation that isn't broken
but simply unfinished
We the successors of a country and a time
Where a skinny Black girl
descended from slaves and raised by a single mother
can dream of becoming president
only to find herself reciting for one
And yes we are far from polished
far from pristine
but that doesn't mean we are
striving to form a union that is perfect
We are striving to forge a union with purpose
To compose a country committed to all cultures, colors,
characters and
conditions of man
And so we lift our gazes not to what stands between us*

*but what stands before us
We close the divide because we know, to put our future
first,
we must first put our differences aside
We lay down our arms
so we can reach out our arms
to one another
We seek harm to none and harmony for all
Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true:
That even as we grieved, we grew
That even as we hurt, we hoped
That even as we tired, we tried
That we'll forever be tied together, victorious
Not because we will never again know defeat
but because we will never again sow division
Scripture tells us to envision
that everyone shall sit under their own vine and fig tree
And no one shall make them afraid
If we're to live up to our own time
Then victory won't lie in the blade
But in all the bridges we've made
That is the promised glade
The hill we climb
If only we dare*

*It's because being American is more than a pride we
inherit,
it's the past we step into
and how we repair it
We've seen a force that would shatter our nation
rather than share it
Would destroy our country if it meant delaying democ-
racy
And this effort very nearly succeeded
But while democracy can be periodically delayed
it can never be permanently defeated
In this truth
in this faith we trust
For while we have our eyes on the future
history has its eyes on us
This is the era of just redemption
We feared at its inception
We did not feel prepared to be the heirs
of such a terrifying hour
but within it we found the power
to author a new chapter
To offer hope and laughter to ourselves
So while once we asked,
how could we possibly prevail over catastrophe?*

*Now we assert
How could catastrophe possibly prevail over us?
We will not march back to what was
but move to what shall be
A country that is bruised but whole,
benevolent but bold,
fierce and free
We will not be turned around
or interrupted by intimidation
because we know our inaction and inertia
will be the inheritance of the next generation
Our blunders become their burdens
But one thing is certain:
If we merge mercy with might,
and might with right,
then love becomes our legacy
and change our children's birthright
So let us leave behind a country
better than the one we were left with
Every breath from my bronze-pounded chest,
we will raise this wounded world into a wondrous one
We will rise from the gold-limbed hills of the west,
we will rise from the windswept northeast
where our forefathers first realized revolution*

We will rise from the lake-rimmed cities of the midwestern states,

we will rise from the sunbaked south

We will rebuild, reconcile and recover

and every known nook of our nation and

every corner called our country,

our people diverse and beautiful will emerge,

battered and beautiful

When day comes we step out of the shade,

aflame and unafraid

The new dawn blooms as we free it

For there is always light,

if only we're brave enough to see it

If only we're brave enough to be it

64

The “W” Word Today

The term “Woke” came into being to describe people who are awakened to the effect that we have on each other by our attitudes, behavior, and communication as we sleepwalk through life unaware of the worlds that other people inhabit.

We were awakened in a jarring way by the death of George Floyd. It unleashed an inner fury that has been simmering for years by people who have been stereotyped and excluded from the mainstream of our culture. They suffered silently with great dignity until they reached the tipping point, and like Howard Beale in the movie *Network*, thousands of people cried out, “We’re mad as Hell, and we’re not going to take this anymore.” Almost instantly, our culture changed.

We watched an old Fred Astaire movie this week on the Turner Classic Movies channel, and the announcer apologized in advance for one scene in the movie where they performed in blackface. That’s what “Woke” looks like. It’s not cool anymore to make fun of other people.

This awakening, as painful as it is for some, has con-

fronted us with our unconscious (sometimes conscious) biases against people who are not like us. Let's hope it is a sign of the evolution of our species.

However, it has become the focus of political campaigns over the next couple of years. About half of our country is against being “woke.” We should do a better job of understanding why so many people are against “waking up.”

There's another ism that we need to address while we're at it. Ageism. There are those who will say this is not the right time to be talking about my “ism” because it detracts from a more important “ism.” I am not trying to rebut the current mantra by shouting “Old Lives Matter.” I'm jumping on the bandwagon full of woke people and shouting, “Me too.” At 81, I've earned the right to indulge myself with a gentle diatribe.

Let me take you on a tour of what an “old person” has to deal with. First of all, the term “old person” is derogatory. Let's look up “old” in the dictionary.

old/ōld/adjective

1. having lived for a long time; no longer young:
“the old man lay propped up on cushions”
2. belonging only or chiefly to the past.

Why can't I just be a person?

I received a birthday wish today on Facebook from a friend whom I don't know (like most of our Facebook friends). It said, “There's a stench in the air from an old fart.” This person meant well. He thought he was being

funny. It’s not funny. Let’s break it down.

Old is an adjective that makes any noun worse. A fart is bad enough by itself because we all know what one of those things can do in a room, elevator, or under the sheets. But, old? Let’s imagine what it’s like after it’s fermented in there for a while. This thing that would make any space uninhabitable is a metaphor to describe what Tom Brokaw called The Greatest Generation.

Jokes. In our politically correct society, it’s not OK to make jokes about gays, lesbians, blacks, Latinos, jews, et al. But everybody loves a good old joke. Especially those jokes about old people having sex . . . or not having sex. It’s standard material for late-night talk show hosts and comedians. It would be nice to see a couple of Millennials in those Cialis bathtubs. They have trouble getting it up too.

40th birthdays. Aren’t those “over the hill” birthday cards a hoot? And the black balloons. That’s when we get the first inkling that we’re left behind.

Stereotyping. I knew I was getting old, but I hoped nobody would notice. Then people started asking me if I was retired when they met me. I began to understand what it feels like to be stereotyped based on appearance.

While we’re on appearance . . . someone told me once that people get uglier as they grow older. Ouch! That one hurt. If you’re a racist, you’re not going to turn into a black person when you get older. If you’re ageist, you’re going to turn into that which you have ridiculed. The wrinkled skin, puffy eyes, and turkey necks

are waiting for you. Why not start finding the beauty in that now? It's there. If you look.

The job market. Forget about it. Yes, we're a protected class. The reason we have protected classes is because people want to discriminate based on a variety of factors and age is one of them. Even though it's illegal to discriminate on the basis of age, it's tough to get a job past a certain age. I have two degrees and a wealth of experience with organizational development in large and small corporations, but I feel like a homeless person on the street corner with a sign when I go into the job market. That's unfortunate because the Millennials could learn a lot from me. And, I could learn a lot from them as well.

Coming out. We hear a lot about the feeling of liberation that people feel when they can finally be who they are without fear of exclusion. Many of us get to that point with our age. We're embarrassed to tell people our age. It's a liberating feeling to say, "I'm 81, and I'm proud of it."

"For your age" qualifiers. That was an amazing marathon run for your age. You look good for your age.

I asked my dear friend, Bill Zaner, who left this world at the age of 86, why people tend to get a little grumpy as they grow older. He said, "Because the world is having a party, and they aren't invited."

Maybe we should start looking at what our elders have gained instead of what they've lost. We are your

forward scouts. We’ve traveled this path before you and we know what lies ahead. While we may have lost our beauty (your definition of beauty) and our energy (your definition of energy), we have gained the wisdom that comes from suffering the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune”, the same ones you will suffer as you walk the same path of life.

As Chip Conley said in his wonderful book, *Wisdom at Work: The Making of a Modern Elder*, “When an elder dies, a library has burned down.”

Maybe we should visit an old-fashioned library every now and then instead of looking to Google for wisdom.

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Off Ramps

I was riding my motorcycle from Houston to San Antonio on IH10 when I noticed an off-ramp that led to old Highway 90. I had traveled that road many times with my grandmother 70 years ago before IH10 existed. “I wonder what the road is like now,” I said to myself. I took the off-ramp, and as Robert Frost said, “It made all the difference.”

I rode through quaint little towns that had been bypassed when IH10 was built. They had names, like Flatonia, Schulenberg, Weimar, Waelder, Ammansville, and Swiss Alp. Some of them I remembered as a small child. It was turning out to be a nostalgic trip into my past.

I saw a sign pointing to a town called Dubina. “I wonder what that town is like?” Once again, I took the road less traveled. I spotted a white church steeple in the distance. “I wonder what that church is doing out here in the middle of nowhere.” When I arrived at the church, I saw a beautiful white country church that looked like a postcard. It was sitting in a picturesque country setting with green fields, and of course, a cemetery. The parking

lot was empty. “I wonder if the church is open.” I walked to the door and opened it. What I saw, left me speechless. I stumbled across one of the painted churches of Texas.

German and Czech immigrants built the churches in the late 1800s and early 1900s. They were painted to emulate the beloved churches they left behind in Europe. Many of the immigrants were fleeing religious oppression, wishing to practice their faith in peace. The churches are perhaps the most awe-inspiring example of the rich German and Czech culture in the Texas Hill Country. The Painted Churches feature hand-painted sculptures, angels, filigree, faux marble, and stencils. Some of them, are listed on the National Registry of Historic Places.

I wonder what would have happened if I hadn’t asked myself a “wonder” question. I can tell you what would have happened. I would have stayed on the quickest and most efficient route from Houston to San Antonio with the thousands of other bored people who had not “wondered” about those off-ramps. I would have gotten home a lot sooner, and I would have missed out on a wonderful afternoon of discovery.

Have we Google Mapped our life to find the quickest and most efficient way to get to our destination while passing too many of those off-ramps that have so much to offer?

I wonder what would happen if we regained the natural curiosity we had as a child when we were filled with wonder about the world around us. Maybe we should

start asking more wonder questions and taking more off-ramps.

66

40 is not the sunset

It's your 40th birthday, and you've been dreading it for a while. The room is filled with black balloons, and you've been receiving "over the hill" cards for several days. Your good friends, who all love you, are both ridiculing and celebrating you. They believe that you've reached the sunset of your life and that the rest of it will be a long downhill slide into darkness as you enter old age. You might believe that yourself, so you laugh uncomfortably at the old jokes while contemplating what you're going to do with the rest of your life.

We're all victims of ageism, both external and internal. We've bought into the "over the hill" mentality about age. We can't do much about the external ageism that exists in our culture, but we can change the internal ageism that may be holding us back.

Before discussing some facts about midlife and beyond, let's send a message to those well-meaning but misguided friends who throw 40th birthday parties. As Ashton Applewhite said, "When you make fun of an older person, you're making fun of your future self." We're

all going to the same place, but some just get there sooner than others.

In his book, *The U-Curve of Happiness: Why Life Gets Better After 50*, Jonathan Rauch argues that happiness follows a U-shaped trajectory, with a dip in the middle of life that bottoms out around age 47 and then rises in old age. Statistically, the sun is rising in midlife, not setting, and we have a lot to look forward to.

Rauch cites several studies that support this claim and attributes the dip in happiness to factors such as work and family stress, the loss of loved ones, and the onset of physical and mental health problems. However, he argues that while the dip in happiness is real, it is not inevitable.

Accordingly, Rauch offers several suggestions for increasing happiness in middle age and beyond, including focusing on relationships, finding a purpose in life, taking care of one's health, being grateful for what one has, and living in the present moment.

In other words, getting old doesn't have to be unpleasant if we do it right.

Finally, let's see how the math works for us. If we live to be, say, 98 (which is not out of the question these days), and our adult life begins at age 18, that means we have 80 productive years. We can still be productive into our 90s if we take care of ourselves. That means at our 40th birthday, we still have half of our adult life ahead of us.

As Mary Oliver said, "Tell me, what are you going to

do with your one wild and precious life?”

Let’s reimagine the 40th birthday party as a new morning in our life. This milestone marks the sun setting on one chapter of our life, but the sun rising on another chapter filled with possibilities.

“The morning is a new page in the book of life. Write something beautiful.” —Rumi

67

If I can't do it well, I'm not going to do it.

A mindset is a set of self-perceptions or beliefs that people hold about themselves, which determine their behavior, outlook, and mental attitude. For example, believing that you are either “intelligent” or “unintelligent”. Carol Dweck, a Professor of Psychology at Stanford University, has identified two mindsets.

- Fixed Mindset: “I’m either good at something or I’m not.”
- Growth Mindset: “I can improve my skills with effort and practice.”

You can ask children if they have ever struggled to master a skill and then improved over time. Examples may include reading, writing neatly, riding a bike, or playing an instrument.

I was confronted with one of my fixed mindsets when I was invited to take a surfing lesson in Baja recently. I immediately rejected the invitation because I was 81, had never surfed in my life, and knew I would look fool-

ish. I finally relented and went with the group. I may have looked foolish and clumsy, but I had so much fun. It was a breakthrough in not taking myself so seriously.

I've been struggling with another mindset for many years that has recently emerged in my consciousness with enough clarity to articulate it. "If I can't do it well, I'm not going to do it at all."

That mindset has kept me from writing, even though I had many thoughts and observations that I wanted to share with others. But I can't do anything well that I haven't done before, so I decided to approach writing like I approached surfing. Just do it. Have fun, try something new, and enjoy the experience.

I'm grateful to the people who have subscribed to this blog. You encourage me to keep practicing and learning. I get that little dopamine hit when I see that people are actually reading what I write.

68

Ode to Joy

I hope you subscribe to Maria Popova’s beautiful newsletter, *The Marginalian*. It is a work of art and always an inspiration when it arrives. It did not disappoint this morning with this uplifting 5-minute video that is truly an “Ode to Joy.” Slow down and spend 5 minutes with this video. Savor a glimpse of spontaneous joy.

“Imagine what life would be like if lived, in May Sarton’s lovely phrase, with “joy instead of will.” That is what Beethoven imagined, and invited humanity to imagine, two centuries ago in the choral finale of his ninth and final symphony, known as “Ode to Joy” — an epochal hymn of the possible, half a lifetime in the making.

In the spring of 2012, the Spanish city of Sabadell set out to celebrate the 130th anniversary of its founding with a most unusual, electrifying, and touchingly human rendition of Beethoven’s masterpiece, performed by a flashmob of 100 musicians from the Vallès Symphony Orchestra, the *Lieder*, *Amics de l’Òpera* and *Coral Belles Arts* choirs. Watching the townspeople — children with kites, elders with walkers, couples holding hands

— gather to savor the unbidden music in a succession of confusion, delight, and ecstasy is the stuff of goosebumps: living proof that music so readily transports us from the present to the past, or from what is actual to what is possible.”

69

Everything is a lesson. Everybody is a teacher.

What would our lives be like if we approached everything that happens to us, positive or negative, as a lesson, and every person we encounter, likable or unlikeable, as a teacher? What if we regarded everything that happened to us as if we had chosen it?

Imagine if we knew that we were surrounded by a world of lessons and teachers, all trying to help us become our best selves if only we listened. In his book “Memories, Dreams, Reflections,” Carl Jung wrote: “Everything that irritates us about others can lead us to an understanding of ourselves.”

I used to feel a great deal of anger and annoyance towards a certain political candidate, but it wasn’t because of his policy positions. It was because of his personality. One day, it occurred to me that the things that were most annoying about him were things I saw in myself, albeit not as pronounced. It was a learning experience. I never thought this person might be a teacher for me.

We create our lives with the questions we ask. What if, every time something happened to us, we asked ourselves, “What do I need to learn from this?”

70

Swimming Pool or Cesspool?

Imagine having two pools in your home: one is a toxic cesspool, and the other is a clean, clear, and refreshing pool with healing powers. Which one would you choose to bathe in every morning? The answer is obvious. Of course, you would jump into the clean, clear, and refreshing pool.

But how often do we start our day by jumping into the cesspool of our thoughts? This morning, I turned on the television and found myself immersed in the story of the latest mass shooting here in Texas. Why didn't I just turn it off? Because it connected to a darker side of my nature... and maybe yours.

Perhaps it was for the same reason that I get some kind of perverse satisfaction from watching violent TV shows. Maybe self-righteousness and anger feed my ego's need to condemn others and raise myself above the unwashed masses of society. I am not sure why I continued to watch it, but I do know that I started my day by

jumping into that cesspool, and it was draining the life out of me.

So I decided to get out of that pool and into the clear, fresh pool. I meditated. I simply turned my attention to something else - my breath and the present moment. The present moment is perfect.

If you have been starting your day by bathing in the cesspool, consider starting your day in the fresh, clean pool of meditation. If you can't stand the thought of doing nothing, go for a walk - a walking meditation. Pay attention while you're walking. Look at the trees, the sky, feel the breeze, and feel your feet touching the pavement.

Shakespeare said, "Nothing is good or bad, but thinking makes it so." All we can think about in that cesspool is how bad things are.

We can choose which pool to bathe in every morning. Let's choose the clear, fresh pool with healing powers. As powerful as those negative, toxic thoughts are, it really is a choice.

71

Goodbye

During a motorcycle road trip, my two companions and I were having lunch at a restaurant in the Mount Rushmore tourist area when a man entered and asked, “Are those your bikes parked outside? Some guy just ran into one of them with a truck.”

We hurried outside and found Jim’s beautiful Honda Gold Wing lying on its side, looking wounded. As Jim talked to the truck driver, I was impressed by his calm and respectful demeanor. Later, I asked him how he was able to remain composed. He replied, “Unlike you Harley guys, I am not my bike.”

Jim demonstrated an understanding of the Buddha’s teachings on attachment as the cause of suffering, even though he probably had never studied Buddhism. By not identifying with his motorcycle, he was able to handle the situation with equanimity.

Over 20 years ago, when I saw Jim’s bike on the ground, my first reaction was relief that it wasn’t mine. Unlike Jim, I identified with my motorcycle. It defined me. Perhaps because it was loud, powerful, and fast,

everything that I wasn't, or thought I wasn't. I rode that motorcycle for 95,000 miles with all of the Harley leathers, t-shirts, and any other Harley paraphernalia that I could find. One of my fondest memories was my ride from San Antonio, TX to Calgary, Canada with my 10-year-old son on the back. It was a high point in my life, although I'm not sure I could say the same for him. Regardless, it was a memory that will last forever.

This week, I sold my motorcycle and let go of my attachment to it. It was like watching a son or daughter go off to college, knowing that you wouldn't see them every day. I watched a part of my life go away ridden by a stranger. It was a bittersweet moment, but it was time to let go of the past.

As the Buddha discovered, holding on to anything, a person, a thing, or the past is a recipe for unhappiness. As I said goodbye, I felt sadness but also a sense of lightness.

In the words of Alexander Graham Bell, "When one door closes, another opens; but we often look so long and so regretfully upon the closed door that we do not see the one that has opened for us."

Now that I don't have my old Harley to look at each time I walk into the garage, I'm looking at my new Triumph Bonneville, which is opening a new door for my next motorcycle adventure.

Older Americans Month

May is Older Americans Month. Established in 1963 and led by the Administration for Community Living, the month is **a time to acknowledge the contributions and achievements of older Americans, highlight important trends, and strengthen a commitment to honor older citizens.**

As an 80-year-old American, I'm grateful that at least one month is designated to honor us, but I wonder why we don't do that every month of the year. I teach classes at the San Antonio Senior Centers and too many of those folks are left behind. They have so much wisdom and experience to share with the world, but they've been relegated to the Senior Centers for free lunches and bingo.

Who is classified as an "older American" anyway? According to the U.S. Census Bureau, people who are aged 65 and older are part of the "older population."

Let's do some math. Assuming that our adult life starts at 18 and we live to be 98, which is not at all unusual these days, that would give us 80 years of adult life to work with. At 65, we've used up 47 of those adult

years, leaving us with 33 years to work with. We still have 41% of our adult life in front of us. (thank you to Chip Conley for this formula)

That brings to mind Mary Oliver's beautiful beautiful question at the end of her poem, *A Summer's Day*. "Tell me, what is it you're going to do with your one wild and precious life?"

As we honor older Americans this month, let's remember that we're honoring our future selves. We're all headed for the same place, and we have a lot to say about what that place will look like.