

## On Being Vigilant for Life's Lessons

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A couple of weeks ago, I decided that it would be a good idea to be vigilant for lessons about how best to conduct my life that came to me during the course of going about the activities of my day. I wasn't going out looking for them; rather, I would be watchful for them as they presented themselves to me. It turned that six of them made their presence known, and I consider learning them to have had importance for me. Perhaps they will for you too. you can see.

Two key conclusions, or hypotheses, to offer here: that these life lessons, as I'm calling them, do present themselves to us, they are there to be discerned and incorporated in the way we think about ourselves and conduct our lives, but unless we put our mind to being on the lookout for them, we are likely to miss them and be less than we would be if we had received them.

I think the best way to get at what I'm talking about here is to list six life lessons that have come to me the past couple of weeks or so, and that's the point, they came to me, I didn't go out looking for them. I was consciously open to receiving them, I had set it out as a goal to do that. I said to myself, "I am *going to do this*." I committed myself to make them *articulate*, put words to them so I could say, "Yes, this is precisely the lesson." I committed myself to work with them, give them *personal meaning*: this is what this lesson implies for me, this is what I need to do about it.

The six life lessons in the order they presented themselves to me:

*Quit pulling the rug out from under yourself.* I was writing a long email to someone—it doesn't matter to whom in this context—outlining a plan of action; very detailed, here's what we should do and why. And then, at the end, I did what I just about always do: undercut myself. "But then again, this is just what I'm thinking at

the moment.” “I’ve been wrong in the past, and could well be wrong here too.” “There might be something better to do than this.” Etc., Etc. Stop doing that! Let the other person make a call about the worth of what you have to offer. You don’t need to put it down. Lay it out there the best you can, and leave it at that. You really don’t need to add your usual “but it’s just little old me, what do I know” finish--cut that part.

*Set standards with people and live by them.* What do you demand from particular people, Robert, in order to be around them, or if you are around them, or have to be around them, to justify giving them any of your energy? Be precisely clear about that. What will you tolerate, and what won’t you tolerate from a specific individual? Get straight about that, because a fact of life is you are very likely to get from them whatever you’ll tolerate. Got that idea embedded in your being? Now kick those standards up a notch or two or three, and, dammit, live in alignment with them!

*You can be reactive with people, that’s an option.* You can choose not to take initiative with some people; or all people, for that matter. You can wait for them to do something and then respond to that in whatever way you consider appropriate. You don’t have to always be pitching; you can be the catcher if you choose. They come to you, you don’t go to them. And if they don’t come to you, nothing happens, and so be it. That’s a posture that is available to you. Choose it when it is the best alternative.

*You don’t have to explain or justify anything to anybody.* The old Nike ads (or maybe they still do them, I don’t know): just do it. You don’t absolutely need anybody’s permission, understanding, or approval. You don’t need to talk anything through with anybody. You don’t need to be right. You don’t need to be good. You can choose to be any or all of that if you want to, but you don’t have to. There are times in life where the best way forward is to make a decision about what’s best for you to do, and then, with announcing

it to anybody, without checking it out or talking it over with anybody, without getting in a stew about how it's going to play with anybody, act on it and let others do whatever they do and think whatever they think.

*Quit babbling with people just doing their work.* I was rattling on with a front desk worker in a dentist's office. There I was, standing there, all chatty and upbeat, passing out my wisdom, telling funny stories, going on, looking for attention and approval or whatever it was, and it hit me, "She didn't ask for this and doesn't want it. You are using her as a captive audience. She's giving as little back as possible. She wants you out of the office and out of her life. Shut the hell up and go home." From now on, Mr. Entertaining Guy, Mr. Wisdom Guy, get to the point with people just doing their jobs, get the task accomplished as fast as possible, two sentences and out the door or a quick "Sincerely yours" at the end of the message. They aren't interested or impressed and they feel trapped with you, and deep down you've always known that, and you're brought down by doing what you do. Leave them alone. Go read a good book, do anything but bother them.

*Quit giving energy when you know it won't be appreciated or reciprocated.* Perhaps this is an extension of this last lesson, or perhaps they are all saying the same basic thing—get out of people's way. In any case, just now, I was on Amazon about to order a book to send someone. And just before that, I was about to send link of a video to someone in an email. And last night, I was about to recommend a film to someone. In all three cases, it came to me: Did this person ask you to do this kind of thing? No. When you've done it before, did they do anything with it? No. Did they even acknowledge your gesture? No, or if they did, it was the bare minimum. Have they ever done anything like this toward you? No. So stop doing this! Find something else to do with your life. Find someone else to play your life to. And if you can't manage that, just sit there and do nothing, or meditate or something. Quit pitching

your wares to people who aren't interested in you or what you have to offer.

There they are, the six life lessons, insights into myself, whatever to call them, that came up the past up the past couple of weeks. Reading over them, I can see how they might seem kind of despairing or bleak, and maybe they are that, but I'm not experiencing them that way, or not yet anyway. Right now, I'm finding them liberating: I don't have to keep doing my personally unrewarding act with people. I'm taking these lessons as an invitation, and an opportunity, to do something more uplifting and gratifying with my life than pitching myself to the unimpressed and uninterested, and a chance to get out of people's life and doing them and myself a favor in the process.

Of course, there's much more to be said about these six lessons than the paragraph-per-lesson I've offered here. What accounts for why I need these lessons? What effects have thinking and acting contrary to them had on me? I've thought about that some, though I've found it's enough to let them sink in and commit myself to knock it off in each case, and it's been encouraging to learn that that it's been surprisingly easy to do, and that, yes, life is better for having done it.

You can decide whether any of these life lessons apply to you, but more important is to decide whether over, say, the next two weeks, to keep your eye open for life lessons that present themselves to you—I bet they do—and then choose what, if anything, to do about them. I've decided that doing this kind of thing is worth my time, and I intend to keep it up.