

On Priorities and Next Steps
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You and I will live better to the extent that we know what we are fundamentally about as individual, mortal human beings. Beneath the particulars of our lives--what we are thinking and doing today, tomorrow, and the next day--what basic goals, values, commitments, purposes, priorities direct us? (I've had trouble coming up with a single term to get at what I'm talking about. At this point, priorities seems best.) If we are going to live our lives and not the ones something or somebody prompts us to live, it is essential that we have a clear and compelling internal referent, our core priorities, to use as a guide to locate and walk proudly and forcefully along our unique path in life.

In the last few months I've gotten much clearer about my personal priorities, and life has improved significantly for me. I feel much more me these days, much more that I'm living day-to-day as I should, and much more settled on my plans for the future, both short- and long-term, and I feel better about what I am getting done. And simply, I am happier than before, in the sense of experiencing a pervasive, persisting satisfaction and gratification with how life is going for me. I go to bed each night feeling that my life is good these days, that, yes, this is it, I'm doing it as it ought to be done.

Which is not to say that everything is going perfectly, or that I don't have down times, or that the world is throwing bouquets my way. I've decided that life is never a complete opening-night-triumph for anyone, no matter what they do. And more than that, if I am authentically the person I am, I've decided, I'm going to be ducking more than my share of rotten fruit, that's just in the cards for me, and that trying to avoid discord in my life pushes me toward being someone other than who I am, and I want to be who I am, which is what prompted the personal priority identification I'm talking about here in the first place.

To illustrate what I'm getting at in this thought and, I hope, inspire you to get clearer about what directs you in your life, I'll sketch out my six basic priorities at this writing, along with some ideas and activities that grow out of them. These priorities reflect who I am--my nature, my background, my current circumstance, my stage of life--and I don't presume that they will suit you. I'm me

and you're you. An existential challenge, to call it that, each of us faces is to define for ourselves what our life means and how we are going to conduct it. I do my life and you do yours.

Anyway, the seven priorities:

Health and Body. I haven't prioritized my priorities except for this one; this is number one. The physical dimension of our being is what allows us to get our life done well. We are limited to the extent that we are physically less than we could be; and, of course, we aren't going to get anything at all done on this earth if we physically don't exist. We aren't a car we can beat up and then trade in for a new one. When our "car," our vehicle, gives out, our driving days are over for good. And between now and the end of our driving days, to stay with that metaphor, if we don't do the tune-ups, we are going to chug along and spend a lot of time stalled on the side of the road. And more than that, our corporal being, our body, is the repository of our experience of life. Our thoughts, memories, inner pictures, feelings of happiness and sadness and all the rest, and our immediate perceptions of the world are bodily sensations, and they are shaped greatly by the our physical state. Plus, the condition of our body, what we have made of it, what we have let it become, is our esthetic, artistic expression. It is a movie we make for ourselves and others to see. It can be a sloppily made, unattractive, graceless movie, or it can be a work of care and beauty and flow. Even late in life as I am, I'm committed to shooting a great movie.

Peacefulness. I don't want to go through life jangly and lurching, and I've jangled and lurched a lot in my time. I want to live fully, I want to be in the world, but I want to do it from a posture of centeredness, rest, calm, tranquility, peace.

Honor. I want to live with honor. Honor has three dimensions for me. The first is personal integrity, which involves the tightest possible fit between my most profound insights and highest values and commitments and my actions. Second, there is being ethical: I want to do the right thing, the moral thing, the good thing, the decent and caring and generous thing. And third, there is personal dignity: I want to do the self-respecting, noble thing, no matter what is going on around me.

Quality. I want the highest possible quality in every aspect of my life--work, relationships, leisure, expressions, personal manner, physical surroundings, what I read and watch, clothing, everything.

Public Self-Expression. I have spent too much of my life silent; enough of that. I want to speak the best that is in me to the world. The world certainly has no obligation to listen to me, or to respect or heed me if it does listen to me, but I do want it to be able to hear me if it chooses.

My Daughter. At this writing, my daughter is five years old. I want her to be healthy and happy and to grow up to be the best possible version of herself. I'll do all I can to contribute to that happening.

Those are my five priorities at this time of my life. This list is what I am about currently. Everything I do, including this writing, is rooted in these priorities, grows out them, makes them manifest. I have decided to live in accordance with these priorities; I intend to live in alignment with them. A decision, or intension, is more than an objective or plan or hope. Rather, it is an overall posture, a bearing. These priorities pervade my being, I feel them right now, they are *me* right now. I'm doing them, period, no questions, no ambiguities, no pulls and tugs this way and that, I'm walking forward along my path. I'm not omniscient. I can't guarantee results. I can't control every outcome. But I can control what I seek to accomplish and what I do--moment to moment, choice by choice, action by action. I can be present, fully alive and aware in each instant, and I can be responsible for my existence, and that is what I'm doing. I'm not doing it perfectly; I don't think perfection is ever possible for any of us. But I am doing the best I can, and I'm getting better at it, and I've learned I have it in me to do pretty well when I know what truly matters to me, and I'm doing well enough that I have pride in myself greater than I've never known.

What it all comes down to is taking the best next steps you can think of to live out your priorities. Given your capabilities and interests and the situation you are in, what are the best things you can do right now? Life is in the details: specific behaviors, little things as well as big things, and often, things you don't absolutely have to do, and things that nobody is watching to see whether you do them and if they were watching they wouldn't care whether you

did them or not or would reject or negate you for doing them, and still, with any or all of that going on, doing them anyway.

The six priorities have pointed the way to specific activities. I'll list some of them:

- Attention to nutrition. I eat for health and optimal energy and not to entertain myself, comfort myself, structure time, or deaden frustration and anguish.
- Weight management. I've lost needed weight the past few weeks. That involved deciding that, indeed, that was what I was going to do. Then it became a matter of counting calories, eating three meals a day of good food, drinking lots of liquids, and persistence and patience--a couple of pounds a week quickly adds up.
- Yoga. The breathing and postures of yoga are excellent for centering, calming down, and toning and flexibility. There are a variety of forms of yoga, and my sense of it is they all work. A good way to start is to take a yoga class, or get a DVD at a bookstore or at Amazon.
- Learning to disconnect. I've decided that the opposite of just about every good thing is also a good thing depending on the circumstance. While engaging the world is good, so is detaching from it. There are some aversive, diminishing, energy-wasting situations and people that as a practical matter aren't going away and/or you can't, or shouldn't, get away from, and the best thing to do in that circumstance is withdraw in place: no energy; don't fight them, don't join them, don't respond to them; you're not in the room.
- Counterpunching. I believe in a very broad repertory of responses to events and people and employing whichever one is most appropriate in a particular context. Sometimes love is what is called for, but despite what they tell you, sometimes hate is what is called for. Sometimes gentleness is best, and sometimes rage is best. A boxing metaphor: the counterpunch. I get hit, I defend myself, but then I hit back, as hard as I can, and I'm going to be in the best physical and mental shape possible so they feel the punch.

- Weeding out the junk. The cable-show babble, the silly ballgames, the cheap K-Mart crew necks, the inane/vaguely hostile colleagues, the Caffeine-Free Diet Coke, tearing at my cuticles, all of it--out!
- Selflessness. I believe strongly in being self-*full*, full of self, grounded in self, being self-serving, in service to one's self. But that opposites-have-their-place idea again, there is a time to be self-*less*, in service to another human being's welfare rather than one's own, even to the point that service comes at the expense of one's own wellbeing. With my daughter, I want to be there for her no matter what its consequence for me. If it's good for her, that's what I'm doing, period. Period.

So those are my priorities these days and some of what I am doing that comes out of them. But that's me; you have to figure out your priorities and what you need do in order to make them realities in your life. I hope what I have written gives you some direction and inspiration in doing that.