

Nine Things I Learned in Ninety Years

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Introduction

Looking back over my life from when I was about ninety, I ruefully reflected on how often I went off the rails. That I'd survived thus far, scathed but in happy circumstances, was thanks neither to grit, nor to determination, nor to wise counsel, but mostly luck. Considering my most memorable lapses, the consequences of which ranged from unfortunate to catastrophic, I suspect that they all would have been avoided if it hadn't taken me most of a lifetime to get a grip on a few basic principles. I'm laying them out here for readers who might want to be aware of them.

Nine Things I Learned:

1) to be self-constituted

In her book *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity* (2009), Harvard philosopher Christine Korsgaard draws on Kant's and Aristotle's philosophies to make a case for self-constitution — being “consistent, unified, and whole”— having “integrity.”

Korsgaard says that to be good at being a person, you need to be committed to acting in accord with what Kant called “a universal law,” for which I would substitute “a virtuous moral framework.” How is that constructed? A strand of thought in philosophy asserts that moral precepts can't be scientifically established — they are indicia of the ways of thinking of particular cultures or religions. Arrayed against this dismal take on our need for guidance are propositions in the “we hold these truths to be self-evident” category, basic principles like, what causes or tends to cause misery and suffering is bad; what causes or tends to cause joy and happiness is good. Anger, hatred, envy, jealousy, dishonesty, meanness, vengefulness, cruelty, resentment, and despair are bad; joy, cheerfulness, kindness, fairness, compassion, and honesty are good. That's my moral framework as far as I've developed it.

I think of life as like being on a raft drifting downstream on a river of time, other people getting on and off; meanwhile, you're poling, trying to steer the best course, sometimes hanging up on a shoal, maybe falling asleep and awakening almost on the opposite bank, where the wind took you, which is not where you meant to be, getting back mid-stream somehow and carried along with the current through sometimes wildly unexpected weather until you reach the sea. Maybe that's why I admire Huckleberry Finn's moral framework: “What you want, above all things, on a raft, is for everybody to be satisfied, and feel right and kind towards the others.”

Professor Korsgaard says, “Your movements have to come from your constitutional rule over yourself. Otherwise, you'll be ruled by a heap of impulses.” That permeated my consciousness. If you aren't self-constituted, if you aren't unified, if you don't have integrity, you'll be a mess.

But what if you are a self-constituted, self-aggrandizing narcissist who is “consistent, unified, and whole” in your life project of gaining ever more money, power, and dominance without regard to how it affects anyone else? That's not in accord with my moral framework, or Huck Finn's, or with Kant's and Korsgaard's universal law. You need moral strands woven into your self-constituted character to be a good person.

Once you've achieved that — once you are virtuously self-constituted — you will be self-assured and have reason to be so. You will be emotionally invulnerable to being pushed around. You will not entertain feckless impulses, much less yield to them. It will be in your nature to do the right thing.

2) to keep awake and aware

If you're not awake and aware, you're sleepwalking. I spent much of my life in this state, and I know all about it. When you're sleepwalking, you fail to consider what the purpose is of what you're doing and how what you do or don't do will affect you and how it will affect others. Sleepwalkers can go off the rails and stay there unless they luckily stumble back on track.

Sleepwalking doesn't necessarily diminish mental acuity, though I think it invariably affects judgment. Many sleepwalkers hold positions of power. Coming upon Christopher Clark's *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (2014), I knew at once why he had chosen that title. In each of the primarily responsible countries, men of imperious bent and puffed-up notions of honor prevailed over wiser and more thoughtful ones in formulating and implementing national policy. Almost without exception, those responsible for making fateful decisions proved incapable of weighing the risk of a staggering continent-wide catastrophe such as was about to unfold. Referring to Austria-Hungary, whose leaders were determined to act forcefully after the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand, Clark says that the decision-makers had no basis for their preconceived notions of how events would play out.

Charles Swann, a principal character in Proust's novel *In Search of Lost Time*, gives us a close-up look at how a sleepwalking state is initiated. Swann is intelligent, cultivated, and socially adept, but whenever he must confront an unpleasant fact if he is to make a rational decision, "a mental lethargy, which was, with him, congenital, intermittent, and providential, happened at that moment to extinguish every particle of light in his brain."

Sleepwalking is an all too accessible alternative to confronting inconvenient facts. If you are sleepwalking, and it becomes habitual, a day will come when, if you were in an awakened state, it would be obvious that, if you continue your present course of action, or inaction, a catastrophe will ensue.

One can stop sleepwalking and keep awake and aware by becoming a buddha. This might seem impossible, outlandish, outré, and out of the question to you, but I have it on the authority of the revered Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh and, to a degree, my own experience, that it's doable. In Hanh's book *The Art of Living* (2017), he says that being a buddha doesn't require any particular belief or practice. Simply "being fully present, understanding, compassionate, and loving" is enough.

"It's not so difficult to be a buddha," says Thich Nhat Hanh. "Just keep your awakening alive all day long."

3) to consider what others may be thinking and feeling

For most of my life, whenever I spoke or acted, I first considered what seemed to be in my best interest, or, more often, gave no thought to the matter at all. Only rarely did I consider how anyone affected by what I said, or did, or failed to say or do, would react.

Fixed in my mind and occasionally emerging in my consciousness is a conversation I had during college years. It was with a man a generation older than me, whom I wanted to impress. At a pivotal point, I thought of a witty remark I could make regarding his boat. I imagined that I would be displaying a high degree of sophistication in making it. That was the extent of my thinking before I blurted it out. If I had taken a few seconds to consider it further, I would have realized that, although there was a possibility that this gentleman would find my remark to be clever, it was certain that he would find it to be crude and offensive, so much so that I'm reluctant to repeat it here, three-quarters of a century later.

Despite this memorable lesson, it took me a long time to learn to give thought to what may be going on in the minds of people I'm interacting with, both empathetically — sensing how others are feeling — and cognitively — conjecturing how they are thinking.

Littered among my memories like pieces of trash along a trail are occasions when I said something that worked to my disadvantage even though I had supposed that it would impress, or persuade, or engender respect for me on the part of the person I addressed it to. Belatedly, I became aware that decisions involving interactions with others should be informed by reflecting on what whomever you're interacting with may think and feel in response to what you say and do.

4) to make happiness my default state of mind

For some years, I scrolled down Facebook posts every day and once in a while came across one by the Dalai Lama. One day, I read:

As long as we observe love for others and respect for their rights and dignity in our daily lives, then whether we are learned or unlearned, whether we believe in the Buddha or God, follow some religion or none at all, as long as we have compassion for others and conduct ourselves with restraint out of a sense of responsibility, there is no doubt we will be happy.

That got me out of my normal slouch and sitting up straight. Can happiness be assured if you just follow a few simple precepts? No need for mastering meditation techniques, observing elaborate religious practices, or divining the wisdom to be found in ancient texts?

I'm sure that the Dalai Lama, a practical man who respects science, would agree that one can't be happy when being subjected to extreme emotional or physical pain. But for most of us who are fortunate enough to rarely or never experience vicious assaults, I came to believe that, if we feel and behave the way the Dalai Lama recommends, happiness can become our usual state of being — our default state of mind.

Later, I came upon another post by the Dalai Lama:

Even more important than the warmth and affection we receive, is the warmth and affection we give....
More important than being loved, therefore, is to love.

I've come to think that understanding this, too, is required for happiness to become one's default state of mind.

5) to seek an eternal perspective

I said that one of the things I learned was to consider what other people may be thinking and feeling. The 17th-century philosopher Benedict Spinoza expanded his view from that of his own ego to include the views of other people, and beyond the views of other people to the view of what he called “God,” or “Nature” — meaning the entire cosmos. He believed that, through knowledge and understanding, one could find joy and equanimity in the natural order of things. It’s a perspective akin to that of Buddhism, whose central thought the 20th-century mythologist Joseph Campbell identified as “compassion without attachment,” a condition in which “you can stay alive, in action, but be disengaged from desire for, and fear of, the fruits of your action.”

Achieving a similarly expansive embrace of life and the world — an eternal perspective — led Spinoza to conclude, “A man strong in character hates no one, is angry with no one, envies no one, is indignant with no one, scorns no one, and is not at all proud.”

Can you feel fully alive if you are trying to achieve a challenging goal, but because you are disengaged from desire or fear (have an eternal perspective), you don’t have an emotional investment in what’s going on about you? Isn’t life colorless if you are never thrilled when you succeed and dismayed when you fail? Achieving extraordinary equanimity has obvious merit, but if you are emotionally disengaged, doesn’t it drain the excitement out of life? Aren’t you less likely to be satisfied?

Not necessarily. In Peter Matthiessen’s book *The Snow Leopard* (1978), he describes his trek in the Himalayas with the zoologist George Schaller. Among other objects of interest, they were hoping to see a snow leopard. They found scat, but never caught a glimpse of the exotic animal they were stalking. Near the end of their journey, when he had reached a Buddhist monastery, Matthiessen marveled at the serenity of the resident lama, who was evidently confined there permanently because of his “twisted legs.”

Responding to Matthiessen’s inquiry, the lama remarked, “Of course I am happy here. It’s wonderful. *Especially* when I have no choice!”

Moved by the lama’s “wholehearted acceptance of *what is*,” Matthiessen, musing about his own experience, writes:

“Have you seen the snow leopard?

No! Isn’t that wonderful?”

That’s what Matthiessen must have thought the lama would have said. Was it a stretch? I don’t think so, because it was a release from attachment, the expedition itself was wonderful, their thinking about it was wonderful, that they were “alive, in action” was wonderful; and that there was a majestic animal nearby that was not to be seen was wonderful.

Some philosophers find seeking an eternal perspective to be at odds with pursuing one's legitimate self-interest. In his book *The View from Nowhere* (1986), Thomas Nagel seems to see it as a balancing act. He says, "The hope is to develop a detached perspective that can coexist with and comprehend the individual one." I think Spinoza would say that an eternal perspective needn't be qualified to accommodate a self-fulfilling life; it's a necessary condition of having one, bringing with it equanimity and joy.

6) to guard against self-deception

Certitude is not the test of certainty.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. (1841-1935)

Self-deception occurs when one's decisions and conclusions are driven or influenced by skewed beliefs, unbalanced emotional states, wishful thinking, and the like. It doesn't take much for us to be subconsciously ingenious at justifying insupportable conclusions. A common example of the process is confirmation bias — giving greater credence and weight to data supporting one's entrenched beliefs and ignoring or minimizing what would undermine them. People who are brilliant and highly educated can be as vulnerable to self-deception as anyone. They employ their superior intellectual capability to display a virtuosity of sophistry most of us couldn't match.

In his book *Things That Bother Me* (2018), the British philosopher Galen Strawson quotes two notable thinkers who lived four centuries apart, but cast lights of similar wave-lengths on how self-deception becomes entrenched in one's mind:

Once the human mind has favored certain views, it pulls everything else into agreement with and support for them. Should they be outweighed by more powerful countervailing considerations, it either fails to notice these, or scorns them, or makes fine distinctions in order to neutralize or reject them . . . thereby leaving untouched the authority of its previous position.

Francis Bacon (1561-1626)

We know that people can maintain an unshakeable faith in any propositions, however absurd, when they are sustained by a community of likeminded believers.

Daniel Kahneman (1934-2024)

In his book *The Disordered Mind* (2018), Nobel laureate neuroscientist Eric Kandel notes, "All conscious perception depends on unconscious processes." Unconscious processes skewed my conscious perceptions, clearing paths to self-deceptions.

7) how to confront mortality

Keep death and exile before your eyes each day. . .

Epictetus (d. 135 C.E.)

The free man thinks of death, least of all things.

Benedict Spinoza (1632-1677)

The ancient Greek and Roman Stoics believed that it's wise to contemplate death well ahead of the event. I suppose their idea was that it's desirable to contemplate death's inevitability so as not to be shocked when it's staring you in the face. If you have cultivated Stoicism, you may be better able to bear unexpected news that you have little time to live. Stoicism is a noble stance, but I prefer Spinoza's, which is that the path to equanimity, self-control, and disinterest in one's mortality is to be found in gaining an eternal perspective through knowledge and understanding.

Spinoza rejected all supernatural claims of the world's religions, including anthropomorphic conceptions of God and rewards and punishments administered by a deity to living persons or in an afterlife. He lived simply, but disdained asceticism. He considered doctrinal and myth-based religions to be superstitions; yet he was pragmatic. Knowing that his landlady found comfort in her religious beliefs, he took care not to undermine her faith.

I try to delight in the sunshine that will be when I shall never see it anymore. And I think it is possible for this sort of impersonal life to attain greater intensity — possible for us to gain much more independence — than is usually believed, of the small bundle of facts that make our own personality.

George Eliot (1819-1880)

Eliot translated Spinoza's treatise, *Ethics*, into English. The passage quoted above, from one of her letters, is a snapshot of an eternal perspective in the making.

The best way to overcome the fear of death — so at least it seems to me — is to make your interests gradually wider and more impersonal, until bit by bit the walls of the ego recede, and your life becomes increasingly merged in the universal life.

Bertrand Russell (1872-1970)

In Russell's essay "A Philosophy for Our Time" he observed that Spinoza's philosophy generated an impersonal feeling that overrode anxiety, and that, even as Spinoza's death was approaching, "he

remained completely calm at all times, and in the last day of his life, showed the same friendly interest in others as he did in days of health.”

I look forward to oblivion.

Katharine Hepburn (1907-2003)

Katharine Hepburn was one of the most high-spirited and goodhearted public figures of her time. Her sentiment, quoted above, which she expressed when she was in decline, in her mid-eighties, exemplifies the fearlessness and bravura that marked her character throughout her illustrious life.

I want death to find me planting my cabbages, neither
worrying about it, nor about the unfinished gardening.

Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592)

The great essayist was probably as sensible as anyone who ever lived.

8) what an outsized role is played by luck

In his book, *Night Thoughts* (2009), the actor, playwright, and essayist Wallace Shawn says that he was born lucky (that is — to well-heeled, sophisticated, highly intelligent, generally enlightened parents). But unlike most people who were born lucky and take their unusual circumstances for granted, Shawn began to notice the differences between lucky and unlucky people at an early age. “Lucky people tend to expand, to fill the space their luck has given them,” he writes.

We’ve become familiar with the very, *very* lucky — billionaires who buy penthouses in incongruously tall towers and fund politicians who express their gratitude by revising the Internal Revenue Code so it favors to an even greater degree the rich and especially the superrich, who then rest their bulky elbows even more heavily on the scales of what happens in our governing bodies, perpetuating for themselves what they think of as their entitlement. But even many rungs farther down the wealth ladder, are many who are luckier than most people who ever lived. Shawn notes that if you’ve lived a relatively peaceful life and not been bombed or harassed or had to live in fear, and you’ve been able to get two or three decent meals a day, you’re lucky. And if you’ve accomplished a lot in life, it’s in large part because you were lucky in the opportunities you had and in how your path was smoothed at a critical time along the way.

So much depends on luck: your genetic makeup, the circumstances in which you grew up, the mix of events and influences that formed your disposition and your predispositions, the random happenings that swiveled you in directions not of your choosing. It follows, I think, that the luckier you’ve been, the more humility and generous-spiritedness you need; and the unluckier you’ve been, the more you need compassion for yourself, and, unfair though it may be, the more you need irrepressible resolve.

9) to consider what you have at the moment

As a general principle, be dynamic, take initiatives, don't be a stick in the mud, and so forth, for sure, but there are times when it's all-important to first think for a moment, lest later you reflect that it would have only taken a moment —

For it falls out

That what we have we prize not to the worth
Whiles we enjoy it, but being lacked and lost,
Why, then we rack the value, then we find
The virtue that possession would not show us
While it was ours.

Friar Francis
Much Ado About Nothing
William Shakespeare

10) A thing I didn't learn until I was ninety-five

Don't assume a memory is accurate even if it is firmly fixed in your mind.

In the previous version of this essay, drawing on a memory I formed while reading Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard* almost fifty years ago, I erroneously attributed the quoted statement — “Did you see the snow leopard? No! Isn't that Wonderful?” — to a lama at the monastery where Matthiessen was staying. The false memory returned to my mind many times during the intervening years, possibly gaining in presumed legitimacy through repetition. Rereading the book this past week, I discovered my error: This wasn't an utterance made by the lama. It wasn't even an utterance! It was a thought that passed through Matthiessen's mind that he preserved for his book.

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