



LIFE RULES

LIVING ON PURPOSE

WRITTEN BY

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Life Rules: Living On Purpose

By: Matt Gordon

To all the seeking pilgrims willing to squeeze life like a lemon.

And to Mark for occupying a secret table and discussing the rules.

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Lemons

Recently a friend and I discovered that we had read the same book. The book is a famous one by a polarizing psychologist (among other things) in which the expert expounds on what he thinks are basic rules for living a well-adjusted life. Rather than busy ourselves with our assessment of this fellow's compelling list of rules, my friend and I decided to list out our own rules for life.

This, if you've never tried to put them on paper, can be a baffling task. Many of us think that we lead very intentional lives—examined lives, to use the vernacular of philosophy. In reality, many of us just sort of get by with our daily decisions and then retroactively ascribe meaning, purpose, and rationale. Or, at least, that is what I do. Without forethought, I live perpetually in dimwitted hindsight. I'm a revisionist when it comes to my own life—intentionality becomes a well-scripted afterthought.

Speaking of revisions, here's something else I've realized: if I never put down some initial rules, I won't be able to weigh them for merit and meaning, or make beneficial changes. I will be unable to test if the "bridge" is too wobbly for my weight, a thing I'd rather find out at the onset—in order to repair said bridge (and the thinking that has led me to it) or find an altogether different route for crossing the chasms of life.

So I jotted down rules. Some good and true; the validity of others still waiting to be proven out in my life. I didn't spend too long on the exercise, desiring not exactitude, but rather a place to begin. Below is my list (in no purposeful order). Maybe a few of my rules will help you craft your own? Perhaps seeing my rules in the broad light of the day will empower you to rebuke, to correct, or to improve upon my thinking? I'm always up for better rules, for cleaner thinking, for truer perspectives. I hope you are too.

And I guess here, too, would be a decent time to offer a disclaimer on this word "rules" that can seem like such an authoritarian imposition upon our freedoms. "I live by no rules!" you claim, with hearty defiance. Well, yes, except for that statement, which is, you know, a rule. We all have them—what we are willing to spend on vacations (and what we won't), what we are willing to call a date (and what we aren't), what we believe is okay to cut corners on (and what we are sticklers about). "Rules" as I am calling them are much like drawers. I put things in them; they help bring order to my life. Sometimes, to my wife's chagrin, I choose not to use the drawers and leave a pair of pants just beyond them. Life goes on when this occurs (for me at least!). These life maxims aren't intended to be oppressive any more than the lines and signs on the highway are. These are suggestions I make to myself on how to best navigate the roads of life.

Rule 1: Say “Yes”

When at an impasse on an action or decision, be willing to say “yes.”

Each day there are 67,324 seconds. Each year there 709,745 minutes. And each sentence, thus far, has failed to offer any actual precise math whatsoever. Timed correctly or not, the point remains: time is limited. (Far too limited, in my opinion, to painstakingly measure out seconds or minutes or seek online for a person who has.)

I wonder just how much time I spend making decisions? I also wonder how many of those decisions actually matter? Do I fill up on gas on Monday or Tuesday? Do I send this email now or later? Do I buy a hat for my son’s Easter basket today or tomorrow? Do I go to work this month or not?

Okay, so that last one matters a little. And actually all these decisions matter—decisions are very important and in everything meaning can be culled. But often the weight of importance is not dependent on *what* we decide. So the decision-making process (the *why*, the *how*, and even the *when*) actually matters more than the decision itself in most cases.

Just last week I went through this. A person asked me if I wanted to get breakfast on Thursday to talk something through. I didn’t really want to, if I’m being honest. My calendar said “yes”—a glaring blank space currently occupied Thursday’s prime breakfast hours. But then I have to pick what place we go to and make some small talk and finally get to the brunt of what we are meeting about, and there is very little payoff. The person in question is serving me with information I had requested, but it isn’t information I care about deeply. It is like that book on the Top-100 Greatest Books of All Time List that I always say I want to read, but haven’t ever read. Sorry, *War and Peace*, if it hasn’t happened yet it probably just isn’t in the cards for us.

So I stare at the email invite and stare at my calendar. This goes on for, again I am approximating here, about thirteen years. Okay, it doesn’t. But really how many seconds is this truly worth? And if I were to add up how much time I waste waffling about saving \$.18 on one grass-seed versus another or that I spend trying to decide which book to check out from the library or which movie to watch or . . . you get the point; and the answer? Well, it is a lot. Probably a decent portion of my daily 67,324.

Now how does this rule help me? Well, take this breakfast invite again. With the rule in mind, I looked at my calendar, it was open, so I said—and I know this is groundbreaking—“Yes.” Instead of wasting time and mental space dilly-dallying with indecision on a thing that isn’t momentous, I just say yes.

And more and more, I try to do this with just about anything. If I don’t have a really good reason to say “no” or “wait”—reasons like: I’m double-booked; this person is likely a murderer; this would be an affront to someone I love; this costs a lot of money; this would display poor character; etc.—then I just say “yes” as quickly as possible and dive in.

The other thing I’ve found with this is that opportunities typically begin with “yes.” Some will say that every “yes” is owed to a “no” said to something else. While true in sentiment, it can also be debilitating: we can delve into deep analytical atrophy on anything. If we are always guarding our “yes” for the future, we miss out on the only moments we actually possess—this pristine present moment. Of course, we need to steward our “yes” well. But I also need to steward my time well, and when there is friction between those two ideas, I save the time and say the “yes.” In doing so I’ve met friends, learned things I wouldn’t have otherwise, and have been placed in some uncomfortable (and good) situations. In just a last few weeks of this writing alone, this rule has allowed me to speak in front of a few large groups, take on a freelance writing project of which I was wary, play soccer with a bunch of strangers past my bedtime, take my son outside, try a new restaurant, and, yes, set a breakfast for Thursday. What have I gained from all the instances of “no”? Well, I can only speculate—it is like pointing at the invisible.

Growing up, drug prevention programs drilled into us: *Just Say No*. I can totally get behind that when discussing cocaine. But when it comes time to help someone, meet someone, or learn something, I want to live toward a contrary maxim.

When at an impasse on an action or decision, be willing to say “yes.”

Rule #2: Spend Dollars

Spend dollars, not dimes.

My in-laws had this sunroom for many of my wife's formative years. Maybe you call it a four-season room? But you know the rooms of which I speak: they tend to jut out from the house into the backyard. If there are woods behind your house and these trees are looking toward your home, these sunrooms must seem to them to be 3D encroachments threatening to merge the domestic with the wild; the indoor with the outdoor; the enclosed with the free. And this, I think, is why I am drawn to these rooms—they feel free and adventurous, while being safe and cozy. My wife likes them because her family would celebrate Christmas in theirs.

And now we are grown-ups and we can buy what we want, dang it! So we have our sights set on the sun, but since that is apparently really bad for your eyes, we've focused instead on a sunroom.

Added to this frivolous impulse is next-level sentimentality. My wife's beloved mother passed away, and, as these things go, we have come to love and to reflect on things about her we took for granted in life. One thing she really loved was her family gathering together, and since a lot of this occurred in her sunroom, she was particularly fond of that room.

So our selfishness meets genuine sentiment, much the way we desire our home to reach toward the woods. Fate then joined this party by way of the company who built my in-law's sunroom twenty-five years ago agreeing to come out and give us a bid even though we are an hour out of their normal business range. It is a sign! It is a call! It is clear and good—if God is for us (and our sunroom) who can be against us!

Oh what righteous fools our wants, coupled with flawed logic, can make us.

We got a bid for a room.

And with the amount of that bid we could build another house altogether. It was absurd. It was gross. It was a profound injustice!

I was incredulous at the proposed cost, and I groused over this later that day, in my car, while eating fast food. This fast food cost around six bucks. It was overpriced, unnecessary, and was doing nothing to aid in our quest of the sun.

It is also where my rule comes in: Spend dollars, not dimes.

Most of the things I've purchased or donations I've made in my life have been forgettable. A lot of this is because I've contented myself with cheap cheeseburgers and even cheaper causes. I'll give \$10 to just about anything, and, with this mentality, I give \$10 to just about everything. It is extreme to say it means nothing, but it is pretty close to that. But to give \$100 or (gasp) \$500 to something—now that gives me pause. What about a cool grand? Makes me nervous just thinking about it. And those nerves make me, you know, *think* about it. I have to really believe in the cause, value it, cherish it, long for it, pray about it and for it. That is how I want to give, but I can't do that if I'm spread thin (and fat) for cheeseburgers' sake.

Like time, I have limited amounts of financial and relational capital. (Physical capital too, if you really look the thing in the eye.) For me, I'd rather create meaningful spaces in my home to gather than fill the spaces I have with trinkets. I'd rather consume with moderation in order to enjoy the big feast all the more.

I see this all over the place in my life. When I invest deeply—in things, in people, in causes—those things stick. I remember them; they are cherished and chockful of meaning. In the age of instant gratification and discount dopamine offered at every turn, I want to wait and save and steward.

I'll probably never get that sunroom, but not getting the sun doesn't mean I have to settle instead for a sun lamp. If I'm patient, if I'm wise, I'll find the light. In my day-to-day choices, I'd rather get the most bang for bucks (both literally and symbolically), and that means having the most bucks (and sense) available for said bang.

In generosity, in consumerism, in experience, in study and spirituality, in investment in my fellow human . . .

Spend dollars, not dimes.

Rule #3: Enjoy God?

Enjoy God so that my view of him joyfully grows, and with that increasing view comes perspective in all things.

Dishwalla had this song in the 90's called *Counting Blue Cars*. For all I know it was their only song. But it was a memorable one. For me this line sticks out: "Tell me all your thoughts on God/ 'Cause I'd really like to meet her."

What catches many is the pronoun used for God. In the Judeo-Christian worldview, along with Muslims, God is often referred to using masculine pronouns. But honestly, that is not the part that strikes me.

You may believe in God or you may not. You may believe in the God I believe in or a different one. Your God may be male or female or fluid or without gender or personal identity, or you may have many Gods with just as many identity markers.

But here for me is the question that informs my rule: Do you enjoy your God? Or, to invoke Dishwalla: Do you really want to meet God? That is what sticks out about the song to me—the narrator's zeal for meeting his God.

For much of my life I believed in a God I had no interest in meeting. God was compartmentalized, like homework and eating vegetables, into the category: Things I Have to Put Up With. I don't think I'm alone in this. My proof? All the angry believers out there. And I'm not merely talking about believers of Jesus—though that group (one in which I include myself) spew plenty of venom on God's supposed behalf. There is the grumpy humanist and the disgruntled omnist and the temperamental pantheist.

There is a passage in Scripture that speaks about "abiding in God." The image is that of a child reclining back against the chest—and by proxy, the heart—of God. It is loving. It is dear. It is tender. It is secure.

My own sons assume this posture on me when they are sad—and they become less so. When they are scared—and they become less so. When they are angry—and they become less so.

But for a long time, I'd lean back on God—usually when pushed by threat of Hell or unhappiness—and my fear and anger and jealousy and power-mongering were stoked rather than subdued.

I'm not sure what led this to change. Ancient creeds claim that the chief end of man is to enjoy God forever. Enjoy. God. These two words didn't seem natural to me, but it is because I had taken all the meat and toppings off the sandwich and then complained of its blandness. I wasn't following God in His completion—in fact, I never actually can—but rather I was subtracting winsome bits from Him. Things like joy and peace and love and contentment. And then less obvious ones like talents and flavors and music and beauty and laughter. God is more than our genial Uncle with whom our hearts fill with joy upon hearing of His future visit. But God certainly is no less than that.

When I made conscious effort not just to obey God or submit to God or surrender to God or put up with God, but instead sought to be awed by His beauty, His people, and the myriad works of His hand—the stars, the trees, the stories—well, it was Mozart filling the symphony hall, trees populating the forest and animals the trees; it was rounding out the idea of love with the personality of the beloved. It was leaning back against the chest—and by proxy, the heart—and our breathing melding into a single indiscernible breath.

And if God is the originator of all things, then God is also the “understander” of all things. Growing up, I was in love, for instance, with playing Nintendo. That practice led to very few real-world skills. But I enjoyed it, at least there was that. Enjoying God is like having the youthful hobby of, say, woodworking. Not only is it enjoyable, it is useful as well. Joy comes from it, but so do tables and chairs and instruments and a shareable usefulness. If God is who He claims to be then enjoying Him is simultaneously the maximal version of joy, of understanding, and of utility possible. Or, put more simply: By enjoying God, I can properly enjoy everything and everyone else, thus becoming a person more easily enjoyed.

The Apostle John closes Revelation with this line: “Come, Lord Jesus.”

There is an excitement there, a hopeful anticipation that falls in line with the Dishwalla sentiment: “I'm on my way to meet God!”

Enjoy God so that my view of him joyfully grows, and with that increasing view comes perspective in all things.

Rule #4: A Better Fire

Find what is lovely about a person and lead with that.

I can be pretty mean. William Faulkner built his literary empire, in part, on misfits. He was masterclass at taking wretched characters and emphasizing their oddities. He highlights idiots and racists and backwoods morons with just enough realism and a touch of humor. I think I have a little Faulkner in me, or rather, I Faulkner-ize the people around me. I'm a big game hunter stalking deficiencies in intelligence, morality, physique.

It is such an easy disposition to slip into, and to quote John Lennon: "I'm not the only one." We tend to know people around us by the worst in them. There is method to this—it gives leverage to the relationship: *I know that misguided thing you did or that mistaken perspective you cling to*. This negative knowledge about another gives you power over him, like finding a manila envelope full of compromising pictures, or, to modernize the reference, we collect timely screen captures of the worst moments of others.

And this ugly heart trend isn't just limited to past misdeeds or online foibles, it becomes our rote operating system. If I walk into a room of strangers—waiting rooms are the best—it is tempting to sit quietly and judge the world around me. There is the person who talks too loudly and misuses grammar; there is the person who asked the dumb question at the front desk; there is the person who can't control her kid; there is the person whose clothes don't fit. And on and on it goes, a rolodex of evidence as to how I am better, smarter, truer, wiser than everyone else on this planet.

It begins with strangers, but then it bleeds to other relationships too. This is why gossip is such a delicious dish many of us can't help gluttonizing over. We get a confidant or two and give voice to the toxicity that has built in our hearts. We conceal it with humor; we cloak it with concern. But it is verbal violence against our fellow human—our friends and family included. And, ultimately, it is a weapon used against ourselves, as no good comes from it. Only the festering wounds of bitterness and loneliness.

Messing up in high school was helpful. My senior year I did something dumb and public. People turned on me. I was astounded to find that grown-ups—formerly supportive teachers and parents of friends—let their disdain for me be known with a certain haughtiness. It was a

disarming season of life, but what was even more dizzying was going home from college or in my mid-twenties or even into my thirties. It was not uncommon to have that decade-old mistake—truly a harmless misstep of youth—be the defining quality of my being, the marker of my identity, the summarizing statement of my entire life. Many people wanted to know me for my blemish and nothing more.

It made me realize all the ways I am prone to “know” such people—the loser from middle school, the annoying woman who never stops talking, the coworker with bad hygiene, the . . . I could go on and on.

Or I could stop.

I could instead find a new rule to live by.

And it is simple: Find what is lovely about a person and lead with that.

This doesn't mean I can't dislike a person or that a person cannot be dumb or unwise or smelly or loud. People are all those things every day—at least I am. But this rule means I don't have to define people by the very worst trait I can pick out about them. It means I don't have to walk into a conference room with coworkers and try to find the ones I don't like and chronicle a tidy list of reasons for this disinclination. I don't have to go around building a case against my fellow human, using their own idiosyncrasies or downright flaws as firewood for the flame of hatred in my soul.

Instead I can challenge myself to light a fire of a different kind.

In bygone days of the Wild West, fires were beacons for the weary traveler to warily approach. There he'd meet the owner of the fire, and there by sacred flame they'd inch closer to heat, to light, and to one another. Meals were often had this way; stories were shared. At some point someone at these fires pulled out a harmonica or a fiddle, and music was made. It was the fire of community, and the way it is built in my own life is through welcoming acceptance, not creating a cache full of misfits to mock.

Every person is made in the image of God, and thus possesses dignity, value, worth. Beauty. When I write the descriptions of the people who populate my mind, my existence, what wording will I choose? What traits do I seek and sift out? What do I see?

The annoying coworker or *The coworker with the warm laugh?*

The know-it-all or *The dogged pursuer of facts?*

The screw up or *The bold taker of risks?*

I want to strive to know people by their beauty.

Find what is lovely about a person and lead with that.

Rule #5: On Time

Be on time (without judging those who aren't).

The unseemly catch about having rules by which to live or aim toward is that I begin holding everyone else accountable to them. Foucault was a French philosopher who repackaged some ancient thoughts kind of like this:

A person wants to build an identity. (So far so good, right?) A person bases that identity on what that person chooses to value. Next this person shapes said identity by proving out that love. (Example: you choose a team to follow and then you begin watching that team play. Next, you buy that team's merchandise.) That goes along and eventually a person reaches a point where they fortify identity through hatred for everyone who does not love the same thing as them. (This is the basis of sports rivalries, and the root cause of just about every other hatred, bigotry, and war that has ever occurred.)

So naturally when one makes a rule like, *Be on time*, a seed of resentment is planted for all of those laggards out there who are forever running late. Do not water this seed. Its roots will choke out any goodness that may come from living an intentional life. It is kind of like that scene in one of the Harry Potter films. The heroes are in a small bank-vault seeking a gold goblet among a horde of them. Whenever the wrong goblet is touched, it multiplies. A good thing (gold) quickly becomes a deadly thing as there is less and less space in the room, threatening to squeeze out life. When our own beliefs are imposed on others without their consent, the breath of life and vitality are strangled; choice and love replaced by threat and fear.

But on to the rule because you have places to be and I would hate to make you late.

Time is so precious I must always consider what I am doing (or not doing) with it. What I can sometimes forget, though, is that the time of others is just as precious to them as it is to me. Here's the thing: I don't steal money from people. What a terrible high one must feel as a pickpocket! There you are walking one way, the mark is approaching from the opposite direction. As your paths cross, you deftly reach your hand into his pocket or her purse and pluck out value. They walk on less valuable in their direction as you saunter on, heart pounding, with an instantly increased worth. It would be exhilarating. The trouble is, it is wrong. It is wrong in itself, which should be prohibiting enough, but it is also considered wrong by the people who can decide legally if I am to spend time in jail or not. So I don't reach in and take value from other people. Yet I'm willing unashamedly to snatch up their precious time.

If I had all the time in the world (just an unlimited weekly allotment of hours), I would have much more money. Think about it. I could work eighty-hour work weeks—I mean I have plenty of time now. I could double my pay. I could write something worthwhile or learn a skill that could be monetized, all while binge-watching *Tiger King* and carving out some hours to volunteer. So many options because there is now so much time. Time yields options and opportunities—it is the space in which life happens.

Now change the hypothetical and give me cash instead of time. All the money in the world cannot buy back a single second. Yes, with wealth I could maximize the time I have—faster car, jets, personal assistants and the like—but there is no buyback option. In the age-old jargon of picking a Popsicle from the box: “You get what you get and you don’t throw a fit.” In terms of time, we get what we get, fits or no.

What we can take from this is that time is actually more valuable than money, and hence all the things that money can buy. When I am late to meet with someone, late in coming home to support my wife, late for play time with my sons, I am, in essence, robbing something sacred from another person. I am also making a direct statement in regards to valuation: my time is more valuable than yours. This is markedly false and stupendously selfish.

Of course, I’ll be late. But I’m nearly certain I’ll be late more often if I make my decisions and schedule without the proper emphasis and perspective. When I don’t think of others—and their time—as important, of course I’ll be flippant with it. Further, I won’t have regret when I am late, and it is very hard for repentance to happen where there is no regret. In short, I’ll coast along through life without stewarding the most precious resource on earth and serving other people with it.

I want to mind the clock as a tangible way of expressing my love for others. They are worth it, and by showing up when I said I would, I’m truly making most of the time, filling it with purpose and love.

Be on time (without judging those who aren’t).

Rule #6: EUREKA!

When there is no choice in a matter, dwell on it as little as possible. Try even to find something enjoyable about it or create a reward for “suffering” well.

“Do I have to?” I whined.

“Yes!” comes the emphatic answer from all directions.

This is an almost daily conversation had when I have to take out the trash or attend a work function I’m dreading or eat my green beans or when I have to talk about my feelings or write a chapter in an eBook or . . .

We all have this foreboding sense of obligation toward the things to which we are committed. Doesn’t really matter what it is, but as soon as it becomes a “have to” a little part of us tries to bend it to “Do I have to?” In college or high school, this was demonstrated through completing assigned research papers. You’d put off developing an idea, checking out books, editing a first draft, printing a second one, doing the dreaded Sources Cited page. At every level of the process was worry and dread and grumbling. You’d begrudgingly finish the assignment, turn the assignment in, and then restart the process of prickly procrastination concerning the next assignment.

And such becomes your life—loathing the momentary obligations of one day, completing them, and then loathing the obligations of the next day . . . until we die (the part of life, in fact, that might be at the heart of this vicious cycle of avoidance).

I haven’t had many epiphanies in my life. There was the time I bit both ends of a piece of licorice and then used it as a straw. *EUREKA!* Oh, and the moment I realized I could increase the reading speed on audiobooks. *EUREKA!* But one of my finer, deeper *EUREKA!* moments came from attending a funeral—death, after all, is the great teacher. But in this case it wasn’t so much seeing a corpse in casket as it was all that led up to that moment. For days I had barraged my mother with reasons why I didn’t need to attend: *I don’t know this person! I’ll miss my baseball game—and we are playing the Astros! It is one more mouth you’ll have to feed along the way. You could stay longer to visit with family if you don’t schlep us kids along. What if I just stay here and paint the kitchen like you’ve been wanting?* There was no shortage to my feeble reticence. Nor to her pithy resilience, which came in this form: “You’re going.”

And she was right. There was no way around it, aside from running away, and that is a pretty short sighted solution. Eventually one runs out of places to run or people to run to. At some point, our path turns to a circle, trodden trails and sodden relationships.

I went to the funeral. I paid what little respects I had. Then I went home, no worse for wear, once my tie was removed, that is.

EUREKA!

Life is made up of obligations. Daily there are things I don't want to do. Most of those things are beneficial to other people, which is why I probably don't want to do them—I am a black hole of selfishness. But I'm not going to leave my family; I'm not going to lose my job over my scruples; I'm not going to behave like my toddler when I can't have my way. Nope, I'm going to realize I've been cosmically drafted into this circumstance and I am not going to waste energy fighting it or miss sleep wrestling with it. I'm going to accept it, do my part, serve well, and move on.

I've found this disposition to be one of the best ways to reduce anxiety in my life—why worry about a thing I have no choice in? Just accept it, and, if possible, try to see something redemptive in it. For that funeral, it was easy: I was there for my mother when she needed me and I got this very life lesson out of it.

Also, with these situations, I've found other rewards. Occasionally these experiences are worse than I anticipate. And this is great! Life is built upon experiences—good ones and bad ones. In fact we need a bit of both to be able to discern the difference. (Think of CS Lewis's famous line—no, not that one, the other one!—about the kid making mud pies in the slum because he doesn't know what is meant by a holiday at the sea.) But, as we catalogue the good and separate it from the bad, we find a nimble line, a shifting distinction. What I mean is that sometimes when a situation is a total mess, it leads to what becomes a fond memory or catchy story—some anecdotal wisdom one can keep in his back pocket chronicling that one time things were torn asunder. That, or things go far better than my dread would have indicated. This is often the case. “You know what? That wasn't so bad!” you say after the dentist appointment, or haircut, or dinner party, or family vacation, or performance review, or, even, funeral.

Sometimes you get surprises along the way too.

In another book (that can be purchased where bad books are sold), I recounted being dragged

four hours by my mother during winter break to a family Christmas gathering. To say I didn't want to go would be an understatement.

On the way there, in front of our car, was a van with some children jumping around. Wildly. Like animals almost. I urged the car forward, our Camry speeding up to drive alongside this plodding mini-van.

"MONKEYS!"

That word probably isn't shouted in mother-and-son unison all too often. My sister stirred from the backseat to take in the scene: A little boy monkey in overalls and a little girl monkey in a child's dress were gleefully cartwheeling about the mini-van. I am not making this up.

The two old women in the vehicle just cruised along as their monkey children explored every inch of their van; our hearts.

So there is that too.

Along some roadway we don't want to be on, on some menial chore or at some dinner party, there is always the possibility of monkeys—unexpected loves and joys and memories, cartwheeling about forever within us.

So along with my head, I want to keep my eyes up. Take life as it comes, for one never knows when and where the wonder (or *EUREKA!*) might pop up.

When there is no choice in a matter, dwell on it as little as possible. Try even to find something enjoyable about it or create a reward for "suffering" well.

Rule #7: An Occasional Cheese Dip

Don't continue on hungry. When a pause comes, feed the muse by feeding the body.

I've been staring at this screen for an hour. Often, that is all I need to make at least a dent in the requisite word count for a chapter, but not today. Blankly at blank page, I stare. I start typing . . .

I recall eating lunch with my friend Pete. It has stayed in mind because the unusual hour of our dining. . .

No, all wrong. Let me try again . . .

Recently a New York Times column suggested that . . .

I can't remember where I saved that column, and I'll need the author's name. I guess I'll Google: "New York Times article about eating lunch." Or I could just go a different direction . . .

Hmm . . .

And so it goes. And so I go. Or at least I should, off to find something to eat.

Virginia Woolf writes, "One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well."

John Kennedy Toole joins this remark to the thinking of Woolf: "I am at the moment writing a lengthy indictment against our century. When my brain begins to reel from my literary labors, I make an occasional cheese dip."

There is much wisdom in this.

But many of us ignore it. We wolf down makeshift meals at our desks, while vomiting out hurried thoughts. Or we neglect both the meal and thinking altogether and press on in futility against immovable wall rather than taking a break, making some cheese dip, being nourished, body and mind.

It is amazing how often I find myself bereft of quality thought and convince myself that the remedy is to think harder, to try more, or to argue louder. No, the fix is actually not in charging

toward the problem, but toward a sandwich.

That would probably be sufficient as a stand-alone rule. But like most good truths—such as, *Hungry, Why Wait?*—there are connected verities. If a proper meal and break revitalizes my work and thinking, where are the lunches and breaks found for the other compartments of my life?

Or said better, as a man once instructed me, “Don’t let your output exceed your input.”

I cannot write one good sentence without reading pages of better ones.

I cannot minister well to the wounded without having my own wounds tended to.

I cannot go on running on empty, whether physically, emotionally, cognitively, or spiritually. Many of our spirits, our muses, are wandering about within us withered, haggard, spent. Below, for me, is how I take up and eat in these areas.

Physically – I’m lousy at exercising—at least what the word has come to mean: weights and DVD-led training sessions and marathons and beyond. But the age-old practice of a stroll out-of-doors still reinvigorates not only mind but muscles and joints. That and a weekly or so recess for a game of soccer with friends. What I find is that I hate the feel of exercise at the very first. Then, after a few moments or minutes, it enlivens, it frees, it builds momentum for not just body but my very soul.

The other form of feeding is, perhaps, even more important—sleep. We live in the age of achievement, so hours in bed are viewed as hours of waste. But this is a scientifically-proven (and anecdotally chronicled) sham. Take the famous study of violinists that Malcolm Gladwell brought to the attention of the world. It was all about practice—that is what separated the best violinists from everyone else. But, not mentioned in Gladwell’s book, it was also sleep. The violinists in the study slept about an hour longer a night than the average American. They napped more too.

There are countless examples like this. And lessons to be gained from them. From Bill Clinton saying that his most notable mistakes in life (and he had a few!) were partially attributable to sleep deprivation; to the wisdom proffered by Ghandi: “Each night, when I go to sleep, I die. And the next morning, when I wake up, I am reborn.”

When hungry—eat. When stiff or tired—exercise; sleep.

Emotionally – For a few seasons in my current career, I've been alone—a wolf pack of one. It is awesome working like this. You make your own schedule, your own boundaries, you tend to always agree with yourself in conversation, you never have to worry about informing or misinforming or neglecting anyone. It was great. Except all the ways it wasn't.

The biggest of these was the emotional build-up. A decent portion of my job was walking into the turbulent times of other people. Day after day of facing hard things with friends, and it became easy not to notice myself limping along with burdens. Added to that were the common job frustrations that come from accidental bureaucracies, subtle office politics, and simple personal ineptitude on my own part. You'd take all of these together and you could plate up a pretty deadly casserole.

So when it was time to hire, I got a confidant. The employee could do other things, of course, but one of the biggest things she provided was an emotional outlet. It is amazing what talking out tiny aggravations will do to eradicate bitterness, to realize introspectively that the evil was actually within. And then there was the vital outlet for fears, for new things, for (gulp) feelings.

We need to express our feelings, to take them out of our pockets, put them out on a desk, and arrange and assess them. Doing this with another person is hugely beneficial.

When overburdened, share the load.

Cognitively – For me this plays out primarily in and through creativity. When I am creative, my soul is buoyant; my mind, bouncy. In this state, jokes and thoughts come easy; emotions are trustworthy guides to empathy and social behaviors made effortless. This authenticity builds trust with others and forges somewhat accurate connection points—I'm not straining or reaching or flexing. It is a sailboat pushed along gently by a sweet summer breeze, not some kayak beating back ceaselessly against ripping rapids.

I think this need for creativity is how it is for most people. Whether it is engineering a building, treating a patient, launching a campaign, fixing a car—when the mind is unencumbered and effortlessly engaged things flow. Problems are solved or worked through with vigor, with patience, with strategy.

My own creativity is stimulated in and through reading. It was a great frustration as a former instructor of Creative Writing to have such an uncreative solution for students. But all the research pointed to reading as the means and mode to improve as a writer. Reading good things and bad things. Or as Ralph Waldo Emerson put it: "Tis the good reader that makes the good book." Feeding that voracious

muse. When I read theology, it helps me theologize throughout my day. When I balance that with a portion of the humor genre, it allows me not to take my theologizing (or self) too seriously. Fiction serves as welcome recess from the rigors of the world, and creates a subsequent welcome back to said world.

Music is another ignitor of thought. Solitude yet another.

I can't be sure what your own mind runs on, but I'm certain that you have enjoyable catalysts available to you. And it is on those we lean when thinking is slow. Was it Descartes who said, "I think therefore I am"? Perhaps there is a syllogism born from that for improved thought: if the thinking is elevated is the "I" likewise raised?

Feed your mind.

Spiritually – A song I like says, "My soul cries out for you." How? How do we tune our soul with what our mind has chosen for belief? Well, the same way we grow in love toward others—we become proximate to them. We get to know them. We grow in that knowledge, and then steadily we take the knowledge of them and they begin to occupy our thoughts when absent. And this is what love is like. It is not only being with someone, but thinking about them when you are not.

For the spiritual, that means God no longer just permeates my Sunday morn—or whenever one practices ritual—but my wakeful Monday night too. That He joins me on my walk in the woods, when I'm curious about why, say, that one squirrel pauses its play to chirp and growl and bark at me? God is there in that moment too, and more and more of them.

The way I build this is through reading sacred texts, praying, and entering solitude. Obviously, this may take different forms per different religious or areligious bents, but to read about God, to pray to God, and to listen for His voice in the silence are spiritual bread to an oft malnourished soul.

My wife just came in and told me to remember lunch. This is not made up. She saw that we are creeping into the early afternoon, and she knows me. She knows I will go on hungry, allowing not only my body to descend momentarily, but to drag all the rest with it.

So, in more ways than one, bon appétit.

Don't continue on hungry. When a pause comes, feed the muse by feeding the body.

Rule #8: I Could Lose My Job!

Love life but, aside from human relationships, make as many things as possible “unnecessary” for that enjoyment. Be passionate yet unreliant.

I have a cool job. I could go into how it can be difficult and time-consuming and frustrating, but that would mostly be a vain attempt at making it seem like I’m something special. I’m not. It is.

I work at one of the best places in the nation (it is documented) and what I get to do there is live out my faith in a winsome way, make friends, support those friends, and try to make the work experience and lives of the people around me better. Oh, and mostly I get to do this with a lot of trust and pretty fantastic resources. Also, I get to work with a team of people better than me—nicer and smarter by bounds. To say I have a one-in-a-million job would likely be an understatement. (I mean this literally. How many corporate pseudo-chaplain-friend positions have you seen in the classifieds? Yup, me neither.)

What has come of having a really cool job is the realization that it can’t get much better than this vocationally for me. A few years ago I invited Matt Holliday in to share with some of the friends I have here at the company. At that time, Holliday was the starting left-fielder for the St. Louis Cardinals, a team I had always dreamed of playing for if, you know, I had been good at baseball and all. The Cardinals never came calling, but as Matt and I sat at a hotel and talked through the impending live interview I would be trying to cobble together, I had this odd realization: I wouldn’t trade jobs with him. Sure, \$17 million a year would be kind of awesome, but even considering that, I’m pretty sure I’d stay right where I am doing just what I’m doing.

And when you really like your job and care for the people you get to be around, you perform. It just makes sense. Passion breeds purpose—or maybe vice versa? Either way you work really hard to be good—or as good as you can be. This leads to a measure of fulfillment and helps make a guarantee: I’m not going to lose this job!

But then a virus hits. A company that is first in its “field” is suddenly vulnerable. The formerly irreplaceable role I filled is instantly made a needless luxury when money gets tight, when business is threatened. Now, let me be clear, I’m probably not going to lose my job. But I could. And so could you. And that applies to really any good thing. Always. 2020 brought a pandemic, yes, but it also toted along with it a weighty reality check regarding control (or a lack thereof).

I think of Mickey Arison. He is the chairman of Carnival Corporation, of Carnival Cruise fame (and now infamy), a formerly wildly profitable endeavor. A health crisis turned it to an albatross of a thing, a liability, a, well, sinking ship. Just. Like. That.

Attached to your physicality? Car accident can take that away.

Attached to your car? Here comes the hail.

Attached to your home? Fire, anyone? You likely see my point. We should connect deeply with things in our lives, but we should also be free from entangling, ensnaring things that can vanish like a mist.

Getting to experience the momentary reality that I could lose my job—that the company I love could be in trouble—helped me to test the attachment. If that causes some sadness, some pain? Well, that is good and shows connection and love. If that fills me with unrelenting anger, with crippling anxiety, with a doom-and-gloom sense that life will never be good or worth it again? Well, then my identity has formed an inseparable attachment to a thing that is always prone to severance.

So what do I do?

I love each day that I get to do my job. I work hard at it. I dream and plan for the future of the role. I hope. But I also safeguard myself from total dependency on it. I keep investments diversified—in my case, I store up an increasing number of my treasures (my loves) in Heaven. I remind myself each day that the good things I have are incredible and also incredibly temporal. So I love them well and steward them wisely. But never do I stake my dependence on a thing that can be wiped out by someone misreading a traffic signal or a weather pattern or, even, a virus.

Without _____, life wouldn't be worth living. What things do you put in your blank? It is those things that will restrict, that will threaten. They aren't bad usually, but when they occupy the wrong seat, they can become dangerous. They are made to be passengers, not drivers.

Or, a different analogy—imagine after years of contentedly living in a one-room apartment being gifted an expansive manor in which to reside. Can you see it? It is sprawling and wondrous. The lush grounds, the stately, enormous house, all of it is beautiful. Each day you fall more in love with the lot you've been given. You explore and run and picnic and post photos online sharing your good fortune. And then you get a notice that you can no longer explore the outdoors around the manor—the yard and woods and trails are off-limits. Well, at least you have your stately manor house. You gaze

longingly out the window, wishing for the former times. And then you get another notice that the windows will be boarded up. Another massive loss. You are sad, but life goes on. Next a wing of the home is closed off to you. Once it is taken from you, you come to realize that it was, indeed, your favorite part of the home. Then a room in the wing that is still available to you is forbidden. Then another room. And soon you are confined to a single room in a stately manor house. You are back where you started, yet you feel a great deal worse. You are devastated and left wondering if life is even worth living like this.

The things I have in life have been given to me. As much as I dupe myself, I didn't earn these things. Not wholly. It is by no aptitude of mine that my eyes see or ears hear. My brain (mostly) functions—not due to some merit of character. I'm somewhat educated—but I grew up in a nation that values and provides education, and I was born to parents who modeled learning and had the means to direct me toward college. I could go on and on, but why not just rely on an ancient text to carry the burden: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart."

So enjoy things. Save. Buy. Use. Share. But forever hold on loosely for things that are on loan—most the things in my life are rentals; here today, gone tomorrow. And everything I have is more complex than the misguided notion: *I deserve this!*

Coming to know my attachments and safeguard myself from untoward dependency will allow me to adapt in life. But, more importantly, it will show me, by comparison, what things transcend. With that knowledge—that wisdom—I can begin to free myself from the grip of material things and cling tightly to that which cannot be taken from me: character, integrity, faith, hope, love. Love.

So now it is back to work. I will complete my job diligently today, aware that the guarantee of it lasts for merely a moment. I'll work hard, but, more importantly, I'll work wise—to all my job is and all it is not; to all I am and all I'm not. Ashes to ashes and dust to dust, I smile on liberated.

Love life but, aside from human relationships, make as many things as possible "unnecessary" for that enjoyment. Be passionate yet unreliant.

Rule #9: Gravity of Truth

Doggedly seek truth in all things, while maintaining the simple truth that I am wrong about most things. Embrace mystery and paradox.

A handful of years ago a blue chair was dropped off at my house. It was a gift; it was a curse. The reason for the latter is because my wife began calling this blue chair the “green chair.” At first I thought she meant a different chair entirely. I’d poke and prod about our apartment, thinking to find some portal leading not to Narnia but to this mythical green chair of which she always spoke. Soon I realized she was just wrong, and it was one of those idiosyncrasies, cute at first, that begins to drive one mad. After about five years of marriage I could no longer take things sitting down and finally got up the courage to tell her what a misguided fool she was—I think I probably used about those words; yeah, I’m pretty good at this whole caring husband thing. But she just laughed at my colorful correction. Hers was the mirth of certainty, for she thought *I* was in the wrong.

A few months back her brother and his girlfriend came over for dinner. Small talk somehow turned to this girlfriend saying of my wife’s brother, “Yeah, Josh is totally color blind. He thinks everything is green.”

The Hallelujah Chorus erupted in my head. *Val-I-Dation! Val-I-Dation!* I politely told everyone to shut up, and I took his girlfriend to our basement and asked her what color the chair was. I asked that she whisper her answer, and, though quiet, it was quite clear: “Blue with a hint of gray.”

Next, I brought my wife’s brother down to the interrogation room. You would have thought it was a Mensa Exam. He hemmed and hawed, scratched his chin. Paced. Finally, after much deliberation, he said, “I want to say green. I’m thinking it is blue, but I really want to say green.”

There is nothing better than being able to tell a person you love once and for all that he or she has been found deficient in some way. Back upstairs I did just that to my bride. “You can’t see colors properly,” I pronounced contentedly. I had her dead to rights.

Only her reply was defiant. “Well,” she began her discourse. And then went on to describe the scientific factoids concerning colors, the nuance of eye shape, and any other lofty, distracting thing she could find in the green pastures of her mind. She was using knowledge—and a fair bit of it—to usurp obvious blue wisdom.

It is the equivalent of what has occurred in every time and place ever. Truth is perhaps the most precious thing on earth—finding it, wielding it, learning it, telling it: there is no shortage of important things we do with truth. Most importantly, though: we follow it. Or we ought to. But we don't. Instead we drag it along behind us on a very short leash. We bend truth to the subjective when we can. When it is inflexible, we just swap it out for a “truth” of our own design. Truth is in “the eye of the beholder” or, to use the modern vernacular, we call it “my truth” and “your truth” like it is a multiple choice test with myriad correct answers.

Some of this convenient conjuring is done through a mangling of language. You know how we use the word “literally” to mean “figuratively”? The way a person—I picture one who is part of a sorority—shares with her friends, “Ugh, I literally ate like a thousand pancakes this morning.” First, why were you counting? I mean, if you had just focused on eating, who knows? Maybe you could have eaten fifteen-hundred pancakes? Second, no you didn't. You *literally* mean figuratively. We've got a word all dolled up to masquerade as another word.

And that is what we've done with “truth.” Truth actually means, as we use it, *opinion*.

By mutating opinion into truth, it ends the conversation. You can't mess with truth. Truth is immovable, sacred, untouchable—or at least the old meaning was. So when we flout our opinions as truth, it ceases all learning and, you know, actual truth from being realized. Blue chairs can be green or purple or no longer even chairs at all.

I think I know what you may be thinking—who made all those pancakes? I don't know. But to answer another more pressing question—*What's the point?*

First, I want truth. Like the real thing. Which means I have to doggedly seek it. Discovering truth is akin to an ancient setting out on an arduous journey to find and explore some new, unknown land. It is dangerous; it is full of the unexpected. And it seldom goes how one plans. Nor does it stop—not for the truly curious explorer. He doesn't find the new land and turn ship and head home. No, he burns boats and walks on. Further and further inland, deeper and deeper into the unexplored, unexplained country. Further up and further in—there is always progress to be made in the realms of truth.

And this leads to a second matter of importance concerning truth—I don't know it all. And neither do you. Of course, we say “aw shucks” and agree with this sentiment. Humility, we know, is an admirable trait. So we fake it as often as we can! But often we live like we know everything about everything. We live like arbiters of truth. Like little fickle gods ruling little feckless kingdoms.

This is why discourse has become wildly toxic. This is why every conversation on social media turns to an either-or. It is because people are certain about their certainties—all of them. Notice how my brother-in-law’s girlfriend gave a better answer than me regarding the color of the chair: “blue with a hint of gray.” Yes, truth gives room for mystery, paradox, both-and, and nuance. But my truth stopped short of all that. I had an axe to grind, and I needed things to be absolute in totality: The chair is blue and only blue and always blue. I needed to be right absolutely. We do this. We pompously have a need to be right in all ways. Always.

Take gravity, for example.

Because of gravity things fall, but also gravity is the means by which we fall upon so many other truths concerning our cosmic understanding. One of our earliest written and followed theories of gravity comes from Aristotle. What he said exactly? I don’t know. But in general, he said things fall to earth because that is their home. They want to be where they belong—to go to their home. It is the same theory Happy Gilmore preached to golf balls.

And it isn’t right. In a logical or technical sense. My phone has no feelings about the number of times I accidentally let it fall to the earth. Or maybe my phone is some sort of sadist and is just trying to create more and more discomfoting conversations for me with my spouse about me dropping my phone (again)? But probably my phone is just, you know, an inanimate object without preference or knowledge that it is actually a thing bound gravitationally to earth. Maybe my phone just has an external force pulling it towards the earth’s center?

That is what Newton says. He published that very notion, in fact, like thousands of years after Aristotle let his own views fall to earth. So for millennia very smart humans “aced” tests with an answer that was actually quite wrong. Then came Newton who was pulled in a better direction. He developed the idea of a pull force and matter and mass and all the rest.

It took thousands of years, but finally we had it! Huzzah! We should all do trust falls to celebrate.

Only then Einstein came along. Just a few hundred years after Newton, a wild eyed, wilder-haired genius started yammering about a space-time curve. Quantum mechanics and a whole lot of other things I don’t comprehend came spilling out of this guy’s brain. The only thing left to drop was the mic. Einstein had done for gravity what Shakespeare did for poetry. We are gravitationally good to go. But I wonder what people will say about Einstein’s theory in five-hundred years? Will it still defy gravity and fly on? Probably not. And remember this: gravity is a

scientific thing that we have some certainty about. The thing we are sure of is likely unsure! So if truth is such a difficult thing to come by, what is the answer? Here are a few of mine:

1. I don't know.

This is an unpopular sentiment. Humans walk into a room and want to hide vulnerabilities. And we all know that “knowledge is power,” right? So we go in and puff ourselves up. About everything. If we don't know about something, we fake it—seriously, how many times this week will you play up your knowledge about something? Where are you overblown? Where do you gaslight? Where do you rely on “facts” you really know very little about? Or how about this one—how often are you willing this week to say “I don't know” and then just listen?

2. Consider biases.

My mind is loaded with hindsight bias and confirmation bias and appeal to authority and conflicts of interest. The more I'm aware that these biases live within me, the more I'm willing to admit that “I don't know.” And this opens me up to actually listen to others. It doesn't mean these others are right about everything, but it does mean that now I can hear them for what they are saying, rather than what I think they are saying or what I feel they should be saying. Bias awareness allows the Baader-Meinhoff phenomenon to kick in. This is the thing where you, say, buy a car and then you see that same kind of car everywhere. Once we spot a bias in ourselves—and, incidentally, in others—it becomes far easier to spot and diminish its negative returns.

3. Be wary of truth claims from people trying to sell me something.

I'm not just talking strictly salespeople here. No, often those are the people I trust the most of this group—at least what they want to sell me is evident by their company polo or whatever. What I mean is that almost every cultural entity is trying to sell me something or use me as an unwitting salesforce for them. Celebrities are a brand—they aren't my friends, as much as they play on my desire for that unreality. Companies, by and large, don't care for me as a person—they care that I buy or consume or endorse their products. I can “like” their posts and drink their drinks and buy their products, sure. But I should be careful that a worldview isn't smuggled in for free as part of the deal.

4. Test truth for sturdiness.

GK Chesterton was an orator and author who said the following:

Some dogma, we are told, was credible in the twelfth century, but is not credible in the twentieth. You might as well say that a certain philosophy can be believed on Mondays, but cannot be believed on Tuesdays. You might as well say of a view of the cosmos that it is suitable for half-past three, but not suitable for half-past four. What a man can believe depends upon his philosophy, not the clock or the century.

I want to take newly discovered “truths” and rub them in the dirt. I want to kick them along down the road a bit before I sign my name on the line and give them my mind, my soul.

This is the great threat of fad. This guru or that, this self-help author or that, this preacher or that, comes peddling some new, inspiring, tweetable thing, and we are like famished cows at the salt lick. Then the whimsical “truth” floats into the ether and we are left to start again with the latest “expert” on the scene. And that is if we are lucky. There are some unfortunate souls lost and left wandering from following neon signs for truth that ended up pointing in all directions but leading to no real destination at all.

5. Feelings are bad guides.

Feelings are good. Knowing thyself—valuable. But allowing our feelings to hijack our reason is a sure path to destruction in every phase of life. It will bankrupt us financially, mentally, socially, emotionally, and spiritually. The world says, “Follow your heart.” Wisdom says that the line of good and evil runs through every human heart. That the heart is deceitful. That the heart has some wickedness in it. Ever follow a blind guide? The answer is likely “yes” whether you know it or not, for blind guides reside within us, clamoring for us to follow this or that path. The pit awaits.

Knowing this, I can more accurately know myself. I can realize that my feelings are worth considering with diplomacy, but I should not allow them to become dictators.

The green/blue chair caused a stir. It wasn’t the first chair in motion for me.

In High School I got out of a real science course by taking Aviation instead. A large bulk of this class, it was well known, was piloting computer flight simulators. Another weekly ritual was taking turns in “The Chair.” This was a homemade chair, based upon a famous one that had won the Nobel Prize. Basically, it would spin. Boy, Nobels used to be pretty easy to come by! The way in which it would spin minimized drag and surface tension and other hints that would alert the senses that one was spinning. So we’d take turns sitting in the chair blindfolded and our

classmates would set us to spinning like overzealous contestants on *Wheel of Fortune*. We were supposed to lift our hand when the chair stopped its spin. Easy, right?

The catch was, we'd lift our hands, take the blindfold off, and find that we were still in full spin, the grinning faces of our comrades, along with our spatial awareness, a total blur.

The reason for the chair—and the Nobel Prize it had earned—is to show pilots that they can't just trust their instincts. Pilot's Vertigo (or Spatial Differentiation) occurs, leaving the pilot uncertain of the direction of their flight. This is a big deal and why many a plane has been on the wrong end of a meeting with a mountainside.

Pilots must study, must learn, and must balance what they think they know and how they feel, with some external information sources: instruments.

The same is true for us. We must, if truth is our target landing strip, be checking the gauges, making corrections, and balancing data on the literal fly. Still we won't always know the truth in all things. Like gravity or pilots, we might not quite know the difference between up and down—at least not perfectly. But knowing this, we fly on, we look on, we keep finding, wielding, learning, and telling. We keep seeking the proper course, a truth to follow.

Doggedly seek truth in all things, while maintaining the simple truth that I am wrong about most things. Embrace mystery and paradox.

Rule #10: A Truly Sorry Person

Say and mean “I’m sorry” before I have to.

If you see a line in San Juan, Texas you might think you’ve arrived at some border amusement park. But if you follow the trail of people you will not come to a Ferris Wheel or rigged carnival games. No, you’ll find an altogether different game afoot. You’ll find a church.

The line in San Juan, made up of a variety of people, awaits confession. Over 20,000 people visit the church every weekend alone. Many of these, like those in the line, come to confess. They come to say “sorry” to a stranger, to some form of God.

I’m terrible at saying “I’m sorry.” One doesn’t need rules in areas of proficiency. I have no rule about being sure to eat candy every day—I have a mouth full of licorice as I type. No, rules give discipline to the flabby areas of our minds and souls—and bodies, too, if this candy compulsion continues.

Saying sorry is an admission of guilt, and I want to be strong, to be God. It is Eden-esque. The human characters in Genesis decided to break a rule in order to become gods. It didn’t work—at least not fully. They had knowledge like God—of good and evil—but not the power to do a thing about it. So what did they do? Apologize for their mistake and move on, right? No, of course not. And their action falls in line with our own. Adam and Eve hid. Once found out, they still didn’t come clean. Instead, they shirked responsibility.

It is my self-same pattern. It plays out like this:

I wrong a friend.

I try to convince myself that I didn’t wrong my friend. The mental gymnastics in this phase is impressive. And tiring.

Finally (hopefully?), the friend calls me out—there is no place to hide.

I rationalize, I blame, I spin. Anything to convince myself, the world, even God, that I, indeed, am clean. The fault was that of society or this friend is too sensitive or she heard me wrong or . . . it goes on and on.

This is a bad way. It takes time. It takes energy. It produces even more damage. The time I spend hiding and rationalizing—that time can be weeks. Months. Years. Even decades. We know this happens, right? Rather than admit wrong, offer a heartfelt apology, and rebuild, we create a relational chasm ever-widened by neglect and silence and self-protective resentment.

It is a shame. Literally. Shame and guilt are the key players in this daily drama. They coax us into destruction, and the worst part is they build on themselves, like some sadistic parasite. I'm ashamed of my original wrong, so I neglect my friend's existence, hoping the infraction will go away. Then, as days pile up, I become ashamed of my negligence, for what I've let happen to this relationship. More mental gymnastics, more neglect, more shame. It builds and builds and builds. Or, rather, it dismantles and dismantles and dismantles.

But there is another way.

There is this old video from the show "Wife Swap." You can find it online easy enough and it is worth the watch for the kid's haircut alone. In it, Curtis, a young boy, becomes a viral sensation when his temporary "mother" comes in and cleans the mess and, gulp, throws away the junk food. The bacon is the final straw for Curtis. He comically runs away. But before running away he, full of passion and defiance and accidental hilarity, says, "She's the queen and we're the sorry people."

The "sorry people." He means it as a negative. To be a sorry person is to be one who is pitied, lowly, made deplorable in some way or another.

But I think it might be a positive way of looking at myself. Not in some self-loathing, anti-Maslow, Eeyore way. No. But in a I'm-not-perfect way. In a I-screw-up way. In a I-wrong-friends way. In this fashion, it is liberating to be a sorry person. And, as a sorry person, I don't fear my imperfections or freely admitting to them. I'm a sorry person. Sorry, not sorry about that. I make mistakes, and now I can do something about it.

When I see them—my mistakes, that is.

That is another facet to this rule. I can only be a good sorry person if I know why I should be sorry. To do that, there must be some measure of self-awareness, of introspection, of listening to others and evaluating myself. Those people in San Juan aren't improvising confessions. They enter a confessional with some self-awareness, with answers to some questions. What actions and words of mine are detracting from the flourishing of my friends? This is one question that will generate plenty to be sorry

about, allowing me to get to work on making amends and making better of the limited time and relationships I've been given.

Or I can go on denying that I could ever do wrong. I could apologize when I am finally called into my boss's office and it could mean my job. I could start apologizing when the papers have been signed; the bags packed. I could start apologizing to my kids when they are older or leave the house. Or I could just go on duping myself altogether, hiding in the proverbial bushes, very much alone. "King Curtis," as he came to be known, packs a little suitcase and runs away that night from the woman attempting to better his life. Off into the dark he goes. He'd rather be alone than do the hard, bacon less thing of conversation. I have the same option before me. Or I can take the posture of those in San Juan, waiting to confess. I can willingly stand before those I wrong and admit my transgressions, abandon my guilt and shame, and live in the light of day. A truly sorry person, blessedly so.

Say and mean "I'm sorry" before I have to.

Rule #11: The Parking Ticket

Never fight for the best parking spot (for myself). Don't Google it, okay? Just don't. Let me fill you in, but first take a ride with me . . .

Imagine you are in your car. No, forget that. We are imagining, so let's optimize it. Imagine you are in your dream car. You pull into the parking lot of a busy store, not a care in the world.

You heed the arrows on the pavement and go the appropriate direction—down one lane and then up another. Head on a swivel, you hunt.

Then gloriously: taillights aglow! You see a car preparing to back up just one row away. You accelerate your dream car, hardly noticing the other vehicles, pedestrians, and shopping carts all about you. You whip the car around and begin driving down the next lane, gliding nearer and nearer to the now-in-motion exiting vehicle. And, by proxy, nearer and nearer to the store. Appropriately, we'll call it Target.

Then you stop. Glare.

Another car, facing you and disregarding the arrows, is also waiting for the nearly vacated parking spot.

You gun your dream engine. Lock eyes with your newfound foe and prepare for battle . . .

How does it end?

Oh, you are reasonable, sitting here on your phone reading this or at your office sipping coffee and working away. You would never let your emotions get out of control in this circumstance. You'd never honk, yell, gesture, or drag your opponent out of their car and beat them mercilessly with an umbrella or purse or shoe or your very fists.

But that is what everyone thinks. Even the people who have done those very things. Don't Google it, okay? Just don't.

Trust me, though, it is an occasion we could call "high-traffic." And the people driven mad in these scenarios aren't even driving dream cars!

Growing up, we'd be made to play this game called "Steal the Bacon." Only there was no bacon, and you didn't get to keep what you stole. We'd line up facing our opponents, who'd be similarly aligned over on the other side of the gym. We'd face each other and snarl. Then the "teacher" would yell a number, and the kid on each team who bore the called-out number would race to the "bacon," usually a decrepit old bean bag, attempt to snatch it up and bring it back across his team's line. Didn't get the "bacon"? Just try to waylay your opponent's path—tag or tangle them in some way or another.

Looking back, the game was stupid. Sure, it taught competitiveness, but it also should have taught that some things aren't worth competing over even if some "teacher" says so.

Tickle Me Elmos. Beanie Babies. I-Phones. Twitter mentions. Titles. Facebook likes.

Parking spaces.

Some years ago I joined a large company. It came with a large parking lot thrown in. Worse than trying to find a "good" spot was leaving for the day and walking toward the wrong spot. Sometimes you'd get nearly within arm's reach before you'd dismiss the day's burdens long enough to realize, "Hey, that's not my car! I parked somewhere else today." The worst part of this scenario was when people were outside smoking, people with whom you've already conversed and wished farewell in a long, drawn-out fashion. Yet here you are, inexplicably moseying by this gaggle anew, headed the other direction. Idiot forgot where he parked, you can almost hear them thinking between puffs of condescension.

What differentiated the "good" parking spots from the "bad" ones? Well, proximity to the building primarily. So I'd spend most of my day in a building wishing I were outside, but on arrival at that building I would waste time—in an empty attempt to save time, mind you—in order to park in a spot that would have me outside for the shortest possible duration.

One day I decided that fighting for the good spots was a totally absurd notion. It was a sprint for a decrepit bean bag. I have a limited amount of decision-making capabilities in a day before depletion sets in. (So do you, by the way. If, of course, you are human.) Depletion decreases wisdom and morality, while increasing stress and fatigue. And depletion builds on itself in terms of detrimental effects and recurrence, for a person spends part of his today overcoming the lapses of yesterday. Tidying such lapses wastes time today, accelerates depletion, and thus sets the snowball of calamity in motion. As part of an attempt to melt away this mental menace and reduce cognitive waste and strain, why not start by removing the arbitrary decision of where to park from my day?

Added to the benefit is that I always know where my car is, the smokers don't judge me, I get more exercise, the stroll gives me time to think a bit, and I get to serve those who now have one more close spot to squabble over. Perhaps one less assault will show up on the internet because of my willingness to avoid the battleground?

Some answer this approach skeptically: But what of the weather?

On hot days, I'm more refreshed, upon arrival indoors, by the wonders of air conditioning. On wet days, I am thankful for a roof; on cold days, warmth. The only thing I waste, arguably, is a bit of time. But if you add the efficiencies gained over a lifetime, one could probably reasonably argue it is break-even if not a time gain. Especially if I avoid being beaten by or becoming a lunatic.

And speaking of lunacy: I find this happens a lot in life. Competition and routine dictates what is a winning and losing position, and I follow these precepts in rote, whether sensible or not. In nearly every human situation there are "best" options that, when one steps back and considers, aren't really all that favorable or worth determined pursuit. By not competing in all of these makeshift, meaningless competitions, I have far more energy to vie for the things that really matter to me. I also have far less stress. Going to the mall no longer begins with the worst of Darwinian Theory. There are no opportunities for road rage when no one wants what I'm after.

Instead I walk by all the cars parked closer than mine and feel charitable and kind for my willingness to take a less sought-after commodity. Good feelings tend to engender good behaviors. Parking lot savvy can actually make me a (slightly) better human!

With rules, however, there are exceptions. For this one, it is awareness of others. In this case, others who might be in my vehicle. Let us suppose, on this visit to the mall, my wife is with me. She is nicely adorned—new shoes, hair done, make-up skillfully applied. She looks great. The day does not; it begins to rain.

I now have a decision: Love my rules or serve my wife? Many times I slip into behaviors that choose the former. I have convictions! Standards! I'm disciplined! In my life, I am a good soldier! Only I forget that the best of all soldiers is the one that serves and protects, the one who lays his own life down for others. Rules are helpful to add discipline to our lives, but knowledge and love of the other are the truer guides. Wisdom trumps policy. So park close or, better yet, drop her off at the door.

My goal throughout the past decade has been to assess my worldview and have no rogue notions—to

eliminate instances where heart, speech, and deed don't align. This is impossible to accomplish, of course. But there is success even when the job is incomplete—a partial meal beats starvation every time. So I drive on contentedly toward the back of the lot, and pull into a place of *my* choice. I'll save myself frustration, door dings, stress, energy, and time. And with those precious seconds saved, I'll have more time for that which truly matters. I'll have time to Google: *Parking lot mayhem*. I'll look on at the burgeoning results from afar in wry bemusement.

Never fight for the best parking spot (for myself).

Rule #12: Hearing Voices

Don't devalue a stuffed animal without first filling it with imagination.

“All grown-ups were once children, but only few of them remember it.” – Antoine de Saint-Exupery

I had forgotten my bunk bed and all its inhabitants with it. A household of women could be a lonely place for a boy, and perhaps this was the psychological root of the personalities and accompanying voices emanating from the horde of stuffed animals who resided in my bunk bed? Or maybe this is a thing most children do? Fill their possessions with personhood, their tiny, child bodies carrying about massive imaginations which can't help but spill forth.

My own deluge saw the animals in favor—Teddy Ruxpin (bear), Max (monster), Dennis (dinosaur), Donnie (turtle), etc.—promoted to the top bunk, while those in the doghouse, like Mitch the Cabbage Patch Kid, were forced to second-tier status in the bottom bunk. Together these stuffed minions and I would talk and travel and fight unseen foes and sing heard songs. Seconds stacked to minutes, minutes to hours, and the days of youthful wonder gave way to the practical realism of adulthood. A place where stuffed animals were the first junk to donate.

And, having forgotten, this is the task I set myself to in my son's playroom. I was throwing “stuffies” into a box. He watched on confused. While rummaging through the closet for more discard-worthy items, I heard a voice. It was the voice of my son, but it was the whisper of the past too, for my son had taken from the box a stuffed dog and was feigning a conversation with it. My son would ask a question of sorts and the dog would utter some high-pitched nonsense, impossible to understand. And impossible not to.

The memories of youth flooded in: a time when stuffed animals weren't viewed for their utility, but for their potential, for their personalities, for their wonder and whimsy.

I had remembered.

These moments happen with young children. They force open the door to a long forgotten basement within the being of their parents. But beyond revealing the miracle of imagination, these instants remind one of potential. Of hope. Of what might be and how that may very well stretch beyond what one can merely see.

It happens all the time—the small kid is cut from the team; the innovator, mocked; the idealistic start up, scoffed. And then something unexpected happens. Through the fires of rejection these misfits emerge as MVPs, revolutionaries, successful businesses. What happens is the refining process of potential being realized, of some belief being processed and churned into reality; it is a father not perceiving what a two-year-old can't miss.

And of course, it doesn't always happen this way. Sometimes junk is junk. Sometimes a kid is cut and goes another route, the innovator was actually just a hapless non-conformist, the business bankrupt in both fiscal and conceptual terms. The stuffed animal thrown in the rubbish.

But isn't it worth taking a look? Kicking the tires? Giving it a shot? Or, to stick with our analogy, seeing if the animal has a voice?

Another memory comes skating in—the time my father and I paid two dollars to see *The Mighty Ducks*. Filled with motivation and dollar-store candy, I skipped from the theater, quacking all the way to the car. On the way home I said, "That'll probably win some awards, huh?"

I didn't know a thing about awards. I was just trying to talk like I knew adults did about such matters.

"No!" my dad chided. "It was bloody terrible."

He was right, of course. *The Mighty Ducks* is no Welles or Scorsese.

But he was also very much wrong.

Movies aren't made to win awards—or shouldn't be. That is a byproduct. If our only measure for success or failure is the utilitarian metric points, we'll miss more than we know, chucking many a keepsake in the discard bin. We'll miss kindling the belief in young hearts. We'll miss hearing voices—all of them, even made up ones. We'll invest shrewdly, but not wisely. We'll distance ourselves from anything with the hint of mystical, bowing sacrosanct at the sturdy altar of materialism.

Life is more than utility. There is more to it than achievement. And purpose can lay dormant and hidden, a thing to be called to life, even by the very mouth of babes.

All those years ago, in the top bunk with my "friends," I was away from the world. The cynicism, the morbidity of doubt, the narrowness that life becomes. I was caught up in adventures that rendered

the world wide and beyond.

I was a child breathing life into the lifeless. A light kindled in the dark.

And now, if I allow it, my own child is breathing life into me. Into the realization that the world is not a rigid, mean thing—or, at least, it doesn't have to be. It can be Pan in flight, a jaunt through Narnia. It can be belief and love and hope and encouragement. It can be a bunk far, far away and a tender, high-pitched voice filling the night. A light kindled in the dark.

Don't devalue a stuffed animal without first filling it with imagination.

Rule #13: What is Wrong with the World?

Always reach for the mirror before the binoculars. (Unless on a safari.)

What's wrong with the world?

I have some theories.

First, why do I have to hit so many buttons to fill my car with gas: *Do you want a car wash? Do you have a rewards card? Do you want a receipt? What is your blood type? Is this a credit card? Did you change your mind and want a car wash yet?* No, I want gas. I want gas.

Second, why is everyone recording everything on their phones? Go to a concert or game and you see people not watching the act or action, but gazing at their tiny screen in order to “capture” it. For what and for when? You telling me that you are going to watch that bouncily recorded four-minute song again? And don't tell me you want to show it to your friends. They don't want to see it. Plus they are too busy recording their own life away to bother with footage from yours.

Third, politicians. And the media. And other countries. And my country. And my neighbor who is always telling me how to handle the weeds in my yard. Or dog people. Not actually half-people/half-dogs but people who treat their dogs with better regard than they do, well, me. And people who watch “The Masked Singer.” And . . .

I could go on. And on.

My answer to the question of what is wrong with the world could succinctly be put this way: *They are. Everyone else.*

GK Chesterton has been credited with a different response when a London newspaper posed the same question to the public. Here is that reply:

Dear Sir: Regarding your article ‘What's Wrong with the World?’ I am.

Yours truly,

GK Chesterton

I am.

In another publication Chesterton explained further: “In one sense, and that the eternal sense, the thing is plain. The answer to the question, ‘What is Wrong?’ is, or should be, I am wrong.’ Until a man can give that answer his idealism is only a hobby.”

I wonder what this world might look like if more of us attacked our own peccadillos as vehemently as we do those of others?

But even this thought betrays me. I turn my attention to this notion of a better world, one brought on if “we” (meaning: *you*) were to be more self-aware and more serious about your flaws. I’ll take the better world, thank you, just leave me out of all the rest, okay?

It is hard to look within. I know this. And it is this knowledge that prevents my doing it more often. By clamoring about the “sins” all around me, I can conveniently cling to my own, smuggling my wrongdoings along like precious contraband. The more righteous my outrage at all the things, the more unrighteousness I can allow myself.

This is timeless. It dates back to that first scathing story—which scathes for its truth. Adam and Eve trespass the clearly stated boundaries of their paradise abode. First they hide; then they blame. Responsibility is offered to the —*just take it!* But of course it is always easy to root others on into the cold lake of virtue from the removed comforts of my own balmy cesspool.

Adam blames Eve—“It is the woman!” he says. And don’t we do the same? I blame my mate for my own lapses in patience. I blame my kids when they interfere with what should be my uninterrupted happiness. I blame my employer for not giving me my way in every single thing. It has nothing to do with my selfishness, thank you very much. It is them, them, them!

Adam wasn’t finished in his scapegoating: “It is the woman *you* gave me.” Daily I blame God when I’m ensnared by temptation. *Well, you gave me this or that impulse! You made the world this way!* I, wretched as I am, can even convince myself that the wrongdoing is a well-earned reward: *I’ve done pretty well despite the way God has set me up to fail—I deserve this. I’m sure God understands this quite well. He’s probably proud of me. Just think what my deadbeat neighbor would do with the same stacked circumstances!? I’m actually pretty great; even at my worst, I rise above the problem, flawless.* Post-rebellion Adam does what I do—blames every other person on earth and the creator of the systems in place. He doesn’t go down kicking and

screaming, for, unknowingly, he is already down. Yet even in that lowly position, he deceives himself into believing he is actually in flight: the kicking a mere flapping of his forever mighty wings.

Eve does no better. She goes straight to the original question—*What is wrong with the world?*—by pointing out all the evil around her, it frees her from the burden of responsibility.

Everyone on Twitter is toxic—*so what's a little meanness?*

The neighbor mistreats his spouse and the divorce rate is high—*so what if I dishonor my mate?*

Some people *really* steal—*so what if I cut a corner here and there.*

I just need to find one person on earth more evil than I am, for that person gives me license to stomp violently to that line of malfeasance with a certain cold numbness. As long as I go no further than that cur, I'm fine.

But what of the harder road—the one leading inwards? What if my actions weren't viewed in comparison, but rather as self evident representations of my own beliefs, opinions, and depravities? Not in a way to belittle or wage a war against myself—or at least not my entire self. No, just taking the battle strategically to the parts already mobilized against me and my fellow human. My wrath, my selfishness, my pride—what if I took up arms against such dastardly foes, without appeasement nor surrender?

Well, for starters, I'd certainly become more empathetic. The sins of others would no longer plant seeds of resentment for them in me. No, rather these misdeeds and character blemishes would set me upon a pursuit—like the antithesis of a treasure hunt—for similar mistruths and failings in my own heart. I would no longer be severed from the angry person, but in community with him. I had a professor once who coughed, leaving some unflattering remains on his goatee. Instead of being the cackling pupil who mocks from the back of the class, I would become the friend who helps the man in front of him and checks into the condition of his own face as well.

Other changes would occur too. Like the ability to more freely give the benefit of the doubt to others. Loudmouths on social media, in my own view, would go from reprobates to passionate, from moronic to misguided. Because I know that I too have wrongness and fanaticism in my own heart, I don't hate others who suffer the same contagion. Instead, I love them *even though: even though they can be strident, even though they are angry, even though they disagree with me.* I

can give even though love because I am one in desperate need of an even though kind of love. By understanding myself, I come nearer to understanding my fellow human—even at their worst; my worst.

Gossip, too, would begin to be eradicated from my life. I could never again begin a sentence with, “Can you believe that he . . .” Because I can believe all potentiality of evil. For it lives in my heart. From a lofty seat of self-made perfection, it becomes easy to demean the minions below. Aptly lowered into the flinging muck and mire, I am wise to keep my mouth safely shut.

We could go on listing the resulting goodness that comes from reaching for the mirror, but first a word on binoculars. One is not to live like some vengeful sniper, no. But neither are we made to be Narcissus, who stared deeply, darkly at his own reflection. One can masquerade as the “greatest sinner” and it is just another form of vanity. We fall in love with our afflictions, and become ensnared by them, proud even of our own folly. On safari, I should not be so consumed with the spots on my own heart that I miss the spots on the cheetah in the distance. In more applicable words, the person who is daily resolving for a life of reflection and self-scrutiny, should naturally grow a type of humility that is strong—that is capable of taking eyes off oneself altogether when appropriate. One who can see dangers ahead and beauties too. Just as we give the mirror passing daily glances for upkeep and assessment, mirrors are not made to captivate and make captive. A growing inward awareness leads to a gentle external wisdom, one that is not seeking out judgment but searching for truth, both within and beyond. The picture becomes that of driving a car—a steady look at the road with intermittent, frequent glances at the speedometer, with one clear intention in mind: to arrive safely where one is meant to be.

What is wrong with the world?

I am. God help me.

Always reach for the mirror before the binoculars. (Unless on a safari.)

Rule 14: Despite the Cold

It's always colder than you think.

There was always that first spring day. The sun would peek through the clouds, the birds would chirp, and you'd be at school, attired in your winter garb, feeling as free as the new warming breeze. The next day you and half the school would don shorts and t-shirts, as if summer could be beckoned forth by making visible your scrawny, sun-starved bare arms and legs.

The day would be far colder, clothed thusly. Yesterday had seemed so pleasant. What happened? A goose-pimpled morning would surely give way to a balmy afternoon, right? It didn't. It was a false spring, and the breath of winter was yet to be spent. You shivered through an uncomfortable day, longing for a warm shower.

It's always colder than you think.

Presently this fact will be made known to you when you head off for a walk, waffling on and then deciding not to bring along a jacket. Ten minutes in, you know you erred.

It's always colder than you think.

But the bony fingers of winter grope beyond the physical temperature. The icy gales blow through the old windows of life; they find their way in through the cracks.

Over the weekend, my family will return to my wife's family's home. We haven't been back there since the jarring passing of her mother. Which followed the death of her grandfather. Which followed some concerns about the health of our youngest son. Already sleepless nights filled with tears. It was so very cold—colder than we thought it could be.

Have you felt the chill? It creeps in, seeming to seep into your very bones. That phone rings and everything changes. Forever. Cold.

And what of the world? There are summers in my life—the trip to the beach or walk along a fetching wooded trail. There is the good book by the better fire, and the hug and laugh of a friend. Oh, a blanket to the soul. Those times can make me forget what it is to be cold and misremember that we live in a world that reports pandemic deaths. One that has always found a way to foment

frothing racism. It is a beautiful world, littered. Besmirched. One that traffics in slavery, in sex. One that abuses children—the most vulnerable set on frozen tundra barefoot, staggering the frigid plains in search of some misplaced sun: alone. Refugees. Rape. Meanness and murder. We kill, we steal, we destroy.

It's always colder than you think.

Know this. That is my rule. Hold the knowledge close, so I never leave without my coat. So the sunny days don't woo me into believing they are enough for a soul—that they won't change as the seasons. With this knowledge, I cling to the hand beside me in the darkness. I weep but not alone: "If two lie down together, they will keep warm." I need others with me to stand against the cold.

It's always colder than you think. In Genesis, God clothes Adam and Eve. Their hearts had gone cold, and the world with them. They made clothes of fig leaves—ridiculous garb unable to stand up to the elements. They were the kids in shorts shivering recess away. The world has gone cold.

Clothes make other appearances in Scripture. There is the famous coat of many colors that turned Joseph's brothers green with envy. Or hippie John the Baptist sporting a camel's hair sweater and leather belt—that guy had it going on. The picture in Revelation suggests Heavenly robes, made new like their wearers, without blemish.

Usually clothes in Scripture are put on. They shield from the weather, and provide warmth from the world. They suggest status in some cases; in others, relationships.

With Jesus, though, his life was taken, and so too were his clothes: "And they crucified Him, and divided up His garments among themselves." The world had left him naked and dead. Cold and colder.

It seeks the same fate for us all. Just as it did for Adam and Eve. But in that sacred scene, when sin had sullied, a door left ajar for the brisk winds to enter, God gives them truer clothes. He removes the figs—they would never do in a cold world. He covers them with something good, something durable; He wraps them in warmth and sends them out to withstand the cold together.

It is always colder than you think.

So I must allow myself to be enveloped by the love and care of a God, the very Creator of the sun. The

fire of friendship, too, must be kept ablaze. When one's hands are frostbitten, it is too late for fire-making. The flame must be tended, cared for, valued in and out of season. You never know when the winds might kick up.

After being cold all day at school, I'd adjust. The next day, I'd revert back to jeans and a hoody, toting a jacket for good measure. I've tried to carry this habit on, dressing against my idealism. Preparing for the rain, I welcome its surprising absence. But should it come, I want to be ready. Equipped to stand against it. And help others do the same. God saw the weak and cold and clothed them. Jesus was stripped so others might put on righteousness. Can my shelter grow eaves for an increasing number of others to gather under? Can I treat joy and kindness and love like proper garments sewn from my life and given freely to those around me?

Despite the cold, can I live warmly on, unsurprised and undaunted by the chill in the air? And forever-always may I keep an eye out for the blessed sun.

It's always colder than you think.

Lemonade

"What would you like to be good at?" I asked my two-year old the other day.

It was a different way of phrasing the question that will dog him until about age twenty-three: What do you want to be when you grow up?

"Huh?" I coax him along.

"Basketball and guitar," he replied, all blinks and ambition.

I'm not sure if that is true. If it is, he is making a bad go of it. He owns no guitar and has yet to pick up a basketball since declaring his goal. I don't begrudge him that—he's two.

But many of us are not two anymore, yet we proclaim what we want to be, but take no action toward becoming said thing, learning some desired skill. Our guitars gather dust, along with our dreams.

This is not just limited to vocations, hobbies, and skills. It stretches into the realm of character, only there, at about age twenty three, we are the ones who stop with the asking: Who do I want to be?

One is an accumulation of behaviors. If I begin lying and cheating and stealing things, I become, based on my behaviors, a criminal. My past behaviors set my present identity, and likely pave my future path—in this case one leading to prison.

Of course, I don't want to be a criminal—very much the opposite, in fact.

I want to be honest. So what behaviors does the honest person exhibit? Well, honesty naturally. But what leads to honesty? What cultivates habitual truth-telling?

I want to get the most out of my time and learn to respect and love others. I don't want to become enslaved to money via debt. I don't want to be ravaged by anxiety. I want to be humble. And on and on I could go about who I want to be—and likely just as long about who I don't want to become.

And speaking of that, I noticed a thing on social media the other day. It was someone in their late sixties making incendiary posts about politics. Basically, this person was a rabble-rouser, and was effectively rousing rabble (and others) for all the world to see. The comments on his posts were a train

wreck as people strutted into no-man's land only to be obliterated by fire from across the way. The man was a crusader—only his crusade was pointless, irksome, and downright ugly. I thought: How does someone end up like that?

I didn't have to go far for my answer, for elsewhere on social media I came across another "friend." Half the age of the dictator-of-thought mentioned above, this younger man was unwittingly on his way toward becoming an angry online tyrant. He, too, made some incendiary post about politics: juggling grenades, smiling at how well they fit his hand and the power he felt surge within.

Without some intervention, the younger will become the older. A bit of misguided passion in one's twenties, will grow in the thirties, mature in the forties, define in the fifties, and imprison in the sixties and beyond. The skin gets harder, the voice louder, the room emptier—the longer one behaves unchecked the more formidable the habits become. It is plodding progress toward the wrong answer.

Rules in math help one solve equations and arrive at the correct (and desired) answer. That is why most math text books freely give the answer in the back. For math is not about the answer but how one arrives at that correct position. Life works the same way. If I do not begin applying some rules that help guard and check and assess my behaviors, with the correct answer forever in view, I am adrift and set on a subtle path toward becoming that angry old man, that bitter neighbor, that judging hellraiser.

Hellraiser. I use that term intentionally. Hell is a place or metaphor or idea congruent with absolute unrest. It is tortuous and loud and binding. It is destructive. To raise that is a willful brutality, a kicking up of the dirt or a tracking in of the mud just because. It is setting fire to a forest simply because it lives green and free. To raise hell might be the very epitome of evil.

Heaven, though. Heaven is peace. It is big, leafy trees casting shade beside calm waters. Can you hear the gurgling stream? Peace. It's restoration and beauty and perspective. It is calm and enduring—not some quick, scorching flame, but a gentle, steady heat. I want to invite that to descend upon my life and give it to the world about me somehow raising Heaven rather than Hell.

To do so means I must actually have some awareness as to who I am, how I am growing, and what I am becoming.

Rules help guide me along. They are not absolute and may change over time. In fact, they probably should. They will adjust as I adjust, as I age ever along toward the answer in the back of the book.

About the Author

Matt Gordon began the “Faith & Community” department at Veterans United Home Loans in 2013. This department seeks to love fellow employees through building healthy community—inside and outside of work—and creating an atmosphere which allows for faith exploration. It is considered one of the best places in the US to work.

Matt stumbled upon the place and stumbled into his role there, and he has been stumbling along ever since. He is very good at stumbling. Really, you should see it. Matt has written one bad book, enjoys writing and speaking, and eats Wendy’s multiple times per week. He lives in Columbia, MO with his wife, Hannah, and their two boys. Reach out through vufaith.com, if you would like to connect.