

*To Grad,
From Dad*

Daniel John

On Friendship

When I was in the eighth grade, I told my mom and dad that “basically” I knew the basics of life. I knew how to read, write, do math, find things in a library, talk, clean up for myself, some basic cooking skills and the life skill of dialogue and discussion.

You know, I was right. Everything that I have learned since the eighth grade has been a deeper and wider explanation of what I have learned. The problem is that the lessons of life get much more painful each time you have to learn...or relearn...one of them.

As I look back over my life, I also realize that the best friends I ever had in many ways were my friends from the neighborhood and school in the eighth grade. My friends at this time knew me. Now, certainly this will be true the rest of my life...but I mean “knew me” in a much more basic way.

They knew the color of my house, the mess of my bedroom, the names of all my siblings, what my dad did and the chores I was expected to do. They understood my family’s Christmas traditions and what we did on Thanksgiving because they usually spent some time with me on those days.

They knew my teachers and my imitations of my teachers. They attended my church, St. Veronica’s, and we played before and after Mass. They traveled with me to games and functions. We played together, we prayed together. When Barney Postman died, my neighborhood friends cried hard...he was all of our friends.

From the day of eighth grade graduation, you will find that these kinds of friends slowly leave your life. The friends that stayed over night for a sleepover in the sixth grade will drift off to other schools, other activities, and other places. It is funny, though, years from now, you will bump into each other either on purpose or by coincidence and you will instantly find someone who knows your heart. Your goals, your figure and your hair may change, but not the inner person. You will see each other as eighth graders again.

When you go to a school, your friends tend to be from that school. When you do an activity, your friends tend to be doing the same things. Single people hang with other singles, marrieds with marrieds, married with children with married with children.

True friends will always help you move from one apartment to another. True friends show up to your wedding and help clean up. True friends expand your life. Whenever you stop and look at the last few weeks or years and wonder what happened to the old gang, stop and look at yourself and the one who hang around the most. A sign that a relationship is failing is when your life narrows and narrows down to just you and them. A good sign is expansion.

When you wake up one day with new hobbies, new friends, new knowledge, and a wider vision of this great world, it is a sure sign that you have chosen wisely in your relationships.

On Organization

There are only two keys to getting life done in the appropriate amount of time. First, “Be Early.” Send things in when you get them, gas up before you run out, fight crabgrass when the snow first clears off the lawn, tell people you love them before they are gone.

Get in shape before the first practice. Fill out the form and give it back. Buy a car battery before the one you have now dies...about every three years. Arrive early and don't drive like a maniac getting there just to be on time.

The other rule for organization is "only make a mistake once." I keep checklists of every event that I organize. I am beginning a master checklist for the home...really, won't summer be coming around every year, so shouldn't I plan a day where I "summer" the home...later in the year, won't I need to "winter" the home? When you go into a Bridal Store, they have books of check lists, Paul Northway laminated his discus throwing checklist...including sunscreen and a book...so, take some advice: try to only make the same mistake once. Try checklists with vacation packing, grocery shopping and weekly tasks...save yourself an enormous amount of backtracking by doing it right once.

The second time you do something, from moving to mowing, don't repeat the same errors. Don't pack boxes from one coast to the other: never open them, then pack them back to the other coast. Throw it away!!!

Do it early, too.

On Success

This could be disappointing, but all the great thinkers of history have basically footnoted what Cervantes said in *Don Quixote*: "It's the road, not the inn." Success is the journey towards a worthy goal, to paraphrase Earl Nightingale.

Planning a dinner with friends at a new restaurant, driving over to the house to pick them up, laughing in the car on the way and joking about the other people waiting to get in is often much more rewarding than the meal itself. The journey through the mountain of books that you read...or ignore...in your education is worth far more than the small piece of paper called the diploma.

You can be seen as "successful" by the world and feel like a failure to yourself. Success should never be measured by bank accounts or pictures in the paper...mass murderers get more press than monks, but who would you rather have watch your kids? Money should never be equated with value, you can spend an enormous amount on plastic surgery and still be a jerk. Lots of people who eat with their mouths open and food dribbling off their chin have money.

Success is the journey towards a worthy goal. A parent striving and sacrificing for their child to attend an excellent school is as successful as any basketball player who makes a free throw...more so, in my book. Watching a preschooler go from struggling to remember all those squiggly lines that make up the alphabet...lower case, upper case, printed, cursive, gothic...then, slowly putting the letters into words, then sentences is to watch success in action. When you pick up a book at a bookstore and thumb through 1000 pages of writing and shrug and decide to read something else, you might forget the long road that took you to that moment.

Celebrate life's journeys. In high school, with only three more football practices, Eddie Cortopassi turned to me and said "I can't wait for this to be over." "Practice?" "No, football." My mind shifted when he told me that and I realized that I would never put on a helmet again in three more practices and a game. I would never play for my high school again. I looked at the uniforms, the coaches, the field and realized how soon it would be over. From my first memories, I had always wanted to play high school football and within hours it would be over. Life has a way of passing us by and we sometimes miss

the chance to appreciate where we are and what we have done. Celebrate the little things: the last practice, the end of the third quarter, a fun afternoon with your friends. Life has a way of passing us by...

Take pictures, keep a journal, scrapbook your stuff. When life turns on you...and it will...it is nice to have a quiet place to remind yourself that much of the time things go well. Embrace your successes and try to only make the same mistakes once.

On Failure

It's going to happen. Brush failure off your eyes and keep reminding yourself about the "mission." The mission is the reason we do things. The mission of a parent is to feed, house, educate and love their children. The mission of a coach is to get the best out of their athletes in the spirit of sportsmanship. Wins and losses in life are temporary states.

Years ago, a competitor of mine died who had use a number of substances to improve performance. He died, in part, from these substances. When I mentioned this to my brother-in-law, Craig, he said: "You won." I didn't understand him at first, yet each day as I greet my children, tend my tomatoes and walk my dog, I seem to understand better and better what victory truly means to me.

Occasionally, you will hear a parent say, "You've ruined my child's life." The story usually involves third grade basketball and some decision concerning playing time. One thing you can count on: nobody cares about third grade basketball. If you are still talking about how poorly you were treated by the rec league officials in the county soccer league in the fourth grade when you turn thirty...you need more help than I can give.

It's going to happen. Sometimes, you need to embrace failure and learn from it. The truth is this: most people rarely learn from success. Failure seems to take life's lessons and pound you on the back of the head with them. Failure tastes so awful, smells so bad, and feels so lousy that you don't want to experience it again very soon. That is when we get back to the mission: why are we doing this in the first place?

Every day, you need to answer in your work, rest, play and pray time what is the reason you do the things you do. If you answer: "...because everyone else is..." we have failed you as parents and teachers. You need to know why you do things and remind yourself of this every so often.

On Frustration

As I type this section, I'm "having one of those days." Bad commute, people not doing their jobs, students handing in work due weeks ago, and, I won't mention names, but children bickering have left me staring at a pile of work with no idea where to begin digging.

So, I'm frustrated. Life is frustrating more often than not. Although I can't really think this way right now...but, in a few minutes I will be back to my usual self and I will think this way...the reason you get frustrated with things is simply because you care. Sure, occasionally you will have some frustration because there is "nothing" on the 200 television stations we currently subscribe to each month, but, usually, frustration appears because you deeply care about something.

The more I worked on throwing the discus, the more I found myself frustrated because I would learn things that I should have found out about ten years before. One of my little mantras as a coach is simply, “You are not good enough to be frustrated.”

I need to take my own advice. When you have put the time and effort into making something better in your life and it doesn’t work out, first, double-check to make sure you actually put the time and effort into it. Nearly every bad student I ever taught, at one time or other, stated: “I just don’t get it.” “Get what?” “It”...then they would wave their arms magically. It would be the same student whose notebook was filled with doodles, class time filled with fooling around and, all too often, their body filled with drugs or alcohol who would declare for the world: “I don’t get it.”

To “get something,” you have to give something...your time, your energy, your passion, your focus, something. Frustration comes from the perceived lack of “get something.” Keep in mind the word “perceived.” Every minute you spend practicing on your own makes you expect more and more of a “get something” at the end of all of the time and effort. What you often miss is that the myriad of gifts that you receive in the struggle.

Whenever you find yourself frustrated, take a moment to remind yourself of the struggle to get to frustration. “The road to frustration” would make a great book title. When you find yourself truly frustrated by the demands of a goal...a worthy goal...remind yourself of all the gifts along the way. It could be as simple as “better health” or as demanding as “I am making the world a better place for all children.”

As I write this, I find that my point about frustration is not being made. This is frustrating. But, anytime you read the words I left behind both you and I move beyond this world and dance again.

And, that is joy.

On Coaching

You may never coach anyone, but the twin keys of coaching are “secrets” that apply to every aspect of life from cleaning the house to making yourself “beautiful” for the prom. These are big secrets, but a bit obvious.

First, identify weaknesses. The hardest job of a coach is telling the athlete that they lack...woefully...in an area. I was talking to a young man recently who was cut from Murray High School’s basketball team. I asked why he was cut. He told me: “My ball handling.” “Have you been working on it?” “Um, no.”

This young man knows what to do, he knows the problem; he has identified the key weakness that is holding him back.

Of course, he will probably not work on it. Rarely do you meet people that work on their weaknesses. Actually, rarely do you meet people that even know what their weaknesses are in their lives, careers or hobbies. Sometimes, you can figure out your own weaknesses, but generally someone else will point them out to you. Hey, that is what family is for!

The reason daytime television has so many talk shows devoted to family members screaming at each other and embarrassing themselves on a national stage is, well, “that is what family is for!” If you have a zit on your face, with any luck right on the end of your nose, don’t worry your sister or mom will point it out to you. Hey, we all will! If you are

rude or overbearing or out of line, family members will often be the first to chirp up for you.

You rarely have to wonder about weaknesses for long. They become apparent when you move up to the next level in sports, theater, music or life.

The only hint I can give you is this: generally, people's greatest weaknesses, their greatest shortcomings are in the basics. The fundamental skills that one should learn and master in any sport, art or field are usually the areas that we tend to overlook until this lack of development is obvious to everyone...save you.

That is why elementary school is so crucial. Those basic skills of reading and discerning what you read, mathematics and the triad of writing, grammar and spelling gives you the tools to expand your universe. Yet, skip one of these basics...or get lazy with them as an adult...and you will constantly struggle throughout your life.

You can survive with lousy handwriting...I learned to type...but it is nice occasionally to read something that you have written. You might be able to overcome one glaring fault, perhaps you could play in the N.B.A. without the skill of dribbling with your left hand, but I doubt you could make it to the higher levels in anything with two egregious faults.

Discover your weaknesses early and take time to overcome them before they overcome you.

Second, the great coach identifies your strengths. Then, true "greatness" comes when you continue to highlight and improve your personal strengths. As a ballet dancer, if you find you can out leap everyone, keep working on that amplitude until the world recognizes your flight times. To stand out...you have to stand out.

It is usually easy to discover your strengths. It is generally what you fall back on when things go bad or when you are uncomfortable or when you decide to add an "extra" something. If you go to a party and you decide to mix the music that might clue you in to your strengths versus the person who decides to dunk their head in the punch bowl.

Constantly try to take your strengths to a new level. In bodybuilding, there are people who are legends not because of the titles won but because of their phenomenal development of a bodypart...Tom Platz's legs, Zabo's abs, Larry Scott's biceps.

Success seems to keep coming back to work. But, work smart...identify and deal with your weaknesses and discover and expand your strengths.

If you ever decide to coach, coach your athletes like you would like to be coached by you. It's a variation of the Golden Rule, but worth considering.

On Prayer

You might not have noticed, but I start each day with prayer. I use the "official" Morning Prayer of the church, but there are times when I don't have my little book with me, so I just pray away. I always keep you and your sister in my prayers, and your mom, and all my family. There are a few moments in church each week where we are asked to prayer for the "departed;" I have noticed that it often takes me longer than the time allotted to get through all the departed that I know.

It is a sign of age, a sure sign of age, that you begin to note long lists of people who you love and have shared your life and "now" are dead. "Now" is a funny term when comes to death as, statistically speaking, we are all going to die. Sooner or later, someone

is going to pause at church and think of you and me when they pray for the “dearly departed.”

So, I pray. I never really ask God for much; that just isn't part of my way of doing things. I always figure that God knows my troubles and probably has seen a lot worse. My usual prayers in panic or pain are pretty simple: “God!,” “Please, God!,” “Please, Dear God!” God seems to answer those prayers a lot more often than when I get really specific about what I want in life. I still don't have a pony.

Mary modeled prayer at the Wedding Feast at Cana. When they ran out of wine, she told Jesus, “They have no wine.” She simply stated, to the Lord, the issue. She didn't spell out: “Get a wagon and run to the liquor store and take care of this...and pick up those pickles I like.”

So, I state the issue: My kids are sick. I worry about money. I am getting old. The car is spinning. Four word prayers often work very well, I found.

I'm a big fan of prayers of praise and that is something most people forget. When you sit in the backyard filled with flowers and butterflies and the sky is bright blue and you feel great, take a moment to thank God. I remind myself to sniff in hard about once a day when I feel good, just to be thankful. Those days I have allergies and head colds are a lot fewer than the days I'm thankful for full healthy lungs.

Praise a lot...you should be thankful for a lot. If you can't find something to be thankful for...then, we really failed you as a community.

On Charity

Give...always. Sure, pick and choose to be sure your donations of time, treasures and talents are given to those in need, but give...always. You have been given much in your life and you need to give back.

Why? You know, I'm not always so sure...I don't want to write a lot of nonsense that can only sound triumphal and not from the heart. You see, I take my clue here from my dad. I have often compared Dad to Simon the Cyrene, some guy in a crowd who is asked to help carry a cross and he does it...without saying a single word. You won't find a lot of buildings named after guys like my dad...they carry a lot of crosses and get very little credit...except where the credit is really important. Jesus talks about giving so the right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing and He taught us not to make a big deal about our giving, please don't have the trumpets blare when you reach in your pocket, but why we should give is a tough one for me to answer.

Sure, maybe giving is like the notion of “paying forward;” do a good deed today and the “karma boomerang” is going to come back and hit you when you need help. You know, it does happen, but that isn't a very good reason to give, either. It is a bit too self-serving for my tastes.

Jesus tells us that we will be sorted when “the Son of Man returns” by whether or not we fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, visited the imprisoned, housed the homeless, and comforted the ill. “Giving,” of course, helps with all of those to a degree, but I would still like to see you give of yourself, too. Don't always simply send in money to feed the hungry...roll up your sleeves and help out, too. And, stick around to help clean up the dishes at the end.

I can only tell you why to give through an analogy I once heard: the Dead Sea is “dead,” because water only flows into it and nothing flows away from it. It dies because it takes, takes and takes but does not give. Through your gifts to the rest of us, you will live...forever.

On Dating

Talk about an area that I know nothing about! But, mom called and asked me to write something about dating. So, wish me luck!

Short course on dating: enjoy dating and don't think you have to marry every person you date. Enjoy dating, but remember that just because someone pays for your meal or movie doesn't mean you “owe” them anything. If they act like you do, they don't think of you as a person, but a piece of meat to buy and sell. Stick with people who think that human dignity is most important thing.

Integrity is one of the things some people forget when they start getting into relationships. Integrity is being “one” person...so, on a date or just out with friends, are you the same person you are when you are with your family at Thanksgiving? If you change from place to place, event to event, you fail the integrity test.

It is a great gauge for people you want to date, too. Watch somebody in the school cafeteria when the teachers aren't around. Watch them when they are with “less popular” people. Watch 'em.

Someone who treats you like fine gold and a disabled person like dirt is going to be treating you like dirt very shortly, too.

A great clue for people is to watch how they act around their parents. When I see a student genuinely happy to see their folks, I know I have a kid who acts the same at home and school. Kids who are rude to their folks may try to charm you but keep an eye on your wallet.

If you are worried about introducing people you date to friends and family, you might want to put yourself through the integrity test. There is no question I am going to be myself around the people you date...now, that is a threat!

On Stress

Stress is going to be part of your life. I am truly sorry. Stress has changed over time. Our ancestors feared being eaten, while your grandparents feared getting enough to eat.

Now, people fear they eat too much and are getting fat. The world does change. It is like my discussion in one of lectures...there is a far cry from hunger to fasting to dieting.

My father used to talk about how he read science fiction books about going to the moon as a young boy and his amazement watching people actually walk on it. Now, we are beginning to discover devices that were not even imagined when I was a child. The internet alone is enough to make my head swim, but the amazing aspects of e-mail and all the rest...and stuff that is just around the corner has changed the world.

Maybe you thought I was talking about stress...let me get to that point. On September 11, 2001, my wife called me from New York to tell me she was okay. "Great, why?" "Turn on the television."

We stood a thousand miles apart talking on a cellular phone while the second plane crashed into the World Trade Center. I watched on television while she watched it through a window.

That, my friends, is a level of stress that our cave living ancestors never anticipated: to be "live" a thousand miles a way.

I have a dozen books on stress reduction and they are not worth the stress to read them. There are two core principles to survive stress: the first one may not be obvious.

The first principle is this: stress has nothing to do with time or time management. It is all about energy and getting things done. I'm always amazed at how "busy" some people are, but how little they accomplish. "Busy-ness" is not a sign of accomplishment or a reason for a trophy, eternal glory or damnation. Often, it is just wasting your time.

In C. Northcote Parkinson's book, "Parkinson's Law," he has a great example of an old lady spending the entire day putting together a small thank you note. She keeps changing her mind about the kind of paper and the pen and the... He then contrasts this with a really busy person who dashes off "Thank You" on a small card. One spent a day; one spent a minute...both got the same task accomplished.

Your life will be filled with opportunities to become more and busier. I always tell my people to "recruit" others to do the "busy work." There are subtle signs in every field or career that you have succumbed to "busyness." Usually, it involves missing the whole point of what you are doing.

I've worked with football coaches who lost every game but could argue statistically that they won. That is missing the point. I've met parents who argued that I was a bad teacher because their child received/deserved poor grades. That, too, may be missing the point: I might be a bad teacher, true, but I don't give bad grades. You earn bad grades!

Some people simply get addicted to stress...especially addicted to the busy lifestyle. If you ask some people to stop and smell the roses, they will put up a barrier to protect children from the thorns. Number one on my list of "things that drive me crazy" is this kind of nonsense: searching for the wrong, the dangerous, and the broken in each and everything we do.

I'm always reminded of my parish priest, Father Dan Derry, and his favorite homily: "Life is short, death is certain, hell is forever." Every minute you spend putting a label on ketchup that you should "use this product only as indicated," you are wasting heartbeats. Quit the busy.

How do I know what is important? It is so simple: what is the mission? The mission? Yes, it is that simple, what is the primary task or goal of a particular part of my life.

As a parent, my mission is feed you, protect you, clothe you and do the best I can to educate you. That fourth one is difficult; it involves you more than the others...usually. Making sure you are the lead in the school play or starter on a sports team is not...many parents may miss this fact...I repeat, not the mission of the parent.

Focus on the mission. The mission will change. The mission of a student is to not only memorize a bunch of stuff, but to learn the skills to apply this "stuff" to life.

Learning to type does not make one a writer. Learning to drive a car will not guarantee that you will be safe behind the wheel.

I always know when I have ignored the mission...I feel a lot of stress.

On Eating in Public

Really, nobody cares what fork you start with...and, if they do, you probably are sitting with someone who has probably never gone hungry. You should start with the outside utensils and move in, but I'm already off the point.

The point is this: you are going to spend a lot of your life eating with other people. I have some opinions about this and a bit of advice. First, let's get to what is the most important thing I want to talk about: when you remember a great meal, you rarely remember the food, you remember the people you ate with at that great meal.

You see, dining is all about people, eating is all about food. When I think back on some of the best times of my life, I know that food was part of it, but the people I "dined" with were much more important.

I hope you never truly go hungry...with your education and your supporting "tribe," this should never happen. If you do make some poor life choices, really poor choices, *maybe* you could be truly hungry, but you would have to alienate a lot of people.

Actually, I hope you never diet, too. A guy named Art DeVany once answered a question, "what is the best way to lose fat?" with this answer: "Don't get fat in the first place." The lady was offended, but there is a lot of wisdom in the answer...albeit not something one would hear every day. DeVany's advice works with drug abuse, alcoholism, and a host of other things, too. Don't do it in the first place.

Sorry, back to dining. If you keep focused on the people, you never have to worry about "which fork?" True, put the napkin in your lap, don't make a lot of noise when you eat, say "thank you" every time you are waited on and remember to reach for the bill.

Recently at a dinner, we talked about three things at a restaurant that you could choose...two had to be bad and only one good. The three choices were: food, services, and company. Everyone at the table chose good company. At least, you can laugh at the food and service.

On Pets

Go to the pound. Never buy a "breed," they always have the brains bred out of them. Find a dog that "gets" that you are their second chance. Loyalty is rare find in the human world, but very common in the canine world.

With cats, of course, things will be different. Cats adopt you. If they continue to feel like you fill their needs, they will continue to allow you to fill their needs.

I used to think there are "cat people" and "dog people." Now that I am a "cat and dog person," I am not so sure.

Dogs and cats keep you balanced. Rarely does a dog or cat care about the commute, taxes, or terrorism. They tend to focus on sleep, food and play...although not in that order. Every so often, take a lesson from dogs and cats and lay around all day. Don't, however, drink from the toilet bowl.

For exercise, nothing beats having a dog. An exercise bicycle won't remind you with tail wagging that it is time to train. Forget about three twenty minute exercise sessions a week when you have a dog...you'll go out everyday and not need a stopwatch.

So, yes, pets are great. When you are ready for pets, I should say. You owe it to a cat to be stable, that is, you shouldn't move too often with a cat. They tend to want "to go home" and your cat may end up dead on a busy road. Dogs need a place to run and play; few cheap apartments have this quality.

So, get pets when you can "afford" them. I wouldn't recommend a pet until you are stable. The last thing you want to have is a newborn baby and a puppy competing for your time. When it comes to pets, the costs are quite low in terms of money but shockingly high in the amount of time, care and love.

When you first see a puppy or kitten, I would recommend thinking twelve to eighteen years down the road. Can you commit to a relationship that long? Hopefully, of course, you will do that with your spouse...but, keep in mind "'til death do us part!"

On Grief

Last weekend, an old high school friend of mine died. A couple of months ago, a classmate from my elementary school died. Living with grief is just one of those things we need to do as humans. I always say: "Everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die to get there." And, it is true; we are all destined to die.

Psalm 23 reminds us that "we walk through the valley of the shadow of death." We don't run. We walk. You will spend parts of your life in some stage of grief. The best way I know how to describe the feelings of grieving is to think of a roller coaster. Sometimes, for no reason at all, you may find yourself overwhelmed with grief. Yet, you may also laugh very hard the evening of a funeral...thinking of a funny story about the deceased, perhaps. Both reactions are perfectly normal. In fact, any reaction to grief is normal.

Some people argue that grief comes to you in stages. Well, maybe for some, but most people I have talked to about grief seem to vary all over the place.

One thing I have noticed is that sometimes a terrible thing will happen and you might find yourself not really bothered by the events. Soon, though, you might hear of the death of someone you barely know or something trivial like a traffic ticket will rend you to absolute tears and depression. It is at times like this that it is good to remind yourself that you recently experienced a loss.

When my dad died, I was certainly numb. A few months later, a person I knew "pretty well" died. I couldn't stop crying. A friend took me aside and simply said: "It's for your father, too."

I didn't feel crazy anymore. I'm sorry to tell you this, but you are going to be grieving things your whole life. You may grieve even things as simple as leaving a school through graduation. I used to warn my high school students about this phenomenon: often, a few months after high school graduation, students would drop by and express regret about all the "roads not taken" in their high school days. The "could haves, would haves, and should haves" of the four year high school experience would wake up an odd form of grieving.

You might find yourself grieving a break up of relationship years later, or maybe weeks later, when you know the break up was for the best.

Grief is going to visit you many times in your life. The best way to deal with it is the best way to live: give yourself wholeheartedly to others. You may or may not manage grief well, but you can always make a difference.

On Money

Your sister, Lindsay, told me I was good with money the other day. I was shocked. I felt like saying: “Not the way we spend it in this house!” Lindsay’s point was not that we spend a lot of money...we do...but that we spend money *wisely*.

Okay, what does that mean? Well, according to Lindsay...we tend to make good choices. On travel, we have learned that saving thirty bucks on a hotel room by going to a cheap place is not often worth the thirty dollars. Choose wisely on where you spend your money on trips. We generally have room service bring breakfast and we eat a full meal. It may cost a few dollars more than going to breakfast, but not much more. But, for “our” money, the savings on time and energy and waiting for a table and the smoke from the people next to us and the problem of getting everyone showered in time...is saved by checking a few boxes the night before.

That is what spending wisely is all about. I often talk about “deal breakers.” What is a deal breaker? It is that “bottom line” that makes or breaks an event. If I don’t get this or do that, the trip or the event is a failure. If you go to Disneyworld and don’t have some quality time laughing, eating and drinking in the international area of EpCot...you missed a great day. When planning a wedding, I would focus on the ceremony, the dancing and the hospitality. When you start thinking that a certain flower...or food...makes or breaks the marriage, you have missed the boat.

Every time you open your wallet to pull out a card or money, remember that you are choosing. One of the nice things about eating breakfast in a hotel room is that you won’t find yourself hungry when you start looking for things to do. You won’t spend the entire morning standing in line for some overpriced food that won’t really satisfy you anyway.

When you spend your money here...you might not be able to spend it “there.” This leads me to an area that I think I am an expert on...

On Cost to Benefit Ratio

Fancy term, no? Basically, this is the key to making life’s decisions...unless human life is involved.

This ratio is simple to understand and even simpler to practice in daily life. I like to take a piece of paper and write two columns when I make a decision. Be careful here, I am encouraging you to think. “Thinking” is a dangerous skill.

In one column, write down the benefits...the pluses...of your dilemma or question. On the other side, write down the costs. Don’t forget time, energy, travel, personality issues, reality and everything else. You can think of it as “pros” and “cons,” but I think most people know the answers to their dilemmas immediately. This little exercise takes it the next step: you look at the benefits in relationship to the costs.

I can almost guarantee that one day you will meet someone that is so “counter” everything that we...your parents, friends, family, teachers, buddies, pets, whatever...believe in and agree about that you will discover that you will be forced to make a decision. “That person or us” will be at stake. If you take out a piece of paper and do the cost/benefit ratio, you may discover some amazing things about what you think is important. Never discount a roof over your head, food, and a future.

If you have a truly tough decision...perhaps choice of what college to attend...you may find that the differences are extremely slight. Perhaps, if you aspire high enough, the differences may be very small. These are life’s “big decisions.”

On the big ones, look at the paper several times and tear it up and listen to your inner voice. Whether your inner voice is your Guardian Angel, the Holy Spirit or the echoes of all your experience, I tend to trust my inner voice with the big decisions. That’s why I asked Mom to marry me. I listened to my inner voice and made the best decision of my life.

On Clothes

“Stay classic. Wear black.” Or, so you’re your mom, Tiffini. Actually, that sums up about all I know, too. We could beat “cost to benefit” ratios to death, but there are a couple of areas that will literally steal your fortune from you...one of the big ones is fashion.

Looking good has little to do with fashion. Designers and clothing makers are trying to get you to keep buying, that is why they keep changing things!

Don’t fall for it. Black suits on men always have looked good. Black dresses on women have always looked good. Quality clothes last a long time and always look good.

Sure, play with fashion but here are some rules:

- Always dress up for funerals, weddings and important evening ‘gatherings.’ You don’t want to be remembered as “the scrubby t-shirt and lousy jeans person” at the wedding.
- Remember your audience. Church dress should never be “revealing.” Don’t interview for a classy job with a belly button ring showing.
- Remember the seasons. Winter is cold, summer is hot. Be appropriate to the weather, too.
- You shouldn’t do it, but people do judge others on how they dress. Honestly: simple, neat, clean, pressed, “compatible” clothes are much better than “fashion.”

Just look at what people wore to weddings in the 1970’s and you will understand the problems of fashion.

On Reading “Great Books”

“When I was in school” may be a bad way to start a discussion, yet when I was in school we had a “Great Books” program where we read classic books, like Tom Sawyer, Robinson Crusoe and the like and discussed them every two weeks. It was wonderful.

What I learned at the time was that it was a real pain. I had to do “extra” reading, go to “extra” classes,” and do “extra” work. Of course, now that I am ancient and wise, I

know the real value of these courses: Great Books DEMAND discussion! There is nothing I like better than when someone reads a book, or even better while in the middle of reading a book, and starts to talk about the book. It can be as simple as “hey, read this” to “this book changed all my perceptions about life.”

My favorite thing to do in life is to read a book recommended by a child. C. J. Taylor got me to read “Del Tora Quest.” I loved it. Lindsay got me to read “Holes” and “The Westing Game.” Fabulous books. When your middle school teacher discovered that I had never read “To Kill a Mockingbird,” I was sent to the library without a hall pass. Fantastic book.

That is what makes books great. The need, the desire, by the readers to make sure everyone else reads the book, too. We will always have a culture, we will always have a civilization, when people demand that we read books.

On cooking...(by Tiffini John)

Few things in life will serve you better than the skilled art of preparing a one-pot meal. Remember, humans eat to live, not the other way around. These simple recipes will provide sustenance for you and yours, be it your roommate, spouse, or children.

As stated earlier, the majority of these meals can be prepared in one pot. If boiling and baking are required, you may need two pots, or a pot and a baking (cake) pan. Since I never owned measuring devices such as cups and spoons, every cup, tsp. and tbsp. measurement you receive will be an estimate.

Don't be afraid to buy good cooking equipment. Don't scrimp on a microwave, pots and pans, stirring and cutting stuff, and never try to save money on meat and vegetables. You don't want to “get what you pay for” sometimes!

Mom's Beef Stroganoff

1 lb. Hamburger or stew meat
1 can Cream of Mushroom Soup
1 small can sliced mushrooms (optional)
½ onion
Sour Cream (to taste)
Salt and Pepper (to taste)
Egg Noodles

Using a large frying pan, brown meat and onion. Add mushrooms. When fully cooked, add C of M soup. Allow sauce to simmer on low heat. In a separate pot, boil egg noodles for appropriate servings. (Some people don't eat noodles). When noodles are ready, add sour cream to the meat sauce. The more sour cream, the whiter, and richer it will be. (That is why I did not indicate a serving amount!) Pour sauce over noodles. Serve with green beans.

Mom's Chicken Noodle Soup

4 Chicken breasts (off the bone)
Half a pot of water (a big pot)
2 tbsp. Chicken bullion
½ onion
½ cup frozen peas
Salt and pepper to taste
Egg noodles

Combine chicken breasts, water, chicken bullion, and onion in large pot. Thoroughly cook chicken breasts in boiling water. Remove breasts from water, chop, and return to water/bullion mixture. At this point, sample the soup-base to determine if you have added enough chicken bullion. If not, add more. If you have added too much, throw in some milk. Add noodles. Allow entire mixture to boil until noodles are cooked. Turn off heat. Add frozen peas. Allow to sit for approximately 10 minutes. Serve with bread, crackers, toast, or green beans.

Mom's homemade chili!

1 lb. Hamburger
½ onion
1 can of Kidney beans
1 can of diced tomatoes
1 can of tomato sauce
1 package chili seasoning (purchased in the baking/seasoning aisle at the grocery store)

Brown the hamburger and onion. Follow the directions on the packet of chili seasoning. You will end up with a fantastic pot of chili every time! Serve with Bisquick biscuits, or green beans.

Mom's Viking Enchiladas

4 chicken breasts (off the bone)
½ onion
1 small can mild green chilies
1 can Cream of Chicken Soup
Sour Cream
Flour Tortillas
Grated Cheese

In large frying pan, brown chicken breasts and onion. When chicken is thoroughly cooked, remove from frying pan and cut up. (if the chicken is fresh, not frozen, you can

cut it up prior to cooking it) Return chicken to frying pan and add green chilies, cream of chicken soup, and sour cream. Simmer for 6 minutes. Remove from heat. Spoon chicken and grated cheese into flour tortillas. Roll enchiladas and place into a separate, greased baking pan. Top enchiladas with cheese. Place into a heated oven (400*) for 6 minutes. Remove. Serve with green beans.

Two Recipes from Dad

Irish Jambalaya

Ingredients

One pound of chicken, boneless, skinless and chopped (or just buy the “fajita or tenders” chicken and save the cutting)

A package of mild or hot Italian Sausage cut up into pieces

Can of French Onion Soup

Jar of salsa sauce

½ cup to full cup of uncooked minute rice

½ cup to full cup of peas

Olive oil

Tabasco sauces or whatever you have on hand.

A nice pan

A good spoon to keep stirring.

One Pan Jambalaya

- Put a touch of olive oil in a pan and begin to heat. Add chicken and sausage until they start to brown up. As you are stirring, accidentally add Tabasco Sauces or any hot sauces into the meat. When eyes burn, that is enough.
- Add one can of French Onion Soup, the secret ingredient. Add one jar of Pace or other Picante Sauce. Allow this to nearly boil. Then, add frozen cooked shrimp, some peas and rice. Cover, if you can, or just stir for about five minutes. It helps to let it all sit under foil for about five to ten minutes before you serve.

One Pan Stew

Olive Oil

Stew Meat (A pound or two)

Frozen Stew Veggies from the store

Can of Tomato Soup

The secret ingredient: a can of French Onion Soup

A Big Pan

A Good Spoon

First, add the oil and brown the meat. Then, add all the other stuff, stir to a gentle boil, then cover and wait about five minutes. Uh, that's it...it is very good.

On Buying a Car

Few Americans can get over our collective love of the automobile. Few Americans are fit. Few Americans have healthy blood tests. Few Americans are shaping the world into a better place.

I think these statements all flow together. If you want to succeed, one of the first things you need to do is get out of our misguided affair with cars. If you ever get a chance to be able to walk to school, work, and play, you might find that cars have little overall appeal...except when you need them.

When do you need them? Well, it depends. If you use a car as a tool, something to get you to work, that is great. But, if you have to work to keep the car...that's the old cliché of the tail wagging the dog. Never get yourself in a situation where you buy a car, discover that insurance isn't free, and have to work to keep the car. It is the single greatest "dream-killer" that I know.

Sure, there are going to be times you need a car...emergencies, picking me up at the airport, shopping for food. But those are fairly utilitarian needs. Do you really need a supercharged engine with four wheel drive and a camper to go pick up milk?

Many young men buy their dream car right out of high school and spend the next few years paying for the car and watching their dreams go no where.

If you buy a car, how you maintain the car is far more important than how it looks when you drive.

- Every three months drive it over to one of those lube and oil places. Try to go to the same shop every time and follow the schedules for maintaining the car. This will save far more than you spend.
- I would encourage you to buy a new battery every three years in the warm months of late summer and early fall. Sure, the battery is "guaranteed" to last longer. It will go out when you need it. Trust me. It has happened to me three times. I learned.
- Be vigilant about tires! Good tires equal long life: yours!
- Don't let the gas tank drift much below half full. Fill the tank before you have to fill the tank!
- Get the garbage out of your car at least once a week. I have found all kinds of odd things in the back seat that make no sense to me at all. Sometimes, it may or may not have been a banana at one time. I'm afraid to ask.

On Buying Good Gasoline

We "relearned" an old lesson this past Boxing Day, the Feast of Saint Stephen. Turns out that mom had been buying gasoline at a station that is "known" for bad gas. What is bad gas? Gas that has a little water in it, not enough octane, and on those freezing mornings in Utah, the car just can't turn over...or stalls without any warning.

So, how much is your time worth? Is it worth the few pennies that you save going with cheaper gas risking being stuck on the side of the road? I would argue, after pushing the truck in a snowstorm that "no," saving a few cents isn't worth it!

Never let the tank get less than half full, if you can help it. The mechanic told us that this rule keeps the moisture out...besides; you will never have that heart dropping experience of running out of gas in the worst parts of America. Fill the tank whenever you are "not busy," so you never have to squeeze in one more thing on those nightmare days.

On Meeting “Potential” People

A short course here: if you want to meet a spiritual person interested in health, don't hang out in bars that offer “a buck a burger” on Tuesday nights. Yeah, sure, maybe the person of your dreams will wander in, but it may be difficult to find them with the waves of people waving singles at the waitresses.

Sometime, somewhere in your life you need to make a list. This list can then be burned, but I don't recommend it. It is a list of the qualities that the person you want to spend the rest of your life with will have...in great amounts.

Things WILL change. Hopefully, the person that you decide to spend the time between “I do” and “death parts” will be far beyond your list. But, at least, have a list. “If you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there” is advice I toss out to discus throwers every workout. It is the same exact advice I give to people who decide to marry some day.

Don't let the lightning bolt of love decide your fate. It is easy to fall in love when you walk through the city dog pound...every mongrel catches your eye.

I'm not saying to look for pure breeds either. All too often, the brains have been bred out of them. The problem is this: am I talking about pets again...or potential mates?

It's funny, but I asked a couple of people about the comparison and we got a good laugh out of it because some people spend more time thinking about a perfect dog than a perfect mate.

You should do more than just hope your spouse doesn't drink out of the toilet.

On Evil

Last night, I was asked to speak to a group at the public library about the story of “Faust.” The story has been made into several books, plays, symphonies, and operas because it deals with a topic a lot of people are interested in...selling your soul to the devil.

We had an interesting panel discussion. Some religions don't believe that there is “incarnate” evil...a creature, a fallen angel, who spends all his time seducing people to the dark side.

I do. I believe there are evil spirits and evil people. Goethe's version of Faust has a wonderful line that explains all evil...in my mind. Mephistopheles tells Doctor Faust simply: “I am the Spirit that says, “No.”

No greater summary of evil can be stated. You might be thinking, “What?”

Evil tells you that you are not good enough, not smart enough, not rich enough, not fun enough, not pure enough, not male, not female, not human, not to be held with dignity.

Whenever evil speaks, evil tells you that “you” are just not good enough, even though God said you are “very good!” The seduction of evil is simple: you are not good, but if you do this or that...then you will be good/better/right.

Evil can be defeated because evil doesn't understand some very simple things. First, evil doesn't understand sacrifice. Evil, especially in our human state, loves sloth.

Sloth is my favorite new word...it perfectly describes the tendency of most people to find the easy way out in everything.

Go to any gym in America and count how many people squat. It will be few, if any. Squatting hurts, but it really packs on muscle. Ask those same gym rats about drugs or supplements and they will know every chemical and its isotopes. Taking a pill is easy, squatting is hard.

That is sloth in a nutshell: finding the easy way. Honest hard work, giving up treats and desserts, and monitoring lifestyle for a better physique can be difficult. Yes, you must sacrifice that piece of pie, the candy bar and soft drink, but anything worthwhile in life involves sacrifice.

You sacrifice television to get your homework done, you sacrifice your body in order to have children, you sacrifice your time to talk to friends in need.

Evil doesn't understand that. Evil doesn't understand friendship, either. "The Lord of the Rings" does a great job with this throughout all the books, but the Harry Potter books do this just as well. Sure, Harry often faces Voldemort alone, but it is the sacrifices of his friends that get him there.

I was told one time by someone that I don't always respect that I wasted my time "jumping through all the hoops" to get my education. This guy wasn't working at the time. He was right in a way; there was a lot of work, a lot of sacrifices. No, I never went hungry, but I sure "did without" a lot of things like hanging around bars and coffee shops.

One thing that helped me was that I was around friends who had nothing...financially...either, just dreams to fulfill.

Every time I open a paycheck and realize that I still had money in the bank I hadn't already spent, I am thankful for the small sacrifices I made years and years ago for my future present.

Evil tells you not to jump through hoops and to blow off assignments and not to do your best because it doesn't really matter in the big picture of things.

Professor Dumbledore would NEVER tell you that!

On Investing

Sir John Templeton said it better than I can. When asked about investing money, he gave two words of practical advice: "Do it."

Now, having said that, there will be questions that will arise: first, why am I telling an eighth grader to invest? Well, any money that you invest **early** in your life will have that wonderful gift called "time" to earn more and more and more for you...without you doing a thing. The second reason is simple: you must always look long term in life. Have you read anything I have written so far? If so, than you must realize that we always stand back and look at the big picture!

A little advice for you: always keep somewhere from ten to twenty-five percent of what you earn "safe." United States Savings Bonds, other safe bonds, even a little savings account will provide one of the core keys to success: not losing everything! If you sign some big contract, get really boring with some of the money. Ignore buying islands and jets and pour some into something so dull, like U.S. Savings Bonds that people will laugh at you. You will laugh later when you have something to fall back on when those same laughers are broke.

Invest in stocks, unless you really know something about another field. Use Mutual Funds for stock investing...I don't mind full-time people keeping an eye on my money. I simply don't have the time or skill to invest full-time. If you know Real Estate, buy land. But, remember how hard it is to unload land, gold, jewels, or antiques when the market drops.

Never invest in things that eat. Never invest in stuff you don't understand. Never invest in someone or something that calls you on the telephone. Never invest in something or someone who promises "easy money."

Easy money is the road to no money. Don't fall for it.

The best investment would be "you." Get all the education and skills and degrees and diplomas that you can get early as you can get them. The next big investment would be your spouse...yes, it is an investment. Don't make a bad investment by choosing a bad spouse.

The biggest investment you may ever make is having children. But, that is another discussion for another time.

Always, always, always think long term. Things go up and down, life goes up and down, stocks go up and down.

When investing in stocks, bonds or life, invest...but keep a safety net, too.

On Hospitality

Always make enough for another person or two or three when you cook. My mom always kept a dessert and a ready pot of coffee to welcome anyone at anytime. Part of who we are is hospitality...both the giving and receiving of comfort when we travel or work. When you are at someone's home and they offer you something, you accept it...no matter what diet you are on. Which, of course, leads me to the most important thing I know...

On Creating Traditions

I grew up thinking that everyone in the world practiced the same exact traditions as the little John Family of South San Francisco practiced traditions. Of course, I was wrong...some open presents on Christmas Eve, some on Christmas morning and many, many people don't celebrate Christmas at all!

Traditions pop up quite quickly. Years ago, while I was a high school teacher, someone in the school didn't copy off the announcements for the staff one Friday morning. So, an administrator read them over the loud speaker. The next week, the administrator said: "As it is a tradition, I will read the announcements on Friday." One time makes a tradition? Yep, one time is all it takes.

Traditions can simply be social habits, if you will, but since I am so in favor of habits, let's frame this out a little bit. I'm in favor of *positive* social habits ("traditions").

My favorite is "practice Thanksgiving." Years ago, while single and living with a couple of other coaches, we discovered that we could cook a turkey. We couldn't, however, cook anything else that went with turkey. So, to encourage women to come over to our place, we invented Practice Thanksgiving. "We will cook the turkey, you need to bring something."

It was a perfect family gathering. No fights, no awful stories of our past, no old grievances, well, no family! We have kept this tradition in our family since then. Every few months, for no apparent reason, we celebrate Thanksgiving.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with celebrating and being thankful every day of the year!

We set up Christmas on the day after Thanksgiving (Thanksgiving Friday) and put all of our Advent decorations and get the bulk of the stuff up that day. Why? Well, it started because we often had little to do that day and the kids were bored and started whining about nothing to do and the next thing you know...we have a tradition!

Make traditions as often as you can. Our whole approach to family travel is based on "instant traditions." It's true; we always stop at certain rest stops because we have a fun memory, like you guys dancing on picnic tables, so we stop there every time.

Make some great traditions...positive ones...in your life and enjoy them!

On Variation

I think the single biggest problem that we humans deal with over a lifespan is that we have two conflicting basic needs: the absolute need for "sameness" and the absolute need for "variety."

When I was growing up, there were television shows called "Variety Shows." They would offer the same ensemble of talented people, mixed in with a few guest stars, who would sing, dance, and perform comedy skits. Saturday Night Live has made this formula into an art form.

These shows seem to "get it." We humans want things to get mixed up a little, but not so much. That is why we like our traditions only to change a little. It is nice to invite different people to Thanksgiving, but not too different. Watching the Christmas shows that we have seen each year of our life gives us just enough sameness, but watching them every week all year would be deadly dull.

I would go crazy doing the same thing at my job every day. I like the variation, but not too much. I also like my traditions to stay the same, but, again, not too much.

There is some wisdom in realizing that we like variation and sameness. It is nice that winter shows up early or late, but I wouldn't want to worry about snowfall all year long. Lots of Science Fiction has been done about cultures that figure out perfect societies and they are always plagued with the boredom of sameness, especially in weather.

I crave lots of variation when I travel but I really look forward to coming home to the stability of my home. This is being human at its basic level: we always seem to want what we can't have and, if we can have it, we want something else!

It's okay. This little dance between sameness and variety drives all of our creative juices...as well as our passions.

On The Single Best Advice I Ever Got...

It was in the weekly Parade Magazine in the newspaper and it was an article about finances by Andrew Tobias. Simply, this...

Copy the front and back of everything in your wallet.

You see, if you lose the thing, you have a problem, sure, but where do you find all the numbers to report all the stuff you lost? On the cards in your wallet! But, you just lost them!!!

So, every so often, slap everything in your wallet on the copy machine and take a picture of both sides. You will have every bit of information, card numbers, phone numbers and expiration dates, to get every cancelled and you can sleep sounder in just a few hours.

On Music

The other day, I put in one of my favorite “albums,” now a Compact Disc, from my youth. I won’t name the group or singer, but I found myself twisting in the chair with the silly lyrics and the attempts at “insight” by the performers. Yet, I could crack open a jazz or blues (or Frank Sinatra) from the same year and be very comfortable.

I have noticed as I age that I tend to like classical music, jazz and the blues more and more. Part of it has to be the fact that I am cheap: the great music of the past is always on sale...only the “pop,” as in popular, music costs you a month’s salary.

Music seems to be a lot like clothes. I would deny this in a court of law, but I owned a fairly large pile of disco records “back in the day.” When I taught high school, I endured hours of ridicule from my students for these albums, but I know that their children would listen to them.

When you decide to start building your record collection...pardon your CD (or insert the newest music thing here) collection...be sure to fill it with plenty of music for snowy mornings and the newspaper as well as parties on the back deck. Don’t have an entire collection of music from one year or brand of music, there are going to be times in life when you need to listen to country and western or the blues.

Trust me.

On Accepting Praise

Smile and say “Thank you.” Don’t brush praise off of you like dust from an old closet, take a moment to enjoy it. You may ask “why?”

Simply, you are not going to receive very much praise in this life. Generally, people notice your shortcomings and point them out much more than people every notice you doing something right.

One of the saddest things I have noted in my life journey is the inability for people to accept a well intentioned “job well done.” We seem to have decided as a culture that accepting praise for hard work is wrong somehow. So, we have become a culture enamored with trophies and plaques. Every kid that runs one lap at school receives an award with a big star that points out this tremendous feat...

And, yet, when someone works 10,000 hours over and beyond the call of duty and are thanked for it, they become very uncomfortable and try to drive the praise away.

Smile and say “Thank you.”

On the “Wish ‘haddas’”

I asked a number of people this question, “what would you do if you could do it all over?” I expected a whole bunch of stuff, but not the answer that was unanimous.

“I wish I had studied harder in school.” What? What kind of lunacy is this?

Yep. Over and over, I heard this response. Even your mom agrees...I asked her, too.

I guess the point here is simple: adults understand what we had in our hands throughout our education: caring teaching willing to open the world of knowledge to us...but we were all too concerned about the triviality of dances, popular songs or “who snubbed whom at the party.”

Alas. I wish I had studied harder, too...for the record.

On Illness

No surprises here: a little prevention is worth a lot of cure. I know, it was said by somebody else a lot better than that, but the point still holds as true. All those high school kids who take up smoking will be the same people complaining about lousy health care in a few decades. Practicing personal hygiene leads to a lot less health issues, picking a restaurant that practices some degree of cleanliness, and taking the three seconds to slip on a seat belt is worth all the antibiotics in the world.

Illness is sometimes the luck of the draw...or being a schoolteacher...but more often than not you can prevent it. Colds take about two weeks whether or not you treat it, so go easy on all the cold pills and the anti-this and anti-that. An annual physical with a doctor worthy of the name will go a long way towards avoiding the real killers...as long as you put on your seat belt on the way over. Let me say it again: 1. Don't smoke 2. Buckle your seat belt.

You'll handle the colds, flus, stomach issues and what not with some aspirin and some chicken soup. The real battles with illness are usually fought with some preemptive strikes like drinking water, eating smart, walking a bit, good friends worthy of the name, buckling up, maintaining balance and getting your sleep.

Don't wait until you are sick to enjoy being well.

On Supporting the Arts

Well, I have to admit that movies made with established stars and huge budgets are often better than local theater. And, sitting in the front room with an excellent classical CD on the stereo while sipping excellent wine can be far more relaxing than the symphony.

But, you have to go...you have to experience these productions live. One of the problems with living in our day and time is that we have grown accustomed to the ease of the arts. If I want Broadway, I pop in a Broadway DVD and enjoy it until I feel like doing something else. Do I want music? Turn on the radio, stereo, CD, and whatever else is available and noise streams out of the speakers.

You see, it is just too easy. 100 years ago, if you wanted to enjoy music, somebody had to do something...either sing, play an instrument, or walk to a local production. The problem with today is that it requires no effort to enjoy the arts.

We need to remind ourselves about the time, energy and expense that the beauty of the arts requires for our senses to enjoy them. In order to be able to continue to appreciate the arts, we need to be willing to support them with our time and treasures.

Every so often, dip your toes in the magic waters of the symphony, the opera or the theater. Buy the overpriced t-shirts and junk they sell at the booth and happily donate a little extra when you can. Moreover, go to the local productions and enjoy the occasional errors mixed with true dedication to the muses of the arts.

Not only will you be a better person, but you can be sure that the arts continue to be around for the next generation and not just fads.

On Successful Failure and Failing Success

Most people are going to miss the point here, so let me start off by reminding myself that most people miss the point of anything related to success anyway, so I shouldn't worry too much about most people missing the point.

The point? Well, you will have to bear with me a little bit, but the basic idea is this: sometimes, NOT getting a goal or a dream spurs people into making a greater impact on the world in general than fulfilling that goal or dream. And, the reverse is true, too: getting that dream can just flatten a person out for years to come.

I have known a lot of College English Majors who spend four years writing their own work in Creative Writing and poetry classes and never write another essay as long as they live. They may spend hours red penning in semi-colons and the words "transitive verb" above a student's paper, but never again write a composition. They attained the degree...and stopped writing.

Many athletes sweat and fight for four years of high school to get a scholarship to college, then quit the first weeks of college practice often because "it doesn't mean anything" to them.

Mark Twight, the author of "Kiss or Kill," and one of the world's foremost mountain climbers, noted the same thing at my dinner table not long ago. Faced with a decision to keep climbing and probably die on Mount Everest or to come back to base camp, he came back down. But, he noted, he learned far more from this failure than would have from succeeding.

In a sense, success can dilute the lessons of life. No, I am not telling you to fail; it is just that success seems to prod most people into rethinking their attempts, their journey, their path.

Joseph Campbell commented on this several times regarding the fact that the most renowned person in Comparative Religion never got his doctorate. No, Joseph Campbell chose not to do it and often encouraged his students to not go on either. He also warned them of getting buttonholed in a job that stopped them from exploring all the directions that life presented them. He noted that people who earned their terminal degree and were next appointed to their dream job often "flattened" out. Much like Earl Nightingale warned us: "A rut is a grave with the ends kicked out."

Every four years, the world turns its attention for a few weeks to the Olympic sports. I am not exaggerating when I tell you that one of the worst kept secrets of Olympic sports is how many of the athletes quit...in fact, they can barely stomach to think about it...their sport after the Olympics. Even gold medalists abandon the pool, track, field, and court. After all the sacrifice and pain, "here is your medal, thank you very much, next!" just doesn't seem to fulfill the athlete as much as the dreams of victory while training.

Those who fail to make their goals turn to coaching, writing or other forms to continue expressing their goals in other mediums. Or, they take those lessons learned and parlay them into a successful life...but, they don't just drop them and walk away.

Now, I'm not encouraging failure, nor the initiating of a "culture of failure." I coached football at Judge Memorial Catholic High School for a long time and I realized a very unsettling thing: when we began losing games, my athletes were getting more out of losing than winners did from winning.

When you win a game, as I had the good fortune to win many playing for South San Francisco High School, the team goes into the locker room and before you untie your shoes, the coach is talking about next week. The total amount of celebration in a winning locker room...for true winners...is often not very much!

But, the losers, the losers have hugs, tears, kisses, long speeches...usually from the prettiest girls. While the victors are thinking of yet another week on the grindstone, the losers are being cuddled and caressed back to a smile. Okay, I exaggerated, but not a lot!

Don't let success flatten you nor let failure let you join the "Loser's Club." Learn from failure, enjoy it if you can, but plug along into another expedition to the top.

When you win, be gracious. When you get your goals, dream of other goals.

On Unfinished Business

I was just getting ready to leave when I found out some really distressing news. It seems that an old friend doesn't have much time left. This comes just a few days after a coworker lost a sibling to an accident, so I thought I better write this down...don't wait until it is too late.

Don't wait...even one evening...to settle problems with people you love. Don't go to bed angry. Don't wait to tell people you love them. Tell them daily.

One of the biggest struggles in dealing with grief is all the "unfinished business." Stuff you should have said, but didn't, should have done, but failed to do. Don't "should" on yourself through life, but don't put yourself in a position to always regret not doing the right thing at the right time.

On Goals

Usually, when you get a goal, you already have a whole new set of goals lined up behind the old goal. To repeat perhaps the greatest lesson of life: it is the journey, not the goal. Very often, the day or moment you finally achieve a long sought out goal, you might notice that you get little satisfaction from reaching that goal.

A few random ideas: first, always...and I mean this...celebrate any goals you achieve. It can be very simple and private like a bowl of ice cream to something elaborate like a dinner party. I don't care...always acknowledge a goal attained. Next, be sure to set a few goals that are hard to get. Don't make a bunch of goals like: "I will go to school tomorrow and sit in a chair." Make a couple like "I will change the world by creating a pollutionless method of creating energy." Or whatever, the point is to make them and celebrate them. Finally, always enjoy the process of the journey towards a goal. Enjoy the steps and look around often...that's where living occurs.

On buying Kelly presents...written by Kelly

This is a note written in your mother's day planner in January 2004.

Subject: Getting Kelly lots of presents!

Kelly is awesome. Having said that, everyone else in the world should buy her things. Don't you think? Lets look at some of the days you can buy Kelly something.

- January 1- Bring in the New Year!
- February 14- She'll be your valentine.
- March 17- Buy Kelly stuff! She's Irish!
- April 3- Ahem, Birthday!
- May 5- People in Mexico get stuff, so she should too!
- June 4- Kelly's graduation
- July 17- Lindsay gets presents so Kelly does too!
- August 23- Kelly's first day of High School
- September 24- Kelly will be bored on this day, buy her presents.
- October 31- She needs Halloween presents!
- November- Turkey Time = Presents!
- December 25- Merry Christmas!

Now that you know the ideal dates to get Kelly presents, go on and get them 4 her. But don't feel limited to ONLY these dates. You can get Kelly presents whenever you want!

On Values...versus Virtues

People think I knock "values" when I speak, but I don't. "Values" are things of all kinds that people "value." The problem with values is that everybody has them, but nobody has the same order. When a moral decision comes along...make that **any** decision...your value order will make you choose your course.

So, if your number one value is friendship and number two is "not making waves," you may find it difficult to help a friend who is talking about suicide, drug use or something else that needs immediate concern. If your number one value is honesty and number two is empathy and I give you the world's ugliest sweater for Christmas that I spent three years making with my arthritic hands...telling me this is "ugly" will conflict with my obvious pride and pain.

I'm a virtues guy. "Prudence" tells me to "look before I leap," to measure the pain and pleasure of doing...or not doing... something. Through the lens of "justice," I know that I need to remind myself "how will this affect the poor?" and are we insuring that we keep human dignity at the forefront? Temperance tells me that there is a need to be sure that I am balanced when I make decisions...on a purely personal level, have I kept my pray, play, rest and work in a reasonable balance? Nothing worse than a tired, hungry sinful decision to wreck your life; it is usually better to be sure you make a life changing decision after a good night's sleep, a good meal and some fellowship with your family and your God. Finally, you need Courage to have the will to do what you have to do.

Rather than making willy-nilly decisions based on what you value today...a red car, a house on the right side of town, a boyfriend with really cool sideburns...make your decisions from a position of virtue.

You will value those decisions in the long run!

On Preparing for Spring

I came home the other day and you had already raked all the leaves in the backyard and started moving the pots around in anticipation of the great colors of the flowers. You were ready and eager for spring...but, we are still going to get more snow. The flowers we plant *too early* will die.

Here is the problem: I love getting things done not just on time...but early! But, when this "theory" has its drawbacks and the drawbacks can be most simply seen in planting flowered flowers too early: they die in the snow.

You did the right thing though: you raked. We moved stuff where stuff needs to be for spring. We took chairs and tables and pots and put them where we can't wait to see them in a few months. We can fertilize this time of year, put some of the stuff out and give the garden some prep work, but we can't yet plant.

There is a moral here somewhere, but I am not sure I can see it yet! Maybe I just need to let the moral "bloom" a bit.

On Choosing

I have been reading a series of articles that we simply have too many choices today. I thought about this for a long time and I'm not sure of any conclusions. You see, I think there is a value in striving for the best...but, then it occurs to me that the problem with most people is that once they get what they want they wish they would have gotten something else.

There are lots of things in life that "good enough" is "good enough." If you know your Maslow, you might realize that some things, like air, water, safety, are probably things you don't want to settle for in life. You don't want your water filled with bugs and your air brown. Toothpaste...good enough is okay with toothpaste. Broken seat belts are another thing.

Part of maturity, as I understand the process, is learning to realize that once you make a selection from the smorgasbord of life and eat your fill somebody is going to

mention how nice the rhubarb pie was at the end of the dessert line. You might think to yourself, “I didn’t see that!”

Several things you need to remind yourself of:

- You may not like rhubarb pie anyway.
- You liked the apple pie you ate.
- You gave up desserts years ago and this conversation has no real meaning.
- You don’t know what “rhubarb” means and you should only eat foods that you can understand. I don’t eat “cat food” even though I like cats...

I think I have a point here, but I am not sure. It might be this: life is full of choices. In addition, there are no “do-overs” in life...once you turn 17, you are not allowed to repeat your 16th year until you get it right. One chance is given for each minute of you life, but you sure have a lot of choices.

So, you have to choose a lot of things and a lot of directions in life. Be wary of your heart when you make choices, for the heart can be a fickle friend. Watch your head, too. Sometimes the long chain of logic that leads you to make a choice skips over some things that may be more important than simply making you happy. I guess you want the easy answer...but, I don’t have it. Generally, the *best* answer is when you put the needs of others before yourself.

Just try not to second guess yourself throughout your life...finish things when you should finish things, do things when you should do things, and walk away from things you should walk away from in life.

Obviously, I wrote this book for my daughter, Kelly, the “you” throughout this text. This next part is written specifically for her and I originally dropped it off the internet offering...but several people emailed me and told me it was the “best” part of the book.

On “Aileen”

Your middle name comes from my mom. My mom died long before you born...ten years and a little change. You were held by my Dad for a brief visit and he died not long after you showed up, but you need to know one story.

My mom died of breast cancer. She got the disease before the modern treatments and it quickly got out of hand. My father continued to guarantee that mom was getting better and better, but then your Aunt Corinne would call and tell me she was getting worse. Since I was living in Utah and they were all in South San Francisco, all I had to go on was the telephone...so, I believed my dad.

At the time, I was just starting my Masters Degree at Utah State University in Logan...a good two hour drive to the North from Salt Lake City when you could legally only drive 55 miles per hour. A group of us arranged to come down to see Phyllis Diller in concert with the Utah Symphony. She was a comedian and the seats for the matinee were very cheap.

So, about four of us came down to Salt Lake City one afternoon and watched the show. It was pretty funny, but I barely remember now. As we left the theater, it was still day and we had that odd sensation when you come out of a dark building and it feels like you get a whole new day given to you.

Yet, jogging down the street was a friend of mine from South San Francisco, Howard Will. It took God some extra work to arrange this: I lived in Logan, and then went to a show in SLC and a buddy from SSF jogs by us. A minute or so either way and I would have missed Howard.

Howard had “heard” that mom was doing really, really badly and I got on a plane and saw her. She looked terrible and died not long after. The last time I saw her, I started to cry and she told me to “Get out of here.” Not the great last words you expect if you are used to movies, but I think I understand better now that I am a parent.

I hate appearing weak or tired or frustrated in front of you. I always want you to feel safe and secure and hopeful...but, the world doesn't always work that way, does it? I think my mom felt the same way and my memories of her are not of a dying woman, but of a funny coffee serving Irish lady with a lot of friends and family.

Part of the process of growing up is watching your parents come apart. Like an old car, I noticed my fenders are a lot more dented than they used to be when I was in my teen years. I look in the mirror sometimes and have no idea who the old guy looking back at me is...or how he got in the medicine cabinet.

God worked overtime making sure I could see my mom before she died. I use this little saying in my workshops: “Coincidence is God's way of staying anonymous.”

“Aileen” means “light bearer.” My mom brought the light of faith to me, the light of learning and the light of life.

When we gave you Aileen for your middle name, we passed the torch on to you.
Light the world.