

More Musings on Life

Peggy Vaughan

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One Planet, One People

To my Wonderful Family
With Love and Appreciation

Introduction

The essays in this book were written over a two-year period between May 2008 and June 2010. This book is a follow-up to my earlier book, *Musings on Life*, that covered the previous two years of similar writings.

As before, they are organized according to topics or themes rather than in the order in which they were written. However, I do note the month in which each article was written—since many of them refer to some current incident or personal experience.

Again, I want to quote from Douglas Hofstadter in saying that “I tell many first-person stories in this book...because it provides all sorts of examples that I suspect are typical of most people’s lives.”

I begin most of the pieces with a reference to something from my own experience, then broaden the focus to reflect on the larger issues involved, inviting you to consider how they impact you personally.

I again tried to write about issues that are universally relevant or meaningful—because the underlying theme of the book is recognizing and acknowledging the many things that bind us all together as people.

It’s my hope that these writings will serve as motivation or inspiration for each of you to take time to do your own “musings on life.”

Chapter 1: Perspective

Perspective on Life
Living Life to the Fullest
Some General Principles to Live By
Slow Down
Silence is Golden
Everything Old is New Again
It Couldn't be Done
Lessons from the Olympics
The Truth about Others' Lives
Ain't it Awful

Perspective on Life

November 2009

I've been feeling a little "down" lately; nothing serious, just not feeling as good about life as usual. Then I got one of the many wake-up calls that can lead us to put our life in perspective. I was standing at a street corner near my home, waiting for the WALK sign when I noticed a man in a motorized wheel chair approaching me. We greeted each other as he stopped beside me; then he said, "Would you do me a favor." I said, "Of course." Then he asked me to lift his arm back up onto the arm rest of his wheel chair. (It was limply hanging down by the side of the chair.)

I was glad (actually honored) to provide this small assistance. But after he motored on in front of me, I paused to really soak in what had just happened. Here was a man who not only had no use of his legs, but also no use of his hands. As a relatively healthy woman who was out for her daily walk, I felt a strong pang of guilt about feeling "down" about anything in my life. In fact, I felt a wave of appreciation for having a body that could still function well and allow me to be mobile on my own.

Most of us tend to compare our situation in life with some kind of "better" situation to which we aspire. What we fail to do is to make the comparison with the full continuum of alternatives for our life circumstances—the ways in which things not only could be better, but the many ways in which they could be much worse. This kind of perspective can allow us to feel much more satisfied with our current conditions and far more thankful for the benefits we enjoy.

This awareness was clearly expressed in a poem called "Then I met a Man" (attributed to Earl Vickers):

*I once had no food to eat;
then I met a man who had no teeth
I once had no shoes to wear;
then I met a man who had no feet*

*I once had no shirt to wear;
then I met a man who had no pants
I once had no lady friend;
then I met a man with no right hand*

*When you're down on your luck,
and you just spent your last buck
There's always someone else,
who has it even worse*

*When you've gone completely mad,
and you've lost everything you had
Look around and you'll be glad it isn't worse,
Your life could be an endless curse*

*I once had no house to live in;
then I met a man who had no skin
I once had an iron lung;
then I met a man whose lung was tin*

*I once had no energy;
then I met a man who had no mass
I once had no toilet paper;
then I met a man who had no ass*

*When you're down on your luck,
no matter how bad your life sucks
There's always someone else,
who has it even worse*

*When you've gone completely mad,
and you've lost everything you had
Look around and you'll be glad it isn't worse;
your life could be an endless curse
Your other car could be a hearse,
I could sing another verse*

*I once had a mirror on the wall,
then I met a man—who was lucky after all."*

So during this period when Thanksgiving is a focus for many of us in the U.S., we would do well to be thankful for both what we *do* have (all the good things in our lives) as well as being thankful for all the things we *don't* have (like serious lifelong problems that can severely restrict quality of life).

But, of course, we don't want to think only of ourselves at this time. We also need to use this awareness of our blessings to show compassion for those who are not as fortunate. Whether others are lacking food, shelter, a job, physical abilities, mental abilities, or a myriad of other challenges, we can't fully enjoy our own life circumstances without doing whatever we can to see that others who are less fortunate have a chance for a better life as well.

So may this time of thanksgiving serve as a reminder of the things we have to be thankful for—as well as a time to reflect on the larger issues we all face together. These reminders can help us maintain a more balanced perspective on life in general—and avoid most of the unwarranted “down” days.

* * * * *

Living Life to the Fullest

March 2009

The recent tragic death of actress Natasha Richardson (from a freak accident during a skiing lesson on a beginner's slope) makes many of us pause to consider how fragile life can be. While we intellectually "know" that we never know how long we have to live, most of us continue to live our lives as if we have forever to do whatever we want to do. So I want to use this incident to invite you to consider how you're living your own life—and whether you are making the most of the time you have on this earth.

I have my own thoughts about all this, but I've decided to turn to words written by others that have been meaningful to me during the years.

One of the most prolific writers about death and dying is Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. Here is part of what she has written:

We are all dying. That is one thing that we could each predict with certainty now—that within X time every one of us will be dead. We are all dying. We all have to face our finiteness long before we are terminally ill. This is perhaps the greatest lesson we learn from our patients: Live, so you do not have to look back and say, "How I have wasted my life."

Another favorite of mine is this quote from Viktor Frankl in his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*: "Live as if you were already living for the second time, and as if you had made the mistakes you are about to make now."

Another inspiration for me (for 50 years) has been a poem that I use as a constant reminder to try to live life today, not to always wait for a time when things are "better" or "easier" or whatever. (Unfortunately, I have no idea who might have been the original author of this piece written so long ago.)

Here's an excerpt from "Life is Today"

*Life is today—not tomorrow.
The time you must live is now.
Don't wait for some far distant future
When all things will be right somehow.*

*Though busy, take time for that kind deed
That you plan for another day,
For perhaps there will be no tomorrow
When you'll pass again this way.*

*The burdens of life may be heavy,
But don't let them block your view.
Don't wait for them all to be lifted
Before counting the joys you have too.*

Finally, if you want more inspiration/motivation to live your life to the fullest... I recommend two books (that I've mentioned before), both written by men with terminal illnesses.

Randy Pausch's *The Last Lecture* and Ted Rosenthal's *How Could I Not be Among You*.

Also, if you want to focus specifically on how you're living your life and what changes you might want to make, you can check out our *LifeDesign Workbook*.

* * * * *

Some General Principles to Live By

February 2010

I've been reading some books about "how to live"—about ways to improve your overall quality of life. They reminded me of a great list of "Principles to Live By" written by my husband more than 30 years ago and given to our (at that time) teenage kids.

1. Tell the truth. Honesty really is the best policy.
2. Perfect your ability to love. It's the most powerful force in the world.
3. Pay attention to two-year-olds and puppies. They know what's important.
4. Look at sunsets; smell the flowers; listen to the birds; touch the people you care about; taste life. Everything you need is there for you.
5. Take responsibility for meeting your own needs, but don't do it in ways that keep others from meeting theirs.
6. Forgive yourself and others. We're all doing the best we can to find our way.
7. Live by your own values. Others may think they know best for you, but you're the one who has to live with the consequences of your actions.
8. Listen to your body and take care of it. It's the best teacher you have now.
9. Laugh often and long. It really does help.
10. Hang out with people you like and admire. We tend to imitate those around us whether we want to or not.
11. Follow your dream. Life is exciting when you're pursuing your own goals—and you can do and have most anything you really want.
12. Learn from your failures and don't be afraid to fail often.

- 13. Life isn't fair, but it isn't unfair either. When things don't seem to be working for you, do something. Movement is the key to change and life itself.
- 14. Peace is possible and it begins with you and me.
- 15. One of the greatest paradoxes in life is that you get more when you give more.
- 16. Relationships are more important than things.
- 17. The greatest challenge you will ever have is to be yourself.
- 18. Be nice to prunes. You may be one someday.

Note: Our kids began calling us “the prunes” (a kidding reference to our getting old) when we were in our early 40's. Now that we're in our 70's we appreciate that everyone who lives will “be one someday.” But whatever age you are now is a good time to stop and reflect on your life and what principles you are living by today.

* * * * *

Slow Down

October 2009

*Slow down, you move too fast.
You got to make the morning last.*
(From, “Feeling Groovy” by Simon and Garfunkel)

Most of us rush through our days, beginning the moment we get up. Despite all the advice to simply get up earlier in order to avoid the out-the-door rush, we usually prefer a little extra sleep and just deal with the rush. But it's highly questionable that this extra sleep provides any extra rest; the stress of rushing requires so much more energy that we'd be less tired if we slept less *and* rushed less.

Since I work at home, I don't have to rush out in the morning. But I must confess that I do still rush! I prepare my breakfast as if it were a time-and-motion study, doing it in the most efficient way in order to take as little time as possible. After breakfast, I do take time for what I consider an important (necessary) activity at my age: doing some stretching exercises.

I had developed the bad habit of rushing through the exercises, so I got a yoga stretching video that I thought would slow me down. But now that I'm familiar with the routine, I even rush through that. I simply move ahead with

the exercises and finish them sooner. So, of course, I defeat much of the benefit I might otherwise receive.

It's clear that my efforts to "slow down" have become a real challenge. I've been focusing on this goal for quite awhile—with almost nothing to show for it. I even have a note posted on my printer (where it's visible all the time I'm on the computer—which is a lot) with a quote from a fortune cookie: "*Do not rush through life. Pause and enjoy it.*" At first, it was a nice reminder; now it's become so familiar that it hardly registers.

I do know I'm not alone. I suspect most of us find ways to sabotage whatever efforts we make to slow down. No matter what activity we're engaged in, we seem to constantly be rushing to get to the *next* activity. We run around like the watch-carrying rabbit in Alice in Wonderland, crying: "*Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be late!*"

Of course, we've been hearing about the need to slow down for many years. In fact, one of Benjamin Franklin's many sayings back in the 1700's was "*Haste makes waste.*" Little did he know that the haste of that period would feel like slow motion in today's world. With each time-saving invention through the years, we have continued to increase the speed of life.

Today, we rush most of our meals, often resorting to "fast food." We've also gotten accustomed to speed with our computers so that any delay of a few seconds seems an eternity. And one of the most obvious illustrations of our addiction to speed is the way we drive. We're impatient if we have to wait for a red light, impatient if the driver in front of us is driving slower than we want to go, and we usually exceed the speed limit. In Southern California where I live, few people maintain the posted speed limit on the Interstates; it seems like almost everybody is speeding most of the time.

We never seem to learn the lesson in the Aesop fable "The Tortoise and the Hare"—where the tortoise's slow and steady pace allowed him to win over the speedy hare. It may well be that humans might come out ahead in many aspects of our lives if we just learn to slow down.

I've been reading a book called *In Praise of Slowness: Challenging the Cult of Speed* by Carl Honore—who admits to being a former "speedaholic." The Amazon.com review says: "*His personal wake-up call came when he began reading one-minute bedtime stories to his two-year-old son in order to save time.*" The experiences described in this book serve as a great reminder of all the benefits possible if we would just slow down.

Frankly, it may be too late for many of us to make significant changes in our hurried way of life. But there's a recognition that many of today's children are already rushing around like most adults. So we can at least commit to helping future generations slow down.

* * * * *

Silence is Golden

March 2010

I'm a talker. The strange thing is that I don't particularly *like* to talk. Although being socially skilled (in that I can talk to almost anyone about almost anything at any time) has served me well through the years, it's also taken a toll. Recently, I've become clearer that part of the unwarranted stress I feel a lot of the time is due to this compulsion to talk.

I've known for more than a year that my way of talking (both fast and frequently) was something I needed to work on. One of the items on the list of changes I wanted to make included "talking less and talking more slowly."

But just this week I discovered that I had not gone far enough in changing my talking habits. It turns out that just "talking less" wasn't sufficient. I needed to practice having some long periods of absolute silence. I've read about people who spend one day a week in total silence, and frankly, thought that was a little extreme. But on a whim, I decided to try it.

So I spent one full day not saying a word to anyone. Since my husband and I work at home and are together all day, this was a challenge for him as well as for me. In order not to shut him out completely, a couple of times when there was something that really *needed* to be communicated, we wrote notes.

While I expected that talking had an influence, I was amazed at the fact that it seems to be *the* determining factor in the difference between feeling stressed and feeling calm. To my surprise, I was completely calm all day long.

For me, this is very unusual—in that the only times in the past when I had been that calm were when I was alone. I had assumed the earlier times of calmness had been due strictly to the fact that I was alone and not accountable for myself in any way. But it turns out that it was the silence that made the difference—whether or not I was alone.

Since it's not only unreasonable, but also undesirable, to spend large chunks of your life in silence, I have determined that for me, silence is the golden ticket to being calm. So both for my health and my emotional well-being, I'll be scheduling some regular periods of silence into my routine.

This is not an easy decision for me to make because I had always felt that slowing myself down too much (in *any* way, including talking) would somehow lessen my ability to get a lot done. But, not surprisingly, being calmer actually allows me to be *more* productive. So it's a win-win all the way around.

I do realize that I'm fortunate to be at a place in life where I don't have the kinds of responsibilities that would make this kind of "no-talking" zone unrealistic (due to children or a job outside the home). However, even when not actively interacting with friends, family, or co-workers, most people tend to fill any possible times for silence with other things—like listening to music or watching TV.

The hectic pace of life today makes it all the more important that we try to recharge our batteries in whatever ways possible. So for anyone who struggles

with lots of intensity/stress—and has some flexibility in how they spend their time—I highly recommend setting aside some time for silence.

* * * * *

Everything Old is New Again

February 2009

Last night the President spoke to the U.S. Congress and the entire nation about our current difficult economic times. He acknowledges that the situation is likely to get worse before it gets better—*but* that there's hope we will come through this period even stronger than before. He made it clear that while the government will do everything it can do, there's a role for *everyone* in making that hope a reality.

It might be harder to believe we can come through this in the positive way everyone wishes were it not for the fact that we've done it before. This country's rise after "The Great Depression" serves as a reminder that it's possible—as does the way everyone came together to do their part in sacrificing (rationing, etc.) during World War II.

In fact, this spirit is reflected in an old song called "Everything old is new again."

*Everything old is new again.
Don't throw the past away
You might need it some rainy day
Dreams can come true again
When everything old is new again.*

It's not only the learnings from the past that we shouldn't throw away; we also might be wise to rethink the way we casually throw away so *many* things. For instance, I recently read a startling statistic (from business writer Polly LaBarre): "*The United States spends more on trash bags than ninety other countries spend on everything. In other words, the receptacles of our waste cost more than all of the goods consumed by nearly half of the world's nations.*"

We tend to throw away anything that is not still in as good a condition as when it was new, choosing to "replace" rather than "repair"—although we're now seeing some changes in that mindset. While most businesses are losing customers, business has been booming at shoe repair shops that are now repairing shoes for customers who previously would have replaced them.

Personally, I'm finding that I'm looking at things more carefully than before. For instance, I can sew quite well, and in tight money times early in our marriage, I sewed everything—from all my maternity clothes to the drapes for our house. But I haven't had a sewing machine for about 15 years and seldom do any kind of sewing or even repairing. But this week I've been altering some of our clothes rather than buying something new, and I'm thoroughly enjoying it.

Most of us have become far too materialistic—which is part of the reason for the financial crisis we find ourselves facing today. We’ve assumed that saving time was more important than saving money, but this is partly a way we rationalize our actions. For instance, spending even a small portion of the time currently spent watching TV would give most of us a lot more time to pursue other worthwhile endeavors.

We’ve known intellectually for some time that we are a wasteful nation; but this period can serve as a wake-up call to the value—and even satisfaction—of “doing more with less.” So rather than write off the past era of frugality as no longer relevant, we’d be better off recognizing that at this time “everything old is new again.”

* * * * *

It Couldn't be Done

September 2009

As a proud grandmother, I was pleased last week when one of my granddaughters (who is a cross-country runner for her school) shaved 42 seconds off her time from last year in the same race. Not only had she not anticipated that possibility, but her coach was surprised as well.

Some of her great improvement this year is due to her determination to do her best—more for the sake of the team than for herself. She's a Junior this year, but the best runners on her team had graduated and she's now their strongest runner and captain of the team, so she felt a certain responsibility to “step up” and do her very best.

[I'm inserting this note 3 weeks after the race described above to report that her determination and her new belief in herself was evident in another race that took place yesterday. This time she was running against someone who usually wins, but she believed she could stay with her and maybe come out ahead. She not only won, but did so by a very large margin.]

While this was a great experience for her, the team, and her family, it's just one of many instances where we are capable of so much more than we may believe to be true. In fact, prior to 1954, it was believed that running less than a four-minute mile was impossible. But once Roger Bannister did it, it has become common for many other runners to do it as well.

I recently saw another example of people succeeding at something through will-power and sheer determination when I watched the second episode of the TV show, “The Biggest Loser.” It was the second week of the program, and they had been promised that no one would be eliminated from the show if the total weight loss for the entire group was 150 pounds (later reduced to 115 pounds through other challenges in which they succeeded).

Although they only had to reach a total 115-pound loss point, they actually lost 155 pounds as a group. As with my granddaughter's race, it was the

determination to succeed (both for themselves and as a team) that led to their doing something they didn't think was possible—and which the trainers didn't think was possible either.

Clearly, much of what holds us back (more obviously in physical efforts, but other efforts as well), is a psychological barrier. Thinking you can't do something can become a self-fulfilling prophesy. But once you really buckle down and try your very hardest, you're much more likely to be able to do it.

This is certainly not a new concept. About 50 years ago, Edgar A. Guest wrote about this in his famous poem: "It couldn't be done."

*Somebody said that it couldn't be done,
But he with a chuckle replied
That "maybe it couldn't," but he would be one
Who wouldn't say so till he'd tried.
So he buckled right in with the trace of a grin
On his face. If he worried he hid it.
He started to sing as he tackled the thing
That couldn't be done, and he did it.*

So I encourage you to think of something you really, really want to do—and give it a serious try. Don't let your doubts or fears block you from reaching for something in your life that you'd like to do or accomplish. Also, recognize that you may not succeed the first time, but with enough time and effort, many things may be possible that you previously thought "couldn't be done."

* * * * *

Lessons from the Olympics

February 2010

Although watching the Olympics provides lots of information about what it takes to excel in sports, it also provides lots of examples about what it takes to excel in life! Here are just a few of the life lessons to be gleaned from what some of the athletes did in this year's Olympics.

Hard work over the years can allow people to excel beyond anything previously done by anyone.

(While there were many examples of excellence during this Olympics, a few of them really stand out.)

Shaun White's new spectacular half-pipe trick had never been attempted or accomplished by anyone else. He developed it himself and "went for it" in his final run—although he had already wrapped up the Gold with his previous run. He pushed himself to prove what he could do under pressure.

In figure skating, two women (who won Gold and Silver) provided another example of excellence: Kim Yu-Na scored more points overall than any previous skater ever! And Mao Asada set several records of never-before-done jumps by a woman in competition.

Also, short-track speed skater Apolo Ohno set a new record for combined medals won by an American in Olympic competition.

You can redeem yourself from failure—if you’re willing to do what it takes and try again.

Bodie Miller, alpine skier, was widely considered a major “failure” at the Torino Olympics four years ago. He had the talent needed to excel, but he failed in a spectacular way, mostly through his own attitude of “not caring”—plus his actions of drinking and carousing at night during the Games. This time he came in with a completely different attitude—and went away with a Gold, a Silver, and a Bronze medal.

Guts and determination can allow you to break through pain and fear to go ahead and succeed.

Lindsey Vonn earned the Gold medal in skiing’s downhill, despite a shin injury that forced her to ski with a lot of pain. She also went on to win a bronze medal in the Super G event. Although the injury could have been used as an “excuse” to hold back, she fought through the pain to great success. While she didn’t earn as many medals as had been predicted (expected?), she was wisely happy with her performances, having succeeded against odds that might have derailed someone with less guts and determination.

Courage and strength can allow you to weather any storm—or tragedy.

Figure Skater Joannie Rochette took to the ice only 48 hours after the death of her mother from a massive heart attack. Her mother had arrived at the Olympics to watch her skate, and her father was still there. Since her mother had been such a strong supporter of her skating through the years, she knew she would want her to go ahead—despite her grief. She performed wonderfully, and “held it together” until the end, when she finally cried. (Everyone watching was crying as well.) It was inspiring to see her strength and courage in performing so well in both her short program and free skate, earning her the Bronze medal.

Poor sportsmanship can pollute appreciation for one’s athletic ability.

Evgeni Plushenko (who won the Gold medal in ice skating at the 2006 Olympics) had retired, but decided to come back and compete in the 2010 Olympics as well. He wound up with the Silver medal this time—and reacted in a most unsportsmanlike way. He claimed he was “robbed” because he performed a quad jump, when the Gold medal winner did not. However, none of his jumps were of the quality (mostly in the shaky landings) as the perfect jumps of the Gold medal winner. So rather than burnishing his reputation as a winner, he’s now widely seen as a sore loser.

People with whom you compete can *also* be cherished friends.

Tessa Virtue and Scott Moir of Canada were the Gold medal winners of the ice dancing competition and Meryl David and Charlie White of the U.S. were the Silver medal winners. Far from there being any animosity between the skaters, they are actually very close friends, training together and knowing each

other since they were quite young. So there was nothing but happiness on the part of everyone in celebrating all of their success.

So the next time you feel like you can't accomplish something you've set out to do, these examples can serve as inspiration for what's possible—both in performance and in attitude—that can bring great satisfaction in your life.

* * * * *

The Truth about Others' Lives

May 2010

This past week I was reminded once again of a message I seem to keep forgetting—that you can't assume to know what anyone's life is really like by what they openly expose. We all know about the scandals that people keep hidden, but people also often hide painful aspects of their lives from the outside world.

When we look at someone who is particularly successful or someone who seems to “have it all together,” we tend to forget that (like almost everyone) there's likely to be some kind of personal pain or sorrow that makes their lives far different from the “perfect” one we envision.

As I said, this week I discovered the “hidden pain” of a person I thought I knew pretty well. Actually, while I had always admired them, I also felt a little envious of how “easy” their life seemed to be. Then I was shocked to discover that they had spent their lives dealing with a painful past that they had kept to themselves.

The learning, again, for me was that we tend to judge people by their “outsides” (the image they present to the world) while we judge ourselves by our “insides” (what we know to be true about ourselves)—and we almost always feel we come up short. But when we learn the “truth” about others' lives, we would *not* want to trade places with them—and we feel bad for ever thinking they had life better or easier in some way.

This awareness is something I've known about for a long time, but I keep forgetting. So with this most recent incident, I recalled a very old tale called “The Sorrow Tree.” Below is a version of it:

So it was that when the Hasidic pilgrims vied for those among them who had endured the most suffering, who was most entitled to complain, the Zaddick told them the story of the Sorrow Tree.

On the Day of Judgment, each person will be allowed to hang one's unhappiness and sufferings on a branch of the great Tree of Sorrows. After all have found a limb from which their miseries may dangle, they may all walk slowly around the tree. Each person is to search for a set of sufferings that he or she would prefer to those he or she has hung on the tree.

In the end, each one freely chooses to reclaim his or her own assortment of sorrows rather than those of another. Each person leaves the Tree of Sorrows wiser that when he or she arrived.

Another old quote that expresses a similar sentiment is this one from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow:

Every man has his secret sorrows which the world knows not; and often times we call a man cold when he is only sad.

No one makes it through life without some struggle or sadness, as reflected in another of Wadsworth’s quotes: “Into each life some rain must fall” (later used as the title of an Ella Fitzgerald song).

So the the next time you judge someone for being too “cold” or too “arrogant” or too *anything*... stop and consider that they are almost surely struggling with some kind of personal sorrow of their own. So rather than judgment, a far more appropriate attitude to adopt toward everyone is one of general compassion.

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Ain’t it Awful

June 2010

For the past few weeks I’ve been dealing with a very frustrating business transaction. As the situation became more and more prolonged, it began to “take over my life.” And I did what I tend to do when I get upset: I began to “awfulize”—to think (and say) that this is awful and I can’t stand it. These exaggerated reactions to life’s irritations are, of course, patently ridiculous. They’re not really “awful;” they’re just the routine aggravations that we face at different times throughout our lives.

This overreaction to everyday events is made all the more ridiculous when you think about things that are *truly* awful—like the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico! I’ve been watching a lot of the coverage of the situation in the Gulf, and am more and more embarrassed at the idea of complaining about *anything*.

The more I focus on these kinds of serious situations, the more perspective I am able to bring to the irritations of daily life that are *not* really awful—just inconvenient. Unfortunately, while the fact that others have it worse—*much* worse—is an awareness that may temporarily help us deal with our tendency to awfulize about life’s normal hassles, it’s sometimes difficult to hold on to that perspective over time.

So I want to share Albert Ellis’s list of “irrational beliefs” that are behind most of the unreasonable thinking that causes so much upset in our lives.

But first, a note about Ellis, the man... While he presented a very gruff persona in his workshops, he was actually a very kind and generous person. I met him about 30 years ago when we were both guests on a TV talk show. In talking backstage, he became interested in my writing and offered to “critique”

my first book. Almost a decade later, he again graciously read my next book and critiqued it as well. He was thoughtful and insightful—and was extremely gracious to use so much time and energy in supporting someone he hardly knew.

Albert Ellis died in 2007, but he left a legacy of clear thinking that can serve as a guide for all us in getting control of the irrational thinking that gives us so much heartburn. His ideas are based on his work in cognitive behavioral therapy, proposing that “*The way you think affects the way you act.*” So if you change your thinking (your “irrational beliefs” about a situation), you’ll change your reactions to those events.

Here is Ellis’s list of twelve common irrational ideas that get us in trouble: (Note that they are deliberately extreme to demonstrate how unreasonable our thinking can be.)

1. Everyone should love and approve of me. (If they don't, I feel awful and unlovable.)
2. I should always be able, successful, and "on top of things." (If I'm not, I'm an inadequate, incompetent, hopeless failure.)
3. People who are evil and bad should be punished severely. (And I have the right to get very upset if they aren't stopped and made to "pay the price".)
4. When things do not go the way I wanted and planned, it is terrible and I am, of course, going to get very disturbed. I can't stand it!
5. External events, such as other people, a screwed-up society, or bad luck, cause most of my unhappiness. Furthermore, I don't have any control over these external factors, so I can't do anything about my depression or other misery.
6. When the situation is scary or going badly, I should and can't keep from worrying all the time.
7. It is easier for me to overlook or avoid thinking about tense situations than to face the problems and take the responsibility for correcting the situation.
8. I need someone—often a *specific* person—to be with and lean on. (I can't do everything by myself.)
9. Things have been this way so long, I can't do anything about these problems now.
10. When my close friends and relatives have serious problems it is only right and natural that I get very upset too.
11. I don't like the way I'm feeling but I can't help it. I just have to accept it and go with my feelings.
12. I know there is an answer to every problem. I should find it (If I don't, it will be awful.)

The bottom line is that it's not the nature of a particular situation that triggers our reaction. Although we like to think “everybody” would react that way, it's simply not true. Two people can face the same trying situation, with

one reacting by awfulizing while the other reacts by rationally considering the best alternative to addressing the situation.

So the next time you find yourself overreacting to some situation, stop and review the above set of irrational beliefs that are likely to be the real cause of your reaction. Since all of us face difficulties throughout our lives, we need to remain clear about what does—and what does *not*—really qualify as “awful,” and then try to respond in the most effective way possible.

Chapter 2: Acceptance

Unconditional Acceptance

The Masks we Wear

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Winning vs. Succeeding

Unconditional Acceptance

November 2009

From the time we're born we have an innate need to be loved and accepted—to feel we're "OK." However, no matter how many people may love us, it's extremely rare to find people who accept us unconditionally. Most of us have expectations of each other that when not fulfilled wind up undermining our feelings of acceptance.

Many years ago I read Sidney Simon's work about the damages of what he referred to as our "red pencil mentality"—the process of pointing out whatever negative aspects we notice in others (similar to using a red pencil on school tests to point out mistakes). Of course, it's not just in school that we are on the receiving end of this kind of "constructive criticism." It continues throughout our lives—with our parents, spouses, friends, co-workers, etc.

After years of experiencing this kind of judgment, we accept it as "normal"—just being "the way it is" in relationships of all kinds. At some point we become so accustomed to being judged that we actually expect it. I hadn't realized that I had this mindset until I experienced for myself the feeling of being unconditionally accepted, no matter what I said or did.

I still vividly recall the first time I had this experience. I had done something that I felt deserved criticism, but a dear friend took me by both arms, looked me straight in the eye, and refused to feed into my self-criticism. In fact, he made it clear that I was fully accepted just as I was—no criticism and no judgment. This was so completely unexpected that it was actually something of a shock. Every encounter I had with him carried this same kind of unconditional acceptance quality. I recall that I chalked it up to perhaps being only because he was a man who had dedicated himself to his religious work.

However, a few years later, I was blessed again, having almost the same kind of experience with another friend—who repeatedly and consistently gave me his total acceptance. He died earlier this year, and it's his death that led me to begin reflecting on what an important role he had played in my life. I again recognized my extremely good fortune in having been on the receiving end of the total acceptance he extended to me and to many others.

I think if you receive this kind of unconditional acceptance from one person during your lifetime, you're fortunate. So I feel doubly blessed to have had this experience with two different people. It's important to note that this was not about a one-time experience of feeling accepted. Their acceptance—of everyone—was an integral part of who they were as human beings.

These kinds of experiences can happen when you least expect them. There was nothing in my initial introduction to these two men that would indicate what special people they would become in my life. For instance, I met both of them in the context of my work with my husband in conducting a variety of workshops back in the 1970's. Even though our contact with them began as colleagues, they quickly became valued friends. In fact, we went out of our way

to find as many opportunities as possible to work with them during the years following our initial meeting.

Although neither of them has been an integral part of our lives for the past decade or so, their influence has never diminished and their value to my life has never dimmed. And reflecting on their influence on me leads me to work even harder to show compassion and acceptance toward others.

I strongly encourage you to do two things: first, to consider who in your life has ever lifted you up when you were down and shown you the kind of unconditional acceptance that made a difference. And second, to contemplate how you can do the same thing for others as you go about your daily life.

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The Masks we Wear

September 2009

I've been reading a book about President John F. Kennedy's life, and I'm learning far more than I ever realized about the extent of his ill health. I have long been aware of the way President Franklin D. Roosevelt's wheel-chair use due to polio had been hidden from the public. And I knew President Kennedy had back problems—and later learned he had also had Addington's Disease. But I had no idea of the extent of the physical constraints hidden behind the façade of youth and vigor.

It turns out that he was actually a shell of the physical specimen that he presented to the public. In fact, he was barely able to function much of the time—and then only due to the extraordinary efforts of a team of three doctors who regularly poked, prodded, and medicated him in order to make it possible for him to function without crutches. And his myriad of gastric problems also created ongoing struggles with pain, diarrhea, and general upset that interfered with his ability to function normally.

While the secrets of the “famous” are often eventually revealed, allowing us to see the reality behind the public mask, all of us in one way or another present an image to the public that varies from the full reality of our lives.

Why is it that we're so afraid to let others know the truth about who we really are? One answer to this question can be found in one of my favorite books, *Why am I afraid to tell you who I am?* by John Powell. Here's his response to that question: “*If I tell you who I am, you may not like who I am, and it is all that I have.*”

However, if we look behind this way of presenting ourselves in whatever way we think will lead others to like us, the person they like is not really us; it's the fake image of ourselves that they like. So we aren't actually liked for who we are, but for who we're pretending to be.

The irony in presenting ourselves in whatever way we think will be the most “liked” (respected, admired, etc.) is that it prevents us from ever really

being known. This, in turn, leads each of us to compare ourselves to others by looking at the way they present themselves (their “outsides”) to the way we know ourselves to be (our “insides”). This invariably leads to a false comparison, always making us look “less than” the other.

But, of course, we’re also trying to present ourselves to others in a way that leads them to compare *our* “outsides” to *their* “insides”—and conclude that they are in some way “less” than we are. This leads everyone to feel worse about themselves than would be the case if we could all be more genuine in our presentation of ourselves to the outside world.

Of course, in addition to the fact that our masks prevent us from being as close to others as we might otherwise be, it also prevents us from being authentically who we really are. While we may be quite skilled at presenting a false front, it does take a toll. It leads us to be unable to relax and be ourselves, constantly being vigilant in maintaining the illusions about ourselves that we have constructed for others to see.

I must admit that I, like most of us, try to present myself in the best possible light, whether or not that light is completely accurate. The one exception (and my saving grace) is that my husband knows the “real me.” Since I don’t hide anything from him, he is the one person who knows me fully.

While it’s unlikely that most of us will drop *all* our masks, I encourage you to make sure there is at least one person in your life who knows you completely. Having this “safe place” where you can relax and be yourself can make a big difference in your ability to deal with all aspects of your life.

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What’s in a name?

June 2008

*What's in a name? That which we call a rose
by any other name would smell as sweet.*

Most of us have heard some version of this famous line by Shakespeare, but I beg to differ with the idea that the “name” doesn’t matter.

Let me provide some examples, beginning with the name I know best—my own. My given name is Peggy (not Margaret, although by some weird path, Peggy is the nickname for Margaret.) Anyway, that’s not the point. The point is that Peggy is an old-fashioned name, no longer in fashion. In fact, when I meet another woman named Peggy, she is invariably of my generation. I don’t dislike my name, but I recognize that it hasn’t generated a particularly positive reaction from people through the years.

However, during a time when I briefly used a different name, I learned that names can make quite a difference in the way you are viewed. I once worked for Disney (long story), taking telephone reservations for their hotels, packages,

etc., and each person was “assigned” a name to use if their own name was being used by someone else. Since Peggy was already taken, I was assigned the name Bernice. I used it for a day or so, during which time the customers were polite but distant.

Then a few days later, we were told there were some names left over if anyone wanted to change. I jumped at the chance—and chose Summer. It made all the difference in the world in that people were far warmer in their reaction to me—even though I was the same person saying the same kinds of things. Almost every customer made a positive comment about my name. (Of course, I never let on that it wasn’t my real name.) But I’m convinced that that particular name led people to have a good feeling about me and that it smoothed the phone interactions, enhancing my ability to perform my job.

In fact, I adopted the name and have used it quite often during the many years since that time. I don’t use it for anything important or serious. (I’m not trying to be an imposter.) But I do use it anytime it’s perfectly OK to be anonymous. For instance, if I’m on a wait-list to be seated at a restaurant, I’ll give the name “Summer.” As with the phone experience, almost everyone has some kind of positive comment to the name and reacts in a more helpful way—even remembering my name the next time I visit.

While my experiences with using Summer instead of Peggy have been positive, I can’t say the same for dealing with my husband’s name. His given name is James, but many (most?) people now call him Jim. I’ve known him literally all my life and he was always called James while growing up. But after we married and moved away from our hometown, whenever he was introduced as James, people would immediately say, “Glad to meet you, Jim.”

Since he felt that asking them to call him James would make him appear to be stuck-up or formal, he went along with it. Since so many people called him Jim, he eventually began referring to himself that way as well. (For instance, when he answers the phone, he says, “Jim Vaughan here.”)

However, the same has not been true for me. In fact, early on when people called the house and asked to speak to “Jim”—I would say they had the wrong number. It didn’t even register on me that they were talking about James. It’s not that I have anything against the name Jim. It’s that as far as I’m concerned, it’s just not his name. And through all these years, I’ve never really accommodated to the name Jim. To his credit, whenever people *ask* whether they should call him James or Jim, he says that if they want to make *me* happy, they’ll call him James.

I realize that in comparison to legitimate problems this is a completely trivial issue. However, on the other hand, our self-image (the way we feel about ourselves) can be affected by how we feel about the way we’re identified by our name. And, as my experience shows, it can also affect the way other people react to us. So if there’s any message in all this, it’s that we would do well to consider the impact of “name” when bestowing names on our children. Of

course, there's no way to know whether they'll "like" their name, but it's possible to get a sense of how others may react to the name—and thus to the person. We all need all the help we can get in making our way through the world.

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The Impossible Dream

August 2008

Along with millions of other people around the world, I've been watching the Olympics for the past week—particularly the swimming competition, where several people accomplished the seemingly impossible.

Like the "Man of La Mancha," Michael Phelps dared to "dream the impossible dream"—and make it come true, winning 8 Gold medals in one Olympics. Whereas most people thought this feat would be impossible, Phelps was optimistic that he could do it—and set out to do everything required to make it happen. It was amazing to observe his grueling schedule during the Olympics—as well as to contemplate the years of grueling schedules that brought him to this point.

And Dara Torres, at age 41, dared to dream that she could come back and not only compete, but win Olympic medals. In this, her fifth Olympics, she became the oldest swimming medalist in Olympic history, winning 3 silver medals. This serves as inspiration to women around the world as to what's physically possible with enough effort and commitment. And it was all the more impressive that not only was she old enough to be the mother of many of her competitors, but she was herself the mother of a 2-year-old.

The accomplishments of these two swimmers were very much "against the odds." A smart betting person would never bet on these results, no matter how talented, prepared or committed the swimmer. And adding to the personal challenge of being able to accomplish these feats, it also depended on the success of their teammates in the relays of which they were members.

In addition to the normal challenges facing these swimmers, they each overcame some additional challenges to winning. The schedule called for Torres to swim a final only 37 minutes after her previous final, meaning she was on the medal stand for the previous race rather than going through the normal preparation for the next race. And Phelps still managed to win one of his races despite swimming "blind" because his goggles filled with water upon his entry into the pool.

As with any endeavor, regardless of preparation, there is always an element of "luck" involved. For Phelps, the luck worked in his favor, winning one of his races by only one one-hundredths of a second. For Torres, the luck went the other way; she barely missed winning the Gold by one one-hundredths of a second in her 50 meter freestyle.

Watching these tour de forces is inspiring thousands of young people who took to swimming pools around the world, dreaming that someday *they* could be like Phelps or Torres. And everyone who witnessed these accomplishments stands in awe of the possibilities when you dare to dream the impossible dream.

Naturally, most of us would like to experience this kind of success in whatever our chosen endeavors. But it's shortsighted to focus only on the outcomes; it's necessary to pause to focus on what it takes to make these kinds of outcomes possible. Very few people would be willing to devote the amount of time, effort, preparation, and dedication required to excel in the ways required for these outcomes. So it behooves us to not only appreciate the results, but to appreciate the sacrifices that made it possible for these (and other Olympians) to make their "impossible dreams" a reality.

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What did you expect?

November 2008

Our "expectations" play a huge role in the degree of satisfaction we get from almost anything we do. We see this all the time in sports—where a given team's reaction to their level of success is based almost entirely on the degree to which their expectations are realized. For instance, if a team that wasn't expected to do well winds up coming in second, they may be quite pleased. Whereas a team that expected to come in first may be upset at coming in second.

One example of this was in the Summer Olympics when the U.S. men's gymnastic team (which did not "expect" to medal) was ecstatic at getting the silver medal—whereas the U.S. women's gymnastic team (which many people expected to win the gold medal) was somewhat less happy when the women won the exact same silver medal.

I witnessed a similar situation this past weekend when I attended the Southern California finals of a school sporting event in which one of my granddaughters participated. The team entered the meet with high expectations—since the team had won first place in the two previous years. While they came very close to repeating their previous glory, they wound up coming in second. Even though both first and second teams go on to the State Finals, they were very disappointed to be second—since they had hoped (expected?) to be first.

It's clear that it's not the *actual* result that dictates the reaction. It's the gap between the expectation and the result.

While it can be good to set goals that you believe can help you move closer to success in whatever endeavor you're undertaking, it's also wise to be aware of the dangers of allowing your "hopes" to become "expectations."

This distinction may seem like just playing word games (substituting one word for another), but it actually makes a big difference in the way you approach the whole endeavor as well as in the likelihood of succeeding. For instance, when “hopes” become “expectations,” you may not be prepared to work as long or as intensely or to fight as hard if it becomes more difficult than anticipated. Of course, even when you’re well-motivated and well-prepared for achieving a particular goal, there are always other people and other factors that can have an impact—no matter what you do.

While sports provide obvious examples of this kind of situation (where external factors beyond your personal control may dictate the outcome), it’s true throughout our lives in all kinds of ways. You may be an excellent parent, but have a child who turns out to be troubled or a trouble-maker. You may be an excellent employee, but lose your job. You may be an excellent “person,” but be struck with a series of serious problems.

Despite our strongest efforts and our most fervent hopes and beliefs, there’s ample evidence that “life’s not fair.” We don’t necessarily get what we “deserve” based on what we do. So we would be wise to do our best (knowing that’s all we can control), and avoid having strong “expectations” about the results. That way you’re more likely to be able to enjoy whatever level of success you achieve instead of being disappointed because it wasn’t what you “expected.”

* * * * *

Impulsive Personality

December 2008

I have become aware of the fact that most of my biggest mistakes have happened as the result of being impulsive—doing something without first taking time to *think*. This is a hard pill to swallow since I consider myself a very responsible person. But this collection of incidents shows that I can do very irresponsible things when I react impulsively.

For instance, one of the first such incidents happened when I was in college. I was sitting by the window in a second-floor classroom when a wasp was detected in the room. The lecture stopped as everyone waited for the wasp to land somewhere so we could swat it. Unfortunately, when it finally landed, it was on the large window next to my desk. Without thinking, I jumped up and hit it with the nearest object—which happened to be my very heavy literature textbook. I took care of the wasp, but I also broke the window, sending the book and glass crashing to the ground outside the building. I was lucky that no one was on the ground near where the glass (and book) landed. But it could have been a very dangerous situation.

Naturally, I was terribly embarrassed. I just couldn’t believe I had done such a thing. If I’d thought for one second, I would have known you couldn’t

hit a glass window with a large book. But that's the problem; I didn't think. I just reacted. And, of course, the whole class saw it as one of the funniest things they'd ever witnessed. In fact, the professor was never able to get the class back under control—and finally just dismissed class.

My next most vivid memory of a similar incident was many years later when I was leaving the San Diego Wild Animal Park with my entire family. I was lagging behind to get a drink of water as the others were going through the exit. When I turned to exit, I saw that the large iron fence was being lowered to close the park. Instead of stopping to think, I just reacted by trying to run and crouch under the fence at the last minute. I made it through, but not without skinning my knee and having to go back to the first aid station in the park. Again, everyone thought this was very funny—and still tell the story when we gather for family occasions.

But this time I wasn't as lucky—in that I did get hurt, however slightly. And it was another of those times when I couldn't believe I had done something so silly. Again, this was due to reacting impulsively—acting without first thinking.

Then a few years ago, I took one of my granddaughters to a special presentation at the Zoo with anthropologist Birute Galdikas, the world's foremost authority on orangutans. She had written a book which she planned to autograph following the speech, but we were asked to stay seated until she exited the building. Since it was a school night, I told my granddaughter we would quickly run out of the hall in order to be first in line and get home before it got too late. So I ran out the door (in the dark), not seeing that there were a couple of steps just outside. I missed the step, turned my ankle—and broke my foot. Since the author was the only one out there, she immediately came over to see if she could help. And all I could say was “please autograph your book for my granddaughter”—which she did. So I accomplished my goal, but in a very irresponsible way—and got hurt a little more this time.

But what really got my attention in recognizing the risks (and dangers) of my impulsive reactions to situations was recently when I was driving at night and suddenly noticed my exit was coming up sooner than expected. Again, without thinking, I just reacted by quickly moving over to exit—and wound up having a very bad accident.

The worst part was that two of my granddaughters were in the car with me. Although none of us got injured, my actions could have caused serious injuries, even death. Clearly, placing them in harm's way was my worst nightmare come true.

This was the single most traumatic thing that has ever happened to me—and shattered my confidence in myself as a completely *responsible* person. In fact, I felt like a complete failure due to this incident.

The only good to come of it was that it caused me to fully recognize the dangers of acting impulsively—and to vow to overcome this way of reacting.

Fortunately, I was heartened to learn that it *is* possible to change longstanding personality traits. I read a report of a study that says we can defy our genes (our personality predispositions) by constantly and consistently working to change our tendency to behave a certain way. When impulsiveness moved from being risky to being outright dangerous (especially to others), I became *much* more cautious and thoughtful in all my actions.

So I want to encourage all of you to consider what personality traits you have that may be counterproductive—and determine to work toward changing them. It *can* be done.

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Regrets

January 2009

*Regrets, I've had a few
But then again, too few to mention*

These are the opening lines from Frank Sinatra's "My Way." I feel fortunate to have very few regrets in my life. But the few I do have are enormous. One of those is the realization that I made a serious parenting mistake while believing I was doing something good.

When our kids were pre-teens, we read a book called *How to Raise Your Kids to Stand on their Own Two Feet*. We met the author personally, and were impressed with the ideas he described. So we incorporated them into our own child-rearing.

Basically, the idea was to gradually give your kids more freedom and more responsibility with each passing year, beginning when they're 13. This way the transition from age 17 to 18 will not be a giant step, but a continuation of each year's steps of growing more and more capable of "standing on their own two feet."

So we gave our kids far more freedom and far more responsibility than their peers, and this seemed to work extremely well. But the final step in the process didn't work out so well.

The goal of the program was to prepare the kids to be "Adult at 18." However, we began calling it "18 and out," with the idea that when each child turned 18, they would be ready to pursue their lives (in college or job) and no longer live at home. We even had a big celebration for each of them on their 18th birthdays, with banners announcing "18 and out."

I'm sure that part of our thinking was due to our own background. My parents married at ages 15 and 17, my husband's parents married at 18, and we married at 19. So our sense of when you were ready to "be on your own" was no doubt affected by our experience.

At any rate, we didn't know the kids had a problem with this until recently when both of them shared their disappointment (and even distress) at not living at home during summers while in college. It would be one thing if they were reporting that they had felt that way at the time, but later saw it as a positive experience. But they feel that way about it *now*—in their 40's.

Naturally, this led me to rethink that time in great detail. And it became clear that they were right to feel this way. I had been viewing it only through the "principle" of giving them more freedom and more responsibility along the way, preparing them to be independent. But even on a "practical" basis, it made no sense—since the money it cost for them to rent a place (with friends) could have been saved by living at home with us.

I've tried to find some solace in the situation, and can appreciate the fact that they *wanted* to live with us rather than getting away from us. (When we were young, we couldn't wait to get out of our parents' home.) But my husband and I were leaving home to be *together*, which made a big difference. Also, times were different when our kids were growing up, and our experience didn't fit for them.

Fortunately, they don't doubt our love or motives for the "18 and out" program, but it still hurts to think that this caused them unnecessary pain. And that's what I profoundly regret.

Of course, none of us can go back and change the past, but being open to rethinking things we thought we knew can lead us to see things more clearly in the present. It can be very enlightening to realize that even with the best of intentions, we don't always know or do what is best.

This experience has led me to be much less impressed with my own opinions and beliefs and to be more willing to second-guess things I thought I knew for sure.

So I hope each of you will consider what regrets you may have about the past and examine them to see what you might learn that could help as you go forward.

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Do you hear what I think I'm saying?

February 2010

I recently had a conversation with someone I didn't know too well about a fairly serious topic, so I was trying to be as clear as possible about my thinking on the subject. Nevertheless I came to see that what I "thought" I was saying was *not* what the other person was hearing. (Since we didn't seem to connect, I suspect that I may not have heard what she thought she was saying as well.)

So once I was alone again, I tried to analyze why we had so much trouble communicating clearly. I recognize that part of the problem with hearing what the other person is saying is based on our own individual "filters" through

which we judge everything we hear. These filters are made up of each of our “perceptions” based on our personal attitudes, beliefs, and experiences.

But another major factor in miscommunication is the fact that the “words” we use are a very minor part of the “message” we send. The “attitude” behind the words carries far more of the message. In studies of face-to-face communication, Dr. Albert Mehrabian found that words are far less crucial to a message than most people would expect.

His original research (described in his 1971 book, *Silent Messages*) has been repeated several times over the past 40 years. These years of research and observation suggest that there are three basic components of effective face-to-face communication.

His findings revealed the different factors determining how others interpret what we say to them:

- 7% comes from the actual words we speak
- 38% comes from the sounds and tones we use
- 55% comes from our body language, expressions, etc.

The bottom line is that our tone of voice and our body language will overrule our words every time.

The 38% importance of the sounds and tones we use includes our volume, speed, pitch, emphasis, inflection, and flow (pauses).

And the 55% importance of our body language includes our gestures, posture, proximity, use of space, facial expressions and eye contact.

If these three components (words, tone and body language) are not in alignment, people will pay much more attention to the other aspects of communication than the words we use. These other factors make up the “silent messages” we are sending, and if our words contradict the silent messages, others will mistrust our words.

Ironically, this dynamic relates most strongly to communications where the emotional content is significant and the need to understand it correctly is greatest. So the more important the conversation, the more essential it is that we make sure we’re being congruent in the message we’re sending.

Most of us have had this kind of experience, but understanding the dynamics behind it can remind us of the importance of saying what we really mean—since the “silent message” gets through despite the words we use.

A final word of caution: email, texting, and other non face-to-face conversations leave us deprived of 93% of the clues needed to accurately assess the meaning behind a person’s words. So it's important to recognize that the other person is unlikely to clearly hear what we “think” we're saying.

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Winning vs. Succeeding

May 2009

When involved in any kind of “competitive” activity—whether specific ones like sports contests or talent contests or more general ones like getting the best grades in school—most of us obviously want to *win*! We may not be quite as extreme about it as Vince Lombardi in saying, “*Winning isn't everything, it is the only thing.*” But in any kind of competition, there’s an underlying assumption that you need to be “in it to win it.”

Many people will find it hard to believe that a thoughtful reflection on the error of focusing only on “winning” could come from a TV show like “American Idol,” but that’s just what has happened. While some of this year’s contestants have been open about acknowledging their desire to “win,” Adam Lambert, one of the finalists, is quoted as saying, “*I didn't really come here to win as much as I came to get exposure and build my career. It's about what the show gives us.*”

Some would say this kind of comment was probably insincere—which might be the case if it came from someone who didn’t have a good chance of winning anyway. (And as I write this on May 13, we don’t yet know the eventual outcome of the competition—since the finals are on May 19, with the “winner” announced the following night.) But I’ve been following the show for some time and fully appreciate that his performances are so extraordinary that it really won’t matter whether or not he wins. The judges, as well as most objective observers, recognize that he has demonstrated such star quality that he’s sure to have a very successful career, regardless of the outcome of the competition.

If he doesn’t win, this wouldn’t be the first time that a non-winner would demonstrate the degree to which not winning didn’t matter. Those who don’t know and/or don’t care about “American Idol” may nevertheless be aware of some of the highly successful careers of former contestants who did not win. Some of the non-winners include: Clay Aiken, Chris Daughtry, and Jennifer Hudson (who wound up “winning” an Academy Award).

So the next time you find yourself getting caught up in the win-lose mentality (in whatever area of life in which you may compete), it would be smart to focus less on winning and more on just doing your best. In fact, as with Adam on “American Idol,” focusing on just “doing well” (without being driven by winning) can free you up to actually do better! Focusing more on the outcome than on the process can interfere with being able to do your best in the moment. But focusing on the performance instead of the results allows you to perform better, thus increasing your chances of also winning.

One final thought: “Winning brings short-term satisfaction, but succeeding has a long-term payoff.”

Specifically, this means that success has more lasting, long-term value than one euphoric moment of being a “winner”—ultimately making it possible to get

more of what you want in life. Also, adopting an attitude of striving to succeed (over which you have some control) vs. winning (which is often up to others to determine) can work to your advantage in any area of life. And it provides the extra bonus of eliminating the stress that comes from thinking only of “winning.” The bottom line is that succeeding “wins” over winning almost every time.

Addendum: Last night was the finale of the competition, and Adam Lambert did *not* win. But his reaction validated the sincerity of his earlier statement that he “didn’t really come here to win.” He seemed to be genuinely pleased for Kris Allen, who was obviously shocked at the outcome. His shock was echoed by the headlines following the results, focusing on how the dark horse underdog pulled an upset. The bottom line is that while Adam didn’t *win* the “American Idol” crown, he’s likely to “succeed” in spectacular ways.

Chapter 3: Changes

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Moving

August 2008

Three weeks from today we'll be moving from the place we've lived for the past 5 years to a new place about 15 miles away. The distance actually represents a much larger change than would be assumed by such a short move.

For instance, we'll be in a different telephone area code and even a different "city" as far as postal mailing address is concerned. Of course, since most of my correspondence takes place by email, that won't make much difference. But the move will necessitate other adjustments, including changing cable service providers for both Internet and TV. (There are a couple of cable service providers in the area, but they're not allowed to compete head-to-head. You are required to use whichever one is "assigned" to your particular location.)

None of the above small inconveniences come close to offsetting the many wonderful changes that will take place due to the move. Most of these relate to very simple, basic things in life, but they can make a dramatic difference in the quality of daily life—if they happen to be your personal preferences, as they are mine.

One of the changes I am most looking forward to is the fact that the daily temperature averages 8 degree warmer than in our current location. Even though we live in a very mild climate, there's never as much warm weather as I'd like. While many people love the "perpetual spring" weather, I really prefer to have some real "summer" weather—where it's warm enough to wear sleeveless clothes in the daytime and go out at night without a wrap.

But beyond the anticipated enjoyment of the general conditions, there are some specific factors that will greatly enhance our lives in terms of health and well-being. For instance, we recognize the importance of physical exercise and both enjoy walking. But our current area requires that the walking be done along sidewalks on city streets—unless we use the car to drive to a more rural setting. However, our new place is situated so that we can step out of the house and walk 2 or 3 blocks in either direction to find absolutely wonderful areas for extensive walking in "natural" environments.

One is a large Recreation Preserve with 6 small lakes. The name makes it sound like a wilderness area, but it's actually right in the middle of a regular community. In fact, it's part of a Municipal Water District, developed as an innovative water reclamation system. Not only does it have about 3 miles of paved paths around the lakes, but includes multiple picnic areas and playgrounds as well as activities like fishing and going out on paddle boats or canoes.

The other nearby walking area is much smaller, a beautifully maintained park with more picnic tables, a basketball court, and grassy areas for games. It too has some paved paths, but it also has dirt paths leading to a bridge over a little stream which also allows for fishing.

All this opportunity for enjoying the outdoors is the primary reason for the move. In fact, the new living space is a little smaller than our current place and not as “private,” but I expect to spend a lot less time in the house and a lot more time outside enjoying nature.

Moves of any kind involve trade-offs—as do most any life changes. It’s all a matter of figuring out your own personal priorities and acting on them. All too often, we settle in to whatever lifestyle we’ve developed and don’t consider making a move unless stimulated by some outside influence. But stepping back and assessing your life situation (and determining whether it meets your current needs based on who you are today) is a good way to be sure you’re enjoying the most “quality” life possible.

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Timeless Wisdom

August 2008

We’re moving this week, which calls for going through everything and determining what we should keep and what we no longer need. I’m enjoying this process because it feels good to get rid of useless stuff that has somehow accumulated through the years. But one part of the process is not as much fun—choosing which books to keep.

Our new place is smaller and won’t allow us to take more than about half of our books, so reviewing which ones to keep has been a challenging process. I decided I needed to come up with some kind of “guidelines” to help me make those decisions. In looking at each book, I asked myself *not* whether I had enjoyed the book or thought it was a good book—but would I be likely to ever read it (or parts of it) again.

I no longer felt the need to simply have it on my bookshelf. I’d rather donate it to someone else who might enjoy it than have it just sit and collect dust. In viewing each book through this prism of whether or not I’d be likely to read it again, I discovered something very interesting. The ones I felt most likely to read again were the more “basic,” simple books with timeless bits of wisdom in them. Since I don’t read fiction, all my books tend to have some kind of “message” or piece of solid information, but real “wisdom” is harder to find.

Anyway, one book that particularly fit my criteria as a “keeper” was one that began as a one-page statement of a man’s “credo”—his guiding principles. As he shared this simple statement with others, it caught on and began being passed around to more and more people. Finally, he decided to write down more of his thoughts and reflections on the basic things in life—and turned it into a book. It was 20 years ago when Robert Fulghum published *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten: Uncommon Thoughts on Common Things*.

I had forgotten just how much I liked this book until I found a bookmark inside it that we had made. We had included it when we gave copies of the book to several friends when it was first published. The bookmark said “We hope you enjoy this simple (and very profound) little book. May its thoughtful ruminations stimulate your personal sense of wonder.”

Now I want to share with you the opening piece of “wisdom” from this book and encourage you to get the book for yourself.

All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten

Share everything.

Play fair.

Don't hit people.

Put things back where you found them.

Clean up your own mess.

Don't take things that aren't yours.

Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.

Wash your hands before you eat.

Flush.

Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.

Live a balanced life—learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and plan and work every day some.

Take a nap every afternoon.

When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.

Be aware of wonder.

* * * * *

Planes, Trains and Automobiles

August 2008

The 1987 movie of this title told a nightmare story of a man trying to get home for Thanksgiving. But it could easily reflect the current nightmare many U.S. citizens feel about trying to get from one place to another. High gas prices have had almost everyone rethinking their transportation needs.

Some are addressing this problem by making fewer trips, doing more car-pooling, taking other modes of transportation, etc. Another alternative (that will become an option for me when we make the move I discussed in the previous piece) is to *walk* to more of your destinations. Obviously, this is not an answer for most people who live too far from their work or shopping areas to make this possible. But we're extremely fortunate to discover this hidden benefit to our move.

We chose our place to move based on being near a series of lakes where we can do recreational walking. But we discovered a very practical kind of walking

that will also be available from our new place. Located within walking distance (less than a mile) are *all* the primary shopping outlets I use on a regular basis, including warehouse store, department store, grocery store, drug store—and even my bank.

Currently, we have to get in the car and go in 3 different directions to reach the stores listed above. So this will definitely save a lot on gas. Plus, I like the idea of doing some “destination walking”—actually walking *to* a particular place, rather than just walking for the sake of walking.

Of course, there’s still the issue of carrying purchases that are made on these walks. This is a particular problem for me since I have a longstanding aversion to “carrying stuff” when I’m walking. For instance, I only use purses that hang across my shoulders or a “fanny pack.” And if I need to carry something I’ve purchased, I try to tie the bag onto my purse.

The kind of shopping I’ll be doing in the new location will not permit me to comfortably carry many items without a backpack. So I’ll try to buy a very lightweight one to use on my shopping forays. Even at that, I won’t be able to carry a lot at once, but it just means more trips to the store, and thus more walking—which is a good thing.

Actually, I’m looking forward to this whole new way of going about my daily errands. It harkens back a little to the days when people regularly did their shopping on foot. And since my only identifiable heritage is American Indian, I take special pride in pursuing a small part of the ways of some of my ancestors.

Perhaps this whole undertaking wouldn’t seem quite as positive were it not for the very practical consideration of the price of gasoline, but it doesn’t feel like a burden; it feels like an opportunity to make a major change in my lifestyle that will be beneficial in many ways.

In fact, it demonstrates that not all changes that are undertaken for practical purposes need to be seen as negative. As with many things in life, it’s possible to find great benefit in making these kinds of lifestyle changes.

* * * * *

Economic Turmoil

September 2008

These are hard times for many people around the world, including in the U.S.—where we tend to “expect” financial times to be good. Most of those who personally recall the “Great Depression” have a different sense of the possibility of hard times, but most of us have difficulty believing things won’t “turn around” soon. But while we’re “hoping for the best,” it’s also wise to “prepare for the worst.”

Not surprisingly, the current economic turmoil in the U.S. does not affect everyone equally. It seems that in recent years, the “rich have been getting

richer” and the “poor have been getting poorer”—and the middle class is being squeezed out of existence.

I identify more with “the poor” than “the rich”—having grown up relatively poor in Mississippi. As I have written in the past, my daddy worked in a stave mill until I was in 10th grade—at which point he got a service station, where he worked the rest of his life.

So I’ve always been “money-sensitive”—meaning I’ve always paid close attention to what I spend. However, during the past few years, we’ve adopted a “budget plan” that has more accountability in it than any we’ve had in the past. We actually write down every penny we spend—so we can compare our “budget” with our actual expenditures. It’s amazing what a difference this makes in your spending habits. Without making a note of every cash expenditure, it’s easy to miss lots of the little things. But they have a way of adding up to a lot more outlay than you ever thought or intended.

Actually, I feel like I’ve come full-circle. When I was young, I was extremely money-conscious, and now I’m again very careful with money. But there were some years in between when we were making more money (but, like a lot of people, not “saving” it)... so that when the income stream lessened, we had nothing to show for it.

Of course, attitudes and behaviors related to money don’t exist in a vacuum. They’re very much affected by other things—like your personal values and goals. One of the reasons we never accumulated money is because of the *choices* we made throughout our marriage. About 30 years ago, we developed a LifeDesign (life-planning) program—which we have used personally as well as professionally through the years. We repeatedly made choices about where to live and what to do professionally that put us in more financial jeopardy than had we made different choices. But we assessed the trade-offs involved in each of our choices and decided they were the ones that most nearly matched our values and goals.

I do understand, however, that many people’s financial situation is not due to any choices or control they had over the situation. While some people took unnecessary (even foolish) risks—particularly in the real estate market—many others were victims of unscrupulous actions on the part of others. And still others have worked hard for many years without ever reaching the point of purchasing a home or accumulating any money to fall back on. Living “paycheck-to-paycheck” is a reality for large numbers of people.

The bottom line is that the current financial turmoil is hitting almost everyone in some way. The gasoline prices are putting many jobs in jeopardy and forcing major changes in lifestyle. Of course, when you feel like you have *no* control, it makes it even more difficult to deal with. So this is a good time to focus more specifically on just which aspects of your money management you can (and can’t) change—and do whatever you can to deal with the current financial conditions.

If you have *no* current money concerns, then this doesn't relate to you. But, as I said, we personally find a little satisfaction in simply “knowing” exactly where our money is going. And while keeping up with every single expenditure may seem like a chore, it does provide a little sense of control.

* * * * *

Worst First

September 2008

As I wrote above, many people are struggling financially these days. And the events of the past week have given people even more cause for concern.

Almost everyone feels some kind of anxiety about the failure of some of our financial institutions. Even those who are not directly affected by changes in the stock market have fears about the safety of their 401(k) or their pension. And many of those who work in the financial industry are losing their jobs—as well as the value of their investments.

Many people see the current financial situation as the “worst” in their lifetime. (Only those who lived through the “Great Depression” have seen worse.) And, in fact, there’s legitimate reason to worry about the well-being of people who are strongly affected by this financial crisis. That’s because the way people react to “complete financial ruin” can be extremely dangerous, even leading to thoughts of suicide.

On the surface, it wouldn’t seem that a person’s financial situation would have such a serious impact on their whole attitude toward life. In fact, most people (when asked) inevitably choose other potential crises as being far “worse” than a financial crisis.

For instance, in one of the exercises we used in workshops (where we were helping people look at their “values”), we asked them to do a “Worst First Ranking.” This was designed to help them get in touch with what’s important in their lives— and to ask themselves what they could do without.

Now I want to ask you to do this exercise:

Read over the list below and rank each item (1 through 5, with 1 being “worst”).

- Drop down 15 I.Q. points.
- Lose your eyesight.
- Suffer a nervous breakdown.
- Undergo complete financial bankruptcy.
- Have your best friend turn against you.

Your rankings may tell you something about your values and may illustrate whether you tend to identify yourself through:

- your intelligence
- your independence
- your emotional stability

- your material success
- your relationship with others

Please determine your own “worst first” item from the list before reading further.

In every workshop we ever conducted, more people chose “lose your eyesight” as their “worst” item, and “undergoing complete financial bankruptcy” was usually ranked rather low. However, experience has shown that people’s reactions to these situations do not conform to their stated significance. For instance, I’ve never heard of anyone committing suicide over going blind, but history is full of stories (especially during the depression) when people committed suicide over financial ruin.

So as we face the prospects of a worsening financial situation, I urge everyone to try to think carefully and rationally about what’s really important. The impact of bankruptcy or financial distress may be a blow to your ego, but it doesn’t compare with the far more significant losses that people face (and successfully deal with) every day.

* * * * *

What do you want to be when you grow up?

November 2008

This is a standard question that has been asked of young children for generations. And there once was a time when it made *some* sense—in that people usually chose one career/profession/job and stuck with it for their entire lives. But in our mobile society, most people have multiple careers/professions/jobs during their lives. So there is no longer the same kind of pressure to figure this out while you’re still young.

However, even though there’s no need to be fixed on your specific goals for the future, it’s easy to guess the general direction a person might take by watching what they do when they’re young. Their interests as a child often provide insights into what the future might hold—because they’re not yet influenced by what might bring the most prestige or make the most money, only what they enjoy!

In fact, this reflects a well-known quote from Peter Drucker, the highly-regarded business guru, who said: *“The best way to predict the future is to create it.”*

With this thinking in mind, I’ve been noticing what might happen when my three granddaughters grow up. They are each unique in their interests and personalities, but all are extremely active and involved in many things.

For instance, one of them has a variety of interests and actually verbalizes that she can’t decide what she likes most: dancing, playing the piano, playing soccer, or pursuing her interest in all things “scientific.”

Another of the girls is clearly most enthusiastic about all things musical: singing, dancing, performing. She is willing to spend long, hard hours pursuing it—while absolutely loving every minute of it.

And another of my granddaughters excels in everything she tries, including sports—where she even surprises herself when undertaking some new sport and quickly excelling, while enjoying the whole experience.

But the one thing they all have in common is “enthusiasm.” And *this* is the key not only to figuring out what you might *be* when you grow up, but what you might most enjoy *doing*. Of course, pursuing your early interests may not mean doing it as a career. There are many ways to continue to pursue a variety of interests without restricting yourself only to whatever you choose as your primary career. In fact, the granddaughter with so many different interests already expresses a clear understanding that she may “choose” one as her career—and still pursue some of the others as hobbies.

Also, as they go through their lives, they’re sure to discover some possibilities that don’t even exist today. So with the longer life spans and these constantly developing new opportunities, there’s no need to be concerned about deciding “what they’ll be when they grow up.”

Of course, this pattern of changing careers during the course of your life is not new. It was 1970 when my husband and I first began conducting workshops to help people who wanted to get more control of their lives and choose what direction they wanted to go. And, of course, at many points though the years we’ve made those kinds of major changes ourselves.

For anyone who wants to ask themselves a lot of questions about their life (to see whether they might want to make some changes), read over the long list of questions in our *LifeDesign Workbook* aimed at “Living your Life by Choice instead of Chance.”

* * * * *

Changing Old Habits

February 2009

I got a wake-up call this week. I’ve known for many years (and have previously written about it) that I need to change the level of intensity I bring to just about everything I do. Now the ramifications of that way of being have finally caught up with me—and I’m finally motivated to make the changes I’ve needed to make for a long time.

What happened is that I have developed high blood pressure and a fast heart rate—and have been prescribed a medication that I will have to take the rest of my life unless I change my hyper way of dealing with everything in life.

It’s generally assumed that if you’re of normal weight, don’t smoke, and engage in daily physical exercise, then you won’t have high blood pressure. But, of course, there are other factors—including genetics and age. So while

I'm good on the basic factors, I am vulnerable to the genetics and age factors. (Regarding genetics: my mother had a variety of heart problems and my daddy died of a heart attack at age 57. And regarding age, I just had my 73rd birthday this week.)

However, in my particular case, both my doctor and I believe that the prime culprit is my high-intensity, hyper way of responding to the daily events of life—so that I'm in a perpetual state of stress! Since I do *not* want to spend the rest of my life on this medication, I'm finally taking the steps I've been needing to take to change this habit of overreacting to everything. And in so doing, I should be able to slow down my heart rate and lower my blood pressure.

Since it's not enough to just “decide” to change a lifetime of engaging in a bad habit, I'm making an organized plan for just how to support this change in lifestyle. I've started by writing a list of changes to make in my daily routines. I'm sure I'll add to the list, but here's what I've determined as a starting point:

- Do one thing at a time, rather than multitasking.
- Talk less and talk more slowly.
- Talk only in the same room, not calling out to someone from a different room.
- Move about more slowly—except when actively exercising.
- Turn on my computer after breakfast and off before dinner, rather than always being online.
- Stop trying to respond to everything so quickly. (Accept that my “in box” will never be empty.)
- Engage in daily calming activities—like yoga and listening to relaxing music.
- Do daily relaxation exercises based on Herbert Benson's “Relaxation Response.” (Do these relaxation exercises for prevention, but additionally any time I get stressed.)

Yesterday was just the first day of this new program—and it's amazing how much difference it's already making. This is a lifelong change that I've needed to make, and it feels great to finally be doing something about it.

As those of you who have been reading my writings for awhile know, I've done “life-planning” for many years, including conducting life-planning workshops and writing a workbook with my husband that people can work through independently. But while I've successfully made many changes in my life, I don't believe I've undertaken this kind of all-encompassing change in my basic way of *being* in the world. So it should be quite interesting to see how it goes.

In the meantime, I want to strongly encourage you to tackle whatever changes you've been needing to make in your own life. I recognize that successfully making changes in most areas of our lives requires using an organized approach—and that the LifeDesign program is a great resource for doing that.

* * * * *

Daily Routines Hard to Change

March 2009

When we think of “change,” we usually think of making some kind of big, significant difference in the way we are leading our lives. And we appreciate that these kinds of “life-altering changes” can be challenging. But what we don’t necessarily appreciate is how difficult it can be to make small changes in our daily routines.

Most of us have a standard way of handling our everyday activities—from how/when we get up, to getting dressed, to going about our daily routines. These daily habits become so “set” that we almost do them automatically—without really thinking. So when we want to try to change one of them, it can be quite a challenge.

I think I’ve learned a few things that can help meet these kinds of challenges. So I want to share my own experience in trying to make a simple change in my daily routine—in hopes that the process can be helpful to others who are trying to make these kinds of simple changes.

In keeping with the general concern about the environment and the call to avoid using so many plastic (or paper) bags, I’ve been trying to make a change in my grocery-shopping habits. I purchased 6 or 8 canvas bags: a couple of small ones, some medium sized ones and some large ones. And with the best of intentions, I put these bags in my car to be available whenever I went grocery shopping.

My first challenge was to remember to actually take the bags into the store with me. All too often I would be standing in the checkout line before I remembered that I had failed to bring the bags into the store. After this happened several times, I realized that I needed to include some kind of “accountability” into my failure to bring the bags. So rather than just be frustrated that I had forgotten them, I began leaving my cart while I went out to the car to get the bags. (Naturally, this expanded my shopping time, creating a situation I didn’t prefer, but it went a long way toward preventing me from forgetting to bring the bags in the next time.)

As soon as I conquered that particular step, I was faced with a new one. I found that occasionally (even though I had brought the bags into the store with me) I would get distracted with the payment process and fail to put the bags up on the counter to be filled. As before, after several instances of being frustrated that I had waited until after my groceries were already bagged in plastic bags, I again inserted an “accountability” action. After completing my transaction, I would move to an unused lane and move all my groceries from the plastic bags to my canvas bags, carefully leaving the plastic bags on the rack for use by others who didn’t bring their own bags.

Just when I thought I had successfully made the transition to remembering and using the canvas bags, I was struck with one last challenge. Occasionally, when getting out of the car at the grocery store, I would discover that I had forgotten to return the canvas bags to the car after unloading them in the house. Fortunately, I live a very short distance from the grocery store, so my final “accountability” action was to leave the store and go home to retrieve my bags before returning to do my shopping.

I have finally achieved my goal of using canvas bags for my grocery shopping. But I doubt that I would have succeeded had I depended only on my “good intentions”—without also taking actions that made me accountable for actually following through on my intentions. And I do hope some of these ideas can be helpful to those of you who have identified a change you’d like to make in your own daily routines.

* * * * *

What’s going on now?

December 2009

The dawning of a new year (and new decade), is a good time to reflect on your life and see what, if any, changes you might want to make. Lots of people make New Year’s resolutions, setting goals at the beginning of the year. But all too often they fail to do a good assessment of the current conditions of their life.

It’s fairly simple to come up with some particular goal in one area of life, often related to losing weight or being more successful in our work, but what’s really needed is to look at *all* the various aspects of our lives to see where we stand and where we want to go. It’s the accumulation of our degree of satisfaction with a wide range of areas that makes the most difference in our lives. However, it’s hard to accurately determine your goals for the future unless you’re clear about where you are now.

So below is a thought-provoking set of questions that may help you get more clarity about what is working in your life, what needs tweaking, and what needs major work. These questions, excerpted from our *LifeDesign Workbook*, guide you through considering where you stand regarding time, people, places, things, ideas and information, your sense of yourself, your responsibilities, your activities, your body, and your spiritual life.

(Note that it’s important to make notes about these issues, not just read through the list.)

WHAT’S GOING ON NOW...

1. With time?

Are you in control of your time or controlled by schedules?

Are you pressed for time or have time on your hands?

Do you think most about the past, the present, or the future?

2. With people?
Are your family relationships satisfying or strained?
Are your friendships meaningful or superficial?
Is your social life a pleasure or a burden?
3. With places?
How do you feel about your physical environment...
—at home?
—at work?
—geographically?
4. With things?
How important are material things to you?
Is your desire for things in balance with your ability to acquire them?
Do you spend more time maintaining your things than enjoying them?
5. With ideas and information?
Are you in touch with what’s going on in the world?
Are you stimulated by new ideas?
Do you make use of books for ongoing intellectual stimulation?
6. With your sense of yourself?
Do you mostly praise or criticize yourself?
Do you feel in control of yourself or a victim of circumstances?
7. With your responsibilities?
Are you in conflict over your various responsibilities?
Does one part of your life dominate the others?
Do you do some things just for yourself?
8. With your activities?
Do organizations and institutions play an important part in your life?
What do you do for “fun?”
Do you choose your own activities or go along with whatever comes your way?
9. With your body?
Do you take care of your body and feel good about it?
Do you live in a basically “healthy” way?
Do you take the time and energy needed to stay physically fit?
10. With your spiritual life?
Do you allow enough quiet time to reflect on what’s meaningful to you?
Do you feel a gap between your internal life and the life you’re living?

* * * * *

You Can’t Go Home Again

May 2010

Thomas Wolfe’s novel *You Can’t Go Home Again* presents a nostalgia for things of past times—including “home.” This longing to go back to some past

time or past experience is quite common. Even if we don't literally want to go back to an earlier time in our lives, we're still likely to want to revisit some of the positive experiences from our past.

This past weekend I personally experienced the disappointment that can come from expecting to relive a previous positive experience. Of course, things constantly change (like the flowing river that makes it impossible to step into the same water a second time), so that we can't really step back into the same experience. But that was my expectation when I went to a performance by a group I had seen "live" many years ago. I still fondly recalled my feelings in attending their earlier performance and fully expected to feel that way again.

With the (perhaps false) memory of the earlier time I saw them perform, I was deeply disappointed. It's not just that they were older—and so was I. It was more of an awareness that memory has a way of playing tricks on you so that the "real thing" is seldom like the memory of it.

I've had this same experience with hearing the sales pitches on TV for collections of CD's with music from the 50's or 60's or 70's. The clips they play during the commercials sound wonderful and inevitably trigger a nostalgic feeling for the past when the music was "new." But I once made the mistake of actually purchasing one of these collections—and it was awful. I wished I had just left my memory intact of how much I enjoyed the music at an earlier time without polluting it with this new experience.

Another illustration of how memory tricks us is how dramatically different it feels to go back to your old home town after many years. For instance, I grew up in a small town, but in later years when I went back for a visit, I was amazed (and somewhat disappointed) to realize how *very* small it was. A bike ride over to "the lake" used to be a great adventure. Later it seemed so close that it was hard to imagine it ever felt like a "trip." These little experiences can add up to the point that you no longer trust your memory of "how things used to be."

Memories of people can also be challenged by time and distance. Although I didn't attend my 50th high school reunion, I saw photos of my class—and could recognize only a couple of the people, the ones that I'd kept up with through the years. (I'm sure the others wouldn't have recognized me either.) But again I realized that it was preferable to maintain my "memories" of these people without this brief experience of seeing them as strangers.

So we would be wise to recognize that time changes everything—including our memories of the past. And it's better to honor the old memories, and (rather than trying to revisit them) to embrace the idea of having *new* experiences that can eventually become positive memories as well.

Chapter 4: Lifestyle

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Lazy Days of Summer

August 2009

Our fondest thoughts of summer are captured by a wonderful old song by Nat King Cole: “Those Lazy Hazy Crazy days of Summer.”

Roll out those lazy, hazy, crazy days of summer.

Dust off the sun and moon and sing a song of cheer.

You’ll wish that summer could always be here.

When I was growing up, we had three full months out of school to enjoy a leisurely summer. But as those with school-age children today know, there are very few “lazy” summer days anymore. In fact, summertime is much more likely to be “crazy” than “lazy,” with an unstoppable schedule of activities.

First of all, the time off during the summer is very irregular—based on your particular school system’s schedule. For instance, some schools have a summer break that stretches from May to August while the break at other schools is June to September. And to really complicate things for families, some schools have a system whereby there is about a six-week break during the summer, with two other 4-week breaks spaced throughout the year.

So if there are several children in the family, time together is limited/restricted due to the varying schedules. But even the time off is not *really* “off.” The many other organized activities (including various sports leagues and camps of all kinds) continue to keep kids busy throughout the summer.

If this sounds like a stereotypical plea for “the good old days”... that misses the point. Actually, what some think of as the good old days were never that “good” because they fell prey to just the opposite problem: too much free time with nothing to do but “get into mischief.”

I’ve often written about the time pressures *during* the school year—especially with so much (too much?!) homework. During the school year, families are hard-pressed to find any “downtime” where they spend time together in a relaxed, unhurried way. So throughout the year, parents struggle with figuring out schedules as if they were working with a Rubik’s Cube—pushing various schedules around to try to fit everything in.

What gets lost in all this is time to relax and recharge—both as individuals and as a family. It’s common knowledge that going full-throttle without downtime can be damaging to mechanical equipment—and the same is true for humans. So I want to encourage all families to “take back their lives” in whatever ways might be possible rather than being a slave to schedules imposed from outside.

When your children are young, it feels like their youth will last forever, but in hindsight you find that it went by in a flash—and you wish you had some of it back for a do-over. For extra motivation in avoiding this kind of regret, consider this famous quote by Viktor Frankl: *“Live as if you were living already*

for the second time and as if you had acted the first time as wrongly as you are about to act now!"

* * * * *

Age of Anxiety

April 2009

We're living in anxious times—not only here in the U.S., but around the world. And no matter how much we try to maintain some perspective (to recognize that “things could be worse”), we must also acknowledge that the current times are more uncertain in general than most of us have experienced in our lifetime.

Many people are facing great hardships these days due to the high level of unemployment—but the stress is not limited only to those who have lost their jobs. There's a gnawing fear and growing concern that nobody is immune from losing their job. This creates a kind of perpetual “floating anxiety” that affects our reactions to everything else that comes along that seems to be a threat.

For instance, the serious and growing number of cases of swine flu has thrown many people around the world into a state of panic. In addition to the fear is the stress of the “unknown”—not being sure what to do to try to protect yourself. Of course, some “hot spots” have led to orders to close schools, cancel events involving large gatherings, etc. But in most instances, it's up to each individual to decide when to go out and where to go—so there's a great deal of uncertainty.

And one of the most vexing areas of uncertainty surrounds the question of whether or not to wear a mask. The pictures we see on TV show large numbers of people wearing masks, but “experts” on talk shows caution that most masks not only don't do any good but may serve to trap germs in them.

Also, there are inevitably certain incidents that create a heightened sense of fear and anxiety. For instance, here in the U.S. this week, one of the President's 747 “Air Force One” planes (accompanied by a fighter jet) was spotted flying low over Manhattan.

With the memories of the 9/11 attacks still vivid in the minds of New Yorkers, the site of this low-flying plane caused people to spontaneously evacuate buildings and run out into the streets. (While it had been a harmless, ill-advised photo op, it set off fear, even panic, among those who saw it.)

In all these kinds of situations: whether job loss, swine flu, or airplanes appearing suddenly where they're not expected... the underlying issue for most of us is feeling that we have no control over our own fate. In many ways, coping with the uncertainty of the “unknown” is more difficult than being confronted with an identifiable problem we can address head-on.

Unfortunately, as the world continues to get more and more uncertain (think “global warming,” for instance), we greatly need more strength and stamina in dealing with the insecurity we feel about what may lie ahead. So

while we certainly want to pursue whatever actions we can take to address any area about which we're concerned, we *also* need to learn how to better cope with the uncertainty that is inherent in the world today.

While it's impossible to avoid all negative circumstances and incidents, we can be much more effective in dealing with them if we can remain calm and focused instead of just getting flooded with emotions and a sense of panic. So we need to find ways to strengthen our ability to use rational thinking rather than emotions in responding to the many uncertainties in our lives.

Personally, I've been working on my own issues with "anxiety" for quite awhile now. While I'm making some progress, I still have a long way to go. And one of the tools I use, in addition to physical exercise, relaxation techniques, and just generally "slowing down," is to read (and re-read) books that help me maintain a more balanced reaction to the daily stresses of life.

One such book (one of my all-time favorites) is *The Wisdom of Insecurity* by Alan Watts. It was originally written in 1951—yet even at that time, the title of the first chapter was: "The Age of Anxiety." So our current anxiety is really nothing new. The only difference is that today's issues about which we are anxious are different from the ones during earlier times.

Here's an excerpt from one of the reviews of the book:

I am a therapist that recommends this incredibly insightful book to most of my clients, especially those suffering from anxiety disorders and control issues. Alan Watts is a century ahead of his time.

In some ways this is a deep, philosophical book. For in-stance, the author points out:

We worry because we feel unsafe, and want to be safe... What we have to discover is that there is no safety, that seeking it is painful, and that when we imagine that we have found it, we don't like it... Safety is isolation.

But on the other hand, the book also offers some very basic, useful ideas for dealing with anxiety *now*. For instance, the author advises us to remember to simply breathe! If you notice your breathing when you're anxious, you'll see how shallow it is—depriving your brain of the oxygen it needs to be able to respond to situations in an effective manner.

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Cool Technology

April 2009

I recently got a new cell phone—just one of the growing technology tools that have become part of our daily lives. This one is "cool" in that it works with a touchscreen and (although it's not an iPhone) includes Internet, email and TV. Actually, I only use the texting tool—to stay in touch with my grandchildren—but don't choose to use Internet or email when I'm out and about, preferring to leave those things behind when I'm away from home.

Even my home computer seems pretty cool, since I use my laptop as my home processor—so that I have all my data available on the laptop when I travel. And at home I simply attach the keyboard, mouse and monitor to the laptop so that I have all the “conveniences” I like for my daily work at home.

Another cool feature of my computer is that it serves as a second TV in the home. Although we have a large TV in the living room, I occasionally want to watch something in the bedroom but don’t want to permanently install a TV there. So my tech-guru son hooked up a system whereby I can watch TV on my computer monitor. While anyone can go to the various websites of the TV networks and watch some shows... with this new setup on my computer in the bedroom, I can also watch shows as they are airing live on TV—or switch to a system whereby I can watch shows I have recorded on my DVR.

Since I’m part of the “older generation,” I’m particularly pleased that I “keep up” with the newer gadgets. For instance, I spent a couple of hours yesterday with my 8-year-old granddaughter as she worked on a “designer” game on her Nintendo. She’s very adept at using all kinds of technology and turned to me for my opinion only on “design” issues for the game—*not* for any technical assistance.

I don’t use Facebook or MySpace—since my websites provide all the outlets I can handle for sharing about myself. But I love YouTube, iTunes, Google Earth and many of the other Internet features that we now wonder how we ever did without. And while I still enjoy holding a newspaper in my hand, I also daily read some of the commentary pieces by columnists on several of the larger newspaper websites.

So while it’s a “brave new world”—full of cool technology—we would be wise to avoid letting the technology take over our lives. It’s only a positive force if we make sure the technology serves us and brings us a better quality of life. “Faster” is not always better; you can lose a lot of life that way. But if you use the newer technologies as tools to free up more time to enjoy *other* aspects of life, it can be a win-win.

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Maggie and Me

June 2009

I’m midway through a 10-day stay with Maggie. My visit was something I *thought* I was doing for her, but it turns out to be one of the best things I’ve done for myself in a long time. Part of this is due to the fact that Maggie is so easygoing and mellow—just what I need to counter my more intense personality. In fact, she’s very accommodating and is happy to pretty much go along with whatever I want to do.

For instance, I love to walk (and generally take a long walk every day), but I usually walk alone because others either don’t walk at the pace I prefer or

want to take a different route, etc., but Maggie is just happy to be walking and leaves the details completely up to me.

While all the above is true, I don't want to go further without acknowledging that this wonderful, easygoing Maggie is not a friend or relative; she's the 8-year old Golden Retriever belonging to my daughter and her family. However, when I stay with her while they're away, I feel like she's mine—and we've developed a very special bond.

If you're not a "dog person," you may decide not to read the rest of this, but I hope you will—because it's not really about a dog so much as about experiencing a quiet, peaceful time in the midst of life's rush. Granted, it's much easier to be peaceful when you're alone with a dog as your companion. But since I brought my computer and am continuing my normal work while I'm here, the difference in being here instead of in my usual surroundings is more about a state of mind.

My normal state of mind is pretty hectic and chaotic, despite the fact that my life circumstances don't call for it. I tend to find things to get "excited" about (any little thing will do) rather than maintaining a degree of calmness in dealing with life. The result is that the "stress" I put on myself on an ongoing basis is contributing to a stomach condition that I've addressed with diet and exercise, but haven't yet taken the necessary final step by consistently reducing my stress.

So one of my "missions" in staying with Maggie was to use her calmness to reinforce the calmness I want to experience for myself. And I'm happy to say that it's working. Of course, I'm helping it along in some other ways. For instance, I brought along some books that would reinforce the idea of approaching life in a calmer way. One of those books, which I'm re-reading, is Eckhart Tolle's *A New Earth*. (Frankly, it's easier to benefit from the ideas in the book in this quiet environment.)

The other "plan" I'm trying to implement is to be less rigid in my use of time. I normally "schedule" myself, deciding in advance when I'll do what—rather than doing things in the time and order that feels most natural. (After all, "getting them done" is the goal, not the specific schedule on which they're done.)

So I want to encourage you to consider in what ways you are "stressing" yourself—beyond the legitimately unavoidable stresses of life. Are there some calming "time-outs" you can give yourself, no matter how small? It's not essential to change your living space, as I'm doing during this period. There are things we can do anytime, anywhere.

We've all heard the simplest ideas—like getting outside in nature, taking a long bath (rather than a quick shower), having a cup of hot tea, sitting in silence with no TV, cell phone, iPod, etc. It's easy to dismiss these as unrealistic due to having no "free time." But even the busiest people "make time" (even if it

means getting up earlier) to engage in activities that have been shown to make you *more* productive the rest of the day.

I do hope you will stop and consider what you might do to even *slightly* slow down the pace of your life to find a little calmness. I can vouch for the fact that it can be very therapeutic—with or without a dog.

* * * * *

Death and Taxes

July 2009

The phrase “death and taxes” usually refers to the two facts of life we can’t avoid, but they’re also two of the things in life that most people dread. In both instances, while we can’t change the inevitable, we *can* have some effect on both—because both are significantly impacted by our lifestyle choices.

When it comes to taxes... if we put work at the center of our priorities, we may wind up earning larger sums of money on which we are taxed—as well as putting us in a higher tax bracket. And the way we spend our money certainly affects our tax returns. Frivolous expenditures do nothing to contribute to our deductions, but paying attention to using more of our money for legitimate expenditures can lead to more deductions and less tax owed.

Of course, there are always people who try to cheat on their taxes. And, unfortunately, many (especially corporations) succeed in finding loopholes that allow them to avoid paying their fair share. But there’s a price to pay in other ways for “selling your soul” in exchange for monetary gain.

The impact of our lifestyle on the taxes we pay, however, is nothing compared to the tremendous impact it can have on when and how we die. Naturally, we can’t avoid those unexpected accidents or unpredictable, random diseases that might strike. But by far the biggest impact on our health (and thus on our death) lies in our choice of lifestyle.

Those who overeat, smoke, avoid exercise, etc., are significantly hastening the date of their death—as well as the quality of their life during the years they live. But those who eat sensibly, avoid smoking, and engage in regular physical activity can have a much more enjoyable quality of life—while potentially expanding the number of years they will live to enjoy it.

There’s a great deal of discussion these days about the “obesity crisis”—and the statistics are frightening. According to the CDC (Centers for Disease Control), obesity affects 19.1% of men and women aged 18-29 years, and 31.7% and 30.2%, respectively, for men and women aged 50-59 years. Also, according to the CDC, over the past three decades the childhood obesity rate has more than doubled for preschool children aged 2-5 years and adolescents aged 12-19 years, and it has more than tripled for children aged 6-11 years.

In addition to the personal costs to the people who are obese, there’s a cost to the country as a whole in that the direct costs from obesity (according to

obesity guru Eric Finklestein) are \$147 billion per year. In many ways, death and taxes are related in that preventing the death of people in poor health due to obesity has an impact on the taxes necessary to underwrite the enormous medical costs. This is particularly true since there is more obesity among those with the least financial resources and the least insurance coverage, making it a financial (as well as a humanitarian) issue for all of us.

I have a very personal interest in the issue of obesity and wellness. In fact, one of the motivating factors in my lifelong effort to maintain a normal weight is the fact that I watched my mother gain more and more weight every day of her life, until she died at age 71 (2 years younger than I am now) at a weight of about 270. For many years she had struggled with Type 2 diabetes and dealt with many of its ramifications, including blindness, and finally dying of gangrene.

So while death (and taxes) are inevitable, you have the power to have *some* influence over the time of your death—at least the part that is affected by lifestyle. So while I don't wish others to go through the experience of watching a loved one die the way my mother died, I do hope we can all take more responsibility for our own health—not only for our own sake, but for the sake of those who love us.

* * * * *

Multitasking

August 2009

Do you find yourself attending to many different things at the same time? Most of us would say yes. In fact, we've developed a word for it: multitasking.

I consider myself a good “time manager.” I'm very conscious of scheduling myself—even when it's not necessary. I tend to organize my day in advance; I always try to be “on time” for any activity; I plan out my route for errands in order to maximize their efficiency; and, of course, I multitask!

Most of us take pride in our ability to multitask. However, our pride may not be warranted. Several recent unintended consequences of my multitasking have led me to rethink the value of doing so much of it.

Of course, I was already aware of some of the more obviously risky areas for multitasking—like cell phone use (or worse, texting) while driving. But many people, especially young people, still think they can safely do this despite the fact that the consequences can be tragic. Last year, a car full of teenage girls died in a head-on car crash when the driver tried to pass while texting.

Although I don't consider my multitasking to be of a “dangerous” nature, I'm beginning to see the ways in which it diminishes my awareness of whatever I'm doing, leading me to miss out on a lot of things. I'm talking about simple things; an example: tending to engage in some additional activity while eating—like reading or watching TV. This means I can't fully appreciate the

food (its look, taste, texture) and thereby not only don't fully enjoy the food, but also may eat too much or too fast. Also, of course, I'm not giving my full attention to whatever I'm reading or watching.

It should not have taken me so long to fully acknowledge the accumulation of all the little losses associated with multitasking—since back about 30 years ago I was presenting a concept called “The Awareness Cycle” in workshops I was conducting. The topic for the presentation was: “What’s the best use of your time right now?” and the premise behind it was “We can be fully present for only one awareness at a time.”

But as I've observed many times (both in myself and in others), it's easier to intellectually “know” something than to “put it into practice” in your daily life. Not only had I not put it into practice, but I got progressively worse at trying to be “aware” of several things at the same time.

Actually, this concept is something we intuitively know from an early age. Any child who is trying to get their parent's attention knows full well just when their parent is “fully aware” of them and their question—and when they are not. They immediately detect the lack of attention in the offhanded comments parents often make to put off dealing with the child at any given moment.

Recent brain research means we no longer have to rely on our intuition to determine whether people can actually multitask in an effective way.

Below is an excerpt from an NPR piece by Jon Hamilton titled “Think You're Multitasking? Think Again” that offers great insight into what's actually happening when we try to multitask. According to this report, multitasking is a human delusion.

Don't believe the multitasking hype, scientists say. New research shows that we humans aren't as good as we think we are at doing several things at once.

Technology allows people to do more tasks at the same time, the myth that we can multitask has never been stronger. But researchers say it's still a myth—and they have the data to prove it.

Humans, they say, don't do lots of things simul-taneously. Instead, we switch our attention from task to task extremely quickly.

It's all part of life these days. We answer e-mails while yapping on the phone. We schedule appointments while driving and listening to the radio. And it seems as if we're focusing on all these tasks simultaneously, as if we've become true masters of doing 10 things at once.

But, brain researchers say, that's not really the case.

Multitasking: A Human Delusion?

"People can't multitask very well, and when people say they can, they're deluding themselves," said neuroscientist Earl Miller. And, he said, "The brain is very good at deluding itself."

Miller, a Picower professor of neuroscience at MIT, says that for the most part, we simply can't focus on more than one thing at a time.

What we can do, he said, is shift our focus from one thing to the next with astonishing speed. *"Switching from task to task, you think you're actually paying attention to everything around you at the same time. But you're actually not,"* Miller said.

"You're not paying attention to one or two things simultaneously, but switching between them very rapidly."

* * * * *

Money or Finances

October 2009

Along with most people in the U.S., I've been thinking a lot about "money" these days. Money has always been a difficult, emotional topic for me personally, based mainly on my upbringing in a family that had very little money. In fact, my earliest memory is of a period when my mother and I moved to another town to live with my grandmother while my daddy hopped freight trains to go in search of jobs to sustain us.

Then for the next 10 years, he worked in a stove mill, earning about \$50 a week. We were OK due to steps my parents took to deal with our situation. For instance, Daddy had a garden where he raised most of our food, and Mother "canned" vegetables for us to eat during the winter. She also sewed all my clothes, with my first "store-bought" dress being the one I wore for my high school graduation.

This was *not* a dire situation, and I'm not complaining. We ate well and my mother was such a skilled seamstress that my clothes were great—even winning me the title of "best dressed" in high school.

While many people who struggle growing up go on to strive to make lots of money as adults, it had the opposite effect on me. Striving to make money has never been a goal for me. In fact, I've felt such a strong identification with those who struggle that I've only wanted to have "enough" money, but haven't aspired to being financially successful.

My personal experience and resulting orientation to this whole issue led me to realize that the very term we use to talk about it reflects our personal relationship with it. For instance, while I call it "money issues," those in a higher income bracket are more likely to call it "financial issues."

One way of understanding this difference is that people who talk about "money" view this issue as critical to their ability to cover their basic expenses and maybe a few extras— while those who talk about "finances" are not concerned about the basics, but about accumulating as much as possible.

The "money" people are not likely to be involved in the stock market— while the "financial" people are likely to closely follow the stock market. In a

tough economy, the “money” people are more likely to be unemployed (or to worry about what would happen if they lost their job)—while the “financial” people are more likely to worry about lowering their standard of living. The “money” people may see this as an issue of *fairness* while the “financial” people may see it only as an issue of *business* where some succeed and others fail.

I suspect that it’s difficult for either group to fully comprehend what it’s like to be a part of the other group. I also suspect that each group in some way “looks down” on the other group. The “haves” may see the disparity as a straightforward reflection of the results of individual efforts—and look down on those who fail to do what’s necessary to succeed. And the “have-nots” may see it as a bad game with a stacked deck where they don’t really have a chance—and look down on those who are successful as being greedy and uncaring.

I can suggest no resolution for these differing perceptions—and doubt whether there will ever be any final resolution. But I’ve been trying to think through my own attitudes and perceptions, and I want to encourage you to do likewise. In the final analysis, any steps taken by either side of this issue have an impact on the other side. So we need to keep in mind that we’re all in this together—regardless of whether we see it as being about money or finances.

* * * * *

If only I’d known then...

January 2010

I’m approaching my 74th birthday, and often think about all the factors that go into “aging gracefully” that I know now—but didn’t know back when I was younger. So I decided to try to organize a few of them for the benefit of younger generations, recognizing that everyone must learn these facts (the hard way) for themselves.

Young people generally feel invincible. When we’re young we feel we can do almost anything without serious consequences. This is especially true when the consequences don’t kick in until many years later. But what you do (or don’t do) when you’re young often determines what you are able to do later in life.

There’s a general recognition of how the actions we take when we’re young can affect our careers later on in life. But there’s often a failure to be aware of the many other areas where our early actions make a difference—particularly in areas related to health, fitness and general wellness.

So lets take a head-to-toe look at some of the areas that deserve early attention. When we’re young:

We take our full, lustrous hair for granted. But harsh chemicals or other mistreatment earlier in life can lead to dry, brittle, thinning hair later on.

Most of us have great eyesight—and take it for granted. We engage in all kinds of activities that strain our eyes, particularly with so much close work with screens of all kinds and sizes. It helps to stop regularly (about every 15 minutes to look up and at a distance) to give our eyes a break. This can help avoid the long-term impact where many of us find that by the time we're in our 40's, we need glasses to see what we once saw quite easily on our own.

We don't take wearing sunglasses seriously—often wearing them more for appearance than for practical reasons. But failing to protect our eyes from the harmful sun rays may lead to potential problems later on.

We resist the idea of always applying sunscreen; it seems like such a bother that we may not be inclined to apply it regularly. However, this omission leads to one of the most obvious results later in life: dry, wrinkled, damaged skin. Even worse, of course, is that it also increases the chances for developing skin cancer.

We eat stuff that can come back to haunt us when we're older. If our parents allow us to eat a lot of “junk food,” we develop a taste for it, but continuing to eat that way as an adult leads to a huge array of physical problems later in life, including high cholesterol, obesity, adult-onset diabetes, etc.

We usually brush our teeth fairly well and fairly regularly (at our parents' urging), as well as visiting the dentist for checkups. But as we become adults we may not be as conscientious about our checkups, thinking cavities are only when we're young. We also often fail to floss regularly—which is extremely important. (In fact, I once had a dentist who posted a sign saying: “*You only need to floss the teeth you'd like to keep.*”) Later in life, you really appreciate the importance of having cared for your teeth all through the years.

Our strong backs mislead us into thinking we can get by with all kinds of lifting and other movements that put a strain on our backs. (It's important to use your legs to lift rather than bending down, and to sit down to put on your pants/shoes, etc.) “Back problems” are one of the leading issues as people get older, and the accumulation of all those times of abusing our backs takes an inevitable toll and can lead to almost constant pain.

We're generally flexible, and may assume we will maintain that ease of movement through the years. But a failure to do daily, regular stretching leads most older people to develop stiffness and poor posture that becomes a daily hassle—as well as affecting our overall appearance.

Lots of walking and running around are normal for kids, but this often gradually diminishes through the years until the point where many people get virtually no regular aerobic exercise. This strongly contributes to the high prevalence of heart disease later in life. And even if you avoid heart problems, the lack of exercise can lead to difficulty in walking without a walker when you get older.

When it comes to caring for our feet, women are in far greater danger of doing damage to their feet that will come back to haunt them later on—due to wearing high heels. The human foot was never designed to be in the position required for heels, and certainly not for being in that position while bearing your full weight. Many women who sacrificed foot care for appearance live to regret it when they have difficulty walking as they get older.

Here’s a quick review of the ways you can prepare for a long, healthy life:

- Care for your hair; avoid harsh treatments
- Don’t strain your eyes; take breaks to look at a distance
- Wear sunglasses regularly
- Wear sunscreen anytime you’re in the sun
- Eat healthy foods, not so much “junk”
- Brush, floss and get dental checkups
- Protect your back; lift properly
- Stretch and maintain your flexibility
- Engage in regular aerobic exercise
- Don’t abuse your feet with poor shoe choices

The above list is just a brief overview of *some* of the many aspects of our lifestyle choices that influence—or even sometimes determine—the quality of our lives when we’re older. So it’s smart to prepare now (no matter what age you are) for a future time when you’ll be dealing with the consequences of whatever you did (or didn’t do) now.

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Empowered to Do your Job

January 2010

In these tough economic times, you may be far less likely to be concerned about being empowered to do your job—because you’re relieved if you simply *have* a job. But even now (perhaps especially now) the best path to more job security is to force yourself beyond being paralyzed with fear and uncertainty to focus more on how you can stand out in a positive way—which is hard to do if you’re running scared.

While your company can establish a hierarchy of authority, it cannot bestow empowerment. Becoming empowered to do your job depends on your establishing both who you are and what you can do—which involves both your integrity and your assertiveness. Integrity reflects who you are—and assertiveness reflects what you do.

A person of integrity is real, credible, genuine, honest, authentic. We recognize a person of integrity when we encounter them. Having integrity involves being committed to fairness and equality, with no hidden agendas or

ulterior motives. However, this does *not* mean just being “good” or “nice.” In fact, it takes real courage to be a person of integrity.

You’ll find that by displaying your integrity (being real and responsible), people are much more likely to trust you. And the confidence that comes from being trusted allows you to increase your ability to handle challenging situations.

Being recognized and appreciated for who you are creates a foundation from which to do what needs to be done. Your integrity as a person allows you to act in a way that is both responsible and assertive. It involves saying what needs to be said (whether or not it’s popular) and doing what’s needed, not what’s self-serving or expedient.

The bottom line is that empowerment is a process that starts with developing a new attitude, a new perspective—that job security is not enhanced by “playing it safe” or “holding back.” Although working in an empowered way doesn’t guarantee job security, it does provide a better chance of keeping your job—while also providing an important sense of personal satisfaction.

When people are empowered, they are energized.

When they’re energized, they’re motivated.

When they’re motivated, they’re more effective.

When they’re effective, they’re better satisfied and more productive.

It’s a win-win for everyone. So it’s important for every individual to become empowered to do their job.

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Being Responsible Consumers?

June 2010

I’ve always prided myself on being frugal, mainly only buying what I needed. (Of course, our definition of what we “need” is often little more than only what we “want.”) Nevertheless, I have a long habit of looking for bargains and avoiding paying retail whenever possible. The bottom line is that I have considered myself a “responsible” consumer.

However, my pride in that approach has been seriously tested lately—as I have noticed that I tend to be buying more (of all kinds of things—from books to shirts) than usual. I think it’s because I’ve identified several places with really amazing prices, which fools me into thinking I’m “saving” money. Of course, you’re not really saving money if you’re spending as much overall—even if you’re spending less for each item.

We do live in a consumer-oriented society where almost everyone (regardless of their income) has the “basics”—which, for instance, has come to include having a television set.

Here’s some recent data about TV in U.S. households:

—99 percent of households possess at least one television.

—The number of TV sets in the average U.S. household is 2.24.

—66 percent of households have three or more TV sets.

I use televisions only as an example of consumerism in the U.S.—but it's easy to defend the “need” for a television in today's world. While far too much time is spent watching TV (an average of 6 hours, 47 minutes per day in an average U.S. home), it's also true that TV provides a lot of basic information needed to be a functioning part of society.

The bigger issue here is not the purchase of any one particular item, it's the fact that most of us purchase so *much*. We generally operate from a mentality that “more is better,” only to find that we accumulate so much “stuff” that we can't find a place to put it all—and we can't find it when we want it.

I've written in the past about my efforts to simplify and rid myself of things that are not being used on an ongoing basis. But it seems that despite my effort to get rid of a lot of old stuff, I compensate by bringing in more new stuff. So I'm now committed to paying more attention to what I add, not just what I subtract—aimed at becoming what's been referred to as a “conscious consumer.”

In the past year or so (focusing only on helping the U.S. economy grow), there's been a need to hold up the level of consuming. But in the long term, it's a recipe for disaster for the world as a whole. So it's time to raise our awareness of the insatiable desire for “more” that drives us to be irresponsible consumers.

Chapter 5: Pleasure

Laughter Makes us Think
Summer's County Fair
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Laughter that Makes us Think

June 2008

The best kind of humor is that which makes us laugh—and makes us think. That's a good description of the humor of George Carlin, a unique kind of comedian whose voice has now been silenced. He had survived several heart attacks and bypass surgery, but his heart finally gave out and he died on June 22, 2008.

I just read some of the reporting about his death and began reflecting on my fond memories of his work.

Back in the 70's when he turned "hippie," he became very well-known for his famous routine, "The 7 words you can't say on television." In response to some of the criticism he received for this routine, he turned it around, saying: *"Tits doesn't even belong on the list, you know. It's such a friendly sounding word. It sounds like a nickname."* I couldn't help but agree with his assessment of the arbitrary nature of the 7 words. In fact, years later this word was even glorified in the Broadway musical, "Chorus Line," by one of the breakout songs, "Tits and Ass"—referring to what a dancer needs beyond talent.

As a mainstream wife and mother of two kids, I was an unlikely fan, but somehow his mischievous spirit captivated me—and my whole family. In fact, when we took a family vacation to Colorado in the summer of 1976, we couldn't resist attending a George Carlin concert outdoors at Red Rock. We found we were not alone in our interest in his humor. People from all walks of life and all ages were in attendance—including our own two kids, ages 14 and 12. (We had some of his recordings at home, so they were familiar with his routines and were not exposed to anything they hadn't heard before.)

Anyway, while his early days were "entertaining," in later years his humor morphed into a heavy focus on "social commentary." For instance, several years ago I saw him do a routine on TV about "saving the planet" in which he stated the obvious (which many others are now pointing out as well)—that "the planet" will go on just fine, regardless of what we do to it. The real danger is to the survival of us "humans," not the survival of the "planet." (Apparently cock roaches can survive long after our abuse of our home planet has made us "humans" extinct.)

George Carlin's influence on the public discourse was *not* just because he had some interesting insights; his influence was only possible because he delivered those insights with a heavy dose of humor. He recognized the same truth expressed by Mary Poppins: "Just a spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down." We were much more likely to think about what he had to say because he first made us laugh.

A sad footnote to his death is the fact that many doctors recommend "laughter" as part of the treatment of many illnesses—including heart disease. For instance, one study made the following observation: *"We know that exercising, not smoking and eating foods low in saturated fat will reduce the*

risk of heart disease. Perhaps regular, hearty laughter should be added to the list.”

It’s unfortunate that all the laughter George Carlin provided to others through the years was not sufficient to heal his own damaged heart. But his example can serve as a reminder that most of the time we take ourselves far too seriously and that life could be far richer, both for us and for those around us, if we took more time for the simple pleasures in life—like laughter.

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Summer’s County Fair

July 2008

Both for better and for worse, County Fairs offer a little bit of everything. I spent an afternoon at our local county fair this past weekend, and I must say that for me personally, the “people-watching” was my favorite activity. There was a huge crowd made up of all kinds of people from all walks of life—and, as usual, I found it absolutely fascinating.

Strange as it may seem, one of my favorite activities at the fair is watching what is billed as the “Swiftly Swine Racing Pigs.” These are races around a small track involving 4 little piglets. I had seen it before and looked forward to it again this year—and it did not disappoint. For a “simple pleasure,” it doesn’t get much better. They are, like most little animals, “too cute.”

Lest I seem incredibly shallow, I also enjoyed many of the “nicer” features of the fair. My favorite was a very large judged exhibit of furniture and other items made of hardwoods. My husband has been a life-long woodworker, having made many beautiful items from hardwoods. In fact, many years ago we briefly had a gift shop where he made all the display cases as well as some of the items we sold—from chess sets to wooden earrings. So I’m able to appreciate exceptionally fine work, and the exhibit at the fair was the *best!*

Another simple pleasure at fairs like this is finding real bargains in the exhibit areas—as long as you’re careful to only buy items you really want and need. For me, it was ideal in that I found a very unique gift for my youngest granddaughter’s birthday later this summer.

Speaking of children, the fair offers many, many rides—which seem to delight all the young people. I once enjoyed many of these rides, but after a pretty harrowing time on a rollercoaster a couple of years ago, I decided I’d had enough and would leave this to the kids.

Another potential pleasure at the fair is the food. But it’s also the greatest potential danger—because almost all the food seemed to be fried, including “fried Twinkies.” However, I made a couple of very enjoyable food stops, once for a charbroiled chicken kabob (shared with my son) and later a frozen banana dipped in chocolate. The food, combined with logging well over my 10,000 steps for the day, meant it was an overall positive day physically as well.

Fairs obviously exist in a kind of “other world” that I wouldn’t care to visit more than once a year, but they’re somewhat representative of what summer is supposed to be. It’s such a traditionally familiar scene that it can be comforting to briefly visit that other world as a reminder of one of this country’s many simple pleasures.

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Music Makes the World go Round

July 2008

Naturally, music doesn’t *really* “make the world go round,” but it certainly adds a lot of pleasure to the trip. And it can be a great way of connecting with others—since it really is the “universal language” in that people who don’t speak the same language can still enjoy music together.

Not only is music a great way of connecting with others, but it’s also a great way to spend time alone. In fact, when you’re alone, you can use music to either calm you down or rev you up. For instance, you can listen to soft, calming music to relax—or you can put on something very upbeat and dance yourself silly for the sheer pleasure involved. (And it’s also great exercise.)

I was reflecting on the versatility of music due to my own personal experience over the past couple of days. Last weekend I went to the local park where there are weekly outdoor music performances by different groups. This week it happened to be my favorite genre—the Blues. One of the great things about the Blues is that all ages seem to enjoy it.

A lot of music is geared specifically toward old or young, but the Blues seems to be able to move everyone. In fact, the small dance floor in the park was quickly filled and people were dancing all over the grass, including kids as young as 3 or 4 as well as senior citizens. And many people danced without partners, which is indicative of the freedom inherent in this music. Even those just watching (and listening) were clearly having a great time.

Then today I received a CD I had ordered of one of my all-time favorite Broadway Shows, “A Chorus Line.” I saw the show on Broadway many years ago, and a touring version is coming to our town next month. Since one of my granddaughters is actively involved in singing/dancing/acting, I got tickets for the two of us to go to the local performance together—just another example of how music can be a great way of connecting.

I never guessed when I was growing up—singing and playing piano—that someday I’d have the pleasure of seeing these interests reflected in my grandchildren. I have three granddaughters, and while one is very much into musical theater, the other two are extraordinary pianists. Nothing pleases me more than to watch and listen to the three of them as they pursue their particular musical preferences.

The wonderful thing about music, however, is that you don't have to have any musical talent to enjoy it. It's available to everyone and can be a great way to either boost your spirits or to relax you. So I hope you'll find your own way of incorporating the pleasure of music into your life—because it really does “help the world go round” more smoothly.

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Finding Your Play

September 2008

I'm a generally serious person and don't take time to “play”—except when I'm with my youngest granddaughter, who brings out the child in me. But for several years, my one regular break from my serious focus has been walking. I try to walk on a regular basis and particularly enjoy those times when we can go hiking. But mostly I've depended on using the treadmill provided by the apartment complex where we lived before our recent move.

The move took place almost a month ago, and during that time I have *not* been walking—due to being busy getting settled after the move, then struggling with a cold, etc. This is ironic—since one of the primary reasons for the move was to be near an area where we could walk in a “nature setting” without settling for the treadmill or getting in the car to drive to a pleasant area for walking.

Anyway, the past few days I've finally gotten back in the groove of daily walks, and it's great. I had almost forgotten how much better it makes me feel: better about life, better about myself, even better about the many problems facing all of us in the world today.

I think one of the reasons I'm having such a strong positive reaction to this renewed walking is precisely what I had anticipated—that the impact of walking outside in nature is very different from walking on a treadmill.

This proclivity for outdoor exercise is nothing new. In fact, it's the only way our ancestors exercised—because it was built into their natural daily lives. And biologically we have not advanced at the same speed as the dramatic changes in our lifestyle—like sitting all day at desks and driving everywhere instead of walking, etc.

With weather conditions being quite different in various areas, outdoor walking is not reasonable or even possible for some people for large periods of time. But whenever there's a chance to do anything outdoors, it seems to do more for us than doing something similar indoors. So I highly recommend making every effort to find outdoor physical activities that you can enjoy.

Actually, finding something you genuinely *enjoy* is one of the keys to getting motivated to engage in daily physical exercise. One way to “discover your play” is to read a terrific book by Frank Forenich with the provocative title: *Play as If Your Life Depends on It*. He points out that the rate of

depression has more than doubled in the past 60 years, that we have lost contact with our bodies and the joy that occurs from spontaneous play.

A lot of our focus on physical exercise these days is on competitive sports—which may or may not provide a sense of play. Physical *competition* may only be available to a few who are particularly talented—but physical *play* is available to all.

While it may sound frivolous to put such a high priority on pursuing “play” at a time of so many grave crises in the world, we will all be much more capable of addressing problems (both personally and in the larger society) if we are revived and rejuvenated by getting back in touch with our bodies, with nature—and with play.

If you’re still not convinced, I hope you’ll go to Amazon.com and read the comments from others who have read the book, *Play as If Your Life Depends on It*.

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Road Trips

November 2008

If you’ve never made a trip just for the sake of enjoying the traveling itself (without regard to the destination), you’ve missed out on a very liberating experience. I just returned from such a trip with my son—who did all the driving, which really left me free to relax and enjoy the experience.

While there was an important purpose for the trip (to attend the wedding of my son’s best friend), the “traveling” part of the trip was important too. It was a one-day drive, but we went a day earlier than necessary and took a different route home, stopping overnight in another city along the way. In so doing we created a very different kind of experience—going beyond the goal of just getting to our destination.

Actually, it’s not enough to just add these “unstructured” periods into a trip unless you consciously appreciate the benefits of what you’re doing. An example of this awareness is illustrated by the way I commented (when we were only a couple of hours into the first leg of the trip) that *this* (the traveling itself) was an integral part of the enjoyment of the trip. While I thoroughly enjoyed everything about the wedding, I also took great pleasure in the road trip itself.

We tend to be so goal oriented that we often only think of the main event—which obviously in this situation was the wedding. But if we expand our focus beyond the initial impetus for the trip to include the entire experience, it greatly increases the enjoyment that’s possible. In fact, I also believe that this enjoyment can begin even *before* embarking on the trip—by including the period of planning and anticipating the venture.

Note that I specifically focused on road trips (trips by car rather than by plane, train, etc.) because the freedom and flexibility of being “on the road” is a big part of the simple pleasure to be had in this kind of travel. In fact, each time we made a stop and then got back in the car to take off again, I often sang a few lines of Willie Nelson’s “On the Road Again.”

So if you haven’t considered taking this attitude toward your travels by automobile, I highly recommend that you give it a try. In fact, there are also many ways to bring some simple pleasure into your day-to-day activities that might otherwise simply involve fulfilling your responsibilities, so it’s worth looking for such opportunities as you go about your daily routines.

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It doesn’t look like the picture

December 2008

Last week I attended an important function that involved group photos. I don’t dress up a lot, but I had done my best to prepare for this special event and thought I looked OK. So I was disappointed when I saw the photo, and said to myself, “Who *is* that woman?” I did *not* look like the picture.

I’m sure many of you can relate; it seems that most people are unhappy with the way they photograph. Of course, part of the problem may be that we unconsciously compare our photos with pictures of famous people, failing to focus on the fact that their photos don’t really look like them either. Between the old-fashioned “air-brushing” and the newer “digital enhance-ments,” their photos are not a true reflection of the subject.

Have you ever noticed how often the real thing doesn’t look like the photo of it? This is particularly noticeable with food—whether it’s a photo of an item on a restaurant menu or an item in a cookbook. When you see the actual dish, it seldom looks like the picture of it. In fact, for many years whenever our family is assessing the appearance of some particular dish (whether or not we’ve seen it pictured), we’re likely to say, “It doesn’t look like the picture.”

Of course, food is not the only thing that looks better in photos than in real life. I recall when our kids were young, like most young people they had very messy rooms. I actually took photos of their rooms to give them an “objective” view of just how bad they looked. But the photos did *not* reflect the real mess in the rooms; they somehow made them look neater. So I didn’t even bother showing the photos to the kids.

This discrepancy is true in many areas—sometimes making something look better and sometimes worse. For instance, many photos of natural settings don’t capture the full scope and beauty of the scene. So whether a photo enhances or diminishes, the real object usually “doesn’t look like the picture.”

My most recent awareness of this discrepancy between the object and the photo of it came when I was absolutely captivated by a photo my husband took

of a duck on our local lakes. I walk along these lakes every morning—and I had *never* seen this particular duck. It was far more colorful than anything I’d seen in person. In fact, at first I thought he was just teasing me, that the photo was not of a real duck at all, but of an artificial duck.

He kept insisting it was real, and looked on the Internet until he found photos of similar ducks—determining that they were “wood ducks.” At first I thought, aha, not “real” ducks but artificial ducks made of wood. But sure enough they were real.

He proved his point by finding these ducks again and taking more photos, this time including one with the wings open high and wide. This photo certainly didn’t look like an artificial duck, but I was still unconvinced. So yesterday, I went back to the lakes in search of these special ducks—and finally saw them. They were nowhere near as dramatic in their appearance as the photos had led me to believe. Most of the ducks were mallards, and these wood ducks were clearly more colorful—but they did *not* look like they did in the pictures.

* * * * *

Rainy Days and Sunshine

December 2008

As is clear to anyone who has read my writings, I love music—and tend to be reminded of songs related to just about any issue I’m addressing. Well, today is one of those days. It’s raining—*really* raining. Here in Southern California, we get *very* little rain. But when we do (which is usually in December and especially January), we can get a *lot* of rain.

This is reflected in the song by Albert Hammond, “It Never Rains in Southern California.”

*Seems it never rain in Southern California
Seems I've often heard that kind of talk before
It never rains in California
But girl, don't they warn ya
It pours, man it pours.*

Today (which happens to be a Monday as I’m writing this), I was watching and listening to the rain—and found myself really enjoying it. I didn’t feel anything like the song by Paul Williams & Roger Nichols (performed by the The Carpenters): “Rainydays and Mondays Always Get me Down.”

*Talking to myself and feeling old
Sometimes I'd like to quit
Nothing ever seems to fit
Hangin around, nothing to do but frown
Rainy days and Mondays always get me down.*

Anyway, the rain today did not “get me down;” in fact, it made me feel happy—which came as quite a surprise. I’ve always had a negative mindset

about rainy days, particularly if I have to be “out and about” a good bit during the day. In fact, I’ve assumed that *only* sunny days could make me happy; I’ve always identified with the words in John Denver’s “Sunshine on my Shoulders.”

Sunshine on my shoulders makes me happy

Sunshine in my eyes can make me cry

Sunshine on the water looks so lovely

Sunshine almost always makes me high.

While I still love sunshine (and it does tend to make me happy), today’s experience provided a real “aha” moment when I realized that I could *also* love a rainy day. We do tend to think in terms of either/or, thinking that if we like one thing, we can’t possibly like the opposite. But in fact, we can enjoy a wide variety of experiences, even ones that are completely different from each other.

Failing to expand our perceived preferences leads to missing out on some very enjoyable aspects of life. So the next time you assume you know what you do and don’t like, I encourage you to open yourself up to the possibility that you might also enjoy something that you never thought might make you feel happy.

* * * * *

Too Cold

December 2008

I admit it: I’m a wimp when it comes to the weather. Of course, I know it’s no excuse, but I was born and raised in the South where we seldom had any really cold weather—so that may be part of my difficulty with the slightest bit of cold. At any rate, I feel terrible for the many people who are struggling with the extreme cold that has blanketed much of the nation this past week. And, unfortunately, it’s likely to continue.

Watching some of the scenes of people digging their cars out of snowbanks led me to recall my own experiences living in a snowbelt area—in Rochester, NY. In fact, it snowed so much that it could be months before you saw the ground underneath the snow. This turned out to be more than an inconvenience when we bought a house and moved in December.

There was a large deck in the back (which was one of the things we loved about the house), and, like everything else, it was blanketed with snow. It wasn’t until April when the snow finally completely melted for the first time that we knew there had been leaves on the deck underneath the snow, causing the deck to decay to the point that it had to be replaced. So we learned a very hard (and expensive) lesson that winter.

We also lived in Pittsburgh, PA, for 9 years, where we had some other memorable “snow experiences.” The children were young—and they loved the snow. They enjoyed sledding down the hill in front of our house as well as

almost any other outside adventures in the snow. And I enjoyed watching them, but it was quite a challenge—since after getting them dressed (snowsuits, hats, gloves, boots, etc.) inevitably one of them would need to use the bathroom. But, all in all, it was a fun time.

However, the older I get, the more difficulty I have dealing with anything remotely resembling cold weather. I've been very fortunate to have lived in warmer climates (Hilton Head, SC, for 11 years and now Southern California for the past 24 years)—so I have no legitimate complaints about the weather. But I have found that whenever it's the least bit chilly in these mild climes, I can still get chilled very easily. So I've learned to turn this time into a very enjoyable one by gradually accumulating all kinds of warm and fuzzy clothes—from Uggs to fleece socks, pajamas, housecoat, bedroom shoes, etc. Like Scarlet O'Hara in "Gone with the Wind" (who said, "I'll never be hungry again"), I've declared that "I'll never be cold again."

I seem to write about the weather quite often. It may seem like a superficial topic—but I do believe that for some people (like me) it makes a tremendous difference in the overall quality of life. Not everyone is strongly affected by the weather, but for those of you who *are*, I strongly encourage you to find ways to offset whatever negative effect you experience from the weather into something that you can enjoy.

For instance, people who enjoy skiing are likely to have a very different attitude about living in a snowy climate. And people who value being near family or near other things they enjoy may consider the weather to be a reasonable trade-off. But for some people the cold can be downright dangerous—when they don't have money for heat or perhaps don't even have a roof over their heads.

However, all too often we assume we just have to "deal with it" when we *might* be able to find a way to either change locations or change some things about the current location that offset the unhappiness with the cold weather. Of course, this is true of many aspects of life, but it's especially important to consider when it just gets "too cold."

* * * * *

Obsessed with the Weather

April 2009

The weather has been a very strong focus of the news during the past week. Of course, the weather is a big topic when there's a crisis—like a flood, a tornado or a hurricane. But even weather that is unusual or unexpected can make the news, illustrating the obsession we have with weather. Maybe it's because it's a generally neutral topic that can be discussed with anyone at any time.

Anyway, it happened again this week. A couple of days ago, the lead story on the news was about the freak snow storm in Colorado. At that same time, in

the valley of the suburb of San Diego where I live, the temperature reached 100! We *are* having a lot of crazy weather these days, so there's some legitimate reason to be so obsessed with it.

Also, many of us learned a lot of weather-themed songs when we were young, setting the stage for focusing on the weather as we got older. For instance, one of the first songs I learned as a child in the South was the country song: "You are my Sunshine."

You are my sunshine, my only sunshine.

You make me happy when skies are grey.

You'll never know dear, how much I love you.

Please don't take my sunshine a way.

But if there's any doubt about how much we think about and talk about the weather, we only need to turn to the long list of songs that use weather-related words in the title.

Here's just a partial list (in alphabetical order):

A Foggy Day (In London Town)

Ain't No Sunshine When He's Gone

All I Needed Was the Rain

Amid The Falling Snow

Another Stormy Night

Blame it on the Weatherman

Fair Weather Ahead

Good Day Sunshine

Here Comes Sunshine

Here Comes That Rainy Day Feeling Again

It Never Rains In California

It's Easy To Blame the Weather

Let It Rain

Let It Snow, Let It Snow, Let It Snow

Rain Drops Keep Falling On My Head

Rainy Days and Mondays

Stormy Weather

Sunshine of Your Love

Sunshine on a Rainy Day

Sunshine on My Shoulders

Sunshine, Lollipops And Rainbows

Walking On Sunshine

Weathering the Storm

You Are the Sunshine of My Life

The bottom line is that the weather is not a little fringe issue in our lives. It's pervasive in affecting much of what we do and how we do it. And since "global warming" is such a serious issue, it's not such a bad thing to be obsessed with the weather—and to consider what we can do to have an impact.

We're fortunate to live in a world where we can enjoy nature and take decent weather for granted. But in order to maintain our optimal living circumstances, a responsible focus on the weather can be a force for good.

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Sitting on Top of the World

June 2009

I had a (pardon the pun) “peak” experience last week when I hiked all the way to the top of Angels Landing, a mountain in Zion National Park. I had done some hiking in the past—but nothing prepared me for the spectacular nature of *really* hiking: 5 miles round trip, climbing 1500 ft. (from an altitude of 4200 to 5700 ft).

The trip itself was quite a challenge, but I never considered turning back—even though many people do. There's something about looking up at the top that just “calls you” to keep going. And it was well worth the trip. It truly felt like we were sitting on top of the world.

However, it was not just the great feeling of reaching the top and seeing the rest of the world so far below. It was also the pure pleasure (and excitement) of the trip itself. Much of the first sections of the hike involved switchbacks, cutting back and forth. But the last portion involved climbing almost straight up—with chains set in the mountain to hold onto in order to facilitate some of the more extreme sections near the top.

I must admit there was a sense of pride in having done this hike, mostly because we got so many comments from younger people who could hardly believe a couple of 73-year-olds were making this climb. But far more important than what I or anyone else “thought” was the sheer way it made me “feel”—so *alive*!

One of the things that's missing for many people in today's world is the sense of vitality that comes from physical exertion. Of course, those who have physically challenging jobs may not find much satisfaction in the full-time exertion that the job entails. But for the masses who sit all or most of the day, there's nothing quite like vigorously moving your body—especially outside instead of in a gym.

I'm not knocking the gym experience if that's all you can manage. In fact, I belong to a gym as well. But while exercising in the gym may benefit your body, it can't match the benefit to your emotions and your spirit that comes with exercising outdoors.

So I encourage you to find ways to spend more time outdoors in nature—especially engaging in active physical exercise of some sort. It's not necessary to climb a mountain or even do anything too strenuous. In fact, walking is one of the best (and safest) exercises around—and one that almost everyone can do.

Being outside helps clear your head of the clutter from constant exposure to technology, so it's not only good for your body, but also for your mind.

Note: The photo on the cover of this book was taken at the top of Angels Landing.

Chapter 6: Love

Divorce is not an Option

Make Someone Happy

Inspiring Love Story

Lasting Love

On Being Loved

Trust can be Romantic

Love Will Keep us Together

Divorce is not an Option

May 2008

Today is our 53rd Wedding Anniversary, which really doesn't seem possible. There are several reasons it feels somewhat surprising. First of all, when you get married, you can't imagine a time when you will be 53 years older than you are at that moment—and you certainly can't envision what it will be like to be married for 53 years.

In fact, we woke up this morning, looked at each other, and said, "Can you believe it's been 53 years!" Actually, in our case, the years we've been a part of each other's lives is far greater—closer to 66 years. We can't recall when we first met; we just know that we were childhood sweethearts at age 6 when we first married in a "Tom Thumb Wedding."

I sometimes wonder how many new marriages will last this long. In fact, I'm not sure how many people expect or even hope for such long marriages. I recently read about one couple who apparently plan on marriage for the long haul. Will Smith was quoted this week as saying, "Divorce is not an option."

Here is his full statement—as reported in the media:

Divorce can't be an option—it's really that simple. If you just remove the option... because, if you have the option, one day that person's gonna make you wanna divorce. That's been a huge part of the success for Jada and me... We're like, "Listen, we're gonna be together one way or the other so might as well try and be happy."

While Will and Jada have only been married about 10 years, he has already experienced divorce from his first wife—and it appears that he has learned from that experience. In fact, many people learn (much later) that a marriage they were ready to give up on *might* not have had to end. Sometimes it just takes persistence and determination to see you through the difficult times.

And there *will* be hard times in any marriage where both people are full participants and equal partners. In fact, *all* marriages have ups and downs. There was a point in my own marriage when we could have been vulnerable to getting a divorce, but we stuck in and worked through it. It's never easy—but it's so worthwhile.

I recognize that "staying married" is much more difficult today, partly because we *expect* more from marriage. In earlier days, people didn't have as many options, so they were more likely to stick it out and try to make it work. But I don't want to sound like the "good old days" were better. In fact, it's highly questionable as to whether many couples may have simply "suffered in silence" due to the lack of options.

So if you're trying to make a marriage work in the best way possible for everyone concerned, I want to reinforce that effort by pointing out that it's often easier to fix whatever problems already exist than to "start over" with a whole new set of problems—plus the old ones that get carried into the future.

Finally, I want to encourage couples to take the long view, particularly if you have children. Being parents together means you will always be part of each other's lives through the children—and the grandchildren. For instance, I'm keenly aware of how nice it is to jointly participate in the lives of our grandchildren and thankful for the opportunity to provide a model of how it is still possible to say, "divorce is not an option."

* * * * *

Make Someone Happy

October 2008

I was awake in the middle of the night earlier this week (a not-uncommon event these days when I can't sleep), and flipped on the TV to find that the 1993 movie "Sleepless in Seattle" was playing. I had seen it in the past, but felt in the mood to watch it again.

While I enjoy the story and the acting by Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan, I particularly enjoy the music. In fact, I have the CD of the sound track and periodically listen to it. Anyway, in the context of the movie, I found that I particularly appreciated one of the songs, "Make Someone Happy." It's certainly not a song you would expect to stand out—since it was sung by Jimmy Durante, who is not what anyone would consider to be a great singer like some others on the sound track, like Nat King Cole and Celine Dion.

For those unfamiliar with this song, the lyrics offer a fresh look at how making someone else happy can make *you* happy too. All too often we spend most of our time and energy on our job, our social commitments, and other responsibilities. And when we consider "making someone happy," if we're parents, we usually focus on our children.

While, of course, we want to make our children happy, this is not incompatible with also wanting to make our spouse happy. Most of us have heard the platitude: "*The best thing a man can do for his children is to love their mother.*" [*The best thing a woman can do for her children is to love their father.*] But we seldom really focus on this connection—or act on it.

In fact, our spouse is often last on our list of priorities. And even when we focus on our spouse, we're not likely to specifically focus on "making them happy." In fact, we may be far more focused on the ways our spouse fails to make *us* happy. But one excellent way to determine whether we really "love" our spouse (as most of us hope/believe we do), is to see whether we find happiness in making *them* happy.

While these lyrics are written from the perspective of a man talking about a woman, it's equally relevant to consider it from the perspective of a woman talking about a man. It's important for each of us to pause periodically in our busy lives to assess whether our stated values are reflected in the way we live, especially when it comes to the way we treat our spouse. All too often, the only

time we fully appreciate the value of our primary love relationship is near the end of our lives—when it may be too late to “make someone happy.” Here are the lyrics:

*Make someone happy,
Make just one someone happy;
Make just one heart the heart you sing to.
One smile that cheers you,
One face that lights when it nears you,
One girl you're ev'rything to.*

*Fame if you win it,
Comes and goes in a minute.
Where's the real stuff in life to cling to?
Love is the answer,
Someone to love is the answer.
Once you've found her, build your world around her.*

*Make someone happy,
Make just one someone happy,
And you will be happy, too.*

* * * * *

Inspiring Love Story

March 2009

No, this is not a piece about Elizabeth Barrett Browning (of “How do I Love Thee” fame) or about any other famous couple. This is the story of the love between a couple of Australian men living in London and a lion cub they rescued from a store, brought home and named Christian.

This story is not new; in fact, it actually began 40 years ago. But the meaning to be gleaned from it is timeless. It illustrates how love can survive despite time, distance and every conceivable challenge that could exist in the lives of those involved. It’s all the more amazing because it also shows how love knows no boundaries, thriving despite being between different species.

As humans, we start our love relationships with high hopes and high expectations, then later when faced with difficulties we’re likely to wonder what happened to those initial feelings of love. So I encourage you to check out this short online video that depicts this very unusual love story that overcame every obstacle.

Even if you’re already aware of this story (and of the amazing reunion after Christian was released into the wild), it’s worth revisiting these images as a reminder of the power of love to survive, no matter what. And the next time

you “lose that loving feeling” toward your partner, you might pause and watch this all over again. It can be a reminder of what’s possible—against all odds.

If you want to learn the whole story, the 1971 book, *A Lion Called Christian*, has been fully revised and updated with more than 50 photographs of Christian from cuddly cub in London to magnificent lion in Africa.

* * * * *

Lasting Love

May 2009

Today is our 54th wedding anniversary, so I’ve been thinking about how long our love has lasted—through good times and bad. Of course, like most loves, ours began long before the wedding. In fact, it began as “puppy love” when we were about 6 years old. Then when we were about 16, our “romantic love” period began. While that kind of love never completely disappears, through the years it becomes transformed into a deeper form of what I call “lasting love.”

I do want to quickly acknowledge that having a marriage that has lasted a long time doesn’t guarantee that the love has lasted as well. Some couples move away from this kind of loving bond, but do not literally move away from each other. This is often a practical decision that may serve their need for companionship, financial support, or just plain old habit. It’s not to be disparaged—because everyone has the right to determine their own course through life, especially when they reach their later years.

But in the U.S. and many other countries, “love” is both more and less important than we recognize. For instance, we overemphasize the importance of “romantic love”—as if it were the be-all and end-all of love. This is a fairly superficial view of love, one that is used to promote all kinds of goods and services in the advertising and marketing world. The most damaging feature of this belief in romantic love as “real love” is that it presents this initial stage of love as the key to “living happily ever after.”

Unfortunately, this leads most couples to have an unrealistic view of what love is and what it can be throughout a lifetime together. When the romantic love stage wanes (as it inevitably does), too many couples think this signals the end of their love for each other. They fail to recognize the far more important kind of love that is waiting to emerge if we value and support the shift to a deeper, more bonded, more connected level.

Those who appreciate this transition and don’t try to hold onto the earlier “romantic” love are far more likely to actually achieve the “happily ever after” relationship. As with many things in life, holding on to a fantasy can prevent you from experiencing the real thing—and the rewards that come with it.

I know that when we’re young, it’s hard to imagine being older and finding joy and comfort in having a partner to hold dear to your heart. We tend to think short-term and fail to appreciate that the decisions we make today eventually

lead us either toward or away from the long-term goals we might want for our lives.

But if “lasting love” is your ultimate goal, it’s important not to cling to the first stage of love (the romantic love that doesn’t last). Otherwise, you miss out on having *both*—the romantic love in the beginning and the lasting love for the long haul. Each one has its place in your life, and the sooner you understand this, the more likely you are to have a life filled with love.

* * * * *

On Being Loved

August 2009

Everyone wants/needs to be loved. Children want to be loved by their parents; single adults want it from their “significant others,” and married people want it from their spouses.

I don’t think you can be the recipient of too much love as a child. Granted, if the love is of a smothering nature, it can be questionable. But one of our favorite family practices, passed down from generation to generation, is for the parent to say to the child, “*I love you up to the sky, across the sky, and on the other side of the sky.*” Invariably this simple phrase delights children and makes them feel extremely loved.

But is there such a thing as being loved too much? I wouldn’t have thought there was much chance of that until something happened the other day that triggered my feeling that way. My very loving husband said, “I know you know I love you, but do you know how *much* I love you?” He has said similar things in the past, but this time my first thought was “I don’t deserve to be loved that much.”

Frankly, I don’t see myself as that “lovable;” I’m often too opinionated, too controlling, too critical, too impatient, and especially too intense. (OK, I’m not *that* bad, but you get the idea; I do not feel like a warm-and-fuzzy lovable type.) Anyway, somehow being the recipient of so much love led me to consider my obvious weaknesses and to feel unworthy of his patience with a person who is not that easy to live with.

He says I’m far too hard on myself, and repeatedly says: “You’re doing fine, Peggy”—even though I know I’m not doing anywhere near as “fine” as he gives me credit for.

Anyway, I decided to ask him specifically *why* he loves me so much. Of course, that’s not a simple question and has no clear answer. But he often says he’s “impressed” by me. I can only assume that he is focusing only on my good qualities (and my good heart, which he knows intimately) and somehow manages to overlook the day-to-day nitty-gritty drama I can generate so unnecessarily.

The bottom line is that his love motivates me in a positive way. I feel much like the character played by Jack Nicholson in the movie “As Good as it Gets” when he says: “*You make me want to be a better [person].*”

So I hope my sharing will motivate you to consider whether you are the kind of person you want to be—both for yourself and for those who may love you.

* * * * *

Trust can be Romantic

February 2010

As Valentine’s Day approaches, I want to share a poem on “Trust” that my husband wrote many years ago.

While we usually think of Valentine’s as a time for candy and flowers and cards with romantic thoughts, trust can also be romantic—as well as far more lasting than the gifts we normally share at this time.

Please Trust Me
By James Vaughan

*Please trust me, so that I can love you freely.
I need your trust to grow; without it I cannot be myself.
Your trust sets me free...gives me strength...helps me open myself to you...
makes me rich...makes me feel ten feet tall...helps me accept myself...feels good.*

*I want to trust you. I will trust you if you care.
I need clear expressions of your caring for me.
I will trust you if you share...
I want to know who you are, what you feel, what you want,
what you think...about life, about love, about me.*

*I will trust you if you dare...
We will change and grow together if we are not afraid.
I want you to be part of my becoming.
I want you to take the risk of hurting me in order to help me grow.
I want to be part of your becoming.*

*I will try to accept you as you are and help you become who you want to be.
Please let me.
I will never hurt you on purpose, but I will run that risk in trying to help you grow.
I will make my trust known to you...
with my eyes...with my touch...with my presence...with my words.*

My trust for you will endure over time and become stronger each time we renew it.

It needs to be renewed so that it will reflect the changes in each of us.

If I should lose your trust, the weight of the loss would lie heavy on my shoulders.

Yet I would still be richer for having had it.

I will not do anything knowingly that would cause you to lose trust in me.

If I trust you deeply, I will also love you deeply.

Trust is a delicate thing.

I may say or do something sometimes that causes you to doubt my trust.

Please share that doubt with me and check out my intentions.

I don't want to lose your trust.

There is no end to the depth of trust we can build.

Each time you show your trust in me,

my love for you grows deeper and I grow stronger.

Trusting you makes it possible for me to trust myself and others more.

When I trust my feelings and natural impulses and act on them, things usually turn out better.

That's hard to do sometimes. Your trust helps me do it more often.

I need your trust now.

Time will never permit us to know each other completely.

But time need not stand in our way.

I have trusted deeply after four hours of sharing.

I have also found trust lacking after four years of working together.

I don't need to know everything you have been or everything you might become.

Let me know you now, and I will trust you now.

I know we need some time together, and yet our ability to trust seems almost independent of time.

Trusting feels good...not trusting feels awful.

Experiencing deep trust with you makes me feel like...time is standing still...

we are touching something precious...

we are reaching out for the highest part of being human...

we are one with the universe.

I can feel your trust when you're not around...it feels like warm sunshine.

When you touch me gently you affirm your trust in me.

I need your touch. I want it. It feels good.

There is power in trust—awesome power.

I can do much, much more when I know you trust me.

I will stretch myself to keep your trust.

*I want to be all the things that I can.
 You can help me if you trust me. I hope you will.
 As I learn more about myself, I will be able to trust you more.
 Please help me learn.*

* * * * *

Love Will Keep us Together

June 2010

The news that Al and Tipper Gore are separating after 40 years of marriage has led to reactions ranging from shock to sadness. They have always seemed to be a very loving couple who were totally committed to each other, and it’s disturbing when we see such a marriage end. However, it’s an illustration of the false assurance promised by the title of a song, “Love will keep us together.”

I identify with their background in that I also married my high school sweetheart—55 years ago. And while I recognize that early marriage can be a drawback, it can also potentially create a closer bond than when you meet as full-fledged adults. However, life has many twists and turns for all of us (regardless of how or when we start out), and theirs has certainly had its share.

For instance, friends have pointed out that their union reflected the old saying that “opposites attract”—and that they have led very different lives for many years, contributing to a certain “growing apart.” So while it may seem sad to see it reach this point, we need to recognize that they seem to have made a very considered, practical decision that they believe to be best for this time of their lives.

While I favor trying to work toward strengthening a marriage rather than abandoning it, I sense that the Gores have done this kind of work. Since I respect each couple’s right to make this decision for themselves, it leaves the rest of us to accept their decision (whatever it is)—whether or not we understand or agree.

With the announcement of their separation, many people jumped to the conclusion that there must be a “smoking gun”—some incident that precipitated it. We may never know whether or not that was the case, but if we take them at their word that it was *not* something like this, then we also need to accept that sometimes marriages end not with a bang but with a whimper.

It’s easy to believe that their caring for each other and their family will continue. And this new situation may feel more authentic than whatever years may have led up to it where they were holding on to the past connection without moving forward together into the future.

One of the many possible factors in the demise of any marriage may be the changing attitudes of men and women as they get older. Although Tipper is 15 years younger than me, I relate to what happened with many women of our

generation. We tended to subvert our own interests and desires to that of our husband and family.

When I married at the age of 19, it was an earlier time when traditional ideas about marriage were far more restrictive. So I abandoned almost all my personal pursuits and interests and threw myself completely into the role of wife, then mother.

In fact, many of us continue to identify strongly with our “roles” as wife, mother, daughter, worker, etc., but can’t clearly state who we are as a “person.” For many years, I’ve tried to remind myself not to get lost in my roles by looking at a saying I’ve posted near my desk saying: “A role is only a task; we’ve been using it as an identity.”

So while I can’t possibly know what might have been the motivation for the Gore’s separation, I can imagine a possible factor being Tipper’s desire to pursue a path beyond fulfilling her “roles” in life. And knowing how my husband has respected and supported my efforts to pursue other aspects of life beyond the roles I play... I can imagine that Al might well be supportive of any desire on Tipper’s part to more completely determine the course of her own life in the future—while maintaining a strong connection to him and to her family.

We would all do well to remind ourselves that there are many ways to live and that each of us struggles to find what’s best at different stages of our lives. So regardless of the reasons for the Gore’s separation, ultimately it’s none of our business—and we can only wish them well.

Chapter 7: Family

A Testament to Fathers

A Remarkable Man

Family First

We are Family

The Importance of Families

Family Ties of Compassion

The Last Move

Babies

A Testament to Fathers

June 2008

We just celebrated the one day of the year when “fathers” get some recognition. On a day-in day-out basis, we’re much less likely to focus on fathers than on mothers. However, even on Fathers Day, appreciation for fathers is often more of a formality than a deeply-felt and deeply-expressed sentiment. This year the public had a chance to witness genuine expressions of love and appreciation for fathers during the extensive coverage of the death of Tim Russert, host of “Meet the Press.”

Several years ago, Tim wrote a book, *Big Russ and Me*, as a tribute to his own father. That book stimulated such an outpouring of messages from others about their own fathers that he did another book, *Wisdom of Our Fathers*, containing many of those testimonials.

I was familiar with Tim’s focus on the importance of fatherhood, but only now appreciate his extraordinary commitment to his role as father to his only son—as well as “father-figure” to the extensive TV family who served under him. The outpouring of detailed stories by so many people made it clear that his love and concern for other people (and for their families) was completely genuine and consistent with all he had written about the importance of families.

Hearing his son speak (only 2 days after his dad’s death) made it even clearer that Tim’s approach to parenting was unusually “hands-on” and involved. His son, who is 22 years old and just graduated from college, said that he spoke to his dad by phone “two or three times a day.” He also described the way his dad would “hang out” with him and his friends—and how everyone was completely comfortable with this arrangement and enjoyed his company.

So while most people know Tim by his “accomplish-ments,” it appears that the far more impressive side of Tim was his love for his family, his faith, his country, and his home-town football team. More broadly, he had an enthusiastic appreciation for the basic things in life, never losing site of the value of hard work.

This brings me to my own father—who played a pivotal role in shaping me and my values. First, he gave me absolutely unconditional love. I was an only child, so he didn’t have a son. And although Daddy was an old-fashioned, hard-working man, he always made it crystal clear that he was thrilled to have a daughter. He said (and I believed him) that he always wanted me to be a girl. In fact, for most of my life, he called me “little girl.” (He died at age 57, when I was 35.)

Here’s a specific example of the way Daddy showed his love on a daily basis. He always got up very early for work and cooked breakfast, and wanted me to join him. As a teenager, early rising was not my preference, but I always did it quite willingly. And who wouldn’t—given the fact that my “alarm clock” was my daddy kneeling by the side of my bed, starting my music box so as to wake me with the same gentle song every morning.

It's not that he thought I was perfect; in fact, his irritation with the way I tended to be late for everything really upset him. But as an adult I came to fully embrace his values—not only about being on time (which is extremely important to me now), but many other values as well. For instance, he was very conservative when it came to money, only purchasing something when he could afford to pay for it with cash. While I can't match that in my own life, I do bring a very spartan approach to “purchasing” as well as a general lack of materialism.

He also believed strongly in “hard work” and worked extremely hard his whole life. As the oldest son in a family of 9, he quit school in the 10th grade to help support the family. Then during my childhood he worked in a stave mill (a wood mill making the kind of boards used for constructing barrels). Finally, as a teenager during my last 2 years at home he had a service station—which he continued for the rest of his life.

I have fully embraced the idea of hard work. In fact, I feel guilty if I “have it too easy,” and even now at age 72 push myself beyond what is needed or expected. I also tend to value people who work hard in the traditional sense far more than people who have “successful careers.”

I'm also more comfortable around what I call “basic people.” I'm sure this is directly related to my admiration for my daddy and others like him who may have been basic, but who had more genuine wisdom than many who are far more educated. Actually, Daddy was quite educated; he undertook his own course of study by reading the entire Encyclopedia and he closely followed the current news.

But it was Daddy's strength of character and genuine love for his entire family that I value most. Not only was he dedicated to me, but to his many nieces and nephews—as well as to all the children who came by his service station with their parents. Unfortunately, too many children grow up without a father in the home, so it's important to be supportive of all children, not just our own. I'm sure that Daddy's wider commitment to children was a factor in my own 2-year stint (at age 21) as “House Mother” in a children's home.

Anyway, the most important lesson from pausing to appreciate our parents is not in what we say about them; it's how we use their example to be better parents ourselves. I've always placed a very high priority on being the best mother I could possibly be. It's clear that my kids come first—even today when they are long past being “kids.” The parent-child bond is one with profound importance in our lives—whether as a child or as a parent. And it's worthy of our focus far more often than just on the “official” times of Mothers Day or Fathers Day.

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A Remarkable Man**July 2008**

Randy Pausch was a remarkable man who, in his famous “Last Lecture,” said: “*I’m dying—and I’m having fun.*” (I wrote about him in my earlier *Musings* book, but there’s so much to learn from him that I want to focus on him again.)

Unfortunately (and inevitably, since he had terminal pancreatic cancer), he died on July 25. But he inspired millions of people in the process of sharing his journey.

At the time of his diagnosis, he was told he had about 3 to 6 months to live—but he made it for 11 months! Good for him—and good for all of us in the lessons we can learn from his example. Ironically, many of us don’t focus on what’s *really* important until it’s too late. Randy clearly demonstrated what was most important to him (and to most people when they near the end)—family!

Although he’d had a prestigious career as a professor and expert in “virtual reality” technology, he was clear that his highest priority was his family. During his final months, he moved his wife and three young children back to the area where relatives lived—so they would have support and comfort after he was gone. And he devoted the time he had left to loving them and enjoying time with them, making sure nothing interfered with that.

For instance, due to the overwhelming reaction to his famous “Last Lecture” at Carnegie Mellon last September, he was pressured to write a book about it, but he was unwilling to take any time away from his family. However, recognizing the benefit it could be to others, he finally found a way to do it—*without* losing any of the precious time with his family.

Since exercise was an important factor in his regime to “live well” during his final days, he regularly took bike rides to maintain his strength. A wonderful writer named Jeffrey Zaslow rode with him and recorded Randy’s words as they rode. This resulted in a wonderful book, also titled *The Last Lecture*.

I encourage you to give yourself a gift. Buy this book (which includes more than just the actual lecture), and you can also watch the video of the lecture online. You’ll be glad you did.

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Family First**February 2009**

The extensive coverage of the new “first family” has been drawing a lot of attention to the idea of putting “family first.” Most parents give lip service to the idea that family comes first, but it’s seldom borne out in their actions. And, frankly, actions speak far louder than words. So the close scrutiny of the first

family's actions are helping to put "family" front and center in the minds of families everywhere.

My husband and I have had a longstanding interest in work-family issues and at one point had a website to focus on this particular area. Although balancing home and work is an issue for many (most?) families, it often takes a back seat to more urgent issues that demand attention.

This is why it's all the more amazing that in the midst of the current urgent problems related to the economy, the family is not getting lost. For instance, most of the coverage of the President's actions include *both* reporting on his efforts to deal with the economy *and* his ongoing focus on how living in the White House is affecting his family. It's insightful to see that no matter how busy or demanding the work part of a person's life may be, it does not have to come at the expense of *also* focusing on the family.

But the first family is not the only one being put in the position of discovering a connection between focusing on the economy and on the family. Yesterday, a friend told me about a couple they knew who were moving back in together, despite having previously moved many miles apart while going through the process of getting a divorce. And I've read a number of articles describing how this phenomenon is playing out in the lives of many other couples as well.

Another indication of the merging of work-family issues is the fact that as so many people lose their jobs, they move in with other family members in order to survive financially. While some of these "forced" mergings may be problematic, it also highlights the significance of family in times of trouble—and has the potential to draw our attention to the ongoing importance of family at all stages of our lives.

All too often we don't become fully aware of the importance of our family until it's too late—which leaves us vulnerable to the experience as described in the opening line of a song from the musical "Damn Yankees," "*A man doesn't know what he has until he loses it.*" Waiting too late means that the loss can feel unbearable. So I encourage everyone to think about the degree to which you put so many other things in life first, taking your family for granted. Putting family first can enrich your life now *and* can help avoid the feeling of loss at what you failed to appreciate once it's gone.

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We are Family

August 2009

In this culture we place a lot of importance on independence and individual rights, sometimes at the expense of family and community. While this is very positive up to a point, it can also create a sense of isolation and a lack of a sense of "belonging" to a larger group. In fact, we're so isolated in many of our

communities that we tend use our workplace or our political affiliation as the basis for establishing a place of belonging.

And when we do focus beyond our individual wants/needs, we're likely to put a lot of emphasis on our "immediate" family—as opposed to our "extended" family. Other cultures more highly value other members of the family, often living with extended family members. They are also more likely to value their "community" as a whole, seeing it as part of their extended family. And they are certainly more likely to value their ancestors.

I have become increasingly aware of the importance of remembering that I am part of a much larger whole. And much of this is due to exploring the teachings of the Cherokee. That interest was motivated by the fact that Cherokee is my only traceable heritage. Even though I am only one-eighth Native American, it gives me both a sense of belonging to a group/clan/tribe *and* a sense of belonging to the wider group of humanity as a whole.

Cherokee teachings are filled with references to "all my relations"—which goes far beyond the particular family or tribe. One of the ways this is expressed among the Cherokee is: "*We are relative to all living beings.*" They have a way of relating "heart to heart" with others, the nation and the planet. Their way of viewing each person as part of a larger whole establishes a sense of family and of belonging that is quite different from our current way of life.

In fact, many of the issues we face around the world today are due to this lack of awareness of how "all of us are in this world together"—all part of a larger whole. Our lack of living as one with nature has led us to try to control nature to suit our convenience, thereby creating many of the natural disasters we are facing today.

We would do well to draw on the Native American experience in reassessing our relationship with each other and the world at large. And this shouldn't be too difficult since many of us (whether or not we know it) have Native American ancestors. For instance, this entire land was fully settled before it was "discovered" by Europeans. No one knows the exact population, but estimates range from 40 million to 90 million when Columbus arrived in 1492. By 1700, there were approximately 50 or 60 distinct Indian "nations" east of the Mississippi River and about 50 Indian nations in the West.

By following the example set by the original "Americans," we can expand our image of "family" beyond the narrow definition we have used to this point. This can help us return to a more cooperative way of dealing with the problems we face—as well as bringing us together as peoples who need each other to survive and thrive.

Some years ago when I was conducting workshops for business, we occasionally used an exercise based on "The Tragedy of the Commons." This simulation consistently demonstrated that when individuals act independently in their own self-interest, they can ultimately destroy a shared limited resource—even when it is clear that it's not in anyone's long-term interest for

this to happen. It was fascinating to watch as people invariably gave in to individual interests even though it repeatedly led everyone to lose. (A good example of this dynamic is displayed in the conclusion of the movie “War Games” in which the computer finally recognized the mutual assured destruction inherent in the game.)

We will have a much better chance of avoiding this kind of scenario in real life if we can begin to see all the peoples of the world as part of our extended “family,” leading us to work together for the common good.

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The Importance of Families

September 2009

The families in many cultures today don’t particularly revere the oldest person in the family. So I feel fortunate to be part of a family where there is a matriarch who is granted the utmost love, respect and admiration. And her position is well-earned. She’s as close to being what might be considered a “saint” as a human can be. As I’ve written about her before, she’s never had anything but a kind word to say about anyone.

She is now almost 102 years old, having survived the death of her husband when she was 47 and both of her daughters. Her son (my husband) is the only “child” remaining. But she’s surrounded by many grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and great-great-grandchildren.

One of the “inside family humor” aspects of her position in the family is that our grandchildren refer to her as the “Super-Prune.” This is said in fondness, not in disrespect. In fact, it developed out of the fact that our own children began calling my husband and me “the Prunes” when we in our 40’s—which is the current age of our children today.

As families have gotten smaller, there’s a certain loss in no longer having the big extended families of the past. But ours may be even smaller than most. First of all, I’m an only child, so my children’s only aunts, uncles and first cousins come from my husband’s side of the family. And this pattern is being repeated in that only one of our children has children of their own. So all of our grandchildren’s aunts, uncles and first cousins come from the other side of the family as well.

Of course, the size of your extended family is not strictly determined by the number of people. For instance, I have 16 first cousins. But since I was the oldest of my generation, only 3 of them were close enough to me in age for us to develop strong relationships.

I’ve been thinking of the particular value of family in these hard economic times when people are losing their jobs and losing their homes—often becoming desperate for somewhere to turn. In times like this, it can be a great

comfort to consider the words of Robert Frost: “*Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.*”

This “going home when there’s nowhere else to go” is a key theme in Tyler Perry’s movies like “Diary of a Mad Black Woman” and “Madea’s Family Reunion.” Unfortunately, not all families enjoy this kind of closeness. But that doesn’t mean you must struggle alone—because “families” can be defined in many ways. This is reflected in the words from an old book, *Free to Be a Family—A Book About All Kinds Of Belonging*. (It was a follow-up to the more well-known *Free to Be... You and Me*.)

For instance, the book, *Free to Be a Family* celebrates all kinds of belonging and the extraordinary diversity among families. The theme of the book is extending the concept of “family” to include adoptive and foster families, step-families, relatives, friends, community, culture, and ultimately global humanity.

So I hope that you will recognize and value the many forms of “family” that are possible—and (in good times and bad) that you will reflect on the nature of your own family relationships and actively work to sustain (or repair) whatever you have.

* * * * *

Family Ties of Compassion

December 2009

At this Holiday Season, my thoughts naturally go to years past when more of my family was alive. In fact, since my daddy died two days after Christmas in 1971, the holidays have always brought feelings of both joy (with my grandchildren) and sadness (thinking about Mother and Daddy being gone).

Although Daddy died suddenly, Mother died a slow, painful death. I sat by her side round-the-clock for her final three weeks. And since she was not conscious, I had a lot of time to think—and to write. One of the many writings during that time was one based on sitting there thinking about my mother’s life. While I’ve never considered myself a poet, when I tried to describe her life, my thoughts came in the form of poetry.

Here’s what I wrote at that time in 1988—when she was 71, younger than I am today:

*My feelings about Mother's life are ones I've had before
But now that she's dying I wish there were more.
More time (not like this time), but time to have had
More of the good things and less of the bad.*

*It's easy to wish for a different kind of life
One with more dreams met, one with less strife.*

*But maybe it's wrong to think that way now
It's not what she did; rather it's how.*

*She certainly had spirit and a mind of her own.
She didn't want "advice;" wanted to do it alone.
Her choices were strange if you didn't understand
How it all fit together in her own private plan.*

*You might have been frustrated that she couldn't see
How much she could do, how much she could be.
But that way of thinking tends to ignore
The impact of all that had happened before.*

*She'd been passive and dependent and somewhat deprived
Of a sense of her potency and ability to thrive.
So when the time came that she could have stepped out
She was afraid of a world she knew nothing about.*

*A world where what's needed is talent and skill
Where safety's abandoned and security is nil.
She had what it took, but she didn't know it.
Her experience hadn't given her the confidence to show it.*

*So those who would judge and say "what a shame"
Had they been in her shoes might have done just the same.
She did what was needed to cope day by day
And when all's said and done, she did it her way.*

So during this season when families often gather, I hope you will think deeply about whatever “issues” you may have about the way either your parents or other family members conduct their lives—and determine to show them compassion, despite any personal objections you may have to their choices in how to lead their lives.

No one can really walk in the shoes of another and fully understand why they are the way they are—or why they do the things they do. But it’s helpful to keep in mind that however much you may disagree with their decisions or their actions, it’s far better to think that just maybe everyone is doing the best they can do at any particular time in their life—and that if or when they can do differently, perhaps they will.

In the meantime, whether or not we understand the thinking or actions of some members of our family, we can (short of their doing something illegal or objectively harmful to us), be more accepting and more compassionate of their struggle to find their way in the world. Believe me, after they’re gone, you’ll be glad you did. I am so thankful that I “made peace” with my personal opinion of

my mother long before she died and was able to accept her as she was and love her as she deserved to be loved. I highly recommend it.

Here's another of my writings during that time:

*She called me her "beautiful daughter"
As if "beautiful" were part of my name
While this probably was good on the one hand
On the other, it was really a shame.*

*For her pride carried with it a sadness
In the way she saw things to be
That the only thing she'd achieved in life
Was giving birth to me.*

*I wish things could have been different
That she'd have gotten her own dose of praise
And that I hadn't represented so much to her
In such contradictory ways.*

*I know none of this is unusual
That life's filled with ironies like this
That it comes with being part of a family
And in some ways is not to be missed.*

* * * * *

The Last Move

December 2009

A large part of the focus in our extended family during the past month has been the issue of arranging for "the last move" for some older family members. There have been two instances of needing to move someone into a nursing home or assisted living facility.

In one situation, it was far past the time when anyone would have expected to live on their own. So there was no real difficulty in making this move—since physical challenges made it an obvious and essential next step. But it still marks a time when there's an awareness that this is "the last move," bringing a certain degree of "finality" to life.

These are very difficult times in most families, one that most people don't want to think about until the time comes when they must act. It's especially difficult if there is resistance to going into "the home," as recently happened with another family member. But within the first few days, she found that she greatly enjoying this new living situation. So it also had a positive resolution.

I've been the primary person responsible for handling this kind of situation twice—for my grandmother and then for my own mother. While I lived far

away from where they lived, I naturally dropped everything to take care of the arrangements.

With my grandmother, it was extremely difficult. Since my mother couldn't face the situation (either physically or emotionally), I was called home to take responsibility for moving my grandmother into the nursing home. Even though there was no alternative, she was extremely resistant to the inevitable move. In fact, one of the saddest (and most courageous) acts I've ever witnessed was when we were walking up to the door of the home—she on her walker and me following behind—and she stopped, turned, and said (with pride), “You didn't think I could do it, did you?” It broke my heart, but both of us were doing what we had to do.

Fortunately, with my mother, it was an entirely different kind of experience. It went smoothly because her health was seriously compromised to the point that she rarely got out of bed. She had almost died four years earlier following a stroke, so she had accepted that this move was coming. And since she would stay in her home town with so many friends, she was fully prepared and accepting of the situation.

I've always had a tendency to think about and talk about end-of-life issues of all kinds, and these experiences just reinforced the value of not waiting until the last minute to address these situations. So I encourage those of you who are gathering with family during this holiday season to take some time to talk about who will do what—and how these responsibilities will be handled. Doing so will allow the whole family to be better prepared when it comes time for a family member to make “the last move.”

* * * * *

Babies

May 2010

Babies can be endlessly fascinating—especially when you can observe them in their natural state. This is exactly the case with a wonderful documentary simply titled “*Babies*.”

I want to encourage you to see this film for many reasons: it's enlightening and entertaining, leading to many laugh-out-loud moments. But it's also a serious study of the enormous contrasts between the lives of babies in different cultures.

I had two “babies” of my own many years ago, and have 3 growing “grandbabies.” Like others in our culture, the way we raise them seems natural and normal. But after watching this documentary, it's clear that what's normal depends almost entirely on the culture in which babies are raised.

The cultural differences in this film are especially striking since the 4 babies are from 4 very different cultures. Ponijao is from Namibia, Mari is from Tokyo, Hattie is from San Francisco, and Bayar is from Mongolia. The first 3

are girls and the last one is a boy. (The families were chosen before the birth of the babies, so the filmmakers didn't know the gender ahead of time.)

The film follows these 4 babies from birth through their first birthday. We watch them learn to crawl, then walk and say Mama and Dada, etc. In essence, we see them go about their daily lives—with no commentary to interrupt our first-hand view of their world. Never was it more true that “a picture is worth a thousand words”—since we not only get a pure picture without commentary; we also get insight into their world without input from their parents.

It's extremely informative to see the stark differences in the way each culture is reflected through the experiences of these babies during their first year of life. Most of us are not as culturally aware as would be beneficial in successfully dealing with a world that is growing more and more interconnected. This film provides a rare opportunity to learn about some cultural differences in a nonthreatening, nonjudgmental way—through the eyes of babies.

The film is short (80 minutes long), and definitely leaves you wanting more. In fact, my husband and I have talked about it a lot, and I fully expect to watch the film again.

Chapter 8: Women

Woman to Woman

“I’m Sorry”

Capable at Any Age

Women Today

Tribute to Strong Women

Woman to Woman

September 2008

I've always been big on sharing with other women for mutual understanding and support; however, I've been much more comfortable when I'm the one *giving* support rather than *receiving* it. But I've had several experiences during this past month where the support I received from other women completely changed my feelings about being on the receiving end of this equation.

I've always known that as women we share many common challenges throughout our lives. But sometimes you encounter another woman who seems to have experienced some version of most of the same challenges you face. This is what happened to me recently.

During this past month I told a friend about three separate issues I was dealing with and was amazed to find that in all three instances she had faced something very similar. By simply sharing what she had done in each situation, I was able to see alternatives I had not considered. And it made all the difference.

While lots of people can provide good objective "advice" or counsel, that's not quite as helpful as when someone shares their own "been there" struggles with the same or similar issues. Drawing on personal experience adds an extra dimension and depth to the degree of understanding of the issue at hand—and thus to the quality of the support it provides.

And best of all, the other person is not "telling you what you ought to do." They're telling you what *they* did in a similar situation. It's nice not to have to reinvent the wheel—but to learn from someone else's experience.

Of course, the benefit of such sharing is not just in being better able to respond to the issue at hand; it's also the enormous relief of feeling so "understood" by another woman. While I've always appreciated the importance of the way we women share our deepest concerns and issues with each other, my recent experience has strengthened my appreciation of the importance of using it more often.

I expect that most of you women reading this have had similar experiences. But sometimes we need to be reminded that it's not necessary (or even desirable) to "put up a front" to other women. With true friends, we can feel free to expose our concerns or struggles—and become even closer by virtue of this kind of openness. There's enormous strength and support available to all of us through our sharing "woman to woman."

* * * * *

"I'm Sorry"

October 2008

How often do you say "I'm sorry" to a complete stranger? If you're a man, the answer may be "seldom" or "never." But if you're a woman (and you carefully

monitor your spontaneous comments when out shopping or anywhere you encounter other people), you may find that you tend to say “I’m sorry” a *lot!* In fact, you’ll notice that it’s kind of a knee-jerk reaction to any even remotely awkward encounter with another person.

If you don’t know what I’m talking about, here’s an example: You’re rounding the corner of an aisle in the grocery store and notice another customer in the general line of the path you’ll be taking—and you immediately say “I’m sorry” as if you had no right to be there in the same aisle.

I’ve noticed this tendency in many women over the years, including in myself. It applies to young women, old women, women in suits, women in sneakers, women with babies pushing strollers, etc. It also applies to interactions both with men and with other women. I’ve even seen women bump into an inanimate object and say “I’m sorry” before it registers on them that there was no other person involved.

Naturally, there are occasions where anyone can inadvertently cause inconvenience to another person, but I’m curious as to why we’re so quick to take responsibility for incidents that are in no way due to anything we’ve done wrong. I suspect it’s a combination of personal tendencies *plus* a big dose of conditioning as females.

While individual issues may play a role in the habit of saying “I’m sorry,” I suspect it’s primarily due to a much more universal set of issues that exist in society as a whole. For instance, the experience of growing up female tends to lead us to see ourselves as the primary nurturer as compared to men. This means we’re generally more aware of and more sensitive to the idea of being considerate of others, which then leads us to be far more likely to be willing to sacrifice, accommodate and inconvenience ourselves for the sake of those around us.

Also, little girls are expected/trained to be “nice” and “polite” far more than little boys. And we’ve taken this niceness/politeness to an unreasonable point where we lose sight of our innate worth and rights as a person. We’re more likely to depend on our deeds to determine our self-esteem. And if we’re not being ultra-considerate of others, we feel we’re not being a “good” person.

One reason I hold these beliefs about women in general is because I *think* they’re part of what has contributed to my own tendency to say “I’m sorry.” And since I can’t know what’s inside the heads of other women, I can only try to dig down in myself to see why “I” tend to react this way.

I do know that regardless of the esteem in which others may hold me, I don’t feel OK unless I meet my own standards of what it means to be thoughtful and considerate. These standards are so unreasonable that, for instance, if I even *think* of something nice to do for someone else (and then fail to follow through and do it), I feel “guilty.” No one else even knows of the possibility of what I might have done, but I still feel bad about myself.

(Unfortunately, I tend to have a lot of spontaneous ideas about nice things I could do for people—which keeps me constantly disappointed in myself.)

As I've written in the past, oftentimes our weaknesses are simply overuses of our strengths. So while it's an admirable quality to be considerate of others, it's obviously gone beyond being reasonable when it leads us as women to say "I'm sorry" in instances where it makes no sense at all. So rather than walking around with a mindset of being prepared to thoughtlessly apologize at the drop of a hat, we'd all be better served by being prepared to actually notice what's happening and determine whether or not it's appropriate to say "I'm sorry."

One final irony... While we're much too quick to say "I'm sorry" to strangers for any real or imagined slight or inconvenience, we're much less inclined to say "I'm sorry" to our spouse or children or friends—even when it would be appropriate to do so. (Maybe we use up our apologies with strangers.) The bottom line is that we'd all be better off if we were more selective in when we do—or *don't* say "I'm sorry."

* * * * *

Capable at Any Age

June 2009

I just read a book called *Defying Gravity*. It's aimed at women, but contains a valuable message for everyone. It encourages us to stop thinking it's too late to do whatever we really want to do, rather to identify what we really love and "go for it."

I think the first instance I can recall personally of someone who embodied the message of the book was President Jimmy Carter's mother. At age 68, "Miss Lillian" joined the Peace Corps, where she spent 21 months working in India, including with lepers.

The book contains the stories of a number of women who were "late bloomers," only pursuing something they loved when they were older. Of course, your idea of what defines being "older" changes as you age. For instance, some of the women profiled were in their 40's or 50's when they embarked on a new venture in life—while others were in their 60's, 70's or 80's.

As we get older, we tend to get more fearless. I can sense this in myself these days. I'm becoming far more willing to take risks in saying and doing things I might have censored at an earlier age. I wish I could have had this attitude when I was younger instead of being so cautious, always second-guessing myself. But it's never too late to make changes in your attitude about what you can and can't do.

While, of course, there are physical limitations that come into play as you get older, even those are usually exaggerated. The body is quite capable and resilient when we care for it in a responsible way. And whatever physical

diminishment there might be is more than compensated for by the emotional and psychological strength that comes from dealing with a lifetime of challenges. Overall, I actually feel stronger as an overall person than I did when I was much younger.

However, this concept of deciding what we can or can't do at various ages is not limited to older people. It's also true when applied to very young people. In earlier days when children bore a lot of family responsibilities, they excelled at tasks that today we tend to think are too difficult for children. But in most cases they are far more capable than we allow them to demonstrate.

We hear exceptional stories of how young children have saved a parent's life through some timely act. But there are many more examples of children in everyday situations who simply do what needs to be done. For instance, just this week I witnessed this kind of situation. I was in a public bathroom stall when I heard a conversation between a mother and her daughter, who sounded extremely young.

The child was reporting on her progress in "taking care of business" in the next stall while her mother asked questions from outside. Then when the child exited the stall, the conversation continued with the child obviously handling her own washing-of-hands, etc. I was curious as to why the mother wasn't more "hands-on" with such an obviously young child. So I rushed to exit my stall before they could leave the restroom.

Then I understood what was happening. Sure enough, the child was only about 3 years old. But she was quite the capable, independent little girl—because she had obviously had lots of experience, based on *needing* to be that way. Her mother was sitting in a special electric chair that accommodated her severe physical disability.

There was no evidence of a downside to this situation in that the child seemed to be thoroughly enjoying the outing with her mother—with no thought that this was anything but *normal*. It was a beautiful example of being "capable at any age."

So the next time you think that your child (when they're young) or you (as you age) aren't capable of something, you might want to consider whether we have been selling ourselves and our children short. We unnecessarily limit ourselves and our children by a mindset that fails to recognize and appreciate our abilities throughout our lives.

* * * * *

Women Today

October 2009

As a woman who is the mother of a daughter and grandmother of three girls, I have a strong interest in all aspects of the status of women today. Actually, I've been interested in this issue for many years, having gone through my own

transformation from a 50's traditional young married woman to gradually becoming a 70's feminist. (Yes, I'm a "feminist"—defined as being for equality in all aspects of life for both men and women. After all, I also have a son and want only the best for him as well.)

In 1992 we heard pronouncements about that being "the year of the woman." However, the current period appears to be a far more significant time regarding the changing status of women in this country. The most recent evidence of women's progress is outlined in the 454-page "Shriver Report" (a study by Maria Shriver and the Center for American Progress) titled "A Woman's Nation Changes Everything."

The report includes a slight disclaimer about the reference in the title to "a woman's nation" by declaring:

While deliberately provocative, [this phrase] does not mean we are, but just as surely it does mean we no longer live in a man's world, underscoring a significant trend of the gradual, undeniable, and irreversible progress toward gender equality in every arena of American life—from the public sector... to private life.

The report does provide convincing evidence of the changing status of women—not just in a few areas, but in a wide range of aspects of life, including: the economy, government, immigration, health, education, business, faith, media, men, and marriage. In addition, the October 26, 2009, issue of "Time Magazine" reports the results of their Time Poll on the status of women—both at work and at home.

These current reports are only the latest in a series of articles and books that describe the growing influence of women in all parts of American life. In fact, a couple of books I've read during the past year go beyond describing women's growing *influence*, to pointing out their growing *power*.

I recently read a book called *Womenomics* by Claire Shipman and Katty Kay (both TV journalists) that provides data indicating that those companies with more women in senior positions were more profitable. It reports on a Pepperdine study that found "*companies with the best records of promoting women beat the industry average by 116 percent in terms of equity, 46 percent in terms of revenue, and 41 percent in terms of assets.*" (The study report was called "Women in the Executive Suite Correlate to High Profits.") Certainly, bottom-line results like this greatly enhance the potential power of women in the workplace.

Even earlier, Dee Dee Myers wrote a book with the provocative title, *Why Women Should Rule the World*. As the first female White House press secretary during the Clinton presidency, she primarily sets forth the *need* for more women to be in positions of authority. She describes the special challenges for women in succeeding in any realm of politics or business—in fact, in all leadership positions. She also points out the special strengths women bring to leadership, arguing that "*women possess the kind of critical problem-solving*

skills that are urgently needed to break down barriers, build understanding, and create the best conditions for peace.”

We would be remiss to focus *only* on the changing influence of *American* women. Women around the world are taking on leadership roles in striking ways. There are women leaders of a number of other countries, but the most impressive changes have happened in the daily lives of ordinary women—most prominently through the success of microfinance projects in poverty-ridden nations.

This microcredit effort began in 1976 with Mahummad Yunus loaning very small amounts of money (beginning with \$27) to women so they could get materials or animals, etc., to begin their own businesses as entrepreneurs. They were highly responsible and repaid the loans at astounding rates, so the practice has continued to grow through the years to many countries, supported by many organizations. It’s become clear that women were more successful because they used their profits for the good of the family—whereas men gaining access to money in these countries tended to use it for their own personal pleasures.

The changes for women in these situations has been enormous—not just in the business arena, but also in their personal lives. Whereas many women had been suppressed or abused prior to becoming financially successful, their husbands began valuing them and treating them with respect.

Being valued and respected is something desired by all people—both men and women. And if the increasing influence of women can help bring this about, then it will be a win-win for everyone. But we all have a role to play in determining whether or not this happens.

For instance, parents play the first and most important role in making this possible. So the challenge for all of us is to focus on raising our sons and daughters to be equally valued and supported so that everyone will grow up prepared to be leaders and productive members of society.

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Tribute to Strong Women

December 2009

Women serve as the foundation of the family, and one of their primary roles has been to preserve the family history.

Below are the words from a greeting card I sent to my great-aunt Roberta—which perfectly expressed the role of this very special woman in my own family. She was the one who had maintained the most detailed history of the family going back many generations—which meant a lot to me because it allowed me to know more of my Cherokee Indian heritage.

*It is the women of our families who keep the traditions,
preserve the memories, and hold us close.*

Where would we be without our grandmothers, aunts,

sisters, and others who add so many “motherly” touches to our lives...

*Who encourage and sympathize, build our confidence,
and let us know that their love is always behind us—beautiful and strong.*

Where would we be without wonderful women like you?

Ironically, although Aunt Roberta and I have corresponded for more than 20 years, we have never met in person. But I've saved all her letters, and her importance in my life has been significant.

Another wonderful woman in my family was my daddy's oldest sister, Aunt Carmen. I greatly admired and appreciated her in life; and when she died, I wrote the following eulogy.

A Remarkable Woman.

Aunt Carmen was one of a kind, but also part of a special breed of women with a quiet, inner strength forged from difficulty. She was loving, caring, and giving “above and beyond” the call of duty; also independent, strong-willed, and determined—even stubborn. She forged her own path through life and “did it her way.”

Above all—she had a strong sense of family, always helping, advising, coordinating, and keeping various parts of the family connected to each other. She strongly valued family get-togethers (even when she might sleep through them).

A mark of the importance of a person's life is the degree of impact on the lives of others when they're gone. In other words, what difference did they make? She made a special difference—the kind of difference that will be greatly missed.

I've always felt a special connection with Aunt Carmen—partly because she was the oldest daughter of one generation in the family and I was the oldest daughter of the next generation.

Her life gives me strength as I remind myself of the kind of stock I come from. I will carry some of her wonderful spirit within my heart to help guide me through the rest of my life.

Perhaps the clearest example of the special strength of women is to be found in the beliefs and actions of mothers.

Many years ago, “New Woman” magazine did a survey of mothers, asking them to consider the following proposition:

“I might be driven to kill another human being, if need be, in order to protect my child(ren) from serious harm or death.”

Here are the responses they received from 12,500 readers:

- 81% said yes
- 4% said no
- 15% said they didn't know

As the magazine said in reporting these statistics:

Throughout the animal community, females with offspring are very aggressive. Certainly in the woods there's nothing worse than to run into a female bear with three cubs; compared to her, a male bear is nothing. The maternal instinct has always been in women, as well as in female animals. Women aren't passive "in nature;" they have simply been cast in that role.

Yes, women are strong in many areas, and we can all take inspiration from their strength. So as families gather during this holiday season, I hope we will pause to appreciate and acknowledge the special role of the women in our families. This is a great opportunity to show our appreciation and respect for what they do—now, before it's too late.

Chapter 9: Body

Body Maintenance
Taking your Medicine
Dealing with Doctors
Body for Life
Me and my Shadow
Better Health with Dr. Oz
Eat Real Food
Born to Run
The Numbers that Really Matter

Body Maintenance

June 2008

It's easy to get so caught up in trying to take care of all our responsibilities that we fail to take care of the most essential factor in being capable of doing other things: taking care of the health and well-being of our own bodies. This fact was brought home to me recently when a good friend had to deal with a breast cancer diagnosis—and subsequent surgery and radiation. It turns out that she had not had a mammogram for about 10 years!

I was quite surprised—because not only is she a smart woman, but she knew all about my own bout with breast cancer back in 1992. She had also been through her husband's bout with prostate cancer. But, actually, she's not that unusual. Many of us are in denial about the realistic health problems we could face—and the need to be proactive in finding out about potential threats *in advance* of an emergency.

While I've been totally committed to having an annual physical and an annual mammogram, there are other checkups that I fail to do in as timely a way as would be advisable. So I have now embarked on a 'full-body checkup' (something like a car's 60,000-mile checkup). In addition to my mammogram, I also had a blood test—which should be routine, but (with veins that are thin and “roll”) required 5 tries by a skilled nurse to successfully retrieve blood for testing. (I'm fortunate that I'm neither squeamish nor strongly affected by pain. For example, I don't even need novocaine to have caps put on my teeth.)

Tomorrow I'm scheduled for a bone density test, and later this month I have appointments with both my dentist and my ophthalmologist. I also did a fecal occult blood test—and am scheduled to have a colonoscopy two years from now. Of course, there's no way to avoid (or even to run a test for) every possible health problem, but it feels good to at least be taking the obvious “body maintenance” steps that we know can make a difference.

Of course, one of the most important ways of maintaining our bodies is on a daily basis—by adjusting our lifestyle to include more exercise and healthier ways of eating. In fact, in some respects these are our greater challenges (and failures)—due to the ongoing nature of the requirements. In fact, it reminds me of a Peanuts cartoon I saw many years ago.

To the best of my memory, it went like this: Snoopy said to Woodstock: *"You should go out at dawn, sit on the fence, and chirp—because that's what birds do. It will make you feel better."* Woodstock did as he suggested, then came back all puffed up with pride, feeling he'd done a good job. Then Snoopy said: *"That's good, but you need to do that every day for the rest of your life"*—at which point Woodstock fell over in a dead faint.

I'm doing pretty well with the “every day” requirement, but I know I can do better. So I'm prepared to recommit to continuing (and even expanding on) my current effort at good body maintenance. And I encourage everyone who is taking care of everything else except their own bodies to pause and rethink the

shortsightedness of that approach. We don't expect our cars to keep going without regular maintenance, and the same is true to an even greater extent when it comes to caring for our bodies.

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Taking your Medicine

July 2008

Most of the time when you hear the phrase “taking your medicine,” it refers to having to face the consequences of some unwise action. But I mean it literally. I've been taking 3 different medicines for a week now (with one more week to go)—and I hate it. I take no medications on an ongoing basis, so this feels like an insult to my system. Actually, it's just an aggravation due to the side-effects, particularly the constant metallic taste in the mouth caused by one of the medications.

I know it's silly to complain—because many people have to take lots of pills every day. And maybe the fact that I've been so fortunate in avoiding that situation is what makes it all the more difficult to deal with. Also, it's hard to remember what to take when—since I take 2 in the morning, 1 at noon and 2 at night.

I'm really good at dealing with health issues that many people find somewhat difficult—like the fact that having a blood test involves repeated efforts before finding a vein (like the 5 tries referred to earlier). I can watch that process, even offering suggestions based on my personal experience with what works best in succeeding. But it's the basic garden-variety health issues that get me down.

I think my impatience with minor health-related problems is because I work so hard to *avoid* them. Of course, rationally I know that we don't have the power to control all the things that can go wrong with our bodies. In fact, it's amazing that more things don't go wrong more often, given the complicated machine that is the human body.

I may be more sensitive to health problems because of the environment in which I live—which is a “senior community.” (Actually, the age requirement is only 55, which hardly seems “senior.”) But since there also are a lot of elderly people who use walkers or wheel chairs, they serve as a constant reminder of the difficulties when the body fails to function well.

I try to use my regular exposure to people who are struggling like this as a reminder to be thankful that I'm still fit and healthy. In fact, another constant reminder of how well people can cope with health problems is my mother-in-law who is now 100 years old! Understandably, she has quite a few health problems, but she never complains and constantly says that she's thankful she can still be “up and around.”

So those of us who are generally healthy need to keep the perspective of how fortunate we are—and not complain about minor irritations like I’m experiencing now. In fact, I hope that writing this will reinforce my determination to overcome the foolishness of my complaining about the temporary inconvenience of taking my medicine.

* * * * *

Dealing with Doctors

October 2008

First of all... if you have insurance and the ability see a doctor, be thankful—and be sure to have regular checkups as well as going for help whenever there’s a physical problem that calls for closer scrutiny.

I’ve been fortunate in that I have always been able to see a doctor whenever I needed one. I grew up in a small town where almost everyone went to the same doctor. (There wasn’t much choice.) Fortunately, he was a very caring man who seemed to be competent to care for all of us who depended on him.

However, since I’ve been an adult, I’ve lived in about a dozen different cities and have had many different doctors—some good, some not so good, and some I abandoned shortly after my first visit. It’s easy to get intimidated by “the Dr.” (and by the whole medical environment) in a way that is not in our best interests.

While most doctors are genuinely trying to do their best in treating you as a patient, even the best doctor can’t anticipate or guess all the various issues that may play a part in ensuring that you get the best treatment possible. So I want to offer some tips in “dealing with doctors” that can help them help you!

First of all, “make an appointment.” No doctor can help you stay healthy unless you have regular checkups. I’m thinking of this today because James just had what was supposed to be his “annual physical”—almost a year late. I’m a “nag,” but had finally let this one slip. Fortunately, he got a good report, but there’s no way to know for sure without having the annual blood tests and other checkups.

It’s critical not to let concern about hearing “bad news” keep you away. If there *is* bad news, it will only get worse as time passes. So it’s much better to know sooner rather than later. Another barrier for some people is wanting to avoid some of the basic procedures. Neither men nor women particularly relish the aspects of the physical that feel embarrassing or invasive. But they’re important parts of the process of prevention and/or detection.

Speaking of detection, I’m scheduled for a consultation with a specialist in preparation for getting my first colonoscopy. This is another procedure that many people would prefer to avoid, but it’s well-established that colon cancer is curable when caught early—and almost always deadly when caught late—and that the colonoscopy is the gold standard in detection. So while I can’t say

I'm "looking forward to it," I certainly don't want to avoid it. In fact, I had it on my list of things to discuss at my last doctor's visit.

This brings me to another tip that can make a big difference in getting the best treatment possible: making a list (in duplicate—one for the doctor and one for yourself) of all the points you want to address during your visit. Doctors are almost always rushed—which may mean you don't manage to ask all the questions you might have. All too often, after answering a question, the doctor thinks that's "it" and starts to wrap up the visit. But if you hand the doctor your list of questions or other issues you want to raise, then he or she knows there's more.

The reason this is so effective is because as the doctor reads over your list and responds, you are prepared to make notes about the responses on your own copy. And you don't need to be concerned that the doctor will be upset about your "list." Since it prevents mistakes and misunderstandings about the doctor's advice, most doctors appreciate a patient who is organized—and prepared to make notes about whatever he or she is saying.

Of course, it's important to take responsibility for your health. In addition to being smart about the way you eat and exercise, etc., that means getting and reviewing all your medical reports. For instance, if you have your lab work (blood drawn) on the day of your doctor's visit, the doctor doesn't have the results to review with you at your visit. So it's important to go in a week in advance of your appointment for the lab work so it's available to discuss with your doctor.

Also, you have a legal right to copies of all your medical tests—but you need to *ask* for them. The office will be glad to make photocopies for you, so don't leave the doctor's office without copies of any tests you don't already have. It's extremely helpful to be able to monitor the different readings on your blood tests over time—to note any changes. You get a clear picture of whether you're improving or backsliding, as well as being alerted to any specific change that might be significant and call for further exploration.

Also, don't be shy about asking for a referral if/when you feel you need treatment beyond the scope of your primary physician. Even the most caring doctor (under pressure to keep expenses down) may not refer you to a specialist—unless you specifically ask. So again, it's your responsibility to be your own best advocate in receiving good medical care.

If you can't find it within you to say or do the kinds of things I've spelled out above, then take someone with you to the doctor who can serve as an advocate for you. It's also helpful to have a second set of ears to hear whatever the doctor says—since it's often hard to remember everything once you get home.

Finally, you'll do better at dealing with your doctor if you remind yourself that he or she is first a "person" who simply has the role of doctor in your interactions. If you take a balanced view of the person/doctor role, you'll be

better prepared to get the most benefit from your visits—and the payoff will be better health.

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Body for Life

April 2009

When you're young, you feel your body is invincible, so you tend to use it any way you please—without regard to how it will hold up over the years. But as you get older and begin to experience the normal wear and tear of all those years of “abuse,” you realize that you could have made a huge difference by following some simple guidelines along the way.

Below are a few of the issues we frequently face as we get older that are the direct result of how we treat our bodies through the years.

Back

Almost everyone at some point has some kind of “back problem.” It may be sporadic and not very serious, but it can interfere with activities at the most inconvenient times. And all too often a real “weakness” develops (especially in the lower back), causing people to severely restrict their physical activities. While we may use care when lifting heavy items (using our legs rather than bending over), we engage in a multitude of daily activities where we disregard the impact on our backs.

I see young mothers with their hips thrust out to support the weight of carrying children around on their hips or jerking strollers out of the back of cars. Many of us lean out over the bed to smooth the covers and almost everyone bends over the sink or lavatory just enough to put some strain on the back.

These are simple movements that can have a major impact over many years. Personally, I had my own wake-up call about 20 years ago due to a 3-year period of severe back pain involving my sciatic nerve. The pain finally subsided (mainly through lifestyle changes involving relaxing more and not being so generally tense), but much of it probably could have been avoided.

Knees, Shoulders, Elbows

These joints are heavily used by most people who engage in any kind of ongoing sport or physical exercise. And as we age, we have problems continuing to do the kinds of activities we'd like to do—or even to easily manage the basic functioning required of daily life. Of course, there are all kinds of treatments (and even replacements) for these parts today, but much of the problems could have been avoided by recognizing that we needed to protect our bodies so we could call on them throughout a full lifetime.

Skin

Many/most older people develop “sun spots” or other more serious skin problems from too much exposure to the sun. My husband had about 40 spots

burned off by the dermatologist last week, plus a couple of more serious ones cut off for biopsy. Unfortunately, when we were growing up, no one thought of wearing sun screen—so we pay a price later on for what we fail to do in our youth. But young people today are still not always as conscientious about sun screen as would be best.

Teeth

Another habit that was nonexistent when we grew up was flossing. We were lucky to be exposed to flossing in time to keep all our teeth, and we've been very committed to flossing for many years now. But young people today who know the importance of flossing *still* don't do it on a regular basis—just one more example of the late-life consequences of a failure to care for our bodies when we're young.

Stomach

When we're young, we put almost anything in our stomachs, and our stomachs do their best to process it for us. But after many years of eating the “wrong” foods (especially failing to eat foods high in fiber), many people develop “stomach problems.” My own struggle with diverticulosis has led to a pattern of eating that I should have been following all my life. In fact, diverticulosis occurs in approximately one-third of the population older than age 45 and in up to two-thirds of the population older than 85 years. (It also affects a significant proportion of younger adults, but they're asymptomatic until later.) So anyone who wants to live a long life without chronic stomach aches would do well to follow a high-fiber diet from youth.

Feet

This one is more of a problem for women because we insist on wearing high heels—which is a full-fledged assault on the structure of our feet. Not only does it eventually lead to deforming the feet, but to pain as well. But in the meantime, the height of heels is getting even higher than in the past, so we can expect even more “foot problems” as today's young women age.

Heart

This body part has gotten the most attention and generated the most serious effort by people to prevent problems. But there's so much denial and rationalization about doing what's best for the heart that many people are at great risk for high blood pressure, high cholesterol, etc., that can lead to heart problems. And, of course, the growing obesity epidemic is a huge problem for maintaining heart health throughout a normal lifespan. Eating a heart-healthy diet and engaging in regular exercise is a simple but significant formula for avoiding many heart problems. While we have more medical treatments and resources, the smart course for our hearts is to prevent having to turn to corrective measures after the harm has been done.

I could continue with other parts of the body that suffer from our failure to care for them properly earlier in our lives—but you get the point. The bottom

line is to commit to focusing on the many ways you rely on you body and to doing everything possible to maintain a high-functioning body for life.

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Me and my Shadow

October 2009

The other day I was walking with the sun at my back and a very clear reflection of my shadow in front of me. Despite the sad lyrics of the old song “Me and my Shadow—all alone and feeling blue,” I did *not* feel “alone” or “blue.” In a strange way, I find that seeing my shadow moving along with my body is kind of comforting—partly because I so clearly recognize it as “me.”

It’s nice to feel that I could see that shadow anywhere (even in a photo or video)—and recognize it as mine. Another reason I like it is that this reflection of me looks better than the real me. It doesn’t show the wrinkles or any of the normal blemishes that come with age. But the biggest reason I like it is that it has been so constant through the years. Although I’ve gained and lost about 20 pounds several times along the way, the changes have not been particularly noticeable and the overall outline has remained generally the same.

The main reason I find such satisfaction in the familiarity of my shadow is that it represents the results of years of trying to take care of my weight and my overall health. My motivation was due to the lesson I learned in watching my mother (who began her adult life as a 120-pound young woman) gradually gaining more weight each year of her life, weighing 270 pounds at the time of her death at age 71. The weight gain led to Type 2 diabetes, which then led to terrible side effects, including blindness, ending in her dying of gangrene.

Now at the age of 73, I’m even more committed to maintaining my health and my weight, since the two are closely connected. Also, the whole issue of weight has become a far more prevalent problem than in the past. I clearly recall a time when very few people weighed as much as my mother did through much of her life. But today, we routinely see many people who are significantly overweight—and as a consequence, more and more people are developing Type 2 diabetes and other weight-related medical problems.

I do understand from watching my mother’s struggles with weight that it’s hard to reverse the weight-gain trend. But we have so much more information today than in the past. We now understand that dieting alone doesn’t work. In fact, actual “dieting” (with the almost inevitable regaining of the weight) should not be the goal. Rather, it needs to be changing our eating style to one that can be sustained for the rest of our lives.

Also, while we’ve known that exercise was an important aspect of weight control, the greater emphasis has been on diet than on exercise. But the greatest advances in our understanding about weight loss have been on the exercise front. For instance, there is now a lot more clarity about the importance of

exercise (the “calories out” part of the equation) than just on dieting (the “calories in” part).

And even more important, we now understand that the recommended 30 minutes of exercise per day need not be done all at one time. It can be broken down into three 10-minute time periods. This goes a long way toward making it more practical for so many busy people. Also, I recently learned that simply “moving more often” (frequently getting up and moving around) leads to great benefit—by revving up the metabolism enough to continue to provide some benefit after sitting down again.

It’s a cliché to say that “it’s the little things” that count—but when it comes to health and fitness, it’s true that every little thing makes a difference. Everything you do or don’t eat and every time you do or don’t move around all add up to contribute to the shadow you produce out in the sunshine.

Since your shadow just shows your outline, it doesn’t show changes as drastically as looking in a mirror. So rather than looking in the mirror to check out how you look, it’s less distracting and provides more useable information to simply observe your shadow. Does it “look like you?” Would you recognize it as being yours in a line-up? If you can’t identify with the reflection of yourself in your shadow, I encourage you to begin taking steps (with both diet and exercise) that will help bring your shadow back in line with the image of yourself that you carry in your head from some point in your life when you saw your shadow as being more representative of “you.”

TIP: There are many excellent sources of information about health and weight today. But one of the best is the new TV show “Dr. Oz” which airs daily, Monday through Friday, and covers just about “everything you wanted to know about your body, your weight, and your overall health.” In fact, I was motivated to write this particular piece because of his closing statement each day, asking everyone watching to tell just one other person. So I decided to tell a lot of people, in the hope that it will provide the encouragement we all need to live longer, healthier lives.

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Better Health with Dr. Oz

November 2009

If you haven’t seen the Dr. Oz Show on TV, I strongly urge you to do so. He’s been referred to as “the wizard of Oz”—partly because he so accurately reflects one of the definitions of a wizard: “a person with great skill in an activity.” His *activity* is explaining everything about the functioning of the human body.

Although he’s a heart surgeon, he seems to be a walking encyclopedia about every aspect of the body and how it works. His expertise is especially wonderful because of his amazing skills at *delivering* the information. He uses

common terms and references that are not couched in medial jargon but are easily understood.

His wisdom has been available for quite some time through the more than a dozen books he has co-authored with Dr. Roizen (including *YOU: The Owners Manual*)—as well as his multiple appearances on the Oprah Show. But having his own show makes all the difference in being able to fully benefit from his extraordinary ability to educate us about our bodies.

In the short time his show has been on the air (just a couple of months at this point), he's already had a huge impact on many people—both show participants and viewers at home. One of the reasons he's having such an impact is that the help he offers is coming from the heart. For many years, I have been quite cynical about most of the “self-help” offered on TV—because so much of it has been exploitive. But the special caring and compassion that comes through on the Dr. Oz Show is something completely different.

The high standards were beautifully articulated by one of the guests (Rocco, the cowboy). After completing his 28-day challenge to improve his dangerous health conditions, he returned to report on what he did and how he did it. In the course of his report, he offered the following assessment of the process, saying the following to Dr. Oz:

You guys do a great job. Everybody here... This is not a TV show. And I'm serious about this. The reason I lost the weight is not because I was on a TV show. Everybody from the first person who called me about this show, to Dr. Oz through Dr. Roizen, all the producers, everybody. This is...I tell everybody I'm moving to the land of Oz. It's a place to go, and that's the reason I lost the weight. It wasn't me. I didn't want to fail you. I didn't want to fail Dr. Roizen.

I have no connection to the show in any way, but I feel very connected to their attitude of “helping people help themselves.” So I encourage you to check it out for yourself.

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Eat Real Food

March 2010

A little over a year ago I was diagnosed with a couple of digestive problems that have caused me to be much more vigilant about what I eat than in the past. Like most people, my eating has varied through the years. Being raised in the Deep South, I grew up on fried chicken, chicken-fried steak, pork chops—as well as on lots and lots of vegetables. So I got some of the best and some of the worst of the kind of diet that can make a difference.

To illustrate part of the really bad aspects of the diet of my childhood, it wasn't until I was 7 years old and eating breakfast at a friend's house after

spending the night that I learned that not everyone put sugar on their toast. Prior to this point, I had never had toast that didn't have sugar sprinkled on top.

After becoming an adult and broadening my experience in eating a wider variety of foods, I eventually went way beyond my basic beginnings—particularly when I took a gourmet French cooking class and spent about 6 months cooking nothing but French food. Not surprisingly, I burned out on that and didn't continue it.

Later, when I had teenagers, we went through a hectic period when we often ate frozen TV dinners. As the opportunities for “fast and easy” food expanded, we got into the habit of eating a lot of prepared food. While that has moderated some in recent years, it's still tempting to fall back on the “quick meal.”

But now, with my eating problems (two different ones that call for contradictory ways of eating), I'm at a loss as to just *what* to eat. Actually, I'm pretty knowledgeable about nutrition. I once took a nutrition class and have done a lot of reading about nutrition through the years. I've even found a few books that are helpful with my current issues—and my doctor is referring me to a dietician to help figure out the best eating plan. So there's hope that things will improve.

However, aside from my particular eating issues, the general population also needs to pay a lot more attention to eating in a healthier way. The statistics on obesity and type 2 Diabetes alone are frightening, especially when projected into the future based on current trends among today's children.

My general concern about the American diet became even greater when I recently watched the documentary, “Food, Inc.” If you haven't seen it, I recommend that you do so. In fact, you don't have to take my word for it. There are 315 reviews of the DVD on Amazon.com—with 267 of them giving it a 5-star rating and 32 giving it a 4-star rating.

After seeing the documentary film, I also read a book by one of the people narrating the film, food expert Michael Pollan. It's called *Food Rules: An Eater's Manual*. This little book provides the clearest, most straightforward guidance for smart eating that I've ever seen. Like most people, I've read all kinds of diet books, but this is *not* a diet book. It's a smart eating book.

Finally, to give you a “taste” of what you'll find in the book, here are a few of its very basic suggestions:

- Eat real food—not food products.
- Avoid food products containing ingredients that a third-grader cannot pronounce.
- Avoid food products that contain more than five ingredients.
- Avoid food products that contain high-fructose corn syrup or list sugar among the top three ingredients.
- Don't eat anything your great-grandmother wouldn't recognize as food.

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Born to Run**April 2010**

As I've mentioned in the past, one of my granddaughters is a runner. She excels at both cross country and track. So I've been watching a lot of running over the past few years—which has led me to have an increased interest in all things related to running.

This interest led to my reading a fascinating book titled *Born to Run* that makes the case for how we humans (like most animals) are literally born to run long distances. In fact, it was essential that early humans be able to run like this in order to last long enough to finally catch an exhausted prey. Humans couldn't run as fast as most of their prey (and they didn't initially have tools with which to bring them down), so they needed to outlast them by being able to run longer.

The only known group of people who still run for extremely long distances (hundreds of miles at a time) are a mysterious group in Mexico known as "Tarahumara." However, their real name is Raramuri—which means "the running people." Not only do they run extreme marathons, but they do it for the sheer enjoyment of running—and they do it barefoot!

Christopher McDougall, the author of *Born to Run*, makes the case that running steadily for hours at a time is not only therapeutic but also natural. Today we still have the physical capability to run for long distances, but we have adopted many habits and ways of life that make it impossible to act on our natural running ability. He studied these people and arrived at some ways for us to understand why we've lost our ability to run and what we can do about it.

For instance, our efforts to enhance our ability to run (by using the most advanced running shoes) have actually been inhibiting our natural ability to run. In fact, these modern shoes are suspected of being a common cause of athletic injury. While it's unlikely we'll go back to being able to run barefoot (partly because our environment is made up of so much concrete and is quite different from running in the open plains), we *can* learn to run longer distances with more comfort.

Frankly, at my age, I have no desire to run, but I do walk about an hour a day and feel much better due to finally adopting this habit. But, of course, if there's a way to make the walking experience better, I'm interested in trying it. This led me to purchase a pair of walking shoes that are patterned on the idea of the barefoot runners. In fact, these shoes are based on what's called Masai Barefoot Technology.

They're designed to simulate walking in sand, and claim to bring relief of muscular tension, joint problems, back problems, leg and feet problems. They have a curved sole so your heel does not pound into the ground first and other very unique aspects. And they do feel entirely different from regular shoes. I've

only had them a short while, but so far I'm extremely pleased with the "spring" they seem to put in my step.

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The Numbers that Really Matter

April 2010

I don't know about clothes for men, but shopping for women's clothes has become a guessing game when it comes to knowing what size you wear. I used to know my size, but a recent shopping trip turned out to be quite confusing. Clothes-shopping is something I rarely do anymore. It's not that I don't buy any clothes, but it's usually only when I happen to see some bargain that I can't pass up. Since I don't do the kind of traveling (or attend the kinds of "dress-up" events of the past), I believe my "good clothes" may last me the rest of my life.

However, with a rare business trip coming up in a couple of months, I found that I needed a few items to cover the days I'd be gone. So I went shopping. It was not nearly as simple as I remember from the past. First of all, most of the clothes on display were far more appropriate for my daughter or granddaughters. And when I did find stuff that seemed appropriate for me, it was *very* expensive. (Somehow the more traditional-style women's clothing seems to be higher priced than the more modern styles.)

Anyway, as I reached the very back of a women's section at a large department store, I saw one small rack of very nice slacks and jackets with a sign that said "SALE! Originally \$200 to \$300. Now Only \$19.94." Like most women, I loved the idea of getting such a bargain, so I quickly looked through the rack to see if there was something that would work for me.

I was hoping to find a really nice pair of slacks in white or beige—and sure enough, there on the rack was a beautiful pair of silk-lined white linen slacks. I checked the size to see if they might happen to be the right size for me. I was disappointed to see that they were a couple of sizes smaller than I usually wear—plus they were Petite. Naturally, I assumed they would be too small and probably too short. But I decided to try them on anyway.

To my surprise, not only were they not too small or too short, they were actually too large and too long. I was shocked, but as I checked other items on the rack, I found that *all* the sizing labels reflected sizes that only exist "in your dreams." Each item was labeled as being at least 2 sizes smaller than the "real" size.

The more I thought about it, the more I became aware that this must reflect the fact that these clothes were originally expensive—and were sized to make the buyer feel they were a smaller size than they really were. I found that items almost identical in actual size varied widely in labeled size—based solely on their cost. The more expensive the item, the more discrepancy between the actual size and the size on the label.

This helps explain why I keep hearing so much about celebrities wearing sizes 2 or 4 or even 0—that in no way reflect the way they appear.

So if the person looks like they're bigger than whatever size they say they wear, you can probably chalk it up to the price they paid for the item—and not necessarily a reflection of their real size. So this is just a little caution against the tendency to feel bad about ourselves when we compare our “size” with that of people who spend a lot more money on their clothes.

The far more important point about our size is *not* the numbers that reflect our clothing size—or even our weight. It's the numbers that tell us about our blood pressure, cholesterol, blood sugar, etc. While clothing sizes can be quite inaccurate, it's critical that we get accurate information about what's happening *inside* our bodies—and that we do everything possible to make those numbers the best they can be.

So when you begin focusing too much on your size, stop and remember that these “inside your body” numbers are the ones that really matter.

Chapter 10: Mind

Using your Whole Brain

Love that Kindle

Educating *all* our Children

Our Education System

Information—Knowledge—Wisdom

Education is Powerful

Using your Whole Brain

July 2009

I read two articles this week in USA Today that focused on the importance of using “both sides of your brain” in order to succeed in the world today. The articles presented a brief overview of some of the ideas in a book I read a few months ago, *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future* by Daniel H. Pink.

This is not a new concept. It’s just that it has taken a long time for it to be taken more seriously within the education system. I’ve been interested in combining right/left brain learning in education for a long time.

About 30 years ago I made a presentation to the teachers at the high school my children were attending at that time that focused on the importance of whole-brain learning. I even wrote a song about “using both sides of the brain” which I included in that presentation. I also included an article (with the lyrics to that song) in my book, *Musings on Life*.

Here’s an excerpt from my earlier writing about this issue, including the lyrics to the song:

I’m concerned that today’s formal education is more about studying for tests than about learning. In fact, in today’s world where so much information is available at your fingertips through the Internet, a strong case can be made for placing much less emphasis on memorizing facts and much more attention on the processes of thinking, organizing, problem-solving, recognizing patterns, and finding meaning and significance. In other words, in such a fast-moving world, we need to focus less on learning facts and more on “learning how to learn.”

For many years I’ve saved an anonymous quote titled “On School.”

Very little of what is taught in school is learned.

Very little of what is learned is remembered.

Very little of what is remembered is used.

But I don’t think it has to be that way. In fact, here are the words to the song I wrote about so long ago and sang for the teachers of my kids’ school.

How’s Your Education.

How’s your education?

Have you learned your ABC’s?

*Learned your reading, writing and arithmetic
and all those things that please?*

*Well that’s a good beginning
for the left side of your brain,
but there’s another side to learning
And that’s the one I want to explain.*

*You see the left side works by reason
and rationality,
and it does all the talking
for everyone, both you and me.*

*But the right side is important
though it never says a word.
You see it's silent and observant
with a still, small voice that's never heard.*

*So we tend to forget it
no matter how it tries.
We use the 3 R's of our left side
and forget the right's 3 I's.*

*The first is Intuition,
then Ingenuity,
and then Imagination
to be the best that we can be.*

*So if we want a lot of learning
we'll use both sides of our brain,
and we'll plan our education
so that both of them we train.*

While there are still practical barriers to implementing some of these ideas into the school system, the nature of the world today makes it evident that this combination of left-brain linear thinking and right-brain creative thinking is absolutely essential to success.

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Love that Kindle

July 2009

As I've often shared in the past, I'm a "bookaholic." Reading is one of my favorite things to do. However, the last two times we moved (to smaller and smaller spaces), we reduced our library of books, keeping only those we expected to read again in the future.

However, as we continue to buy new books, it's becoming almost impossible to avoid increasing our library again—beyond the space we have to keep them. So we decided to explore the Kindle reading device from Amazon.com. It allows you to have books downloaded to your Kindle within one minute—at a cost of \$9.99 for most books. Best of all, you can download from anywhere through their "whispernet" system without being connected to the Internet.

The original Kindle had a 6" screen that didn't allow as much text on the page once you adjust to a larger type size, which we preferred. So even though it was more expensive, we got the new Kindle DX with a larger, 9.7" screen.

Frankly, I was shocked to find that I absolutely *love* reading on this new Kindle DX—even more than reading a printed book. It's easy on the eyes with no glare even outdoors; it's easy to hold (rather than trying to hold a book open); it marks the place you stop reading, saving it for next time; it makes turning pages much easier and smoother (just with a quick tap)—and you can read a lot faster.

Honestly, if it continues to function as positively as this, I may buy very few printed books in the future—unless I really need to have a physical copy for some reason other than reading it. And you can also get newspapers and magazines delivered to your Kindle.

Another exciting feature is that, in addition to books, you can also read other documents—Word, text, PDF, etc.—on the Kindle. The process differs between the two versions of Kindle, but this is a nice additional feature, allowing you to read these documents anytime, anywhere—rather than being restricted to sitting at your computer.

While this is clearly a luxury item, it's a worthwhile investment for a bookaholic like me. And, as I said, I absolutely love it because it makes my reading experience even better.

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Educating all our Children

September 2009

I just watched a 3-hour presentation by Jonathan Kozol—who, for many years has been the strongest advocate for equal education for *all* our children. This renewed my longstanding interest and grave concern about the discrepancy in the quality of educational opportunities in this country.

The fact is that children who live in upscale communities with high real estate tax rates get to go to excellent schools that offer all kinds of “extras”—while those children who live in poverty-ridden communities with low real estate tax rates must settle for schools that do not even offer the “basics!”

Those of us who only see the better schools can't fully appreciate the damaging impact on children who go to the many poor schools in this country. Most of the schools that are without basic needs are in inner city areas, primarily affecting people of color. So this inequality in education winds up also being inequality based on race.

Although the Pledge of Allegiance of the U.S. promotes “Liberty and Freedom for all,” this simply isn't possible without also pledging to support “equal education for all.” The degree to which a person is able to realize their full potential in life depends in large part on receiving a good education. Of

course, we can all point to some success stories where people have overcome dire educational opportunities. But they are the exceptions, and we hear about them specifically *because* they are the exception.

The general concern for the well-being of children has led the U.S. to provide many programs to help children learn and grow—such as Head Start programs, School Lunch programs, Children’s Health initiatives, etc. However, all these efforts just nibble around the edges of the huge “elephant in the room:” the disparity in basic educational opportunities—based primarily on economic differences.

I want to repeat what I have written in the past:

Focusing only on the alternatives available to each of us personally (like the ability to live in a nicer area of town, pay for a private school or get a school voucher) leaves those who are not able to do these things even worse off than before. If we allocated education monies based on an equal amount per student, it could be the first step to addressing not only the problem with public education, but the human problem for those who fail to receive an education—and the impact of their failure on all of us.

The bottom line is that providing equality in education is not just the *right* thing to do; it’s also the *smart* thing to do. So I hope we can move beyond thinking only of whatever immediate impact this issue has on each of us personally to focusing on the much larger societal problems that result from our joint failure to provide a quality education for *all* our children.

To become better informed about the whole issue of the lack of equity in public education, please check out the many books Jonathan Kozol has written about this issue.

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Our Education System

December 2009

I just saw a very uplifting movie—based on a true story. While it’s primarily the personal story of one young man named Michael Oher, it includes a powerful message on the importance of educating all our children—despite what may appear to be overwhelming odds against some of them succeeding.

The movie is “The Blind Side,” based on Michael Lewis’s book of the same name. It recounts the story of a 15-year-old homeless black youth who was taken in and adopted by a white family in the deep South who made it possible for him to get the kind of education that had previously been unavailable to him. He completed high school, went to college, graduating from Ole Miss, then was drafted by the NFL’s Baltimore Ravens.

The film does not trace his entire journey; it focuses on his early years. Also, the film did not detail his school experience *prior* to the time he finally got to go to a good school. But it does show the difference it makes when you

have teachers who “go the extra mile” as well as (in this case) the opportunity to have access to a tutor. The movie also doesn’t tell about the changes in his IQ; this information is only in the book.

Below is an excerpt from a story reported by Star Parker for Scripps Howard News Service:

He’d been in 11 different schools. The public schools were pushing him through to get rid of him, not to educate him. His records showed that in ninth grade he missed 50 days of school, yet he was passed. By his senior year, making a final push to get his grade-point average to meet NCAA standards for college admission, they took him to psychologists for intelligence testing. They found, incredibly, that in his few years at Briarcrest, his IQ increased almost 30 points. When he was admitted, his IQ measured 80. Now tests showed him as between 100 and 110. This, according to Lewis [author Michael Lewis] “wasn’t supposed to happen. IQ was meant to be a given, like the size of one’s feet.” The psychologists were dumbfounded.

The fact that IQ is not “fixed” has been known by brain researchers for many years, but the old thinking about IQ is finally being challenged by the education system itself. One of the many books making this point is *Einstein Never Used Flashcards* by three Ph.D.’s, Golinkoff, Hirsh-Pasek, and Eyer, in which they say:

IQ and other test scores provide a narrow view of intelligence.

Many people are now speaking out about the faults and failures of our education system and the need for serious reform. On November 28, 2009, Bob Herbert of the New York Times wrote:

We still have a hideously dysfunctional public education system, one that has mastered the art of manufacturing dropouts and functional illiterates. We have not even begun to turn that around.

There is now a new effort to overhaul our education system to make it better serve all our children. The depth of the challenge was the focus of the TV program, “Meet the Press,” November 15, 2009, featuring Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich and Democrat Al Sharpton. Here’s how Duncan stated the problem:

We have a time of educational, academic crisis. We have 1.2 million dropouts a year in this country.

This group is on a multicity tour of public schools with the mission to find out what works, what needs to change and what students themselves expect.

There are other efforts that are producing excellent results as well. Here’s a quote from Carl Honore’s book, *In Praise of Slowness, Challenging the Cult of Speed*:

Rudolf Steiner pioneered a brand of education that... eschewed rigid timetables that forced pupils to hop from subject to subject at the whim of

the clock, preferring to let them study a topic until they felt ready to move on. Today, the number of Steiner-inspired schools around the world is over eight hundred, and rising.

And one of the most impressive turnarounds in educational success is the story of Prep Public Charter School in Detroit, called Uprep University, led by Amber Arellano. The school has 512 students—chosen through a blind lottery process, and the results prove that any child can succeed; it’s not about poverty or ethnicity, but opportunity and support. Here’s the proof:

—100% of seniors graduated in 2008. (94% went to college)

—In all Detroit schools, only 32% graduate.

It’s not enough for us to be satisfied that our own children or grandchildren may have excellent educational opportunities. In a country like the U.S., we can do much better at seeing that *all* our children are educated in ways that allow them to succeed personally as well as make significant contributions to our overall way of life.

Nothing I can write here is likely to be as motivating to care about this situation and want to do something about it as reading the book titled *The Blind Side* or seeing the movie based on the book. So I encourage everyone to put that on your priority list. By the way, the “blind side” refers to the fact that the task of an offensive lineman (like Michael Oher’s position as left tackle) is to protect the quarterback’s blind side from the pass rusher.

Update: Michael Oher has now written a book himself, providing the definitive information about his life, titled *I Beat the Odds*.

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Information—Knowledge—Wisdom

January 2010

For over 25 years I have saved an article that provides some of the most relevant perspective about learning (and education) that I’ve ever seen. I don’t recall the source, but I do know it’s even more relevant today than it was back then.

We’ve heard for a long time that we now live in an “information society.” In fact, we’re inundated with information—and more is at our fingertips through Google or some other search function on the Internet. Unfortunately, learning facts (“information”) has been the foundation of our education system. But as the world continues to change at an accelerated rate, we need to educate our students for a lifetime of learning.

To pick up on the main point in the article, information is just a *resource*. Alone, it doesn’t provide the kind of knowledge that we need to address the problems and challenges we all face every day—as individuals and members of a global society.

In addition, even “knowledge” is not the ultimate goal of our learning and our education. In order to make the best use of our information and knowledge, we need to integrate it into a more meaningful, relevant whole—to achieve “wisdom.”

Here’s an overview of the differences between information, knowledge and wisdom, as explained in a December 1982 article in “The Futurist” titled “Information as a Resource” by Harlan Cleveland.

Information is the raw material. It’s the sum total of all the facts and ideas that are available to be known by somebody at a given moment in time.

Knowledge is the result of taking the mass of facts and ideas and then selecting and organizing what is useful to others.

Wisdom is integrated knowledge—information made far more useful by crossing disciplinary barriers to weave into an integrated whole something more than the sum of the parts.

The article included a cartoon strip that illustrated how this process might have worked back in caveman days. Below is a description of the panels in the strip:

In the first panel, labeled *Information*, the caveman looks around and gathers facts as to what things he finds in his environment: grass, dirt, rabbits, wolves, clouds providing rainfall, etc.

In the second panel, labeled *Knowledge*, the caveman puts together the separate pieces of information: rabbits eat grass... grass grows in soil... rain falls from clouds... wolves eat rabbits... etc.

In the third panel, labeled *Wisdom*, the caveman recognizes that if he kills off all the wolves, the rabbits will eat up the grass, and the soil will all wash away in the rain.

This simple example demonstrates the need to integrate all the information we teach in schools—in order to be prepared to organize data that can be used in any situation that may arise in the future.

So while we need to begin with information, it’s important to learn how to get information and then *use* it rather than just memorizing facts. While some schools go well beyond just imparting information by also teaching how it’s applicable to real-life situations, there needs to be much more emphasis on integrating the facts and less on the facts themselves. In other words, we need to become better skilled at how to *use* the information we learn in school.

We can’t possibly teach all the facts that a child will need throughout their lives. But if we can teach them how to learn, they’ll be set for life.

This kind of idea is well-expressed in the old saying attributed to Confucius:

*Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day.
Teach him to fish and he will eat for a lifetime.*

* * * * *

Education is Powerful

February 2010

I've had a lifelong interest in issues related to education, along with the inevitable concerns that come with paying attention to what's happening in this area and how it affects our future. Most of my focus has been on education here in the U.S., but for the past few years I've had a growing interest in what's happening in other countries—especially when it comes to educating girls.

A lot of my interest in education around the world is due to having read Greg Mortenson's two books about his efforts (and successes) in building schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan. I read *Three Cups of Tea* a few years ago and have just finished reading his newest, *Stones into Schools*.

For those who don't know the story of Greg Mortenson's path to this work, it began in 1993 when he had a serious accident while mountain climbing in the Himalayans and was rescued and nursed back to health by a group of people in a small Pakistani village in the area. During his recovery, he came to learn about their extreme poverty, the Islamic extremism, and the lack of education.

He also learned of the strong wish of parents to be able to educate their children and the desperate desire of children, especially girls, to be able to learn. This led to his commitment to work to provide educational opportunities for Central Asian children, particularly young girls. The impact of this work goes far beyond just the education of the girls who would be attending school for the first time. As he explains, "*when you educate a girl, you educate a community.*"

So he spent a great deal of time (and, according to custom, drank enormous amounts of tea) in the process of gaining the respect and support of the leaders in many villages in the area. Then he began attacking the challenge of raising money, gradually developing an organization and enlisting on-the-ground local people to oversee the work. The result is that he has won over hearts as well as minds during the past 11 years, during which time 131 schools have been built in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The American military wound up taking note of his effectiveness in changing attitudes and pulling people away from their old allegiances that were often aligned against the U.S. In fact, last year Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, attended the opening of one of the new schools to see firsthand what a difference this effort was making in the lives—and the attitudes—of the people.

Admiral Mullen brought some media with him on the trip, one of whom was Thomas Friedman, op-ed columnist for the New York Times. Friedman had a strong interest in these issues as well—not only in those countries, but also in Yemen. In fact, he wrote a column on February 9, 2010, titled "It's All About Schools." In this report from Yemen, he said:

So here is my new rule of thumb: For every Predator missile we fire at an Al Qaeda target here, we should help Yemen build 50 new modern

schools that teach science and math and critical thinking—to boys and girls.

So the issue of educating children in these far-flung areas of the world is important not only for improving their lives, but also for the safety and well-being of *all* children. The interconnected world in which our children will live in the future cries out for our attention to this effort. We're only *beginning* to see just how powerful education (or the lack of it) can be.

Chapter 11: Meaning

The World is Flat
The American Crisis
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The Best of Times, the Worst of Times
Call to Service
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Only the Good Die Young
One Planet, One People

The World is Flat

July 2008

The World is Flat is the title of a book by Thomas L. Friedman in which he describes the patterns behind the most complex global developments in our world today. He shows how the world is *connected*, that everyone is impacted by whatever happens anywhere in the world.

The title has been referred to as a metaphor for viewing the world as a level playing field where all competitors have an equal opportunity. This is not a pessimistic view of what's happening; it's a *realistic* view. But a failure to recognize this new reality can turn into a negative if we (people and governments alike) fail to accept this new world order and continue trying to live as in the past.

The book's subtitle is "A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century." It may sound strange to write about the history of a century that is only 8 years old. But it's not about trying to predict the future; it's trying to illuminate the present, pointing out where this could lead us in the future.

Perhaps you find these kinds of books to be too serious or too complex or too boring to spend time reading. But those who are the least informed are likely to be the ones most damaged by the dynamics in this new *connected* world.

For instance, it's relevant for each of us to be informed about the impact of China and India (and many other countries) on our own economy and our way of life. The cost of oil/gasoline and the pollution resulting from the expanding use of it is affecting all alike. We may hear about the growing automobile market in China (as well as their increased use of energy of all kinds) and fail to recognize its impact on everyone on the planet. Or we may look at the haze covering most of China, comparing it to the pollution in the U.S., and think we're doing OK. But when you learn more about the interconnectedness of all these factors, you realize that you ignore it at your own peril.

The author of *The World is Flat* is not trying to "scare" us; he's trying to enlighten us about the new world in which we live. However, it's not just books like this that provide "wake-up calls." We can learn about these changes just by paying attention to the many news stories about what's happening to the way business is being done today. Examples of the blurring of lines between countries' holdings include reports of the many purchases of U.S. companies by other countries. Most prominent in the news recently were the purchase of the Chrysler Building by Abu Dhabi and the pending purchase of Anheuser-Busch Cos. Inc. (makers of "America's Beer," Budweiser) by InBev, a company in Belgium.

The same kind of points are being made by another important author, Fareed Zakaria, whose book *The Post-American World* also describes the changes that are taking place in the world order, again focusing primarily on the

rise of China and India. He is also not trying to “scare” people. As he points out in the first chapter:

This is a book not about the decline of America but rather about the rise of everyone else. It is about the great transformation taking place around the world, a transformation that, though often discussed, remains poorly understood.

Our challenge is to become informed so we can be fully engaged in the world of the twenty-first century. There’s no going back, only going forward. And the sooner we begin the path to recognition of what’s involved in living in this new connected world, the better off we’ll be—both individually and as a society.

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The American Crisis

October 2008

These are the times that try men’s souls.

These words were written in 1776 in an essay by Thomas Paine titled “The American Crisis.” But they might just as well have been written about the crises we face today, particularly when it comes to dealing with two wars and with our financial situation.

Of course, our crises today are far more than just “American.” For instance, we now live in a time of “global economics” where when something affects one major financial sector, it affects others as well. And war of any kind involves far more than the particular countries actively participating. So what we’re experiencing is not just “The American Crisis” of Thomas Paine’s time, but “The Global Crisis” of today.

I’ve written several times in the past about how we’re all in this together—and how it’s shortsighted to think only in terms of “me and mine.” Never has this been more true than with our current political divisions where what’s best for the overall good of the people is often discarded in favor of personal self-interests. Of course, it’s not possible to determine just what’s “best for the overall good of the people.” Well-intentioned people can honestly see this differently—as is clear from the sharp divisions in Congress about how best to deal with the financial crisis. (And it’s been true for several years when it comes to dealing with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.)

But it’s important to step back and consider when these are honest differences based on careful assessment of the alternatives—and when the differences are based on expediency or personal benefit. It’s not necessary to suspect that everyone who disagrees with you is somehow self-serving while you are being purely objective. Frankly, none of us is completely objective; there is no absolute truth about how to address some of the dilemmas

confronting our political leaders—or confronting each of us in our personal lives.

To expand beyond just our leaders here in the U.S., it’s also not necessary to suspect that everyone in another country who disagrees with us is somehow self-serving while we are being purely objective. Again, no country (even one as great as the U.S.) has all the right answers while others are universally wrong.

We need to more fully appreciate the complexity of the world we live in today and the difficulty of determining the best course of action—either within a country or as one country in the global community. In the final analysis, we have more in common with others than we typically acknowledge. We seem to focus only on our differences at a time when it’s more and more essential that we recognize our interdependence.

The stakes are too high for us to continue to look at situations in terms of how we can prove we’re “right” and others are “wrong.” We need to understand how it is that different people can look at a particular situation and reach such different conclusions.

* * * * *

Politics and Religion

October 2008

People of good intention can disagree—strongly—about many important issues. Of course, sometimes there is overwhelming “evidence” for one side or the other, but generally, each side picks the evidence that supports their own beliefs. Never is this more true than when it comes to two of the most divisive issues around: politics and religion.

If you think I’m going to comment on my own feelings about these issues, you would be quite mistaken. As I discussed in an earlier piece about “debating,” I don’t believe people change their opinions based on debating with others who hold different opinions. I think changes on major life issues come only through an ongoing process of internal questioning that may eventually lead to rethinking earlier stances. In fact, this has happened to me regarding several important issues—where I have made dramatic changes in my opinions and beliefs.

However, in keeping with my preference to avoid debating personal opinions, I only discuss “politics and religion” with those close friends and family members where I already know we think alike. That doesn’t mean I close myself off from opinions that differ from my own. If we only listen to those who reinforce our own thinking, we close ourselves off from learning—as well as from “understanding” how it is that others can see things so differently. So I do a lot of reading and listening to opposing positions—since I think it’s essential to be well-informed about all sides of important issues.

At this time particularly (when there's so much focus on the political process here in the U.S. as well as a growing "debate" about religion), we desperately need to pause and consider the importance of "mutual respect." There will always be disagreements, but we don't have to be disagreeable.

This commitment to "respecting differences" doesn't mean you accept badgering from those on the other side of these or any other issues. In fact, this is precisely the approach I take when confronted by those who disagree with my thinking. I'm extremely respectful toward their right to hold their opinions—and do *not* try to change them. But I stand up—quite strongly—against any efforts they may make in trying to change *my* thinking. I go for a certain *détente* (a policy promoting the relaxation of strained relations or tensions). In general, this simply means that I "don't lay my stuff on them" and insist that they not try to "lay their stuff on me."

Of course, this policy is easier to execute when dealing with friends or acquaintances than with family. But it may be even more critical to employ it with family—where there's more at stake. We are not "defined" by our beliefs about politics or religion, regardless of how important these issues may be. And the things that bind families together are stronger than any differences held by individual members of the family.

So I hope you will pause and consider the likely ramifications of debating such hot-potato issues with the important people in your life—and instead go for "mutual respect."

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Winning and Losing

November 2008

The 2008 U.S. Presidential Election is over—some would say "finally" over. It has been quite a ride for everyone involved. And, as with all competitive contests, there is a "winner" and a "loser." But it's not too soon to begin considering the need to focus beyond winning and losing in order to determine how both sides can move forward and work together for the benefit of everyone.

As with many things in life, there's a song that reflects this sentiment: the Beatles tune, "Come Together Right Now."

Of course, it always takes time to resolve feelings surrounding the competitiveness of something like our national election, so coming together "right now" may be a little unrealistic. However, it's a goal to work toward, especially since (as with most things) people on different sides have more in common than they have differences.

In fact, a less well-known section of the Beatles song alludes to this: "*I know you, you know me; one thing I can tell you is you got to be free.*"

While it's tempting to think that it's the responsibility of the "loser" to put the past behind and join in for the benefit of all, the "winner" also has a huge responsibility to ease the path toward reconciliation by being inclusive and inviting the participation of everyone in achieving our mutual goals.

If you're reading this thinking it only applies to the politicians actively involved in this political campaign, you need to stop and consider the breaches that have taken place among friends and even in families during this time. So it behooves all of us to begin the process of coming back together to focus on our common needs and goals rather than on whatever beliefs divided us during the campaign.

As I have written in the past, "we're all in this together," so all of us need to take responsibility for healing the divisiveness of this campaign and committing to the need to "Come Together."

* * * * *

Come Together

July 2009

Michael Jackson died a week ago today. I had *not* planned to write anything about it, but to avoid commenting would be like "ignoring the elephant in the room." You can't pick up a newspaper or magazine (or watch a TV news or entertainment program) without seeing something about his death—and his life.

This is not just a big story here in the U.S.; it's a big story around the world. He is one of those rare people (like Muhammad Ali) who is well-known in every corner of the globe. In fact, one of the interesting things about the media focus since his death is that it "brings the world together" in focusing on the same thing at the same time. This is particularly poignant since many of his lyrics are aimed at uniting the world around the idea of coming together for the benefit of everyone.

While I don't want to comment on his death (or on the more eccentric parts of his life), I do want to comment on his "message" to the world as delivered through the lyrics to some of his songs.

One key example of his come-together message is in the lyrics to the song, "We are the World," which he co-wrote:

*There comes a time—when we head a certain call
When the world must come together as one
There are people dying
And it's time to lend a hand to life
The greatest gift of all.*

*We can't go on pretending day by day
That someone, somewhere will soon make a change*

*We are the world
We are the children
We are the ones who make a brighter day
So let's start giving.*

Then, to bring this message down to a personal challenge for each of us, he wrote the following in “The Man in the Mirror:”

*I'm starting with the man in the mirror
I'm asking him to change his ways
And no message could have been any clearer
If you wanna make the world a better place
Take a look at yourself, and then make a change.*

Another of his songs that has meaningful lyrics produced an even more impressive video, depicting the morphing of people’s faces from one color/ethnicity to another—illustrating that we’re really all “one.”

And here’s an excerpt from “It Don’t Matter if You’re Black or White:”

*It's not about races—just places, faces
Where your blood comes from is where your space is.
If you're thinkin' of being my brother
It don't matter if you're black or white.*

So rather than dwell on the particulars of his life and death, we would do well to focus on the message he left, challenging all of us to “come together.” Despite his enormous talent, this was his major contribution to the world.

Like many people, I was a huge fan—primarily due to his amazing performance during Motown’s 25th Anniversary TV show in 1983. I also attended a live performance during his big 1984 tour. I’ve seen a good many live performances through the years, but this was by far the most spectacular.

* * * * *

World Peace

January 2009

It seems there are a number of conflicts going on around the world at all times. Most currently in the news is the one between Israel and Hamas in Gaza. And as we watch the fallout from these conflicts, we tend to think *surely* there’s some way to make it possible for people to get along.

Most civilized people fervently wish for “world peace” where the countries of the world get along—or at least peacefully coexist. But it’s pretty clear that each of fails to live peacefully with others who are different from us in some way. (Heck, we don’t even sustain peaceful relations with the people we interact with every day: friends, family, coworkers, etc.)

It often seems hopeless—with so many differences in our beliefs and backgrounds. But periodically I find encouragement from a very unlikely source: the stories of animals who develop cross-species friendships. Most of

the stories involve situations where orphaned animals of one species are “adopted” by a female of another species—literally saving their lives.

But I just heard about a cross-species friendship that is more amazing than anything I’ve seen before. In fact, I doubt I would have believed it if I hadn’t seen it on the news. It’s the story of a most unlikely deep friendship between a dog—and an elephant. The depth of their friendship is illustrated most vividly by the way the elephant stood vigil for 3 solid weeks when the dog was ill.

While it’s a nice, uplifting story, it also carries a very large “message” for us humans. In fact, the final words of the video (being spoken during our last look at the unlikely pair) are:

Take a good look, America.

Take a good look, world.

If they can do it, what’s our excuse?

So I invite you to “take a look” at this (and many other animal-friend stories) by checking YouTube for “unlikely friends.”

I hope we can use this example as inspiration for what’s possible. These “dumb” animals have a lot to teach us “smart” humans about dealing with those who are different. Actually, we don’t have to be “friends” like these animals in order to have world peace. We only need to stop killing each other.

* * * * *

The Best of Times, the Worst of Times

January 2009

*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,
it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness...*

These words were written by Charles Dickens exactly 150 years ago (in 1859), but they describe the current times as well. The words hold true for the world as a whole and particularly for the United States of America during the country’s transition of leadership on this day of the inauguration of a new President.

We’re facing a serious economic crisis as well as a long list of global crises that require our best efforts to deal with. As reflected in President Obama’s inaugural speech, the U.S. is a young country, but it’s time to “put away childish things” and rise as a people to effectively deal with the responsibilities we all face. This requires moving beyond our obsessive focus on the things that divide us—whether in this country or between this country and other nations of the world.

In that context, I want to share the final three paragraphs from my earlier book titled *Musing on Life*.

The world’s problems are so large and so seemingly insurmountable that it’s tempting to think there’s nothing you as an individual can do. And we

tend to marvel at the stories we hear on the evening newscasts about how some individuals are, in fact, making a difference. But each of us can do something! And this is where the power lies—in the accumulation of all the individual efforts we can make.

So let's not sit around waiting and hoping that someone else will step forward to take care of these problems. Frankly, that won't happen without the involvement of everyone.

The bottom line is that we're all in this together, and like Lincoln's famous line, "A house divided against itself cannot stand." In this case, the "house" is the Whole World.

Finally, I'd like to encourage each of you to accept the challenge to "get involved" in whatever area is of most interest to you personally. By all working together, we can turn the worst of times into the best of times.

* * * * *

Call to Service

January 2009

Those who heard President Obama's inaugural speech (or have heard some of his earlier speeches) know that he has issued a "call to service," asking everyone to participate in "the work of remaking America."

Sometimes we think there's nothing we can do—that the problems are too great for us to be able to make a difference. But everyone *can* contribute (and in fact *must* contribute) if we are to be full participants in building the kind of world that will be better for generations to come. So I hope you will carefully consider the area in which you might focus your own personal efforts—and begin.

For additional motivation/inspiration, you might consider the words from a song called "Pick Yourself Up" written in 1936 (the year I was born), lyrics by Dorothy Fields, music by Jerome Kern.

Here are a few of the verses from that song:

*Nothing's impossible I have found,
For when my chin is on the ground,
I pick myself up, Dust myself off,
Start all over again.*

*Don't lose your confidence if you slip,
Be grateful for a pleasant trip,
And pick yourself up, Dust yourself off,
Start all over again.*

*Will you remember the famous men,
Who had to fall to rise again?
So take a deep breath,
Pick yourself up, Dust yourself off,
Start all over again.*

A prime example of this is reflected in something I wrote about a couple of years ago: the many times that Abraham Lincoln picked himself up after failed efforts.

Here’s a list of some of his many failures:

- He failed as a business man, as a storekeeper.
- He failed as a farmer; he despised this work.
- He failed in his first attempt to obtain political office.
- He failed when he sought the office of speaker while in the legislature.
- He failed in his first attempt to go to Congress.
- He failed when he sought an appointment to the United States Land Office.
- He failed when he ran for the United States Senate.
- He failed when he sought the nomination for the Vice-Presidency in 1856.
- Then in 1860, he sought to become President of the U.S. and he succeeded!

While we don’t need to aspire to greatness on a large scale, certainly each of us can find a way to contribute to making the world a better place. So for us to "begin again the work of remaking America," we would do well to remember that nothing is impossible if we are committed to picking ourselves up and trying again.

* * * * *

The times they are a-changin’

January 2009

Do you feel it? There’s something in the air—and that something is “change.” Of course, change can be either good or bad. So it’s critical that everyone in the U.S. (and around the world) consider how we can all come together to make these changing times more positive for everyone.

A lot of what will make this change work in a positive way depends on our adopting a general mindset of doing things for the common good. We need to approach issues with an attitude based more on cooperation than on “what’s in it for me.” In fact, whatever helps others is also likely to be what helps us individually as well.

Before you think that all problems are too big for you to make a contribution... there are things each person can do in their own communities

that can help this positive attitude to grow. For instance, my own increasing awareness of the “oneness” of all our problems has led me to step up my long-time habit of doing “random acts of kindness”—particularly for strangers. When you are on the lookout for ways to be helpful and spontaneously step in to do helpful things for complete strangers (with no expectation of reward or praise), it promotes a very good feeling about the state of human interactions.

Another very simple act that my husband has started doing also contributes to an overall positive sense of our common community. In this instance, part of our daily walking takes us along a dirt path, across a little bridge over a very small part of the San Diego River. Although there are trash receptacles placed along the way, you’d never know it from the amount of litter. One reason there’s a more-than-normal amount of litter in this area is that at the end of this hike you surprisingly wind up in a Wal-Mart parking lot. And unfortunately, people tend to buy things, then discard the packaging or the bags, etc., as they walk.

Anyway, he purchased a “gopher pick-up tool” (designed for trash collection)—and is taking responsibility for collecting the trash along this path. It’s quite satisfying to make an immediate, visible difference in the surroundings. And we’ve begun to notice that other people who see this are now stopping to pick up stuff as well.

While these are very small, low-level efforts to make a difference, they serve as an example of the kind of things that anyone can do. So there’s really no excuse for saying “there’s nothing I can do.”

In ways large and small, it does feel like people are energized to action—to doing something! While we may start small, we can all find ways to increasingly contribute to the greater good. And with the current global interdependence, it’s pretty clear that we’ll all rise or fall together based on the way we address today’s more challenging issues.

As with most things, there are always songs that capture the moment. One such song that fits the current times is a Bob Dylan classic that was written in 1964, during another time of great change.

Here are a few lines from “*The times they are a-changin.*”

*Come gather round people, wherever you roam
And admit that the waters around you have grown
So you better start swimmin or you’ll sink like a stone
For the times they are a-changin.*

The people of the U.S. are not being asked to start swimming, but they *are* being asked to pick up an oar and start rowing. And it’s clear that a lot of people are getting the message. Of course, there are those who have been working for the common good for many years, but today there seem to be far more people who are getting their oar in the water—which can make all the difference.

Not only individuals, but companies are also stepping up in larger and larger numbers to sponsor meaningful service efforts. And most encouraging of all, the U.S. government is showing a recognition of the importance of working in a far less partisan way. In fact, one of the few silver linings in the dire situations we face today is that our attention is drawn up and away from focusing on petty differences—which is essential if we are to move forward.

Since the difficulties we face in the U.S. and around the world won't be easily or quickly relieved, we need to "gather round" and be prepared to keep swimming for as long as it takes. And if we're all swimming in the same direction (and helping each other along), it will make it a lot easier for all of us to make progress.

* * * * *

Fascinating Facts

May 2009

Our world is rapidly changing in many significant areas—so many that it's difficult to keep up with the present, much less prepare for the future. But to succeed in the world of the future, it's critical to get some sense of how drastically things are projected to change in the years to come. This is particularly true for young people, especially since one fascinating fact is that "half the world's population is under 25 years of age."

Below are just a few of the many "fascinating facts" that we all need to be aware of:

Workplace Facts

- The top 10 in-demand jobs in 2010 did not exist in 2004.
- We are currently preparing students for jobs that don't yet exist...using technologies that haven't been invented...in order to solve problems we don't even know are problems yet.
- The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that today's learner will have 12 to 14 jobs...by the age of 38.

Technology Facts

- 1 out of 8 couples married in the U.S. last year met online.
- There are over 200 million users on MySpace.
- There are 31 Billion searches on Google every month.
(In 2006, this number was 2.7 Billion.)
- The first commercial text message was sent in December 1992.
(Today, the number of text messages sent and received every day... exceeds the total population of the planet.)

Marketing Facts

- Years it took to reach a market audience of 50 million through Radio: 38 yrs.
- Years it took to reach a market audience of 50 million through TV: 13 yrs.

- Years it took to reach a market audience of 50 million through Internet: 4 yrs.
- Years it took to reach a market audience of 50 million through iPod: 3 yrs.
- Years it took to reach a market audience of 50 million through Facebook: 2 yrs.

Internet Facts

- The number of Internet devices in 1984 was 1,000.
- The number of Internet devices in 1992 was 1,000,000.
- The number of Internet devices in 2008 was 1,000,000,000.

Technical Facts

- It is estimated that a week’s worth of the New York Times contains more information than a person was likely to come across in a lifetime in the 18th century.
- The amount of new technical information is doubling every 2 years.

Education Facts

- For students starting a technical degree, half of what they learn in their first year of study will be outdated by their third year of study.
- By 2013, a supercomputer will be built that exceeds the computational capabilities of the human brain.
- Predictions are that by 2049, a \$1,000 computer will exceed the computational capabilities of the entire human species.

Current Fact

Since Mother’s Day is on our minds, here’s a “fascinating fact” about this day: *More personal telephone calls are made on Mother's Day in the USA than on any other day in any other country.*

* * * * *

One World

May 2009

The space shuttle Atlantis has just completed an 11-day mission that included a breathtaking series of space walks to repair the Hubble telescope. I’ve always been captivated by anything to do with “space” and have enjoyed countless hours watching photos taken by the Hubble. I hope they are correct that this latest successful mission will keep it operating until its replacement is due in 2014.

But beyond the Hubble or this particular mission lies the much more significant view we now have of our own planet and its place in the universe. For instance, scientific study has revealed that there are one hundred billion stars in our galaxy, and the observable universe contains at least one hundred billion galaxies.

So although the earth is very small in the grand scope of the universe, it’s our home and is critically important to everyone who lives here, now and in the

future. And it's more and more obvious that we need to take better care of it—and of each other.

Also, it's becoming clear that we all live on an ever-shrinking planet. Of course, I don't mean that the Earth is getting smaller. But the relative importance of any one area of the planet is definitely getting smaller—as the whole world becomes more and more interdependent.

This sentiment is captured by a song from The Cheetah Girls called “*One World*.” Here's an excerpt:

*One world, one love, one and all
We're a circle together
One world, one heart, one song
Now and forever*

*Every guy and every girl
Stand up and shout, say it loud
Everyone around the world
Come on and join in*

*One world, one love, one and all
We're a circle together
One world, one heart, one song
Now and forever
We're a circle together
Now and forever
One world*

So when you hear “world news,” it's important to avoid thinking this isn't relevant for you personally. In fact, it would be wise to keep in mind that everything that happens anywhere in the world has a ripple effect and affects us all in one way or another. While we may live in different cities or countries, we also really do live in “one world.”

* * * * *

Where All Things Belong (Revisited)

June 2009

In my earlier book *Musings on Life*, I included an article about a film I saw back in 1975 called “Where All Things Belong.” Now I want to revisit the themes from that film and encourage everyone to think more globally about the issues facing all of us today.

It becomes more and more critical that we appreciate the fact that all the peoples of this world are interconnected—and “belong” to the same human family.

Revisiting this theme is due to the fact that I recently received a message from a man who read my earlier article and wanted to know where he could find the film. Unfortunately, I had to tell him that I had no idea. Although I had searched the Internet, I had not been able to find it anywhere.

We owned it in reel form about 30 years ago and showed it at many workshops and seminars, but that copy is long gone. Since it's one of the most uplifting, inspiring movies I've ever seen—I would dearly love to have it now on DVD.

However, I did find the words to a song from the movie that I had kept all these years. So I'd like to share it as a way of further reminding us that all things really are connected.

*All things come and go.
Every star melts as surely as every snowflake,
Only to be born again in another time, another place.*

*From oceans to rain, then to oceans again
The cycle goes on and on.
Through all the changes remains the same
In a world where all things belong.*

*And the morning turns into night.
The moon and the earth turn dark to light.
And here it goes round til time runs out.
And we each play our part.*

*We are born into a wondrous world.
We reach out joyously to touch and experience,
To explore, to delight in the ever new discovery
That everything is connected to everything else.*

*From the moment of birth our lives from the earth.
The earth, its life from the sun.
We work, we play, we live day to day.
Then our life to the earth when it's done.
And we learn that all things are one.*

*And the morning turns into night.
The moon and the earth turn dark to light.
The cycle of life ends as it starts.
And we each play our part.
And we each play our part.*

*We are forever rediscovering
That the world is round
And all things are connected.*

* * * * *

Beyond Race?—Not yet

July 2009

It was hoped that the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States of America signaled a significant shift in our ability to see beyond race. It led many people to hope we're entering an era that will reflect Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream "*that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.*"

But no, we are clearly *not* "beyond race." Despite some real progress in the stereotypical way we have of judging people by their race or ethnicity, we still have a very long way to go. This was brought home forcefully this week with the arrest of distinguished Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr.—in his own home!

The incident is one that would not have happened had he not been an African American. It was a clear case of racial profiling—and demonstrates that no other factor (neither character, education, nor accomplishment) is protection from this kind of treatment. It somehow seems all the more ironic that Dr. Gates is one of the nation's most prominent African American scholars and director of Harvard's W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research.

Actually, the police can be thankful that he is such a thoughtful, knowledgeable person regarding racial issues. Anyone without his depth of focus and awareness of African American issues might not be as gracious as he is being in not stereotyping all police or all white people in the way he was stereotyped by them.

If you aren't familiar with this story, here's a brief overview:

Dr. Gates had just returned from a trip to China and found the front door of his house was stuck so that he couldn't get his key to work. So he and his driver were pushing against the door, trying to get it open. A neighbor saw the two men involved in what "appeared" to be a forced entry, and called 911. (So far, this was an understandable mistake. And, in fact, Dr. Gates says he applauds the idea of neighbors looking out for such things.)

But the trouble began a short time later when police arrived at his home and confronted him. When he understandably protested, he was arrested—despite his showing the officer his driver's license, which included his address showing this was, in fact, his own home. He was handcuffed, taken to the police station, submitted to mug shots, and booked for "disorderly conduct." (Eventually, they released him and all the charges were dropped.)

When this kind of treatment can happen to a person of color who is as accomplished as Dr. Gates, it shows just how difficult it can be for those who haven't achieved his level of success in life.

This incident serves as a wake-up call to remind us that we still have a long way to go in race relations. One hopeful sign for the future is the way each generation of children views others in a more equal way. But it's important that we recognize the bias and stereotypes that still exist in the way most of us still see each other—and that each of us has a role to play in working toward Dr. King's goal of equality for all.

In reflecting on his experience, Dr. Gates responded to questions by his daughter, Elizabeth Gates, which were posted on the DailyBeast.com. Here is an excerpt where he talks about the fact that the election of an African American President does not automatically change the racism (and classism) that exists in the country today.

The only people who live in a post-black world are four people who live in a little white house on Pennsylvania Avenue. [laughter] The idea that America is post-racial or post-black because a man I admire, Barack Obama, is president of the United States, is a joke. And I hope no one will even wonder about this crazy fiction again. I am proud of the American people for electing the best candidate who happened to be a black man and that's a great historical precedent in the United States, but America is just as classist and just as racist as it was the day before the election—and we all, to quote my friend Cornel West, “are recovering racists,” and we all have to fight those tendencies. In America there is institutional racism that we all inherit and participate in, like breathing the air in this room—and we have to become sensitive to it.

* * * * *

Make the World a Better Place

November 2009

I borrowed the above title from the song, “Heal the World.” Those who are familiar with my writing know that I think songs often accurately reflect on the various issues we face in our lives. I recently had a particularly strong reaction to the lyrics of some of the songs included in the Michael Jackson documentary based on the rehearsals for the planned “This is It” tour.

While I went to see the movie just for entertainment, I wound up focusing far more on the messages in the lyrics to some of the songs. I was already familiar with one of the songs that I found particularly moving (and I was somewhat aware of a couple of others), but all together they had a strong impact on me.

I want to encourage you to read the lyrics of three of the songs that I found especially meaningful. I hope you will set aside any personal opinions you may hold about Michael Jackson or about any of the specific issues addressed in these lyrics—and just allow yourself to contemplate “the big picture” of our life on this planet.

Below are the lyrics to three of the songs: "Heal The World," "Earth Song"
(What about Us), and "Man in the Mirror."

"Heal The World"

*There's a place in your heart and I know that it is love
And this place could be much brighter than tomorrow
And if you really try you'll find there's no need to cry
In this place you'll feel there's no hurt or sorrow*

*There are ways to get there
If you care enough for the living
Make a little space,
Make a better place...*

*Heal the world,
Make it a better place for you and for me
And the entire human race
There are people dying
If you care enough for the living
Make a better place for you and for me
For you and for me*

*If you want to know why, There's a love that cannot lie
Love is strong, it only cares for joyful giving
If we try, we shall see in this bliss, we cannot feel fear or dread
We stop existing and start living*

*Then it feels that always love's enough for us growing
So make a better world, make a better world...*

*And the dream we were conceived in
Will reveal a joyful face
And the world we once believed in
Will shine again in grace
Then why do we keep strangling life
Wound this earth, crucify its soul
Though it's plain to see this world is heavenly
Be god's glow*

*We could fly so high, let our spirits never die
In my heart I feel you are all my brothers
Create a world with no fear, together we'll cry happy tears
See the nations turn their swords into plowshares*

*There are ways to get there,
If you care enough for the living
Make a little space,
Make a better place...*

*Heal the world,
Make it a better place for you and for me
And the entire human race
There are people dying
If you care enough for the living
Make a better place for you and for me
For you and for me*

“Earth Song” (What About Us)

*What about sunrise, What about rain
What about all the things That you said we were to gain...
What about killing fields, Is there a time
What about all the things, That you said were yours and mine...
Did you ever stop to notice All the blood we've shed before
Did you ever stop to notice,
The crying Earth the weeping shores?*

*What have we done to the world, Look what we've done
What about all the peace That you pledge your only son...
What about flowering fields, Is there a time
What about all the dreams
That you said were yours and mine...
Did you ever stop to notice All the children dead from war
Did you ever stop to notice
The crying Earth the weeping shores*

*I used to dream,
I used to glance beyond the stars
Now I don't know where we are
Although I know we've drifted far*

*Hey, what about yesterday, What about the seas
The heavens are falling down, I can't even breathe
What about the bleeding Earth, Can't we feel its wounds
What about nature's worth, It's our planet's womb*

*What about animals, We've turned kingdoms to dust
What about elephants, Have we lost their trust*

*What about crying whales, We're ravaging the seas
What about forest trails, Burnt despite our pleas*

*What about the holy land, Torn apart by creed
What about the common man, Can't we set him free
What about children dying, Can't you hear them cry
Where did we go wrong*

*Someone tell me why, What about babies
What about the days, What about all their joy
What about the man, What about the crying man
What about Abraham, What about death again
Do we give a damn*

“Man In The Mirror”

*I'm gonna make a change,
For once in my life, It's gonna feel real good
Gonna make a difference
Gonna make it right*

*As I turned up the collar on a favorite winter coat
This wind is blowin' my mind
I see the kids in the street, With not enough to eat
Who am I to be blind, Pretending not to see their needs*

*A summer's disregard, A broken bottle top
And one man's soul, They follow each other
On the wind ya' know, 'Cause they got nowhere to go
That's why I want you to know*

*I'm starting with the man in the mirror
I'm asking him to change his ways
And no message could have been any clearer
If you wanna make the world a better place
Take a look at yourself and then make a change*

*I've been a victim of a selfish kinda love
It's time that I realize
There are some with no home, Not a nickel to loan
Could it be really me, Pretending that they're not alone?*

*A willow deeply scarred
Somebody's broken heart and a washed out dream*

*They follow the pattern of the wind ya' see
 'Cause they got no place to be
 That's why I'm starting with me*

*I'm starting with the man in the mirror
 I'm asking him to change his ways
 And no message could have been any clearer
 If you wanna make the world a better place
 Take a look at yourself and then make a change*

There's a clear need for all of us to actively work to "make the world a better place," so I encourage you to consider what else you might do to contribute to this effort.

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The Message of "Avatar"

January 2010

Although I get most of my information from reading serious writings, I also frequently gain insights and perspective from movies and other media. I recently had this kind of experience in watching the movie "Avatar."

Frankly, I had not intended to see the movie. I had read a lot about the technical wizardry, but wasn't drawn to it—*until* I learned about the movie's underlying message. (I've learned that my initial reaction to hearing about the movie and then changing my opinion when I heard word-of-mouth reports is similar to what happened with many women.)

When the movie first opened, the audience was made up mostly of men who were attracted by the technical aspects and their familiarity with avatars in computer games. But since the plot became better known, the audience has been about evenly divided between men and women.

I don't want to "give away" the entire story, but for those of you who saw the movie, "Dances with Wolves" some years ago, the theme is somewhat similar. People from the "outside" try to take over the land of the natives by force, but one man sees the beautiful qualities of the natives and switches sides.

In "Avatar," the natives are on another planet called Pandora, and the military from Earth tries to take their land by force. One of the marines, the central character in the film, comes to see the beautiful qualities of the natives and their connection with nature—and also switches sides.

One of the most inspiring parts of this movie is the strong point it makes about the avatars' connection with nature (all plants and animals)—similar to the way American Indians valued nature in "Dance with Wolves." But in

“Avatar” the connection is even stronger because it is not restricted to a real-world place, but exists on another planet, albeit a fantasy land.

I have long been fascinated by the idea of our connection to all living things. In a previous piece that is currently part of my book, *Musings on Life*, I wrote about my favorite film of all time (that was not released in theaters) called “Where All Things Belong.”

Below is an excerpt from that writing which reinforces the idea that all things are connected.

The film featured many of the ways of thinking of Native Americans who maintained a much closer connection to the earth, to nature, and to the world in general. The film provided many illustrations of the cycles of nature, including the “cycle of life” by closing with a dramatic scene of a baby being born.

When considering that humans differ from chimpanzees and bonobos by only one per cent of DNA (so close we could accept a blood transfusion or a kidney), we should be able to appreciate that humans are 100% linked biologically, in essence being “the same.” But we continue to act as if anyone unlike us in any way (ethnic, religious, etc.) is somehow different. But our differences are due primarily to our different perceptions based on filtering our view of the world through our own personal experiences.

Our interconnectedness with each other and with all of nature seems to be a lesson we need to learn—and relearn—if we are to survive and thrive as a species. And the message of “Avatar” is just one more reminder that we’re all in this together.

* * * * *

Plastics!

March 2010

For those who have seen the 1967 movie, “The Graduate” with Dustin Hoffman, you’ll recall that one of the most memorable scenes (other than the seduction by Mrs. Robinson) was when Benjamin (Hoffman’s character) was involved in the following exchange with his father’s friend regarding his future now that he had graduated from college.

Mr. McGuire: I want to say one word to you. Just one word.

Benjamin: Yes, sir.

Mr. McGuire: Are you listening?

Benjamin: Yes, I am.

Mr. McGuire: PLASTICS

Benjamin: Just how do you mean that, sir?

Well, the way Mr. McGuire meant that word was that a career in “plastics” was the future. It turns out that this statement was prophetic—because during the 40+ years since that movie, plastics have indeed become hugely successful.

So successful in fact, that it has become the answer to another (very different) question: “*What is one of the primary contributors to the pollution of our planet?*”

If you think this is an extreme statement, consider the following about our consumption of products involving plastic.

—2 million plastic bottles are consumed every 5 minutes.

(200 billion plastic bottles are consumed in one year.)

—1.14 million grocery paper bags are consumed every hour.

—2.3 million pounds of plastic enters the world’s oceans every hour.

Frankly, these numbers are hard to comprehend because we can’t quite imagine what that would look like. But I now have a much better sense of it—because I just watched two short videos that visually translate these numbers into pictures. Photographer Chris Jordan put together visual illustrations for these and many other numbers that demonstrate the degree of damage created by our consumerism.

One of the most fascinating pieces is in the second video about the destruction caused by “the Great Pacific Garbage Patch” in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. It covers an area of the ocean about twice the size of Texas, but can’t be seen as a ship moves through it because it’s 60 feet under water.

However, it’s having a huge effect on the whole eco-system—beginning with the deadly impact of Albatross babies born on Midway Island (which is right in the middle of this garbage patch). The parents fly out in search of food for the babies, filling their pouch and returning to feed the babies what they find, which is *plastic*—that kills them. The real-life photos of these dead birds that have been cut open to expose stomachs full of all kinds of plastic trash is a real wake-up call.

In fact, it’s visual evidence of our need to focus on the impact of our runaway consumerism—and how we dispose of it, especially our plastics. The videos challenge us by pointing out that “We’re lost as a culture.” But they also encourage us to take responsibility for doing our part to change the culture.

Personally, watching them led me to commit to a different level of use and disposal of plastics. For instance, I had been buying bottled water, and have felt good about the fact that I reused the bottles several times before throwing them away. However, I have now gotten some reusable bottles that are “safe” and (despite the fact that they’re larger than I prefer to use), I use them more often instead of the small “unsafe” plastic bottles I had been using.

And whenever I do use a small plastic bottle, I make sure I recycle it. This is something I had always done prior to moving to our current location, but since there’s no convenient recycling bin here, I had slipped into the bad habit of throwing them away after several uses. However, there’s a public park with recycling bins only a couple of blocks away where I go walking almost every day. So I’ve committed to taking all my plastic garbage there for recycling.

There are a growing number of possible sites that make it easier to recycle plastics. For instance, my local grocery store has a bin for depositing the plastic bags you took home from a previous shopping trip. But the plastic bag issue is one I confronted (and wrote about) some time ago—when I switched from using plastic bags to taking my own canvas bags when I go grocery shopping.

I encourage each of you to think of ways you can make a small contribution toward addressing this very large problem. There are so many problems in the world that it's sometimes overwhelming to try to do the "right thing" about each one—especially if we think our small gesture won't make any difference. But if enough people take small steps in their daily lives to reverse some of the bad habits related to our consumerism, it can make all the difference in the world.

For more inspiration, I recommend a wonderful book titled: *State of the World 2010: Transforming Cultures: From Consumerism to Sustainability*. It's by The Worldwatch Institute and Erik Assadourian with a foreword by Muhammad Yunus.

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The Power of Mother Nature

April 2010

Mother Nature can be very powerful—and unpredictable. We've seen a lot of evidence of this during the past few years all over the world. We recently had unprecedented flooding in the Northern and Eastern parts of the U.S. and hurricanes along the East Coast and the South, notably Katrina. We've also seen the incredible devastation from other natural disasters around the world: tsunamis, landslides, tornados, volcano eruptions and earthquakes in Haiti, Chile, Indonesia and elsewhere.

Where I live here in Southern California, we're aware of the potential for earthquakes at any time. However, the only significant one we'd felt in our 25 years of living here was during our very first year. (I don't recall what it measured, but it was strong enough to move our heavy hot water heater a couple of inches.)

Then on Sunday afternoon, April 4, 2010, we felt an earthquake that was almost as strong as the one from that earlier time. It turns out that it measured 7.2 and was in Baja, California (near Mexicali, Mexico), a little over 100 miles from our location. There were several more aftershocks during the next couple of hours, and a smaller one during the night.

Every time something like this happens, it's a reminder that we need to be prepared for possible emergencies. So I went to the folder I keep with a list of "emergency supplies" that should be kept on hand—and realized I was not really prepared at all. So I'm using this as a wake-up call to appreciate that it's simply smart to be prepared—just in case. Just as we have auto insurance or

health insurance (while hoping we never need to use them), we also need to be prepared for any unforeseen natural disaster.

So I hope you will join me in focusing on the need to acquire the “Supplies for a Basic Emergency Supply Kit” as recommended by the Department of Homeland Security. These include:

- Water, one gallon of water per person per day for at least three days, for drinking and sanitation
- Food, at least a three-day supply of non-perishable food
- Battery-powered or hand crank radio and extra batteries
- NOAA Weather Radio with tone alert and extra batteries
- Flashlight and extra batteries
- First Aid Kit
- Whistle to signal for help
- Dust mask to help filter contaminated air and
- Plastic sheeting and duct tape to shelter-in-place
- Moist towelettes, garbage bags and plastic ties for personal sanitation
- Wrench or pliers to turn off utilities
- Can opener for food (if kit contains canned food)
- Local maps
- Cell phone with chargers, inverter or solar charger

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What’s Wrong with this Picture?

April 2010

I’ve been aware of the increasing gun violence in the U.S. for a long time, but it has a greater impact when it strikes close to home. Last week a young boy brought a gun to the middle school that one of my granddaughters attends. Up to seven other boys “handled” the gun during the day before it was discovered.

This happened in a supposedly “nice” neighborhood, with supposedly “good” schools, illustrating how it can happen anywhere. And while there were no deaths from this incident, it led me to check more closely on some of the statistics I had read in the past about the level of gun violence in this country.

According to the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (NCIPC): In 2006, the number of U.S. firearm homicides was 12,791.

While I’m not interested in a debate over the political issue of “gun control,” we do need to recognize the inordinately high rate of deaths from the violent culture that exists here in the U.S. To put it in perspective, we only need to compare it with the rate of deaths from the wars we are currently involved in.

We understandably and legitimately focus a lot of attention on the number of U.S. military fatalities in fighting the “war on terror” in Iraq and Afghanistan. As of April 12, 2010, the total U.S. fatalities in Iraq and Afghanistan combined were 5,396.

However, we have another “war” going on right here at home. And it’s even more dramatic when you compare the deaths from gun violence at home with the deaths from the two wars:

—Deaths from U.S. firearm homicides (for just *one* year, 2006) were 12,471.

—Deaths of U.S. military serving in both Iraq and Afghanistan *combined* (for just *one* year, 2006) were 920 (www.icasualties.org)

—Deaths of U.S. military in Iraq and Afghanistan com-bined during *all* the years of both wars were 5,396.

So the casualties at home for *one* year were:

—almost 14 times higher than the war casualties for the one year, 2006.

—more than twice the number killed during *all* our years in Iraq and Afghanistan.

It simply doesn’t make sense to allow a culture where so many more people die here at home than die in the wars we fight abroad.

The rate of firearm homicides in the U.S. is even more disturbing when you consider it in relation to other countries. Our 12,791 firearm homicides are far greater than other countries. They are:

—6 times that of Canada

—13 times that of Germany

—15 times that of Austria

—26 times that of Australia and Spain

—31 times that of England and Wales

Lest you think this high rate of gun violence in the U.S. is recent, the 2006 rates were only slightly less a decade earlier. In 1996, the number of firearm homicides in the U.S. was 9,390.

Here’s how this compared with other countries:

—2 in New Zealand

—15 in Japan

—30 in England and Wales

—106 in Canada,

—213 in Germany

We U.S. citizens are justifiably proud of our country’s promise of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”—as well as our many achievements through the years. We lead many of the world’s lists of “best” in various categories. But we do *not* want to continue to lead this list of gun violence rates around the world.

The number of deaths from gun violence in the U.S. is not a “new” problem. Cumulatively, we’ve had many years of senseless deaths. In fact, since 1968, when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy were assassinated, over a million people have been killed with guns in the United States.

All these statistics are so overwhelming that it seems beyond our ability to do anything about the issue. But it's important that we recognize that what it takes to address it can not be limited to looking to the government or laws. We need a major shift in the "common character" of our people—*all* of us. Each of us needs to do our part in working toward a "kinder, gentler" way of dealing with our fellow citizens.

This kind of major cultural change can't be accomplished easily or quickly, but the facts presented above can help motivate us to recognize that there's something terribly wrong with this picture—and to work toward diminishing our violent culture here in the U.S.

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Only the Good Die Young

March 2010

I thought of this Billy Joel song this week when I was contemplating the loss of so much promise when the young do indeed die young. It happens far too often, and is always terrible—perhaps made even worse when it happens through senseless violence.

This is what happened here recently. Chelsea King, a wonderful 17-year-old girl who was a cross-country runner for her school, was killed while running in a beautiful park that *seemed* safe. The park included a recreation center, tennis courts, playground at the parking lot and houses within view of some of the park. But the park itself is fairly large with many trails that stretch for several miles. It's a beautiful place to walk or run. In fact, my husband and I have gone walking there quite a few times, once taking our teenage granddaughter with us.

After Chelsea went missing, it took five days to find her body, buried in a shallow grave. (The alleged killer, a registered sex offender, is in jail and awaiting the trial process.) But I don't want to focus on him or the murder itself. I want to focus on Chelsea, the beautiful young woman who will be greatly missed by all her friends and family.

She was described as the "perfect daughter"—achieving in everything she did. And since most of us as parents, grandparents, etc., are close to a young woman like this, we tend to empathize with the pain and grief of those who knew her by recognizing that "it could have been my loved one."

As a result, the wider community reached out to become involved in everything related to this situation—first participating in the search for her body, then in several other large events in her honor. There was a huge turnout for a candlelight gathering the evening of the day her body was found.

Then the following week, there was a "take back the park" walk/run for all those who wanted to reclaim the area where she died. About 3,500 people

participated! (We decided not to go for that particular event, but the following day, we did walk the 3-mile path that had been designated with blue ribbons.)

Of course, nothing can change the tremendous loss, but it's inspiring to see the way people are making every effort to honor her and her short life. And many of the young people here are thinking far more seriously about what they can learn from this experience. For instance, young women are now committed to always carrying cell phones when they run and to avoid running alone, etc.

In addition, Chelsea's parents have already announced they are backing a proposed California law (to be called Chelsea's Law) to strengthen restrictions on violent sexual predators. So out of the worst experiences of our lives, people often step up to "make a difference" in the lives of others.

In fact, some of the most effective efforts to improve laws have come through the efforts of families who have suffered a terrible personal loss. One of the first was MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Drivers), and one of the most visible is the work of John Walsh (the father of a young boy who was killed many years ago) in overseeing "America's Most Wanted"—which is the longest-running program of any kind in the history of television. And there's a long list of other great efforts that began from personal tragedy.

So as we reflect on this particular loss, it's helpful to also recognize the efforts made by many people to honor their lives. All of us need to think about what we can personally do to make the world better (and safer) for our children—*before* being faced with a tragedy like this where a beautiful young woman died much too young.

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One Planet, One People

April 2010

I recently wrote about "the power of mother nature," focusing on the many natural disasters that wreak havoc on our lives—like landslides, tornados, tsunamis, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions. In most instances, these kinds of incidents primarily affect those in the immediate vicinity—while motivating all of us to do whatever we can to help.

However, the most recent volcanic eruptions in Iceland have had a direct affect on many people over a large area of the planet in a more dramatic way than we've seen up until now. This experience created upheaval in people's lives—and not just among those who were unable to fly to their intended destinations. It also had a financial impact—not only for the airlines, but for businesses who depend on air travel to receive goods essential to their operation.

Despite all the negative fallout from this experience, it does provide a "lesson" that we need to keep in mind for the future. It offers a clear picture of how events in any particular location on the globe have the possibility for setting off a chain of reactions that affect people far beyond the initial site. In

this case, there were about 15 other countries directly affected by the ash that grounded planes. And almost every country around the world was impacted by the disruption of the transport of people and goods.

We also need to recognize that this was not just an aberration that has little chance of happening again. In fact, it appears that it may happen again quite soon—and could be even more serious. That's because an event like this usually contributes to triggering another event. In this case, each of the 3 previous times this volcano (Eyjafjallajökull) has erupted, it has triggered an eruption of the Katla, a much larger volcano nearby. More evidence for the possible eruption of Katla is that it's "overdue" in that it erupts about every 80 years, and the last time was 1918 (92 years ago).

If Katla erupts, it's likely to be as much as 10 times stronger than what we've just experienced with the smaller volcano. This, of course, would pose a much greater threat to the surrounding areas—and probably extend far beyond the countries previously affected.

For those who are interested in the history of the impact of such unpredictable natural forces, here's an example of one of the most serious natural disasters on record. Below is an excerpt from "The Living Universe" by Duane Elgin:

Our lineage almost died out about 70,000 years ago, when a period of abrupt climate change produced extreme hardship for our species. A massive volcanic eruption in Indonesia appears to have been the precipitating event. ... This mega-colossal eruption—the largest in the past 2 million years—produced 3,000 times more ash and smoke than the 1980 eruption of the Mount St. Helens volcano. The resulting haze blocked the Sun, cooled the atmosphere, and triggered a severe ice age that lasted a thousand years or more and may have produced the bottleneck in human evolution. Geneticists now estimate that between 1,000 and 10,000 humans in southern Africa survived this catastrophe. A few thousand humans who survived (perhaps from a single village or locale) provided the gene pool from which the entirety of modern humanity derives. These ancestors went their separate ways out of Africa to populate the planet. Now, 70,000 years later, their descendants are encountering one another once again.

With our history as a species, we would be well-advised to recognize that we are all part of one world with one common destiny. While countries may have major differences in cultures, beliefs, governments, and lifestyles, we *all* share a common relationship to the planet. So it's time to recognize our interdependence and to join forces in cooperating to deal with issues that ultimately affect us all.

While we have no power to prevent or change the course of nature, we do have the ability (and the responsibility) to think differently about our “separateness” from other countries and their people—and to act more in accord with what is required for everyone to continue to enjoy the benefits of living together on this planet.