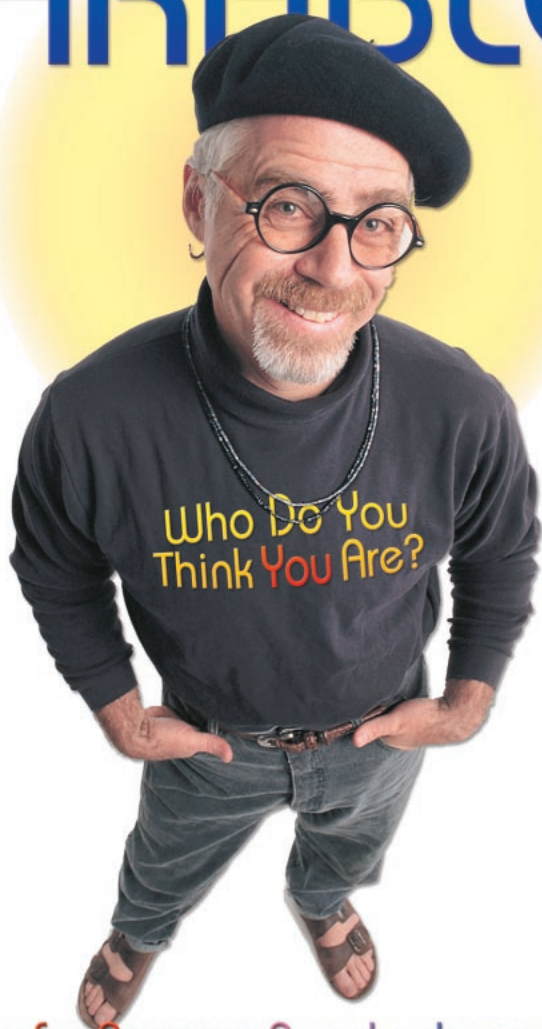




WEARABLE PARABLES



Proverbs for Program People • Lessons for Life
A Do It Now Foundation Publication by Hal Ackerman

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Start where you are.

“Hello, my name is...”

how many times have *you* started a talk like that? (While in the back of your mind you were thinking, “I really don’t want to say the same old stuff, and I’m sure my audience would like to hear something new...”)

I’ve done that. I’ve told about my mother’s confession (unearned) to causing my alcoholism. I’ve told about soiling my pants (and my self-esteem) while passed out in my car at a drive-in restaurant.

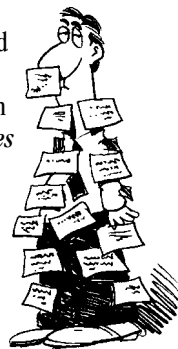
I’ve spoken of despair and joy, tears and fears, hurt, loss and miracles.

That’s a lot of stuff to go through over and over. And even though it *is* all true and hopefully helpful to my listeners, it *does* get stale in the delivery.

Recently, I’ve taken a new tack.

I’ve collected a good chunk of the inspirational and thought-provoking tales I’ve heard from others over the years and added some I made up for occasions of my own. I call them parables, because that’s what they are.

But I’ve taken things a step further and elected to call them “wearable,” because a good life philosophy (which is what a good parable should revolve around) ought to be comfortable enough and adaptable enough to cover our hearts and souls and minds, the way clothing covers our bodies.



Jesus was a master parable-teller. He often taught by telling stories. He had to, because many of his audiences were experientially, educationally or deliberately ignorant.

I'm not comparing myself with Jesus (at least not since I've been sober), nor do I mean to insinuate that members of 12-step programs are stupid. (We have to be pretty creative to get ourselves into the messes that we do!)

Still, I thought it would be helpful to speakers, sponsors, 12-steppers, therapists, counselors, "significant others," and just plain *other* others to have a supply of starter stories to help get things started, to make a point that may need to be made, or otherwise cut through the crap in a discussion or intervention.

Like the guy who took a two-by-four to a jackass explained, "First you got to get their attention," I'm hoping that one or two of the parables that follow fit a parable-shaped hole that you might be confronting.

And I hope they wear as well for you as they have for me.

—Hal A.

■ At last! The perfect relationship!

Overheard at an AA meeting, this 12th-step conversation between sponsor and pigeon:

"Tom, I've spent years and years looking for that ideal relationship. I searched for someone I could trust, and who would trust me.

"I dreamed about this person who could love me no matter what, and who could share my deepest secrets. Someone I could admire and respect, and who would admire and respect me in return.

"Well, Tom, I finally found that person."

"Wow!" said the sponsor. "Congratulations. Do I know this perfect person?"

"Yes, it's me."

The listener had to pause and take a breath, because his friend had made a very significant discovery...one that even your beloved author sometimes forgets:

We're our own best friends and faithful fans. Tattoo that on your forehead!

■ If you haven't heard this story at a meeting before, you should have!

One day, when a missionary in Africa was walking through the jungle, he suddenly found himself in a small clearing, face to face with a fierce lion.

He ran, of course, like a man possessed (actually, more like a man being chased by a lion), until he came to a deep canyon. Looking desperately around, he spotted a sturdy-looking vine trailing over the edge, so he grabbed it and started climbing down.

He did, that is, until he spotted two *more* lions at the bottom, silently eyeing him. When he looked up at the lion snarling at the canyon ledge, he noticed a good-sized rat in a hole in the canyon wall, silently munching on the vine above him.

He lowered his eyes in disbelief and despair, then right in front of his face, noticed a frail little scrap of a plant with one large, red, ripe strawberry on it.

Know what he did?

You bet! He did the only sensible thing available to him and ate the strawberry!

If you're worried about the lions in your past or possible rats in your future, look around. There may be a strawberry in your present.

And that's all there is.

■ You always get what you ask for!

Ever hear the story about the farmer, the blind horse, and the dried-up well? No? Well, try this on. See if it fits.

One day, a farmer's old blind horse fell into the farmer's useless old well.

Since the farmer thought it would be more trouble than it was worth to haul the horse out, he figured he could finish off two birds with one stone, so to speak. So he decided to fill in the well and bury the old nag at the same time.

The problem was that, as he shoveled in the dirt, the horse just shook it off and kept treading it under his feet.

Eventually, as the dirt rose in the well, so did the horse, until he finally climbed out at the top and walked off to pasture.

The moral of the story is, of course, that we don't need to be buried by hard times, discouragements, or calamities. Unless, of course, we're willing to stand still and let someone shovel dirt in our face!

Ask for what you want!

■ The inner voice

This thing has been called a lot of different things: A hunch, a lucky guess, a feeling in one's bones, intuition, an answer to a prayer, and on and on.

Edison called it "listening within." Leo Burnett, the great ad man, called it "creative conscience."

I call it the incubation process.

Whenever I have a problem, I input and input all the data I can, then I just let it incubate in this great machine in my head I call a mind.

Then, one day, viola! [*I know...*] A light comes on and the answer pops out.

Every one of us has a small, underdeveloped voice inside ourselves. Call it what you want, but to really create you have to listen to that voice—trust it and act on what it tells you.



Before you go to sleep tonight, go over all the material you've collected for that special project, then pop it into your incubator.

If the answer doesn't pop back out in the morning, you might want to go for a walk or a workout or otherwise keep an open and receptive mind.

If you really did do all your homework, the answer will come.

And if you still don't get an answer, that's an answer.

■ The care and feeding of a habit

A workman on a construction site went through the same routine every day at noon: He'd open his lunch box, peer inside, then curse and complain: "Peanut butter and jelly again! I *hate* peanut butter and jelly!"

This went on for weeks, until one day one of his co-workers suggested that if he hated peanut butter and jelly sandwiches so much, he should tell his wife.

"What wife?" he bellowed. "I'm not married. I fix my *own* lunch!"

The same thing is true, in one way or another, for all of us: Most of what we like least about our lives is of our own making.

If you're sick and tired of something that's happening in your life, look around and see, exactly, *who* is doing it to you.

Then remember that you do have a choice: You can keep eating peanut butter and jelly, or you can try something new. It's up to you.

But don't get booked on baloney, either!

■ Acceptance (or “be as little children”)

A little girl was playing with a doll one day, and got a bit enthusiastic in tossing her “baby” around. She missed a catch and the doll fell to the floor, smashing its head.

The little girl was crestfallen and took the doll to her father, pleading, “Daddy, will you fix my doll, please?”

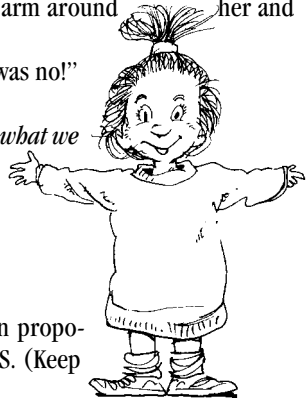
Dad surveyed the damaged doll and just shook his head. “I’m sorry, honey, but I don’t know how to do that. I can’t fix your doll.”

Suddenly angry, the little girl said, “All right, then I’ll go into my room and pray for God to fix it!” Then she flounced into her room, slamming the door.

After a while, the little girl returned to the living room, this time playing happily with another doll. Her father put his arm around her and asked, “Did God answer your prayers?”

“Yes,” replied the little girl. “But the answer was no!”

Moral: Praying is good, but being thankful for what we get is better.



■ Eschew obfuscation*

People in various 12-step programs are often proponents of an unassuming acronym known as K.I.S.S. (Keep It Simple, Sweetheart).

Others are impressed at just how easily (and how well) problems get handled when we deal with them one at a time.

In our increasingly technical world, we’re surrounded by examples but don’t always recognize them: Nuclear energy (which is the most complicated, dangerous, and expensive way of boiling water yet devised), jet propulsion (which really *is* rocket science, but simple enough if you take it one step at a time), computer systems design (a mind-bogglingly-complex substitute for thinking built entirely of ones and zeros), even getting sober (let me count the ways...not to).

Maybe that’s why it’s so easy to get lost in details and processes today, and maybe, too, that’s why so many of us miss the point of what we want our lives to be about. Next time you find that you’re intellectualizing yourself into or out of a problem or situation, KISS yourself, instead.

It really is that simple, sweetheart.

*A complicated way of saying, “Keep it simple.” Got your attention, didn’t it?

■ When in doubt, ask!

I still remember an evening a long time ago, when I was dating a young lady who showed up for one of our dates with a huge frown on her face.

Right away, I started inventing explanations for her expression, and finally decided that she'd probably found a big, rich, good-looking hunk and she was working up the courage to dump me before the night was out.

I immediately started mentally rehearsing for the confrontation-to-come. I worked out how I'd act and even imagined some clever insults to throw back at her, and retorts to her potential comebacks.

I stewed about it so long, in fact, that I almost decided to beat her to the punch by dumping her first! Fortunately, though, I had the good sense to ask, and found out she had heartburn from eating Mexican food.

I could have blown a perfectly good relationship by acting instead of asking!

Moral: Don't do to yourself what you don't want other people to do to you.

■ Living in the now

"There's never enough time!"

How often have you heard someone say that...or said it yourself? Think about it. Does anybody have any more time than anyone else?

Can there be more or less time? Certainly not. The whole point is that it's not a matter of having enough time—rather, it's how we use the time that we have.

Someone once joked that the whole point of time is to keep everything from happening at once. The only time is now. And life, then, is an unbroken series of nows.

If you really want to get the most out of the here and now, don't waste it by reliving other times, good or bad.

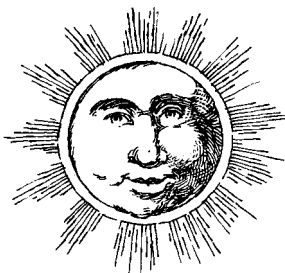
Do what needs to be done every day. Putting tasks off or frittering away time by worrying or feeling guilty only results in a bigger stack of things not getting done.

Then, when the stack gets really humongous, we worry about how out of control our lives are!

Is it worth it?

Naaaah!

Take time to do what needs doing now. It will add years to your life and life to your years.



■ How to make it rain on your parade (even when it's a sunny day!)

I usually know, as soon as I get up in the morning and say to myself: "Groan, it's going to be a miserable day," that sure enough, that's what it will turn out to be.

Sometimes, though, I wake up singing, "Wow, what a great day this is!" And the same thing happens, and I just know I'm in a *zone* and great things are going to keep turning up.

Am I psychic? I don't think so.

Do I have some special power to influence or control everything in the world around me? *Bingo!*

Do *you*?

Bingo right back at ya, baby!

Just consider the implications.

■ Giving depression the air

How are you feeling right now?

A little tense, perhaps? Maybe the opposite, kind of drug-out and lethargic?

Here's a suggestion:

Check your breathing. If you're slouching in a chair or flopped on a couch, taking in little shallow sniffs of air, your body may not be getting the fuel it needs to perform up to par.

Think about it: Your brain needs oxygen to fire itself up. Your body needs oxygen to burn the energy it needs to function properly and keep you feeling good about it.

Try this:

Sit up straight. Breathe deeply, now, into your stomach. Hold it for a count of four. Now blow it out through your mouth as though you were putting out a candle in front of you. Do it again. And again.

Now breathe in through your nose, and count one, two, three, four. Now exhale.

Notice a change in the way you feel? You should, and you will.

Not especially a high-powered motivational exercise, maybe, but a good way to get motivated when you're feeling deflated.

Just tell your troubles to blow!

■ You can make yourself crazy ...If you want to!

Let's see, I've got to pay the electric bill...check out the funny noise the car's making...talk to my wife about Susie's science project.....have my driver's license renewed...write another "parable" for this booklet...make sure I'm registered for the next election...write Mom...wonder why the boss gave me that funny look today....

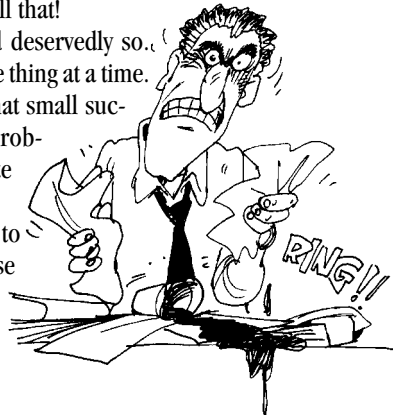
Whoa!

There's just no way I can possibly do all that!

I feel a load of stress coming on, and deservedly so. Because it's true, we really *can* only do one thing at a time. I can go pay the electric bill. Then with that small success I have the confidence to tackle the problem with the car, then have lights to write my next parable by, and so on and so on.

My point is obvious. When things begin to get us down, the best thing to do is face those things one at a time.

Prioritize...then actualize.



■ Which comes first, The necessity or the need?

There was a self-styled good Samaritan who spent his hours and days at the foot of a dangerous cliff, waiting for the cars to plunge through the guard rail and crash below.

When they did, he'd swing into action. He'd run over, pull the broken bodies out, administer first aid, and call an ambulance. Then he'd pat himself on the back and wait for the next accident to happen.

One day, though, an observer noticed what he was doing and confronted him. "Why in the heck don't you go up to the *top* of the cliff and stop people from driving over in the first place?"

The Samaritan looked at him like he'd just materialized out of thin air; he'd simply never thought about it that way.

We all know people who function in much the same way—cleaning up messes afterwards, rather than preventing them in the first place. Maybe that's why so many doctors are getting into preventive medicine these days, and counselors are working on relationships rather than separations.

It sure works for me.

In fact, I make it a practice now to check the gas gauge *before* I drive to work, rather than after I get stuck out on the road somewhere. A mundane example, maybe, but it's better than being stopped by a mundane problem.

Look at where you're going today, and see if there's a way to smooth the road now—not later, when you're spinning your wheels.

■ Mind over matters

Ever watch a great basketball player get himself set, going through the motions without the ball, before taking a free throw? Or a football team working itself up into a frenzy before a kickoff?

Ever wonder how a sugar pill, a placebo, can make us think we're well when we're sick?

Does all this have a point? Yes: That this delicate bundle of neurons and neurochemistry that we all carry inside our heads and which has been evolving for eons is a powerful creative instrument. It does exactly what we tell it to do and can bend the world to its beliefs.

So be careful how you use yours. Don't ask for something you don't really want. You'll probably get it.

Remember...your mind minds!

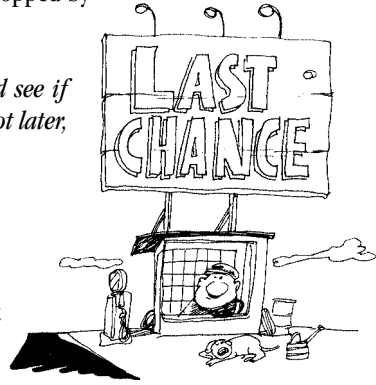
■ Don't wait—activate!

On the way to work I saw another one of those bumper stickers that you see everywhere these days: "Expect a Miracle."

I wonder what people mean, exactly, when they stick those words on their cars.

Because as I look around, I see so many miracles that have already happened and continue to happen so regularly as to become commonplace.

The very car I drive is a miracle of ingenuity and enterprise. The idea that my printed thoughts can come to you wherever you are is a miracle. My own existence, and yours, is the result of a miraculous coming together of energies, intentions, opportunities, and biology...not to mention some sort of higher (very!) intelligence.



Instead of waiting for miracles to happen, I'd rather look around to see all the miracles I already have in my life, and rejoice in them. Because I have them here now, I don't have to wait for them.

Pray to accept what is, not what might be.

■ Time is the greatest happening of all

Remember the last time something really great happened to you?

How long did you wait in anticipation for that really great thing to happen?

No matter, just think about *this* for a moment: What would have happened if you had given up on achieving or receiving this really great thing the day before it happened?

I'm reminded of the "unlucky" gardener who planted what he thought would be a bounty of fruit and vegetables but kept going back every other day to dig up the seeds to see if they'd sprouted yet!

What I'm getting at here is the need for patience, which simply means having enough faith in yourself and in the natural course of things in this world to let them work. If you've been working hard for something, and you've done everything you can to cause it to happen, you've done your part. Now, get out of the way. Let it happen.



Then act surprised when it turns out exactly how you expected.

■ Thoughts are real things

Try this: Think back to one of the worst things that ever happened to you. Remember how it happened, how it felt. Got it?

Now, think back to one of the best things that ever happened to you. Relive it. Enjoy it. Roll it over in your mind. Okay?

Now, which one felt best? And who was it that made you feel that way?

Right... *you* did! There's nobody but you inside the control room of your mind, pushing buttons, twisting knobs, making you feel bad—or any other way.

Why persist, then, in pursuing bad thoughts when the same amount of energy can convert them to good-feeling thoughts?

Think about it.

■ Polish your gold

At Fort Knox in Kentucky, there are vast reserves of gold. This gold has potential value, but as long as it's buried inside Fort Knox, it has no practical use, especially since the United States—and most of the rest of the world—went off the gold standard.

Some day the gold in Fort Knox may be exhumed and put to use and lots of folks may benefit. But in the meantime, it just sits there.

Many of us are the same way. Because the fact is that there's great wealth buried in the hearts and minds and souls of every one of us. It may be buried in personality traits that have never been developed. It may lie in a special talent that has never been cultivated or a curiosity that's never been given room to discover itself. It may be a capacity for kindness, sympathy, or unselfish devotion to others that's gotten rusty from disuse.

We all have vast stores of gold buried inside ourselves. Many of us will die without having experienced or having shown the rest of the world the real riches hidden within us.

It's a shame, and doubly so because we all know that the old saying about misers is true. You really can't take it with you!

Gold is worthless when it's not put to use.

■ Success is how you see it...not me!

More books have been written on the secret of success than just about any other topic.

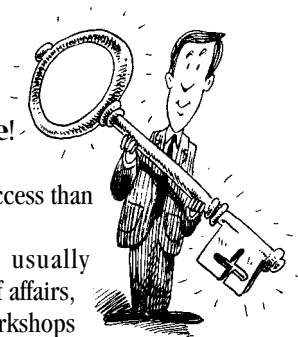
Uncounted “experts” and unnamed (and usually unaccredited) schools have profited from this state of affairs, of course, serving up an endless supply of weekend workshops and self-help seminars, with tuition and fees that speak volumes about how well the courses' designers succeed in helping *themselves*.

Still, after we've read all there is to read and have taken all the courses in all the community colleges and all the hotel conference rooms, it might come as a shock when we realize that there is no “secret” to success—not one infallible foolproof formula in the whole batch.

Unless, of course, you count simple hard work and determination.

All of this reminds me of the young man who set himself on the quest to find

Big homes, big cars, and big basketball players are all of special importance because of their size. In the workplace, big jobs are big deals because they pay big money. A child will usually open the biggest present first at a birthday party



the secret of success. After many months of study and interviews with successful people, he finally put a point on his entire enterprise in this way: "I have not yet discovered the secret of success, but I am afraid that it is work."

I'm afraid that I'll have to confirm the young man's findings, but I will add this afterthought: Maybe we need to change our conception of success. Mine might not be the same as yours.

And that's okay.

■ For sale: Thirty dollars worth of happiness

How much is happiness worth?

A London judge had to answer that question, when a 70-year-old Englishman filed a suit involving considerable damages he felt entitled to as a result of an injury which prevented him from playing golf. He asked the judge to consider the zest and pleasure that golf brought into his life.

The difficulty in trying to measure unexperienced happiness interested the judge and he did his best to strike an equitable balance. But he discovered what most of us already instinctively know, that we can't measure happiness—especially happiness that doesn't happen.

Everyone must seek joy in his or her own way. A millionaire can be miserable (Anybody remember Howard Hughes?) while a street sweeper may be happy as a clam. (And what's a clam got to be happy about, anyway?)

The inverse is also true—as inverses often are. A boy in the middle of the Library of Congress can miss what Lincoln got out of a borrowed book by the fireside.

Happiness, then, isn't a matter of getting what you want. Rather, it's a matter of wanting what you get. And no judge or jury can ever do that for us.

Thirty bucks is a lot, if you're broke!

■ What's the big deal?

Size makes a pretty big impression upon us human beings.

Big homes, big cars, and big basketball players are all of special importance because of their size. In the workplace, big jobs are big deals because they pay big money. A child will usually open the biggest present first at a birthday party or at Christmas.

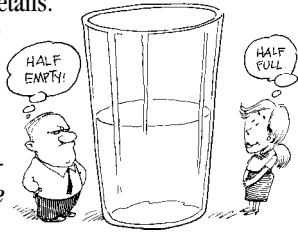
Size makes a pretty big impression upon us human beings.

or at Christmas.

The problem is that we're so busy paying attention to the so-called big things in life that we often overlook and neglect minor details.

And that's a problem because the average man or woman is a "little" person. We live in small houses or apartments, hold small jobs, and enjoy small successes.

And that's why it's not just a cliché to remind ourselves that it's the little things in life that really *are* important.



Consider a thumbtack. A thumbtack may not be big, but if you sit on one it can begin to seem pretty important right away. Or consider the atom—it contains more energy than a trainload of coal. A termite can destroy a building that an earthquake can't budge.

For me, this article doesn't have to be the biggest, best, and greatest thing ever written. But if you—or someone like you—comes away with a small but useful thought for today...wow! That's big!

Then think of how many days there are in a whole year!

■ You can't fix what you can't see

You've heard it before: "Perception is reality." "What you see is what you get." "Seeing is believing." How we look at things determines how we experience them. For example, if I told you that the sun rises in the Pacific and sets in the Atlantic, you'd probably say that I was at best misinformed. But to people who live in certain parts of Panama, it can be a reality. Look at a map.

If I get up in the morning and it's raining, I have a choice. I can say, "Damn, it's going to ruin the wash job on my car." Or, I can say, "Perfect...now I don't have to water the lawn!" Either point of view is my option. Nobody but me is upstairs in my mind pushing attitude buttons. And the same thing applies to all the people with whom we interact during the day. Their perceptions may not match ours, which is why they may act differently than we think they should.

And we may not match their expectations, either. When that happens, both of us have a decision to make—to resent, argue, deny, or accept. Which is easiest? Call me lazy, but I'd rather accept things as they are.

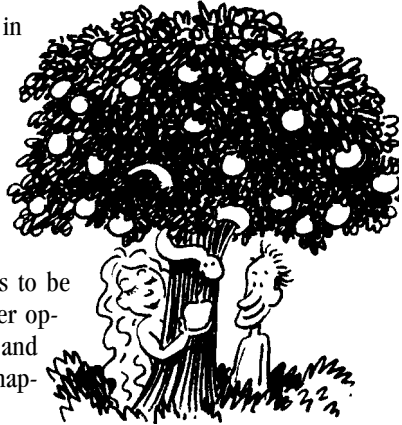
I don't have to like it, but I have to accept reality if I ever want to change it.

■ A word about consequences

Adam and Eve knew what would happen if they dined on forbidden fruit. They deigned to dine. Jesus didn't have to be crucified. He made the choice. In more modern times, Roberto Duran had to choose between getting his brains beaten out by Sugar Ray Leonard, or bowing out in the middle of the "no mas" fight with his face and fortune intact.

Even closer to home, I can go stand in the middle of the freeway any time I want to. Or not. That's a choice I make when I'm aware of all the facts. We all make choices every day, but remember, we also choose the results of those choices. Life isn't black or white. It's black *and* white—and a lot of other colors, too.

When you have a decision that needs to be made, you have the right to pick whatever option you want. But don't call me up later and say, "Hey, I didn't know that was going to happen!"



When you flip a coin, it hardly ever lands on edge.

■ Fear is in the ear of the beholder

A forest ranger was working deep in the woods when his sister tried to call him person-to-person at his headquarters office.

She was only calling to say hello and thought she might as well save the price of the call if her brother was out of the office (as he often was), so she canceled the call when the operator told her that he wasn't available.

When the ranger got word by radio later that his sister had called person-to-person, though, he immediately started worrying about all the things that might possibly be wrong at home. The more he imagined, the more he worried. Finally, he radioed his boss for permission to take the day off so he could hitch hike to the nearest phone, some fifty miles away.

It took hours for him to get the call through and when his father answered he cried, "Dad, it's good to hear your voice! Is anything wrong?" His dad thought for awhile, then said in a thoughtful voice, "Well, we could use some rain."

Men and women, me and you, often make big things out of little things. But it's important to remind ourselves from time to time that nothing is anything until we put a name on it. Good or bad, happy or sad, it has whatever force we lend it.

The important thing is not to give something a name before it's born.

It might not belong to you.

■ You only fail when you quit trying

Some of the most famous and successful people in the world considered themselves failures.

Harry Truman and Abraham Lincoln failed as shopkeepers before becoming president. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected president more times than anyone else, but had to do it after failing as a candidate for vice-president in 1920. Eddie Rickenbacker smashed up his plane on his first solo flight before going on to become the greatest aerial ace of World War I. Later on, he headed up an automobile manufacturing company, which promptly went broke.

And did you realize that Babe Ruth, the first home run king of baseball, or Hank Aaron, his modern-era successor, both struck out more times than anyone else?

In fact, when reporters asked the Babe what he thought about when he struck out, he just shrugged: "I think about hitting home runs."

It just shows that you have to get up to the plate and take your swings.

You can't do a home run trot if you're sitting on your butt in the dugout.

■ What you get is what you got

A man in a restaurant was overheard asking the waiter for black bottom pie



and coffee.

"I'm sorry, sir, but we're fresh out of black bottom pie," the waiter replied.

"*No black bottom pie?*" the customer shouted. "I've been coming here for years, and I always order black bottom pie! It's the reason I come here! I want to see the manager!"

Everyone in the place was listening by this time, so the waiter excused himself and told the man that he'd see what he could do.

Instead of bringing the manager, though, he slipped out the back door and hurried to a bakery down the street, returning with a single slice of black-bottom pie.

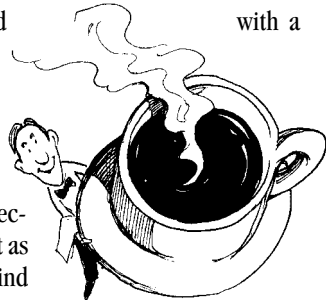
"Compliments of the house," he announced with a flourish as he delivered the pie and coffee to the man's table.

The man looked at him, then at the pie. After a long pause, he said, "No, thanks! I'd rather be mad."

He was joking, but sometimes when our expectations don't match up with reality, we can be just as hard to please. When that happens to me, I remind myself to start counting what I do have—eyes, ears, health, a job, and on and on.

How about you? What have you got today?

If you don't have a fork to eat your pie... use your fingers.



■ Playing it safe

We live in an age where we expect protection against every conceivable calamity, natural disaster, and possible loss of income or prestige. For most of us, security is prized even more than opportunity. Still, sometimes security can be disastrous.

For example, ten years before the Wright brothers made their first flight, Hiram S. Maxim invented and built an airship powered by a steam motor. How come you never heard of him? Because he built in so many safeguards that one of them caused the ship to crash while proving it could fly. The crash not only destroyed the machine but killed any further ambitions of Maxim to build an aircraft.

There are times when a certain amount of risk spurs us on to greater success. Our ancestors certainly had no guarantees when they came to this new land and settled it. They knew that you can't get something for nothing unless you're will-

ing to run the risk of getting nothing in spite of everything.

We can never substitute security for courage. Only slaves and prisoners get to avoid worrying about where they're going to sleep and eat and work.

And even a turtle has to stick his neck out before he can get anywhere!

If you can't make a move, it's like being in jail. And the only thing people in jail have in common is that they all want out.

■ Ladder etiquette

When an important French dignitary was a guest at a dinner party while visiting the United States, he was conspicuous for his polite and considerate manners.

One of the guests took exception to his display of *savoir faire* and announced, "Ah, that's nothing but a lot of wind."

The French dignitary only smiled. "There is nothing but wind in an automobile tire, either, but it certainly smooths out the bumps along the way."

Maybe you don't consider politeness a suitable topic for a motivational talk, but consider all the stress, anger, wasted time and blocks to good human relationships that bad manners can cause. To me, simply not having to explain or apologize for my behavior, or not having to excuse someone else's, is motivation enough to be polite at all times.

After all, we've all been warned about being careful who we insult on our way up the ladder. We might meet them again on the way down!



An insult, given or taken, isn't worth getting drunk—or into a fight—over.

■ Are you boring yourself?

Anybody out there remember Tony Martin, the handsome leading man of a few years back?

Tony was complaining about being bored and fed up with life at one point at the end of his career, and bemoaning the way Hollywood was treating him. "One day you're making love to Betty Grable," he said, "another day to Lana Turner, the next day to Linda Darnell, and before you know it, you're a has-been!"

“Yeah,” spoke up a friend, “but look where you *has been!*”

If you really want to escape from boredom, there are *tons* of possibilities if you’re willing to face life as you find it and take your happiness as it comes to you.

And anyone who has been in a good place has the experience to get there again.

Quit staring at the cliff in front of you, and turn around to admire the canyon you’ve climbed out of. Be glad you’re a has-been.

■ Talk about choices

Sometimes I like to start my AA or NA talks with, “Hello . . . I’m the greatest Hal there ever was!”

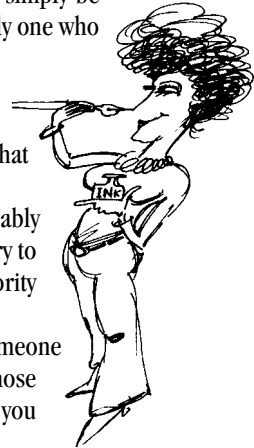
Does that sound conceited? Egocentric? As Muhammad Ali, the original “Greatest,” used to say, “It ain’t bragging if you can do it!”

And I can prove I’m the greatest Hal there ever was, simply because I’m the *only* one there ever was. In fact, I’m the only one who ever will be just like me.

So, this package that I arrived in is all I’ve got to work with. Good or bad, rich or poor, success or failure, what I am at any point in time is the best Hal in existence at that time.

It’s up to me. Nobody else. I can’t be A.J. Foyt. I probably wouldn’t even be a second-rate Paul Newman. I’d never try to be a Sugar Ray Leonard. But I’m the world’s leading authority on Hal A.

How about you? Who are you? Are you trying to be someone you aren’t? Are you even being someone you don’t like? Whose fault is that? Why don’t you relax and enjoy being what you are: someone unique for all time in all the universe.



Nobody else knows how.

■ Don’t make the pity pot Too comfortable

I was feeling angry with myself one day, and told a friend about a certain wrong I had committed. He said, “Hal, remember when your kids were growing

up and one of them spilled the milk at the breakfast table? What did you do, go and get a baseball bat and pound his brains out?"

"Of course not," I said. "I simply comforted him and told him the spill could be cleaned up easily, and to just try to be more careful next time."

My friend laughed and said, "Well then why don't you treat yourself the same way?"

He was right. Have you ever taken a baseball bat to yourself over some silly misadventure that you'd easily forgive another person for?

Pay no attention to my grammar, just the message. Love yourself a little bit, too.

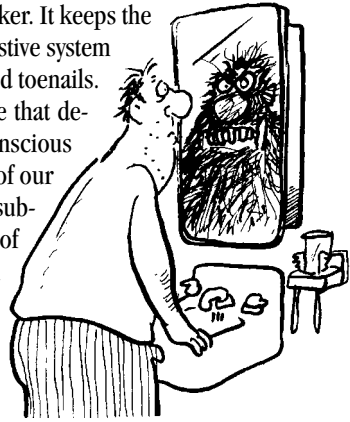
I hate it when I don't talk good!

■ Who's in charge?

I think we can all agree that we have two minds, right?

One, the subconscious, is the dumb worker. It keeps the heart pumping, the lungs working, the digestive system turning cheeseburgers into hair and skin and toenails.

The conscious mind is the boss, the one that decides what needs to be done. When the conscious mind—the one we think of when we think of our "selves"—says, "drive the car to work," the subconscious mind says, "Okay." It takes care of turning the steering wheel and stepping on the brake and checking the rear view mirror for traffic cops while "you" listen to the radio or make plans for what you're going to do when you get to where you're going.



By the same token, though, when you consciously say in your conscious mind, "I'm no good," or "I'm stupid," the subconscious doesn't know you're kidding or that you're just feeling frustrated or angry at the time. It simply accepts your judgment and says, "Okay," then goes ahead and does no good or stupid things.

So be careful what you put in your subconscious. You may not like what you get back.

By then it's too late to say, "just kidding!"

■ Weeds in your garden?

A lady I know takes a lot of pride in her lawn. She has it mowed meticulously, and feeds it and waters it lovingly. Still, she can't keep the crabgrass out, no matter what she tries.

Once, she even wrote to the Department of Agriculture for advice. She explained that she loved her lawn and begged them to tell her what to do about the crabgrass. Finally, the answer came back: "Learn to love the crabgrass, too."

There's an old saying that what can't be cured must be endured. I'm not sure I agree with the wording, but the idea of accepting what we can't do anything about is a good and valid one.

Ever try to change another person—a husband or wife or lover or friend—to suit your idea of what they should be like? Then you know what it's like to have crabgrass—which, when you get right down to it, is something pretty awesome all by itself!

If you're trying to recreate someone in your own image, then one of you will be redundant.

■ Blues plate special

Although I know I'm only talking to one person here, myself, I also realize that there are a lot of others reading this with individual needs, hopes, and dreams.

And it's impossible to respond to all of those different themes in one short essay.

So, this time, I'm offering a motivational menu. Pick out one you like and chew on it during the day:

☉ Instead of sitting around waiting to go to Heaven, why not make Heaven out of where you are?

☉ Those who try to do something and fail are better than those who try to do nothing and succeed.

☉ We can't all be topnotchers, but we can all climb a little higher than we are and thus relieve the congestion at the foot of the ladder.

☉ A man with six children is more satisfied than a man with a million dollars. A man with a million dollars wants more!

Any of these work for you?

Here's another: Have a good day—if you want to.

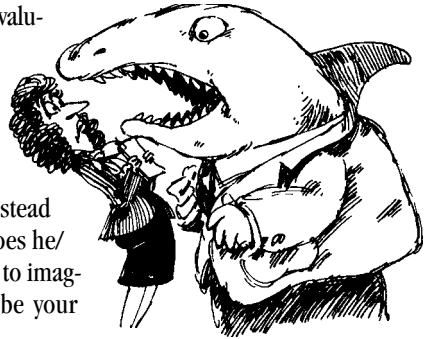
■ Courage to criticize

All of us think about friends in terms of their loyalty to us.

We may feel that with our real friends we don't have to be fussy with words or deeds. They'll understand. And, if we screw up, our true friends will forgive us.

But it's also possible that our acceptance of their l o y a l t y
keeps us from accepting something really valuable from our friends: criticism.

When an enemy or a stranger challenges something we say or do, we fight or run. When a friend makes a critical comment, we're often resentful. The next time a good friend is critical, instead of snarling silently ("Just who the hell does he/she think he/she is?"), it might be useful to imagine that the person was only trying to be your friend.



Most of us would do well to toughen our hides and welcome a little frankness from our friends. It would probably also benefit most of us to consider the courage it takes for them to even take a chance on critiquing us. We *can* be pretty hard to help.

When we're all wrapped up in ourselves, it makes a pretty sorry package.

■ Keep your eye on the ball

Former New York Yankee catcher and baseball hall-of-famer Yogi Berra was famous for his inimitable style of quotable quotes.

"Yogi-isms" are legion—and legendary. "It's like déjà vu all over again," "Nobody ever goes there because it's so crowded," and "The opera ain't over 'till the fat lady sings," have been told and retold so often that they've even become a permanent part of our language and culture.

But even Yogi was speechless when he tried to rattle home run king Hank Aaron during a World Series game one autumn day.

When Hank came to the plate, Yogi began working Hank, telling Aaron that he was holding the bat wrong. "You need to be able to see the trademark," Yogi scolded. Aaron stepped back from the plate, rubbed some dirt in his hands and just laughed.

"I didn't come here to read," he said, "I came here to hit!" And so he did—then, and many times after.

Sometimes we need to refocus and remind ourselves of why *we* are up to bat. Leo Bascaglia, the famous “Love Doctor,” put it this way: “When you eat, eat. When you make love, make love. When you scratch, scratch!”

You get the idea. The point is that if we let all kinds of extraneous hopes and fears and expectations muddle up our enjoyment of what we’re about to do, chances are we won’t be happy with the outcome.

And when you bitch, do a good job of it. Then get on to the next project.

■ The secret of life

I remember a “Peanuts” comic strip I saw once that put things in pretty clear perspective.

Linus was talking: “I think I’ve learned the secret of life, Charlie Brown.” In the panels that followed, he explained. “I went to the doctor yesterday with a sore throat. The nurse put me in a small room. A kid in another room was screaming his head off. When the doctor came in to see me, I told him I was glad I wasn’t in that other room.”

The doctor said, “Yes, that kid will have his tonsils out. You’re lucky, you only have a mild inflammation.”

“The secret of life,” Linus declared, “is to be in the right room.”

Things happen. We don’t always have control over them, but nothing is ever accomplished by worrying or blaming bad luck for where we find ourselves at any specific time. But we *can* take charge of our life. We can set goals, then take the necessary steps to make sure we’re in the right room when lucky breaks get handed out—or taken away.

Satisfaction and joy come through the faith which we translate into positive action.

Saying the Serenity Prayer fits.

■ All the world’s a stage

The old ham actor had struggled through a career of near-misses and flops, always rationalizing and blaming his way out of repeated failures.

Still, one day near the end of his career, he managed to land the lead role in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. To his credit, he worked hard and rehearsed diligently, preparing for opening night. And when it came, he was ready—he thought.

But far from being prepared, he was bad—terrible, in fact. He fumbled his

lines and played his part with so little feeling and insight that the audience grew impatient, then surly.

Finally, as he reached the climactic scene, the soliloquy, and began solemnly to intone, "To be or not to be..." audience members could contain themselves no longer, and suddenly let loose all their pent-up displeasure. They booed, they hissed, they threw vegetables at the stage.

At this point, our hero stopped in exasperation. He glared at the audience across the footlights, then shouted self-righteously, "For God's sake, *I* didn't write this crap!"

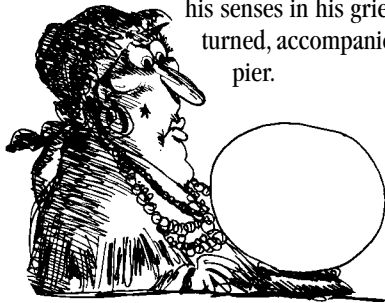
Draw your own conclusion.

■ How to tell the future

An old Chinese proverb tells of a humble farmer, who was seemingly unaffected when he discovered his prized stallion had wandered off.

His neighbors were loudly sympathetic. "Isn't it terrible that your valuable horse is lost?" they inquired. "Who am I to say what is good or bad?" the old man said, shrugging his shoulders.

His neighbors simply shook their heads in disbelief, figuring the man had lost his senses in his grief. A few weeks later, when the horse returned, accompanied by twenty young mares, they were happier.



"Isn't it wonderful?" they exulted. "How lucky you are!"

"Who am I to judge what is or is not wonderful?" the farmer muttered, accepting his luck as a matter of course.

The neighbors were suddenly sympathetic again when the farmer's son was thrown off one of the mares, and fractured his leg. "Things happen," the farmer sighed. "I am not one to say things that happen are bad or good."

Again, the neighbors were surprised at how calmly he accepted his misfortune. But they all agreed he'd saved himself some grief a few days later when the local warlord sent troops into the village, conscripting all able-bodied young men into the army.

What do you think? Is this a good or bad story?

Don't ask me. I'm not the one to say.

■ You can't please everybody

Once, an old man and his grandson had business to attend to in the next village, and used their little donkey as transportation. They started out with the elderly man riding and the younger man leading the animal with a rope around the burro's neck.

However, along the way, the boy developed a blister on his foot and began to limp slightly.

It didn't take long for observers along the way to shake their heads and chastise the old man for making the limping boy walk while he rode. So they switched.

At the next crossroads, the crowd scolded the young man for riding while his elderly grandfather trudged along in the dust. So the two of them both climbed aboard, and guess what?

Right! People criticized them for being cruel to the little burro! So what else could they do but dismount and walk together?

We don't know how the story ends, or whether they even got to where they were headed, but they must have been tired and sore by the time they got there.

Are you going to be an ass or ride one?

■ Some laws you can't change

Laws exist for one reason. They work.

Take the law of gravity, for example. It works equally well on a marble or a kitchen stove. It is impartial and has no conscience. Put a kitchen stove in your living room, for example, and gravity will keep it there. It doesn't care why you put the stove in the living room and not in the kitchen. It's doing what it's supposed to be doing and it assumes that you know what you're doing, too.

Other physical laws are also pretty non-judgmental. Take electricity. You can plug your toaster into a wall socket and electricity will make toast for you. You can put your finger into the same wall socket and electricity will make toast of you.

Other kinds of laws—moral codes, ethical concepts of right and wrong, justice and compassion, principles of character—work much the same way.

How you work with those laws is your choice. What you get from using or abusing those laws is also up to you.

The fact that we don't agree with something doesn't change it. The Law of Cause and Effect doesn't care what we think.

■ What you see vs. What you get

A young fellow who had just spent his entire life savings to make a dream come true took possession of his brand-new Ferrari and immediately took the car out to road-test it.

He was tearing down a country lane, up-shifting, down-shifting, braking, and accelerating through the curves when he passed a young woman driving the other direction in an old pickup truck. She yelled “Pig” at him as he went by.

Not to be outdone, he yelled back at her: “Cow!”

Then just as he rounded a bend in the road, he ran smack into a 300-pound sow, totalling out his new toy. Fortunately, the young man wasn’t hurt terribly—at least not physically.

He did realize (although it *was* a minute or so late) that things aren’t always what they seem at first blush. And sometimes when life seems least fair, it’s still being kinder to us than we probably deserve.

Look twice before you leap. Or at least, slow down.

■ It rhymes with gratitude

Every day, we have a choice about what kind of attitude we’ll carry throughout the next 24 hours. Strike that and make it the next *hour*.

We can’t change the past. We can’t change how people act or speak or think. We can, maybe, change the next hour or so by doing the right thing right now.



The only cards we can play is the hand we’re holding now. That’s what we mean by “attitude.” Attitude is more important than facts. It’s more vital than past or future, money or education. It’s more important than success or failure (although it’s a crucial factor in both), and it matters more than what other people say or do to us. Appearance, ability, and circumstance don’t have all that much to do with attitude, either, which determines entirely how we face and deal with each moment.

A negative or improper attitude can make or break a company, home, or person.

Life is ten percent actuality and ninety percent reactivity.

We’re in charge of our attitudes. Thank God for that!

■ Warts and all

A cartoon in a popular psychology magazine showed two guys sitting at a bar, talking about Very Important Stuff, which we all know is what one does in a bar.

One guy was saying, “My counselor is getting into to Reality Therapy. Now he’s blaming me for everything I do!”

There’s no follow-up panel to show what the other guy might have replied, but it reminds me of a conversation I had with a certain “Father G,” a priest and favorite friend of mine who is also in the fellowship of AA.

“G,” I said, early on in my recovery process, “I’m not sure I can believe in this God of yours.”

He surprised me by laughing out loud. “Nobody cares what you believe!”

I was dumbfounded, but only briefly. Was this the way for a man of God to talk? Especially one also recovering from a beverage fixation?

Of course, as he explained and I now understand, what I believe doesn’t change anything. Whether I believe in God doesn’t alter the fact of His/Her/Its existence. In fact, it’s grandiose of me to think that my belief (or lack of belief) in any particular thing or thought or being will change it.

God-like, almost, isn’t it?

Sudden thought: What if God has warts? Do I accept that along with the good stuff? And who am I to say warts are bad?



■ We are what we think

Ever hear about the three major-league umpires? One day, during the World Series, a sportscaster was interviewing some of the more prominent arbiters of the game to demonstrate just how demanding and crucial an umpire’s skills are to the National Pastime.

When asked how he worked a game, the first ump just shrugged, “I call ’em as I see ’em!” The reporter nodded, then passed on to the next umpire.

“I call ’em the way *they are*,” said the second official. The reporter considered the answer for a moment, then moved on.

The third ump just scowled, squared his shoulders, and shook his head: “They ain’t *notbin’* until I call ’em!”

That pretty well sums up the basic choices we all have in calling the great game of life. Some observe. Some participate. Some take charge.

How you think about your life and your part in it is how it’s going to be. What do you think?

If life is a game, are you playing full out or bitching at the umpire?

■ Take your pick

Occasionally, we all need a quick retort or a short reminder to keep something going—or to stop it. In those cases, it’s always nice to use someone else’s words, preferably someone of some stature, because we’re obviously not being listened to.

We humbly offer the following selection, and sources, to cover many such situations:

1. A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. (Lao Tsu)
2. Nothing in life is to be feared. It is only to be understood. (Marie Curie)
3. The world of reality has its limits; the world of imagination is boundless. (Jean Jacques Rousseau)
4. The only true happiness comes from squandering ourselves for a purpose. (John Brown)
5. Of all things you wear, your expression is the most important. (Janet Lane)
6. Do what you can, with what you have, where you are. (Theodore Roosevelt)
7. Failure is only the opportunity to begin again, more intelligently. (Henry Ford)
8. In youth we learn, in age we understand. (Marie Eschenbach)
9. Experiment to me is everyone I meet. (Emily Dickinson)
10. The gem cannot be polished without friction, nor man perfected without suffering. (Chinese Proverb)
11. All things come to him who waits—provided he knows what he is waiting for. (Woodrow Wilson)
12. Life is not always what one wants it to be, but to make the best of it as it is, is the only way of being happy! (Jennie Churchill)
13. If you see any job as “fun” it will be fun—no matter how dull. (Phyllis Clark)
14. When you ask me how I feel, I’m the only one who can tell you! And I like that! (Anonymous kindergarten student)

■ You are enough

Think about it: When you go to a doctor with a problem, what does he or she do? Reach inside you and manipulate your organs, or poke an instrument into your veins to remove a germ or replace a gene?

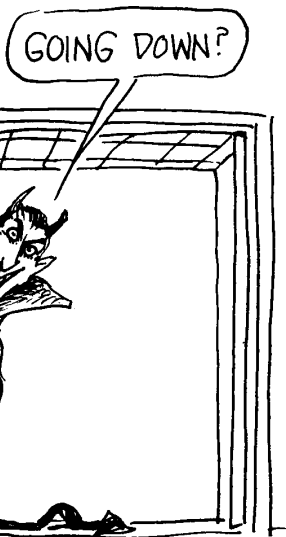
No, doctors can't do that. All they can do is assist the body in its own efforts to fix what's wrong. Your body already has all the stuff and all the ability it needs to heal itself!

Think about this, now: Whenever you go to your psychiatrist, therapist, counselor, or your sponsor with a problem, what does *he or she* do? Reach inside your mind, push a few buttons, adjust the emoto-cognitive focus of an aberrant brain cell or two?

No, nobody can do that.

All anyone can do to help you out of a funky mindset is to remind you of what you already know:

You are in charge of what goes on inside your head! Notice, though, that this isn't intended to mean that you shouldn't go to doctors or counselors or therapists. They have a definite role and function in your recovery process.



But don't give them hell, either, if something in you refuses to accept what's wrong or do something about it.

And don't get upset if you can't see yourself as clearly as they can.

Sometimes, old Mom Nature just hides things from us.

(For our own good!)

■ Start where you are

If you want to learn calculus, don't ignore learning the basics of addition and subtraction (that is, if you *really* intend to get around to calculus, ultimately).

If you want to be president some day, don't think you can bypass community service, carefully studying policy issues and the role of government, and developing a personal leadership style and a public persona.

If you merely want to be happy and have a productive life, don't wait until

you're vice-president of the bank with a big salary, great perks, retirement plan, and a lovely wife/husband and smart kids.

You start with being who you are, where you are, and looking at what's required to get where you want to go.

If you need more schooling, and you really think it's worth the time and effort to achieve your goals, then go to school!

If you want a beautiful house but don't have money for a down payment, and you really believe that owning a particular home will make you happy, then sacrifice a little to save for the down payment!

On the other hand, you may just decide after reviewing all your options, "Hey, it's not so bad being where I am!"

When talent and energy don't match expectations, at least one (if not all three) needs a good hard look.

■ Take a chance!

An American on his first trip to England, desperately wanted to make a good impression, be liked, and be well thought of.

So, on his first visit to a very exclusive club, he did his best to strike up a conversation with one of the members. He introduced himself and offered to buy the gentleman a drink.

"No, thank you," the gentleman demurred. "I tried liquor once, and I didn't like it."

Undeterred, our American friend continued to try to become better acquainted. After a long moment, he pulled out an expensive cigar and offered another to the Englishman.

"Oh, no," he responded. "I tried smoking once, and really didn't like it!"

After a while, observing the activities in the club and looking for other options, the visitor asked his neighbor if he would like to play cards.

"I played cards once and found it really wasn't my cup of tea," said the Englishman. "However, my son will be joining us soon, and perhaps he would play cards with you."

"Your only son, I take it?" offered the American.



Try everything once. Try everything you like again.

■ You are important!

The Governor of a certain Northeastern State was touring his territory, drumming up support for his reelection. He'd stopped at a church social after a long, grueling trip, and stood patiently in line for lunch, half-starved.

When he held out his plate for chicken, a serving lady placed one piece on his dish, and then turned to serve the next person in line. "Pardon me," the Governor said, smiling. "Could I have another piece of chicken?"

"No, my orders are one piece of chicken per customer," said the lady.

"But I'm starving," the Governor pleaded, "I've been up since dawn and didn't have any breakfast!"

"I'm sorry," the lady insisted. "Just one piece of chicken per person. That's the rule."

The Governor decided to fall back on authority, since charm hadn't worked. "Don't you know who I am? I'm the Governor of this state!" he declared.

"And I'm the lady in charge of the chicken!" she responded firmly.

Who do you think you are?



About The Author

Hal Ackerman is a Phoenix-based chemical dependency therapist specializing in adolescent chemical misuse and family violence issues. He is frank about his own addiction and recovery, saying, "I was never anonymous when I was using! Besides, if people want to talk to me, they need to know who I am!"

All illustrations, except "Ziggy," by Phil Frank. "Ziggy" by Tom Wilson.