The Education of a Lifetime

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The Education of a Lifetime

“The supreme end of education is expert discernment in all things—the power to tell the good from the bad, the genuine from the counterfeit, and to prefer the good and genuine to the bad and counterfeit.”

-Samuel Johnson

When speaking of education, people often refer to the traditional classroom curriculum children begin in youth and continue through their teenage years. They have in mind exactly which books should be read, the types of papers to be assigned, and the particular mathematical concepts to be addressed in order to cover the essentials of reading, writing, and arithmetic. It is often said that in order to succeed in life, one must “get an education,” usually implying a college degree. This coincides with the common expression, “Learn more to earn more.”

Supporters of this great academic experience fail to realize that a classroom is just a classroom unless there is a teacher who can take the given material, animate it, and present it in a manner to which students can truly relate. A “classic” novel is of little value to a student who labors through it solely to earn a particular mark. A student who really appreciates the novel is one who can find meaning in it and apply it to his own life—who can perhaps avoid making a devastatingly bad decision because he recognized a character flaw in a tragic hero. Addition is merely a game of numbers until students learn the joy of adding a big pay check to their bank account or the anxiety and pressure that come when bills must be paid on time and there is a greater amount to be subtracted from the account than is actually available.

There is inherent value in the lessons of science, language, art, and other subjects that children have been taught for many years. The knowledge passed down through generations has
led to a continually advancing society. No one questions the value of traditional education and the great benefits it has brought. The point to be made is that there are many other, often more subtle, knowledge bits that students miss. One cannot know the ways of love from reading a textbook. It is difficult to understand the tremendous contribution one person can make to the world until realizing the cascading effect of one inspiring teacher on one student per year over the course of just ten years. This aspect of education is equally valuable. Once a single hidden lesson is recognized, one comes to find some value in everything he sees, hears, and does.

Hidden lessons are not limited to the traditional educational experience. At commencement ceremonies, speakers do not usually focus on the academic lessons learned throughout that particular phase of schooling. Often, they concentrate on other lessons the students should have learned or will quickly come to learn. Author Charles Sykes has compiled a list of such lessons. Some of his most profound points stress responsibility, the value of earning something, the infrequency of second chances, and the courage to accept mistakes made and to grow from them. Speaking of humility, Sykes advises, “Flipping burgers is not beneath your dignity. Your grandparents had a different word for burger flipping—they called it opportunity” (qtd. in Kudzko). Too often people only realize the impact of Sykes’ maxims after having experienced them personally, failing to identify the ideas in their less obvious form.

Other more subtle lessons are frequently taken for granted. Consider, for example, lyrics from the traditional hymn, “How Great Thou Art”:

O Lord my God! When I in awesome wonder
Consider all the worlds Thy hands have made,
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder,
Thy power throughout the universe displayed…

When thru the woods, and forest glades I wander
And hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees;
When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur
And hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze…

2
Then sings my soul, My Saviour God, to Thee;  
How great Thou art, how great Thou art! (Hine 500)

The simple observation of nature’s beauty inspires one to praise the power of God and His magnificent creation. The individual’s mere presence in this environment fortifies his connection to the Earth and his fellow human beings, with whom he shares God’s awesome gift.

One can choose to acknowledge and cherish the hidden jewels of life, heightening his experience, or fail to recognize and appreciate its subtleties, leaving his experience a series of repetitious insignificant events. The song “Seasons of Love” from the hit musical Rent asks,

Five hundred twenty-five thousand
Six hundred minutes
How do you measure, measure a year?
In daylights, in sunsets, in midnights
In cups of coffee
In inches, in miles, in laughter, in strife.
In five hundred twenty-five thousand
Six hundred minutes
How do you measure
A year in the life?
How about love?

The point is made that a year of life is precious, as is every moment it contains. It suggests the monotonous tasks of daily living are merely instruments of love and collectively compose the overall expression of love exchanged in a lifetime. The lyrics pose the question of what is truly important in this life, forcing one to identify how he chooses to measure his time. This is closely related to life lessons, as people frequently cite ideas that have changed how they live.

The human experience consists of continuous learning from a variety of sources, but especially from other people. An individual seeking constant self-improvement tends to identify particular aspects of others’ character that are better than his own, that he admires and seeks to emulate. Many times people do not feel they have important things to teach others—that to offer such a contribution to humanity places them above others. As Marianne Williamson explains:
'Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.' We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we subconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we're liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

This is the responsibility of all people. The learning process is a communal effort, where hopefully, the best ideas are those most often exchanged. Human encounters are a give and take experience in some combination. Not all encounters are in person; a particular idea may be read in a book or heard in a speech and passed on subsequently.

Despite this sharing of information, people, diverse as they are, develop varied perceptions of the same ideas. The Catholic Church is identified with very clear conceptions of certain virtues and other things generally considered “life lessons.” Although they sometimes coincide, the Church is careful to make specific distinctions from certain secular ideas. Still another unique perspective is offered by pop culture. In the pages that follow, principles typically classified as “life lessons” will be explored from the avenues of the Catholic Church, secular authorities, and song lyrics to understand the relationship of the different approaches. Following that is an examination of what ordinary people consider life’s most important lessons.

Life lessons, far from hardening men by experience, make them wiser and more attentive to God’s plan for humanity. As Samuel Johnson’s quotation elucidates, education leads to the discernment of Truth and goodness and to the choice of these over fallacies and evil. The education he speaks of is two-fold, encompassing an academic component that teaches reason and an experiential component that teaches faith and other things mere reason fails to explain.
Lessons in Discipline

“Said, if you’re gonna play the game, boy, ya gotta learn to play it right. 
You got to know when to hold ’em, know when to fold ’em, 
Know when to walk away and know when to run. 
You never count your money when you’re sittin’ at the table. 
There’ll be time enough for countin’ when the dealin’s done. 

Now ev’ry gambler knows that the secret to survivin’ 
Is knowin’ what to throw away and knowing what to keep. 
’Cause ev’ry hand’s a winner and ev’ry hand’s a loser, 
And the best that you can hope for is to die in your sleep.”
- Lyrics from “The Gambler” by Kenny Rogers

In Rogers and Hammerstein’s The Sound of Music, Captain Von Trapp informs the new governess, Maria, that discipline is the primary rule of the household. The presence of seven children essentially requires that this be so. Without order, chaos would ensue. Lacking any type of structure, the children would not be aware of that which was expected of them and would not have a clear understanding of their roles. It is demonstrated that discipline can be carried to extremes, but as the story progresses, it is evident that discipline and happiness can easily coexist. A common phrase advises that all things are to be done in moderation, except moderation itself. Discipline is no exception.

Mention of the concept of discipline often leads people to think of the rules of childhood. Most children do receive a great deal of attention relative to their conduct, whether it is at home or at school. These are the lucky ones. There are others who seem to slip past the regulations and are able to do as they please. Though in a child’s eye, this may be paradise, these children are ultimately the disadvantaged. Without discipline, children are ignorant of structure. Without structure, life becomes an unrelated series of events, preventing children from accumulating their
efforts toward a positive contribution to the world.

A well-disciplined child learns to find a suitable balance among the aspects of his life over which he has control. He discovers how to manage his finances, distribute his time, and conduct himself generally. Many times people lack this control in their lives and blame other factors for their subsequent collapse. Discipline is only learned from those who possess it themselves. It is taught by constant verbal reminders as well as by example. Thus a parent who tries to teach his child a habit contrary to his own behavior will be considered a hypocrite and will not be successful. In cases where parents and other authorities fail to develop a sense of self-discipline, the law becomes the next teacher.

The self-discipline, from which other forms extend, includes various aspects. The lyrics from “The Gambler” offer a valuable perspective. They are in the context of a gambling man giving advice to a fellow train passenger who is out of sorts. Though he gives his tips in terms of a poker game, a setting with which he is familiar, the lesson is very applicable to the game of life. He says if one is going to live, he might as well live the best life possible. For this to happen, a good sense of self is necessary. One must acquire the ability to restrain himself, whether it is in biting his tongue to prevent altercation or maintaining a secret for his own advantage. However, one must also recognize when he has been beaten and know when to surrender. One must possess the control to resist a tempting offer or a provocation and the foresight to identify dangerous situations and react accordingly. Similarly, good fortune is a personal consideration. One is not to flaunt his status or possessions, for it brings jealousy to those in his company and wastes precious moments of life.

The gambler continues to advise, hinting that personal success in life is based on the right sequence of actions. One should establish an awareness of those people and habits that are
negative influences and leave them behind. Likewise, he should embrace positive support. People are all given essentially the same raw material, and whether an individual has a good or bad life is dependent upon how he “plays his cards.” Regardless, his final goal should be to leave this world in peace. Ironically, the gambler, often associated with greed and lack of control, describes the discipline necessary for a good return in any situation. Great lessons often come from unexpected sources.

Life is a series of choices and discipline is a function of the will. Aside from the personal regulations of weight control, time management, and other private issues, there exist disciplines associated with promises and pacts the individual makes. For instance, a married man must maintain his promise to his wife to be faithful, though it may be difficult when he meets a woman to whom he is attracted. Temptations are not eliminated by the fact that one has made a pact. Similarly, though one is baptized, he still must battle the inclination toward sin.

Faithfulness to God also requires discipline of the will. In these cases, discipline of self is not just for personal betterment, but also to honor the person with whom one has made a covenant.

St. Augustine understood the human need for discipline. His *Confessions* is the story of his development of discipline. He did not begin his faith life in the Catholic Church, but rather spent a substantial amount of time exploring different heretical groups, seeking out Truth. His will was greatly troubled by sinful pleasures, particularly lust. Augustine fathered a child out of wedlock and later left the woman and did little to help raise his child. He also admits to stealing pears in his youth, under the peer pressure of his friends, simply for the thrill of stealing (29). In these situations, he lacked the proper discipline to exhibit prudent behavior.

Through his struggles, Augustine came to see conversion as an act of will. He could only overcome temptation by willing to do so. He came to understand that it was he who was flawed.
In his involvement with the heretical sects, he tried to redefine God instead of reforming his own life. Until his conversion, Augustine felt that he was dependent upon his sinful lifestyle. The combination of Augustine’s cooperation, God’s work, and the prayers of his mother, Monica, contributed to his recognition of his own power over his will. Augustine was a learned man and used his reasoning skills to arrive at the Truth. His attraction to the rhetoric and content of St. Ambrose’s sermons led him to see past the suave but substance lacking presentation of the Manichean Faustus. Here again was an application of his discipline.

In today’s society, though people often lack personal discipline, they can appreciate its need on the playing field. Vince Lombardi, coach of the Green Bay Packers in the 1960s, relied on discipline in commanding his team. His theory was essentially that the team’s performance in games was directly related to how they practiced (Phillips 100). He extended this beyond the football field, telling his team, “Wherever you go, you will represent the team…You will talk like, you will look like, and you will act like the most dignified professional in your hometown” (qtd in Phillips 101). He had no special treatment for popular players and punished all the same for infringement of the rules. He held his players to higher standards and helped them become better people, as well as better athletes. Lombardi insisted the players believe in themselves and their ability to be great and thus transformed a losing team into champions.

To maintain discipline during hardship usually requires one to look beyond the immediate rewards and strive toward a greater goal. Though the journey is sometimes painful, the fruits delivered are always worth the struggle. Discipline guides the will to keep going through tough times. This is a humbling experience and ultimately results in an improved self.

Lessons in Responsibility
“You who are on the road
Must have a code that you can live by
And so become yourself
Because the past is just a good-bye.

Teach your children well,
Their father's hell did slowly go by,
And feed them on your dreams
The one they picks, the one you'll know by.
Don't you ever ask them why, if they told you, you would cry,
So just look at them and sigh
And know they love you.”

-Lyrics from “Teach Your Children” by Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young

In any type of institution, the person held responsible for its success or failure is the one who makes the decisions. In the case of the individual, one makes his own decisions and must pay the consequences of those choices. Life is a collection of decisions made, some large and some small. Individuals have the responsibility to exercise appropriate self-discipline in order to make themselves positive contributors to the world community instead of an added burden. Far more than just wearing a watch and showing up on time, responsibility is a measure of an individual’s control of his independence and the subsequent actions he makes as a result.

Personal responsibility covers the entire list of human problems. With responsibility, there would be no need for litter laws because responsible individuals clean up after themselves, realizing they have no business leaving their trash in inappropriate places for others to collect. They would realize the difference between an open car window and a trash can. Similarly, people would not leave their trash in common areas or cafeteria tables, knowing these areas are for the use of all, and they have no more right to them than anyone else. On a larger scale, environmental pollution would decrease, as leaders of companies would understand the harm
they do to the common resources of Earth, and alter their activity, halting the cause of such destruction.

Beyond environmental issues, immoral actions would be considerably decreased. Theft would not exist, as individuals would understand the appropriate means of acquiring goods is through payment. They would know they have no claim on others’ possessions and limit their desire to admiration from a distance. Likewise, vandalism would be nonexistent. There would be no crime in general, as people would control their passions and fits of rage. One would accept that all people have the right to live, just as he lives, and valuing this right, would not dare deprive another of it. In an idealistic world, individuals would possess self-control even to the point of managing temper loss, preventing deeds they would later regret. There would be no cheating or lying because an individual would be prepared to face the fact that he had been beaten by another, or did not study sufficiently, or made a mistake in general. He would have nothing to hide and would be willing to face the consequences of his behavior. Globally, this would alleviate any worries of impending nuclear warfare. There would be no need for intense competition because none would seek to control another and trust could be established.

Personal responsibility makes issues like abortion out of the question. There is a common notion in current society that since mistakes teach you lessons, it is acceptable, in fact sometimes encouraged, to make as many as necessary to learn. Youth are often encouraged to “sow their wild oats” while they are still young. This is a problematic philosophy. There is nothing wrong with being adventurous and spontaneous, but it must be controlled to some extent, if only by the individual’s guiding principles. The concept underlying abortion, whether the act itself is considered right or wrong, is that an unwanted pregnancy has occurred. If the pregnancy was unwanted, it never should have been created in the first place. Some answer that
the solution is in the wide distribution of birth control and condoms; yet these measures also can fail. The answer to the problem is to exercise personal responsibility in seeing and considering the consequences of an action before experiencing them—to abstain. People, being imperfect, do make mistakes, and it is important to learn from them. However, these lessons could easily be learned without paying the consequences if given a little thought.

Personal responsibility means exactly that—responsibility for oneself. Realistically, this is difficult to accomplish and must be taught, either by good parenting or through tumultuous experience. The lyrics of “Teach Your Children” indicate that parents must possess personal responsibility before they can teach their children. They must have a “code” to “live by.” They in turn have the responsibility to pass this code to their children so that they may have guiding standards. The key to personal responsibility is to establish standards for oneself and maintain them. Eventually, one will find his place, but the standards should not be altered without good cause, for this will result in the individual arriving in the wrong place. Successful teaching of responsibility is accomplished through love. If parents succeed in gaining a child’s love, thus becoming role models, the child will strive to emulate the principled life of his parents. Parents must achieve a careful balance of love and discipline, defining their roles as authority and friend.

The problem in current society is that children are raised by parents who have no sense of responsibility themselves. They do illogical things, like buy cigarettes or alcohol and complain there is no money for food, or drive without seatbelts, or blame their problems on others or circumstance, failing to recognize their own flaws. Many problems result from irresponsible parenting, but there is only so much that parents can do; sometimes the best parents have bad children. At some point they must let go and hope they have taught their children well.
Pope John Paul II was a major proponent of responsibility. He often addressed the issue of personal responsibility in chastity of the body. The following quotation was written in the context of environmental responsibility, but applies to all types. He wrote,

A true education in responsibility entails a genuine conversion in ways of thought and behaviour. Churches and religious bodies, non-governmental and governmental organizations, indeed all members of society, have a precise role to play in such education. The first educator, however, is the family, where the child learns to respect his neighbour and to love nature (11-12).

The move to a more responsible society is a communal effort. Naturally, the greatest change comes in educating the children who are the future. To accomplish this, humanity must band together. John Paul II suggests, “Respect for life, and above all for the dignity of the human person, is the ultimate guiding norm for any sound economic, industrial or scientific progress” (7). Respect for the lives of fellow human beings will lead to a world community that will work together to promote the personal responsibility that will bring peace to a troubled world.

Albert Schweitzer had a comfortable life in Europe. He was a physician, but served a much greater capacity to humanity with his philosophy, theology, and mission work, among other things (Coles and Kerrey ix-xvi). Called to action, he opened a hospital in Africa. He wrote, “The idea that men should ever be…favored by being free from the responsibilities of self-sacrifice as men for men, is foreign to the ethic of reverence for life” (158). He felt the responsibility to take his talents and service to Africa, where he helped many people. He encouraged others to act upon their responsibility to assist their fellow men and was an inspiration to many.

The imperfect nature of humanity prevents a perfect world. People will always fall. However, there is hope that attention to and practice of personal responsibility can improve the conditions of mankind. Though perfection will never be reached on this Earth, it can be approximated. This is an effort that begins with the individual fostering personal responsibility.
Lessons in Hope

“I hope you never fear those mountains in the distance
Never settle for the path of least resistance
Livin’ might mean takin’ chances but they’re worth takin’
Lovin’ might be a mistake but it’s worth makin’

Don’t let some hell bent heart leave you bitter
When you come close to sellin’ out reconsider
Give the heavens above more than just a passing glance
And when you get the choice to sit it out or dance
I hope you dance”

-Lyrics from “I Hope You Dance” by Lee Ann Womack

The first line of the theme song from the sitcom Cheers states, “Making your way in the world today takes everything you’ve got.” All people can associate with this idea. Individuals concern themselves, not only with personal problems, but also with foreign and domestic issues. As responsible citizens, people are expected to follow the political happenings of their nation. As responsible parents, they are expected to engross themselves in even the most trivial details of their children’s daily lives. As employees, they are expected at all times to be conscientious of their work and coworkers. In addition to all these things, as human beings, people are expected to accept and cope with their own hardships while supporting and advising spouses, children, and friends. This is a heavy burden for the average person to carry. Yet all people face similar loads in varying extents. As the theme song continues, it asks, “Wouldn’t you like to get away?”

Quite often people do look to get away from their problems. Unfortunately, some people turn to alcohol or drugs to find some relief. These people ultimately ignore the problem, and somehow think that forgetting it temporarily will dissolve the trouble. Others may take their
aggression out in an activity or on another person. They attempt to excise their negative energy and proceed with a different attitude. This can be healthy, in the case of exercise, or harmful, in the case of physical or mental abuse of others. In the former case, this is only a first step. To be successful in dealing with difficulties, one must return with a renewed vigor to address the issue. In the latter case, the individual may perceive relief to some degree, but in actuality, this dangerous activity only serves to degrade others and lesson one’s own self-image. Other people take a more positive approach and look to the Church, family, and friends for understanding acceptance, solace, and advice. Their goal is to engage the problem directly to quickly rectify the situation. They seek to share the knowledge of those who have survived similar situations. Traditionally, this has been the most successful approach to problem solving.

To persevere through troubles in search of an answer is to hope. It is to realize there is only so much to lose in this life, and know there is a point at which things can only get better. It is to ward off the greatest despair, which says that life is not worth living, and instead see the strength and resolve that result from the struggle. In simpler terms, hope is to live with the imperfections of people and encourage them to better themselves. Even people who do not have a rich faith life admit imperfection in the world. They reason that there must be something better, whether it is some variety of an afterlife or even an improved human condition. Hope is the optimism leading to the belief that individuals are capable of reaching great heights with the talents they are given. To hope is to “dream the impossible dream” and make it come true.

Rarely is this hope arrived at by a singular effort. Usually, it must be taught either as a lesson of early childhood or by the guidance of others through personal experience. Lee Ann Womack’s “I Hope You Dance” offers what appears to be a mother’s hope for her child. In effect, she takes from her own experience and prepares the child to face life. She wishes the
child courage and stamina through adversity and hints that the easier course is often not the most rewarding. Challenges are opportunities to rise to the occasion, not things to be feared and averted. She advises that life is full of choices, some being risky. One may win some and one most certainly will lose some, but if the chance is never ventured, one will never know what could have been. The same applies to love. Hope is what allows people to continue to live and grow after having their heart broken. It is the hope and belief that other people exist with whom they can make a connection of the soul and again come to know human love. To know that one can give his love and have it possibly unreturned is not a sufficient cause not to love at all.

Womack also suggests that one’s hope should not be leveled by bad experiences or disappointment. She cautions against cynicism and the abandonment of hope and optimism people sometimes face when others exert powerful negative influence. When it seems that to continue fighting for one’s beliefs is a lost cause, give it another push. Finally, she enlightens her child to the fact that life is an experience to be taken for all it is worth. Given the option to embrace this idea or settle for mere existence, she encourages the former.

St. Jude, the patron saint of hopeless and lost causes, has become increasingly popular in recent times. Although details of his personal life are not well known, he is often labeled the “forgotten” saint, because people confused him with Judas Iscariot (Orsi 99). Those who face seemingly impossible circumstances remember him in their prayers. The following message of hope is often associated with St. Jude and is found on the back of his prayer card.

When things go wrong as the sometimes will,
When the road you’re trudging seems all up hill,
When the finds are low and the debts are high
And you want to smile, but you have to sigh,
When care is pressing you down a bit,
Rest, if you must, but don’t you quit.
Life is queer with its twists and turns,
As every one of us sometimes learns,
And many a failure turns about
When he might have won had he stuck it out;

When things go wrong as the sometimes will,
When the road you’re trudging seems all up hill,
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And you want to smile, but you have to sigh,
When care is pressing you down a bit,
Rest, if you must, but don’t you quit.
Life is queer with its twists and turns,
As every one of us sometimes learns,
And many a failure turns about
When he might have won had he stuck it out;
Don’t give up though the pace seems slow—
You may succeed with another blow.
Success is failure turned inside out—
The silver tint of the clouds of doubt,
And you never can tell how close you are,
It may be near when it seems so far;
So stick to the fight when you’re hardest hit—
It’s when things seem worst that you must not quit.

The prayer encourages hope, even in the moments when despair seems the only option. It is realistic in acknowledging that all people go through these times, but emphasizes the end result is a function of the individual’s attitude and how one chooses to react.

Rudyard Kipling, poet and author, offers similar sentiments in his poem “If.” The following excerpt is part of a conversation between a father and his child. The father says,

If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;
If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with triumph and disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you’ve spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to broken,
And stoop and build ’em up with wornout tools; (9-16)

Although Kipling does not specifically identify hope as the driving force in these situations, it is clearly responsible. Hope is essential in good times and bad; the former because one hopes the good times will continue, aware of the alternative, and also that others may find the same happiness; the latter case is obvious. Hope is what carries the individual through both situations, not allowing him to be caught up in either.

Hope is also that which allows individuals to rise from crushing defeats and begin again, even amidst the worst odds. It prevents one from succumbing to lies and deceit, for he knows, through his hope, there are greater truths to be found. It is a natural part of the human spirit, as people always want to see the positive. Even when it is buried under great weight, hope burrows through the tunnel to see the light at the end.
Lessons in Peace

“Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace…

Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world”

-Lyrics from “Imagine” by John Lennon

Peace is a highly sought but well-hidden treasure. Individuals look to be at peace with themselves. Families and groups try to establish peace among members. Nations seek peace with other nations. And everyone knows that world peace is the winning answer to that which one most desires at the Miss America pageant. It is a popular cause. It is well-hidden because its true achievement is very difficult and requires great work.

John Lennon’s “Imagine” offers a charming idea of a world joined in unity without conflict. He describes a planet devoid of countries or any type of classifications. Such a world, in his mind, is easily conceived. Without possessions, there is no cause for jealousy. Evenly distributed resources prevent unfair advantage. He encourages people to imagine this great society and make it come true. Another part of the song states, “You may say I’m a dreamer, but I’m not the only one. I hope some day you’ll join us, and the world will live as one.” He believes if all people accept this philosophy, world peace will automatically be established.

Lennon has been criticized for his ideas. When picked apart, that is all that remains—an
idea. He does not address how people will be governed without nations or account for the fact that the purpose of government is to maintain order. His idea actually is difficult to conceive. Lennon sees a world where religion causes wars and hatred, much against its nature, and wants to eliminate such negativity. However, if there is nothing to die for, there is nothing left to live for either. Those things that people hold most dear are also those for which they are willing to sacrifice themselves.

Life without possessions equalizes people, ignoring their differences. They have the same inherent value and right to life, but people have different abilities, strengths, and weaknesses. Equalizing everyone removes individual contributions to the world community. Pondering the unequal distribution of society, Lennon sees injustice, but he does not look further to see the complementary relationship of those with different skills. There are distribution problems in the world community, no doubt, but equalizing people without a government in place to direct distribution is a faulty plan. A “brotherhood of man” with no leadership cannot effectively share resources. Lennon’s ideas, though creative, are naïve. His philosophy would not work in a household, where love thrives, let alone a world community.

Lennon speaks of a peace that unites the world. Before such peace exists, it must be achieved in the family household. Here children learn tolerance, patience, and love. Failure to learn these qualities shapes dangerous world views. If siblings are unable to tolerate each other, with their common backgrounds and similarities, they will be unable to peacefully accept the world around them with the diversity it offers. Peace is a delicate thing to establish; it cannot be taught, only cultivated. Parents must introduce the raw materials of honesty, respect, tolerance, and love and demonstrate their own dedication to peace, living by example.

Peace in the family is challenged by the struggles of daily life. People are often stubborn
and fail to see other perspectives than their own. They are unwilling to compromise and do not have the humility to accept their errors or admit there might be a better way. This brings conflict among individuals. As long as conflict exists internally or externally, an individual cannot be at peace. There are rare moments in one’s life when he feels completely unburdened and at peace. They afford extreme mental clarity and feature a true understanding of and consideration for others. With the incessant activity filling the days of most individuals, it is difficult to find time to even sit down without interruption to consider one’s state in life and his purpose in terms of the world community. Yet peace is only found in these quiet times, without worldly distractions.

The peace of the world begins with peace within the individual and his willingness to share that peace with others. It is more than just a simple decision. Unlike the peace movements of the 1960s in which many people decided to make peace happen, the realization of peace is a true call to action. The establishment of peace requires devotion to the cause, not just a simple decision. Peace is an active resolution. One cannot just speak of what he imagines could be and expect it to occur. The “brotherhood of man” actually requires great work. To consider peace that simplistically is to forfeit the achievement of true peace from the start. Those committed to peace not only share their vision of the world that can be, but also introduce a practical plan to make it so. People, being flawed, will never live in complete harmony with one another. Admitting this and working toward a constantly improving state of world relations is the best approach to putting peace in practice.

St. Francis of Assisi encouraged the practice of peace. In his youth, he sacrificed his privileged status, selling his material goods to better serve God. He associated peace with poverty, for the absence of material inequality among people gave them one less subject of quarrel. The peace of St. Francis was driven by love. He was well known for his love of all
St. Francis was not always well-received, particularly by those who knew his former self. However, he continued to preach his message of the great blessings endowed upon the peacemakers.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was another messenger of peace. A civil rights leader in the 1960s, he battled tirelessly against racial injustice. In this fight, he asked his followers to use the “weapon of love,” making protests and peaceful demonstrations rather than turning to violence (Montgomery). He also offered practical solutions to the peace problems. In his Letter from Birmingham Jail, he laid out his four-step formula: “collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation; self-purification; and direct action” (183). In one of his most famous speeches, he improvised and shared from the heart his profound vision of what true peace brings, saying, “I have a dream that my four 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” (qtd. in Hansen 81). Driven by his dream, he actively sought its realization.

King’s ideas delve deeper than issues of racial equality. This is the complete idea of peace. All individuals are to be assessed on character. When this occurs, differences in personality are not a major focus. Peace comes down to respect for other people, no matter how different they are. All people form a “brotherhood of man” as children of God.
Lessons in Wisdom

“The longer I live the more I believe
You do have to give if you wanna receive
There's a time to listen, a time to talk
And you might have to crawl even after you walk
Had sure things blow up in my face
Seen the longshot, win the race
Been knocked down by the slamming door
Picked myself up and came back for more

Life's a dance you learn as you go
Sometimes you lead, sometimes you follow
Don't worry about what you don't know
Life's a dance you learn as you go”
-Lyrics from “Life’s a Dance” by John Michael Montgomery

Some consider wisdom to be knowledge of the answers to all questions, particularly the
difficult questions life poses. Others believe wisdom is knowledge of how to act in any
situation, despite even the most challenging circumstances. Still others hold that wisdom is
having one’s affairs in order, aware of those places he should involve himself as well as things
he should avoid. In a more humble idea of wisdom an individual knows his limitations and
respects them.

It is often the case that a person considered wise by society does not consider himself
wise. There is a sense of humility in true wisdom. Certain wisdom comes from experience.
Those possessing wisdom realize, not having had every possible experience, they still have the
capacity to increase what they know. These people journey through life searching for
knowledge of any kind. They learn from even the most trivial situations and are able to convey
their lessons to others. The person wise in society’s view knows that, far from having all the
answers, he builds his knowledge as he continues to live. He understands that learning is a lifelong process. People who envy the wise, not necessarily wise themselves, often do not realize that to acquire such knowledge requires effort. Wisdom is a gift, but like all gifts, if not used and cared for, it loses value. All individuals have the capacity to be wise.

John Michael Montgomery’s “Life’s a Dance” describes wisdom well. There is a time to share wisdom with others, but also a time to step back to listen and absorb. He addresses the humility of wisdom; the wise admit they can be wrong. It also involves hope. Wise individuals only have the capacity to control their behavior. They cannot control situations beyond their own contributions. There is a point at which one must hope his actions produce positive effects. Even at times when their words or actions do not produce the desired result, the wise learn from their experience and begin again, happy to have gained a jewel of wisdom.

Montgomery’s consideration of life as a dance, indicates the necessity of coordination. Dancing also requires skill. Montgomery claims you learn the dance throughout life. In other words, the acquiring of sufficient skill is a process and the dance is perfected with time. Sometimes one has a good grasp of the events of life and plays the role of teacher for another. There are other times when life leads him, and he must be taught either by another or experience. There may be pain when one has his feet squished, but with perseverance these instances diminish. Montgomery concludes by stating that points of ignorance are not cause for concern. The best method of their elimination is to continue living.

Aside from wisdom in action, the world often identifies wisdom with science and philosophy. At times, they mistake pure knowledge for wisdom. In science, wisdom is much more than awareness of the facts. The wise individual takes the complexities of the world, identified by studies, and relates them to greater concepts. As he sees the amazing order and
structure of the universe or even of the human body, he relates it to its cause. He is awestruck at
the intricacy of such creations. Wisdom is perhaps the greatest connection of faith and reason.
One observes the creative design he encounters throughout life and reasons there must be
something greater to have brought such order to a naturally chaotic world. Far from opposing
faith, this form of reasoning enhances it.

Wisdom is not always the product of such complex sources. Children look to their
parents for advice, thinking they have some privileged information. In actuality, parents learn
from their children just as much as they teach. At times, adults are distracted by the trivial
events of life, with bills, projects, and deadlines. They complicate life further by adding their
worries. Amidst this, children offer simple ideas that often provide the greatest wisdom. They
are usually lessons the adults once knew, but forgot with time and testing. Wisdom itself is very
simple. Those people who succeed in being wise have mental clarity and are able to maintain
simplicity during the times of greatest challenge. The wisest individuals continue to observe the
wisdom of their childhood while incorporating that of experience gained through life. In this
manner, they take only the best pieces of each stage of life and develop a strong set of life tools.

St. Thomas Aquinas has long been considered one of the greatest minds of the Catholic
Church. He was very scholarly and is among the wisest of the philosophers. In describing
wisdom, he wrote, “Thus it is appropriate that the two-fold function of a wise man be declared
by Wisdom itself in the proposed words: to meditate on the divine truth itself and to publish it
abroad...to fight against the error opposed to truth” (382). Aquinas here considers wisdom in
the context of religion, identifying its relationship with divine truth. The wise man’s
responsibility is to seek the truth, spread it, and strongly reject any resistive arguments. With
their heightened sense of awareness, wise men in Christian duty and compassion must enlighten
others to their knowledge. This coincides well with the common notion that the wise tend to be leaders, turned to by others in times of trouble for their advice. They are able to gently correct the misunderstandings of others, preventing them from falling into serious error.

Aquinas, himself, possessed the gift of wisdom. He had the appropriate balance of faith and reason in the wisdom he practiced. His argument for the existence of God is highly logical. Yet, in all his work, Aquinas still recognized that reason cannot be solely depended upon in matters of divine truth. Thus wisdom goes beyond mere reason.

It is quite apparent that the world defines wisdom in other terms. Alan Greenspan, who served as Chairman of the U.S. Federal Reserve for over 25 years, is considered a man wise in the economic world. He bore most of the burden of the national economy and the resulting individual economic status of every citizen. This was no small task, considering how sensitive people are in issues involving money. Amidst the difficulties of analyzing economic trends, Greenspan also had to deal with the political aspect of his job. He had to receive simultaneous criticism from many directions and still perform his duties. The key to his success was the way he handled difficult situations. As Bob Woodward describes, “Greenspan’s style—a patient, almost total willingness to listen respectfully and openly to others—tended to diffuse potential confrontation” (77). In other words, he had the wisdom to acknowledge the concerns of others and address them appropriately. He admitted to not knowing all the answers, but in the end, gave his best anyway. Bill Clinton said of him, “You’ve done a great job in a period when there was no rulebook to look to” (qtd. in Woodward 221).

Wise people do not cower at the prospect of having to make their own paths. They proceed with confidence, hope, and rationality. They realize that others are looking to them for guidance and demonstrate poise such that the doubts of others are erased by their presence.
Lessons in Courage

“I break tradition, sometimes my tries, are outside the lines
We've been conditioned to not make mistakes, but I can't live that way
Staring at the blank page before you
Open up the dirty window
Let the sun illuminate the words that you could not find…

No one else, no one else
Can speak the words on your lips
Drench yourself in words unspoken
Live your life with arms wide open
Today is where your book begins
The rest is still unwritten”

-Lyrics from “Unwritten” by Natasha Bedingfield

There are many aspects of courage, and individuals are daily called to exhibit the courage they have or come to strongly desire the courage they lack. People constantly face conflicts involving other people, circumstances, or even themselves. The inherent nature of human beings is that they are different. If there is not a disagreement to be had with another, there is surely some hardship to face, and even if this is minimal, there are typically questions one asks of himself regarding his worth and purpose.

Natasha Bedingfield’s “Unwritten” describes the adventure of the individual through life and the courage required to fulfill an unknown destiny. Her actions do not always follow an accepted standard of how things are supposed to be done. Going against the grain is, more times than not, unpopular and very difficult. Still, she emphasizes the importance of doing things for oneself. No other person is able to represent the individual one has the potential to be. No other
person can express the thoughts or make the contribution to the world that a particular individual has to offer. Bedingfield focuses on the endless possibilities that exist in life. Her advice to “live your life with arms wide open” encourages embracing as many opportunities as one can.

Bedingfield makes an interesting comparison of life to writing a book. Often, authors are left staring at a blank page as they suffer from “writer’s block.” She considers this blank page a good thing. There is no history associated with it. To write on is to move past mistakes made. In essence, she says go out and live without reservation or fear. Every person has a story. Each serves as his own author. If the story one tells is to be interesting and full of great detail, it is the individual’s task to make it so. This is the book’s beginning and every day is a new page. This philosophy is very similar to the often heard phrase, “Today is the first day of the rest of your life.” It not only looks toward the future with courage and enthusiasm, but it also looks to the past with the courage and gained knowledge to accept whatever it may hold and continue living.

This popular theme has been echoed many times. The movie Dead Poets’ Society explored a similar idea. “Carpe diem” was the phrase repeatedly recited—“seize the day.” In practice, it means not being afraid to address situations. Have tact, but do not be timid. One may not get a chance to ask the necessary questions of himself and others unless he creates the opportunity. This is an optimistic outlook. However, the courage to live these principles is the sum total of the courage one must possess on the small scale features of everyday life.

The courage involved in upholding personal convictions is often the first form of courage recognized. Inherent in this is establishing one’s personal identity. The courage to be true to oneself naturally follows. Those willing to take a stand have a duty to constantly remind themselves who and what they are. There is temptation to let illusions of how things should be
redefine the person one is. This pressure may come from society or even unintentionally from close friends. It takes courage to be oneself, having pride and knowing one’s worth.

Although admirable, courage is much more than bravery in the face of grave danger. Courage is required to accept the possibility of failure and endure in spite of it. It also takes courage to accept help from others, especially when one must request it. True courage involves humility and the risk of mockery. Perhaps the greatest relationship of courage and humility is in human relationships. A significant degree of courage is necessary to reveal to others the personal impact they have had on the individual. This is obvious in the case of expressions of romantic love, when the reply is uncertain. More subtle is the case of sentimentality among family, friends, and acquaintances. Many people live their lives without specific acknowledgement of the effects others have on them. Often they do not even consider such things until funerals or some other form of separation. They lack the courage to openly affirm the meaning of such relationships in their prime, and instead reminisce about how great they were. A sentimentality stigma exists in current society. Courage takes one past this.

Courage is very much present in the act of forgiveness and granting second chances. This is particularly true in the case of forgiving oneself. On the other hand, it also requires courage to be self-critical in attempting improvement. The most courageous individuals are willing to offer their mistakes as learning experiences for others, no matter how terrible they may have been. This is often seen in parents and figures of authority. They are often seen by children as having all the answers. Adults know they do not, and as children grow into adults, they come to realize this as well. However, a great deal of courage is required to maintain this image in which children find security, though adults too must figure things out as they go.
St. Thomas More was a man of exceptional courage. He had a great vivacity for life and although martyred, was not one to intentionally seek death. Thomas served under the king, but resigned his post as he wanted to extricate himself from the administration whose activity he could not approve. Later, still unwilling to submit to King Henry VIII’s decree that his divorce and remarriage be approved by all English citizens, Thomas was sentenced to die (McCain 3-9). He would not be persuaded to deny his conscience in accepting Henry’s decree against his faith. He had the courage to maintain and defend his beliefs, even to the point of death. The character Thomas possessed is presented very well in Robert Bolt’s play *A Man for All Seasons*. Thomas states, “I believe, when statesmen forsake their own private conscience for the sake of their public duties…they lead their country by a short route to chaos” (22).

Nelson Mandela also endured political struggle. Mandela was persecuted for his race. He lived in South Africa during the apartheid era, where the white minority controlled the black majority. The black citizens were considered worthless and had essentially no rights. Mandela actively opposed this form of government. When the peaceful efforts of the African National Congress, to which he belonged, were unsuccessful, militant measures were adopted. He became the head of this branch of the organization. For his efforts in this group, Mandela was sentenced to prison for 27 years, during which time, he was not even allowed to attend his son’s funeral. Despite these harsh circumstances, Mandela forged a very close friendship with his jailer and when he was freed, was elected president of South Africa (McCain 168-175). It took incredible courage for him to overcome the wrongs he bore and continue to live without grudge.

To make the blanket statement that someone has courage almost seems to downplay the specific courageous events of one’s life. It is a daily requirement for any person, but some people truly excel at it on a large scale because they have the greatest compilation of smaller
incidents of daily courage. Thankfully, these people not only live courageous personal lives, but inspire others to do the same.

Lessons in Friendship

“It must have been cold there in my shadow,
To never have sunlight on your face.
You were content to let me shine, that’s your way.
You always walked a step behind…

Did you ever know that you’re my hero,
And everything I would like to be?
I can fly higher than an eagle,
For you are the wind beneath my wings.”

-Lyrics from “Wind Beneath My Wings” by Bette Midler

Throughout history, friendship has been one of the most addressed issues. Perhaps it is because more than most things, friendship can take one to lofty heights when things are going well but can also drag one to the greatest depths in moments of betrayal and hurt. It has a unique way of pulling on the human heartstrings. There are a number of quotations expressing outright the more romantic idea of friendship. One example is the following quotation. “Everyone hears what you say. Friends listen to what you say. Best friends listen to what you don’t say.”

Though quite true, its approach is more sentimental and witty. It makes one chuckle at the astute nature of a collection of words seen in passing, as he recognizes the different degrees of friendship in his own life and the other qualities that come along with a person who truly listens.

Other quotations are meant to be deeper. Ralph Waldo Emerson said,

The glory of friendship is not the outstretched hand, nor the kindly smile, nor the joy of companionship; it is the spiritual inspiration that comes to one when he discovers that someone else believes in him and is willing to trust him (qtd in Klein 322).
Emerson is talking about the connection of souls when they find someone with whom they can relate at an intimate level. This is particularly powerful. As a child is raised, he comes to know the unconditional love and trust of his family. Though the condition of family being of blood relation does not always necessitate this love, children are often of the opinion that familial love exists because they “have to” love each other. The love, acceptance, and trust in friendship are of a different nature to some extent. It is not meant to overpower or surpass familial love, but there is something to be said when an individual finds a friend who will believe in him and love him, knowing the friend has no obligation to do so. It is to find love in friendship, whereas the individual likely knew familial love before he understood the concept—it simply existed.

Another more practical conception of friendship is demonstrated in Oprah Winfrey’s words: “Lots of people want to ride with you in the limo, but what you want is someone who will take the bus with you when the limo breaks down” (qtd in Klein 51). It is another witty comment, but not without truth. In today’s society, it is often difficult to recognize real friendship. Some people associate with others for social or material advantage, and often they are quite good at disguising their efforts under the veil of friendship. Oprah suggests that the best friends, and those worth keeping, are the ones who remain even in the most desperate times.

Friendship is more than just a sharing of common interests. It involves sacrifice. Bette Midler’s lyrics describe a friend who always put her first—someone who cared about her well being more than personal glory. Her line, “You always walked a step behind,” might indicate to some that the friend was satisfied with being second behind Midler. More accurately, it is a testament to the friend, that even though Midler was in the limelight, the friend stood there, right behind her, to offer support and encouragement. A further compliment to the friend is Midler’s awe in labeling her friend a hero. This calls attention to the admiration and esteem in which
friends are held. As Midler indicates, friends serve as inspiration and offer examples to be emulated. People often find in friends some qualities in which they are deficient. Friendship is a give and take relationship; the greatest of friends are complementary, filling each other’s gaps. In providing the things individuals are lacking, friends enable them to soar to heights not achieved by solo efforts. As Midler says, an eagle cannot fly without the air under its wings.

Friendship comes in different degrees and forms. Although friendship is not defined by age, there are differences in the experiences of those of similar age and those of very different ages. Friends of similar age face the same challenges and grow together. Older friends are able to offer the advice of their acquired knowledge and thus achieve a status of mentor. Regardless, the best of friends are close to heart, even when they are physically distant. In these friendships, individuals might not see or even converse with each other on a regular basis, but their connection is so strong that when they do communicate, they are able to continue from where they last were. The distance does not make them think of each other less, but something in the friendship provides the strength to overcome the inconvenience. These friends go the distance and witness everything from the challenges of youth, to career choices, to relationships had and lost, to marriage, to children, and even to death. Not all friends reach this level. In fact, there are probably only a handful with whom a person maintains such contact throughout life.

There are other friends that live more for the moment. People are provided with certain sets of friends for certain situations in life. With new challenges, one finds himself amidst a different group of people to help him get through the particular circumstances. In return, the individual serves a similar capacity to his friend. People take turns leaning on one another. Some of these friends are kept long term, but often they provide stability and support for a phase of life. This is demonstrated by the changing circles of friends kids have at different educational
levels and even with the changing coworker friends at different places of employment. Far from being “used,” these friends fill an important need in helping the individual grow and mature.

St. Francis de Sales wrote a great deal on the topic of friendship. In essence, friendship is recognition and appreciation for the virtue in others (174-175). Through friendship, one cultivates his own virtue, and the result is a better individual. He identified three special features of friendship. The first is that mutual love must exist between two people. The love of one person is not enough to carry the friendship. His second characteristic is that this love must be acknowledged. One cannot simply assume the other person recognizes the love that exists between them. A friend must make clear, in no uncertain terms, that the other knows he is loved. Related to this is the third quality of friendship: the friends must effectively communicate with one another. If any of these conditions is lacking, the friendship is not true (169).

One of the most famous friendships of recent times is that of Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan. Helen was blind and deaf, and Anne was her teacher. Helen offers an interesting account of Anne’s attempt to teach her love. Anne spelled into her hand, “I love Helen” (40). Although Helen did not understand the concept at the time, she did come to know Anne’s love. When Anne received the Teacher’s Medal, Helen described her work as a “labor of love” (Lash 419). Helen was similarly inspired by Anne. In her acceptance of the award, speaking of Helen, she said, “What she has accomplished without sight and hearing suggests the forces that lie dormant in every human being” (qtd in Lash 420). The two women held each other in great esteem. They found true friendship and encouraged each other to grow.

The majority of society’s youth does not understand the concept of real friendship, as they have a new “best friend” every week. They do not yet know the unconditional love of friendship in its truest form. This is found by sharing in human experiences of great happiness.
and great sorrow. It is something to be built over time and requires attention and nourishment.

Lessons in Love

“I would not leave you in times of trouble
We never could have come this far
I took the good times, I’ll take the bad times
I’ll take you just the way you are

I don’t want clever conversation
I never want to work that hard
I just want someone that I can talk to
I want you just the way you are”

-Lyrics from “Just the Way You Are” by Billy Joel

Love is experienced in many different forms. People are bombarded with love from every direction; the love of God, of parents, of siblings, of children, of friends, and of course, of romantic interests. Billy Joel’s lyrics, though meant romantically within the context of the song, are applicable to many different kinds of love. Perhaps the most obvious connection is the acceptance of good and bad times, echoing traditional marriage vows. Similar unspoken vows are made between parents and children, as well as between friends. A base foundation of love exists that even trying conditions cannot erode. Genuine love not only survives hard times, it grows through them, when nourished properly.

Joel’s lyrics also address the unconditional aspect of love. Despite the many sources of love, one thing is consistent. Love in its truest form is unconditional. Parents know this well. Part of childhood is making mistakes, sometimes with great consequence, and learning from them. Part of parenthood is guiding children through even the worst mistakes with the
appropriate balance of discipline and love. No matter how far a child may fall, a parent’s love spans the distance.

This type of love is not easy to give or receive. Joel’s line, “I never want to work that hard,” might be misinterpreted. From one perspective, it seems to say that he does not want to make the effort to love— that it should just happen. This is reminiscent of the “love movement” in the 1960s that is basically summed up in the Beatles’ hit “All You Need Is Love.” It gives the naïve impression that love will solve all of the world’s problems, and while it very easily could, the song gives no indication as to exactly how difficult it is to foster and maintain that love. To look at Joel’s lyrics from the angle he most likely intends offers further insight. He indicates that love is hard enough and to add the pressures of trying to impress someone with something other than one’s true self is both fruitless and a wasted expenditure of energy.

Unconditional love requires total acceptance of an individual, complete with flaws and attributes. As Joel says, “I’ll take you just the way you are.” It is sometimes difficult to see past the flaws of another person to the good that is inside. Perhaps even more difficult is convincing oneself that another can see past his own flaws and love him with that same unconditional character, though he may not seem worthy. In the recent movie, The Wedding Date, the character Nick, played by Dermot Mulroney, makes a particularly astute comment. Ironically, he plays the role of a male escort, who would seem to exploit love. Yet he proves some knowledge of love when he remarks that the hardest part of loving someone is having the courage to let them love you in return.

At times, love seems against all reason. It is not something easily understood—it is simply known. Love is not created by an individual, but rather already exists and individuals come to share the experience. The key to understanding this conundrum is the recognition of the
features of love itself. St. Paul, in an often-referenced passage, describes love’s qualities well. He says,

Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, [love] is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (1 Cor 13:4-7).

Given human nature, perfect knowledge and practice of love is an unattainable goal. Human love will always have moments of jealousy, impatience, self-interest, and unkind words. Still, it is the human vocation to continue striving for perfect love. The most perfect love is God’s love, delivered directly to humanity in the life and death of Jesus Christ. It is this perfect love, given to humanity freely and abundantly, though undeserved, of which all other forms of love are microcosms—mere imitations in comparison with the greatness of God’s love.

Many times the human conception of love is slanted toward romantic love. Any skepticism as to its prominence in society is eliminated when one considers the large commercial market surrounding all sorts of love paraphernalia. People lose sight as to the origin of love in God. As a result, they not only fail to recognize God’s love, but also any other form of it. Preoccupation with physical attraction and false impressions of love makes friendship merely an activity of common interests and leads children to overlook and sometimes even deny the love of their parents. Human relationships have no animating character and thus little or no personal growth occurs. Individuals possessing this mindset have no concept of the personal sacrifice and deep consideration of others that real love entails. They cannot possibly understand the struggle of heartache and immense concern for one’s well being that generate “tough love.” They reject exposure to the best examples of love and form inferior and naïve personal conceptions of it, similar to the philosophy described previously. This leaves individuals to define love by subjective opinion, ignoring its inherent characteristics.
William Shakespeare is often looked to as a secular authority of love. Though he intertwines the themes of friendship, parental, and romantic love in his writings, the general public often focuses on the romantic aspect of his work. This is particularly true of his sonnets. Sonnet 116 is a popular example. Though perhaps not meant romantically, it is often interpreted as such. Still, it offers a good message about the nature of love itself. He writes,

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments; love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
O no, it is an ever-fixed mark,
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering barque,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come.
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved (Burrow 111).

Here, love is described as stronger than the things of this world. It does not cower in the face of difficulty and the love of one person for another is not weakened if it is unreturned (Burrow 110). Love remains steady amidst tribulation and is unaffected by time. Similar to Paul, Shakespeare speaks of love itself, rather than as the feelings of an individual. However, his consideration of love chiefly regards how it responds to certain circumstances, whereas Paul speaks of the exact nature of love. Shakespeare’s comment on love is valuable, its greatest value being when one realizes he considers more than just romantic love.

A common saying states, “Love means never having to say you’re sorry,” emphasizing its unconditional aspect. This is not quite right. To express sorrow is to realize that one has been imperfect in his love of another. The sorrow expressed is a necessary acknowledgement of the love offended and the beginning of new growth after testing. To apologize is to respect the love of another. To forgive is to raise the love to a higher form with unconditional character.
Both are necessary in love, allowing one to say, as Billy Joel ultimately concludes, “I love you just the way you are!”

Lessons in Faith

“When I am down and, oh my soul, so weary;
When troubles come and my heart burdened be;
Then, I am still and wait here in the silence,
Until you come and sit awhile with me.

You raise me up, so I can stand on mountains;
You raise me up, to walk on stormy seas;
I am strong, when I am on your shoulders;
You raise me up: To more than I can be.”

-Lyrics from “You Raise Me Up” by Josh Groban

The world is full of catalysts to faith. Many times people only acknowledge their faith in times of trouble when they wish their petitions to be heard. At other times, they know their shame in sin committed and express their sorrow. There are other aspects of faith. Prayers of thanksgiving and praise accompany those of need and contrition. Since times of sorrow lead people to appreciate times of extreme happiness, faith should be greatest during the times people feel most blessed. The simplest things can have profound effects on one’s faith life. Things as small as appreciation for a beautiful day, a scenic view, a great performance, or a kind word are enough to produce significant increases in faith.

Josh Groban’s “You Raise Me Up” is an anthem of faith. He begins in his lowest state, tired and bordering on despair. In the quiet, he finds the presence of God and relief from his troubles. This echoes a very Catholic principle. No matter where one is or how far he has fallen, if he is open to God’s presence and grace, God will come to him right where he is. God travels
to even the deepest valleys and in His power is able to lift people out, as they could not do by their own efforts. Often the realization that humans need God does not come until one contemplates his situation in silence and stillness. He raises individuals to greater heights and allows them to see their full potential. God also guides people through turbulent times and is present through it all, carrying people when they are weak. In essence, people are able to give God greater glory with His assistance than they could by their mere human efforts.

In another context, Groban’s words can be applied to other human beings, though slightly less majestic in meaning. The reference is to a friend who comforts in times of need. The friend remains through hard times and shares in the greatest achievements of the individual. He is a major component of the support system that allows such triumph. This is most clearly indicated by the friend’s action of carrying the individual upon his shoulders, implying great strength and firm grounding. The friend serves as the connection between the individual and the stable ground. Without him, stability would be lacking.

Human connections are closely related to faith in God. God works through others. This is obvious when the goodness of others is apparent. However, when faith in other people is tested, either by betrayal or disappointment, people often make a similar connection with God. This may be God’s way of making an individual reconsider his own perspective—a gentle means of rectification. However, it is not God failing His people. In this respect, there is a vast difference between faith in God and faith in others. Humans, by their very nature, are unable to fill completely the needs of others. At some point in time, they will disappoint another. In fact, this will likely happen many times. God is incapable of disappointment. If an individual feels disappointed by God, it is because he did not receive that which he thought he needed. The often unrealized truth is that God knows the needs of humanity more than people do themselves.
As people fluctuate between high and low points in their faith lives, they doubt the value of their faith compositely. As a child, faith seems simple. If one says his prayers, behaves, and treats people nicely, he has fulfilled his requirements. People find that as they grow, this experience becomes much more difficult. They learn that high and low points are not only present in faith, but also in friendship, love, creativity, and in life. There are moments of intense inspiration and others of deep questioning. The most important aspect of this struggle is to persevere, for perseverance brings strength. The key to faith is the knowledge that God reveals His Plan to people in His own time, when He knows they are ready, not according to their schedule. This waiting period is a time to build belief in oneself. Self-doubt should not change the course of one’s destiny, preventing him from fulfilling his potential. God gives talents to each individual and guides their use through life. Everyone has value.

A good example of faith is that of Job. He was tested and underwent great trials, only to reply, “The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord!” (Jb 1:21). The faithful person has complete trust in God and worries minimally. This is difficult to do in today’s fast paced society. Jesus gave a very practical piece of advice in His Sermon on the Mount. He says,

So do not worry and say, ‘What are we to eat?’ or ‘What are we to drink?’ or ‘What are we to wear?’ All these things the pagans seek. Your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom [of God] and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides. Do not worry about tomorrow; tomorrow will take care of itself. Sufficient for a day is its own evil (Mt 6:31-34).

The faithful must seek the Kingdom of God. Everything else follows when this is done.

Mother Teresa’s life serves as a modern day personification of the words of Christ. She entered the convent in service to God, but still felt compelled to do more. Acting on her calling, she took to the streets of Calcutta and started an order to help the poor, who needed her service
most. She had great faith and allowed God to direct her activity. She said, “I headed the work in accordance to how I felt called by the people’s sufferings. God made me see what he wanted me to do” (qtd in González-Balado X). It is obvious that Mother Teresa had great faith, as she chose to work with the sickest people in service to God. She was not concerned for her own health.

She advised those who felt they had no time for God, saying,

There are some people who, in order not to pray, use as an excuse the fact that life is so hectic that it prevents them from praying. This cannot be. Prayer does not demand that we interrupt our work, but that we continue working as if it were a prayer. It is not necessary to always be meditating, nor to consciously experience the sensation that we are talking to God, no matter how nice this would be. What matters is being with Him, living in Him, in His will. To love with a pure heart, to love everybody, especially to love the poor, is a twenty-four-hour prayer (González-Balado 7).

Her words are consolation to those who fear they have neglected God by not saying formalized prayers. The faithful offer everything to God–word, deed, and thought. Though these people may feel they have not begun their prayers, they actually never stopped praying.

Faith was viewed from a different perspective by Descartes. Mathematician that he was, he sought proof of God’s existence. To do this, he began by doubting everything, including knowledge of his own existence. He needed some starting point and so concluded he must exist as he was the source of his own doubt. This was the basis for his famous notion, Cogito Ergo Sum, translated, “I think, therefore I am” (Hecht 317). From this he gathered that his idea of God was inspired by God, Who could not possibly be malevolent. This led him to accept sensual perception, since he proved it was not a trick of the mind (Hecht 317).

Descartes reasoned that God existed and thus justified his faith. Though he successfully united faith and reason, relying on sources other than the senses, he ignored that some things are not explained by reason. This is the concept of a “leap of faith.” One jumps, hoping and praying to be caught or suspended. If one knows for certain, then it is not faith. Instead it is mere
knowledge. Faith is ultimately known through love and communication in prayer, not merely by exercises of the mind.

Lessons in Understanding

“To everything (turn, turn, turn)  
There is a season (turn, turn, turn)  
And a time to every purpose, under heaven

A time to be born, a time to die  
A time to plant, a time to reap  
A time to kill, a time to heal  
A time to laugh, a time to weep

A time of love, a time of hate  
A time of war, a time of peace  
A time you may embrace, a time to refrain from embracing”

-Lyrics from “Turn! Turn! Turn!” by The Byrds

Any person who has ever had any kind of relationship with another human being knows the limitations of human understanding. These limitations are the reason they cannot perfectly coincide with one another. Often, one does not take the time or effort to understand another’s situation and instead hastens to make judgments on the basis of his perception. In a given human relationship, if one can relate to the other’s view of himself, understanding how he sees their connection, one will have a better overall understanding of the relationship, the result being an enhanced bond. The need for understanding arrives because nothing is one-sided. An individual’s relationships are always in the context of something else, whether it is another person, God, the circumstances of life, or the surrounding world.

There are different degrees of understanding in human relationships, often correlating to
the intimacy of the bond. Some friends, when surprised by the action of another, can simply shrug and say to the friend, “I will never understand you.” They are satisfied with that conclusion and continue on in their friendship. This type of response limits the growth of the friendship, as they are content to exist without striving to know one another more fully. Other friends, more deeply connected, would not make such a statement, but rather would attempt to understand why the friend acted as he did. Typically, this leads to examination of the character of the friend and likely subsequent deep discussion. In voicing such concerns, a friend makes clear that he is concerned for the other’s well being and is dedicated to the relationship. Still, there are times when even these, the closest of friends fail to understand one another.

The greatest illustration of understanding in human relationships is in the bond of marriage. It is said that husband and wife learn new things about one another every day. This is the result of continual observation, contemplation of, and discussion about the other’s behavior. The attitude that one will never understand the other in marriage is disastrous. Understanding is even more important here than in the case of very close friends, because husband and wife are partners for life. They are paired to work together in a long-term covenant. It is impossible to make organized efforts to face the world together without a common understanding of the plan of approach. It is even more difficult for them to dismiss moments of misunderstanding than it is for close friends. Friends can recoil and focus on other positive aspects of the friendship. In marriage, ignorance of such disparity creates instability and leads to further problems. Success requires total commitment to understanding.

If the flaws of human understanding are clearly evident in the context of human relationships, human inability to completely understand God naturally follows. He is beyond complete human understanding. Individuals can come to know God, and often develop a close
relationship with Him. Most people, at one time or another, have fallen into the trap of asking the question, “How could God let this happen?,” usually in reference to some unfortunate event. This is failure to see His goodness. Such events occur because of the sin of humanity. People fail to see this cause and instead blame God, not understanding His nature.

People often do not understand God’s Plan. Many conclude everything happens for a reason, though they may not understand why. They are at times ignorant of the role they are to fulfill, but trust that it is revealed to them. Sometimes the events of life do not seem to indicate a particular path—they do not reasonably fit together, indicating that understanding is not merely a product of the mind, but a fruit of the mind and heart in conjunction. It goes beyond reason.

The Byrds introduced this idea to pop culture with “Turn! Turn! Turn!,” a song adapted from Ecclesiastes. The words explore the seasons of life, indicating there is a time and place for every thing that happens. It describes the ebb and flow of human life, with its ups and downs. Life must begin and end. One must contribute time and effort in his work to reap any type of benefit. For times of intense joy are corresponding times of misery. There are occasions when one sees the world with great love, and others when he is blinded to all but its faults. One should attempt to live in peace, but there are things worthy of a fight. Sometimes love is shown physically, but other times it is demonstrated through other means. Some love must be tough.

The greatest example of understanding in the Catholic Church is the Blessed Virgin Mary. She had a normal childhood and saw no particular reason why God would choose her to bear His son. Upon receiving the news from the angel Gabriel, she was surprised and did not understand how she could become pregnant in her virginity. This was the only question she asked. Once Gabriel explained the Holy Spirit would come upon her, she understood and humbly obeyed, saying, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me
according to your word” (Lk 1:38).

Though she knew the shame she risked by bearing a child while unwed, Mary did not argue or concern herself with it. She served a higher purpose. Her understanding of the role she was called to fill directly corresponded to her faith and obedience. She did not have all the answers, nor did she know if the road would be smooth. Her understanding was total acceptance of God’s will, without reservation. She did not question her decision after acceptance, but rather rejoiced in it, proclaiming to Elizabeth,

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my savior. For he has looked upon his handmaid’s lowliness; behold, from now on will all ages call me blessed. The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name (Lk 1:46-49).

Mary was unaware of the pain she would endure in watching her son sacrifice Himself for the salvation of the world. Knowing nothing about her future, except that she was to be the vessel to deliver the Son of God to the world, she happily complied.

Ben Franklin is a figure well known in American history. He played the role of ambassador, inventor, philosopher, revolutionary, and social planner. His understanding of human needs led to his ideas of a postal service, bifocals, insurance, and roadways (Needleman 60). At the Constitutional Convention, he publicly identified the “imperfection of human understanding,” as the delegates bickered about policies of the new nation (Needleman 62). He suggested the solution to overcoming this flaw was to turn to God, saying,

In this situation of this assembly, groping…in the dark to find political truth, and scarce able to distinguish it when presented to us, how has it happened, Sir, that we have not hitherto once thought of humbly applying to the Father of Lights to illuminate our understanding? (Needleman 63).

Franklin posed a good question and refocused the efforts of the group. At times understanding is beyond human capacity, but can be found with divine assistance. People often fail to connect with one another, but God can bridge the gaps.
In the movie *Good Will Hunting*, Matt Damon’s character, Will Hunting, is in search of good will. He had a troubled childhood and was passed among many foster homes, resulting in a disordered adult life. He is brilliant, able to understand complex things easily, but is unable to relate his knowledge to life experience or to establish meaningful relationships with others. He limits his own potential, content with his janitorial job, and has even had some clashes with the law. His life changes when he meets the psychologist Sean, played by Robin Williams, whose influence brings Will to see life from a different perspective. In a poignant scene, Sean explains to Will that life cannot be contained within books. He says more is known about art by experiencing the smell in the Cistine Chapel than in knowing the complete life of Michelangelo. Though Will’s experience of war might consist of reading poetry, he does not know real war and the experience of holding a dying friend. Sean explains to Will that these are the real lessons of life and drives the point home by telling Will he does not suppose he knows Will’s complete person or life situation, having read *Oliver Twist*.

Sean indicates that life teaches through connections made by experience or personal
encounter. Frank Sinatra expressed a similar theme in “Cycles.” He identifies the highs and lows of life and their alternate occurrence. He most clearly recognizes them in his own life, but realizes that many other people are in the same situation. He names his most important life lesson as the discovery of life’s “cycles.” His continuing education is accepting and living through the tears, looking forward to the laughter of the next phase. Though he cannot explain how or why it works, his strategy is to keep smiling and living.

Every person lives by a credo–some guiding principle. Some are complicated, while others are very simple. There are those of complex philosophy, and those of simple practicality. Every person’s is different, reflecting who he is and where he has been, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. This credo represents a composite summary of the person’s life to date, and may change with experience gained and individuals met. It is closely related to an individual’s most important life lesson. If the credo is not the life lesson itself, it is a direct result of the lesson.

A recently conducted project involved a series of mini-interviews, in which people of different ages, and educational and economic backgrounds, were asked a simple question: “What is the most important lesson you have learned thus far in life?” Participants were asked to give a response of one to two sentences and the point in life during which they learned the lesson. They were given no further direction, only that answers could be philosophical, practical, academic, or otherwise. Essentially there were no restrictions and the question was carefully posed so as not to lead anyone. Individuals were prevented from knowing the responses of others, eliminating any influence on their answers. Close to 60 people participated.

Initially, it was expected that people would have relatively immediate answers. If these are the lessons people live by, one would expect them to flow quite naturally. The reality was quite different. The most common initial response was, “Can I think about it?” Very few individuals
were able to provide their most important lesson spontaneously. An insight from one participant made the reason very clear. His desire to think about the question was an attempt to offer an answer encompassing his entire life, as opposed to a position influenced by his mindset in that moment. He made a very good point, even admitting the answer he would have given spontaneously was different from his final answer. This is an excellent example of how people easily become stuck in a moment, failing to see the overall picture. Ironically, some people even cited the ability to escape this trap as their most important lesson.

Though the answers given were very diverse, they can be categorized into seven related themes. They include human limitations; issues of trust; good times and bad; appreciation for life; faith and family; humility; and relationships with others. At times, answers encompassed two or more categories simultaneously. One person even stated that every day lived and every person met is an opportunity to learn a lesson, the very idea for the project. Another expressed that he had either learned a lot of lessons or none at all. He said it was difficult limiting himself to one because there always seemed to be something more important. Lessons typically were things people claimed to know their entire lives, learned in middle age, or were still learning. Very few were able to pinpoint the exact time the lesson was learned.

Among the more disheartening interviews were with those who learned to trust no one. This reply was frequent among those grown adults who did not attend college and also advised that one get an education. They cited such causes as being taken advantage of by institutions like government and the corporate world. Another individual observed, “people are stupid!” Still another listed learning to defend himself, being mugged four times. Though they seem pessimistic, many have concluded these are realistic principles of self-preservation in the world.

A more positive response was learning to trust people in close personal relationships.
Others took different lessons from tough times. Several advised taking control of life and its circumstances. One learned early, in eighth grade math class, three guiding principles: there are different ways to solve a problem, but there is usually a more efficient way; one asks the problem questions, not the converse; and based on these answers, one develops a plan of attack. Many expressed that there is a reason for everything and good often comes from bad, though not immediately recognized. One person said, “To be fully human…one must have the bitter and the sweet.” Noting the inevitability of difficult choices, he stated, “‘having it all’ is a canard.” A common recognition was human limitations. Accepting events and circumstances beyond one’s control was a particularly difficult lesson for many. Specifically, several stated they came to know their own wants were not in their best interest. In these cases, all identified God as knowing their needs to an extent they could not possibly achieve. Another made a related comment, saying, “Know that you’ll never understand everything. Act confidently and attempt anything. Learn from your mistakes and be humble always.” In his words, he connected three of the categories into which most replies fell. Many people spoke of learning from their past mistakes and in gratitude for the forgiveness and love of God, no matter how serious the offense. One also cited the humility of life experience, and the lesson that there is always someone with greater skill at any given task. Improvement is always possible.

The connection was also made with confidence. One man said his most important lesson was learning to “live with gusto,” choosing to live life to the fullest. Similarly, another man stated that happiness is a choice to be made daily. Addressing the many choices to be made in life, another stated that there are only two answers: “hold on or let go.” Given a situation, one can either grasp tightly and stick it out, or loosen his grip and move on to other things. One must make a careful consideration of that which he embraces and that he left behind. One woman
said, “Throughout this experience they call college, I have learned that the life you have now may not always be better than the one you left behind. It’s kinda like the cliché the grass is not always greener on the other side.” She continues on, making reference to the change in friends she experienced and the realization that she will hold on to some, no matter the circumstance.

The faith category was very popular. In the face of human problems, one woman stated, “Nothing is so bad that a little faith and prayer cannot help.” Similar to this response was another, identifying the profound difference between faith in God and faith in other people. He expressed that people will let you down, but God never disappoints. Others corroborated these thoughts with expressions of the need sometimes to “just believe.” Coupled with these thoughts were the ideas of gratitude for many blessings, particularly family and health, and love’s ability to overcome all obstacles. Additionally, one told of a personal commitment “to surround myself with windows and not mirrors in continually developing and using my God-given talents.” He seeks opportunity to help others in service, rather than serving himself. This category was summarized well by a man saying, “If you ain’t right with the Lord, nothing else matter much.”

The broadest category was that involving relationships with others and self. Among the most common replies was the Christian idea of treating others as you would like to be treated. Supporting this was another thought that although people are different, all are alike in God’s image, however difficult His presence is to detect in them. The presence of God was recognized in ordinary events. Several made reference to the St. Francis DeSales quotation, “Be who you are and be that well,” noting the necessity for honesty and sincerity with oneself and others in order to find one’s right place in life. Many saw the importance of compassion and not judging
others, as well as the supportive role they were to play, using their experience to help others. One man shared his interpretation of a lesson passed to him from his grandfather: “‘Keep your mouth shut and your ears and eyes open.’ Listen and see others before saying something that you might regret.” A unique final lesson sums up many of the ideas: “Never take pictures without people in them. All the places you see, the parties you have, the beaches and the sunsets don’t really mean a whole lot without the people that you share them with. Life is all about relationships and no one can go through it alone.”

Each of these lessons is important. They were collected from those considered wise and those not necessarily known for their wisdom, with surprising results. Together, they impart a great deal of wisdom. None of the lessons are particularly academic, though some were likely influenced by academic events. Though the population possessed varying degrees of faith, the union of faith and reason in these lessons is clear. They are meant to function together. Their relationship to one another is as evident as the relationship among people experiencing the common human condition. As one man said,

I’ve learned that even though everybody is so different and unique, we’re really all pretty much the same. Everyone has been angry and excited and jealous and confused at some point in time, so if you feel like you’re all alone, and that nobody could possibly relate to you, chances are someone you know has been through a very similar situation.

God works in mysterious ways to ensure that people find the support they need in others. Real education is in taking advantage of all the life lessons one encounters, no matter their origin, using them to better himself. With different talents and abilities, people demonstrate different strengths in their personal behavior or convictions. Some remain hopeful amidst the most trying times. Others radiate love everywhere they go. Still others demonstrate rock solid faith even on bumpy paths. The person one becomes is a collection of others’ greatest attributes, as he strives for his personal best. The greatest gift in life is being able to recognize the near
perfection of such qualities in others and imitating them. If one can accomplish this, he will come to realize that the education of one’s lifetime truly is the education of a lifetime!
Works Cited


