

***Love Many, Trust Few, and Always
Paddle your Own Canoe***

15 Wisdoms for a Good Life



By Laurie A. Bonser

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15 Wisdoms for a Good Life

The credit for most of these ideas belongs to family, friends, and associates who have generously shared their thoughts and feedback with me during the past few decades. These words of wisdom come from people of all generations, backgrounds, and experiences.

Despite the diversity in these lives, there is an underlying common thread in the advice and suggestions which relates to the core of a good life as I share here:

A life in which an individual:

- recognizes the blessings and gifts available,
- reaches out to other people to help (and receive help) along the journey,
- achieves personal satisfaction in chosen areas of focus, and
- leaves a beneficial trace that contributes to the universal circle of life.

These pages are intended as a short compilation of thoughts to emphasize what's really important from day to day....realistic, down-to-earth, straight-forward reminders.

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WISDOMS TO SHARE

1. Love many, trust few, and always paddle your own canoe
2. Attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference
3. Count your blessings
4. Learn something new every day
5. Doesn't make sense to pass college and then flunk life
6. Try to be the person your dog thinks you are
7. Make conscious choices, not default reactions
8. A man is judged by the company he keeps
9. Don't go borrowing trouble
10. Handsome is as handsome does
11. Take the nightly mirror test
12. Use your best silverware every day
13. The difficult we do immediately, the impossible takes a little longer
14. Sometimes you don't get what you want....you get what you need
15. This too shall pass

Wisdom # 1 - Love Many, Trust Few, and Always Paddle your Own Canoe

My maternal grandfather shared this advice with my mother while she was growing up, and she, in turn, pressed home its importance to me and my siblings while we were young.

This motto has helped me keep the balanced perspective of reaching out to others and experiencing the gifts of different relationships, attempting to avoid “blind trust” in others just because they are nice people or are known to us, and the reality that we ourselves are the ones ultimately responsible for our own decisions and how we live our lives.

Having relationships with many people can be a great asset in our lives – helping us to learn, grow, reach outside ourselves, remain connected, and more. Trusting people is also an integral part of life, but the downside to overly relying on other people is that we sometimes end up abdicating responsibility for investigation and decision-making. Of course, there are also times when another person’s actions just catch us completely off guard by betraying a trust, but that’s part of life’s learning process too.

Paddling your own canoe doesn’t have to mean a solitary venture through life. To the contrary, it can be a healthy and social experience to visualize like-minded people all paddling their own vessels in a collective trip on various rivers, lakes, or oceans of life.

Each person has their own perspective, responsibilities, and selected path, but this doesn’t preclude a fellow paddler offering a helping hand if a problem arises, or a person ahead calling out to alert others to a tricky situation coming up. And we can certainly all use some outside encouragement at times when fatigue or confusion threatens to swamp our boat.

Questions for the reader:

What people in your life do you love and can also really trust?

Are there certain times or situations when it would be better for you to try 'paddling' on your own more often?

Wisdom #2 - Attitude is a Little Thing That Makes a BIG Difference

A healthcare associate of mine had a poster in her office highlighting this advice. She wasn't advocating a "Pollyanna", "everything is always beautiful", or "simply God's will" approach at all. Painful things happen all the time, to all kinds of people, all over the world and it would be dishonest to try to paint these events by putting on the proverbial rose colored glasses.

In the long run we do have some control over how we choose to respond to life's difficulties (once the initial shock, surprise, or pain subsides, of course). If we subscribe to the notion that we have very little personal power or impact on what happens in our life, then we become mere pawns or victims serving our time on the planet earth.

However, if we focus on using our brain power and emotional strength to figure out ways to pull ourselves up "by our bootstraps", then we have a lot more options for influencing how we choose to respond to a less than desirable situation. Having a "positive attitude" doesn't mean that our health issue will go away, or we can turn back the clock on losing a loved one, or all our financial concerns will disappear. It does mean, though, that we begin focusing on finding more effective uses for our time, better ways to stay connected to the people important in our lives, and different choices to improve our mental, emotional, and physical health.

Tweaking our attitude isn't always the first thing we think about doing when faced with challenges.....but if the 'journey of a thousand miles' begins with a single step, think of how far we can go if we tweak our "attitude dial" upwards a small amount each day.

Questions for the reader:

What mental images or affirmations could you use to increase the frequency and strength of a positive attitude in your daily life?

How would it benefit your life if you recognized more positive events on a daily, weekly, and yearly basis?

Wisdom #3 -Count Your Blessings

There is an old hymn tune that begins with “Count your blessings, Name them one by one.” I imagine that ministers often selected this song throughout the year to remind their flock to take time to reflect on the gifts and good things that do exist in life.

It’s so easy to become agitated with the events or people that interrupt or derail our careful plans as we rush around accomplishing our daily “to do” lists – and we end up with a daily litany of gripes and complaints instead. When we lose sight of the overall picture of our lives, it is human nature to dwell on the individual problems we experience. Rather than just live through them once, we process them over and over in our minds....multiplying the impact of one negative event until the volume of the repetition wipes out any positive aspects.

And that’s assuming that we were even in the right frame of mind to recognize that good things did happen throughout the day – such as another driver letting us out into traffic, getting to work/school/errands without an accident, being able to talk with a friend, finding the desired product at the store, etc. Why is it that we seem to program our minds to think that such benefits should be ‘standard’ in life, instead of gifts to be recognized and appreciated?

Rather than give so much mental air time to the “bad things” that happen, what if we allocated at least as much appreciation time to the good things that give us a lift – and why not set aside a few minutes each day to affirm the good things we’ve received?

So the hymn ends with, “Count your many blessings, Angels will attend, Help and comfort give you, To your journey's end.”

Questions for the reader:

What blessings were present in your life today?

How can you 'short circuit' your focus on negative events or people?

Wisdom #4 -Learn Something New Every Day

On top of just surviving some days, now we're expected to learn something new every day? Not likely to happen, right?

Well, if we universally equate 'learning something new' to taking a full class in calculus (or literature, or economics, or some such), we likely won't have time to tackle – much less master – a new topic. However, what if we focused on the more manageable observations or choices available to us during the day?

For example, we could listen to our teenager explain about a new scientific discovery they studied in school – or find out that having a well-made salad for lunch actually helped us have more energy in the afternoon – or discover that a sometimes verbose business associate actually did have a good idea for the new project.

Or perhaps we could take five minutes to read a personal growth article, review a few words of Spanish that we mean to re-learn, figure out how to do a new function in Word/Excel/PowerPoint, ask a friend how they saved money on their vacation arrangements, or bookmark a new website to keep up on health news.

We can also allocate a certain amount of time for a new exercise regime, listen to personal growth CD's, plan a specific dedicated activity with each child in the family, make arrangements for you and your significant other to have a long-awaited outing, or anything else that rates highly on your wish list.

The idea of this particular advice is to get in the habit of viewing learning as a healthy part of life. The scope of your life learning is up to you – whether it's a structured program or through daily tidbits that stretch your mind.

Questions for the reader:

What are some new activities you would like to try and things you want to learn?

Do you have someone who can be a partner in these activities – or can you reach out to someone new to share your interest?

Wisdom #5 – Doesn't Make Sense to Pass College and Then Flunk Life

My father is one of the original MacGyver types. Given a roll of duct tape, several pieces of wire, a few bolts and nuts, and some old lumber, he can fix anything, anywhere, anytime.

He also has quite a bit of formal education via college degrees, but has always retained a reliance on the problem-solving skills and ingenuity that was stressed during his youth and exhibited by his generation in countless industries. And one of his pet peeves has always been those people who have focused solely on academic studies, awards, and achievements to the neglect of common sense and basic every day skills.

Such as the know-it-all PhD student who can't figure out how to locate a store in a new city that carries the type of shirts he prefers to wear. Or the top class engineer who won a number of design awards, but can't seem to remember that her own car needs to have oil changes, tires inflated, or insurance premiums paid on a regular basis.

If school curriculums aren't reflecting basic skills such as managing your money, how to work on a project team, what an employer expects from its employees, how to write a business letter or client proposal, or how to research information (evaluating mortgage options, fixing a plumbing problem, finding the right medical professional, etc.) then we actively need to find other avenues for learning these skills.

All the diplomas in the world can't be converted into food, employment, housing, personal safety, or any other critical need if common sense and problem-solving skills are lacking.

Questions for the reader:

What are some topics you've wanted to learn about for a while, but haven't taken the time to research?

What are the benefits you would add to your life if you did invest some time gathering that information or asking questions of your resources?

Wisdom #6 – Try To Be the Person Your Dog Thinks You Are

Those of us who have dogs or other close companion animals know they provide continual enthusiasm at seeing us, unconditional love even on the days when we're feeling miserable, abounding trust that they will be fed and cared for, and a definite "in the moment" response to life.....usually with little baggage from previous events.

In healthy people/animal relationships, these companions view us as caring, trustworthy, reliable, consistent, interesting, dependable, and fun leaders. Pets are remarkably forgiving and tolerant when our sincere efforts are less than perfect, and generally give us another chance and respond favorably when we get better with our skills.

Anyone who has watched some of Cesar Milan's "Dog Whisperer" episodes or seen some top notch horsemanship demonstrations knows that even we mere mortals can build new skills and relationships with our animal friends – often more than we ever could have imagined.

Seems that we really do have the ability to tap into this portion of our self when it's brought to our attention and we recognize the importance of cultivating this part of ourselves!

So, as we see and hold our furry companions on a daily basis, perhaps we can actively remind ourselves that we do indeed have the wonderful characteristics that they recognize. And we can then make a conscious commitment to affirm these traits in our ongoing behaviors – with both those at home and those we meet outside in work, shopping, volunteer efforts, and more.

Questions for the reader:

What qualities and responses do you share with animals that might benefit your human relationships?

Why would you feel reluctant to share those characteristics with your human contacts?

Wisdom #7 – Make Conscious Choices, Not Default Reactions

It seems in our society that being “overbooked” has become synonymous with being an important, valued individual. So we rush from children to work to errands to housework to volunteer time to renovations to social time with hardly a chance to breathe or think. If we can’t return phone calls or emails or respond fully to customers, then it’s just another sign that we’re really handling the other more important stuff in life – other people will just HAVE to understand.

While there’s no doubt that some days are quite hectic or turned upside down by real emergencies, maybe we’re really fooling ourselves about the important parts of life if we’re always focusing on our “TO DO List” instead of our “WE VALUE List”?

When we take the time to figure out what our values are, how we want to contribute to the world, what principles are most important to us, and how we want to tap into our best strengths, then we have our own platform available to help us make choices about what we do each day and how we do it.

For example, you want to take your kids to their extra-curricular activity because you think it will be fun for them and/or help them learn new skills. But, because you’re still fuming over a colleague’s response at work, you’re also now upset at having to drive in afternoon traffic and end up arguing with the kids all the way to the activity and then all the way through dinner and the evening afterwards.

What if we had decided it’s a critical part of our lives to be more “in the moment” and we then focus on how great it is the kids are healthy enough to participate and we really want to use the time together to build more family memories?

Or, while you're working on a project deadline that is rapidly approaching you decide it's also imperative to answer the phone anyway when it rings. On the other end is a friend who is getting back to you about getting together the following day. You are so stressed and upset about the project that you bluntly tell them that you're stuck in this important project and you don't have time to deal with them today.

Unfortunately, what you've now accomplished is putting a major dent in your friendship and making it clear that your friend's time is less valuable than yours. What if we had already decided that our friends and family were top priorities for us, and so instead reacted by either 1) NOT answering the phone unless we were prepared to respond with civility to the caller, or 2) taking the 30 seconds necessary to thank our friend for calling, make some plans, or set a time to talk later in the evening?

Because it takes some upfront time (and some ongoing reminders) to think about what we really need in life and what we think our purpose is, it often seems much easier to just "go with the flow" or "wing it" with whatever comes at us.

But, if we're usually being reactive, doesn't that mean we're also not making conscious choices and taking control over how our life turns out?

And if we feel out of control and stressed, how can this be good for the long term happiness and success we say we want?

Questions for the reader:

What are some reasons you use to avoid or defer making decisions in your daily life?

How do you think your life might improve if you made more thought-filled choices?

Wisdom #8 – A Man is Judged by the Company He Keeps

For hundreds of years, parables have provided cultural commentary and reflection on a whole variety of issues. You may be familiar with the following from Aesop's Fables:

A man wished to purchase an Ass (a Donkey), and decided to give the animal a test before buying him. He took the Ass home and put him in the field with his other Asses. The new Ass strayed from the others to join the one that was the laziest and the biggest eater of them all. Seeing this, the man led him back to his owner. When the owner asked how he could have tested the Ass in such a short time, the man answered, "I didn't even need to see how he worked. I knew he would be just like the one he chose to be his friend."

While we do need to exercise some caution in making blanket judgments about people and situations, it may also be helpful in our own personal lives to periodically consider the people and situations that we regularly choose to associate with.

For example, if we find ourselves spending much of our time griping and truly unhappy about work, relationships, time, children, money matters or another topic, maybe we're actually getting reinforcement from our regular crowd and are stuck in a never-ending cycle of 'misery loves company.' Having this negative reinforcement may seem somewhat comforting at the time, but it's also greatly limits our chances for successes and creating the better life we would like to envision.

So, while life doesn't always cooperate the way we'd like, we do have the ability to choose our path and select the company we keep to support us in that journey.

Questions for the reader:

Do you believe the current companions in your life are people who support your goals and values?

How would the value of your life be enhanced by actively seeking some new friends, neighbors, or colleagues?

Wisdom #9 – Don't Go Borrowing Trouble

With all the changes in life in general these days, this wisdom has become a daily staple for me personally, as it seems easier than ever for anxieties, uncertainties, and concerns to overwhelm our thought processes. Although my abilities to tackle long-term planning and focus on strategic options may be a strong skill to have for helping business clients, on a personal level too much “what if” can leave a person with either the ‘analysis paralysis syndrome’ or a constant feeling of unease and unhappiness.

“Don't go borrowing trouble” is a good phrase to keep in mind to help re-focus our attention on being more ‘in the moment’ and appreciative of all the good things that are actually present in life. While it's necessary and healthy to consider options and what choices we want to make, it's also true that we can spend too much time dwelling on events that may or may not occur – often with what we perceive as negative connotations.

If we've been thoughtful enough to understand and consider that life events will occur – sometimes very unexpectedly – then it's equally important to realize we can only deal with these events IF and WHEN they actually materialize. We can then use our resources to address a real situation, rather than wasting precious energy and time conjuring up multiple problems and figuring out actions or solutions for each that may never be needed.

When we consider each day to be a special gift and decide that we want to allocate our energies in the most productive ways possible during that 24 hour period, we can then minimize the minutes spent obsessing on the fear of the unknown. Please note the deliberate use of the word “minimize” – because anxieties do touch all our lives...but we can influence how much mental ‘air time’ we give them!

Questions for the reader:

What other positive thoughts and activities could replace any anxious or negative focus you currently have?

How could a new focus help your life and the lives of those close to you?

Wisdom #10 – Handsome Is As Handsome Does

I remember hearing this piece of advice as a kid when heading out to a school event or a friend's party. After agonizing over what to wear, how did we look, and whether we would fit in, we were also then reminded that the expectation was we would also behave 'properly', i.e., being courteous to friends' parents, being ready on time, and otherwise using our manners. The message was clear: if we really wanted to be viewed as worth attention and respect, then our actions had to match the visual image we were trying to create.

Sometimes it seems we still need that reminder as we head to work, happy hour, or shopping. Many people appear to spend time and money on the "right outfit" but then completely ruin their credibility and image by inappropriate language, expressions of sarcasm, ignoring common courtesies, or being self-absorbed. How could anyone really put their faith in someone who is really only interested in their own bottom line?

For example, I can't count the number of business people who want me to see them as trustworthy, good folks to buy products or services from, but then they freely exhibit traits of impatience, lack of follow-through, or sloppy documentation when you try to work with them.

Or, how about the business owner who just spent the last few hours networking with other professionals at a Chamber of Commerce event to convince them why they should do business with him....but then gets in his car, blows his horn at others leaving the parking lot, and runs through the exit stop sign?

The next time we step out the door, maybe adding the old adage "...as handsome does" would be the real finishing touch to our attire?

Questions for the reader:

Do you believe that the “little things in life” make a difference to you and other people?

What are some adjustments you think you could make in your own life that would improve the quality of life for yourself and those you interact with?

Wisdom #11 – Take the Nightly Mirror Test

There have been many songs written about looking in the mirror to see what type of person we are – or would like to be. The analogy of having our face reflected back to us in the mirror is a pretty clear picture of facing ‘the truth,’ rather than relying on the various interpretations we devise within our minds.

This wisdom is a reminder to take an honest look at ourselves each day to think about whether the sum of our daily actions contributes to the kind of person we really want to be. The purpose of this review is to help us consciously think about the decisions we’ve made and figure out whether we’re still headed in the right direction overall.

While we all make mistakes or less than perfect judgments, if these appear to be occasional “blips or slips” then we can acknowledge these actions as errors, offer sincere apologies as needed, and move on to continually improving our decision-making track record. However, if we routinely find ourselves making the same mistakes, judgments, or deliberate choices that are hurtful to ourselves or others, then we need to consider a much stronger and immediate change to re-direct our thoughts and behaviors.

Sometimes it seems easier to keep putting off the mirror test (just for a night or two, or a week or two, right?) and so we create a more pleasant, but false, sense of ourselves and our situation. And if we keep up the fantasy long enough, we often end up with a very rude awakening one day – after having done much damage to ourselves and/or other people and many wasted opportunities to move to a better path.

So maybe it’s better to ‘face the music,’ ‘take your medicine,’ or whatever phrase you prefer, than to be buried under a mountain of regret, guilt, unhappiness, or pain with few opportunities to reverse the damage and start over?

Questions for the reader:

What is some affirmation you can give yourself at the end of the day?

What are some things you would have liked to do differently?

Wisdom #12 – Use Your Best Silverware Every Day

Many years ago, my Aunt Joan shared with me her advice to use your best silverware every day. Her thought on this was twofold: First, each day should be considered a special day and we should celebrate by using those items that help reinforce our conscious recognition of this idea. Second, those items that we label as “best” were often received as gifts or handed down by close family and friends, so using these tangible things can be warm reminders of their presence in our lives.

Maybe pulling out the entire silver set seems pretty impractical on those busy days as we rush in and out the door. But how about using the place settings for family dinners on the weekend – or pulling out one spoon to stir the morning coffee? Or perhaps selecting a special pottery mug to use for our morning beverage of choice.....and starting the day with appreciation for the gift giver?

We can also extend the same use to other items we usually tend to save for a special occasion and end up never using at all due to daily oversight – such as a silk scarf, neck tie, sweater, dress, jewelry, hat, or other accessory.

I believe Aunt Joan’s advice is a nudge to help remind me that we need to appreciate the everyday blessings we receive and to enjoy them in the moment.....as we all know how quickly our good lives can be changed by both temporary and longer term events.

So, what best items do you have in your house that can bring you pleasure and good memories today?!

Questions for the reader:

Where are some of your special treasures hidden?

How would these items add pleasure and meaning to your daily life?

Wisdom #13 – The Difficult We Do Immediately... ...The Impossible Takes a Little Longer

You may have seen the motto, “Lead, follow, or get out of the way.” Or the admonition, “Those who say it can’t be done should get out of the way of those already doing it.” For me, Wisdom #13 is another daily self-challenge to take on those activities or services that are beyond the usual, fairly standard tasks that we’re accustomed to.

My father is one who routinely uses this phrase in his hands-on, fix-it projects, but I’ve also found it applies to my own regular interaction with client requests and new initiatives. Developing and maintaining this more active path requires real focus and a willingness to think out of the box for every opportunity that comes to us. When we do this, it never ceases to impress on me that the solutions we once found difficult then become standard fare, and those situations that previously struck us as impossible then become new break-throughs and greatly add to our “bag of tricks” for creative development.

In his new book “Strategy Execution Heroes”, Jeroen De Flander includes a section on the results of 100 goal-setting studies with 40,000 individuals. Among other observations, the research revealed the following:

- 1) Difficult goals, when accepted, result in a higher level of performance than those of easy goals,
- 2) Goals directly affect performance by steering what people pay attention to and how long and hard they work, and
- 3) Goal commitment increases when the goal is considered important and achievable.

When welcoming new challenges, it's clear that we have the opportunity to tap into ideas and inspirations we may have previously submerged in our subconscious...and a chance to be a 'hero of the day'!

Questions for the reader:

Are there some goals or 'next steps' you've wanted to take on for a while?

What benefit would it bring to your life if you started putting some focus on those areas?

Wisdom #14 - Sometimes You Don't Get What You Want...You Get What You Need

How many times has this happened to you: You choose to get into a new job, relationship, living situation, or other scenario thinking you'll have a lot of enjoyment or fun or adventure.....only to eventually find yourself feeling the same frustrations, disappointment, unhappiness, or discouragement?

Sometimes there are certainly legitimate reasons to look at making yet another change to 'fix' the problem, but I've equally found that there are times when I need to take a step back and honestly ask myself if these reactions actually stem from things that I can address or improve.

For example, could I try a different approach in communicating with the person who appears to be 'difficult' at that time – thereby stretching my skills and maybe resolving whatever seems to be getting in our way of greater harmony? Or can I try seeing the situation from a different perspective and find a more positive or effective way to respond instead of defaulting to being upset?

When I was much younger, I would diligently pray for wisdom and patience, believing that these skills would help make my life easier and less stressful. In retrospect, I think this was a clear case of needing to be more careful for what one wished.....as the universe took me up on my request and has regularly sent various 'learning opportunities' my way – often in ways more frustrating, annoying, and challenging than I ever imagined possible.

However, at this point, there's no doubt in my mind that often the very people or problems we definitely DO NOT want in our lives may actually be the best medicine for us in the long run – depending on how we choose to respond and the effort we invest.

Questions for the reader:

Are there some challenging people or situations in your life that actually could bring value to you if you were to take a second look and invest some attention?

Even if it seems there's no immediate solution or relief, what can you do to make sure your longer term situation is more beneficial?

Wisdom #15 – This Too Shall Pass

As it should, the final words of wisdom in this little book come again from my mother. And the phrase has proven so apropos in my own life that I now find myself sharing it with family and friends when they are facing troubling situations.

One reason I enjoy reading historical books is the constant reminder of the cycles in human nature, culture, economics, philosophies, and other facets of life. There's a very old, very true, quote that says, "If you don't study history, you are doomed to make the same mistakes." But I think it's also appropriate to recognize that people do survive, and often move ahead, when going through the various cycles or situations in their own lives.

For example, going through unemployment, family separations, illness and death of loved ones, physical relocation, unhappiness in work or relationships, business failures, and other events are very trying and painful times. However, sometimes it helps keep life in perspective when you realize that many other people have faced similar times in the past and have lived through and worked through those emotional and physical tribulations.

Knowing that you're in good company and being able to visualize the light at the end of the tunnel can give us some additional strength and the willpower to find other options, solutions, and support to get through the current challenges.

And I do believe it's helpful to recognize that while there are times we will struggle or have pain, there are also times when we can experience all the good parts of life too.....much like the historical message from Ecclesiastes, "For Everything There is a Season."

Questions for the reader:

What skills and support do you currently have to help you through challenging situations?

If you need more help, what other resources can you tap into so you have some extra support during that time?

