

## PREFACE

The first pages of this book came to me a few years ago when I was teaching a high school class. Some of the students were having difficulty with the basic academics, especially reading. I could see their frustration flipping over into rough behaviour. I thought if I could wave a wand and turn them into better readers... would that make them less aggressive in their conduct? Not instantly, they would not know what to do with their new skills. So what could I offer them that would bridge the thirty-five year gap between us, so that they could understand that their lives mattered, that they could change and appreciate the joys of finding their own skills and value? With their record of academic difficulty, and in some cases social friction with those around them, what could they learn to help pull themselves out of these cycles of failure before it was too late?

Some time later, one of their friends died in a traffic accident. The boy had just finished school a few months before, and this hit everyone hard. The accident was only a few blocks from the school. I saw the roughest, most problematic of the students facing their grief. They didn't know what to do. Some went to sit at the accident site along with the gathering of flowers and cards, some prayed, and some got bored and started to drink. I went to the viewing the night before the funeral and watched the same students move up to the casket, cry or stand still, sit back down again, go out for a cigarette, talk to their friends, move back in again and repeat the pattern. They behaved and dressed the best way they knew how, but they were in such a strange land facing

death and trying to help the surviving siblings that they knew so well.

In the faces of those troubled students, I saw the same hurt and bewilderment I have known at all funerals. Why did this happen? Why at such a young age? These students were no different. I sat in the back and watched them, and nodded to the ones I knew. Funerals make everyone reflect on their own death; it is a way for us to finally and fully realize in the most physical of ways that the person will no longer be here. Thus, some day we will no longer be here. There is no cure for death.

If there is no cure, what would make a person feel the most comfortable as they faced their death? What would make the survivors most comfortable? Outside of a person's religious beliefs, what could bring a sense of peace at the end of a life?

I looked into my own life and realized that the important events are ahead of you, that what matters are your relationships and your achievements, not how much beer you drank on the weekend, not how shiny your new car is, nor how big your TV screen is. Those would be ridiculous things to talk about at a funeral; that talk would be obviously hollow.

Your relationships: how you lived with other people, how you loved, how you helped to improve the world, and as an optional branch of this tree for some people, your relationships in spiritual matters. Your achievements: did you use your potential, did you build, did you heal, did you create, did you have markers on the road that distinguished your organized energy? These two important standards are just as important for the struggling high school students as they are for the research scientist, Olympic champion, and the

person overcoming an addiction. Whatever you achieve will always be compared: a better bookcase, a quicker marathon, a song with more popularity. But what you did, was that the best you could do at the time? If it was, then you have done well. If you extend that into relationships, then the fear of death lessens. The only cure for death is to live well.

So it started as a simple essay. I felt that if all of these students could learn what it was like to be excellent, they would feel better; if they found a way to continually bring that level of excellence into their lives, it would become a style of living so important it wouldn't matter if they were two years behind on their reading levels, they would compensate. It wouldn't matter if they were a difficult student or even one with a criminal record, once they had consistently tasted excellence, they would become changed people because they wanted to change. It would not matter if the feeling of excellence came from rebuilding an engine, renovating a house, serving in the military, starting a business, or finding the right life partner. Continual success would breed more success.

This is not a new idea, nor probably a very profound one. But, put it into practice and watch the results. The feelings of accomplishment over many years can lead to a sense of peace and comfort about a person's role in life.

When I brought this essay into daylight, there were two clear types of responses. Students would nod their heads and say, "Okay, what assignment is connected to this essay?" Not knowing who wrote it, they assumed it was another task. They have already been hit with lectures, talk, lessons, paper. This essay was on yet another

er thin piece of paper, and they didn't yet have many experiences to know how that self-habituating patterns of achievement leads one away from drugs, alcohol, gambling and other self-destructive behaviours moving one toward a bigger life, not a smaller one of rules and discipline. Parents recognized quickly what I was trying to communicate. They gave me support and encouraged me to write more.

I decided to maintain the tone and continue to write directly to students. Halfway through, I realized some would ask: what are your qualifications? Who are you to tell me, more than anyone else, what is important? I could only answer that my beliefs came from my experiences. By reading the details of my experiences, the reader could better understand the foundations of my thinking. That does not mean I have the answers for everyone, or even a few. I only have some answers for my life, derived from my life.

Students, by the end of this little book you will understand why I feel that my heart is one-hundred years old. But, it is the freshness in your smiles and the nods of acknowledgement I get from parents that teach me every day about excellence.

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