

GENEROUS WISDOM

Fifty-one things you wish your grandmother had told you... or maybe she did

By Steve Lawler

This work began in a conversation with a friend, who was quoting back to me a story I had told him some years before. He had it down chapter and verse, including a moral. I remembered the story, but not that I had given it a punch line. He felt that the story had given him a life-changing insight.

Over the next few days I thought about the conversation, and stories others had told me came to mind. As certain stories and phrases came back, so did the voices and contexts. The tellers became present. I realized that these stories, sayings, and ideas have meant a great deal to me, and that those who shared them are my teachers. I also realized that I am far from unique in receiving this generous wisdom. Nearly everyone I know has a story to share once the threshold of friendship is crossed.

Characterizing them as stories is a little misleading. They are not remembered for information they contain, but because they point to something beyond information, something about living. They offer practices. Or, as I have come to understand them, life practices.

In their popular form, life practices are printed on plaques, posters, doors, bumper stickers, and greeting cards. But most of the powerful ones require a more personal and textured story. They resemble the maxims of the sage or enlightened one, but are less polished.

The attic where I write contains more books than I will ever

read, but it struck me that the power of the practices cited by regular people in my vicinity is equal to that found in the works of these well-known teachers. How I could have I missed such an abundance of wisdom? Like many who have had a conversion experience, I began to talk about my awakening with anyone who would listen.

Slow learner that I am, it took me awhile to shut up and listen to those who wanted to tell me their own stories. In conversation, everyone is a pilgrim. Life practices were available from all and to each of us. The truth of the advice “listen and learn” animated many of my conversations in these days.

While doing some research on the web for a client, I started thinking of ways to connect with people in various places, whose culture, religion, age, or region offered other practices than those of my own circle of acquaintances. I collected email addresses of people around the globe and sent them a request.

Under the subject line “Writer/researcher needs your help,” I asked people to share a life practice, revising

my letter over time. Here is part of the most recent revision:

“I am writing to ask your help for a book I am writing about Life Practices. I am looking for examples of those simple things that we all do that are essential to expressing and maintaining our values as we face life’s ups and downs — our Life Practices.



“What I am seeking is a bit like folklore. Something with a story and an easy-to-remember slogan or catchphrase. I am asking you to contribute out of your own personal experience, not as an official representative of an organization. I am especially interested in those practices which help you deal with others — in your family, at work, in your immediate community, in the larger global community, etc.

“This is the only email you will receive from me unless you choose to participate in this project.”

I was expecting tens of responses, maybe even hundreds, but not thousands. The generosity of people around the world was revealed in the thoughtful responses that poured into my inbox daily. Some questions came in, as well. Why me? Why are you doing this? Will you let me know when the book is finished? I began to think of the project not as a book, but as a work that continues to grow and unfold. In preparing this article, I sent the message to the thousands who subscribe to *Spirituality & Health's* “Soul Boosters” email list, and received hundreds of new stories.

What follows is the first published collection of these practices. They form a kind of breviary, a collection of spiritual readings. Except for some minor editing, the words are those of the contributors. It is their life practices being offered to you, dear reader, and to anyone who might have the good fortune, borrowing one of my favorite phrases, to “read, mark and inwardly digest” them.

I don't have time to properly thank everyone. But we all have enough time to pay closer attention the plenitude around us. And there is all the time in the world to honor these contributions by making them our own and by passing them — and our own life practices — on to others.

So let's keep it going. Send in yours to share (wisdom@spiritualityhealth.com) and to be reminded that we are all saints and sages, pilgrims seeking a better world.

Steve Lawler is an Episcopal priest, ethics consultant, and writer.



1 Whenever you feel shy or alone, help someone else.

At the outset of any new adventure — the first day of school, a first dance, moving to a new place, a new job — there is the inevitable self-consciousness and unease, even fear. But somehow, there is always someone even less at ease or more fearful. By concentrating on their needs, you bless them and the situation — and the circumstances lose their power to do anything but bless you.

— Carol P. Leibau, San Marino, California

2 Mistakes are just Chapter One in a textbook on a new subject.

My life changed when I went from seeing mistakes as awful, to seeing them as the first chapter of a textbook on a new subject. I even had this made into a sign for the wall of my office. Now I get bothered if I don't have a royal screwup every few days. It's like I am not trying. It's like fishing. You have to throw the line in a lot of times

before a fish shows up. If you can't handle that, you can't fish.

— Criag Benton, Tulsa, Oklahoma

3 By the inch, it's a cinch; by the yard, it's hard.

This saying comes from a friend and mentor who has since passed on. I've found it to be true. Usually things happen incrementally, and it helps ease our frustration at not having everything go as fast as we'd like.

— Patte Purcell, Las Vegas, Nevada

4 If you cannot find it when you need it, you might as well not own it.

It is simply too frustrating to be unable to find something I own when I look for it! As a result of this mantra, I am known to friends and colleagues as being extremely well organized.

— William Roberts, Fairfax, Virginia

5 Nice them to death.

How do you find something good in people who you feel have betrayed you or your child, who go against your interests, who

seem devoted to seeing that nothing good comes your way? Nice them to death. If you answer nasty behavior with nasty comebacks, your “torturers” have excuses for treating you as they do. But if you find something — anything — to compliment, sometimes the most sour person will be a little more accommodating, a bit less mean, a tiny bit more human.

— Michele Williams, Miami, Florida

6 Water what you want to grow.

Whenever I see something being done well, I acknowledge it as soon as possible in some tangible way. The least that I do is to compliment the person doing the thing well. More often, I try to send a note or a small gift.

— Mary Obawa, Brentwood, Missouri

7 Don't ever learn to do something you don't want to have to do.

That's the advice my mother-in-law gave me before I got married. I didn't understand, and she suggested things such as learning to use the lawnmower or the chainsaw, things like that. I have done so and often been grateful that I can say, sorry, I don't know how to do that, could someone please help, and not have to feel guilty! I've been married 35 years to that woman's son.

— Barbara Curtiss, Kent, Connecticut

8 Negative attitudes aren't all bad.

Most people who decry “negative attitudes” don't know how to handle the truth. They lack the courage and determination to overcome adversity, so they demand that the adversity be denied. The guy obsessed with “positive attitude” keeps butting his head against brick walls, refusing to admit they are there. The guy with the “negative attitude” sees the wall, looks around...and walks through the gate a few yards farther down. To me, that's the guy with the REAL positive attitude — the one who insists there has to be a better way than plowing stubbornly straight ahead.

— Harry Noyes, San Antonio, Texas

9 One word: “lärpengar”

It is Swedish for, literally, “learning money” — an expenditure that turned out to be stupid but that, in hindsight, will at least provide a lesson for the future.

— Daniel Tarschys, Sweden

10 Everything in life that's really important I learned from the pack.

Such as: playing is the most important thing! NEVER pass up an opportunity to play! Sniffing a flower is better than picking it and watching it die. Traveling 125 miles a day with no particular place to go and appreciating the journey more than the destination. I know intimately the joys of bonding, sloppy kisses, muddy paws, and the need to give and get affection. I've developed unparalleled organizational skills; I know the value of team effort, commitment, patience, focus, and tenacity! I see that it's RIGHT for youngsters to be doted upon by the whole pack, spoiled, loved, cared for, tolerated, and forgiven instantly — for any infraction.

— Rae Evening Earth Ott, Director, North American Wolf Association, Spring, Texas

11 If you have a weak mind, you need strong legs.

That's what my grandmother, who came to the U.S. from Hungary around the turn of the last century, used to say whenever she forgot something and had to climb the stairs to retrieve it. For me, the saying is more profound. How often do we find ourselves overwhelmed and near panic trying to get more done than we ought? And then we do stupid, time-consuming things, compounding our problem. When we find too much on our plate, we need to stop running around, clear the mind, and refocus on what's really important and how to achieve it most efficiently. Hectic situations are indications that — temporarily, at least — we are victims of a weak mind. That's when we need to pay attention to excessive strain on the legs.

— Bob Mellert, Lincroft, New Jersey



12 Picture yourself at 80.

Since I was in my teens, I have pictured myself as an 80-year-old woman, all alone, with nothing left but my memories. When making important choices in my life, I have always asked myself which choice will be more interesting once it is done and I am old and have only the memories. Generally, this approach has me erring (if error it is) on the side of trying new things because, after all, at 80, I won't remember the things I THOUGHT about doing, but never did!

— Tina Mazza Ralls, *New York, New York*

13 Take the opportunity to explore the unintended.

I remember my sister's philosophy while we were traveling back roads in Ireland. We had a destination in mind, but I was beginning to worry that we might be getting lost. "Oh, I never get lost," she chirped, turning onto yet another unmarked lane, "I'm just taking the opportunity to explore the unintended." We eventually got where we wanted to go and saw some lovely countryside along the way. There are many worthwhile paths in life. Sometimes, when you feel you're getting off track and losing direction, sit back and enjoy the view.

— Roch A. Ducey, *U.S. Army Corps of Engineers*

14 Acceptance comes before understanding.

Life became simpler when I realized that there are no applicable formulas to life or living and that every human being and every situation needs to be treated as special and unique. So now I listen more than I talk and hear more than I judge. I accept first and then wait for life to guide me to understanding.

— Shatarupa Chaki, *Hyderabad, India*



15 When you are not sure whether you are allowed to do something, don't ask.

That's the way my father coped with life under a dictatorship, and it has served me well. Long after my father gave me that advice, when I found myself in America and my schoolmates warned me, about who knows what, "You are not supposed to do that," my instinctive response was, "Who is doing the supposing?" Responsibility has many faces, and questioning authority is one of them.

— Andrew Calimach,
Romanian writer, now living in the U.S.

16 My short list:

Yoga
Bubble baths

— Carmelle

17 Listen. Think. Reply.

I was a missionary. One day, in conversation with a white-haired village elder, I asked, "How can I become wise so that people will trust me and look on me as a friend?" After thinking a while, this is the advice he gave: "Wisdom does not mean that you know everything or have the answer to every question. Wisdom has to do with how you deal with people. When people come to you for advice you have to do three things well. One: listen! Two: think! Three: reply! When a person comes with a question, listen. Most white men start to answer the question before we have finished asking it. Then, bring your hands together, look the person in the eye and say, "Thank you." Then, just sit and think about what the person said. Maybe an answer will come, maybe it won't. Whatever the outcome, the fact that you have thought about it will give you honor among the people. Even though you don't know everything, the news that you gave your time to listen and to think will spread among the people. You will be known as a wise person."

— Edmund Rowland, *U.K.*

18 "It's amazing what one man can accomplish if he doesn't care who gets the credit."

My dad used to say that when I was growing up. During the past 40 years since I left home, I have tried to remember that slogan, and I have found it to be true. Getting the job done is what matters, not getting the glory. Ideas are seldom truly original. As my dad also liked to say, "I was born totally ignorant; everything I know I learned from someone else."

— Edward William Fudge, *Houston, Texas*

19 Do five things that scare you every day.

At one moment in my life, I decided that I would do five things that scared me every day. These might include making a difficult phone call, signing up for a class, reaching out to befriend a new person, or something truly scary, such as sky-diving, buying a ticket to a foreign country, or committing to running the marathon. Of course, I rarely did five every day, but it was amazing how committing myself to reach beyond what I thought possible opened my life and made me, essentially a timid person, brave.

— *Carey Lovelace, New York, New York*

20 If you keep doing what you've been doing, you'll keep getting what you've been getting.

If what you have been doing isn't making the changes you want, then you need to change the way you're doing things. Try a new road, because the old one wasn't working.

— *Debbie*

21 Meguriai

It's a Japanese term for chance meeting. So far, throughout my adolescent years, I've begun to believe that life is really about meguriai — chance and the people we meet by chance. I'm 20 years old and I've found that the small experiences I get from meeting people — be it on the train, on the way to school, or anywhere — add up to make me a much better person. I don't close my doors to any possibility of knowing someone or learning from someone.

— *Kellemp Delmitri, Singapore*

22 I did the best I could with the knowledge I had at the time.

This phrase has taken me out of the blame game many times over the past few years. It's so tempting to second-guess myself, especially when it comes to being a parent. It helps to remember that my motives were good and that I didn't have all the knowledge that I got from that experience — and since — when I was dealing with it.

— *Kay Lindahl, Laguna Niguel, California*

23 See the four-year-old.

As a parish minister, I am intimately accountable to an entire community, and some folks are very high-maintenance indeed! There was a time when I used to respond to everyone's needs, demands, and anxieties with a sense that I needed to fix them or their problems, all while trying to hide my own fear of rejection and criticism. One morning



at church I was preparing to lead our weekly worship service when a beloved elder member came into my study to talk, as is his custom almost every Sunday morning, when I am most busy and unavailable. As usual, he launched into a complicated request that had nothing to do with the worship service. I prayed that I would not lose my temper, and suddenly I had a vision of him as a little boy of four. The vision was so clear, and the little boy so endearing, that I was suddenly able to be present to the man in an affectionate way and simply let him know that I needed to go into the sanctuary but that we'd talk after church. From that day on, when anyone is anxious, upset or needy, I picture them as they must have looked as a little child.

— *Name withheld*

24 Use “and.”

I have learned to use the word “and” instead of the words “but” and “or.” In almost all circumstances it allows me to see two views or options as coexistent, instead of mutually exclusive.

— *Chris McIntosh, Lancaster, Pennsylvania*

25 Go first.

Whenever I'm with an unfamiliar person or group of people, I break the ice by going first and disclosing something about who I am and how I feel. This disarms people and lets them know that I am a person who is interested in sharing about things that matter, issues of the soul. It's like those old cowboy movies where you see two gunmen at a table in the saloon. One takes his guns out of his holster and lays them on the table. Then the other does the same. Once the guns are on the table, they are disarmed and can get to the business at hand without fear or hesitation.

— *Jan Phillips, San Diego, California*

26 When you cry, it washes your eyes and you see better.

I learned that from my grandmother, and it has always helped me get through things by just letting myself have a good old-fashioned cry. Crying is a wonderful release and afterward there is a sense of peace and relaxation all through your body.

— *Noreen Agis, Middletown, New York*

27 To God.

Several years ago, while visiting the studio of my cousin who is a graphic artist, I noticed those two words written on a tiny piece of paper taped to the upper left corner of her computer monitor. When I asked about it, she said she had adapted the

practice from Mozart, who wrote those words at the start of his musical scores. Taping those words to her monitor reminded her that every job she undertook was ultimately completed for the betterment of God's kingdom. I adapted the practice to my own life. Each morning as I roll out of bed, I say, "This day to God." I find it easier to be compassionate and forgiving, to put myself in others' shoes, to deal with the trials and tribulations that come my way.

— *Laurie Wozniak, Buffalo, New York*

28 Hand to heart.

I put my hand on my chest when I want to thank the universe for something, often for simply existing. It's a common word in international body language that helps me slip into contemplation — even when my mind won't hold steady or my heart stay focused. No one notices — except the hidden forces around me — who seem to grin at my harmony.

— *Bill Cleary, Burlington, Vermont*

29 How can I see this differently?

Asking that question is one simple discipline that has given me wonderful results over the last year. When I hit a brick wall in my work, or a client is having a hard time, or I feel some awful judgment or negativity swell up in me, I ask the question — and by God's grace I can almost always see something I missed before and look at it with new eyes.

— *Nancy Hein, Lynchburg, Virginia*

30 Listen for the change that wants to happen.

When life feels uncertain, when it is dark, unsettling, confusing, sad, or troubling, I have found great comfort in repeating those words and creating quiet time to listen. Moving into change feels positive and good, rather than frightening and sad.

— *Lorraine LaHuta, New York, New York*

31 If you see a runaway train, get off the railroad tracks.

Recently, my boyfriend died suddenly. It has been the worst time of my life. His brother, for his own unknown reasons, "uninvited" me to the funeral after it was established that I would be coming. Because I had known long before that this person has anger management issues, I knew enough to back off.

— *Debbie Graham, Kew Garden Hills, New York*

32 Feel it.

My name, Shakti, means energy — creative energy, sexual energy, life energy — in Sanskrit. So that is what I wish to radiate. When I'm exhausted and my body aches from overuse, I feel the pain and know I am alive. Each sensation has a meaning and you can be friends with it. Don't reject it. Accept it. Embrace it all and move on. When there is too much going on around you, sit and take a deep breath. Feel the breath pass through your body and embrace each pore. Feel the warmth it brings. And remember that it all comes from within you. The universe is in your soul.

— *Shakti, Japan*

33 Life is messy and Everybody is weird.

Together these seem to capture the strange realities of human existence. We cannot assume thoughts, motives or actions about others, but the miracle is that connection can happen in the midst of this mess, between all these weird and wounded people (myself included), and that transformation can seep through, again and again and again.

— *The Rev. Deborah Patterson, St. Louis, Missouri*



34 Every act of love adds to the balance of love in the world.

This is my motto and a life-way that I adopted after reading about the life and theology of Thérèse of Lisieux. Life is a balance of light and darkness, good and evil, positivity and negativity. In this time of war, I often feel helpless. I commit small acts of love: helping someone find their way in the hospital where I work, picking up garbage from a sidewalk, giving praise and compliments, even simply making someone smile.

— *Mary Bubbenzer, Madison, Wisconsin*

35 Normal is a transient state between crises.

In the past in turbulent situations, I wasted a lot of time and energy waiting and longing for things to “get back to normal.” Once I realized that normal doesn’t last, I became more adept at living through crisis without longing for normalcy — whatever that is. I now see that what I really need is to find periods of calm, even if I have to create them, in an ever-changing world.

— *Carole Martin, Kingsport, Tennessee*

36 To write is to survive.

At beginnings and endings of experiences, whether I’ve made mistakes or am filled with joy, or if I’m perplexed or challenged in a relationship, I write. Writing has accompanied me through the slow death by lung cancer of a good friend and helped me deal with one son’s car accident and another’s overdose with alcohol. For the past four or five years, my writing has been in the form of a dialogue with my Higher Self/Holy Spirit (I see them as one).

— *Lisbeth Hadden-Fritzberg, Olga, Washington*

37 The best way out is through.

— *Natalie Zaino, Farmingville, New York*

38 You eat a peck of dirt before you die.

I recall my French Canadian grandmother saying this from my earliest childhood. My interpretation is, “Don’t worry too much; live a natural and creative life; know that life’s pains, mistakes, dark sides, and wrong turns are natural and that you’re resilient enough to survive them!” I take a deep breath and try to embody this gutsy wisdom whenever I find myself uptight about how I’d like things to be, instead of embracing them as they are. It helps me relax, be more genuine, and see the perfection of what is.

— *Lyn Roberts-Herrick, Massachusetts*

39 Meite’akari, roto te reka i te puru.

That’s a contribution from the island of Rarotonga, Cook Islands, where I come from. It means, “As with a coconut, to get to the core you husk away the inessentials.” In other words, do not waste time. Be focused on what is important to you and have patience. This has helped me accept what others may see as disappointments, and remain positive and goal-oriented.

— *Professor Jon Tikivanotau M. Jonassen, Provo, Utah*

40 We don’t make the wood.

Many years ago, I was an apprentice in a cabinet-making shop. When people complained that the wood shrank or twisted,



or the grain or color didn’t quite match, Mike, the senior cabinetmaker, would say, “We do everything here but we don’t make the wood!” He was right, of course, and there isn’t much to say after that.

— *Derek Verso, Ireland*

41 Don’t move.

I was full of anxieties and money problems. When this happens, I look for a good conversation with bright people. I went to a bookstore to try to “hear” some good words. A book cover almost shouted at me: *The Tao of the Leaders*. On the first page it said, “Don’t move.” I closed the book. That was the kind of conversation I needed.

— *Jose, Mexico*

42 Life is like a puzzle that we are constantly building.

The problem comes when you start looking at all the other puzzles being built around you and decide that some of the pieces would look good in yours. You start picking up pieces from other people's puzzles and try to fit them into yours. You end up bending their pieces and ruining your picture.

— *Brett Osborn, Durban, South Africa*

43 A winner is a loser who never gave up.

I had to learn that because my fear of men (especially Afrikaans-speaking men!) ruled my life. I could not achieve because I always felt I had to wait for a man to take the lead. Good came out of it! I am now a winner with a great future and no fear of anything — because I also learned that the baggage of the past should not control the parcels of the future!

— *Marianne, South Africa*

44 You do it and it's done, and it isn't still to do.

When I was very young, my brother, 10 years my senior, used to say that. It was implanted in my consciousness as an antidote to procrastination, and has served me in good stead into adulthood, as a journalist and magazine editor.

— *Michael Smith, London*

45 Leave the woodpile a little higher.

When I get involved with a project, committee, organization, or position, my goal is to leave the group with more than they had before I joined. When I hold an organizational office, I pass on my records ASAP, in good order, with a tip sheet on how to do the job. This practice helps me know the position as I'm in it and leave the records in better shape than I got them. It has been super-rewarding to see some of my successors use my tip sheet and build it a little higher.

— *Christine Kniep, Wisconsin*

46 Life is a dressmaker specializing in alterations.

I have framed this quote by Faith Baldwin in my sewing room, where I used to spend more time than I presently do making clothes for my family and myself. I don't have difficulty welcoming new items into my closet or getting



rid of things that no longer suit my style. Times change; styles change. It's not a problem. If only all change were that easy. Now when I come home from a successful shopping trip or clean out my closet, I think about welcoming, rather than dreading, other kinds of change

and accepting change as having essential spiritual value.

— *Diane Doro, Des Moines, Iowa*

47 Always tell the truth, but don't always be telling it.

My mother taught me this and I have tried to practice it. If you always tell the truth you don't have to remember what you said, because the truth is always the same. But if you know a truth about another person, you don't always need to tell it, especially if it is going to cast doubt on their character.

— *Barbara Poage, Springfield, Missouri*

48 Cover your tail.

I've learned from my work with groups to teach people how to spot a person with leadership potential early on. Arrange to have them work alongside you. When and if the time comes for you to move on, you have "covered your tail," and the group will be grateful to you for providing for them long-term.

— *Carla Mae Streeter, St. Louis, Missouri*

49 Use the best materials you can afford.

I learned that from my grandfather, and it has provided a model for my life's work. Even in my late seventies, I am still building things, and more to the point of your book, I am still building my life out of "the best materials I can afford."

— *Clarence Cherry, St. Louis, Missouri*

50 Ask the only question that matters.

I often use this practice in my daily life as a parish nurse/health minister. When I am frustrated, angry, inattentive or preoccupied with the daily injustices I witness about me, I reflect on what a wise old priest taught me: "At the end of our life when that day of accountability comes and you are standing at those 'pearly gates,' God will ask you but one question: "Did you care?" As I try to live a compassionate life in this world where competition, control and power seem to be the

order of the day, there is a little voice in my head that keeps me grounded in why we are here and asks the only question that matters — Did you care?

— *Stephanie L. Ulrich, Omaha, Nebraska*

51 Learn how to play an instrument, and you'll never be alone.

My Dad told me that when I was eight years old. It didn't mean anything to me at the time, but now that I am 37, those words have stood the test of time. I am never without friends. Even during my darkest times, I only need to pick up my guitar, and all my worries are dealt with, with every note I play.

— *Damh the Bard, Order of the Ovates, Bards and Druids, UK*

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