



# THINKING ABOUT LIFE LESSONS

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## Introduction

In the book *Pearls from Sand: How Small Encounters Lead to Powerful Lessons* (see [PearlsFromSand.com](http://PearlsFromSand.com)), I describe thirty-seven life lessons—“pearls of wisdom”—I’ve accumulated over my life through a wide variety of ordinary conversations, everyday occurrences, and observations of the world around me. In each chapter I state the pearl of wisdom that grew out of some small experience or observation, describe the experience that led to that insight, present other related anecdotes, and describe how I’ve applied the lesson to enhance my happiness and satisfaction with life. I also suggest how you might be able to apply many of the lessons to your own life.

This brief guide presents some thoughts about life lessons: what they are, where they come from, how you can collect, assess, and apply them, and how you can share your often painfully-gained lessons with others. At the blog that accompanies this book, [PearlsFromSand.blogspot.com](http://PearlsFromSand.blogspot.com), I have presented many other pearls of wisdom I’ve acquired. I welcome your comments on these blog entries.

What constitutes a “life lesson”? In my view, a life lesson is a fragment of wisdom, an insight about how the world and the people in it work. Life lessons go deeper than mere knowledge, like “If you just dropped a can of soda on the floor, don’t open it right away.” That’s certainly good advice, but I wouldn’t call it a life lesson. The most effective lessons provide you with an “Aha!” understanding that can shape how you think about yourself, your relationships with others, your values, and your behaviors.

Even though we all learn our life lessons in random sequence through our individual experiences, I’ve found that many such lessons are broadly applicable to nearly everyone, regardless of their age or cultural background. Please share your own important lessons at [PearlsFromSand.com/submit.html](http://PearlsFromSand.com/submit.html). I will post selected submissions on my blog, so that others can learn from your experiences and insights.

## Where to Find Life Lessons

Life lessons can come from your friends, from role models such as parents, teachers, or other authority figures, and from everyday experiences. Sometimes you deduce your own life lessons, through observation, through trial and error, through successes and failures. You might glean an insightful lesson from a book or article you read, or from a presentation you attend.

Life lessons are all around us, but you have to be alert to them and receptive to the message. I have my life-lesson antenna up at all times. If I hear something during an ordinary conversation that really resonates and makes me think, there's probably a message in there. Sometimes I don't appreciate the significance of the lesson until later, after I've had time to reflect on the experience or conversation and its implications.

You aren't likely to pick up many useful pearls of wisdom unless you go beneath the surface of a conversation or experience and think deeply about how it can help you be a better person, interact more constructively with others, and feel more fulfilled or contented. Pearls of wisdom are there for the picking. If you simply collect the pearls as you encounter them, you will accumulate a rich set of life lessons that will help guide your behaviors, decisions, and feelings throughout your life.

Who did you learn most of your life lessons from? A parent, a teacher, a friend, a mentor, an author? How did they communicate these lessons to you? How receptive to their messages were you at the time? Sometimes the most significant lessons don't arise from where we might expect.

Of course, we learn a lot from our parents, especially at an early age. By adolescence, though, when we could probably benefit the most from a parent's experience and wisdom, many people aren't very receptive. I sure wasn't. Teenagers often think they already know everything they need to know. They think their parents can impart almost nothing that's relevant to today's youth (no matter what era "today" refers to). It's an understandable type of rebellion, but it's unfortunate if this typical adolescent attitude interferes with picking up valuable lessons from folks who have been around the block a few times.

Leaders and authority figures are valuable sources of information, although what they teach you can't always be neatly encapsulated in a "pearl of wisdom." I remember one college professor who was very influential in my life as a teacher, mentor, and friend. I respected and liked him a great deal, and we stayed in touch for years after I graduated. I learned a lot from this professor. However, thinking back, I can't remember any particularly powerful sentence he ever spoke to me or any specific life lesson that he imparted. I find this surprising because this professor clearly had a significant impact on me. Concisely stated pearls of wisdom aren't the only important types of knowledge we acquire, even if they are the things I recall most readily and rely on most frequently.

## Everyone Has Pearls of Wisdom Worth Sharing

Some people tell me they don't have any pearls of wisdom; they don't remember any lessons from eye-opening conversations or seminal experiences from their lives. I suspect they're not giving themselves enough credit. Certain people are perhaps more conscious of the kinds of small encounters that I describe in Pearls from Sand. I'm pretty good at collecting such experiences and remembering them, often with startling clarity, years later. Nonetheless, I believe that most people

do have a treasure trove of life lessons at their disposal. I also believe that many of these lessons are broadly applicable to others, even though each individual likely learned them in a unique way.

I recently discussed this issue with a highly intelligent and well-educated friend I'll call Cheryl. She claimed to have no pearls of wisdom worth sharing. But Cheryl had a life-changing experience about six years ago. When she was forty-one, Cheryl suffered a heart attack. Fortunately, it wasn't terribly destructive. Since then, she has become the poster child for "what to do after a scary cardiac event." Cheryl lost a lot of weight, she permanently changed her eating habits, and she still exercises vigorously six times a week.

Not everyone who undergoes such a frightening experience takes the message to heart (get it?) the way Cheryl did by altering her lifestyle dramatically and, I suspect, for the rest of her life. Maybe the pearl of wisdom here is simple and obvious, something like: "Take good care of your heart; it's the only one you have." But I find Cheryl's story compelling and inspirational. She showed that it is indeed possible to change your life significantly in response to a serious health scare. I'm proud of Cheryl for doing all the right things after her heart attack so early in life. She probably has the healthiest heart in the West now.

Even if you aren't aware of it, I'll bet that you, too, have acquired some meaningful life lessons over the years. I'll also bet that if you think carefully, you can remember who spoke a significant sentence to you once upon a time, or an experience that led to an insight that is still useful to you today. Please contribute your favorite pearls of wisdom at [PearlsFromSand.com/submit.html](http://PearlsFromSand.com/submit.html).

## Pearls of Wisdom and Your State of Mind

A few months ago, I was talking to my friend Kyle about *Pearls from Sand*. I described how, at various times in my past, I picked up on a particular sentence someone spoke to me that I found especially insightful and remembered it for the rest of my life. Kyle said that I must have had a question in my mind that the conversation resolved for me. That is, I was already looking for an answer to something that was bugging me, which is why I found that particular comment meaningful at that particular time.

I don't entirely agree with Kyle on this. True, that does happen occasionally. I can remember times when I was discussing some topic with a friend or teacher, and that person made a salient observation that struck home and clarified the matter for me. There was the time I was talking to a college professor and another student about a teaching issue I was struggling with, as I described in Chapter 35, "Knowledge Is Not Zero-Sum." One of the comments that came out of that conversation gave me just the understanding I needed. So that's a good example of what Kyle was talking about.

But I don't think that it's always necessary to be walking around with specific questions in mind, seeking the perfect pearl of wisdom for that moment's issue. Often, the pearls I've accumulated just dropped into my lap. I wasn't wrestling with an issue or being particularly introspective. I just heard or saw something that made me ponder and provided some valuable understanding.

The key is to be alert to possible learning opportunities wherever you find them. Keep your life-lesson antenna operating at all times and contemplate whatever it detects. That way you can collect

pearls that just happened to wash onshore by your feet without having to open a lot of oysters to look for them.

## Life Anti-Lessons

Some life lessons come to us because of a thought-provoking statement made by a friend, relative, or teacher. Others arise when we observe how our role models deal with particular situations. These can be inspiring and motivational. Occasionally, though, you can acquire a meaningful lesson by watching someone handle a situation poorly and vowing not to do the same thing yourself. Think of this as an anti-lesson.

Here's an illustration. Long ago I was involved with auto racing at a local racetrack (I didn't do very well, but it was fun). One of my teenage friends was much more successful. At the end of the season, he and another driver both had a claim on third place in the points competition, depending on how the points for a rain-shortened racing evening were counted. The racing association awarded trophies to the top three points leaders, but they had never encountered a situation like this before. What to do?

My friend would have been happy to share the third place award, and the association would simply have had to buy one more trophy. But my friend's father (who was also his car owner) demanded sole possession of third place based on a tie-breaking scheme, such as how many races each driver had won during the season. "We want just one trophy for third place, or we don't want any trophy at all," he said. The racing association opted to give only one trophy for third place; the other driver got it. My friend went home from the awards ceremony empty-handed, thanks to his father's stubbornness.

There was indeed a life lesson here. You could phrase it in various ways, but it boils down to the importance of being flexible, of negotiating and accepting compromise. The lesson was particularly poignant because it was my friend who paid the price for his father's inflexibility. As a result of this counter-example and other experiences, my friend's practice became to observe how his father behaved in various situations and, more often than not, do the opposite in his own life.

Do you have any examples of life anti-lessons from your own experience? Please share them at [PearlsFromSand.com/submit.html](http://PearlsFromSand.com/submit.html).

## On the Inside

Detecting that you have identified a new life lesson is just the first step. The lesson is of little use until you figure out what it means and what its implications are for your life. It takes a while to internalize life lessons so they become part of your automatic thinking and behaviors. It takes time for each lesson to become a habit, such that you can follow its guidance without having to consciously stop and think about it in each relevant situation.

Until you have internalized a life lesson, you might have to remind yourself to consciously scan your memory to see if you've acquired some appropriate guidance to apply in a particular situation. Once taken to heart, however, it should pop to mind almost automatically. For instance, I

internalized a lesson from Stephen Covey's fine book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. One of the habits is "Put First Things First." Now, whenever I'm faced with a daunting task list, I always ask myself which tasks are important versus not so important, and which ones are urgent versus not so urgent. This quick analysis helps me decide on a plan of action. I'm not even consciously aware that I'm prioritizing my workload. That's a real example of internalization, when you realize "this is just how I operate" as opposed to following a checklist or procedure to get something done. It takes some time for a good practice to become a steady habit.

## Sharing Your Life Lessons

How do you pass along your life lessons to others? If you are a parent, you have countless opportunities to impart both knowledge and wisdom to your children. You'll have the greatest impact during the first several years of your children's lives, but preteens can begin to absorb more significant life lessons—that's where the wisdom part comes in. As children become teenagers, though, they're likely to tune you out—just when they could understand and benefit the most from your experiences. At least, that's how I was when I was a teenager. Yet, I do have friends who have crafted relationships with their children (or stepchildren), such that respect for the elder's wisdom lasts through adolescence and into adulthood. Perhaps you can influence your nieces and nephews even more than your own children. To many young people, aunts and uncles seem cooler and wiser than their own parents.

Imparting life lessons to young people involves more than just lecturing. It involves coaching, mentoring, and steering as well. Anytime you're in a position of respected authority over others, you have a chance to communicate the lessons you've learned. If you're like me and you learned a lot of your most important life lessons by making mistakes, maybe you can make someone else's life easier by sharing what you've learned. You can play such a role as a scouting leader, church leader, sports coach, mentor, or employment supervisor, as well as through other kinds of relationships.

If you're reading this, then you already know that the written word is another way to communicate life lessons. Countless books, articles, and blogs communicate an author's insightful experiences. Blogs like the one at [PearlsFromSand.blogspot.com](http://PearlsFromSand.blogspot.com) provide a participative forum for readers to share their own experiences, which could either reinforce or counter the author's viewpoint. Some people keep journals or write memoirs to pass along their experiences to their descendants, but typically that's something that adults do later in life when they aren't quite so busy.

Look for "teachable moments." These are opportunities to have conversations with younger people that can help them absorb significant lessons at just those times when they will provide the greatest impact for long-term growth and happiness. One of my friends helped his young stepdaughter learn to make and sell soap. She learned some important lessons about money and responsibility along the way, and those messages have stuck with her to this day. Think about the valuable lessons that you've accumulated and how you can best pass them along to others.

## Learning from the Masters

What books have taught you the most significant or useful life lessons? I got a lot out of Stephen Covey's classic *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. As with most such compendiums, the

lessons are not particularly subtle or unobvious, but the author does a fine job of selecting powerful messages that are helpful to nearly any reader. Since I read the book, I've incorporated several of the habits into my daily life. For instance, I routinely practice the habit to "Put First Things First." When I'm facing a lengthy task list, I try to tackle the most important tasks first, not just the ones that seem urgent but might not be very important.

Just recently, I had an opportunity to practice Covey's habit "Seek First to Understand, Then to be Understood." The bill I received from my accountant for preparing my income tax returns was substantially higher than I expected. My first instinct was to call the accountant and tell him how outrageous this bill was. But then I recalled my commitment to following this habit. I sent the accountant an e-mail and asked if he could help me understand why the bill was so different from my expectation.

I've found that it is far more constructive—and collaborative—to start by asking this type of question. In this case, I knew that more information would allow me to make a more considered evaluation of the situation, and that I could squawk later if I still thought the bill was unacceptable. By taking this approach, I don't get agitated unless and until I need to, and the other party isn't immediately put on the defensive by my complaint, which might have a perfectly sensible explanation. In this case, we negotiated a payment that we both found acceptable.

I've learned a lot from other authors, as well. In fact, I learned a great deal while writing *Pearls from Sand*. As I reflected on the major lessons I've accumulated over my life, I kept thinking of new ones that hadn't come to mind for some time. You, too, might find it instructive to search your memory for the books that have had the greatest influence on how you think about yourself or on how you interact with others. Perhaps you can share those books with people around you who might also find them insightful.

## About *Pearls from Sand*

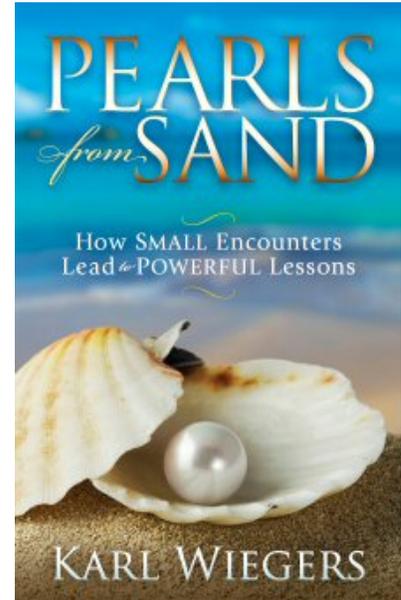
Throughout your life, you've had numerous everyday conversations and other experiences in which a small observation—perhaps a single sentence someone spoke to you—resonated so strongly that you still remember it years later. The “pearls of wisdom” that arose from such small encounters helped shape your values, how you think about yourself, and how you interact with others.

In *Pearls from Sand: How Small Encounters Lead to Powerful Lessons*, Karl Wieggers presents more than three dozen of the personal pearls of wisdom he's accumulated over his life. You'll find that many of these lessons will apply to your life, as well. Karl describes the experiences and conversations that led to each pearl, along with ways that you can apply them to enhance your own happiness and fulfillment. The 37 life lessons, revealed and illustrated through dozens of true anecdotes, are grouped into six categories: interpersonal pearls, personal pearls, motivational pearls, practical pearls, cautionary pearls, and professional pearls.

*Pearls from Sand* will:

- Give you many insightful and practical ideas about how to apply these lessons to your own life.
- Encourage you to think of your own pearls of wisdom, the experiences that led to them, and how they can guide your thoughts and actions.
- Motivate you to find opportunities to pass along your own life lessons to your children, life partner, friends, and colleagues.

Daily life is full of opportunities to learn and grow—if you're paying attention and receptive to the message. Read *Pearls from Sand* to learn how to detect, assess, absorb, and apply these powerful life lessons.



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