

Thank you for requesting to preview these chapters from "LESSONS FOR LIVING: SIMPLE SOLUTIONS FOR LIFE'S PROBLEMS."

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INTRODUCTION: AWAKENING MOMENTS

"A mind once stretched by a new idea can never go back to its original dimensions."
~ Oliver Wendell Holmes

Where in your life are you today? Are you comfortable, or are you comfortably miserable? What lesson is life teaching you today? Can you hear the message?

Most people do not hear the messages or see the lessons. Awakening moments pass them by. It may be that the lesson is so obvious that it is overlooked. The harried, rude clerk at the grocery store may be your teacher today, but you are so focused on what she/he did that you missed what you did. By contrast, the lesson may be so profound that it shakes you to your core, and you lose perspective. Being fired from a job may so totally disrupt your life that chances for growth are overlooked; a collapse into despair occurs.

Some people do glimpse the lesson but are so stuck in a position of wanting life to change--while they remain the same--that they do nothing. Life is trying to wake all of us to the fact that we are responsible for our own changing. To change we must act, and to act we must see the possibility of real choice and be willing to take responsibility.

Each day tries to teach us something. Each day offers awakening moments. An awakening moment is an instant of clarity in which new insight is

gained. It is a moment in which "reality" is clearly seen, options are presented to us, and choices can be made. To say that reality is clearly seen means we see what is before us just as it is. We see the present moment stripped of the hopes or fears we project into it. We see the psychological reality we are creating and realize that it could be different. We see "what is" and not just what we bring to it. It may be a pleasant surprise or a rude shock, but it is reality--a reality that wakes us up if we glimpse it.

For the awakening moment to be useful though, we must grasp it and perceive its meaning. Once understood, it brings a new awareness, and the experience of life is viewed differently. New opportunities open up, and changes in patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior occur. Such an awakening allows the possibility of growth to new levels of psychological and spiritual maturity.

Awakening moments can be ordinary--as ordinary as a rainy day. I have a photograph of an awakening moment. It was taken on a day that started sunny but soon turned to rain. During a bus ride from Salisbury, England, to the ancient stone formations at Stonehenge, a downpour occurred. I grumbled to myself and to my wife about how the rain would ruin this long-awaited trip. Later, walking around Stonehenge in the cold, wet mist, I was disappointed with the day and continued to grumble. Suddenly the rain stopped. For a few glorious moments the sun broke through the clouds, and a rainbow appeared. My photograph of a rainbow over Stonehenge captured this awakening moment.

That rainy day, and especially that moment, became the highlight of my two-week trip to England. It also opened me to a new attitude. Without the rain, I would not have found the rainbow. This simple truth is very profound when it becomes a lived experience. Grumbling about the immediate situation does not help. It only distracts from what is happening. We must be open to every moment--open to possibility. We never know what it will bring.

Opening to the moment can be difficult because in order to be open, we must be willing to change. In life, we become comfortably settled into routines which are not easily given up. Sometimes the comfortable routine is actually more of a comfortable misery, a misery that is familiar and whose depths we know. When life is comfortable, even comfortably miserable, it feels risky to change. It is easier to stay the same. Why jeopardize a state of comfort?

The problem is that if we stay comfortable long enough, we become stuck. Comfort that becomes a routine can turn into a rut. When a rut is deep enough, it becomes a grave, and we are covered over with the inertia of inaction. Life loses its vitality and meaning.

While it is difficult to change when we are comfortable, opening to change is less difficult when we are in distress. It is not that hard to change when we feel impelled to seek relief. Awakening moments often come out of broken moments, which open us to new possibilities.

While we do not intentionally seek broken moments, life hands them to us anyway. Often they come our way because we were too comfortable too long, and lived out the comfortable pattern until it no longer worked. Had we been more mindful, given up comfort on purpose, and taken a chance, life may not have fallen apart.

Learning to seek change, even in the presence of comfort, can lead to a more meaningful life. The paradox is that learning to challenge our comfort zones may also keep life from falling apart. Being motivated to continually grow and develop enables us to challenge ourselves to stay on the cutting edge of life. Being open to change, even in the midst of comfort, gives life vitality. Each day we must actively look for opportunities to grow. For a meaningful life, we must engage in the

daily, intentional challenging of comfort. We must constantly push our limits to achieve our "personal best," much the way champion athletes in the pursuit of excellence seek to set new records.

THE CHALLENGE TO CHANGE

"Do you want life to go better? Do you want to change today? Are you willing to work hard to improve your life?" For nearly thirty years, I have worked as a psychologist, and these are questions I ask the people I counsel at the beginning of every session. They are just ordinary people with problems. Some are depressed; others are anxious or angry; some have addiction problems; some are struggling with a chronic illness. Family problems, marital conflict, and job stress may be involved. What I want to know from them is simply this: "Do you want to get better and are you willing to work at it?"

Most often the answer is "Yes" and "No." "Yes" they want to get better, but "No" they really don't want to work at it. People often are looking for magic. They want some magic words, a magic pill, or even a magic wand. Those looking for magic words go from one counselor to another or from one self-help book to another and are always dissatisfied. Those who are looking for a magic pill hope their doctor can find the right medicine. They have tried everything and nothing seems to work for them. If their condition has worsened, it is always because their medicine has stopped working, and now they need a new prescription. Moreover, no one seems to know where to find the magic wand, so instead of looking for the wand there is sometimes a frantic search for the "magical person" (spouse, lover, guru) who can make life wonderful.

Magic "is" hard to find, but the absence of magic is not the primary problem. The fundamental difficulty in changing our lives is one of having to directly face issues of responsibility, choice, and action. To improve our lives, we must assess the situation, determine what we control, make a

choice, and take action. We must create our own magic. If we want to change, we must take a chance. We must let go of where we are, so we can get to where we are going. This "letting go" is a scary prospect because we know and are familiar with the relative safety of where we are even if it is unpleasant at the moment.

Making a change is like leaping from the safety of one trapeze to another. There is a risky time during which you are in mid-air. Why would you attempt such a leap? What if you didn't make it? Perhaps you could just hold on, refuse to leap, and stay where it momentarily feels safe. Maybe you must leap because you cannot tolerate your present situation any longer. You leap out of a sense of desperation. You could be slowly losing your grip; so, you leap before you fall. Furthermore, you may be roughly shaken from the trapeze when a crisis arises, and things cannot stay the same.

Whether you choose to change or have change thrust upon you, it helps to have a plan. It helps to have some sense of how life works and what can be done to regain balance and momentum.

USE YOUR COMMON SENSE

In a psychiatric hospital where I once worked, patients stayed an average of four days. They brought intense problems with them, but only received only four days of treatment. Before the days of managed health care, they may have stayed four weeks. While this may have been too long, four days is often too short. What can be done in four days?

People can be challenged to use their common sense. Common sense is just information that makes sense to us once we hear it. Common sense presents itself whenever we learn something and then think, "I knew that." True--we did know it. But we were not using the information. We had forgotten what we knew and needed a reminder. In the hospital setting, people needed reminders to explore their

common sense, evaluate their situation, and then test out what they "knew" through action.

Common sense "is" obvious and self-evident, but only "after" we have seen it. Before that, we are often oblivious to its presence. Later, we wonder, "How could I have missed it?" Frequently, we miss the common sense solution because we do not want to see it. If we acknowledge common sense, then we face the frightening possibility of having to change. We are confronted with our responsibility for our life situation and must decide whether or not to act on what we now know. If we choose not to see the common sense solution, we may not have to change. We avoid responsibility, but we stay stuck.

LESSONS FOR LIVING

This book is a series of "lessons for living." It consists of simple, practical essays on how you can make your life go better. Brief, to-the-point chapters provide insight into life's problems and suggest courses of action. Some lessons are a variation on a basic theme and present the same information from different viewpoints to aid better understanding. Each chapter can be read independently and used as a guide for daily change. Or, when read as a whole, the series of lessons provide a model for living a more joyful and meaningful life.

These lessons also serve as common sense reminders. They will help you remember what you know and challenge you to use it. Try out each lesson and see if it works for you. Your daily life is a laboratory for such experimentation and learning. Use each day as an experiment. Try something new and see what works. You will only know what works for you by testing it out for yourself.

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LESSON 1 THE RULES FOR LIVING

"Nothing is good or bad, but thinking makes it so." ~ Shakespeare

Examine the following statement. Is it true or false? "You are responsible for all of your experiences of life." Most people quickly say it is false, arguing that they don't cause everything that happens to them. This is certainly true. All kinds of things happen to you that you don't cause. However, the statement is absolutely true. You are responsible for all of your experiences of life.

Now, it is a bit of a trick. Notice that the statement says "of" life and not "in" life. You are not responsible for everything that happens to you, although you may often contribute to it. Many things will happen, both good and bad, over which you have no control--floods, tornadoes, and the fluctuations of the stock market. These events are your experiences "in" life. Your reactions to them are your experiences "of" life. You always control your experiences of life. This is exciting news. It means that you can take charge of your life.

Life has rules sometimes known as the "facts of life." These are not the "birds and bees" facts but the real facts about how life works. If you know the facts and the rules and follow them, life goes better. Here are the "facts."

Life appears to have two steps. Step One is "Life Acts" which simply means that something happens in life. Let's call it X--the unknown. Event X happens, and it can be anything. You might get married, get divorced, be fired, receive a promotion, or win the lottery. Once "Life Acts"--once something happens to you--it is your turn.

Step Two is "You React." You react to whatever has happened with response Y. Y also represents the unknown because it is not certain what you will do. What is certain is that your response always includes some emotional reaction. You "feel"

something--perhaps happiness, sadness, anger, or frustration. Your response also includes a behavioral reaction. You "do" something. You respond in some way, such as laughing, crying, or jumping for joy.

Viewed from a distance it appears that event X causes your reaction Y. If your boss criticizes your report, you might get angry, tear it up, and throw it into the wastebasket. Later, you tell someone, "My boss made me mad." Thus, it appears that life has two steps: "Life Acts" and "You React." External events cause your responses.

In reality, however, life has three steps. Step One is "Life Acts." Your boss criticizes your report. Step Two is "You Think." You think about what happened, about what your boss said. You start thinking, "He is always picking on me. It's horrible. I can't stand it." And, Step Three--"You React." Your emotional response is anger, and your action is to tear up the report and throw it away.

You have created your own negative reaction with what you have been telling yourself. You do have other choices. You could think, "Great, now I can correct the report before the staff meeting." Your reaction will be different as you feel a sense of relief and get busy with the corrections.

In between life's action and your reaction, something has to be done in order for you to have any reaction at all. After becoming aware of what has happened, you must "think" about it. In thinking, you evaluate the event and create your response.

Once you become aware that something has happened, the Voice of Conscience speaks up and tells you what it means. The Voice of Conscience is that "little voice" that talks to you. You probably recognize it as the one that speaks up when you look in the mirror or get on the bathroom scale. It can say how wonderful you look or how out of shape you are. The Voice can be positive or negative.

This Voice of Conscience is simply you talking to "you." It is you telling yourself about life. Your Voice of Conscience can talk you into a lot of trouble, or it can talk you into a positive outlook that changes your life experience.

Learn to listen to the Voice of Conscience, and catch it when it is talking nonsense. Catch it when it is being too critical and when it is too extreme. Catch yourself when you are making things worse than they are. Change the nature of your inner dialogue and life will go better. Control your reactions to life by monitoring your thinking. Learn to think realistically--without exaggeration--about life.

Life will give you enough trouble. Don't make things worse than they are. When driving to work, if someone suddenly pulls into your lane making you miss a turn, don't focus on what a jerk the other driver is. Don't tell yourself how it always happens to you. Don't rave and rant about the injustice of it all. Accept the reality of the inconvenience and keep driving. You will get to your destination, perhaps a few minutes late, but you will be in a better frame of mind and in a better mood.

Remember: "Life Acts," and "You React," but in between "You Think." Choose your reaction by choosing "what" you think. Pay attention to your inner dialogue. How you talk to yourself is important. Be sure you are making sense. Take responsibility for your thinking. Always choose a realistic but positive point of view and make life go better.

- * Recall a recent event that upset you.
- * How did you react?
- * What were you telling yourself about the event?
- * Was there another more positive point of view?
- * Would it have changed your reaction?

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LESSON 2 COMFORTABLE MISERY-NOT READY TO CHANGE

"Misery no longer loves company. Nowadays it insists on it." ~ Russell Baker

Are you in a bad situation that you wish would just go away? Maybe it is the dull routine into which your life has fallen or the dead-end job that you have. Perhaps it is your small, cramped apartment. You are unhappy and frustrated and complain about how terrible it is, but you don't take action. You won't change. You feel stuck, and you are. You are caught in comfortable misery.

Comfortable misery is a situation that you don't like, but one to which you have grown accustomed. Think of a bad marriage that has gone on so long that both spouses have resigned themselves to it. Neither likes it, and both complain about it, but no one leaves. It is a habit and brings a sense of safety. Leaving might not only bring loneliness but also require demanding and risky changes. Perhaps it is better to just stay the same. Why take a chance?

Comfortable misery means you "are" miserable, but you are used to it. You know the limits and bounds of this misery, and also that you can tolerate a situation "this" bad because you do it every day. The problem is that trying to get out of comfortable misery is frightening. You could make a change, but then what? You're tempted by the hope that things could get better, but paralyzed by the fear that they could get worse. You wonder, "If it got worse, could I stand it?" You think, "If I change, I might create something even more miserable. I could be jumping from the frying pan into the fire. Maybe it's better to stay the way I am. At least I know I can tolerate it."

This type of thinking holds you back and keeps you stuck. While you are miserable, you are not miserable enough to change. How miserable do you have to get?

You can wait until your situation becomes a crisis, and you are impelled to act, but this isn't the best way to change. It is better to take responsibility and plan your action. Look around. What are your choices? What can you do? Be realistic about your resources and possible outcomes. Anticipate what might go wrong and be prepared for it. Accept the fact that you might be somewhat more uncomfortable as you go through the change process, but be optimistic and hold onto the expectation that things will improve.

Which is better--quick and intense or slow and steady? Think of a Band-Aid that you need to remove. Do you pull it off quickly to get it over with, or do you remove it slowly so as not to hurt yourself? Slow and steady can actually be more painful. Quick will also hurt, but it is soon over.

Quick is when you directly confront the misery of your alcohol abuse by choosing the difficult path of going into treatment rather than waiting to hit bottom. It is when you choose the discipline of joining the health club rather than continuing to complain about the difficulty of losing weight; it is when you break the misery of a bad relationship by packing your bags and leaving.

Comfortable misery gradually increases in intensity. Action is the best remedy for comfortable misery. It may be temporarily unpleasant, even difficult, as you change, but life can get much better when you are no longer stuck. You can jump out of the frying pan and over the fire. You can leap in to a new opportunity--a new possibility.

Remember: you have the power of choice. Take a chance. You only have your misery to lose.

- * Recall a past state of comfortable misery.
- * How long did you stay in it?
- * What did you do to get out of it?

- * Are there current areas of your life in which you are comfortably miserable?
- * What can you do today to give up comfortable misery?

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LESSON 3 BEING REALISTICALLY UNHAPPY: TOO MISERABLE TO CHANGE

"Life is full of misery, loneliness, and suffering--and it's all over much too soon."

~ Woody Allen

Most people's lives would improve if they could just learn to be realistically unhappy. To be realistically unhappy means to react to the negative events of life, such a divorce, losing a job, or failing at an important task, with an appropriate amount of distress. It is normal to be upset by these events--to a point. Being realistically unhappy helps you to accept the unfortunate events in life, and gives you the motivation to move past them.

Not everyone accepts realistic unhappiness. They avoid it in one of two ways: denial or exaggeration. Those who deny their unhappiness pretend they don't have a problem (when they do) by saying things like, "I can stop drinking whenever I want." Or, "This job stress never bothers me." Denial is like sweeping the problem under the carpet. It only gets bigger when out of sight. It grows in the dark until it can no longer be ignored and becomes a crisis. It is better to directly face the issue and be realistic even if it makes you unhappy.

Some people avoid reality by exaggerating and making everything worse than it is. Whenever anything mildly unpleasant happens, they start thinking about how bad it is going to become and about all of the things that may go wrong. They reach out into the future of imagined bad possibilities and bring them back into the present moment. They begin living as if the worst case scenario is their new reality and become much

unhappier than the actual event warrants. These people are "unrealistically unhappy" and create more trouble than they need.

For example, the loss of a job is a real problem. Most people would be distressed. Let's say that most people would be about 50 percent miserable, and let's call this normal.

Now, suppose you get a layoff notice and lose a job. You respond by becoming 50 percent miserable, but on the way home you start thinking. You tell yourself, "This is terrible. I bet that I will never get another good paying job. My spouse will be upset. My kids will be mad. My car will be repossessed. I will lose my home and wind up living on the street. This is terrible." By the time you arrive home, your misery may have doubled to 100 percent. Where did all this extra misery come from? You have created it from an imagined future of bad things that have not happened. You have made yourself unrealistically unhappy.

If, in a few days, none of these imagined bad things happen, and you get a lead on a job, you may rethink the situation. You may shrink your misery back down to 50 percent. You return to normal. Your life will have improved, but you still have a problem. You don't have a job. However, you are now "realistically unhappy" and can use this normal degree of unhappiness to motivate yourself into action.

Remember, when life gives you a problem, don't create more misery than you need. Learn to be realistically unhappy, and life will go better.

- * Are you currently unhappy?
- * What happened to cause your unhappiness?
- * Have you added to it?
- * Is your unhappiness realistic or not?
- * Can you rethink your situation and improve your life?

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Thanks for reading these lessons. I hope that you enjoyed them and found the information helpful.

You can order the book online from Amazon.com at <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0971216509/awakenilessonsfo>

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