



## 40 Lessons From My First 40 Years

Looking at the glass half full, the world did not come to an end with the Mayan calendar on December 21, 2012. Looking at the glass half empty, no apocalypse meant that my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday arrived as scheduled on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. Since I wasn't otherwise preoccupied with the four horsemen, I had a few extra hours to reflect on the past four decades. Below are 40 things I've learned over my first 40 years. They are in no particular order and aren't necessarily the most important things I've learned, just some that came to mind. I gave credit if I could remember where I learned something, but I'm sure there were some that I forgot.

- 1) Curate your life. Your life will largely be defined what you let in and what you keep out. Choose everything—friends, hobbies, work, philanthropy, clothes, vacations, meals, gadgets, books, etc.—with a discerning eye. Show me someone with a remarkable life and I'll show you someone who is a tough curator.
- 2) The most practical career advice I've heard came from Scott Adams, creator of the Dilbert cartoon. He sees two paths to an exceptional career: 1) Be the very best at one specific thing (also known as the Tiger Woods approach) or 2) Be very good (top 25%) at two or more things. By combining these "pretty goods" you eventually create a package that is very rare and likely valuable to a potential employer. The first path is very unlikely for most of us, but the second path is fairly easy and nearly as effective.
- 3) You are the average of the five people you spend the most time with (hat tip to Jim Rohn). Choose wisely.
- 4) One of the most important questions you can answer is: "What do I really want out of life?" Once you know the answer, take it very seriously.
- 5) "What" is an important question, but don't forget about "Why." Have a strong "Why." If you don't have a good answer for "why" you won't have much success with "what" or "how."
- 6) Worrying is a waste of time. Almost everything you worry about (95% +) will never happen. When something worth worrying about does happen, ask

- yourself “Will this matter in five years?” If the answer is no, then you can probably stop worrying.
- 7) Read. As Twain said, “A man who doesn’t read good books has no advantage over the man who can’t read good books.” The information that you feed yourself is just as important (and has pretty much the same effect) as the food that you feed yourself. Fill yourself with new, interesting, and challenging information and you can expect a healthy mind. Fill yourself with the informational equivalent of Twinkies all day and you can expect a mind that is flabby and lethargic.
  - 8) Climb the mountain so you can see the world, not so the world can see you (hat tip to David McCullough Jr.). Don’t go through life treating everything as a potential status update on Facebook.
  - 9) Always be learning something new. A language. An instrument. A skill. A hobby. Challenge yourself. Have fun. Stretch your mind. Be a lifelong learner.
  - 10) Don’t be afraid to screw up. As Will Rogers said, “Good judgment comes from experience and experience comes from bad judgment.”
  - 11) Dream big. When you dream big, something happens. It changes how you think and how you act. It changes the types of questions you ask. It inspires and changes those around you. Dreaming big has led to things like cures, computers and space travel. Don’t limit yourself to those things that seem “reasonable” or “probable.” Take a risk and dream big.
  - 12) The best parenting advice I’ve heard (hat tip to Stan Parker): Parenting is all about influence and influence is all about relationship. If you want to influence your kids, then you need to be consistently building into your relationship with them.
  - 13) The number one key to success is consistency. Just like money compounds over time, so does effort.
  - 14) Given the choice between spending on “more stuff” and “more experiences” you should almost always choose the experiences. A life spent in dogged pursuit of rich experiences will usually have a much better payoff than one seeking the latest gadget or gizmo.
  - 15) Don’t wait for a roadmap. With most things in life you need to make due with a compass.
  - 16) Don’t be afraid to take risks. “Sometimes all you need is 20 seconds of insane courage. Just literally 20 seconds of embarrassing bravery and I promise you

something great will come of it.” Yes, that’s a quote from the movie *We Bought a Zoo*.

- 17) When it comes to new obligations, say “yes” slowly and say “no” quickly. When it comes to new adventures, say “yes” quickly and “no” slowly.
- 18) We are often under the mistaken impression that we can add sin to our life, when in reality we can only trade for it (hat tip to Ken Wytsma). Cheating on your taxes or having an affair are not things that you add to your life. Choosing them will eventually force you to trade something else, like your spouse, kids, character or reputation.
- 19) If something is on your calendar, it gets done. Don’t just schedule the stuff you have to do. Schedule the fun stuff too and you’ll be much more likely to do it.
- 20) Respond well. If tragedy strikes, keep your head. If difficult times come or things don’t work out as planned, stay strong. If some jackass builds a bunker and says the world is ending on Tuesday, wish him well and invite him over for dinner on Wednesday.
- 21) Done is better than perfect.
- 22) Be a system thinker. Your life is a complex system with lots of different parts. Just like your car couldn’t function without a transmission, your life can’t function if there’s a major problem with something like your finances, relationships or health. Each of those parts affects the whole. Handle each area well and the system functions as it should. Handle them poorly and you can expect problems.
- 23) When things don’t go as expected, don’t be afraid to make changes. As Derek Sivers said, “Success comes from persistently improving and inventing, not from persistently doing what’s not working.”
- 24) Ever wondered whether or not to take advantage of an opportunity or adventure? Put it to the 50-Year test. Ask yourself, “Will I remember this in 50 years?” If the answer is yes, you should probably do it.
- 25) Work on high priority tasks. Don’t get bogged down with maintenance (e.g. paying bills, worthless meetings, pushing paper). Focus on milestones (e.g. family, relationships, creative projects, education, adventure). When reflecting on your life, the milestones will be the things that stand out. They will be the things that you are most proud of. The maintenance will just fade into the background.

- 26) Most of what we do is unimportant and doesn't need to be done. Eighty percent of our results will usually come from 20 percent of our effort (hat tip to Pareto and Tim Ferriss). Simplify as much as possible so you can focus on things that actually produce results.
- 27) Delayed gratification is overrated (hat tip to Chris Guillebeau). It's great if it's allowing you to work toward something, but bad if it's an excuse that's keeping you from something. Rather than starting now, we often come up with an excuse and say "Someday." Unfortunately, the longer you wait, the less you believe yourself when you say "Someday." Your dreams begin to atrophy. Your opportunities begin to vanish. You aim lower. You talk yourself out of things. Before you know it, it's too late.
- 28) Don't save the best for last. If you retire at 65 and stay healthy and active until 75 (a stretch for many), then you've got 10 years to do everything you've been putting off for the last 40. Ten years is not enough.
- 29) For the most part, happiness is a choice.
- 30) Get out of the lecture and into the lab. It's easy to talk, speculate and dream. It's passive. It's like you're an attendee at a lecture. Doing is difficult. Doing is getting out of the lecture and into the lab. It's getting your hands dirty by experimenting and taking action. "Do not be too timid and squeamish about your actions. All life is an experiment. The more experiments you make the better. What if they are a little course, and you may get your coat soiled or torn? What if you do fail, and get fairly rolled in the dirt once or twice? Up again, you shall never be so afraid of a tumble." (Ralph Waldo Emerson).
- 31) Focus on things you can control. When you do that, your productivity is high and your stress is low. If you focus on things you can't control your productivity is low and your stress is high. "The more concerned we become over the things we can't control, the less we will do with the things we can control." (John Wooden)
- 32) When making major decisions in life, think about the path that those decisions put you on. That path will likely lead you to some great new opportunities, but it will also lead you away from other opportunities, places, people and experiences. In that way, major decisions are directional and difficult to change. Don't make them flippantly.
- 33) While we're on the topic of decisions, most usually present you with an easy way and a hard way; a wide path and a narrow path. Paradoxically, narrow, difficult decisions that require discipline and sacrifice usually pay off by leading you into a place where the road is wide and our options are plentiful. On the other hand, taking the wide, easy path ends up funneling you down a

narrower and narrower chute until all good options are gone and all that is left are painful consequences.

- 34) Live with a sense of urgency. Someday you're going to die.
- 35) "Good" is succeeding at something. "Great" is being able to repeat that over and over.
- 36) Explore. It's a big world and you can't see it from behind a desk.
- 37) Solve problems early, when the solutions are usually less painful. To summarize Frank Lloyd Wright, you can solve problems on the drafting board with an eraser, but you need a wrecking ball at the building site.
- 38) Always look for opportunities to help other people.
- 39) Be curious. It will lead you to some interesting people, places and experiences.
- 40) You will be who you are becoming (hat tip to Gavin Johnson). You're never going to wake up one morning and be something that you haven't been becoming little by little, day by day, for years. Take a small step today that moves you in the right direction. Then do it again tomorrow and the next day and the next. Before you know it, you'll wake up one morning and you'll be the person you've been becoming all along.

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