



LIVE

8 BRIEF LESSONS
ON LIFE

T. Byram Karasu

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Introduction

Uncommon Common Sense

There was once an old country priest who had listened to his parishioners' confessions for many decades. This priest summed up what he had learned about human nature in two statements: "First of all, people are much more unhappy than one thinks. . . and second, there is no such thing as a grown-up person."¹ Poignantly, the priest never defined happiness nor did he explain what he meant by "grown-up," but the implication is that these two concepts are somehow related, if not the same: the path to happiness goes via being grown-up.

While unhappiness is easy to define, happiness is not definable a priori. We know that obsessively focusing on attaining happiness not only fails to bring it about but leads to people's missing their own presence. "Grown-up" is also not definable because it is not a fixed state; there are degrees of being grown-up. Growing-up is an improvisational process. In fact, we all "grow-up" or "not," while living. We make our way by going, but we should not be like Tristan, who travelled on the sea without oar or rudder, making his way by his playing harp. We must at least know our destination, i.e., adulthood, even though we may not know how to get there.

Families, schools, and society inundate us with information. We learn by osmosis which often leaves us at certain stages of an adult developmental arrest. The maturational knowledge of life is gained through experiences, especially what we do with these experiences, and struggling to come up with answers to some basic questions such as: who am I? Or even am I? how to best live or even why to live; am I well-grounded or even half-glued? What is the essence of love, marriage, work, religion; what are the principles of living and dying? These are not merely esoteric questions that just generate philosophical dysphoria. They are essential in finding remedies for the inner disquietude that we all experience and searching to establish harmony within ourselves. “Aldous Huxley referred to this as the ‘perennial philosophy,’ that is, the philosophy that remains the same at all times, in all places under all circumstances and for all people.”²

As human beings, we are unique and universal. In Broadway lingo, plays don’t change; only actors do. Actors (people) are unique and plays (lives) are universal. We all experience immediate or time- released traumas; we all participate in real and subjective impasses; we all suffer from anxiety tied to various forms of real or anticipatory disruptions; we all get depressed from actual and imaginary losses. All human activities, joys, sorrows, pain, pleasure, desires, fears, etc. mirror each other in their basic elements. In the Jungian sense we humans have irreducible psychological templates. We are not always sure of what it is that we are really looking for, but we know all the time that we haven’t found it yet. King Lear expressed this nameless, formless, barely discernible feeling. “There is a dissatisfaction in me, but I am not sure exactly what I am dissatisfied with. There is a longing in me, but I am not sure what I am longing for.”³ At other times, we feel we are almost there, but never there. Like the mythological Tantalus⁴, the bogged down ruler of Lydia, we are condemned to reach yearningly for that so-near fruit that recedes anew with each fresh attendant grasp.

Chapter One

Love

Live a “felt” life: be alive

The first lesson is love; in fact, it could have been the only lesson. Without love, the rest of the lessons are irrelevant. By love, I do not mean its most exalted version, i.e., passionate love, though not excluding it. Nor do I mean a targeted love such as loving someone or something. I am referring to a state of mind, a predisposition: a love that extends to all beings and all things.

Love in all its variations is a universal phenomenon, whether it is romantic love, affectionate love, or compassionate love. Love is the primary organizer of mind, a marrow of life that anchors all relationships. Romantic love—that raucous ascension, is the most popular and celebrated one in all languages, races, and ages. It is associated with beauty, youthfulness, and a powerful emotion: longing. This painful desire in lovers is compounded with an equally powerful and painful sentiment: “to be longed for”.¹ This longing to be longed for, of course, is beyond a lover’s ability to bring about. We can neither demand, nor buy it. Love is not a substance that we give or take; it is not a tradable commodity as any other matter. It is a felt referent, rather than conceptual referent. If forced, it is a kind of “felt cognition”. The only currency for passionate

romantic love is passionate love itself and that cannot be faked. In contrast to love itself, both sex and orgasm can be faked and/or can be artificially generated.

This passionate love is also intensely associated with sex —the pleasure bond. Passionate love is a poetic condensation of libidinal urges, wrapped in romantic camouflage. Its recipients project an unequalled hedonistic gloss. Passionate love has no rules or guide books. It is id-ridden and generates many excesses: triangulated jealousies, social transgressions, destructive and self-destructive behaviors. Its rudiments of illusions dissolve in immediacy. The Zen master says: “In the existence of your love, I became non-existent.” Though his love expands in the subjective boundaries. What seems to be all that unfair to innocent onlookers is totally fair to those participants of inner lawlessness.

People are at their best and at their worst when in love. William Godwin is at his best in his declaration of his love to Mary Wollstonecraft:

“When I make love, it shall be with the eloquent tones of my voice, with dying accents, with speaking glances (through the glass of my spectacles), with all the witching of that irresistible, universal passion...When I make love, it shall be in a storm, as Jupiter made love to Semele, & turned her at once to a cinder.”²

Passionate love is a sort of febrile agitation of mind, an aching lust spewing out from the biological furnace of the body and ransacking its habitation. It has all elements of delusion and impractical preoccupation with the lover, including her/his past to the exclusion of all other concerns; it tends to be ruthless and paranoid, it has an obsessive desire to possess the other person’s past. Such engrossment is not satisfied with the love of the lover; puzzlingly, it aims at appropriation of the lover, if not his/her annihilation. This even confounds the Bible:

“There are [many] things which are too amazing for me, four which I don’t understand: The way of an eagle in the air, the way of

a serpent on a rock, the way of a ship in the middle of the sea, and the way of a man with a maiden (Proverbs 30:18-20, World Mes-sianic Bible)".

Sex could be just for pleasure, independent of emotional rela-tions. But indulgence in sex with multiple partners is a pathological quest of the self in others, best portrayed by Don Juan. Such ex-cesses thin the soul, leading to sexual incontinence and to moral relativity. Sex is a physiological act, similar to other physiological functions of the body. In all animals, sex serves procreation. It is the same in humans, especially at the subcortical level of our brain. The evolution of the brain in humans, that is, its cortical develop-ment, however has added many other dimensions to sex: entertain-ment, anxiety reduction, power play, expression of aggression, emotional control of partner, a displacement of obsession, and fre-quently, an alternate or substitute addiction.

The pleasure aspect of sex is best experienced in passionate love wherein a mutual longing form of desire transforms lovers into an ecstatic state of abandon. But such passionate love ends by its loss, either when one of the lovers leaves or when love loses its intensity or emergence of intercognitive resonance. It is difficult to sustain passionate love partly because such an exaltation of another de-mands mystery of and a psychological unfamiliarity with the lover. Any shedding light on the lover will dissolve the mystery and will disintegrate this boundless ecstasy. What is desired cannot be all and always so desirable. What we really love is how we feel when in love. That is, we love our desire and not what is desired.

Sex researchers identify the half-life of passion at the four-year mark.³ In passionate love, lovers with uncanny erotic intelligence gaze at each other; for it to survive they need to look together in the same direction. They need to cultivate the same unforced, natural emotional intimacy to save the relationship from the decline of sexual attraction and passion. It will take about two years for such an emotional intimacy and affectionate love to develop between

lovers, provided that the couple remains physically close and sexually reciprocal.⁴

While passionate love is also a power and control struggle (wherein who loves less is the more powerful), the opposite is true in affectionate love, wherein the stronger partner subordinates. Affectionate love translates poetry into prose. Affectionate love is primarily asexual; the deeper it gets, the more it desexualizes a relationship. That doesn't mean that affectionate couples don't have sex, they have "good enough sex". But that sex is less a longing for ecstatic merging than for satisfying physical and psychological needs for self and/or for the partner—another expression of caring.

Affectionate love is soft descent; it is where we all begin and end up in our relationships, if we are so fortunate. This is the love that is felt most deeply and enduringly when it is lost. Affectionate love is our emotional home, our anxiety-reducing sanctuary; it is expressed *pianissimo*, noiselessly. It is with our mothers (or a maternal person) that we first experience that affectionate love. Obviously the fetus is a part of the mother, who continues to experience the child as her extension even after its birth. The love of the mother for her child isn't the love of someone else; it is like the love of the self. A child, if so loved, feels emotionally attuned to, without any need for reciprocation. A mother knows the inner life of the child intuitively, and attends to its needs while often muting her own. A person's well-glued, coherent "sense of self" develops within such a context. In all our lives we carry a mix of highly pixelated memories of this early childhood feeling, and try to bring them into focus in our contemporary relationships.

Our self continues to be formed and cultivated in relational contexts, no matter how indifferent we may seem to be. Even the primitive disinterestedness of cats plays out within complex relationships. Our original context—parental mirroring and shaping—eventually gives way to a peer relationship: lovers, spouses, and

especially friends. While all other relations are time-limited, real friendship with time gets only deeper and more meaningful. The master of neoclassical English poetry Alexander Pope's had these final words: "Nothing is meritorious but virtue and friendship; and indeed friendship itself is only a part of virtue."⁵

A good friend, a really good friend, is our first affectionate relationship outside the family. Such a friend is an alternate self. We all have a number of associates, colleagues, and acquaintances, but a few real friends. Primo Levi wrote:

...remember the time
 Before the wax hardened,
 When everyone was like a seal.
 Each of us bears the imprint
 Of a friend met along the way;
 In each the trace of each.⁶

A friend is someone with whom we can be totally transparent; we may be criticized, even laughed at, but never diminished or rejected. We are accepted as we are, even though certain changes may be wished for. Actually the only way to bring about desired changes is to accept that person as is.

Acquaintances with various degrees of intimacy are the most common form of a relationship. Such relationships are maintained by mutual interests such as through businesses, jobs, or by common interests in social life. These relationships tend to have a secondary agenda. We should not expect total loyalty or permanency from such agenda-based relationships. There is a French peasant saying: "Cow dies, partnership ends." Expecting infallibility from such relations is less likely to create disappointments. Genuine loyalty is like genuine love; it is not transactional.

In contrast to passionate love, affectionate love is not that selective. Its needs being met are as important as who meets them. Affectionate love is not exclusive: if we love one person, we can love many. Except if we choose one as our "soulmate". Emily

Chapter Two

Work

Synchronize yourself with your work: be successful

Our work is one of the defining characteristics of who we are and how we relate to the world. Work is one of our prisms. For Freud,¹ at least as Erikson relates, happiness is reached simply by “Arbeiten und Lieben” (“to work and to love”). The Sufis say work is faith—dip your bread in your sweat. Work is liber mundi, a “book of the world,” say Catholic monks—work is life literacy. “Laborare est orare (Work is worship).”² But they all imply reasonably successful work. Occasional failures are fine, if not desirable, but they do not consider chronic failures as the source of happiness.

Success at work, first of all, depends on whether you love what you are doing. Rabinath Tagore says “I grew tired of the road when it took me here and there./ I married the road in love when it took me Everywhere.”³ Furthermore, the work must be suitable for your skills and knowledge—a kind of dwelling in your element. All work demands certain basic skills; there is really no such thing as “unskilled labor”. Computer literacy for example is expected in most jobs, even from a beginner. Of course every expert was once a novice, and the expertise on a specific skill may require on-the-job learning.

There is also the question of temperament. Unfortunately people sometimes choose their careers by their abstract qualities, such as prestige, power, and money, and often independent of their suitability for those jobs. Whether your brain is lateralized to right or left and whether your corpus callosum is firing well in both directions is important to know. Do you have a digital mind that employs discrete bits, or an analogue one that operates on continuous linearity?

We should cultivate aspirations, but like in music we must know the rules. Sound and structure require adherence to an exactness of $1/3$ of a second (e.g. 16 notes with mm-60). Then we can hum. We all cannot be musicians or cannot be innately suitable for careers like nursing or sales. While certain empathy for suffering is desirable for nurses, facile encounters with strangers are necessary for salesmanship. That is not to say we cannot be trained for those dispositions, but that will be like learning a second language—it is hard and rarely fluent.

We need to succeed somehow, to be competent at something, to be a master at even some minor skills, in order to feel good about ourselves. Our self-esteem is highly dependent on feeling relevant, needed, valued and appreciated. That requires, of course, earning your merit without stagnation on your laurels. All other compensations will follow once merit is earned. Any mastery is a lifelong apprenticeship. Think of a black belt judo master, who wanted to be buried in a white belt, so that he can go on learning in eternity. Success, i.e., mastery, should not be confused with illusionary perfectness. Upon completing the universe, God pronounced it “very good” (Genesis 1:31, World Messianic Bible), not perfect.

The point of reference for success should not be our parents, or others, but our self. By standards of “shoulds” we all fail. The point of reference is being true to our self. If our innate disposition is not suitable for a certain type of work, we will not succeed in spite of any singular determination. Whatever we do is another manifesta-

tion of ourselves. We may approximate, but ultimately we must synchronize our work with ourselves in order to reach our goal. Such synchrony is best displayed where one cannot tell the singer from the song.

In the same vein, God didn't make the world in one day (the exact time lapse is seven!). We need to be steady, patient, and resilient. Drops also fill the pot. We must know our potentials and build on them. We must be able to focus simultaneously on the whole field with a wide-angle attention and also focus on a specific matter with zoom-lens attention and shift back and forth. You may strive for greatness, but do not underestimate the value of good, basic usefulness. Leonard Cohen, the famous poet and musician, was once asked by a producer who wasn't sure whether he could make money out of this reticent poet; "I know you are great; but are you any good?"

Equally important, we must come to terms with our limitations and/or learn how to get around them, if we are so determined. We are all tirelessly confronted with our limitations. Accept your shortcomings the Bible advises: "I will rather glory in my weaknesses"⁴ Caesar covered his defects with laurels. But do not let your limitations define you. Some of these limitations are given to you at birth but it is what you do with them that counts, whether those limitations of your intelligence, your health, your family background, or all other inequalities and privileges.

Intuitionistic cognition is a fallacy. Neither successes nor failures are overnight occurrences. They are usually the results of hard work and cultivation of certain behavioral patterns. In our imprinting stages of development (~ages 0-11), we have two nodal points that seed our characterological traits: Oedipal and Preoedipal stages with their own conflicts and deficits. The former creates various forms of neuroses presenting themselves with colorful rhetoric. The latter generates psychological handicaps presenting colorless pseudo-neurotic states. For example highly intelligent but neurotic

people can be self-destructive. It is that Medea phenomenon—that a person can act against her better judgment. Some other people complain about their miseries, illnesses, losses, pains, bad luck and misfortunes with such a negative exuberance that you may suspect that they are getting various pleasure out of their misfortunes. They keep repeating their depressive stories so often that eventually they do get depressed for real. There is an Irish proverb; a man becomes a song he sings. You need to recover from your imprinted negative noises and learn to sing positive, modest, and soberly cheerful songs. But do not join a cult of self.

Independent of professional skills and dispositions, there are some generic and cultivatable psychosocial skills that contribute to any success. For example, listen and listen attentively. There is an old proverb: One can seldom listen his way into trouble. Whatever the job, you must be fully immersed and absorbed to be in the present like “no-time” of children playing, or an artist’s concentration. Focus, filter, reflect, and be responsive to minimum cues. Conversational postulates demand that what you say has to be understandable even if you are a poet. What you say has to have clear relation to what the other person just said. Some talk too much and say nothing. There is another Zen saying: A man’s gravitas emanates from the density of the unspoken. Be assertive but not aggressive and never transgressive. Taoism emphasizes strength in yielding. Sometimes you need to yield to overcome. Never complain, accuse, or blame. There is a Zen saying: When a man points a finger at someone else, three fingers are pointing back at himself. Try it.

You can accomplish much just by being pleasant, optimistic, agreeable, and grateful. You succeed by functioning as if everything depended on you; by having mini goals, by generating an energy of positive priming and leaning forward wholeheartedly, without being a zealot—a psychological disorder of the inexperi-

our best efforts, personal and professional failures may still occur. You need to be prepared to contain your failures and losses. You need not to avoid painful feeling, especially in response to losses. Grief is a healing feeling. In fact, you'll feel better by feeling worse. Failures are potentially growth promoting events, if one does not fall into psychological inertia.

Things in life are rarely as good or as bad as they seem to be. If anything, they are like the dances of Echternach (a town in Luxembourg), where dancers advance 3 steps forward and 2 steps backward in their processions. Understanding the nature of any failure can help us accept and learn from it. Like our limitations we cannot let failure define us. You may have failed at some specific matter, but that does not make you a failure. Those who are loyal to their mistakes perversely enjoy *capitis diminutio*—debasement of head, with a negative exuberance that will make matters only worse. That person might feel to have reached to an impasse, i.e. that there is no way out; in fact there is always a way out or a way through.

We all move forward stumbling. We can privately feel and share with our intimates those humiliations and disappointments, and not be afraid of hitting the bottom hard with optimistic toughness; that is the fastest way to come back to the surface. Ultimate success is recovering from a failure, and taking life on, again.

NOTES

1. Sigmund Freud, quoted in Erik Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York: International Universities Press, 1968), 96.

2. Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present* (Boston: Standard Publishing Company, 1898), 198.

3. Rupert Spira, *The Nature of Consciousness Essays on the Unity of Mind and Matter* (Oxford: Sahaja Publications, 2017), xi.

4. 2 Corinthians 12:9, *World Messianic Bible*.

5. John Gardner, *Conversations with John Gardner* ed. Allan Chavkin (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1990), 168.

Chapter Three

Belong

Expand your outer communion: be grounded

Although there exists an a priori self, the sense of self is established by being acknowledged—a kind of relative Descartes, Hegel compromise. We all long to be known. In fact, existence is essentially co-existence. Although an adult should cultivate the capacity to be alone, he or she cannot live alone. This need for others is not just about physical survival, but also about a psychological one. Very few of us can survive by being alienated from our communities without succumbing to self-alienation. We should engage in social relations with others to generate fun, laughter and a sense of lightness. Even the Bible notes, “Iron sharpens iron; so a man sharpens his friend’s countenance” (Proverbs 27:17, World Messianic Bible).

We all need moorings in a communal matrix, outside of our families. Jobs, associations, clubs and other organizations provide variant matrixes for present-time engagements. At times mistakenly, we seek similar engagements in the mystic edifices, or organized atrophy of churches, synagogues, mosques, temples and miss the essence of the spiritual. Idries Shah tells a probably apocryphal story about a mystic shrine:

It was customary for pilgrims to make an offering of a few yen to the custodian, a monk, who sat there all day, mostly in contemplation.

A Western tourist, who nevertheless wished to have a proper respect for the properties, approached the holy place one day and, not knowing how much money to give, pulled out several thousand yen, which he offered to the monk. He was a little surprised when it was handed back to him with a smile and a shake of the head.

‘I must have offered too little’ he thought, and, doubling the money, he made his offering again.

The monk looked at the banknotes for a long moment. Then he shrugged and reached into a box and brought out an ancient scroll, which he presented to the visitor. And he walked away, down the road.

When translated, the mysterious document proved to be—the title—deeds to the shrine itself.¹

Our longing to belong is not only for the present, but also for the past and for the future. The orchestra score drives its value from the fact that it is anchored, (read) both vertically and horizontally at the same time. Such anchoring is only provided by a congregation, however real or illusionary. Rabbi Harold Kushner², says “One goes to a religious service, one recites the traditional prayers, not in order to find God (there are plenty of places where He can be found), but to find a congregation.”³ We cannot be cut off both from the supernatural order above—God— and from the natural order below—a congregation-- and expect to survive. If we excommunicate ourselves, we will need to sustain and develop our own self-grounding philosophy. If at first you don’t succeed, you’ll be running above average. Very few of those who have self-excommunicated can sustain a self-grounding philosophy and thrive.

All religions are versions of the same truth and untruth. Focusing on the untruth is missing the importance of religions; they are normative institutions. Religions are a ready-made philosophy for living and dying, even though they may be versions of the same

untruth. Organized religion, no matter which one, is enormously attractive, contagious, and universally calming, even if it is received with deferential incredulity, or simply for its practical consequences. Religion adds to life an enchantment says William James “which is not rationally or logically deducible from anything else.”⁴

“*Homo sapiens is also Homo religiosus.*”⁵ Like love, ambition, jealousy, and other innate impulses, our need for religion is a human instinct. “We may speak of a *religious drive*” writes H. Bänziger “just as we speak of sexual and aggressive drives”.⁶ Even our brains seem to be programmed for religion. Robert Wright says “[if] a religious meme doesn’t find a perch in individual brains, it can’t spread from brain to brain and so come to characterize a whole group in the first place.”⁷

The word *religion* derives from the same Latin root as the word *ligament*, which means “to bind.” Religion binds us to each other. Religion is an organizational structure, a communal glue that provides a comprehensive world view. It explains everything that the human mind wonders about, whether the origin of the universe, the purpose of humanity, or the nature of an afterlife. It dictates concrete values to maintain a communal order. Religion invented God to be used for its default position, both as a potentially rewarding and punishing instrument to assure obedience to its tenets, as well as for an ideal to be emulated.

Joseph de Maistre said “Whether religious ideas are denied or venerated is immaterial; true or false, they form the sole basis of all durable institutions.”⁸ Of all people, Karl Marx asserted, “Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its popular logic, its spiritual point of honor, its inspiration, its moral sanction, its solemn completion, its general consoling and justifying reason.”⁹ It frames the past, the present, and the future.

Religion, says, existential philosopher William Barrett “had been a structure that encompassed man’s life, providing him with a