

LIVE & LEARN

excerpt

Ask yourself:

“Why am I here?”

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RE-DEFINE

In this chapter, you'll see value (your own). As a retiree or someone newly retired, your life may be seeking new meaning, validation, and, of course, new purpose. Here, you'll find that you've (more than likely) been living your true purpose all along. Your purpose will be renewed once it's re-defined and re-recognized. Lessons you continue to learn will have heightened meaning because you'll know they're so directly related to living your true purpose. You'll value wisdom in a different way; you've worked hard to attain it.

You'll learn by example the power of lessons lasting a lifetime. They forever change you. You'll receive tools in this chapter to help you spot these lessons quickly. In maturity, time is of the essence, but unlike your work life, no deadline is imposed. It's all up to you and your discretion. Nearing the completion of this chapter, it should be clear to you that the "why?" questions you ask will provide the greatest benefit.

Life's full of givens. No, not Robin. Remember her? A given is a known or established fact or situation; something taken for

granted, a basic assumption. But who on Earth first decreed that life's purpose has anything to do with *doing*?!?! And why did we accept that as a given? Attaining, achieving, acquiring, accomplishing. And those are just the *A*'s. Don't get me started on the rest of the alphabet.

Awesome if you're "on the right path." Even more commendable if you got there without the use of GPS. If you think your journey's nearing completion just because you're now retired, it's time to re-think. In the United States, the average age of retirement is 66, up from sixty years of age in the 1990s, according to a Gallup poll. Americans also live an average of 78.7 years.¹ That's a lot of time remaining. Plenty of time left to re-define your life purpose and re-commit.

No matter:

- Where you're at
- What you're afraid of
- What you're hoping for
- What you're trying to achieve
- What you're struggling with

Life's (true) purpose = *learning lessons*.

A given? When referencing most dictionaries, no. Instead, peruse your lifetime report card. If not already there, give yourself an *A+*. The best grade going, and now that you've graduated to retiree, you've earned it. No matter how long you've been out of school, you're still learning. I'm certain of it. These lessons haven't come easy because they're not supposed to.

Learning the Difficult Lessons

In your career lives, you have learned about success and failure. Both milestones, both opportunities from which to learn—about yourself. Lessons are personal; they're about you, the way

you live your life, and how you relate to others. By now, you have learned the value of money; perhaps you were once wasteful and had to learn to save (a lesson to not take it for granted). The same could be said for life and death. Perhaps you had to learn the hard way to value what could easily be taken away. Maybe the love of your life came and went because you weren't emotionally available. These are challenging lessons you never asked to learn, but you got 'em anyway. They keep you going. The more lessons there are to learn, the longer you have to hang around (in life) to learn them. These lessons are why you're here. They were given to you because they're your life's purpose. Period. Full stop (if British).

As a mature adult, you wouldn't still be here if you hadn't chosen to learn from the lessons (aka challenges, obstacles, roadblocks) you've already encountered. Am I right? Quite a dull, predictable life if you hadn't. Everyone's lessons are different, unique to them, based on individual needs. Have you given thought to what yours may be? What do you feel you need to learn in this lifetime? Signing up for *Spanish 101* or *Crafting Made Easy* doesn't count. Although admirable, life and continuing education classes at your local community college are not the same. Think bigger picture.

Life's lessons have to do with you, your character in the here and now, the way you live (or don't) live your life, and the way you see and interact with others. Some examples:

- If you're impatient, you will perpetually be given lessons about the consequences of acting/re-acting impatiently. You'll be forced to slow down, whether you want to or not.
- If you're overly selfish, you'll discover that those around you will stop "giving." The imbalance will become too obvious to them. Your lesson is to realize this.
- If you're greedy, you will face an unhealthy emptiness,

always wanting more and becoming more and more empty. Your lesson is to be grateful for what you have, no matter how small.

- If you're overly critical, you're automatically pre-disposed to being sensitive or thin-skinned when facing criticism of yourself.

These lessons could last a lifetime or a short while. And, as I mentioned previously, lessons exist until the day we die, so if you feel as if you've conquered one, another will take its place. And there are usually a few others on our plates at the same time. It's too easy to just have a mere one or two. Life's challenging for a reason. So that we learn. We wouldn't grow wiser otherwise.

And sometimes, our lessons don't become fully evident for years. We don't want to have to admit we have them, we're delusional, or we're just too busy to even recognize them. In my case, it's a combination of being in denial, being humiliated, and being unaware of the truth of my own past. I recognized the easiest lessons first; then, I had to accept the reality of those most challenging.

I mention a sampling of my own lessons to learn now, early on, so you can begin the process of contemplating yours. Yours, of course, are the ones that matter most as you read ahead. In late 1991, my life changed forever. How I've lived my life in those years since (my own lessons learned) has established what I consider to be my expertise, my qualifications. Three-plus decades primarily devoted to learning my lessons, how I've benefited by having chosen to learn them, and now, passing along to you the infinite benefit(s) of lessons learned that you can apply to your own life. As I share a bit of my own history with you now, please indulge me. My lessons were and are my teacher, and by the time you finish this book, I hope you'll see yours the same way.

As I mentioned, in late December 1991, at age 34, I had an experience that transformed my life forever. A bizarre discovery of ritual abuse and murder, hidden from my memory, that had taken place in my childhood. Sounds like science fiction, but it's not. It was an unearthing of gigantic proportions, to say the least. *My* moment of truth. *The* moment in my life when I could finally say, "Now everything makes sense."

One of the byproducts of this experience was my awareness of self; this is when I began to clearly see the lessons I must learn. Patience, living truthfully at all costs, living for myself (not for others), self-love, and more than anything, compassion—compassion for others and compassion for myself. It took many years for me to admit that I was indeed a narcissist. Prior, I pointed fingers at other narcissists until I looked long and hard into the mirror. I am alive to inevitably learn that I am better than no one. My sh— *does* stink. Learning to not be a narcissist doesn't happen overnight, and there are surprising sub-lessons connected to this one.

Before going any further, what is written here is for *you*, for *your* life, and more! Some of the lessons I'll mention throughout this book are about me, my life, and my experience. They are merely examples. Only you can identify your own individual lessons, and sometimes you never will. Your purpose is not to identify; it's to learn. You may be learning lessons or not even know you've got a lesson in front of you. Be open. Be curious. And keep going. From one retiree to another, my wish is that the anecdotes in this book make you more mindful of your own lessons and help you assign meaning to each.

Much in life is defined for us. *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the noun "purpose" as *the reason for which something is done or created or for which something exists*. The definition of the verb "purpose," in formal use, is *to have as one's intention or*

objective. “*Life’s purpose*” is a compound noun and the *OED* doesn’t define those. Up to your own individual lexicon. Perhaps not a given after all. Life’s purpose is open to interpretation, just like the rest of life.

In this writing, I’ll make little to no reference to “destiny” or “karma,” although they could very well be linked to life’s lessons. Some would say that destiny cannot be altered. This is where it’s similar to lessons; we cannot order them up or schedule their arrival. You get them when you get them; there’s no mixing and matching, no ordering off the menu. Most of the time, lessons show up unexpectedly (until you know better). What we do control, without question, is our desire—our decision—to learn them. We choose to, or we don’t. When we realize that they are happening for a reason, they are the reason we are here, alive, it becomes infinitely easier to accept them, and once you get good at it, you no longer see them as obstacles or challenges. You see them as an organic ingredient in life. Kind of like some savory, bizarre-sounding herb you thought you’d never find tasty.

When I was a kid, I bought into the question every kid was asked, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” How horrid. Unrealistic that we could have replaced it with a much more intelligent question back then, “What do you want to learn from life?” Only in adulthood.

So, I’ll ask you right here in this moment, at whatever age you’re at now, “What do you want to learn from life?” Start thinking, and while you’re at it, continue to erase all you’d previously thought of as (your) life’s purpose. All you’d accomplished (or not), all you’d achieved (or not), any advanced position you’ve risen to (or not). Most importantly, all you’ve dreamt of happening that may or may not have materialized. How awesome to dream, accomplish, achieve, and advance. Takes a lot of time, energy, creative thought, and fortitude to make happen,

no doubt about it. Congratulations to you! Job well done.

Still, beating cancer, bringing peace to the world, becoming CEO of a *Fortune* Top Ten, or bedding your fantasy lover may be connected to your purpose in life, but as standalones, they are *not* your life's purpose. The reason it's important to hammer this thought into your brain now is you're transitioning from the working world to your "rest of life." Inspiration doesn't come easy, and this is when inspiration is needed most—in your 50s, 60s, 70s, and more and more. Time moves quickly and—without warning—can come to an end.

This makes me think back to the late 1990s when I held two friends very close to me. Katherine, a co-worker of mine at a publishing company in Monterey, California, and Sean. Katherine and I would walk and talk on the beach after work, and one day, she told me she'd met someone incredible, Sean, a man she was becoming close to. I was thrilled for her. And after I met Sean, I became ecstatic. How wonderful for Katherine. How wonderful for Sean. Their marriage took place close to Sean's fiftieth birthday, and I remember asking him, "So, how does it feel? About to turn 50?" I don't recall his answer verbatim, but the gist stuck with me forever. "Fifty is when people start to die."

Only a few years after saying that, Sean died in his early fifties. Sean's kindness and compassion were off the charts; he was forever giving to others. His goodness was obvious to behold. Was Katherine shortchanged? Was she blessed by having been with Sean at all? In my opinion, it was a union that was meant to be. Fleeting in duration, filled with lessons only the two can learn from.

Watch what you say because we're lasting longer than we used to. And there's more of us lately. America's older population has grown by 38 percent since 2010, compared to an increase of just 2 percent for those under 65.²

Do you ever recognize “meant-to-be’s”? Events that happen for a reason you presume was meant to be? Does it inevitably make the accident, the challenge, the lesson easier to accept? So different from life’s lessons we learned as kids, right?

- Don’t run downhill on a slippery sidewalk, or else...
- Don’t drink scalding hot cocoa, or else...
- Don’t walk barefoot where there’s broken glass, or else...

Correct answer: Yes. Very different. Lessons you were given as a child were for your safety and survival. As mature adults, we’ve been there. Done that. Any lessons we learn now are for the sake of gaining and building wisdom.

Mature adults *are* survivors! *All* mature adults. Right?!? Who hasn’t had struggles by this point? Struggled big time. *Everyone!* So, it's time to own that and move on.

Now that we’re all admitted ~~strugglers~~ overcomers, let’s aim to reduce one menace while we’re at it. OK? Go. Expectation(s). Expectations that are born from perceived “purpose-driven” accomplishments. Oh, those inflexible dreams we have/had. Goals that originated decades ago that we still hold onto. Why? Are you kidding me?

So many problems we have today stem from expectations, unrealistic or otherwise. Big problems. That toxic yet delusional feeling that lives inside the pit of our senior guts, telling us that we never lived up to our potential. The worst are those that are connected to attaining anything material or tangible. Senior self-worth measured by a raise in income that never came. Living with prolonged lament over “lost opportunities.” Waiting and waiting and waiting to attain something you were maybe never meant to own in the first place. All that wasted time.

Taking full responsibility for your destiny is a noble action, especially when life’s lessons are unavoidable. When we see our purpose as being connected to lessons learned, there are

no expectations. (For the most part) lessons are perceived as being intangible, not material, and come to us as an opportunity to learn, a gift you can't exchange. We don't spend our lives hungrily seeking them out. If you do, hats off, but make sure to have some fun while you're at it.

Well, are we having fun yet? No need to answer just now. A better question: Is even the tiniest part of you looking at the term "life's purpose" differently? Has the dictionary inside your head revised its definition, or at the very least classified it under a new sub-heading? Please continue to be open, maybe even curious, and together, let's hope.

Never Too Late to Start Over

Starting from scratch is always an option, except when it comes to lessons learned (your life's purpose). Who'd want to do that?! Don't forget that lessons are cumulative. They add up and change throughout your life—even disguising themselves to catch you off guard. Some of them, if learned completely (as infrequently as that happens), disappear altogether. How many of you have ever said, "Whew! I'm glad I don't have to live through that again." Well, when lessons are fully learned, you never will. You move on to the next or simply move on.

But, yes, getting second, third, thirty-third chances to begin again at something, anything, to get it right this time, is awesome. I'll go for that. I love it, actually. It's never too late for anything as long as you keep replacing your batteries. Batteries keep you young.

Have you ever been asked, "Would you ever want to go back to a time in your youth?" Think about your answer. It means you'd have to unlearn all those lessons, all those challenging times where you chose to learn something from adversity. Me: "Hell to

the no!” I ain’t going backwards for nothin’. Yes, I’d be thinner, have fewer wrinkles, and have enough hair to grow bangs again. Life is tough. Lessons are tougher. But life gets better when you know you’re living it for a purpose. Your life’s purpose.

Can I be honest with you? For many years since turning 34 (my life-changing experience), I saw life as a burden. For the most part, I closed myself off and took my life all too seriously. I fully accepted life as something that had to be done, something obligatory. I felt for sure that life’s purpose was solely to learn lessons, and that’s that. My huge mistake was to neglect the rest of what life has to offer.

There’s an ecstasy to when you “get it,” too. Nothing like it in the world when you end up learning when you weren’t expecting to. I’d like to share a story with you, and if you ever spend too much time in your head (like I did), perhaps you’ll learn to look out.

Please indulge me for a moment, and while doing so, imagine your imperfect self in this scenario. Only two years ago, a very valuable lesson came my way (again), one I’ll remember forever. It wasn’t a new one at all, only newly delivered and re-wrapped. Please also think of the lessons that have come your way as I share. Ask yourself, “Anything similar to me? My life? My circumstances? My opportunities to learn?”

Picture it. A two-mile trek on a dirt trail through the forest filled with streams and wildflowers. A walk that ends at the east shore of Lake Tahoe, Nevada. A place I will cherish forever. Maybe you have a similar place you consider to be your very own.

All my walks are alone, time to myself. At the end of the walk, there’s a bench on the shore, with the sand under my feet and a few beachgoers in front of me. I love to be there, to sit on that bench for ten or so minutes.

While I sit alone on my bench, a man approaches me. It

looks like he's going to sit on it beside me. He has a most noticeably positive spirit surrounding him. He appears to be homeless. I spot his filled shopping cart nearby. We chit-chat at first; the type of conversation I *least* prefer.

I forever ask a ton of questions whenever I get the chance to talk to anyone, so I did. Not intrusive, but "Are you up here in the winter as well?" My questions were pointed; I was curious. He probably knew that. He was sharp and didn't mind. He was thoroughly positive and optimistic about life. And I was impressed.

The man was always upbeat, never uttering an unkind word, never complaining. Before he sat down, the judgments inside me were going crazy. My judgments began when I realized I had seen this man once before, pushing his shopping cart in the Safeway parking lot. Judging this man before he even came up to me on the bench.

When it was time for me to continue walking, I couldn't proceed without acknowledging him and his positivity. My guard had to come down. We'd never discussed anything about the possibility of this man identifying as homeless. Seemed like it may have been irrelevant because he appeared so at peace with his life and his existence on this Earth. His pleasure in living overwhelmed me. In the most non-obtrusive way, I asked, "Have you eaten lately?" Honestly, I don't remember what his answer was. He had never asked me for a thing and didn't seem to want anything. This is why I trusted this stranger; I knew he was as genuine as anyone I had ever met.

I gave him all the cash inside my wallet. I then said, "You amaze me. I'm so grateful to you! I'm sitting on this bench feeling sorry for myself—and you. You're so positive. You're not bitter. To me, you're loving life. Thank you for talking to me. You taught me something huge today."

It pains me that I can't recall that man's name. You deserve to know who he is. On that day, he was my university, and I was his student. That wonderful man was one of the many people I had judged in life. He is one of many who helped me stop doing that. He provided two things: one of the most valuable lessons I will ever receive and one of the best memories of my life. Trying to re-tell it doesn't do him justice, nor how outstanding I felt that experience was. More than anything, I hope it makes you reflect on any similar encounter you may have had, how someone else provided you with a lesson of your lifetime. Does it? Please think back every once in a while. Nostalgia keeps us trapped, but these transformational moments are meant to be valued and appreciated. Like I said, I share stories of success and failure, so you'll acknowledge your own and value each as much as I do mine.

Again, please recognize that your lessons are *yours*. They are specific to you. You may share some of the lessons I share about myself with others. Judging, thinking you're better than someone, or feeling the need to be defensively anti-social for survival are relevant lessons to me. They're the ones I was born to learn and overcome. Don't attach yourself to these, mine.

As we go further now, please put emphasis on the "I" when I encourage you to ask yourself, "Why am *I* here?" and "What do *I* want to learn from life?" Only you know the answer, but be open to a stranger helping you get closer to it.

Until you're done reading, I'm your stranger for now. Are you with me? Now that you've become more familiar with "lessons" and their importance, do you happen to see how they just might be our purpose? A part of it? None at all? If you happened to answer, "Who the hell cares about any of this?" let's talk.

Benefits of Lessons Learned

This is why you're here. You want to reap the rewards for all your hard work, choose to learn from life's lessons, and recognize your true life's purpose:

1. Spotting lessons and mastering them adds worth to your existence and makes you feel like you're constantly working towards a goal. Whether you're retired or not, it gives you a reason to wake up.
2. We've been conditioned to believe that our jobs, our life paths, and our career paths *are* our life's purpose. If you want to succeed at any of these three, a sense of belief, dedication, and hard work are required. The same is necessary when learning lessons.
3. Lessons provide a sense of peace. When you recognize lessons and choose to accept and maybe learn from them vs. fighting them, you'll begin to feel like you're no longer constantly going against the grain.
4. By realizing that unexpected challenges, obstacles, hindrances, and roadblocks are really lessons in disguise, they lose their wallop. Their shock value isn't as shocking as before. When the same lessons reappear time after time, they'll become quite predictable. None should come by surprise.
5. Now retired, your daily planner, once filled with meetings, tasks, and conference calls, is replaced with an internal calendar that's been there since the day you were born. Best to honor these entries first.

Hey, you wanna know what the best thing is about ~~getting~~ ~~older~~ maturing? You're still young enough to try new things, but now you'll ask why. More experiences will have meaning. Maybe all of them. I'm talking about life. Yours. You feel me?

Notes

1. Rosenfeld, Jordan. “10 Surprising Stats About the State of Retirement in America.” yahoo/finance, November 28, 2023. <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/jaw-dropping-stats-state-retirement-200025720.html> .
2. Searing, Linda. “More than 1 in 6 Americans Now 65 or Older as U.S. Continues Graying.” The Washington Post, February 14, 2023. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wellness/2023/02/14/aging-boomers-more-older-americans/> .