



5 Rules for Living, Loving and Laughing Your Way to Contentment

**The first in
The Thrill of Living Can't Be Found on the Couch
series**

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As I travel this country, I see too many unhappy people. I see people chasing occupational success at the expense of their relationships, not knowing their kids, and always trying to get a little bit more and never being satisfied with what they achieve. I see a country of people focused on their insecurities and caring more about what other people think of them instead of working to form positive opinions of themselves.

Our pace of life has us packing every usable moment with activity in an effort to win a competition, to be the best -- when there are no winners in this game. We have been led astray from what living means. Our pursuits are no longer happiness and contentment. They have been replaced with material possessions and status as the new definitions of our lives. To use a cliché, we have become human doings instead of human beings, and in the process we've lost our focus on how to live, love and laugh.

It's not that we are no longer created to do that. Watch children of a very young age and you see how they live, love and laugh out in the open for everyone to see. Once we start sending children to institutions of learning, at a younger and younger age these days, we take some of that away and replace it with competition and the drive for comparison of who can be the best. But the best at what? The best at making friends? The best at resolving conflict with a schoolmate? The best at recognizing and appreciating beauty? The best at being able to laugh?

No, we want our children to be the best at getting good grades, to get a good scholarship, to get a good job, to make good money, to be able to afford the status symbols of success so the world to see how damn good we are! In that quest we've lost ourselves, we are losing our children, and we are making life an experience significantly less happy than it needs to be.

In this "arms race" to be the best by societal standards we have sacrificed living. We

have let Wall Street, Madison Avenue, and television programming describe what they define as success for us. Most of us realize it's a hollow pursuit. Some of us have actually had the fortune to achieve that success and when we get there we ask ourselves, "Is this it?"

We have been given three wonderful gifts in life that we discard and take for granted too quickly as we go for the successes as prescribed for us by people we don't even know. The gifts of living, loving and laughing are special and can make us feel better than any possession or status.

To help all of us sit back and reflect on our lives that are moving so fast before our eyes, I'm offering five rules to help find inner success that will out-distance your current success pursuits by a long shot.

Rule #1. Keep only positive influence friends.

We know how particular we are about who our children play with and interact with on their own time. We've all heard the stories about a "good" child falling in with the wrong crowd, about peer pressure and the impact of poorly chosen friends. This is one of the greatest nightmares parents have when they send their kids off to school. They are hoping they taught them the right way to choose the people they interact with.

It's not just a child's dilemma. The people you surround yourself with as an adult also determine how your life is approached. When your friends become more taxing than beneficial, more caustic than supportive, more of a drain than a deposit, its time to move on to new friends because the damage they do to you is real.

Who are Positive Influence Friends?

Positive influence friends are the friends who challenge you to improve yourself, teach you to add new benefits to your own life, and model the behavior of loving life to the fullest. These are people who are very comfortable with who they are. They look to have a positive impact on others, oftentimes because someone once did that for them. Positive influence friends live by example. They don't just talk a good game -- they live a good game.

I look back on my life, and I've had friends that fit all categories. Some have hurt me or led me astray, and others have made huge positive impacts on making me who I am today. In my life these positive influence friends have taught me to smile more, to share, to get over shyness, to have fun in life, to play sports better, to explore my creativity, to grow up by telling me to go away to school, and as an adult, they taught me to play guitar, showed me the way to inner peace through a spiritual relationship, challenged me to complete a marathon and continue this activity as a lifestyle, kept me from making terrible mistakes, showed me the flip side to a dark view of a situation, laughed with me not at me, encouraged me during insecure moments, and supported me in big steps to improve myself. They are there when I need a friend the most.

These are the friends who are worth more than any possession you could possibly own, and they are the people you wish you had more of in your life. Be sure to let them know how

important they are to you. Start by making a list of your friends who have been the Positive Impact Friends over the course of your life.

Some you may have lost touch with and simply drifted apart. Make the effort to bring them back into your life. Some you never told about the impact they made in your life in a positive way. Find them and let them know, they will appreciate knowing what they did well. An interesting thing about Positive Impact Friends: Once you start to mirror their behaviors you become one of them for someone else, and I find no greater thrill of living than getting feedback that I've touched someone in a positive way.

Three types of friends who limit your thrill of living (and should be avoided)

The Grouch

Grouchy people love to pull everyone down to their level so everyone is as miserable as they are. These are the friends who are never satisfied with what life has to offer. They love the snide remark, the digging comment, and the grumpy responses that sound funny for television sitcom characters but only sound sad in real life. The Grouch is never happy and always sees the negative in every situation. You may see the day as bright and sunny, and the Grouch pronounces the day as too hot and humid, or says, "Of course. it's a beautiful day while I'm at work. It always rains on my day off."

Grouchy friends usually have something amiss in their lives that they either don't want to let go of and move beyond, they don't want to face something about themselves and improve upon, or they simply have a vicious streak where they like to make people around them uncomfortable as some type of distorted power play. The Grouch wants to suck the energy out of a room. In fact, they want to suck the energy out of relationships of every kind as well, whether it is with their friends, spouse, children, co-workers, or the occasional person who harmlessly enters their life, such as a waitress.

Grouches can invade your mind like a virus and color your vision to seeing the negatives of life, the things that are wrong beyond repair and how everyone is out to get you.

Who are the people you interact with by choice that fit this category?

The Victim

The Victim has no control over his or her destiny and life delivers a terrible blow to the gut on a regular basis. Victims are those people who find themselves in unfortunate situations of their own making, yet take no responsibility because life just happened to them. They are convinced life is a cruel joke they just have to survive.

Victims are people with overwhelming debt issues because life is too expensive, people who have been laid off without any alternate skills or contingency plan, people who blame corporations for providing products that contribute to their personal poor health issues, people who are looking for handouts constantly, people who resent the successful, people who are passed by for lack of the proper education degrees, and people who have had a bad thing happen to them and they wallow in it because there is nothing they can do about it.

Victims also are dreamers who make no effort to make the dream a reality. “I’ll never be able to afford that,” “We don’t stand a chance,” and a general “woe-is-me” approach to life is the mantra of the Victim. Many couches are populated with Victims. To search for the thrill of living is just too hard, or the thrill can’t be found or isn’t worth the effort.

The Victim persona is growing around us quickly. People looking for huge litigation judgments are Victims trying to make a big score because the world owes them. The Victim is the person that can’t find (doesn’t want to) work in an economy of 5 percent unemployment and would rather get a government check than seek gainful work.

My first exposure to having a Victim friend occurred at church. A woman, knowing I owned a business, approached me after church one Sunday morning and asked me to sign her unemployment form. I asked her what the form was for. She told me the form says she came to me looking for a job and I didn’t have anything available. When she collected a certain number of signatures, she could get her unemployment check.

I misunderstood. Here was a fellow parishioner in need of work, and unfortunately I didn’t have a position for her, but I knew someone who was looking for employees that also was there that Sunday – a fellow business owner. Instead of signing her form, I asked her to follow me. We went over, and I said, “Mike aren’t you looking for someone to work in the warehouse cataloging carpet?” Before he could answer, she blurted out, “Oh, I don’t want to work over the summer, I just want you to sign this form.” This was the same woman that cried about not having enough money and being in need. No, neither of us signed the form.

Victims will prey on your good nature and can be masters of being in need. Don’t get me wrong. Not everyone in need is a Victim, but every Victim is needy and that kind of needy will only take from you without giving anything back.

The Ticking Time Bomb

The Ticking Time Bombs are those people who are a moment away from boil-over. Their anger is just below the surface and the slightest thing can send them over the edge. When the bomb explodes, it causes damage for everyone in the vicinity.

I was in the car with a buddy coming back from a baseball game, and we were in a normal conversation as we sat in the middle of stop and go traffic. He decided not to let a car in front of him in line, and the driver of the other car made a shooting motion with his finger toward my friend. My buddy went ape.

He threw his car into park, jumped out of the car, and started screaming at this other driver, “You want to shoot me, go ahead.” He screamed, “You get your gun and I’ll get my gun out of the car and let’s see who’s alive at the end.”

His eyes bugged out, and he was shaking his fist in the air. As I sat in the passenger seat totally shocked and embarrassed, I was wondering to myself, “Am I in the middle of a gun fight? What happened to the mild conversation we were just in? Where did this monster come from who was just sitting beside me?”

Needless to say, that was the last time I got in his car, went to any event with him, and, in fact, I've not even talked with him in years. The Ticking Time Bomb can take you places you don't want to go, places you didn't know you were even going. Many arrest records are owned by friends of Ticking Time Bombs.

Who you surround yourself with has a great impact on your outlook on life. Cheerful friends help you stay on a positive path, keep you focused on the joy of living and exhibit youthful exuberance for what each day brings their way. Now survey your friends. What category would you place them in? Are they people you want to stay in your life, or are they people you need to let drift away as you make the effort to surround yourself with more positive influences? Surround yourself with the cheerful friends, thrive off of their joy, and live the life of excitement and enjoy the ride.

Rule #2. Surround yourself with what you love – your house is your home.

Did you grow up in a house where the couch was covered in plastic, the living room was never used other than for company, you had to remove your shoes to walk inside, and "cleaning the house" meant making it look like no one actually lived there? A house is just a building where people reside, receive mail, and repair. A home is a place of comfort, a place where you are surrounded by what you love, a place where the spirit of you thrives.

When I travel I find all hotel rooms start to look alike. It's not that hoteliers don't make the effort to decorate tastefully, or to give me the creature comforts of home such as a recliner, microwave and mini-fridge. What are missing are the things that actually make my house a home that can't be duplicated on the road.

Family pictures

I used to wonder why my grandmother had many, many, many, too many framed pictures of family around her house. I used to think of them as tough to dust around, poorly organized and a bit cluttered on end tables, in fact, on every flat surface she could set a picture frame. I now realize she was surrounding herself with what she loved. The pictures reminded her of people she didn't get to see enough, of memories that made her smile when she caught sight of a picture out of the corner of her eye as she passed through the room, and of people who no longer could be seen as they had passed away long before the legacies of their stories.

We tend to store family pictures in albums on well-ordered shelves. Not only are the pictures out of sight but the memories are out of mind without the trigger of the smile looking back at you from the mantel above the fireplace. Get your family pictures out of those albums and into frames where they can be relived. The rejuvenation of the memories will bring a smile to your mind and remind you of times of joy.

Music

From the first transistor radio I owned when I was 6 years old up to the new MP3 player I recently purchased, music has been a significant part of my world. I'm not talking about just any music. That can be found anywhere in the country on umpteen radio stations across the dial. I'm talking about *my* music. I'm talking about how each of us has specific songs tied to

mental pictures, peculiar songs that resonate with us and evoke a mood, the music that lives within us.

I have songs to listen to when I want to relax, when I'm feeling wild, when I want to party, when I'm on top of the world, when I want to dance, when I need a mental boost out of the doldrums. I have a play list for every mood I own. Most of what I listen to can't be found on radio stations, and even if it could, would be punctuated with too many commercials, traffic reports and noise I don't care to hear. In my home I am the DJ with the play list that I want to hear, that I need to hear, that I love to hear. Through hundreds of albums, hundreds of tapes, and stacks and stacks of CD's in my home, I have just the music I want to hear, played at the volume I want it at (especially when I'm home alone.)

The image of Tom Cruise in *Risky Business* singing into a candle stick standing in the doorway in his underwear with Bob Seger at full volume on the stereo just after his parents have left him alone for a few days is the vision of being home.

Turn off the television, turn on the stereo, listen to the music that molded your years, and remind yourself of the good living you've experienced. In fact, with downloadable music so easy to obtain, why not create a soundtrack for your life? Imagine making a CD with every song that has a strong particular meaning to you.

Go for it! Imagine the excitement of finding those songs and building your life through music on a disk. It would be your life's soundtrack that is uniquely for you. Now that is exciting!

Keepsakes

We live in the world of the disposable everything. I lived in a house with a rotary phone for 23-plus years. I've lived with a mobile phone for less than 15 years, and I know I've owned three times as many mobile phones as I did rotary phones. Material goods are just items to use and discard these days.

But what about the keepsakes? What about the little things that have so much importance? Keepsakes are not necessarily special in themselves, as much as what they represent. A house full of keepsakes is a home filled with stories and loving memories.

In my bedroom I have a wooden 1940s era radio that no longer works, has a bare-wired cord, and has no particular antique value. But it was I listened to it when I went to my grandmothers' house as a child, and it was an adventure. My sister and I would take the obsolete radio that was more a curiosity than radio down to the basement and tie the ground wire to a sink pipe and turn the dial. We'd hear languages other than our own and squeal with delight at the airwaves treasure we found. It was a treat of staying over at Grandma's house.

My grandfather created family heirlooms using his creativity and spare time. The stainless steel trinkets my grandfather spent hours making in that very basement are a living heritage of his workmanship and design craft. He was always known for his quick temper and violent bursts of discipline, which makes one trinket my favorite. By far it was his least

polished design and poorest workmanship, but it showed a side of him I seldom ever saw.

It's a simple toy, where you blew in one end to get a pinwheel to turn on the other end. While you blew hard as you could to get the pinwheel to barely turn, a fine black powder was actually being blown on your upper lip, unbeknownst to you. He knew the trick to making the pinwheel turn without getting any powder on you as he demonstrated, and I've never seen my grandfather laugh as hard as when people tried his toy. That is a keepsake that reminds me all people can enjoy living, even if at sparse moments. What are your keepsakes that make your house a home?

Love what you have

Coming home from a long road trip there is nothing that beats the lingering hug and kiss from my wife, the excitement and total body wiggle-welcome of my two dogs, and the eventual comfort of revisiting my own pillow. The thrill of living doesn't have to be anything more than the participation in what enriches you as a person and appreciating the surrounding love you find in your home.

Rule #3. Cherish your health – improve it, preserve it or get help with it

When you are in your youth, you feel invincible. You can eat anything without it growing on you. You recover from aches and pains after one night's sleep, and you don't think about the future when your metabolism is going to hit the brakes. But those of us who have passed that age of carefree health are surrounded with reminders of how precious health can be. With young friends dying from heart attacks, having prostate surgery, bypass surgery, and feeling the constant dull pain of getting older, our health is an important key to enjoying living.

Improve it

As the days click by in the world of working behind a desk and living an increasingly sedentary lifestyle, health can slowly deteriorate without much notice. Instead of walking, we drive. Instead of pushing a lawn mower, we ride a lawn tractor (complete with beverage holder.) Instead of pursuing a game of flag football, we ride a golf cart. Instead of going to the store, picking up groceries and preparing a meal, we have it delivered to our front door. Pretty soon, we can't do half the things we once considered normal behavior.

When you realize the slide in your activity and the resulting deterioration of your ability to be as active as you once were, you have found the time to cherish your health and improve it.

The first step for me making strides in my improved health was to look at my influences. I mentioned earlier to notice the friends you socialize with and how they influence your own behaviors. I noticed my closest friends had encouraged me (and I went along eagerly and willingly) to enjoy fine dining, fine wines, fine cigars, and fine liquor. We rode in limos to concerts so we could imbibe to our hearts' content without the fear of driving violations. We would enjoy "the good life" at every opportunity, until one night my slide culminated with what I refer to now as a "stupid party."

In our infinite efforts to find the perfect vodka, we decided to have a vodka judging

party. We purchased 18 brands of vodka. Throughout the evening, we ate wonderful foods, smoked wonderful cigars, had great conversation and drank 18 shots of vodka in search of the best vodka money could buy. My body should've had me arrested that night for assault.

I had to make a decision to improve my health habits. I only have one me, and I only have one body to get me through life. Even with the replacement parts the medical world is making available, I still have to get through with this body I was given.

Health is a choice. It's up to me if I want to give up and experience adult-onset diabetes, have high blood pressure, suffer acid reflux, and be out of breath running to the bathroom during commercials. Or I can make the decision to improve my health while I still have time. I asked myself if I wanted to be one of those people hauling around an oxygen tank behind them everywhere they go, or even worse, be in my permanent resting place before I see even one Social Security check.

The answer is I want to enjoy every day the Good Lord gives me, and I know I can enjoy it more with better health. The decision is easy if you find yourself where I've been. Take your health seriously and work hard to improve it.

Preserve it

Some of us have been given a blessing of good health without much effort. If you are one of these fortunate people feel blessed, because you have been given a gift. With your good health, you have a few options: Take it for granted and make no effort to maintain it, abuse it because your body is so forgiving you want to take it to the limit, or preserve it.

To preserve your health you usually already have well-established positive health habits such as good diet choices and an exercise routine you enjoy doing, and have them firmly in place before deterioration begins.

One of the healthiest people I know ran track in high school and let things slide a bit when he joined the Navy. One day, while bowling he tore his pants across the thigh. He wasn't obese. He wasn't in horrific physical shape. He had fallen into some poor health habits and was not pleased with the embarrassment of tearing his pants.

From that day forward he has held tight to proper diet, a daily exercise routine, and a commitment to positive health. He is not a professional athlete, a medal-winning runner, or a personal trainer. He is a man in his late 40s who is physically fit, works hard at preserving his health and enjoys the thrill of living because he has the stamina and will to want it that badly. That is the perseverance of a positive health model.

Get help with it

After my "stupid party" night and a year on the road eating in hotels and airports, never seeing the inside of a gym, my health took second place to making money. OK, my health wished it was in second place. Honestly, at that time my focus on health was on par with checking to see if the caulking around my shower needed replacing. It wasn't a high priority.

Growing up I was taught some pretty bad health habits. Dinner was usually around 9:30 p.m. An after-school snack was a bag of potato chips. Meat was served at every meal, otherwise it wouldn't be considered a meal. Exercise was a residual benefit of yard work, and not something to be wasting time with on its own.

So how would I learn to be healthy? I figured the most impossible thing I could do with my 300-plus pound body at that time was to complete the ultimate human test – a 26.2 mile marathon. Yeah, right, this was a delusion of grandeur. How in the world was I going to accomplish this impossible feat? Surely not on my own. I never knew anyone who ran even a 5k, so how was I going to learn this? Get involved with those who knew how and get them to help me with it.

A friend of mine told me of a group called Team In Training. The Leukemia and Lymphoma Society runs Team In Training (TNT) and helps teach non-runners how to complete a marathon. I raised money for a great cause, and they taught me how to train for a marathon.

Not only did I train for a marathon, but I got to meet people I'd never spent time with before. I don't mean just people I'd never met before, but a mindset I'd never met before. This was a group of people in the know about mental toughness, about physical discipline, about finding thrills in areas I previously saw as agony.

They taught me how to find the right footwear, how to eat, how to drink fluids, how to find a pace, how to work through minor pains, how to envision success, how to enjoy incremental progress, and what fellowship was like when everyone was exhausting themselves for the joy of the pursuit.

Yes, I thought these people were insane, but this was a different insanity that the vodka party. This insanity had purpose. It had a positive intent, it had a positive focus, and if I stuck with it, it would have a wonderfully positive outcome.

Six months after sitting in my room and making the commitment to enter a marathon I completed my first marathon in Myrtle Beach, SC. I can say I've never felt so much self-induced physical pain in my life, and I have never felt prouder of myself for any accomplishment. I never would've come close had I not found people in the know to help me out.

At the conclusion of the race I felt I was done. Check that off the list, and let's go back to the way things were. Wrong.

When you get people with positive health habits who become great friends, they continue to help you with health. Great health is not an event, it is a lifestyle. The person I talked about in the "Preserve it" section has become one of my best friends, mentor and role model for having the proper health to enjoy the thrill of living.

Rule #4. Forget the numbers – age, weight, etc.

Think of the numbers that are important to us, that have meaning, that control and rule

us (if we let them). I find numbers restrictive to my thinking. Numbers are a manmade creation. They provide us with order, a common ground for people to communicate — and a stumbling block to our thinking if we let ourselves go there.

Age

I have been called a big kid, a person with a youthful zest for life, and Big Tease (by my nephews.) I wear every one of those monikers with pride because I consider age an attitude, not a number. I've seen people go into sudden depression on the event of their 40th birthday. It wasn't that they woke one day, and their body turned to an immovable object because of the onset of the Big 4-0! No, their minds said 40 was a bad thing because they saw the number.

I surprise people all the time with my real age, and I'm fortunate to have a young face to go with my young attitude. But I believe how I act says more than my physical appearance. Have you ever known someone who was old before his time? I hear people all the time say things like, "I'm too old for that." "That's for young people, not me." And "If I have to live in one of those places, you might as well kill me." Wow, that's not a body saying it is no longer functional, that is a mind that thinks negatively.

I've learned a lot of things about ignoring my age:
I'm not too old to get on the floor to play with trucks.
I can still enjoy a good matinee with an animated feature (without taking children).
I can body surf the ocean waves.
I'm not too old to get in a sand box and have fun.
I can ride a swing.
I can totally enjoy an ice cream cone as if I'm still 6 years old.
I can get into the competition of playing a simple video game.
Board games with only adults can still be a blast.
I can get beat every time at Junior Monopoly – when I'm really trying to win.
I no longer need but can understand the benefits of a security blanket.
I love to dance.
Finding new music is exciting.
I don't care what I look like in a bathing suit while walking the beach.
Sharing a laugh with a person of any age is one of the greatest joys in life.
I can be good friends with a 15 year old daughter of great friends and really talk.
I can enjoy a round of golf with a septuagenarian and look forward to the next time we get to play.
I can go to a bar and listen to a great band until 3 a.m. and not stand out totally.
I can spend hours in a half-marathon race and make new friends every mile of the way.

What are the things your "age" no longer lets you do? Maybe it's time to rediscover a time when the number wasn't important, when age wasn't an issue, or even discover it for the first time in your life. Age as a number is only confining when your mind lets it be. Turn it lose and be ageless. You might be surprised at how liberating that can be.

Weight

I had someone ask me how much weight I had lost since they last saw me a few years

ago. I said, “In my life I’ve probably lost 2,000 pounds at one time or another.” I have been weight-obsessed for as long as I can remember. I would check my weight sometimes three times a day. It has always been a source of frustration, until a conversation with a friend. She was talking about having put on a few pounds, and I asked her how often she weighs herself. She looked at me with this odd expression and told me her family doesn’t own a scale. When her clothes get a bit tight, she knows she needs to lose enough to get them to fit like they should. I was astounded at that concept!

I talked to my doctor about my weight at my last physical. He told me my health was in good shape. Yes, I’m carrying more weight than I should, but with my exercise routine and active lifestyle he said I was fine unless I just wanted to lose some weight. Once again, astounded!

The obsession with weight in our country has nothing to do with health and everything to do with appearance. A counselor at a prestigious university told me 40 percent of the female population of the entering freshman class has an eating disorder. The driving force of image and the unattainable figures of television have eroded our social self-esteem and self image.

Every body is made a little different. We can’t nor should we all look like Britney Spears or Brad Pitt. The fact people will sacrifice health purely for image, or heaven forbid, try something as abominably wrong as plastic surgery just to look like a celebrity as reality television shows promote says that the number on a scale has become far too controlling than need be.

Care for your weight as it relates to health, care for your weight as it allows you to enjoy the thrill of living, and forget the scale. Let your thriving lifestyle be your guide to the healthy weight you need, not an image weight that is unsatisfying and detrimental to enjoying living.

Rule #5. Enjoy the simple things – such as a bowl of ice cream, a matinee, a dip in the pool

I think everyone agrees with me when I say life has become far too complicated. We race against the clock to cram in as many activities as we can. That is not thrilling living; that is exhaustion waiting to happen. In our society, in an effort to improve things, we add bells and whistles, constantly looking for the competitive advantage. We take the simple and in some cases turn them into the absurd. We are on an adrenaline junkie’s search for a high around every corner.

The Thrill of Living isn’t hopping in the rollercoaster seat every day to see how much of a rush we can experience, because when you do that you lose the joy in the simple things.

Touching others with simple things

Flowers

My wife and I find that having a vase of cut flowers in the house brightens it a bit and adds a bit of cheerfulness. I’ve been bringing her flowers once a month for close to 20 years, and she never get tired of it. I still get a kick from the comments people make when I’m

walking out of a florist or simply grabbing a small arrangement at the grocery store to bring home for my wife. Elaborate demonstrative showy professing of one's love can be overkill or maybe even overcompensation. A simple bundle of flowers says, "I still love you and was thinking of you today." Not because I screwed up and I'm trying to buy favor, not because it is a birthday, anniversary or St. Valentine's Day, but because it's a random day and I thought you'd like a reminder of how I care for you. Sometimes simple can be the best statement you can make.

A Bubba Basket

Ladies, you don't get off easy here. There is a form of simplicity you also can do to touch the man in your life. We call it a Bubba Basket. A Bubba Basket contains his favorite beverage, his favorite snack food, and two fresh batteries for the remote. Nothing says "I love you" more than paying attention to what is important to someone else.

A simple phone call

Have you ever had a person's name pop into your mind for no apparent reason? I always took that as a sign to make contact with that person, either by phone or with a note or by planning a visit. I can't begin to say how many times I responded to that random thought and discovered that person needed to hear from someone that very day. The more I listen to that inner voice we seldom take the time for, the easier it is to hear it and the more often it is right on the money. Take the time to listen and make the effort to act.

Treat yourself simply as well

When you want to treat yourself, it doesn't have to be a plasma screen television, a trip to Las Vegas, or some other expensive high-energy item. Pepper your life with the simple joys of living you haven't done in a while. Avoid anything complicated, keep it simple, and by all means, be sure it is joyful. I have rediscovered simple things I long forgot in the complicated world that until recently ruled my life.

A bowl of ice cream

This can be simple or overly complicated. I say opt for simple. Ice cream places have taken the big business route and have added every bell and whistle you can think of. How many flavors do we need? How many toppings can we use? What happened to a simple bowl of good quality ice cream standing on its own merits? Take a step back to simplicity and linger over a bowl of topping-less vanilla ice cream. If you find this boring, then you've lost touch with basics, but if you've been serving in the armed forces in a desert somewhere and you've not had anything close to real ice cream, that bowl of vanilla will taste like manna from heaven – it's all in the perspective.

Afternoon matinee

As a child I went to Saturday matinees all the time. It was a chance to give the parents a break, have fun with my buddies and watch movies. Watching movies for me never went out of style. I thoroughly enjoy going to the movies still. I have found that catching a dinnertime matinee during the week is a great break from a tough day and a chance to see films at more reasonable prices. It gives me the feel of going to a movie as a kid. I consider a movie a matinee when I come out after the film is over and it is still daylight. Matinees give you a chance to get

lost in a cinematic world for a couple of hours, and a matinee is a bit out of the norm, something you can't do every day. It's a special treat which I know I deserve every so often.

A dip in the pool

As an adult I never lived in a house that had a pool, wasn't a member of a country club with a pool, and never saw that I was missing anything by not having a pool. Until a few years ago, when we purchased a new home that had a pool. I was concerned it would be a nuisance that I was going to have to maintain, but we loved the rest of the house, so we made the offer. Sure enough the pool had not been well maintained by the previous owners, and for the first few years we had major repairs that needed to be taken care of. But once we got those repairs completed and the pool water stabilized and easy to maintain, I discovered something.

A daily dip in the pool is refreshing! I'm not doing laps for exercise, there is no diving board, and it's barely five feet deep in the deepest part. This is a relaxing pool. A pool I can splash around in with a refreshing drink sitting on the side. A pool where my wife and I can have conversation about nothing in particular while we bob around each other. At night with the house lights off, it's even a place we can get naughty and toss off our bathing suits and go skinny dipping, although for us, it's more like going for a chunky dunk. Now it is our pool, our privacy, and our opportunity for relaxation and treating ourselves.

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Life is not complicated, we make it that way. Success doesn't mean how much we own, it means how much we enjoy living. Living, loving and laughing are basic fundamental joys, rewards and gifts that have been tainted in today's world. Restore these gifts in your life.

Learn to love again, even though you've been hurt and are afraid of that vulnerability. Learn to laugh, not at someone else's expense or cruelty, but at the funny things life gives us. Lastly, learn to live. Living isn't filling everyday with activity and checking the scoreboard to see how you stand in the game of life. Living is enjoying the moment, allowing the simple things to touch you, being able to lay your head on your pillow at night and reflect on the day with a smile, thinking to yourself "I had a really good time today."

Imagine being able to string together months of days like that. Would that be a change from what you currently have? It's your choice, to live, love and laugh your way to personal joy and contentment. I'm sure you will make the right choice.



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