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Observations Which Presently Degenerate Into Advice

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Observations Which Presently Degenerate Into Advice

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"I don't know about you, but I could probably fill an entire book (of indeterminate length) with the small observations, little anecdotes, and pearls of advice that I continually acquire as I live out my days. Instead, I'll just fill about four pages."

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OBSERVATIONS WHICH PRESENTLY DEGENERATE INTO ADVICE

prose by
JOHN PRAY

(Based in the Style of Kenkō)

I don't know about you, but I could probably fill an entire book (of indeterminate length) with the small observations, little anecdotes, and pearls of advice that I continually acquire as I live out my days. Instead, I'll just fill about four pages.

1

Knowing what to do in that moment when you're passing someone in a hallway or on a sidewalk who is walking in the other direction is a kind of art, especially if you are only acquainted with him or her (as opposed to being good friends or never having met one another before). Do you smile? Say hello? Give a nod? Mention how nice/nasty the weather is? Pretend to check your watch or cell phone? Stare straight ahead and hope the other person interprets that as you being deep in thought instead of asocial? There is only one reliable solution: become good friends with everyone you are even vaguely acquainted with. And refuse to become acquainted with anyone new unless absolutely necessary.

This is, of course, about as hard as it sounds.

2

Honesty is always the best policy. Even—and perhaps especially—when it causes short-term unpleasantness, outright honesty always makes things better and, yes, easier in the long run. I just think about that college roommate who I'd wished I'd told on the first day that I hated how he played his video games loudly late at night, or that girlfriend I had nothing in common with but with whom I wasted months simply to spare her feelings—feelings that would have lasted a few weeks or days at the most. I think of how much better things would have been if I had told the truth, endured the awkward moment, and moved on.

3

Parents spend years—usually about twenty, to be approximately precise—raising their children with little thought for themselves, for their own wants, or dreams, or goals. Then the twenty years comes to a close, the no-longer-children move away to college, and the parents are again free to live for themselves. But like with anything that goes unpracticed, they have forgotten how to pay attention to and how to follow through on their own wants, their own dreams, and their own goals.

Take, for example, my own newly empty-nested parents. They cared for me and my younger sister for the last 21 years, and now we're suddenly both out of their daily lives. My mother tries to immerse herself in her work (work that she isn't particularly passionate about) but just gets frustrated with coworkers who don't share her dedication. My creative and good-humored father for so long has been conditioned to first worry about bringing in the paycheck and then consider thinking about other things if there is time left over. (There usually isn't.) Moreso than my mother, he manages to find the pockets of humor hidden in daily life. But there's only so much humor—and even less self-fulfillment—to be found in school bus driving, self-employment, and watching the evening news.

OBSERVATIONS . . . (continued)

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“I worry, but there’s only so much I can do. I can encourage my dad to pursue that childhood special education degree he’s long considered, but I can’t make him do it. Only he, as they say, can do that.

Some parents will relearn how to live for themselves, especially those with friends or family who push them in the right direction; some will not, and will live out their days pining for the time when what to do was set out clearly before them, sometimes-difficult but never confusing.

4

Everything is odd and uncomfortable at first. We just invariably forget about this awkward period as soon as it is over. The man who tries something for the first time and then vows never to bother with it again because he was bad at it or it made him uncomfortable is, frankly, a fool. His life will be an empty one.

5

Equating the enjoyment of “childish” objects and pastimes with being of a “childish” level of maturity is a flawed way of thinking. It would be so sad to relegate colorful games, toys, comic books, animated films, and amateur sports only to our earlier years. They keep the senses sharp and the mind exercised in ways that more “adult” activities cannot. They certainly cannot be connected to what we could call “childish” behavior: short tempers, helplessness, irresponsibility, and self-centeredness—all behaviors that, unless I am mistaken, are more often observed in those same people who are telling us to put our “childish” toys and games away.

6

Never assume that everyone around you holds some secret knowledge about life that you do not. We are all just muddling along the same as you are.

7

It goes against conventional wisdom about how “everything changes gradually”, but I can draw a distinct metaphorical line somewhere in my memory dividing my “childhood” from my “adulthood,” marking a significant shift in my way of thinking that I still occasionally marvel at today. I say I could draw a line, but I could not name a specific date or even a year – my sister has always been the one for dates. Rather, I define it as Before and After. Before, I would have been annoyed and distressed, perhaps vocally so, at some inconvenience caused by something totally beyond my control. After (that is, now), I would not only accept that inconvenience, but look for and find ways in which it is actually improving my life—by giving me time to organize my thoughts, for instance, or giving me an opportunity to learn something new.

You could accurately describe this shift as an acquisition of maturity. I couldn’t say what caused it to come on so suddenly, or even if it really was so sudden. Perhaps finally renouncing my ever-hypocritical-and-always-logically-unsound Catholic upbringing did it. After all, making sense of myself comes much more easily when the world around me actually makes sense (and vice versa).

OBSERVATIONS . . . (continued)

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8

Sleep is as important as the scientists say. A good night's sleep (neither too short nor too long) can mean the difference between having the best day of your life and the worst. I spent most of my early high school days in a sleepless stupor. Not coincidentally, those were some of the unhappiest days of my life. On days after I had happened to get a good night's sleep, things always seemed so much better. It took me too long to figure that out, so learn it now.

Exercise, too, even if it just means taking the stairs whenever you could take the elevator. Trust me when I say that the instantaneous sensation of inflating your lungs with much-needed air after a good run totally beats the foggy comfort of sitting on a couch for hours.

9

A wise man learns basic skills in a variety of fields so that he can be as self-sufficient as possible. If I find I do not know much about plumbing, programming, or playing piano, I should find a couple of hours in which to get, at least, a basic grasp on the skills required for each. The few hours I spend doing this will mean hours or days of frustration saved later, when I am able to solve some basic problem or create some art myself, instead of relying on a specialist in the field to do it.

A wise man is competent in everything he does. He does not half-ass things, in other words, because he knows doing so will just cause him more work in the long run.

10

Always jump at the chance to do something new. Here is a chance: draw a picture in the space below. You may be a "bad" artist, but you will still be an improved person for attempting the unfamiliar task.

Yoshida Kenkō, 13th c. Japanese author and Buddhist monk, best known for "Essays in Idleness"