



Simple Truths that We are
Meant to Learn While *Living*

An Essay
by Maria Giuliani

Introduction

I'm on maternity leave as I write this, and as with my previous leaves with my previous children, I started my year off by trying to come up with a list for myself of projects and goals I want to accomplish. I felt a sense of anxiety over having this gift of time, and felt pressure to do something with it. The word *hustle* kept popping to mind, as in *do more, get it done*.

But unlike with my previous maternity leaves, a decade ago when I was a much younger and less wiser me, I now have the benefit of an inner voice that speaks up and with greater clarity. This voice keeps telling me, *Let it go, just be present, relax*. And this is the voice I find myself listening to.

I have made the decision that, if I do nothing else over these twelve months, if I can just learn to be present, it will have been a success.

This led me to ruminate on the word *success*, and all its various meanings. And, obviously, on my own successes. And this is what I have uncovered:

If the meaning of life is (as I believe it is) for us each individually to become the best version of ourselves that we can be—to grow into ourselves, to find our way back to our innermost home—then, success can only be measured by how near or far we are to that one purpose. Not money, not material goods, not any of the stereotypical/societal measures of success will get us there. How close are you, am I, to the one true self that's within?

Ruminating further, I've come to understand that there are several levels to this process of becoming ourselves. Some of us are fast learners, and come into this world ready to deep dive through any layer or boundary that stands in our way. Others, much like myself, learn very slowly, chewing over each lesson, sometimes for years, before their value finally enters our bloodstream. Either way, I believe the lessons are the same.

These are the lessons as I understand them.

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Nothing, and Nobody
Owes Us Anything

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1

Lesson: We Are Entitled to Nothing, and Nobody Owes Us Anything

I find this one particularly apparent as a mom. My kids lately have been coming home talking about so-and-so-at-school who gets money for chores, or an allowance, or a certain amount of money from the tooth fairy (more than the tooth fairy leaves at our house). They want the instant gratification of dollars in their piggy banks, but they don't necessarily want to work for those dollars. I have to remind them, I don't owe them anything above and beyond what I must give to them as their mother in order for them to thrive and survive. If they need something, they get it. For any of these mores that they envy for, I need to see some give before the get.

As adults we often go around feeling resentful because someone didn't bestow something on us that we wanted to have or receive, but how often do we stop to think about whether or not we have actually earned or made space for that thing? What did we *give* before considering the *get*? I tell my kids to forget about "deserve," as *deserve* has nothing to do with it, and to forget about "fair," as life isn't about *fair*. These are passive words intended to tell the universe, I want something that I don't have, but I don't want to do anything but complain about it. This is not the language of the universe.

Nobody owes you anything. You can ask, but without the expectation of getting. Keep your energy open to receiving, but move on with your life. Do the work. In this way, you are free from any ties to expectation or assumption, free to just move on with the business of living your life.

2

Lesson: We Are Entitled to Everything

Life is here for the taking. Many of us are raised with a scarcity mentality, feeling that there are limited resources available in the world... limited dollars, limited popularity, limited freedoms... and we crave for, envy after, and deeply desire to receive in our lifetimes a small piece of the proverbial pie. But what if, rather than one pie, we were all standing around an open buffet with unlimited access to *all* the pies. What if life is the buffet, and we are born with the freedom to access any pie we want at any time. Scarcity is a lie we tell our souls (don't get too big for your britches, Jane), for no reason other than to keep ourselves small. If we don't believe that everything is possible, then there's no room for disappointment. We cut our legs out from under ourselves without ever really giving ourselves a chance for something more. We often hear the phrase "get out of your own way," and this is exactly why. If you can stand back, allow for the possibility of more, and be open to the unlimited, you may just come to understand how you've been your own worst enemy all along, and how, in truth, there is a wide open pathway between you and the pie. Between you and ALL THE PIES. It all starts with just one step.

3

Lesson: We Are Not Victims

When I turned forty, I came to realize that I've spent much of my adult life playing the victim card. I didn't even know it.

As a teenager I was victim to my overprotective mother not allowing my free-spirited self enough leash. In my 20s I was victim to curveballs entirely beyond my control, and entirely unexpected. In my 30s I was victim to life not working out the way I had wanted it to; victim to my dreams not coming to fruition. I felt like a complete failure, like I had the opposite of the Midas touch, that everything I touched turned to ash and dissolved. I felt that life hated me, and I had the envy, and I had the resentment, and I had the woe is me's and the tears and the why me?'s. I had myself a nice little bed of wallow to curl up in whenever I pleased. But it suddenly hit me—I'm not a victim. If no one owes me anything, and if I'm not entitled to anything, then there was nothing left for me to feel validly victimized by. The overbearing mother, well, I know she did the best that she knew how to do. I still forged my way through life and remained headstrong and intent. Really, her overbearingness was a test for and a testament to my strength as an independent individual, why not focus on that? Why not give myself credit and move on? Why allow a smaller version of myself to weep in vain? The unexpected drama—sure, this was a pertinent time in my life, a tipping point. But tipping into the sea of self-pity rather than a deeper acknowledgment of my strength, that was a choice. Whether conscious or unconscious, I could have pulled myself up by my bootstraps and told the universe that I was ready, but instead I added feathers to my bed, making it an even more comfortable place for my passivity. By my 30s, well, I was so comfortable with being passive that there was no space for any improvement or personal betterment. I didn't have room in my bed for positivity or success, it was already too full with the other stuff. It was only by acknowledging that I was not actually a victim that I could finally kick these bedfellows out to make space for my soul to stretch out.

4

Lesson: Failure is a Good Thing

I am someone who learns through direct experience. I need to feel out a process or situation in order to better assess my feelings about or around it. I am also someone who gets a lot of ideas. As you can imagine, this often means that I will get an idea of something I can do, or might like to do, or think I might want to do, and the only way that I comfortably make a decision about it is by trying it out.

Sometimes we try things out because we are desperate. Sometimes, it's because we know what our end goal is, we just flail around in trying to find the means to get there. Sometimes we successfully manage to convince ourselves that an idea is precisely what we want, although in our heart of hearts, the truth is that we don't want it at all.

I've gone through all the trying. I've circled the gamut of possibilities. And ultimately, this has led to a lot of failings, some of them pretty public. But at the end of the day, each failure has led me one step closer to knowing what I want on a deeper, more spiritual level. Intellectually, we can tell ourselves anything. We can convince ourselves that we are happy or satisfied or can manage with anything. But when we understand the truth deep in our insides, that's when we can put ourselves on our truly intended path.

Failures are like posts on a road. They serve to guide us and steer us off certain paths and onto other, better ones. Failures can lead us to feel shame, but if you can move through the shame (embarrassment, hurt feelings, tears of why?, etc), on the other side there is always an "Ah! *That's* why."

If you can learn to not be ashamed of failure, if you can continue to put yourself out there despite failure, you can continue to learn, and grow, and know the *that's why's* of your life. This requires a certain amount of courage. This requires a certain level of strength and willingness. This requires us to let go of the illusion of perfection, to do it anyway.

On the other side we will always find that if we failed, it's because it was not meant for us. And when we failed, we learned. And because we failed, we have stayed on course. And that is always a good thing.

The by-product of working through our failures is it's own reward: that we will have proved to ourselves the depth of our own strength, in finding the courage to keep going, to try again.

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Lesson: The Surest Way to Receive is to Surrender

Life exists in the paradoxes. It is hard to wrap our brains around, but it is a truth that thinkers and philosophers have acknowledged throughout the ages. The *Tao Te Ching* outlines these paradoxes beautifully. So does Dolly Parton ("If you want the rainbow, you gotta put up with the rain."). When we learn to walk the line between two sides of a proverbial coin, that is when we experience the sweetness of life.

One of these paradoxes is just this: The clearest and shortest pathway to receiving is to surrender. When you hold on to a desire you are saying, I lack this. When you let go, you are filling that space with the knowledge that you don't need it to be at peace. Might be nice, but don't *need* it. Thus, the obstacles unclutter, the pathway opens, and you can receive.

This happened to me in the conception of my third child. This happened to me the day before I met my husband. Both times I was conscious of the act of letting go. I was aware of this process happening inside me, and I also acknowledged to myself that in surrendering, there was a good chance that I was opening a door to just these things. And so it was. It took me seven years and three unsuccessful pregnancies to be able to let go of my grasp on the idea of a third child enough for her to be able to have the space needed to make her appearance. Letting go makes the space needed to receive.

On some level, we have all heard these types of stories and we know, deep in our bones, that they are true. But we fight it anyway. Nevertheless, what is true remains: Unattachment to what you want brings you what you need.

6

Lesson: Be Okay With Not Knowing Everything

None of us knows everything. It's virtually impossible for any one of us to know everything there is to know about this life, this planet, this world, and this universe that holds us. By admitting and acknowledging all that we don't know, we open the door to curiosity, and to the process of learning anew. We can be pleasantly surprised by facts we weren't aware of (my 8 year old taught me that an orca is not a whale and my mind was blown!). We can also decide that there are certain areas we simply don't want to learn more about, while still remaining open to others who do choose to possess that knowledge. Acknowledging that we don't know all there is to know about the complexities of this great big world is how we remain humble, how we maintain our awe, how we tap into inspiration and how we manage to build connections.

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Lesson: The Surest Way To Get is To Do, the Surest Way To Do is Not Doing

This means that action will always be required of us (small actions, baby steps to demonstrate our willingness to put ourselves out on the ledge of our own personal mountains—think, 'if you want to win the lottery you have to buy a ticket'). However *being* is more important than *doing*, and in being, we can be intuitively led in the actions that are in our best interest to take. That is, making massive To Do lists keeps our minds and bodies so preoccupied that we forget to check in with our souls, our intuition, and to verify whether our To Do's are the right things to actually be doing. For this we need to stop and feel, stop and be, stop and *not* do. Taking breaks between our small, baby step actions allows us to breathe, feel, and be led quietly toward the next baby step action (and the next after that). At the end of the day, It will always be up to us to actually take that action.

8

Lesson: To Go Fast, Slow Down

When I was learning to drive, my dad didn't beat around the bush. "Speed kills," he'd say, in his most matter-of-fact voice. That was the end of the story. In other words, he was saying, Don't be stupid.

Similarly, in my teenage years, I came across a line that (I'm paraphrasing) went, *Going slow and getting there is still faster than going fast and never getting there at all.*

If we apply this lesson to our internal lives (and not in the context of a teenager learning to drive a car), the message is simply, *slow the heck down.* We can't enjoy our short time on this earth if we're rushing through it. How many times a day do we wish away time? How many times do we catch ourselves saying, I can't wait for this day to end? Or, I don't have time for fun, I have too much to do.

This is not a lecture. As a mom, I am perpetually walking a tightrope between wanting to enjoy my children, and needing to stay on top of the never-ending duties/chores/schedules that need to be maintained. But, still, if I don't give myself permission to stop now and then, to breathe, who will?

The truth is, if we can succeed at slowing down, even just a little, we start paying attention to our lives and loved ones a little more. When we do that, we receive messages and cues we would otherwise have missed. When we receive these messages and cues, we learn new things and get inspired by new ideas. When we learn and get inspired, positive changes can occur. And what we then realize is that we brought these positive changes to our lives precisely because we slowed down. It's like *When You Give a Mouse a Cookie*, except we are the mouse, and we get to eat the cookie.

9

Lesson: There is Only One Goal in Life

I mentioned this in the opening, but it bears repeating. Until this is recognized, nothing else can follow. The one and only goal in my life, your life, every single person's life is to return to love (Marianne Williamson has a book by this title based on the teachings of *A Course in Miracles*, I believe I'm using these words with the same intention as she did, and I can only aspire for it to be with the same purpose). By this I mean, circle back to the pure being we were when we were born, the most true version of ourselves, a return to the basis of our existence. We are here to become the best version of ourselves that we can be: the most present, the most centered, the most grounded, the most loving. We are here to learn how to release all the negative gunk we collect along the path of our aging. We are here to learn how to surrender with grace. At the heart of all of this is love: love for self, and love for others.

I'm on a path—a journey—and I've come a long way, but I'm not yet at the end. I may never be at the end. I may die before achieving my one true goal, and the thing is, this is perfectly okay. The attainment of the goal is not where the success lies, but in the way I worked toward that goal... Did I learn? Did I grow? Did I do the work? Put in the effort? The time? If so, I have already succeeded.

10

Lesson: Truth is the One and Only Tool Needed to Achieve Our One and Only Goal

You can't catch a train without a ticket; you can't learn to read without knowing your ABCs; you can't cook a meal without any ingredients. This is basic. Yet we humans tend to make something equally basic feel like the most complicated thing of all. If we want to know ourselves, if we truly want to get back to that most "us" part of ourselves deep within, we must be honest.

Truth. Integrity. Authenticity. These words are synonymous with Self, and are the one and only tool required to achieve our one life's goal. When we are not honest with ourselves, we behave much like a hamster on a wheel, going nowhere fast. But, the more we unfold into our authentic truth (and it is much like an unfolding, a slow and gradual process), the more the spinning wheel morphs into a free and open road that leads directly to our deepest selves. Authenticity is a choice, however. Which leads me to the final lesson...

11

Lesson: No One Can Do It But You

I've been a student of life for my entire life. I was the kid who was always lost in thought, perpetually trying to figure out how exactly to be human. I've read all the books, I've filled out plenty of journals, I've done retreats and meditation and yoga and hikes and sat by lakes and chased dragonflies... literally all of it. I've worked through my layers a bit at a time, and for everything that I've written here, I have spent years cultivating this understanding of what I believe to be true.

Still, there is a difference between learning and acting, knowing and living, understanding and being.

When I go back through old journals of mine it is evident that I understood these lessons from a young age. I "got"—on a mental level—the essence of these lessons. I have always known that this is the path. It is another thing entirely to live one's life in the spirit of these lessons; to make the emotional changes needed to walk the talk.

It's freaking hard. It sometimes feels impossible.

But at the end of each day, I know that if I haven't cracked the code, it's on me. This isn't self-blame, this is taking responsibility.

This is my work. This is my life. Your life, your work. However we choose to live it, the end result is up to us and no one else. The sooner we pull up our big kid pants and start walking, the sooner we are stepping into our power; the sooner we are actually *living*.

Conclusion

I often refer to myself as a self-help book junkie, or a personal development junkie, because I consistently put myself on the path of reading and learning about other people's experiences of self-betterment, enlightenment, and process of coming into themselves. I have a deep interest in following people's stories, knowing that we are all born inherently perfect, deflect from that perfection as we grow and experience, and then, if we're lucky, catch ourselves in this realization, and begin the process of self-correcting.

I believe that there are many tools out there to assist and to guide us. You know what they are—yoga, meditation, nutrition, exercise, reiki, acupuncture, books, retreats, etc, etc. The list is long. I believe we can benefit from these tools, especially at times when we are lacking in direction. The important point to remember, however, is that they are merely tools. We can invest all our money and all our time into any one of these tools, and not be any closer to our ultimate goal, the goal of returning to Self (...God...love). That is a choice, a choice we make for ourself; a choice that anyone can make at any time, with or without the benefit of any particular tool. My point is, use the tool, but don't lose site of who it is giving that tool power. It's not the hammer that drives the nail, but the person wielding the hammer.

That said, we can always learn from others who have already done the work, and this essay an homage to these *others*: writers, thinkers, masters, educators, and researchers, people who did the work and took the time to explain it. I appreciate them, because although I am a life-long student, I am waaaaaaaaaay far from being a master. I have much still to learn. And much still to integrate, once learned.

Circling back to my introduction, and to what started me down the rabbit hole that led to this essay, I find one of the hardest things to learn in life is simply how to *be*. However, understanding that learning to be is but one step in a process of steps—one layer in a multitude of layers, one understanding amongst several, all leading to the same place, yet all

important in their own small way – makes it feel more attainable, less intimidating, and equally accessible.

I was listening to a meditation recently that suggested that we arrive on this earth with our trials and tribulations already planned out – that we accept in advance certain challenges for us to work through and learn through. It's an interesting thought. Yet, even if this doesn't fit your belief system, imagining that this could be true opens our thoughts up to a certain level of freedom. That trial was supposed to happen, so I know I'm able to succeed through it. That tribulation was meant to be, so I know I am able to handle it. As David R. Hawkins writes, "Everything is perfect." Everything is as it was meant to be. And knowing that, we can continue about the business of going deeper into ourselves, learning the lessons, integrating them, and returning, finally, to love.

Recommended Reading

Martha Beck
David R. Hawkins
Brené Brown
Dr. Shefali
Byron Katie
Marianne Williamson
and so many more...

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