

TWO SAMPLE ESSAYS

THREE LIFE LESSONS

John Kellmayer

In college I had a professor of American literature, an old Jesuit who had been teaching at the university for four decades. He loved the Southern Gothic writers, especially William Faulkner, and told story after story about Faulkner and his fictional Yoknapatawpha County. The old Jesuit said that we all have stories to tell and lessons to teach and urged the class to someday put those stories and lessons down on paper. It has taken me a very long time to follow my American Literature professor's advice, but what follows is dedicated to his memory.

My first story unfolded from my decision to train for and run a marathon. When the day of the marathon arrived, it seemed as if I had been looking forward to this day forever. It was the nastiest April morning that you could imagine. A cold wind had been blowing all day from the north. The shadows, gaunt and mean, were shifting and bit the ground like teeth. Rain had come and gone and then come again. The rain never brought relief, which I desperately needed but only added to my misery and soaked my t-shirt and running shorts. My New Balance running shoes were as wet as if I had worn them in a swimming pool.

As I neared the end of the race, every muscle and bone in my body ached. My legs felt like lead weights had been strapped to them. The police support had been pulled because most of the field had finished by now. There were only a few stragglers still on the course. Twelve hundred runners had entered the race but due to the weather forecast, fewer than five hundred ran.

I was on my own to navigate the late Sunday morning traffic and the streets of Philadelphia. I saw the University of Pennsylvania and Franklin Field in the distance and attempted to rally whatever resolve I had left to complete my first marathon, which would finish with one lap around the Franklin Field track.

I thought of the glorious, sun-splashed October afternoon when my friend Kathy, a much better runner than I would ever be, asked me to train with her to run the Penn Relays Marathon. I agreed, and we began to run together five or six days a week. We went for long runs along the sandy trails of the New Jersey Pine Barrens, where the forest was quiet and almost reverential like a great green cathedral. We would sometimes see deer, which stared at us for several moments before running off.

We ran at dawn along the beach in Long Beach Island as the first rays of the sun promised the fresh hope and opportunity that comes with each new day. We ran through drifts of brown and golden leaves that erratic November winds swirled and scattered in every direction.

Kathy and I increased our distance until we were doing two runs of twelve miles or longer each week. After exchanging presents on Christmas morning. We ran through several inches of fresh snow as pure and perfect as a child's dream. At the end of the run, we playfully threw snowballs at each other.

Our friendship deepened with each mile we ran together. And then one night, completely unexpected but destined, we crossed the line from friends and became lovers. Training for the marathon with Kathy was a magical period that will live forever in my memories.

Franklin Field was one block away. I shuffled across the street like an old man in a crosswalk and entered the stadium, where I was directed to the track and the final quarter-mile to reach my destination and complete all twenty-six miles and three-hundred and eighty-five yards of a marathon. A large clock showed my time: 3 hours and 58 minutes. Could I complete the final quarter-mile in less than two minutes? Could I break four hours?

I saw Kathy, who had finished thirty minutes earlier, waiting on the infield grass, cheering me on. I tried to rally but there was nothing left. I was running on empty. I had no more chance of running a 4-hour marathon as a 4-minute mile. Kathy jogged on the grass, alongside me, staying with me until I crossed the finish line with a time of 4:01:26. Kathy handed me a towel and we embraced.

It was not long after the marathon that Kathy and I began to drift apart. Something was different. Something was missing. Our shared vision of completing the marathon was gone, scattered by unforgiving winds like November leaves. But as I look back, training for that marathon with Kathy was one of the most meaningful periods of my life. Running the actual race, however, was one of the most disappointing, anti-climactic events I have ever experienced. I had learned an important and bittersweet lesson. The journey is more important than the destination.

While my first lesson was about a journey and a destination, and unfolded over six months, my second story took several years to reveal its lesson. Some stories and lessons are like that, I suppose. They can't be hurried.

I had been a college adjunct reading and writing instructor for six long years, teaching at Penn State's Ogontz Campus in Abington, Pennsylvania, Temple University in Philadelphia, and Camden County College in Blackwood, New Jersey. Most semesters, I taught six to eight classes, never made more than \$20,000 a year, and had no health benefits. I had wound up on the adjunct circuit after I was laid off from a high school English teaching position due to budget cuts. I had two master's degrees, one in educational leadership and the other an MBA. I had thought that the adjunct gig would be temporary and that I would find a school administrator position. But after six years the gig had turned into a grind, and I felt like my career was on a treadmill to oblivion.

I wasn't entirely unhappy, however. I was young and single. I enjoyed teaching college classes, and I was spending a lot of times in bars, trying to meet women. I had a monopoly in those bars on the "*I teach at Penn State*" pickup line. Looking back, I would describe myself as rather shallow and egotistical during that period of my life. Maybe that description fits a lot of young people in their twenties. Still, I was frustrated with my lack of career progress. I had gone on several interviews without obtaining a school administrator position and had started to wonder if I ever would.

When I saw an ad seeking a principal to start a new grant-funded county-wide alternative high school to be located on a community college campus, I applied. There were two interviews. I felt confident during the first interview. I felt almost destined to land the job during my second interview. I was offered the position at \$33,500 a year and with actual benefits.

My task was a daunting one—to start a school for the most disruptive and disaffected students from eight high schools and to locate this school on the campus of Atlantic Cape Community College in Mays Landing, New Jersey. I had no teachers, books, students, or classrooms and only two months to open the school. Technically, my small staff and I worked for the county vocational-technical school district, but in reality we had little to do with the vocational-technical school district.

A representative from the county office of education told me in confidence that my assignment was an impossible one, to rescue young people who had been considered lost by the educational system; to keep the sending high schools satisfied; and to do all this on a college campus that had virtually no idea of the school I was supposed to open on their site, and to keep college administration, faculty, and staff happy. The principal of a high school that would send us students told me my job was to create a school for what he described as a county-wide all-star team of troubled youth.

I opened the school on time, but was completely unprepared emotionally for this challenge. There were no courses that could have prepared me. How do you learn to take a knife off an angry seventeen-year-old, two-hundred-pound boy who wants to hurt the world? What do you say to a sixteen-year-old girl who is pregnant and thinking about suicide?

My students were racing to devour the greatest volume of gratification of life before it killed them. Many of these kids would come from families trapped in poverty and living on dimly lit streets where hope had deserted long ago. Others would come from middle class backgrounds but were afflicted by drug and alcohol addiction, which were like oxygen to some. Many came from dysfunctional families, psychological and emotional turmoil, and had learning disabilities. A few had children themselves. Several had been sentenced to juvenile facilities. Some struggled with their emerging sexuality. Several were gifted but with no interest in school. We had members of Black and Mexican gangs, as well as white supremacists. Some were just plain weird and to be called weird at the alternative school was a definition of weird raised to an almost unimaginable exponential power.

Many of the adults I would interact with believed these throw-away adolescents needed a good, old fashion ass-kicking to scare them straight. Some adults, including other educators,

resented my students being offered a second chance on a college campus where they had opportunities for jobs, internships, and to take college classes on a tuition-free basis. We were accused of rewarding bad behavior, to which I would always reply that we were not rewarding bad behavior but changed behavior. Some thought these kids should be locked up and the key thrown away. They wanted me to be the John Wayne of school leadership. I rejected the get-tough approach as foolish and unprofessional. I told my small staff that we would try to create a sense of family.

The alternative high school experience proved life-changing for me. I dealt with crisis after crisis. In fact, I became as used to facing crises as the sun rising in the morning and setting in the evening. In less time than you might imagine, the shallow and egotistical me began to change. I didn't have the luxury to be shallow and egotistical any longer. Too many kids were counting on me. Too many needed rescuing.

Our first two deaths, both by car accident, occurred in June at the end of the first year. I had been very close to both students. Over the years at the alternative school, more deaths would follow. The big four were car accidents, gang activity, suicides, and drug overdoses. The mother of the first to die, a seventeen-year-old girl, asked me to say a few words at her viewing. I assumed that there would be a priest or minister at the service, but that assumption proved wrong. There were several hundred people in the funeral home. Most were students. I had prepared some brief remarks but was totally unprepared to speak to so many people and to say something of substance. I did the best I could. And that night, I could actually feel myself changing. I was a different person walking out of that funeral home than the man who had walked in.

My job was to rescue at-risk kids. In performing my job, those kids actually rescued me. The lesson I learned in my years at the alternative high school was one that will remain forever with me. We can learn, change, and grow from hardship and adversity. My experiences taught me that hardship and adversity can bring unexpected gifts.

My third story is about my father. While my first story took six months and the second several years, though my father is gone, his story still affects me today.

I always resented how little time my father spent with me when I was growing up. I don't recall ever calling him my dad—not even once. The word “dad” somehow seemed intimate, and there was just too much distance between us for me to call him dad.

I was the youngest of three children. My father was fifty when I was born, and some of my friends thought he was my grandfather. He was a good man with traditional values who believed in the virtue of hard work above all else. My father was a talented trumpet player and owned a music store in Camden, New Jersey, one of the poorest and most dangerous cities in America. He opened his store during the Big Band era of the 1940s and made a marginal living until the early 1960s when Camden had deteriorated, inter-state highways and shopping malls were built nearby, the growing suburbs drew people out of the city, and the British Invasion

changed the music business forever. All these events led to the demise of my father's business, but he did not understand such trends and hung on grimly for another fifteen years.

My family never had any money. Neither of my parents completed the tenth grade. We never went out to dinner and never went on a family vacation. If something was broken in our home, rather than bother my father and keep him from work, my mother would ask her alcoholic brother to attempt to fix it, being careful not to pay my uncle up front for fear he would disappear on a drinking binge. I cannot recall even a single meaningful conversation my father ever had with me. Never once did he say "Goodnight" to me when I went up to bed or greet me with a "Good morning" when I came into the kitchen for breakfast. When he got home in the evening, more often than not, he fell asleep spread out on his big Lazy Boy easy chair. And once when I was a little boy going to bed I playfully tapped him on his belly as I was leaving the living room and going to my bedroom; he was dozing at the time and I startled him awake and he looked up at me and angrily said, "What's going on?" I felt something freeze in my heart in my relationship with him.

There were times when my mother would leave the house go out to visit a friend or her sister and I'd wonder whether my father and I would have any conversation with me or my brothers. But he would seldom say anything to us and he never played with us such as going out in the back yard to throw a ball back and forth or something. He was kind of the anti-Ward Cleaver, the kindly dad of Wally and the Beaver on *Leave It to Beaver*, who would counsel his sons on the challenges of life in every episode. I remember wishing that my father could be more like that TV father. And I will never forget the painful feeling I sometimes got—as if I didn't exist--when my father and I were alone but he would not talk to me.

My father worked six days a week in his music store and on Sundays, he would give private music lessons in our home. I'd see him interact with the kids he would be coaching and wonder all the more why he would not have time for me. I understand now that my father believed that if he could just work more hours, then he could better provide for his wife and three children. I think he was a great believer in the idea that hard work was the foundation of the American Dream.

We finally convinced my father to retire after he was the victim of a third armed holdup in his little music store. My father was seventy-five by then, and though he continued to give private music lessons at home, he seemed lost without his music store and ill-equipped to enjoy retired life. Meanwhile, as I grew older, the resentment I felt for my father spending so little time with me turned to a mix of admiration and sadness. I admired my father for his long commitment to support his family to the best of his ability. I felt sad for my father because he seemed empty and lost without his work and because he remained disconnected from a family life with his children. When he died after a quick illness, I mourned the person he could have been if he had given more time to his family.

The hard and sad lesson I learned from observing him was that a strong work ethic is not enough; one needs to cultivate meaningful relationships to have a full and rich life, and those relationships begin with the members of one's own family.

LIVE LIFE BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE!

Tanya Savory

Sometimes it's a little blurry trying to remember exactly what important lessons about life I was taught and which ones either permeated slowly into my consciousness over the years or seemed to show up in a surprisingly unexpected manner. Of course, even the life lessons that parents, teachers, friends, and others work to instill in us often don't really take hold until *we* teach them to ourselves, either through heeding or ignoring. "It's only through hard work that you will achieve your goals" sounds boring to a teenager until, a few years later, that job she wanted or the college she hoped to get into evaporates due to laziness. Lesson learned. "Don't cheat," "Take time to appreciate your friends and family," "Watch your temper," and so on are all important lessons that we often learn through trial and error, but, typically, we're guided in the right direction by others.

But what about those revelations that we learn all on our own solely through the benefit of living our lives and absorbing the world around us? Three distinct lessons come to mind for me.

The first lesson's seed was planted when I was fairly young, and it was the result of listening to a conversation. I was about ten years old, and my dad was sitting out on our front porch talking to Mr. Thompson about crabgrass. Clearly, the topic of crabgrass was not exactly exciting for a ten-year-old girl, but I was bored on a long summer afternoon, so I had gone out to stare at Mr. Thompson. He was an older man who drove around in a beat-up pickup truck loaded with mowers, shovels, rakes, clippers and a dozen other lawn-related tools. He wore a floppy straw hat and sometimes gave me a piece of bubblegum. My dad generally took care of our yard, but every now and then he would hire Mr. Thompson to do some of the more complicated or skilled landscaping chores. On this particular afternoon, Mr. Thompson had spent an hour or so throwing handfuls of little pellets around our front yard and then getting down on his hands and knees to measure something in the dirt.

As usual, my dad offered Mr. Thompson a glass of iced tea when he was finished, and on this particularly hot afternoon, he really looked like he needed it. I always felt kind of bad for

Mr. Thompson, because he was about the same age as my grandad and here he was digging around in our yard in 90-degree heat. I wondered if he'd rather be doing literally anything else. After a good fifteen minutes of tedious chat about mulch and weeds, Mr. Thompson stretched and said, "Well, I expect you got better things to do than talk to an old gardener."

"I don't know about that," my dad said.

"A college professor and all," Mr. Thompson said, nodding at my dad. "Now that's something. I didn't even finish high school. We're 'bout different as night and day."

My dad shrugged his shoulders. "But you obviously love what you do."

I looked at my dad to see if he was joking. Who on earth *wants* to work in a yard? Was Dad making fun of Mr. Thompson? I glanced nervously back at the old gardener.

But Mr. Thompson just thought for a moment and said, "Well, there are some bad days now and then, but being outside and making the green more green—there's nothing else I'd rather be doing. Except maybe being at the beach." He winked at me when he said that.

"Then that's all that matters," my dad replied. "We're pretty much the same."

Mr. Thompson looked surprised. Then he laughed and said, "Well, I never thought of it that way."

At the time, I don't remember thinking too much about what my dad had said, but that conversation stayed with me. As I grew up, I often thought back on the idea that if you're happy with what you're doing and who you are, then you're no greater or lesser than the next person—regardless of background, popularity, or status. You can't and shouldn't demand any more respect than anyone else simply based upon what you might perceive as your own "importance." That wasn't always the easiest thing to remember in high school when pecking order and popularity, based on any number of ridiculous things, was at its peak. I was neither popular nor unpopular, falling more into the "invisible" group. But even in my invisibility, I was constantly aware of how some of the kids who had money, cars, or good looks thought they were automatically better, and they demanded respect they often didn't deserve. That left a pretty big impression on me.

Luckily, my invisible friends and I were all learning the important lesson that we were just as worthy as anyone. It seems like that should be an obvious lesson, but it's often one of the hardest to learn at that age. There were the kids that never caught on, that walked around with their heads down, fearful, and easy targets. One student, in particular, Heyward, sticks in my

memory. The self-important guys passed him in the hallway and called him “Hey Weird” because he had cheap clothes, thick glasses, and a bad haircut. Sometimes, they pushed him around or worse. It got so bad that, one day, he just stopped coming to school. I never knew what happened to Heyward, but I hope he eventually realized he was worthy.

Mr. Thompson is long gone by now, but that conversation he had with my dad lives on in me. As I got older, the basic point of the lesson—no one is better than anyone else—played a fundamental role in the way that I looked at the world around me and in the friends I made. I never cared too much about what kind of car someone drove, what they wore, or how important their job was. I tended to be more impressed by talent, humor, and curiosity. As a result, my friends ranged (and still range) from dog groomers to songwriters to surgeons to old gardeners. Adults are often no less absurd than high schoolers when it comes to the “type” of friends they think they should have and the “caliber” of people they think they should be seen with, and that’s too bad. It seems like that would make for a pretty dull existence. Half a century later, I’m thankful that that seed of “we’re pretty much the same” was planted in my ten-year-old brain. It certainly produced a rich crop of experiences and friendships.

A second important lesson may have begun on the high dive at the nearby public swimming pool that same summer. It was another hot afternoon, and the neighborhood kids were lined up at the ladder to the diving board that seemed to loom a mile above my head. It was a rite of passage for any boy over the age of about ten to have already jumped off this particularly scary board, but at that time (1971), it was a little more radical for a young girl to do it. As a result, all eyes were on me as I climbed the ladder. Once at the top, I wondered if I had made a grave mistake. This was really scary! What if I made a fool of myself? What if it didn’t turn out the way I hoped it would? No matter. I had made up my mind, and there I was, so I gritted my teeth, held my breath, and took the leap.

I lived! Other kids clapped for me! What’s more, I was proud of myself and discovered that I could do something that frightened me. That discovery, and the joy it brought me, would stay with me the rest of my life. Of course, as children and then teens, much of what we experience is new and often rather daunting (giving a class presentation, driving, dating, puberty), and we really don’t have much of a choice in the matter. And other risks (skydiving, joining the circus, driving across the country) are limited by age and parental control. But what about when we become adults?

I think we absolutely should keep jumping off high dives. As Eleanor Roosevelt famously said, “You must do the things you think you cannot do.” She also recommended doing something every day that scares you. I don’t know about every day, since I also believe in relaxing, but there’s nothing like an unnerving challenge or, at the very least, an out-of-the-comfort-zone experience to make you feel good about yourself. When I was younger, this “lesson” was not one that always thrilled my parents. In my early twenties, I moved 3000 miles across the country, without a job or even a solid plan, just to see what that would be like. My parents worried about me, but they didn’t try to stop me. It was a lesson they had learned themselves decades earlier when, newly married and also in their early twenties, they sailed to Europe with very little money and no real plan, much to their own parents’ consternation. They returned to the USA three months later, flat broke but infinitely richer. More than sixty years later, at ninety years old, my mom still reminisces about that adventure, often saying, “I can’t believe we did that, but I’m so glad we did. The things we saw and the people we met!” I never heard the tale of their journey until I was older. My parents, obviously mirroring their own parents’ concern, were likely “worried” that I might follow in their footsteps. I did.

In the years that followed, I suppose I might have been better off financially and had a lot more so-called security if I had settled down quickly and pursued a career that used my college degree, but in addition to adhering to the high dive lesson, I was also following what I’d learned from the Mr. Thompson conversation: I loved what I was doing, so why worry about what I was “supposed” to be doing? Why compare myself to others? This was my life, so I continued to do things that often challenged and even scared me. I drove alone to Alaska to work in a truly gross fish cannery for a summer. I wrote songs and played them for small audiences. I moved to Nashville to play for bigger audiences and to *really* scare myself. I returned to college in my forties to pursue writing, nearly old enough to be the mother of some of the students in my classes. But here I am at 62, writing.

This is not to say that every challenge was a big shiny success. I had a flat tire in the Yukon on my way to Alaska and waited half a day on the side of an empty highway just to flag down a stranger. In my many years of playing music, I played to some empty rooms and got some not-great reviews. Sometimes I stare at blank pages and think I’ll never write anything interesting again. Taking risks obviously isn’t a celebration of nonstop reward; sometimes it’s stress and second guessing. But, to me, the reward received from taking chances is enough

despite the downsides. Eleanor Roosevelt explained it this way: “You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face.” Every time I’ve done the thing I thought I couldn’t do, my life has gotten a little richer.

Which brings me to my third lesson learned. It is certainly not a unique lesson, and, in fact, if you live long enough, it’s universally learned and perhaps a bit trite to point out. Even so, I’ve learned, through living, that life is short and passes surprisingly quickly. Back when I was ten, bored on a summer day and listening to my dad chat with a gardener, the length of my life was the last thing on my mind, and the days often moved along interminably slowly. Mr. Thompson, like my grandparents, seemed ancient to me. It was incomprehensible that I would ever be someone like *that*. Tomorrow was guaranteed.

Although I had more than one friend who died quite young, including one who was only 19, the reality of the brevity of life didn’t really hit me until I was old enough (probably about Mr. Thompson’s age) to have a concept of just how much time I have left on this earth—if I’m lucky enough, that is, to live into old age. Once you’ve lived far more years than you have left to live, you begin to do the math and realize that the years have gone by remarkably quickly. For me, this “lesson” came as something of a surprise, though I’m not sure exactly why. Perhaps this is true for others. After all, it is a common experience when we’re young to think life just goes on and on; why wouldn’t it be equally common to be a bit startled by the realization that life is short and suddenly getting exponentially shorter?

The good news is that the first two lessons have eased the reality of the third. No one lives a life free of regrets, but I don’t feel that I have many. Of course, I still have things I want to do, places I want to see, and people I want to meet, but if I died tomorrow, I would be glad for the life I lived: the people I knew and the chances I took. Naturally, not everyone I’ve known has been great nor have all the chances I’ve taken turned out well (a particularly disastrous camping expedition that ended in mud and a hailstorm comes to mind), but no one ever sits around in old age and laments having loved too many people or having had too many experiences.

And, finally, all three life lessons have intertwined in their way to clearly spell out the main lesson: *live* life. Don’t sell yourself short by worrying about how you compare to others, and don’t sell your chances to meet others short by judging others unworthy. And remain curious about challenging and even scaring yourself. Settling for the comfort zone may be comfortable, but it’s not particularly rewarding. And going outside the comfort zone doesn’t have to involve

driving to Alaska or singing in front of people; it can be just as scary to tell someone you love them or to be honest with a friend about something difficult or to run in a three-mile race.

Eleanor Roosevelt summed it up by noting that, “The purpose of life is to live it, to taste experience to the utmost, to reach out eagerly and without fear for newer and richer experience.” If I’m lucky enough to live to ninety, I hope, like my mother, to look back on the years with a mix of disbelief and gratitude and to be able to say, “I can’t believe I did that, but I’m so glad I did. The things I saw and the people I met!”