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# QUOTES FROM THE EDGE OF NOWHERE

The Art of Noticing Unnoticed Life Wisdoms

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Gary Lewis LeRoy, MD, FAAFP



## “Fate has its virtue.”

In this book’s introduction, I explained how I randomly selected the 10 quotes for each chapter by putting a copy of each quote into a kitchen cookie jar – similar to the one that sat on the top of my mother’s refrigerator for most of my childhood. I pulled each slip of paper containing a quote out of the jar to determine which 10 to use as chapter themes (there were about 80 quotes in the jar). I wrote each chapter in the sequence I drew quotes from the jar. During the process of reading the emerging pieces of paper, I was tempted to change the order of the 10 quotes or to repeat the exercise until I got an arrangement of quotes I preferred. I did neither. If fate was truly going to assist me in the construction of this project, something told me I should not interfere. When I looked at the quote typed on the final folded slip of paper, the four

words staring back at me were “Fate has its virtue.” Lesson learned. It seemed appropriate to conclude the final chapter of this little book with my oldest and briefest uttering from the edge of nowhere.

I spent nine of my first 13 years of life roaming the echoing halls of Longfellow Elementary School. I left the mammoth red brick building with the ornate gray slate roof for the last time after my 8th grade graduation ceremony concluded. Constructed in 1860, the original building (called the 11<sup>th</sup> District School) inherited the name Longfellow School upon completion of its two additions in 1950. With the exclusion of my cousins who lived on the other side of Dayton, OH, practically every kid I knew up to that point in my life attended Longfellow Elementary. On Longfellow’s black asphalt playground, I learned what I thought were all of the essential secrets of life. From kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade, I learned the alphabet and how to tie my shoes; write my name in cursive; recite the pledge of allegiance; play well with others; shoot marbles and win; and hang upside down from the top rung of the boys’ monkey bars without falling. I figured out that girls were actually “kind of” interesting to be around; that life is not always fair; that even kids can die; and that bullies

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are scary. And, oh yeah, I also learned about arithmetic, science, and social studies. Without a doubt, the best thing I learned was how to read chapter books that did not have pictures in them.

After my 8<sup>th</sup> grade graduation ceremony, my mother and I began our walk through the neighborhood back home. As we were waiting for the light to change at the crosswalk just outside the school building, I looked back and pointed up at the new large white and green plywood sign hanging from the black iron fire escape on the side of the Longfellow school building. At the end of the school year, students made the sign in shop class. Reportedly, people unfamiliar with the ancient building on Salem Avenue did not know it was a school. So students participated in a contest to come up with a slogan and a sign to place on the side of the building to identify it. I proudly told my mother how our art teacher selected me to help paint the plywood sign white and fill in the large green letters she had outlined with the slogan: This is Longfellow where we try harder to make school better. It hung on that fire escape for nearly 20 years before weathering forced its removal. As a young adult, every time I drove by Longfellow I would look up at my sign. It reminded me of all those wonderful and whimsical years of life I spent within that grand old building. It also reminded me of friends who left my life.

I still vividly recall one particular summer evening after our 8<sup>th</sup> grade graduation, but before the beginning of high school. We had the summer free to do whatever our young hearts desired. We were officially teenagers! At our graduation, we sang songs of hope and gave speeches about how we would someday make the world a better place for future generations. We knew we had all the answers to life's puzzling questions. We would certainly get around to solving these problems once we completed the process of growing up and having fun.

Every summer my best friend, James, and his siblings would go to East St. Louis to stay with their father. They returned to Dayton prior to the beginning of the new school year. On the day of James' scheduled return, I scampered over to James' house to welcome him back home and catch up on "stuff." James and I lived one small city block (about half the length of a football field) away from each other.

A block long section of asphalt-paved alley separated the backyard of his house from the front yard of mine. Traveling east from James' backyard, the section of the alley merged onto Williams Street in front of my house. In the winter, when the tree foliage was absent, I could stand on my porch and see the outer edge of James' backyard, precisely the spot where they placed their large metal garbage cans at the alley's edge for pick-up on trash day.

I was somewhat surprised to see James sitting on a large rock at the alley's edge talking to two other boys I didn't know. James was a handsome youth. His skin was the color of the light caramel we dipped apples in. His sandy brown curly afro had grown noticeably in length during his hiatus from Dayton. James had what my mother classified as "good hair." I guessed that meant what I was growing on top of my head was "bad hair." Along with our hair, both of us had also grown in height during our summer absence from each other. But, this particular summer James had grown in more ways than height. I detected some facial hair emerging from above his upper lip. He was back in Dayton with a new hairdo, more vertical height, facial hair, and new friends. Other than maybe being a half-inch taller, I was still the same skinny kid with bad hair who had graduated from Longfellow Elementary in early June. James introduced me to the other two boys. To this day, I do not recall their names. I don't remember what they looked like. I just stood silently with my head down pretending to be interested in kicking rocks around in the dirt while they continued with their conversation. I desperately wished the two strangers would leave so I could talk to James about the stuff best friends like us talk about. Nothing the three of them were discussing seemed relevant to me. I suddenly felt a flash of fear that I had not only lost my best friend for the summer, but that James was about replace me with a more mature group of guy friends who could talk about things real teenagers valued. Maybe they had all come of age during the summer while I was languishing both physically and emotionally in an extended childhood.

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While I listened for opportunities to provide comments to the conversation, I glanced over at James. He was still sitting on the large rock now with a stick in his hand, writing something in the dirt as he listened to the other two boys' banter. He was preoccupied with whatever words or artwork he was creating in the dirt when a stray black dog came up to him. The dog positioned itself over whatever James had been scribbling in the dirt. James began to pet the dog and talking doggy to it. That was the James I knew and loved. I knew he was in there somewhere. Maybe he was just hanging out with these boys to be cool.



The summer days were longer than at any time of the year, but the sun had begun to drop beneath the horizon enough to cause the white glow of the alley's street light to become noticeable. To this day, I still do not know why, but I suddenly experienced an overwhelming sense of fatigue. Both the emerging evening darkness and exhaustion seemed to blanket me simultaneously. James was still playing with the dog while the other two boys remained absorbed in their own conversation about a topic foreign to me. I told James and the others good-bye. During the introductions, I learned that the two other boys lived about a block east of my house. Since school hadn't started back yet, I normally would have just hung out with James until late in the evening. But tonight, I seemed to be the odd man out in the group, so I took the opportunity to go home and get in bed early. Perhaps my exhaustion was less physical and more emotional due to my sad thoughts of potentially losing my best friend forever.

I slowly walked back through the alley toward home. With bowed head, I watched each of my steps, thinking about what I had experienced. Why didn't I grow up as much as James did that summer? Who was going to be my best friend if James didn't want to be my friend anymore? Half way home, the alley light on the post revealed a few large interesting rocks I could kick along the way as I thought about James. When I got home, I immediately went upstairs to my bedroom. I quickly peeled off my clothes and got in bed. Sleep captured me instantaneously.

Deep in sleep, I was stunned to near consciousness by what sounded like a canon firing. A second booming sound rattled the windows of the house and several loose objects in my room. Then I heard tires squealing in the distance followed by a car rapidly accelerating south on Williams Street toward my house. The sound of the car quickly faded into the quiet of the night. I felt my heart racing, but I did not get out of bed to inquire about the sequence of unusual sounds emanating from outside. Within seconds, my unrelenting need for sleep recaptured me. I did not recall hearing any other awakening sounds for the remainder of the night.

The next morning, I went downstairs to the kitchen and saw my mother sitting at the table drinking a cup of coffee and watching the morning news on our portable television. The television news reporter described a fatal drive-by shooting that had occurred in Dayton last night. The suspect randomly shot two boys from his car at the corner of Williams and Holt Street. One boy died from his wounds. As I was absorbing the news from the television, I realized that the canon blasts I thought were a dream were actually the sound of a shotgun firing. I looked at my mother's sad, concerned face. I had never seen her cry about anything, but her eyes revealed evidence of prior tears. She struggled to explain to me how James was the fatally wounded victim in the incident reported on TV.

Everything else that day was a mental blur. I just kept remembering the last hour I spent with James. He seemed so at peace with his young life. Even the little

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black dog who approached him in the alley selected James that night providing him with a moment of loving attention. The events of the fateful evening replayed in my head all day long. If the other two boys hadn't been there, I wouldn't have decided to go home early. James and I would have been the ones under the streetlight when the stranger with the shotgun drove by looking for young black males to shoot. (Author's Note: Years later, authorities apprehended the deranged killer as he attempted to gain entry to a federal court building with the intent of murdering a federal judge. The man was angry about the legal enforcement of federally mandated school busing in the city. The series of shots were his method of protesting the court orders). If fate had not stricken me with a sudden overwhelming sense of fatigue, I probably would have walked home with James and the two other boys to the corner of Holt and Williams Street, instead of detouring through the alley. We had few fears back then. Most likely, the boys continued their conversation as James walked the other boys back home when the man with the shotgun spotted them. When I left James for the last time that evening, fearing I was about to lose my best friend, I did not realize how prophetic my unshakable fear had been. I never imagined how swiftly and tragically I would permanently lose my best friend. Had I not been safe in bed sleeping at that fateful hour, my mother might have been sitting alone at our kitchen table that morning watching reports about the death of her son and his best friend, James. I think she would have cried.

As children, James and I shared mountains of comic books, played cowboys and Indians, cops and robbers, pretended to be heroic soldiers, master spies, and superheroes. We could talk about anything without fear of reprisal. We were going to go on to enjoy high school together. We were going to save the world together. We were going to be best friends forever - but fate intervened to change all of our most hopeful dreams.

**“Fate has its virtue.”**

As I pondered the origins of these quotes, I was amazed that the 10 chosen for each chapter of this book somehow flowed together in a logical fashion. When I initially stood at my kitchen counter looking at the slips of paper I had

sequentially pulled from the cookie jar, I did not see how each chapter could possibly transition into the next in a meaningful way. Each quote seemed so random. Each quote arrived at random periods of my life, often separated by decades of life experiences. As I read this last slip of paper with the quote, “Fate has its virtue,” I realized it was the first quote I took the notion to write down nearly 30 years ago. Prior to that time, I simply carried them around in my thoughts.

Given the perplexing task of someday weaving this random sequence of quotes into a book, I initially considered either reorganizing the quotes into a more desired chronology or, better still, just going through the quotes to select the quotes I felt most comfortable writing about. Life got in the way, causing me to put the project away for over a year. Another life event caused me to remember the content of the cookie jar setting atop my refrigerator. Fate brought me back to the 10 little slips of paper with the quotes written on them. After a year's absence from the project, something inside me had certainly changed or evolved. I suddenly realized how life's events are like the sequence of those 10 little quotes. Each quote was a reverberation of wisdom acquired from an earlier salient life experience. With time, each quote assisted me in achieving a better understanding of the complex world of human events surrounding me. Thus, I resisted the temptation to reorder the chapters. I simply began to write each chapter when inspired to do so in the sequence fate had intended. If someone read the book in a different sequence, hopefully, the virtue of fate would provide an appropriate narrative meaning to the reader.

Our lives are akin to an intentional novel created every day about our existence here on earth. It begins with our introduction at birth. Our parents, having written multiple chapters of their own life's book, provide us with the basic table of contents we need to learn how to begin our life novel. At some point early in our existence, our trusted guardian(s) preemptively prepare our book with pages of their desired life outcomes for us based on their dreams

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and expectations. Yes, once upon a time those who loved us most wished us to only to live a life of “happily ever after.”

Our guardians' prescribed sections of our life book would follow this basic sequence:

- 1) **Childhood:** With each chapter, we become increasingly more aware of the world around us during our years of biological growth;
- 2) **Adolescence:** We determine how to effectively exist independent of our guardian(s);
- 3) **Young Adult:** We develop a biological and emotional desire to give love and be intimately loved by another human being;
- 4) **Adult:** We seek a vocation to provide us with the basic necessities of human existence;
- 5) **Advanced Adult Years:** We produce and nurture offspring to perpetuate our legacy of having once existed here on earth; and
- 6) **Golden Years of Life:** With age comes the increased probability of disease and physical deterioration, thus, we retire to rest and review each chapter of the life story we have created.

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**“At any moment, fate can intervene to create a new life chapter. Fate has both its perils and its virtues.”**

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These six basic sections of our book of life have multiple chapters based on salient events that unexpectedly alter intended life outcomes. Unlike book chapters, these sections of life have no hard cutoffs or boundaries. Time and biological forces do not permit us to rearrange them in a desired sequence. Some teenagers may think that, based on their vast life experience, they have more knowledge of life's secrets than those individuals who have lived the later chapters of life. What they do possess is the advantage of freedom from the dogmatic self-inflicted social constraints that many adults have written into their lives as boundaries.

At any moment, fate can intervene to create a new life chapter. Fate has both its perils and its virtues. During our formative years of life, we begin to discover how the world

around us is supposed to work. Because childhood is the fertile soil where our moral, spiritual, and ethical values are rooted, certain disruptions of fate during this section of our life can linger for a lifetime. If you have been reading this book in chapter sequence you may have noticed how most of the introductions to each quote began with a story from my formative years of development. Our childhood/adolescence is the substrate from which we grow our adult emotional health and stability. Childhood/adolescence can also be the unfortunate, dark cauldron from which our life's demons and dragons (abuse, addiction, prejudice, greed, disregard for life, etc.) arise to haunt us throughout our adult years.

During each era of life, a new chapter develops and fate creates an unexpected plot twist. So, let's take a moment for a final pop quiz on life expectations:

- Are you in the vocation you expected to be doing when you left high school?
- How many of your friends have changed their vocation since college?
- How many times have you said to yourself, “That would never happen to me,” only to have fate prove that you do not have total control over how your life chapters will be edited?
- Just because you have always done everything according to the accepted social/cultural norms, has as your life always (at least 80% of the time) gone the way you planned it?

When asked, many extremely successful people living out their golden years admit a random sequence of unanticipated events was the nidus of their ultimate success. While they were developing their carefully scripted chapters of life, fate intervened with failures, misfortune, death, disease, misadventures, or missed opportunities. Fate also revealed opportunities for success, good fortune, the birth of new ideas, miraculous cures, joyfully unexpected adventures, new companionships, and infinite opportunities. In order to get to the latter chapters of joy we often have to struggle through the initial chapters of misery. Each of these twists of fate punctuate a necessary section of life. They are unavoidable and should

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be an expected variable of life. Instead of cursing your fate in life, celebrate it as an opportunity to gain another foothold in climbing toward unimagined life summits.

The virtue of fate will come disguised in many ways. It may arrive as a poolside bully or a soulmate you unexpectedly meet while on a walk in the park. It may arrive on your journey to find truth and wisdom during a contentious debate. A virtuous twist of fate could come to you while trapped in the darkness of an unanticipated life situation; or in a fictional story conjured up in a dream. It could also arrive with the death or loss of someone you loved dearly. Fate has its virtue, prompting you to write your next life chapter when the time is correct to do so. Review your life chapters and learn from each. When adversity arrives, prayerfully wait in silence for fate and circumstance to grant you a special delivery message of salvation from the edge of nowhere.



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**“The louder I give love, the more I will experience the immeasurable reverberating joy of a life well lived.**

**We write our book of life; but God has ownership of the entire library.”**