UPWARD BOUND JOURNAL
SPIRITUAL LESSONS FOR YOUR PERSONAL GROWTH
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God Works In Mysterious Ways

From the time we are young we all have a curiosity of how our life will turn out, or our desires to make it what we dream. And yet for all our wonderings and determinations, much of life ahead is a mystery. We just don't know how it all will turn out. Our parent's desires for us are much the same; become a business success, a doctor or leader of some sort, escape from the wrong side of the tracks or take over the family business. Fulfill their unfulfilled dreams, or at least get married, have children and a home of your own and the comfortable life that goes with it.

And yet, the reality of the future is and always will be, a mystery. We simply can't know what lies ahead, where our life path will take us or how long or short it will be.

When I was in high school the son of a prominent newspaper editor sat across from me. He was an active skier, excellent student, and looking at a rich future. But one Monday morning his seat was empty. Over the weekend he had been killed in an avalanche on the ski slopes, his life abruptly ended before it could even begin. What would his future have been? His life story became unwritten and unfinished; a mystery. But at that same time all of our life stories were mysteries. At a recent class reunion several of my classmates got together, reminiscing about our experiences, our memories. A common thread in all our life stories was the unfolding of the mystery of life's unexpected journeys and adventures. Did God have a plan for each one of us? Yes. Did we have clue what it would be? No.

I was reminded of this idea a few weeks ago when I met a 97-year-old veteran of World War Two. His name is Russell Hardin and he was just a 21-year-old college student when the war started. A few classes short of graduation, Russ was drafted into the army and sent
to Texas for combat training. His company was preparing to fight the Japanese in Borneo. One morning at muster his drill Sergeant called him aside and told him that the General wanted to see him. He'd never seen a general up close and his first thought was, "what have I done wrong?"

But the General told Russ that the Government had established an education program for service men who qualified, and because he was so close to graduating, he was being offered an opportunity to return to school if he chose to become a doctor, dentist or veterinarian. Russ had grown up wanting to become a Vet and so he agreed immediately.

"Very good," replied the general, "pack up, you leave in the morning."

Russ was so excited that he saluted the general with both hands. Hours later he was off to the University of Indiana and the beginning of a totally different life. I asked Russ if he kept in contact with his army buddies later on, but he said no, he thought most of them were killed in action in Borneo just a few months after he left for veterinary school.

There's no way Russ could have predicted how his life would take such a dramatic turn, and nothing he could have done to make it happen either. It just did. One of life's unexplained mysteries.

From that point on Russell's life just got better and better. He graduated, got married, started his own Veterinary clinic, had two children, built a staff of five associates and began buying land to build a very large pig farm - which is still going strong today.

The big mystery in Russ's life was what saved him from combat in Borneo and put him on a path of veterinary success? Why was his life spared? Did God save him and let the rest of those young men go on purpose? Surely that can't be. God works in mysterious ways . . .
and yet?

It is just part of the mystery of life; one pixel in the billions that make up the “big picture.” But it demonstrates how important life stories like Russell's are in our attempt to understand what life is all about.

What about your life story, or at least the story of an incident or experience that either changed the direction of your life, or defined it. We all have stories that are meaningful, not just to us as individuals, but to everyone else as well. That's the thing about our stories. As different as mine is from yours, when we share them we find both commonalities and deeper understanding. Your story helps explain your behavior, why you say and do things that sometimes might confuse or baffle me. Your stories help me to feel empathy, and empathy is what brings us all closer together. It puts me in your shoes - at least for the moment.

Today we are a nation divided; racially, politically, religiously, economically, and socially. We're even divided in our understanding of science. Empathy and understanding between Conservatives and Liberals is all but non-existent, with little if any effort being put forth on either side to right that wrong. But, the same is true in the racial divide, the religious divide, the economical divide, and the social divide. And in every case we have so much we can learn from each other; so much healing waiting to take place.

Angela Ahrendts (pronounced Errents) is senior vice president of Apple in charge of Apple's retail stores. While brick and mortar retail department stores are going more to on-line sales, tech giant Apple is building brick and mortar stores, not singularly as places to sell their technical products, but as gathering places where people from all techie 'brands' can come together for learning and to exchange ideas. Places where people can connect with each other face to face. Like Starbuck's, Apple has products for sale, but first of all they are
gathering places that serve the need people have for personal connections with one another.

Angela's success in the retail gathering place stems from a deep understanding that people work best when they work together, when they care about each other, when they can feel the connection of mutual trust and empathy for each other. She says, "Empathy is one of the greatest creators of energy" - human energy that is the real source for human accomplishment. "When you're empathetic, you're putting yourself into someone else's shoes."

While she didn't say so directly, the empathetic connection is quickly and meaningfully created when we share our personal stories with one another. How many million people today are searching historic records to find and somehow connect with their ancestors, dating back hundreds of years or as long as records are available. They find when and where their great-great grandparents emigrated here from somewhere in Europe back in the 1700's, and they nearly always come away with the unanswered question, why? What motivated them to leave their families and homeland and risk everything to make their way to this new country. The universal curiosity is about the missing 'back story'. Seeking not only how, but how come? Every one of their stories has that element of mystery.

When my grandparents Frank and Anna came to New York in the 1890's, from separate villages in what is now Poland, they were strangers in a strange new land, and they were young teen-agers alone, getting to know each other simply because they came from a similar place. My grandmother was sent here to earn money for a dowry so her family could marry her to some local man searching for a wife. My grandfather arrived after avoiding Russian soldiers who were conscripting young men from the farm fields in his home village to put in the Russian Army.

One day Frank came by to visit Anna only to find her sitting on a
steamer trunk about to leave and return home. She had received a letter informing her that her parents had found a widower willing to marry this 17-year-old girl. Frank said that was sad news; he was hoping that the two of them would eventually get together. "That's enough for me," Anna replied, and she immediately began to unpack her trunk. Frank and Anna were married very shortly thereafter and moved across the country to Seattle, thus beginning another story about how their daughter Mary met and married an immigrant Swede named Arthur.

I love their story because I obviously wouldn't even be here if Frank hadn't come over to visit the day Anna was preparing to return to Poland. It was God's mysterious ways that brought them together.

Our SunCoast Unity Ministers group recently held a retreat on St. Simons Island, Georgia, at the Methodist Retreat Center. While there, we began to look at the importance of writing our own personal stories and we shared several of them with each other before leaving. While we have known each other for several years in many cases, it was in the telling of our stories to each other that we felt a deeper connection and a bond beyond the fact that we are all ordained Unity ministers. In sharing our stories we felt the empathy that comes from being close to another person and caring about each one at a far greater personal level than we have had in the past. Our stories have entwined our lives, and we are all the richer for it.

Jesus' principal message was to love God first and foremost and to love one another equally. The Gospel stories of His life demonstrate His philosophy and are exemplified in every single act of His recorded life. If we use His story as the example of how to live our lives, we will have learned the ultimate lesson. Jesus put His love of God above money or economic position, above religious laws and restrictions, above secular separation, above social status, above masculine superiority, above tribal or racial color or culture. And He treated everyone with the respect they deserved, healing any and
everyone in need, equally and with His total dedication and ability.

If we re-wrote the four Gospels in contemporary descriptions using Liberals and Conservatives and Jews and Muslims and Christians interchangeably, economic top one per-center's and people on welfare and Medicaid, the have's and the have-not's, perhaps we might develop a better understanding of the mess we have created by not acting like the Christians we pretend to be.

When we say everyone has a story and every story deserves to be told, we are also saying we need to spend more time and energy listening, caring, understanding and empathizing with everyone, especially those we don't know and don't even want to understand. We are all subject to the mysterious ways God works with and through each one of us. We need to write our stories, we need to share our stories and we need to pay attention and look for ways and means that will bring us ALL together, not just some or our favored few, because that is how we will better understand God's love for us.

Novelists will tell you that every story has a beginning, a muddle and an ending. The story of human life is just one gigantic novel with an evolutionary beginning several million years in the development; a muddle in the middle of the mess we call Now; and an unwritten ending that has the potential of being "Happily Ever After," or the slow and painful, ugly demise of life in all forms.

Jesus left us with His story and it is one that can lead to "Happily Ever After," but it is up to each one of us to write those final chapters, mutually, cooperatively and lovingly . . . and Together.

Richest blessings,

Art Holt

Upward Bound Journal #89
“Be still, and know that I am God.” Psalm 46:10

In the stillness of this quiet place, the Presence of God is available to you to give you the peace you seek; “the peace that passes all understanding.” Phil. 4:7.

As you relax into this time of contemplation, perhaps it would be worthwhile to use these moments to allow your cares, concerns and empathy to pour out to each of the people who come to mind, and then to open yourself to feel the care, concern and empathy all those others have for you as well.
If you're feeling something special around all these thoughts it is an awareness of God’s presence in the form of totally accepting love. God loves you more than you love yourself. And God loves everyone, everywhere the same way — just as much as He loves you.

Rest in this awareness for as long as it moves you. Feel the love being given and received. Allow yourself to be filled to overflowing with God’s universal and unconditional love for you. It isn’t necessary for you to say anything or to think anything special. Just be in the sensation of love’s presence.

As you accept your own worthiness and feel the joy of receiving unlimited love, allow yourself to also become aware that everyone in God’s human family is also experiencing the same joy that you are. For every man is your brother; every woman is your sister; every child is your son or daughter; and every adult is your mother or father. And God loves you all, equally and the same, now and forever.

Breathe, Relax and Rest. Life is good and full of more love and kindness than we can possibly use. If there is anything in unlimited supply it is God’s love.

When you are filled and ready to move about once again, you may conclude your time of contemplation with one more life enriching breath. And as you pass by a mirror, pause and look at your reflection. Can you see the deeper side of you and appreciate who and what you are? Now you are seeing what God sees in you.

Amen.
Our thoughts and words create our reality. Let us acknowledge the word that impact our lives in wonderful ways. This time, the word is... *Expectation*.

The word expectation is a little like the level of your faith. It carries with it an awareness that you have both a positive expectation and an element of doubt. Some people have more expectation and some have more doubt.

When you go to a nice restaurant do you expect good food and good service? Do you expect to wait a long time or be seated right away? When you get ready to pursue your hobby (golf, tennis, gardening, photography, etcetera) do you expect to do well, perhaps your personal best? When you need to replace your refrigerator or buy a new car, do you expect the task will be smooth and easy, or challenge you to your core? If you get sick do you expect to get well right away, or do you fear it may just well be symptomatic of something far worse?

Most of us are aware that the thoughts we hold in mind tend to manifest in our lives and that certainly applies to our expectations, whether positive or negative. That can be good news or not so good depending on the level of your expectations.

If you find you have more doubt than positive expectation there is a simple exercise that will align your thoughts with the positive outcome you desire. It is a simple affirmation.

*“Everything always works out for me even better than I expected!”*

Repeat that affirmation as often as you need to until you truly belief it, and watch how wonderfully your expectations will turn out.
“Never lose an opportunity for seeing anything that is beautiful; for beauty is God’s handwriting - a wayside sacrament. Welcome it in every fair face, in every fair sky, in every fair flower. And thank God for it as a cup of His blessing.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson
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Rev. Arthur and Dottie Holt
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Art & Dottie

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