

# Life is what happens to you

IN THE BOOK OF LIFE,  
THE ANSWERS AREN'T IN THE BACK.

*Charlie Brown—Peanuts*

“**W**hen you get what you like in life,” one of our old nuns was fond of repeating to the novices, “Jesus smiles at you. When you don’t get what you like,” she went on, “Jesus reaches down and kisses you.”

It’s not a theology I’d teach with much gusto today, but I got her point. There are things that look very bad for us—in fact, that are very bad for us—that confuse us and anger us and depress us, but

which, in the end, do more for us than sunny days and endless fortune and limitless luck can ever do.

John Lennon put it another way: “Life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans.” And who doesn’t know the truth of that one?

You plan to go back to college and the recession comes and there’s no money for that kind of thing anymore. Now what do you do?

Your mother-in-law is babysitting so you can go on working and she gets cancer. Now what happens to the baby?

You’re already beginning to look for the retirement condo in Florida and your spouse dies. There’s no one to retire with anymore. Now what happens to the rest of life?

Indeed, there are no answers at the end of the book of life. No quick fixes. No ways around the tough parts. Instead, life is what we learn as we live it. And what we learn, as we live it, is what tests and shapes the mettle of our souls.

There is no way to comprehend how to go through grief other than by going through it. There is no way to practice foregoing the hot rage that

comes with feeling ignored or dismissed or found to be “essentially disordered” — for any reason. There is no way to plan for the sense of abandonment you feel in a society that thinks differently from you: because your child is gay, maybe, or because you’re a woman and so automatically considered deficient for the work, perhaps, or because you’re not white in a white world, or because the person you thought was an eternal friend abandoned you.

Those things we need to figure out for ourselves, one situation at a time.

But then, once we have been through those dark and raw moments in life, we discover a newer, better kind of sweetness. We not only find out who other people are, we find out what we are, too. We find out not only how weak we feel but also how strong we can really be in the face of endless pain or mockery or bigotry or the shallowness of self-righteous morality.

Then, we discover that life is not a terminal disease. On the contrary, it is always, and at best, a time of endless development, of choosing to be either more or less than we thought we could be.

Then, we know not only the answers to the

hard periods of life, we know that no question can ever defeat us, can ever make us less than the best of ourselves again.

---

❖ “There’s no way out but through,” the wag said. What the wag didn’t say, however, is that there are some things that, without having gone through them, not even we will be able to know the full truth of ourselves.

❖ It’s not important to answer every question in life. Most of them aren’t worth struggling with. They come today and disappear tomorrow. “It is not every question that deserves an answer,” the Roman philosopher Syrus wrote. Let them go.

❖ Beware those who never doubt that there may be answers beyond their own. They can be very dangerous for the rest of us. “Great evil,” Lynn Andrews wrote, “has been done on earth by people who think they have all the answers.”

- ✧ It takes a great deal of strength to refuse to answer anything of importance too quickly. It is often better to let a newly emerging question answer itself over time than to insist on dealing with it from perspectives too old to be useful to the present situation.
- ✧ We grow in life to greater emotional and moral stature, not because of what we think we know, but because of what we know we don't. "Life," Florida Scott-Maxwell writes, "does not accommodate to you, it shatters you. It is meant to. And it couldn't do it better. Every seed destroys its container or else there would be no fruition."
- ✧ Life is about doing the best you can in the moment in which you find yourself, so that, eventually, you can find yourself even wiser than you now are.
- ✧ To look at life's problems—nuclear proliferation, the pollution of the seas, the oppression of women, the starvation of peoples—as if they belonged to some-

one else other than ourselves, is the greatest of all moral immaturities.

- ❖ There is no similarity whatsoever between being accepting of difficulty and being resigned to it. Where injustice or pain or oppression exist in my life, I must struggle to free those who come after me from what I myself could not avoid.
- ❖ Life is not meant to be perfect. It is meant to be perfectly capable of challenging us to be everything we are meant to be.
- ❖ Life is one long list of instructions, none of which are ever eternally true. Which means that sometimes you simply have to trust yourself.
- ❖ The problem with life is not that we find ourselves in one challenging situation after another. The problem comes when we face no challenges at all. Then we never exercise our mind and soul enough

to equal the growth of our bodies.

- ✧ Don't expect to be given a blueprint to lead you through life. We all create our own.
- ✧ It is not what we've been taught that makes the difference as we go through life. It is the choices we make for ourselves when we are finally forced to choose among them.
- ✧ Life does not get easier as we go along. It only gets to be a question so great that we have no choice but to trust that its answer will be as profound as the problems it poses. Albert Schweitzer said of it: "As we acquire more knowledge, things do not become more comprehensible, but more mysterious."
- ✧ It's not a matter of going through life; it is a matter of growing steadily deeper, always broader, forever wiser.
- ✧ Do not aspire to know it all. Aspire to listen to it all and to respond with

compassion. It is only compassion that makes life livable for anybody.

- ❖ Life is at best an invitation to begin and begin and begin—all over again. It's when we cease to begin that we cease to be fully alive.
- ❖ Discovering our purpose in life is never complete unless we discover it in relation to the rest of the world around us. Anything other than that leaves us with a very small purpose in a very small world called “me.”
- ❖ Discovering ourselves is often a very slow, a very accidental process. People study all their early lives to become one thing and then, along the way, become something very other. Then, we know that the self has trumped the straight-jacket of other people's “expectations.”
- ❖ To be an eternal learner is to live every moment of life fully alive. We never know it all. We can never know too much. We can



never be happy by becoming static. When we stop growing, we stop being really alive.

❖ Folk literature explains the need for challenge both succinctly and poignantly for those who are denied the opportunity to be anything they feel they are called to be in society. “Old lady,” the young woman asks, “what is a woman’s greatest burden?” And the old woman answers her: “Young woman, the greatest burden in life is to have no burden to carry at all.”

❖ Very little of what we learn now will still be considered current knowledge ten years from now. Which means that none of us can rest on last year’s information. “In times of change,” Eric Hoffer wrote, “learners inherit the earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists.”

❖ Don’t be afraid of the unknown. It is, in fact, the doorway to the future. “The

illiterate of the 21st century,” Alvin Toffler said, “will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.”

✧ Life in our times demands new respect for creativity. We must now begin to earn our bread differently, live differently, learn differently, and imagine the future differently. It’s time to strike out and make life what we want it to be.

✧ Don’t wait for someone else to tell you what you should become. Become *it* a piece at a time. Follow your interests and inclinations, and watch your life become what you always wanted it to be.

✧ Never despair of life. It does not depend on what you get in life; it depends on what you do that makes you happy. The artist Pablo Picasso tells us, “I am always doing that which I can not do in order that I may learn how to do it.”