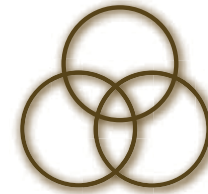


# A Happy Guide to a Short Life



**A Happy Guide to a Short Life**  
A Response to Ms Quindlen's Fine Book

Tony Brown

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For Mom

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Anna Quindlen needs no introduction, certainly none from me. However, for those readers whose attentions are confined to the sports pages, her op-ed column in the *New York Times* won a Pulitzer Prize in 1992. She is the author of 12 books, one of which was made into a movie featuring Meryl Streep and Rene Zellweger. She currently writes a column in *Newsweek*.

I was given her book, *A Short Guide to a Happy Life*, by a friend of mine; a 60 year-old gentleman, who has survived cancer and (I think) works for the CIA as an undercover agent. I read it on a commuter flight from Washington to Charlotte.

I've been told that the book was originally written as a commencement speech. I recommend it to everyone. I don't particularly have any issues with Ms Quindlen's message, but for some reason I was moved to write a response - a reaction to her themes.

The words on the following pages entitled *A Happy Guide to a Short Life* were not intended to do anything other than to continue the spiritual and emotional debate in my mind around several concepts, including happiness, service, gratitude, and love.

The more I thought about my reaction to Ms Quindlen's book, the more I started talking to my friends - Dan, Terry, Mom, Mike, Victor, Deb, Jasper, Bonnie, Miles, Ms Rimmer and a few others. From those loving conversations and communications, this little book was produced. Thanks to all who participated and cared.

Finally, and importantly, I used Ms Quindlen's book as a paragraph-by-paragraph framework to draft the original text of this book. Then I salted in ideas and concepts to illuminate my points and poke fun. There is no attempt to disguise my source of motivation.

Respectfully, I thank you, Ms Anna Quindlen.



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I am somewhat qualified by both profession and education to give advice and counsel on a very narrow subject that has virtually zero existential value. It is a matter of record that I was born a dirt-poor farmer in the mountains of Appalachia and I had nothing to do with that reality.

I have, however, run the Boston Marathon, ridden a bull for 8 seconds; raced a NASCAR late model stock car; fought in a Toughman contest, pole-vaulted 12 feet 6 inches, gotten a private pilot's license, and climbed the highest mountains in the continental United States.

I have an MBA, but most of my friends do too. I've never given a commencement speech, but I have read a picture book to my son's second grade class. I think the New York Yankee's Manager Yogi Berra's advice "When you come to a fork in the road, take it." is both stupid and lazy.

While I can pretty much talk about any topic, I'm not qualified to intelligently discuss anything. I think "simple truths" are complicated lies made up to make you feel in control.



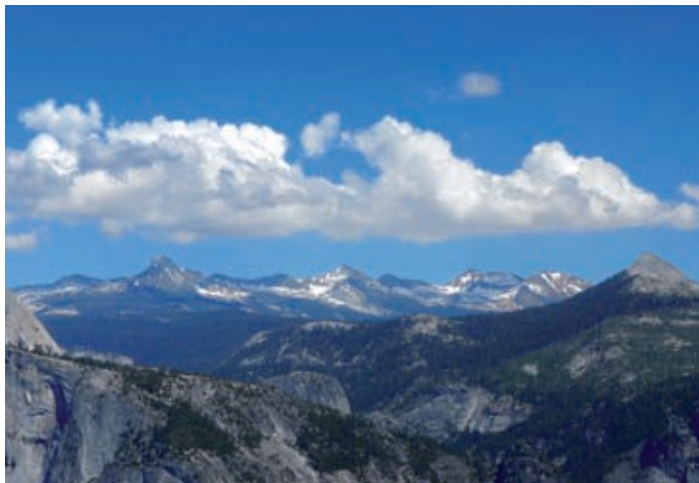
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I am a consultant. I tell people only two things: what they want to hear and what they don't want to hear. Often it is the same thing. Then they pay double. Most clients do not want answers. They want reassurance that they are heading in a good direction. I do that very well.

*I think “simple truths” are  
complicated lies made up  
to make you feel in control.*

By contrast, I do not have the answers to my kids' most important questions. Is there a heaven? Why do children starve? Who invented God? Why do dogs eat poop? Why are you driving 30 when the speed limit is 25? Why do you and Mom argue? When I die, will you be there?

My only answer is that speed limits are man-made, and I live by God's rules. It is actually worse than that. I am a self-proclaimed Contrarian. I feel an evolutionary responsibility not to follow conventional wisdom, silly instructions and some speed limitations.



3

I'm sorry Senator Paul Tsongas got cancer, but I'm happy his friend was not running for President. I think the President of the United States of America should proudly state on his deathbed, "I wish I had spent more time in the Oval Office." World hunger, pollution, and peace deserve more than a part-time work effort.

*I think the President of the United States of America should proudly state on his deathbed, "I wish I had spent more time in the Oval Office."*

"If you win the rat race, you're still a rat" is an incomplete thought based upon the-glass-is-half-empty mindset. "If you are a rat, then be happy to have a race to run. Don't forget, you are doing well for a rat." Most people have very little ability to change their core characteristics, so accept the traits you have. If that means being a workaholic, then so be it. You have to be something.

I'm also sorry John Lennon got shot some 27 years ago. He said, "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans." That is a useless saying in my



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opinion, especially from the guy who penned “Give Peace a Chance.” Life is making plans. Mr Lennon actually promoted a peace plan during the last years of his short life. We MUST plan our lives.

Let me attempt to explain. If you live in the “now” ... right NOW ... then you have a navigational responsibility. The responsibility is to accept that what you are actually doing right now is thinking about what is immediately NEXT.

For my philosophical friends, I respectfully suggest that as soon as you can meditate on “the moment,” as Mr Lennon suggested, it is in the past. Attitudinally, simply resting yourself in the “now” will leave you feeling like life has passed you by. So, if you want to live in the NOW, you must stay slightly out in front of the “now”, as opposed to being in the “now”.

In brief, life is planning. It is all about potential. Life is hope, anticipation, and spiritual planning. The journey of the “soul” is a sole journey, and I believe it is a solo flight worth some pre-flight planning.



*The journey of the “soul” is a sole journey, and I believe it is a solo flight worth some pre-flight planning.*



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If I were asked to talk with graduating seniors, I would tell them that life is not simple, and they have few, if any, unique qualities. I would tell them that the “world” could not care less if they were “successful or happy”.

I would tell them that most of the people I know are unhappy, out-of-shape, American, heterosexual, married once or twice, college-educated, and stressed. I guess that’s why no one has asked me to speak to a class of graduating seniors.

Welcome to life as an imperfect human.

OK. So what? Those are just characteristics. Words. If most people are one thing or another, so what? If most people are NOT one thing or another, so what?

Here's the so what? You have sole custody of yourself and your clock is running. What are you going to do with your mind, body, and soul for the flash of time that you are alive? Life is short ... 90 seconds, 90 days, 90 years... those numbers are no different in the context of Universal Time.

*What are you going to do with  
your mind, body, and soul for the  
flash of time that you are alive?*

Are you going to use those precious units of time in a relentless pursuit to be happy, even if you're a chronically sad person? Let that go, it would be like wishing you were 6 feet your entire life when your God-given height was 4 feet 10 inches.

Most of the world is depressed and unhappy and unsuccessful. So why can't everyone agree that those are just names attached to human characteristics? It's alright. Let it go. You don't HAVE to be happy.

However, if you want to be happy, then you should understand that everyone is given a "happy switch" that they can choose to flip. You and you alone get to decide if you are happy.

You can take the most miserable situation in the world, and if you want to be happy, then no one can stop you. So just being happy is not really a worthwhile ambition. It is too easy and it takes only a second to do.

*just being happy is not  
really a worthwhile ambition.*

The important question, I think, continues to be, "What are you going to do with your mind, body, and soul during your short life?"

I've watched a few people go through the "I'm alive, and they told me I'm going to die" process. Lung and colon cancer, mostly. I watched my Dad go through 6 months of suffering before they pumped his veins so full of morphine it would have killed a 1500 pound Belgian plow horse.

I've seen death. Each time someone I know gets  
“diagnosed” with the BIG C, I do two selfish things:  
(1.) Watch them to see if they come up with any new  
insights to change their mind, body and soul, and  
(2.) ask myself is my mind, body and soul where I  
want them should I be the next one to the death call?

Here's what I've observed while watching my Dad, Uncle,  
Aunt and Grandmothers pass on. They were tall or short  
(body), smart or dumb (mind), as well as spiritually happy  
or sad (soul), all their lives up to the last breath. The core  
characteristics did not change in any significant way that  
I could see.

Looking at, through, and into death's door, everyone I've  
watched die, could not or did not choose to change the core  
characteristics of their humanness. They died just like they  
lived. I have nothing really insightful to report here.  
Here's my résumé: I am a hard-working father of three



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wonderful kids. I have allowed both my work and play to make me a better parent. I consider myself an insignificant, yet involuntarily well-integrated part of the universe. My presence is important to my kids. I need to listen more. I am happy, but I was born with that characteristic. I also have freckles.

I love my wife, and I am confused by my obvious lack of sensitivity. My presence is important to my marriage. I need to listen more. I am optimistic, but I was born with that characteristic. I also have a big nose.

I am a good friend, but I don't have many. I entertain half of the people I meet, the others I piss off royally. I'm not running for Mayor of any town, but I'll climb high mountains to help a friend.

I don't call or bug anyone without needing something. I believe friends should be able to ask and refuse any request of another friend. My physical presence is somewhat unimportant to my friends. My friends and I laugh a lot.



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*I believe friends should be able to ask  
and refuse any request of another friend.*

I would be rotten at my job if I did not have kids, a wife, and friends who are often great clients. The needs of my family and friends give me purpose. I am most grateful that I have people who need me to provide service in work, play and family.

So I suppose the best advice I can give anyone is not really simple. It's tricky to explain and very complicated to execute; make your work, family and friends, and your play into a single-circled Venn Diagram.

For those of you who haven't had the fortune (we'll leave open the debate as to good or bad), to learn about Venn Diagrams, let me give a brief explanation of this graphic tool often used in math classes to visualize logical relationships.

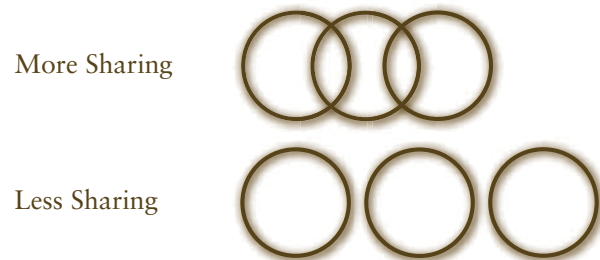


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Just before drawing a Venn Diagram, the Professor will invariably say, “A picture is worth a thousand words.”

A Venn Diagram is a technique invented by John Venn where overlapping circles are utilized to show how much (or little) things are related to each other.

The more overlap of the Venn Diagram circles, the more “sharing” of characteristics between the “overlap” the circles represent.



So, let’s say one circle is your work, another circle is your play and the third circle represents your friends and family. If the three circles are drawn on a piece of paper and they do not touch in any way, then you are the kind of person who “doesn’t bring his or her work



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home, you leave it at the office” or “you do not interact with co-workers or clients outside the office.” Which is fine for some folks, but I believe it is really inefficient.

To optimize your life experiences, my advice is that you take out a piece of paper and draw those three circles (work, play, friends and family) right on top of each other.

Put it another way: make it impossible for anyone to tell at any single point in time if you are at work, play, or doing something for your friends and family.

*make it impossible for anyone  
to tell at any single point in time if you  
are at work, play, or doing something  
for your friends and family.*

That way, you are never supposed to be doing something else. You are in the proper moment. What is in your life of any value that does not fit into one of these three buckets: work, play, or family and friends? If everything you do falls into all these buckets, then you, my friend, have found bliss.



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You will be in the present because anything ahead of, or behind you, will be less important. The “now” you are in, and the one you are about to enter, are saturated with purpose.

*You will be in the present because anything ahead of, or behind you, will be less important.*

Find a job that you love. Make sure your hobbies and outside interests support your job. Work and play with your friends and family. Love your work, love your play, and love your friends and family.

However, do not forget, love is a verb. As my 9 year-old daughter will tell you, a verb is an action word. Love is an action that YOU must perform. Love is not simple no matter what anyone says. It’s complicated. It’s tiring. It takes effort, and the rewards are sometimes hidden.

Write a letter to your kids. Call your Mom. Jog with a buddy. Simply connect with a client, friend or family

member by listening to their problems and set out on the task of finding the solutions. You don’t have to spend a ton of money. You may not have to do anything other than listen.

Be generous with your time and money. Find causes that combine your work, play, and family and friends. “Oh look at Fred, he’s taking his kids to work in the Homeless Shelter where his company is sponsoring a Christmas gift drive for the needy children.”

Is Fred motivated by work, family, or play? Who knows or cares? Fred’s simple activity is providing service to someone less fortunate and covering responsibilities at home and work at the same time.

Live by the words, “You reap what you sow.” Life is a blink. You only have a limited amount of time. Spend it where it counts and has the highest net value: work, play, family and friends. Work hard to plant seeds that will produce fruit for those individuals you care about.





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I have not always understood this idea of efficient generosity and integrated service. I used to believe that one person had the power to change the world; that I could personally have a broad and measurable impact on the human race.

Well, that idea is as misguided as every small boy in the ghetto placing his entire life's ambition on being the next Michael Jordan, forsaking school, family and friends, and other interests to be the .01 percent of the pros who come from 1 percent of college athletes who come from the 10 percent of the high school basketball players. It might happen, but I doubt it. It is a poor statistical bet that you are going to change the world. Let that go.

Thank God, or the Higher Power of your choosing that you have the gifts you have, and set your mind, body, and soul on having an impact on those around you.

If you happen to break out and do something really famous, great. Just don't bet your precious seconds on this planet dreaming about being the next Mahatma Gandhi, when you



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could help your cousin fix her car so she can drive to a job you helped her get at a friend's company. Besides, Gandhi did not set out to change the world. He just started helping those around him.

*Just don't bet your precious seconds  
on this planet dreaming about being the  
next Mahatma Gandhi, when you could  
help your cousin fix her car.*

As I have observed first hand, you'd better be comfortable with dying. You are going to be dead a lot longer than you are going to be alive. Get your head screwed on to the idea that you simply do not "know" what happens after you die.

By observation in nature, it's clear that everything dies and turns into something else. Your body will most definitely do that, and I suspect that your soul will also have an unknown destiny.



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Study the major religions. Develop a theory that you feel makes sense. The theory should include common sense, religious teachings and practical science. Put all that in your intellectual blender and make yourself an existential smoothie.

*make yourself an existential smoothie.*

It simply does not matter what you choose to believe. What matters is that you believe it at your core and don't waste your entire life "searching for the truth."

Let's say you were a dog.

No matter how long a dog ponders his heart, the dog will never understand the shape, function, or relationship between its heart and the rest of the physical body. The dog's brain has no concept or perspective on how the heart does its job. However, the dog still runs rabbits, howls at the moon and loves finding a bone. The same is true for humans and their souls.



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Ponder away, but you will never have the capacity to understand eternal life. So go find something to believe in and move on. Once you have confidence in your beliefs, then you will make choices in a context that should allow you to optimize your physical time on earth.

People who are confident behave differently than those who are insecure. A kid who was the captain of his undefeated basketball team is a perfect example. Three seconds to go, down by 2, he gets the ball ... looks down, steps back 6 inches and drills a 3 pointer to win the game. Why can he do that? Because he is confident.

Why is he so confident? Because he is well-practiced. How did he practice so much with friends at school in other sports, etc.? He was efficient and his life (work, play, friends and family) when drawn as a Venn Diagram of 3 circles would overlap almost completely. His work, play, friends and family “share” the characteristics in his life.



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His friends are on the basketball team, his family loves basketball and any “optional” reading or special projects are about basketball. There is no line between work, play, family and friends.

*There is no line between work,  
play, family and friends.*

You don’t have much time, so you’d better be efficient and focused by combining your priorities. Why is this a good idea? Imagine a guy piloting a private airplane (play), flying with his kids (family) over the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, while on special assignment opening his firm’s office (work) in Oakland.

Out of nowhere, an idiot seaplane operator crashes into his horizontal stabilizer. Everyone dies. OK. What a great way to go! You must go, and you cannot change that fact. Make sure you spend most of your life doing stuff that if you get killed while doing it, you say “Hey, that’s a good way to go.”

Would you rather live to be 96 in a wheelchair, blind, deaf, and tied to an oxygen tube? I've seen that life with my Grandmother. No thanks.

Don't live for tomorrow's rewards. How many people have you heard of that lived for "when I retire" and then die within a year of that glorious date? It makes no sense to think tomorrow will ever really exist. At this point, if you are paying attention, you should be asking, "Isn't that Mr Lennon's point you just rebuked?"

Excellent question. No. It is not the same point. He suggested that you not "plan", and I suggest you not "wish away" your current time in the present hoping for some future outcome. It is a subtle, yet significant attitude.

Don't live in yesterday's memories. How many people have you heard talk about "when I was in school" and never pushed themselves to be any better. It makes no sense to revise history so it brightens up today. It's in the past. Set your mind on doing your best today.

*It makes no sense to revise history so it brightens up today. It's in the past.*

I personally have never suffered any major illness. Therefore, I do not feel particularly qualified to give advice to people who have survived a life-threatening sickness or injury.

What I do feel comfortable commenting on, is that the people I know best, who have "escaped death" are not necessarily any different at their core. If they were cranky people before almost dying, they come through it being cranky. If they were positive people before flirting with the Grim Reaper, they continue to have optimistic outlooks. I guess the "lights come on" for some people, but I find most people don't change. What I believe is that they cling even more tightly to the characteristics that describe them as a person.

Tall people are still tall after almost dying of lung cancer. Could it be that mean people are just mean whether they

are healthy or dying? Some suggest that an individual's "values" become more prominent when their mortality is evident.

OK, so why shouldn't unhappy people continue to be really unhappy when they withstand a serious health challenge? Happiness is a value, not the goal.

The goal should be making the best use of the time you have in this world. Don't waste a single second, because your body starts to decay the millisecond after you are spanked on the bottom. It continues to decay long after they shovel the last pile of dirt on your coffin.

Life is a precious gift. It is wonderful and fleeting. Every person should selfishly dedicate their entire existence to being generous to their friends and family at work and play. If everyone does this, then by definition there would be world peace, a great environment, and hunger would be eliminated.



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Life is the time of your life. Don't think or talk about things that are not important to you. Make sure that every conversation and action has something to do with work, play, and/or family and friends. Even within that very tight and focused framework, you are going to run out of time.

*Life is the time of your life.*

You can be unhappy and you can be a malcontent. It is all right to be unhappy, but stop talking about it. No one wants to hear about it, and you make yourself and everyone around you feel worse. It's simply a waste of time. The glass may be half empty to you, but I promise those negative words are not going to fill it up. Besides, who cares ... take a drink from that glass.

What is the meaning of life? Why do so many people want to search endlessly for an answer or provide a pithy multiple-choice answer? Don't get sucked into this mind game. You are trying to draw a box around the universe, which by definition is beyond your comprehension, much less your pencil.



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Let's say you pondered the meaning of life so long that you actually came to a final conclusion. Then what? Well, you would have finally figured out what the Chinese learned several centuries back; if you really understand the truth, then no one else will understand what you are talking about. It is by definition unexplainable, and you will still die trying to explain what only you figured out.

*Let's say you pondered the meaning of life so long that you actually came to a final conclusion. Then what?*

That was a wasteful detour to make the simple point, focus on what you can affect. Apply your energy and time to friends and family in purposeful ways to explore things that relate to your work and play.

If you do that, the meaning of life will reveal itself in an immediate and obvious way. You will feel the warmth of smiles. You will hear the joy of kindness. You will taste an investment in a child's fantasy. You will smell immediately the calmness in your home and office.



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You should not wait for a disaster to happen to focus your life and commit to efficiency. If trouble has already struck, then there is no time to get started like this second. But if you have found yourself just wandering around in a junk pile of superficial commitments and conversations, then get out the social weed wacker and trim your weekly calendar back to work, play, family and friends.

*get out the social weed wacker and  
trim your weekly calendar back to  
work, play, family and friends.*

I grew up in the country where the rules were simple. Ten Commandments. Golden Rule. Seven Deadly Sins. Boy Scouts. They were not much help dealing with the “gray” which is inherent in becoming an adult. What is a lie? What is the law? What is respect?

Sure, everyone could spout out the politically correct concepts, but when it came to learning to “read between the lines”, there was not a lot of tutoring going on.



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I once read one of those goofy e-mails that talked about a “conversation with God.” I only read the forwarded e-mails that promote my desire to connect with friends and family about whatever is really hot at work or in my hobbies. For the record, I do my level best to never send a “forward” without adding some emotional or intellectual value.

In this particular case, there was a statement to the effect that “most people live like they will never die, and die like they have never lived.” Well, I do not think anyone who spent all their time on earth loving and serving their friends and family could possibly die with any regrets.

*I do not think anyone who spent all their time on earth loving and serving their friends and family could possibly die with any regrets.*

I believe, and you can disagree, but I think every human should be walking around with a “Ten Things to Do Before I Die” list that is constantly updated and challenged. Make the list. It will tell you a lot about your priorities and where



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you should focus your energies. Then, with a real sense of urgency, embark on checking that list, and make another.

Here is something you might want to consider: even better than a crystal ball, black magic, or high-tech computer forecasting models, the old-fashioned paper to-do list is the single best indication of what will happen in your immediate future.

Life is complicated, and we humans will not figure the universe out for at least a billion years. Our bodies are physical containers for our souls. It stops there. Your body isn't you. Your soul is untouchable. You have the power and responsibility to decide how your life is going to play out.

If we assume the game of life is going to be made simple by simple human minds, then we can only fail if we are either stupid or lazy. Harsh by most definitions, but obvious. Choose to focus on your priorities and do so efficiently. Don't be stupid or lazy and do not waste time.

Your physical life has a beginning and an end in your physical body. That is what we know through direct observation. If you are stupid, then you will spend all your seconds thinking that the goal is to be “happy” instead of flicking the “happy switch” and picking a finite number of things to do while your heart is still beating and your brain is sending out waves.

If you are lazy-minded, then you will spend all your time running around trying to do too much instead of limiting your activities to those which your resources can offer the highest existential and/or practical net value. Stop looking for the meaning of life, and start living with commitment and focus.

*Stop looking for the meaning of life, and  
start living with commitment and focus.*

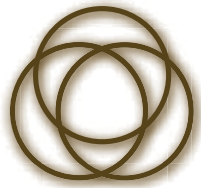
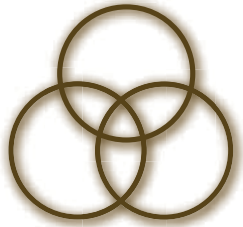
I have found that 3 of my best teachers are at home: our children. Always quick to point out parental inconsistencies and shortcomings, the kids have an evolved capacity to make detailed recommendations for my improvement.



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One night, my eldest son (age 9 at the time) and I were talking about the number of stars in the night sky and commenting on vastness of infinity. My youngest son (then 7) stated that there was really only one star and that we should stop wasting our time counting. The entire family laughed at his statement.

He went on to explain that our perspective was wrong, and we were just too close to realize what we were seeing. The 7 year old explained, “If we backed up, then we would see that all the stars were really just part of one star ... made up of lots of little stars.” Made sense to me.



You can visualize your life as a Venn Diagram with billions of little unrelated circles with no overlap and just dark, empty spaces between these random activities. Or you can back up, change your perspective and realize that your life is not an infinite number of unrelated events that fill your day and night. It should be a single set of priorities that come together to create a very bright flicker of happiness.

The diagram created by your daily decision-making should illustrate that you understand there is a necessary relationship and important overlap between your work, play, friends and family. Be kind to yourself.

Go make a circle.

## Image Captions

- 1 Taylor Swift. Dragons Tooth, Appalachian Trail, near Roanoke, Virginia.
- 2 Taylor Swift. Santa Ynez River,  
Los Padres National Forest, California.
- 3 Taylor Swift. Sierra Nevadas from Glacier Point, Yosemite, California.
- 4 Taylor Swift. Grand Canyon, Arizona.
- 5 Taylor Swift. Eastern Utah.
- 6 Taylor Swift. El Capitan, Yosemite Valley, California.
- 7 Taylor Swift. Radford, Virginia.
- 8 Taylor Swift. Grand Canyon, Arizona.
- 9 Taylor Swift. Grand Teton Range and Jackson Lake, Wyoming.
- 10 Taylor Swift. Clouds over Eastern Utah.
- 11 Taylor Swift. Pine Mountain, California.
- 12 Taylor Swift. Mt. Shasta, California.
- 13 Taylor Swift. Wild Goose Island, St. Mary Lake,  
Glacier National Park, Montana
- 14 Taylor Swift. Logan Pass, Glacier National Park, Montana.
- 15 Kirk Gross. Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco, California.
- 16 Taylor Swift. The 2006 Red Eagle, Wildland Fire  
near St. Mary Lake, Glacier National Park, Montana.
- 17 Taylor Swift. El Capitan, Half Dome and Bridal Veil Falls,  
Yosemite National Park, California.
- 18 Taylor Swift. Willis, Virginia.
- 19 Taylor Swift. Glacier National Park, Montana.
- 20 Taylor Swift. Two Medicine Lake, Montana.
- 21 Taylor Swift. Redwood National Park, California.

All Taylor Swift images are available through [www.tayloradamswift.com](http://www.tayloradamswift.com)



