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Learning Life's Most Valuable Lessons From Friends and Ordinary People

Who needs a shrink or philosophy class? It's the offhand comments of everyday people that have changed my life

posted by **John Stark**, July 2, 2012 [More by this author](#)



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When I was just out of college, I lived for six months with friends in a communal apartment in Goleta, Calif., less than a block from the beach. Goleta is the home of the University of California at Santa Barbara. To earn money, I took a job as a busboy, server and dishwasher (who says I can't multitask?) in the cafeteria of a large student dorm.

Starting at 5 p.m., the quiet, empty cafeteria would become filled with ravenous, rambunctious students scrambling for tables and a place in the food line. One evening as

the students were arriving, I noticed that the juice machine was empty. I went to the cafeteria manager to ask him what to do. If ever there was a dead-ringer for Bob Newhart, it was this nervous little man who was always wringing his hands. When I told him the problem, I'll never forget the panicked look that came across his face. "Son," he said to me, "*This is a helluva time to be out of pink lemonade!*"

To this day I've never forgotten those words. Whenever I find myself in a difficult situation, I repeat them. They always make me laugh and help me move on.

(More: [Why Today Is Better Than the Past](#))

As I've gone through life, it's rarely been the words of history's great thinkers — Aristotle, William Blake, Confucius, the Dalai Lama, Jesus or even Deepak Chopra — that have most influenced me. Instead the most invaluable guidance has usually been an offhand remark or observation by an everyday person, often a friend.

When I was moving from Boston to Minneapolis last year, I didn't know what to do with all the stuff I had from my late parents' estate. How could I get rid of my mother's high school diploma, or my father's Navy discharge papers? Or their love letters from World War II? I was talking about my dilemma on the phone with my friend Kathy, who lives in San Francisco. "Everything has a life," she said.

With those four little words I was finally able to let go of my parents' space-taking objects, even if some of them had to go into trash bags. Now whenever I drop an expensive wine glass on the kitchen floor, I don't waste too much time getting upset. Its life is over, I figure, even if it was a short one.

When I was in my mid-30s and working for the San Francisco Examiner, I got a job offer from a magazine in New York, which I accepted. After giving notice at work, I began having second thoughts. One evening I was expressing my reservations to an elderly friend who over the course of her life had done a lot of serious decision-making.

Her name was Lillian Clark, and in the 1930s she was a diva at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. After her high notes went, she changed her first name to Lelane and adopted an ex-husband's last name, which was Rivera. Donning tutti frutti hats and standing atop platform shoes, she spent the next two decades performing in nightclubs in New York and Argentina, and on luxury cruise ships.

When I told her about my fears, she said to me: "Once you make a life-changing decision, kill the alternatives. That's what I've always done." Since then, whenever I start to doubt the choices I've made, I invoke her words and get on with it.

When I was living in New York, I became friends with a friend's mother, Rose Goldman. She was living in Florida, but came often to New York for visits. Rose didn't have a judgmental bone in her body. She got along with everybody, and everybody loved her. Every so often I'd call her in Florida to see how she was doing. If I were to complain about something or say I was feeling a little down, I'd receive a box of her homemade apple strudel and rugelach within a few days.

During one phone call I told her that I had been invited to a party — and that I dreaded going. "I'm very shy in social situations," I said. "I'd rather stay home."

"You are going to that party," she shot back. "You're going to talk to all the guests and you're going to dance. It's your duty to have fun. You owe that to the hostess."

From then on, I've not had a problem going to social events. It's not about my having a good time, it's about my making sure that the host has a good time. Why would I want to deny that pleasure to someone who went to a lot of trouble?

After living in New York for 10 years, I took a job as an editor on a food magazine in Birmingham, Ala. One day I was telling Susan, the art director, about how I was late turning in a story because I couldn't get it to come together. Her words to me weren't original, but I'd never heard them before or since, and they changed my writing process.

"There's a theory in design," she said. "If something isn't working, get rid of the thing that you love the most."

From then on, whenever I'm feeling blocked, I usually get rid of the paragraph that I'm most fond of, often my creative lead. From then on, the story usually flows.

After I moved from Birmingham to Boston to work on a fitness magazine in the late 1990s, I took the Acela Express to New York for business. The train had just started service between the two cities. A few weeks later I was doing a phone interview with Rosemary Gladstar, who runs the Sage Mountain Herbal Retreat Center in upstate New Hampshire.

I told her how cool it was to ride on a sleek new train with comfortable seats and a diner-bar car, "just like in the glamorous old days."

"See," she replied, "the good things in life do come back." As the founder of United Plant Savers, which is dedicated to preserving and cultivating North American medicinal plants, she should know.

Whenever I start to get all Debbie Downer over what's been lost, gone away or replaced in my lifetime, I recall her optimistic words. I try to focus on the good things that have come back since I was young, like eagles, wolves, clean rivers, Thunderbird convertibles, farmers' markets, even Mr. Rogers, who's gone viral.

Not everything profound that's been said to me by an ordinary person has been guidance-oriented. I'm thinking of a question that a child once put to me that stopped me in my tracks, and forced me do some serious self-analysis — and unlike my Freudian and Jungian shrinks, she didn't even send me a \$200 bill for her services.

I was flying from Miami to LaGuardia on Labor Day Weekend. Sitting next to me was this 4-year-old girl, all by herself. We began chatting. She told me she had spent the summer with her aunt and was now on her way home to Brooklyn. At one point in our conversation, she asked if I was married.

"No," I told her, "I'm single."

"Who do you live with?" she asked.

What was she getting at, I wondered. "No one," I said, "I live alone."

With a look that combined compassion, concern and curiosity, she asked her follow-up question: "But when you fall down, who picks you up?"

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

I didn't have an answer for her then, or maybe I did but just didn't want to admit it. But now — some 20 years later — life has given me one, and it's an answer I like. If I were to see this same girl again, I'd say: "No one picks me up. I pick myself up."

That's because I'm a boomer, and I'm over 50. Anyone who has made it this far knows what it's like to run out of pink lemonade. It isn't fun, but it shouldn't stop you.