

THE READING

25 Things About Life I Wish I Had Known 10 Years Ago March 15, 2016 | By Darius Faeroes

Socrates, considered one of the founders of Western philosophy, was once named the wisest man on earth by the Oracle of Delphi. When Socrates heard that the oracle had made such a comment, he believed that the statement was wrong. Socrates said: "I know one thing: that I know nothing."

How can the smartest man on earth know nothing? I heard this paradoxical wisdom for the first time from my school teacher when I was 14 or 15. It made such an impact on me that I used Socrates's quote as my learning strategy.

To me, "I know nothing" means that you might be a wise person, but still, you know nothing. You can still learn from everything and everyone. One thing that I like better than learning from my mistakes is learning from other people's mistakes. Over the years, I've been blessed to have great mentors, teachers, family, and friends that taught me about life.

[Here is] is a list of the 25 most important things I learned from other people and books. . . .

1. Struggle is good.

Never say, "I can't take it anymore." Instead say, "bring it on!"

2. Don't complain.

Complaining is the biggest waste of time there is. Either do something about it, or if you can't, shut up about it.

3. Spend time with people you love.

That's your family and best friends. If you don't have a family, create one. Most people in life are only visitors. Family is for life.

4. Don't start a relationship if you're not in love.

I've done this more than once. You kind of like someone and think, "We might as well give it a shot." Not a good idea. You're either in love or you are not. Don't fool yourself. It's not fair to you or the other person.

5. Exercise daily.

I didn't get this until recently. A healthy body is where you have to start everything in life. If you can't build a healthy and strong body, what can you build in life?

6. Keep a journal.

No, keeping a journal is not for children. It helps you to become a better thinker and writer. "I don't want to be a writer," you might think. Well, how many emails and texts do you send a day? Everybody is a writer.

7. Be grateful.

Say "thank you" to everyone and everything. "Thank you for this beautiful day." "Thank you for your email." "Thank you for being there for me."

8. Don't care about what other people think.

We all die in the end—do you really think it matters what people think of you?

9. Take more risks. Don't be such a wimp.

10. Pick an industry, not a job.

If you want to become good at something, you need to spend years and years doing that. You can't do that if you hop from industry to industry. Pick an industry you love and start at the bottom. You will find the perfect role for you eventually.

11. Lead the way.

When you find yourself in a situation where everyone looks at each other, it's time for you to lead. You're a leader when you decide to become one. There's no initiation or a title. Just a decision.

12. Money isn't important.

It really isn't. But you have to train yourself not to care about money. Don't become too dependent on the stuff you own; otherwise, the stuff will own you.

13. Be nice.

I don't mean you should be a pushover. You can be someone that doesn't take [crap] and be nice about it. Just don't insult people, think you're better than them, or act like an idiot.

14. Learn every day.

You've got to train your brain to stay alert. You don't have to read a book a day to learn every day. Learn from your mistakes. Learn from the people around you—be open to what they can teach you.

15. Rest before you are tired.

Even if you love your job and every day seems like a holiday, you need to take time to rest. You're a human, not an android. Never forget that.

16. Don't judge.

Just because people make different choices than you doesn't mean they're stupid. Also, you don't know everything about people, so don't judge them—help them.

17. Think about others.

Just be mindful, that's all. We all have families, bills to pay, and our own issues. Don't always make everything about yourself.

18. Give without expecting something in return.

Don't keep score. You will become a bitter person if you do that. Give solely for the joy of giving. If you get something in return, great. If you don't, great.

19. There's no end game.

We, as a species, just are. Don't try to figure it all out. Enjoy your journey.

20. Enjoy small things.

I like clichés because they are true. Especially this one. You know why? Everyone says they know it, but no one lives up to it. They just chase big things.

21. Don't take yourself so seriously.

Yeah, yeah, you're an individual, and people have to take you seriously, I get it. But at the end of the day, we're all a bunch of ants trying to chase the same things. Lighten up.

22. Don't blame people.

What's the point? Do you want to punish them? You don't do that to people. Also don't blame yourself—you're only human.

23. Create something.

Not to leave a legacy (you won't be here to see it anyway), but to be of use. Make music, write a book, build a table—anything. You'll feel good about yourself, plus you give something back to people to use or enjoy.

24. Never look back too long.

Reflecting on the past is only good for one thing: learning.

25. Take action.

Don't just sit there, do something. Without action, there is no outcome.

THE SERMON

[four agreements]

We were in Richmond, staying with Karen's sister Mary for Thanksgiving. Mary is a clinical psychologist who deals with patients who have chronic pain.

In the midst of a conversation about I don't remember what, Mary made reference to the "Four Agreements" of don Miguel Ruiz which she said she often suggested to her patients:

1. Be impeccable with your word
2. Don't take anything personally
3. Don't make assumptions
4. Always do your best

I had never encountered them before and they seemed to make a lot of sense. "There's a sermon here," I told myself. [One of the curses of ministry is you are always in the market for sermon ideas.]

I asked Mary for the source and context and she gave me don Miguel's name which I entered on my Kindle and bought his book.

Don Miguel Ruiz [that's his pen name] was born in Mexico City in 1952, the youngest of 13 children. He attended medical school and became a neurosurgeon alongside one of his brothers. He experienced a near fatal car accident which radically changed his life path.

He went home to his mother and through her ancestral teachings, he discovered his own path to awareness, which evolved into a deep understanding of the physical universe and the virtual world of the mind., and then apprenticed himself to a shaman. In 1997 - 21 years ago, he wrote his book on "**The Four Agreements**" which has sold 6 million copies in the United States, was on the NY Times best seller list for a decade, and has been translated into 40 languages. He links himself to the ancient Mexican Toltec esoteric tradition who taught a way of life that focused on happiness and love.

I am surprised I had never heard of him, although I tend not to be enthusiastic about mystical self-help books, which is the genre in which he writes.

The "Four Agreements," to which he and his son subsequently added a fifth, have merit just on the superficial level, but much more so when the context is understood.

["agreements"]

The concept of "agreements" on which his work is based is the belief that while we are born free, during the domestication process, humans make a series of agreements with ourselves, the people around us, and our society – agreements of which we are not conscious – that lead us away from our innocent freedom into lives that are circumscribed by restrictive and false understandings of who we are and what we are not, what is possible and what is not. We receive messages from our parents, our siblings, our friends, our teachers, that set up expectations we strive to meet, expectations that lead us away from our true potential.

These constraints are passed on with the best of intentions because, of course, these people want us to fit in and be successful. The problem is that most of what we are taught is not congruent with our truest selves and is, in Ruiz's eyes, 95% lies because, "The real us is pure love, pure light." He believes most of what we see and hear is nothing but a dream, and not a happy one. We are taught the difference between good and bad, right and wrong, beautiful and ugly, as seen by our society, and we have no opportunity to choose. It is these unconscious agreements that rule our lives. Ruiz advocates his four, now five, agreements as

“A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom.”

[1. “Be Impeccable With Your Word”]

Ruiz places the greatest emphasis on the first agreement: ***Be impeccable with your word***. Words are, of course, not inherent in the things or actions they connote: words are symbols, they are a force, the most powerful tools we have.

Our sense of ourselves is deeply impacted by the words that our families use to describe us: good, bad, smart, not-so-bright, lazy, a source of pride or shame, handsome or ugly. On the basis of these cues, we form a false picture of ourselves. Words can free us or enslave us.

In this book, 21 years ago, Ruiz wrote about how Hitler sent out “seeds of fear” by the words he used and successfully manipulated a whole country of intelligent people. “All over the world people destroyed other people because they were afraid of one another.” Note: these words were written 21 years ago and were not intended as a commentary on any contemporary politician, although “if the shoe fits. . .”

My eldest daughter was a national merit scholar and the roots of that showed up early in her life. Her next sister, two years younger, tried to keep up with her and did a pretty good job of it. Our next daughter was two years younger. For her to keep up with her sisters would have required her to take a four year leap. While we never commented to her, she gave that up early and their mother and I accepted that she was going to be her own person. She did ok in elementary school, but nothing exceptional. I still remember the day she came home from eighth grade excited that the other kids thought she was one of the smart ones and turned to her for help. Her view of herself was transformed by their words - new doors were opened for her and she became academically successful.

I had the strange experience a couple of years ago of finding in my papers a note my father sent me many years ago, apologizing for having been so critical of me. Strangely, I have no such memory of him. What I remember is a sense of freedom and support from my earliest days which made it hard for me to identify personally with some of what Ruiz was writing, although I see it as on target for most people.

The word impeccable, as he uses it, means “without sin.” He writes, “Being impeccable with your words is not using the word against yourself.” He suggests that we bad-mouth ourselves, and we also use words to attack other people, which also hurts us because they respond in kind. He views gossip as a kind of black magic - pure poison – and likens it to a computer virus. “Being impeccable with your word is the correct use of your energy in the direction of truth and love for yourself.” If we free ourselves from all that negativity, we stop making our minds a fertile ground others use to plant negativity

[2. “Don’t Take Anything Personally”].

The second agreement Ruiz advocates is ***“Don’t take anything personally.”*** Everybody operates out of their own understanding of the world and their place in it. Nothing other people do or say is because of you, it is always because of themselves. If we are always worrying about what other people might say to or about us, we are creating a prison for ourselves.

Ruiz suggests that we should imagine a movie theater we enter in which there is only one person seated. We sit behind him or her and when we look at the screen, we recognize that we are the central figure in the drama and we see our mother, and father, and siblings, and friends all playing their roles in our lives. And we realize we are the person watching our story of our life.

Then we go to the next theatre in which there is a solitary woman whom we sit behind.

She has a film showing her life – she is our mother but she appears as she sees herself, not as we see her. Your father and siblings and grandparents and all the neighbors show up as she sees them, very differently than the roles they play in our story.

And there is a theatre for your father's story, and each of your siblings, and so on.

The point of this is that we craft a story for our life in which other people play subsidiary roles as we perceive their impact on us. We never know them as they know themselves, nor do they ever know us as we know ourselves.

When we take something personally, we are assuming that we know what is intended by the other, that they are responding to something we have said or done, but what they are responding to is their perception of what your character has done in their version of their story, over which you have no control.

When I was in junior high I took one of those vocational tests. It clearly ranked ministry as one of the least fruitful paths for me to consider. That's because there are some common expectations of ministers which are not a part of my makeup. I went ahead because I believe that UU ministers face different expectations than mainline ministers.

One of the things about being a minister is that you trigger a whole lot of sub-conscious stuff in other peoples' lives. They have irrational expectations of who you should be over which you have no control because they come from their previous experience.. Before I understood this, I tended to take some of the inevitable criticism personally. I felt some need to try to meet all their expectations.

When I went to the Bedford Church, one of the things I was informed was that the minister always worked on the rummage sale. "No," I said, " your former minister worked on the rummage sale, but that is not one of my priorities.

When I went to my second congregation, in Fairfax VA, I was told that I should not wear suits and ties - my predecessor always wore dashikis. I tried to gently suggest that was him and this was me. Some folks didn't welcome that. Also, he was a poet and I have made that claim.

When I went to Rockford, one woman wrote me a note about the physical pain the deep tone of my voice caused her – she had been deeply attached to the female partner in the interim team. She never forgave me.

After I had been in Rockford for 20 years, the congregation did an evaluation which showed a high level of satisfaction with my ministry. There was a small group of 25 out of 450 that felt differently. One of the leaders of that secret group stated publicly that he did not care how many people were satisfied, he was not satisfied by my ministry and he was tired of waiting for me to leave. They developed a list of demands for how I should change. [One of the items on that list was how messy my office was.] By that time I had become better at not taking this kind of thing personally - I realized it was their problem more than mine. Following a congregational vote endorsing my continued ministry, those folks left the church and formed a new congregation in a neighboring village, and we successfully undertook a \$950,000 addition to our building.

Ruiz says, "There is a huge amount of freedom that comes to you when you take nothing personally."

[3. "Don't Make Assumptions"]

The third agreement he advocates is ***"Don't make assumptions."*** Much of the difficulty we face in relationships (personal, social, professional and casual), is based on our making assumptions. We think we know what is going on, and when we don't know, we fill in the gaps with assumptions. Going back to those movie theaters, we approach every situation with whatever the distortions are that are caused by our personal perspective on the situation.

We assume our partners know what we are thinking and we don't need to say, so we end up disappointed and saying "You should have known."

Wars, family feuds, racist acts, all are caused by people making assumptions about other people that are not grounded in reality. Ruiz points out that *"Truth doesn't need to prove itself, it exists whether we believe it or not. Lies exist because we create them and they only survive because we believe them."* Or we can convince other people to believe them, as Hitler did.

The value of watching out for and avoiding making assumptions is that we can focus our attention of what is real, rather than on what we would like to believe is real. [Again, this was written 21 years ago and "any resemblance to any demagogue living today is purely coincidental."]

The way of dealing with and disarming assumptions is to ask questions. Rather than filling in the gaps with what we think is going on, ask rather than assume. And in the opposite direction, when we are looking for something from someone, don't assume they know what we want, tell them!

There is also the danger of making assumptions about ourselves – overestimating or underestimating what we are capable of doing.

If we can begin being impeccable with our word, Not taking anything personally, and refraining from making assumptions, it becomes easier to achieve the fourth agreement: ***Always do your best!***

[4. "Always Do Your Best"]

We need to recognize that our best is not always going to be the same from one moment to the next. We may be tired, or stressed, or sick. The point of this is to do the best you can under the circumstances and forgive yourself if it is not always the best you can imagine.

One of the freeing experiences I had was at a UU Ministers meeting at which Edwin Freidman, a prominent rabbi spoke. He told us that the dumbest thing we could do was to devote more energy to the ways in which we fell short in the eyes of some congregants. "You can never do everything well," he said. "Spend your energy on doing even better the things you do well, rather than wasting it on things that are not your strong suite."

Ruiz tells the story of a seeker who approaches the Master in a Buddhist Temple and asks how much time he should devote to meditation in order to achieve transcendence. He asks if 4 hours a day is sufficient. The Master suggested that at that rate it might take 4 years. "What if I spend 8 hours a day meditating?" the young man asked. "At 8 hours a day it might take you 20 years," said the Master. The Master taught, "You are not here to sacrifice your joy or your life. You are here to live, to be happy, to love. If you do your best in 2 hours of meditation, but you spend 8 hours instead, you will only grow tired, miss the point, and you won't enjoy your life. Do your best and perhaps you will learn that no matter how long you meditate, you can live, love, and be happy."

Ruiz teaches that we need to learn not to worry about those internal forces, those lies, that wrongly judge us. We are our own worst judges, needing to prove something to ourselves. When we are worried about being judged, we often become afraid to try, to take risks, to enjoy our lives. If we can do our best, that is all we, or anyone, has a right to expect. "You have the right to be you. You can only be you when you do your best," Ruiz says.

And it is important to realize that sometimes we will fail, we will not be impeccable with our word, or we will take something personally, or we will make assumptions. It is not easy to un-domesticate ourselves, to free ourselves of the old agreements, but the goal is worth the effort, if we are trying to do our best.

[5. “Be Skeptical, but Learn to Listen.”]

The Fifth Agreement, that don Miguel’s son helped him articulate, is the Power of Doubt **“Be skeptical, but learn to listen.”**

The first part of that is easy for most UU’s, we are ready to question our old agreements, the common rules, that’s what brought most of us here. What is tougher is learning to listen to others with whom we might disagree and listen for the meaning behind their words, without judging them. We are not required to form an opinion on their perspective. We may not know how they arrived where they are.

Don Ruiz points out that we should be skeptical about what he says, taking what makes sense and maybe holding off on the parts that don’t, but listening nonetheless.

One of my problems with self-help gurus is they commonly attribute all of our misery to our attitudes. It is true that some people who grow up poor never perceived themselves as poor and therefore were not disabled because of their family’s economic status. The problem is, there are dangers in life beyond our control. If you have a Black son, he is in real danger from police. Hell, if you have black skin, you can face obstacles that people with White Privilege do not. Most self-help gurus do not acknowledge the existence of systemic problems. It is not all about positive thinking.

The current National Geographic magazine has a fascinating and insightful article by Jared Diamond on “The Global Peril of Inequality” in which he asserts:

In poor countries today, people are barraged with media visions of lifestyles that are available elsewhere in the world and unavailable to them. In anger and desperation, some become terrorists themselves; others tolerate or support terrorists. . . I predict that there will be more terrorist attacks against the United States, Europe, Japan and Australia – as long as big differences in living standards persist. . . . The only sustainable outcome for our globalized world is one in which consumption rates are more nearly equal around our planet. . . . But no optimist is crazy enough to suggest that the world can support the equivalent of 80 billion people.”

I do not believe that all the problems people face rest on false messages in their heads.

As I suggested earlier, there is a real sense in which Ruiz’s agreements apply somewhat less to UU’s who are people who have challenged the restrictions under which so many people live because of the agreements under which they were domesticated. But that is not true for all – in fact, some bear guilt for having rejected the old rules.

We strive to do better as parents, supporting our children who break the molds. One of my roles as a minister has been to assure parents that their non-conforming children are that way because of our emphasis on supporting their freedom, which does not always please classroom teachers. We can’t have our cake and eat it too! Some wonderfully creative thinking kids make waves.

I do believe that we can all benefit from the Ruiz’s Five Agreements. As he suggests, *“Awareness is the key to coming back to life. . . . Doubt is the power we use to recover our faith, to take our power back from every lie and superstition.”* But, again, beyond pure skepticism there is also a need for real listening so we can understand others and find clues into our own true selves.

Ruiz suggests:

I want you to use your imagination to see the kind of interactions that you have had in your entire life with other people. I’m sure you have lots of memories of your interactions with everybody around you. People are always delivering messages to you , and you’re always perceiving their messages. What kind of messengers are the

people in your life? What kind of messages did they deliver to you in your whole life? How did those messages affect you? Out of all the messages that you received from other people, how many of those messages did you agree with and take as your own? How many of those messages are you still delivering now?.. .

What really matters is to be who you really are – to be authentic, to enjoy life, to be love. And not the symbol of love that humans have distorted, but real love – the feeling that you can't put into words, the love that is a result of being what you really are.

Be impeccable with your word.

Don't take anything personally.

Don't make assumptions.

Always do your best.

Be skeptical, but learn to listen.