

## BITE-SIZE WISDOM

Here's a morsel of sound advice that's lately been popping into my head – every time hubris begins its incessant creep, and I'm feeling too full of myself:

BE MODEST. A LOT WAS ACCOMPLISHED BEFORE YOU WERE BORN.

Or how about this pithy precept that surfaces to chide me if I sense I'm not carrying my weight in some group endeavor:

WHEN THERE'S A PIANO TO BE MOVED,  
DON'T REACH FOR THE STOOL.

Speaking of pianos, some of my happiest moments occur while seated at the keys; but in photos of me playing, my expression is often dour – which brings to mind this pointed dictum:

WHEN YOU FEEL TERRIFIC, NOTIFY YOUR FACE.

And regarding three situations that admittedly may not arise too often, here's some superb practical advice for when they do:

NEVER ORDER BARBECUE IN A RESTAURANT  
WHERE ALL THE CHAIRS MATCH.

and

BE CAUTIOUS OF RENTING LODGING ACCOMMODATIONS DESCRIBED  
IN THE AD OR BROCHURE AS "RUSTIC."

and

NEVER EAT A SUGARED DOUGHNUT WHEN WEARING A DARK SUIT.

What do these seemingly disparate aphorisms have in common? Well, they're all contained in "*The Complete Life's Little Instruction Book*" by H. Jackson Brown, Jr. (Thomas Nelson, 1997) – a random half

dozen of the 1,560 numbered observations Mr. Brown has accumulated over the years, ostensibly to pass along to his son as useful fatherly advice.

There's no organization to the book – the adages, which cover a wide variety of situations and occasions, aren't divided into specific topics but simply presented in numerical order throughout the pages. In truth, many of them are underwhelming, and a fair number approach cliché status.

But there's also some fine advice in Mr. Brown's book – advice boiled down to concise precepts that stick in your mind, prime candidates for sharing with sons, daughters, friends, whomever.

I'm convinced that the ability to express some bit of folk wisdom in succinct terms is nothing to be sneezed at. Sure, I could say something along these lines to my sons: "You know, there will probably be times in your life when a friend who's not doing so well asks you to help him out with a loan. You'll be tempted to accommodate him, but my experience has been that there's a good chance you'll never be repaid. And even if you can live with that financial outcome, his inability to extinguish the debt might prove such a source of shame to your friend that he no longer seeks out your company."

Or, I could say to my son, a la Mr. Brown:

BE CAUTIOUS ABOUT LENDING MONEY TO FRIENDS.  
YOU MIGHT LOSE BOTH.

Much better. So, what I've done here is select the little gems I like best (81 of them, to be precise, in honor of my age – just over 5% of what's contained in the book) and provide a little structure around some common themes. They aren't my original maxims, but they do resonate with me – and I hope they will with you also.

### FAMILY

Let's start with your spouse – arguably the most important relationship you'll ever have. Or, as Mr. Brown puts it:

CHOOSE YOUR LIFE'S MATE CAREFULLY. FROM THIS ONE DECISION  
WILL COME NINETY PERCENT OF ALL YOUR HAPPINESS AND MISERY.

But as he makes clear elsewhere, this isn't a solo endeavor by any  
means. Here's how he expresses the concept:

REMEMBER THAT A SUCCESSFUL MARRIAGE DEPENDS ON TWO  
THINGS:(1) FINDING THE RIGHT PERSON AND  
(2) BEING THE RIGHT PERSON.

Now let's say you're at the stage of contemplating this important  
choice. A lot of thoughts may be whirling around in your mind, but make  
room for this sound counsel:

NEVER MARRY SOMEONE IN HOPE THAT THEY'LL CHANGE LATER.

Okay, you've taken the plunge. Now you need to focus on the  
effort required over the years to sustain the relationship. Here's a  
homespun analogy that hit the mark with me:

REMEMBER THAT CREATING A SUCCESSFUL MARRIAGE IS LIKE  
FARMING; YOU HAVE TO START OVER AGAIN EVERY MORNING.

I'm happy to say that Barbara and I have faithfully adhered to this  
next one, and it's always a fresh delight.

EVERY YEAR CELEBRATE THE DAY YOU AND YOUR WIFE  
HAD YOUR FIRST DATE.

A number of Mr. Brown's most sensible precepts relate to your  
kids. Here are the two I found most incisive:

WORK HARD TO CREATE IN YOUR CHILDREN A GOOD SELF-IMAGE.  
IT'S THE MOST IMPORTANT THING YOU CAN DO  
TO INSURE THEIR SUCCESS.

and

CHERISH YOUR CHILDREN FOR WHAT THEY ARE, NOT FOR  
WHAT YOU'D LIKE THEM TO BE.

As for parents, I'm ashamed to admit that I didn't subscribe to this  
next gem until later in life – but then it really paid off:

DON'T ARGUE WITH YOUR MOTHER.

There's another that I wish I'd done (but didn't) with my father,  
who died 41 years ago:

TAPE RECORD YOUR PARENTS' LAUGHTER.

As for your parents' parents, let me confess to something I blew  
completely (but shouldn't have):

ASK YOUR GRANDPARENTS TO TELL YOU STORIES ABOUT  
YOUR PARENTS WHILE THEY WERE GROWING UP.

Each of my sons has sired a delightful young daughter; and I'm  
hoping that before long someone will pass this recommendation along  
to them:

WHEN YOU NEED A LITTLE ADVICE, CALL YOUR GRANDPARENTS.

And here's a brief byword that cuts across all family relationships:

NEVER GIVE A LOVED ONE A GIFT THAT SUGGESTS  
THEY NEED IMPROVEMENT.

### FRIENDS

In terms of friends, let's start with a truism I've assiduously tried  
to adhere to over the years:

MAKE NEW FRIENDS BUT CHERISH THE OLD ONES.

Mr. Brown touches on many worthwhile aspects of friendship.  
Here's a pair that caught my fancy.

NEVER REMIND SOMEONE OF A KINDNESS OR ACT OF GENEROSITY  
YOU HAVE SHOWN HIM OR HER. BESTOW A FAVOR AND THEN  
FORGET IT.

and

AFTER SOMEONE APOLOGIZES TO YOU, DON'T LECTURE THEM.

How about if you're on the receiving end of a friend's bodily  
embrace – anything to think about? Try this:

WHEN SOMEONE HUGS YOU, LET THEM BE THE FIRST TO LET GO.

Attention! – all you self-appointed tonsorial stylists:

NEVER TELL A WOMAN YOU LIKED HER HAIR BETTER  
BEFORE SHE HAD IT CUT.

And while you're at it,

NEVER SAY ANYTHING UNCOMPLIMENTARY  
ABOUT ANOTHER PERSON'S DOG.

Even if you're having trouble deciding what bounty would be  
appropriate to bestow upon your hostess at a holiday gathering –

NEVER GIVE ANYONE A FRUITCAKE.

Here's something I haven't done, but now, thanks to Mr. Brown, I  
intend to try it out in the years ahead:

ASK AN OLDER PERSON YOU RESPECT TO TELL YOU HIS OR HER  
PROUDEST MOMENT AND GREATEST REGRET.

(I'm already working on my own answers, should someone  
chance to pose these queries to me.)

## SELF-HELP

Okay, now let's focus on *you* – as so many of Mr. Brown's adages do. And in one place, he actually grouped four sensible maxims together:

DON'T BE AFRAID TO SAY, "I DON'T KNOW."

DON'T BE AFRAID TO SAY, "I MADE A MISTAKE."

DON'T BE AFRAID TO SAY, "I NEED HELP."

DON'T BE AFRAID TO SAY, "I'M SORRY."

But his groupings are rare – most of the time, you've got to dig a little. I found the following three dictums in different parts of the book, but they definitely tie together for me:

DON'T WORK FOR RECOGNITION, BUT DO WORK  
WORTHY OF RECOGNITION.

and

DON'T ACCEPT "GOOD ENOUGH" AS GOOD ENOUGH.

and

STRIVE FOR EXCELLENCE, NOT PERFECTION.

Here's one relating to work that I never heard before but now will never forget.

DON'T WASTE TIME LEARNING THE "TRICKS OF THE TRADE."  
INSTEAD, LEARN THE TRADE.

Mr. Brown preaches an activist approach, as in:

DON'T BE CALLED OUT ON STRIKES. GO DOWN SWINGING.

But on the other hand, don't let all that striving overwhelm you:

LOOSEN UP. RELAX. EXCEPT FOR RARE LIFE-AND-DEATH MATTERS,  
NOTHING IS AS IMPORTANT AS IT FIRST SEEMS.

And keep this in mind:

GET YOUR PRIORITIES STRAIGHT. NO ONE EVER SAID ON HIS DEATH  
BED, "GEE, IF I'D ONLY SPENT MORE TIME AT THE OFFICE."

Here's a worthwhile groove to occupy if you end up doing well:

DON'T FLAUNT YOUR SUCCESS, BUT DON'T APOLOGIZE  
FOR IT EITHER.

I heartily endorse the two following axioms, which appeared  
separately in the book but form a useful pairing for my own glass-is-  
half-full attitude:

PAY AS MUCH ATTENTION TO THE THINGS THAT ARE WORKING  
POSITIVELY IN YOUR LIFE AS YOU DO TO THOSE  
THAT ARE GIVING YOU TROUBLE.

and

PROTECT YOUR ENTHUSIASM FROM THE NEGATIVITY OF OTHERS.

And by the way:

NEVER LEAVE FUN TO FIND FUN.

When you get angry at a person, one inner voice tells you to give  
him hell, while another counsels you to just get over it. I like Mr.  
Brown's third-possibility advice:

WHEN YOU ARE ANGRY WITH SOMEONE, WRITE A LETTER TELLING  
HIM OR HER WHY YOU FEEL THAT WAY – BUT DON'T MAIL IT.

Make sure, though, that you've made a valid assessment of the  
merits. In other words:

STOP BLAMING OTHERS. TAKE RESPONSIBILITY  
FOR EVERY AREA OF YOUR LIFE.

And, in the same vein, here's some very helpful advice:

DON'T ALLOW SELF-PITY. THE MOMENT THIS EMOTION STRIKES,  
DO SOMETHING NICE FOR SOMEONE LESS FORTUNATE THAN YOU.

Be inquisitive.

REMEMBER THAT THE ONLY DUMB QUESTION IS  
THE ONE YOU WANTED TO ASK BUT DIDN'T.

And try to avoid letting others misinterpret your words or actions.  
So, for instance:

WHEN YOU MEAN NO, SAY IT IN A WAY THAT'S NOT AMBIGUOUS.

Regarding matters of commerce, I've grouped together three of  
Mr. Brown's precepts that make a lot of sense.

NEVER BUY SOMETHING YOU DON'T NEED JUST BECAUSE  
IT'S ON SALE.

and

WHEN YOU FIND SOMETHING YOU REALLY WANT,  
DON'T LET A FEW DOLLARS KEEP YOU FROM GETTING IT.

and

WHEN YOU'RE BUYING SOMETHING THAT YOU ONLY NEED  
TO BUY ONCE, BUY THE BEST YOU CAN AFFORD.

Sequencing your moves can be important. For instance:

BRUSH YOUR TEETH BEFORE PUTTING ON YOUR TIE.

Planning ahead is equally vital:



NEVER GO UP A LADDER WITH JUST ONE NAIL.

If you're like me, you make an effort to clear away the debris in your life before undertaking some main event on your plate. Not wise, says Mr. Brown – and I'm forced to admit he's right:

START EVERY DAY WITH THE MOST IMPORTANT THING YOU HAVE TO DO. SAVE THE LESS IMPORTANT TASKS FOR LATER.

I noticed one common theme throughout the book, expressed in a variety of succinct adages. Here are three that sum up this oh-so-valid principle:

LEARN TO RECOGNIZE THE INCONSEQUENTIAL; THEN IGNORE IT.

DON'T MAJOR IN MINOR THINGS.

REMEMBER THE MAIN THING IS TO KEEP THE MAIN THING  
THE MAIN THING.

Oh, and by the way,

ACCEPT A BREATH MINT IF SOMEONE OFFERS YOU ONE.

### MISCELLANEOUS

There are some nifty pairings in Mr. Brown's book, although some of them require moving about through his numbered offerings. Here are a few I'm partial to.

DON'T BE A PERSON WHO SAYS, "READY, FIRE, AIM."

DON'T BE A PERSON WHO SAYS, "READY, AIM, AIM, AIM."

\* \* \*

UNDERESTIMATE WHEN GUESSING AN ADULT'S AGE OR  
WEIGHT.

OVERESTIMATE WHEN GUESSING SOMEONE'S SALARY.

\* \* \*

BUY WHATEVER KIDS ARE SELLING ON CARD TABLES IN THEIR  
FRONT YARD.

WHEN A CHILD IS SELLING SOMETHING FOR A DIME,  
GIVE A QUARTER.

\* \* \*

NEVER TELL A CAR SALESMAN HOW MUCH YOU WANT TO SPEND.  
WHEN GOING TO BUY A CAR, LEAVE YOUR GOOD WATCH AT HOME.

\* \* \*

PROPERLY FITTING SHOES SHOULD FEEL GOOD AS SOON AS YOU TRY  
THEM ON. DON'T BELIEVE THE SALESPERSON WHO SAYS,  
"THEY'LL BE FINE AS SOON AS YOU BREAK THEM IN."

NEVER BUY AN ARTICLE OF CLOTHING THINKING IT WILL FIT  
IF YOU LOSE A COUPLE OF POUNDS.

\* \* \*

DON'T BURN BRIDGES. YOU'LL BE SURPRISED HOW MANY TIMES  
YOU HAVE TO CROSS THE SAME RIVER.

NEVER CUT WHAT CAN BE UNTIED.

\* \* \*

NEVER UNDERESTIMATE YOUR POWER TO CHANGE YOURSELF.

NEVER OVERESTIMATE YOUR POWER TO CHANGE OTHERS.

And, in the interests of self-preservation, be sure to check out this cautionary quartet:

NEVER SHARPEN A BOOMERANG.

and

NEVER SQUAT WITH YOUR SPURS ON.

and

DON'T TAKE MEDICINE IN THE DARK.

and

NEVER FRY BACON WHILE NAKED.

Here's an unrelated trio worth keeping in mind as you deal with others:

NEVER TELL A PERSON WHO'S EXPERIENCING DEEP SORROW,  
"I KNOW HOW YOU FEEL." YOU DON'T.

WHEN SOMEONE IS RELATING AN IMPORTANT EVENT  
THAT'S HAPPENED TO THEM, DON'T TRY TO TOP THEM  
WITH A STORY OF YOUR OWN. LET THEM HAVE THE STAGE.

NEVER MAKE FUN OF PEOPLE WHO SPEAK BROKEN ENGLISH.  
IT MEANS THEY KNOW ANOTHER LANGUAGE.

Okay – you want some really practical advice? Try this:

WHEN TAKING A TRUE-FALSE TEST, REMEMBER THAT ANY  
STATEMENT THAT INCLUDES THE WORD  
*ANY, ALL, ALWAYS, NEVER, OR EVER* IS USUALLY FALSE.

And here's my absolute favorite from the book:

PLACE A NOTE READING "YOUR LICENSE NUMBER HAS BEEN REPORTED TO THE POLICE" ON THE WINDSHIELD OF A CAR ILLEGALLY PARKED IN A HANDICAPPED SPACE.

Finally, summing it all up, as Mr. Brown does so well:

REMEMBER THAT ALL IMPORTANT TRUTHS ARE SIMPLE.

Now I want to hear a few such succinct words of wisdom from my readers . . . .