

## A message to the young generation:

### **Core Ideas for a “Good Life” Perspective**

**“We must think right in order to speak and act right”**

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It is generally assumed that we indefinitely get smarter with age. That happens to be not the case. Modern science indicates that, notwithstanding ongoing accumulation of knowledge and experience as we advance in years, we do not get any smarter beyond middle age. As years go by, the brain’s capacity for higher thought declines as well: it declines in step with the natural decline in the activity of neurons involved in vision, hearing, memory and other cognitive skills. No wonder, one might say, that Einstein (1879-1955) produced his theory of relativity at age 26, and that much as he tried, could not construct a field theory in his more mature years. Newton (1642 - 1727) lived to be 85, but he had already published his Principia (Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy - 1686) at age 44. He in fact claimed that he had understood gravitation and conceived of his laws of motion when he was 24. All that had seemed so simple to him that he had told no one about it for twenty years. The rationale for you, young people, to consider is: don’t wait to hit your sixties before you claim your intellectual prime. Reach for it early on.

Age, however, does mellow us out, but again, it does not make us wiser as a matter of course. The rough and tumble of life, the hardships, the disappointments, the regrets over opportunities missed, disciplines ignored, and excesses indulged, do take a toll. They do blunt the sharper edges of our personalities and subdue much of the abrasiveness of our younger years. If such involuntary, though timely, moderation could pass for wisdom I, as one old man, would gladly accept the complement. But wisdom is a far superior achievement of the mind. It develops not at random, but through consistent application of right thinking to the affairs of life. And so here is the distinction I draw. We may not get smarter beyond middle age as our neurological capacity begins to decrease, but we may continue to become wiser as the quality of our consciousness continues to improve. It is in this sense that wisdom makes for good life -- the topic of this talk. In the words of one wise man, it is by the bounty of nature that we live; but of wisdom that we live well. The first makes for life; the second makes for life that is good.

**Wisdom and knowledge are twins, though not identical twins.** We may have knowledge, yet lack in wisdom. Wisdom, in the words of Indian thinker N. Sri Ram (born 1889), is not knowledge, but lies in the good use we make of knowledge. Knowledge, as Francis Bacon (1561-1626) noted four centuries ago, is power; and like power, it can be applied wisely or unwisely. We can build bombs with it, or build bridges. That being the case, society risks much when it entrusts the power of knowledge to an undisciplined mind. To anchor knowledge to ethics, moral philosophy and science should be taught in tandem. We need personal integrity and professional competence congruously linked in every human enterprise. Paraphrasing Aldous Huxley (1894-1963), we would not want a world in which knowledge accumulates and wisdom decays. That would not make for good life.

**How might we define “good life” and how might we attain it?** At the generic level, the good life paradigm is present in all cultures, though the means of fashioning good life is articulated variously, reflecting diverse cultural experiences and outlooks. Socrates (469-399B.C) thought good life is predicated on self-understanding: in his words: the unexamined life is not worth living. Confucius (551-478B.C) taught that proper social conduct generates social harmony and makes for good life. His contemporary Lao-Tzu (6thC.B.C), the founder of Taoism, also of China, accentuated the personal rather than the social: improvement, he said, begins with self-improvement. The ancient seers of India (writers of the Upanishads - 8/9<sup>th</sup> C.B.C.) **taught that the secret of good life lies in nurturing a mind that is intellectually open to all things yet emotionally attached to none.** And the great Buddha (566-480B.C), calling it “nirvana,” said good life was to be attained **through removing ignorance and exercising right thinking, right speech, and right action.**

In the biblical tradition, the call to good life is predicated on the fear of God. This is basic to Islam as well. In either tradition, fear of God basically means maintaining constant vigilance against slipping into unethical conduct -- a caution that is warranted by man’s moral frailty. Deep down it is a fear for one’s own welfare: fear of falling into self-destructive behavior.

The Qur’an specifically mentions good life as **the fruit of the performance of good works**, from a state of faith. It suggests that one’s ethics and quality of life are correlated. When one does evil, the self is diminished, and suffers ill effects within. Conversely, when one does a good deed, the self is enhanced, and happiness finds home in a noble heart. Christian literature concurs. “Do not be deceived,” said Apostle Paul, “God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.” I truly believe such to be the law governing human affairs, apart from all notions of reward and punishment after death.

In reflecting on what makes for good life, I conclude that right thinking, or wisdom, is foundational. **We must think right in order to speak and act right.** We must know in our own mind that what we say or do is right, ere we seek approval of society. That means training ourselves to think in a way that is intellectually honest, logically coherent, morally sound, and personally as well as socially conducive to harmony and happiness. And we must be willing and able to defend our convictions in the face of opposition, or rejection, once we have thus objectively and honestly ascertained the veracity of we have come to understand.

Among the core ideas that make for right thinking, I will briefly speak to you of six. Taken together, these ideas broaden our horizon, discipline our outlook, and educate our mind in the possibilities of good life for our own selves and for the others. And while they may not make us smarter in some worldly way, they do elevate the quality of our consciousness of ourselves and of our fellow humans, thereby making our relationships healthier, happier, richer, and more mutually beneficial.

**The first core idea for a “good life” perspective is the idea of the one humanity.** Here we realize the commonality of the human condition: that we share the same characteristics, sentiments, and needs; that we partake of the same fund of knowledge, reason alike, cooperate, strive for similar goals, and instinctively submit to the same moral code. Here we learn that the principles and values that sustain and nurture us as individuals and societies are the same as well. Here we discover that the negative factors that degrade our lives, diminish our worth, and impede our progress are not different for any individual or society. And here we are reminded that unchecked negativism against one another, in thought, word, and action, ultimately plunges us all in conflict and chaos.

Notwithstanding the diversity of our thought, which is so amply demonstrated in our various religions, philosophies, and works of literature and art, we remain one species. What is common about us at the bottom is far greater than what is varied about us at the surface. We are in essence one genetic pool, one intellectual consciousness, one bundle of sentiments. And we have come together along the same evolutionary tract, over a long period of time.

We all thrive on freedom and dwindle in serfdom. We expand with knowledge and wisdom, and waste away in ignorance. We are nourished by the same foods and sickened by the same toxins; attacked by the same diseases and cured by the same medicines. We laugh and cry for the same reasons. Love enlivens us, apathy stifles us, and rancor poisons our days. We care for our families; beyond that, we like to be of service to fellow humans. There is something intrinsically and substantively human about us all, and that is what makes us one.

**The second core idea for a “good life” perspective is the idea of liberty as a human birthright.** “By what right have you enslaved people since they have been

born free from the wombs of their mothers?" asked Islam's Second Caliph, Omar (Ruled 634-44), outraged at the practice of slavery in his time. To renounce liberty, said Rousseau (1712-1778) is to renounce being a human. This is so basic that a day of liberty is to be preferred to an eternity in bondage. Patrick Henry's famous battle cry: "Give me liberty or give me death" to this day resonates with us because it so quintessentially states the ultimate choice that has to be made if such is forced upon us.

**Liberty is not a license from all law**, or a release from every constraint. Nor is it the prerogative of a privileged few. The wise see liberty as an ethical and equitable concept: **doing no harm to others, and allowing others as much of freedom as you and I allow ourselves.** Freedom of belief, speech, assembly, and legitimate choice are integral to liberty. Where liberty is suppressed civilization retreats. Sometimes this happens in a seemingly harmless way. United States Justice Louis Brandies (1856-1941), writing from the bench in 1928, made this astute observation:

"Experience," he said, "should teach us to be most on our guard to protect liberty when the government's purposes are beneficent. Men born to freedom are naturally alert to repel invasion of their liberty by evil-minded rulers. The greatest dangers to liberty lurk in insidious encroachment by men of zeal, well-meaning but without understanding."

Needless to say that there is no dearth of such zealots today, especially in the ranks of government and religion.

**The third core idea for a "good life" perspective is the idea of equality.** The best of relations between people develop when they interact as equals, and the worst when one party tries to impose its will on the other. People of course do differ in a great many ways, and so their achievements vary as a matter of course. To the extent that their rewards ensue from their effort and merit, fairness prevails and society benefits. But where fortunes are arbitrarily derived from privilege, effort and merit are undermined and society stands to lose. Paraphrasing another wise man: a society that places the privileges of its few before the rights of its many loses both at the end of the day.

By equality, then, I mean equal status before the law, equal citizenship rights, and equal opportunity for personal advancement. Achieving this entails removing all extant political, social, and economic stratification. Talent is spread far and wide in every society, and by leveling the field of opportunity we immeasurably improve the chances of bringing our best national talent forward.

Writing in 1869 England, John Stuart Mill wondered why would we not want to live as equals. "The true virtue of human beings," he wrote, "is fitness to live together as equals; claiming nothing for themselves but what they as freely concede to everyone else; regarding command of any kind as an exceptional necessity, and in all cases a temporary one; and preferring, whenever possible, the society of those with whom leading and following can be alternate and reciprocal." Contrast this noble thought with the crude notion of clinging on to power until death, then bequeathing it to a kin waiting in the wings.

**The fourth core idea for a "good life" perspective is the idea of justice.** Justice must be upheld in every human activity, public or private, big or small. Without justice no human transaction can be validated as right or beneficial. The accumulation of injustice leads to the disintegration of society. The perpetrators and victims of injustice both suffer, the first by morally damaging themselves by being unjust, the latter for failing to resist injustice collectively at the outset. With justice societies are helped to endure and prosper.

Justice is the guardian of liberty, and whenever the two are separated, wrote Edmond Burke (1729-1797), neither is safe. Justice is above party, friendship, and kindred. This is universally acknowledged in civilized society. In the Qur'an we are admonished to stand up for justice, as witnesses to God, even against ourselves, or our parents or our kin, and whether it be against rich or poor, friend or foe (4:135; 5:9).

From time immemorial to our contemporary notions of human rights, justice has stayed a central theme in human affairs. The great teachers of humankind have placed no greater emphasis on any other aspect of the moral imperative. "Of all the things of a man's soul which he has within him, said Plato, "justice is the greatest good, and injustice the greatest evil." "Justice is indiscriminately due to all, without regard to numbers, wealth, or rank," wrote United States Chief Justice John Jay in 1794. Today, as invariably as in the past, the greatest impediment to justice is despotism whose motif is force, not equity. Despotism begets privilege, which violates justice by seizing for a few that which rightfully belongs to all.

**The fifth core idea for a "good life" perspective is that of the dignity of the human individual.** It means, in the words of Emmanuel Kant (1724-1804), "every man is to be respected as an absolute end in himself; and it is a crime against the dignity that belongs to man to use him as mere means to some external purpose."

It means, moreover, that while a person may be convicted and punished for a civil or criminal offense under the law, he or she should never be condemned or humiliated. It also means that while we may oppose each other's opinion we may not disparage each other personally; that while we may fight each other's position we may not touch each other with harm.

In the Qur'an there is a categorical assertion of the dignity of man. "We have honored the offspring of Adam," says the Qur'an, speaking of humanity at large, without distinction based on religion, race, or sex (27:70). Elsewhere, the Qur'an posits all persons on equal footing before God, the closest to God being the ones most righteous in His eye. (49:13). Those piously admitting we are equal before God, yet insisting we are not equal among ourselves, do indeed reveal a remarkable lack of consistency.

**The sixth core idea for a "good life" perspective is that of democratic governance.** The first democratic governments were established in a few Greek city-states during the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. They did not last long. By Aristotle's time in fourth century B.C. they were extinct. Not until the political revolutions of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries did the democratic impulse surface again. In England, in 1689, parliament gained supremacy over the king; the rule of law replaced the rule of men. In the new world, a century later, the American Declaration of Independence proclaimed "all men are created equal," and shortly thereafter, the United States was founded on a constitution that firmly posited sovereignty in the people, the constitution's first words being: "We the people.."

Democracy is premised on the sovereignty of the people, the supremacy of the laws they collectively make and commit to obey, and the equal status of all citizens before those laws. In non-democratic governments, there is no equal status before the law, and no law that is superior to the will, or the whim, of one or more men. In a theocracy, all law is inferior to the sacred text, whose guardians, the clergy, thereby become guardians of society as well.

Democracy means public participation in deciding public business through representative government. The participants are all citizens of voting age: one person, one vote, exercised freely and periodically through secret ballot. Only through election can legitimate authority be asserted for any echelon of public office. Where authority is not derived from election, it remains arbitrary and authoritarian. Besides representation through election, democracy entails separation of powers, checks and balances between co-equal branches of government, and constitutional protections for civil rights and civil liberties. It also involves judicial review, legislative oversight, transparency, and accountability. To appreciate democracy as such, and to actually practice it as such, are two different things. I earnestly hope the young men and women of Oman, in their own good time, will both appreciate and practice democracy. I also hope young men and women worldwide will support and encourage democratic progress everywhere.

These, then, are the six core ideas that I believe make for a "good life" perspective: that humanity is one; that liberty is indispensable; that equality is essential; that justice must prevail; that human dignity must be protected; and that democratic government ought to become the political norm everywhere.

By deepening our own appreciation of these ideas and by discussing them with the others, we may build and disseminate a perspective that is humane and wise. In this perspective, good life is not predicated on affluence, influence, privilege, or sheer smartness. It does not entertain pomp, circumstance, prestige, or grandeur. Instead, it is a life experience that is simple and modest, rich and graceful. It is a mode of thought that is informed by knowledge, anchored to ethics, and illumined by wisdom.

Our great teachers from the past, in all nations, taught and acted from such a perspective. They lived ethically, and encouraged everyone around them to live ethically as well. From Hammurabi's law of 18th Century B.C., through all the great prophetic missions, to the Declaration of Universal Human Rights of the mid Twentieth Century (adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 10, 1948), to our contemporary codifications of human rights and civil liberties, theirs has been one consistent effort: to establish and uphold the moral imperative in the human experience.

From these teachers, past and present, we learn that human progress is more than merely the expansion of raw knowledge, the production of material wealth, or the acquisition of military power; that, beyond knowledge, wealth, and power, it is moral growth that makes us better humans capable of good life. It is through moral awareness that we come to realize that enlightened self-interest and public good are ultimately inseparable; that we err when we think of the one as unrelated to the other. Through it we learn that there is no gain to be realized from an immoral act, only a negative return that strikes at the victim, society, and the perpetrator himself; that any time we diminish ethical standards we diminish ourselves; any time we ignore morality, we do so at our own peril; that, on the other hand, a moral act, intentioned and engineered to be good and right, benefits both the receiver and the giver; beyond that, it benefits society and posterity as well.

And so, in a final word, I invite you, young people, to claim your human legacy in its best content and form. **The ideas I just enumerated represent the best offerings from all nations and cultures.** Claim and help spread these ideas, because they cleanse us of

prejudice, bigotry, rancor, malice, and the like, and thereby make us more humane and wise. **Let knowledge be your informant, wisdom your guide. And live ethically and well, for good ethics and good life are inextricably joined.**