

Choices

A while ago, a friend of mine asked me, “What do you consider your life motto? You know, something you hope someone will say at your eulogy.” I congratulated her on giving me some serious food for thought and promised to get back to her when I had figured it out.

I found it a bit overwhelming to try and condense my life experiences and the wisdom they’ve produced into one phrase. But I was determined to try. I considered fortunecookie type philosophies that had influenced me over the years - things like:

“Doing what you like is freedom, liking what you do is happiness.”

Or: “Life is like a bicycle; to keep your balance, you must keep moving.”

Or even something cheesy like: “When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.”

But that felt like cheating. And I pondered exactly what is a motto, anyway? According to Webster, it is defined as “*a short sentence or phrase chosen as encapsulating the beliefs or ideals guiding an individual, family, or institution.*” That prompted the thought: what social foundations or significant events have shaped my beliefs or motivated me throughout my life?

My mom had a saying that has stuck with me throughout my life: “*The road to hell is paved with good intentions!*” She usually spouted that in her abrupt and sarcastic manner after I had failed in some way. And while I cringed at the words, I came to realize that it meant you cannot just say you’re gonna do something, you must choose to do what you say you’re gonna do. As much guilt as that phrase laid upon me through my childhood and even into my adult years, it simultaneously reinforced the foundational principle that I was responsible for my choices, and

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the consequences of those choices could be positive or negative, depending on how I chose.

Even now, when I'm tempted to try and wiggle out of some "good intention," I can still hear her words in my head...

I pondered my adult years. I married a person who is my polar opposite, which taught me a lot about choosing to love unconditionally, even when it's not easy or fun. At some point, the revelation that "*love is not a feeling, it's a choice,*" became reality - and a living breathing mantra for us through rough years in our relationship. It gave our vow of "*til death do us part*" a whole new meaning as we learned that contrary to what Erich Segal tried to convince us, love often means having to say you're sorry - and choosing the relationship over your fickle, non-trustworthy emotions. This philosophy has preserved our marriage through almost fifty-seven years at this point.

During our years raising a large family in today's ever-changing world, the philosophy of choosing to love unconditionally, even when it hurts, was constantly hammered home to me. I learned about "tough love" - holding kids responsible for their choices, no matter what.

Accountability is never fun for anyone, but enforcing rules and consequences in a large and boisterous family continually underscored the reality that choices matter - good or bad - and they don't always just affect you, but those around you as well. "Tough love" for us involved making sure that our offspring knew full well that wrong choices would catch up with them, sooner or later, just as good ones will reward you at some point. It was not an easy path and at times, it bucked against the permissive, indulgent culture around us. But choosing to "tough love" those kids through literal hell at times has also yielded the fruit of stronger relationships, independent adult children and a family that still enjoys each other, as different as we all are.

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In my professional career, I was blessed with over twenty years in a corporate environment that emphasized and rewarded creativity, teamwork and accountability. I learned that I could choose to succeed or I could choose to just take home a paycheck. Thankfully for me and our future, my bosses inspired and motivated me to go above and beyond - and it paid off, literally and emotionally. My favorite boss, Bob, had a famous speech that he gave to disgruntled employees. We called it the “Be Happy” talk. Basically, he reinforced the idea that working for our company was a choice we had made, we were not indentured servants, and if we couldn’t be happy in our jobs there, we should go be happy somewhere else. He always gave that speech respectfully, but the point was unmistakable, and it stuck with all of us. Making the choice to “be happy” in my job resulted in a satisfying career and an extremely comfortable retirement — but perhaps most unexpectedly, it gifted me with lifelong friendships I still treasure.

So, after all that reflection, I have arrived to my “golden years.” Now I can do whatever I choose whenever I choose, yet I realize more than ever just how much my choices continue to matter. I can say what I’m thinking, or I can hold my tongue. I can dwell on what I’m losing as I age or I can focus on the rich experiences I’ve had up to this point. I can be cranky about the hard stuff, or I can appreciate the easiness of my life. Each day is an opportunity to decide how the rest of my life plays out. The biggest goal I have in life at this point is to be able to say, when I close my eyes for the last time, that I have no regrets.

So what do I believe is my life motto? If I distill all the philosophies I’ve encountered and incorporated into my approach to life, I’d have to say my motto is this:

Life is a choice. Choose wisely.