

PHILOSOPHY FOR A QUALITY LIFE
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By
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Officers, members and friends of the Arlington Rotary, it is a pleasure to be here today. Rotary's motto is: "Service Above Self", which acknowledges the importance of reaching out to the community -- be it local, regional, national or international, and, making a contribution of time, service, and/or money.

INTRODUCTION

Today, I am not going to address service, since I'm not sure I could tell you anything you don't already know. I am, however, going to talk about self -- not in psychological terms but in philosophical terms, because each of us is bound by our philosophy. It is what propels us out of bed in the morning and directs us in our daily activities, plans and goals. It is how we treat ourselves and the people around us. It determines our commitment to the greater good of the community, through such organizations such as Rotary.

PHILOSOPHY

Philosophy encompasses the guiding principles that determine the quality of our lives, what we deem important and why. However, having a philosophy is not enough. Implementation is the key as a philosophy is only as good as the extent to which we choose to enforce it.

Who talks philosophy? Who even has time? Life is hectic, things happen, changes occur and everyone rolls with the punches, absorbing minor annoyances and everyday occurrences. I have to admit that in another time, I would have agreed with you. Life for me was something to get through -- just a series of ifs. I will be fine if I can just make it through the baby's teething; if I live through my son's teenage years; if I survive the party tomorrow night; or if I can meet my client's deadline.

However, not all changes minor. Some of us have had to face life-altering crises such as the death of someone close to us -- a parent, a spouse, a child or a relative, a life threatening illness, divorce, or loss of a job. More often than not, this kind of change can be a boulder that blocks our way.

If you have been there, you know what I mean. Did you change substantially, or pretty much go on as before?

My life-altering crisis was the death of my husband, almost seven years ago. I, who took everything for granted, found myself questioning everything and everyone. I became very

disillusioned and disenchanting. The world as I knew it -- safe, predictable, and secure -- was no longer. I was scared, angry and alone.

Once I acknowledged that my world would never be the same, I needed to understand this different world. Instead of fighting what was, I had to establish a new life on my own terms. I had to define and create a quality of life that I wanted. This process is, it appears, never-ending. When I get discouraged, I remind myself that it is the journey that matters.

PHILOSOPHICAL GUIDELINES

My philosophy forms the basis of my decisions and guides me down my path. If you have heard these guidelines before, maybe they will serve as a reminder.

- **Each day is important.** Live in the present.
- **People are more important than things.** And so are pets.
- **Negativity is debilitating.** Change it, diffuse it or remove it.
- **There is always a choice.** There is more than one way.
- **Nothing is forever.** Appreciate what you have while you have it. And remember the tough moments will pass.

EACH DAY IS IMPORTANT

First, each day is important. Make it count and enjoy it. Give your attention to what is happening now, instead of losing the intensity of the moment by thinking what was or what will be. The benefit of this is that concentration, awareness and sensitivity are sharpened and moments become events that can be visualized and remembered.

Driving to see my new grandchild (yes, I have pictures) during the height of the Fall Foliage season was an experience all its own. I decided to take the more scenic Taconic rather than the Thruway. I turned off the radio to focus on the roadway, colors and views. When my mind started to wander, I brought it back to the beauty around me. It was surreal, like moving through a painted canvas or a free standing sculpture. I can still recall that trip today, and will never forget it.

When you are present, people will notice that you are *with* them when you are *with* them -- not at work, or trying to watch TV or planning foreign policy or figuring out what to eat next. Quality time is time spent when your mind, body and spirit are all in the same place.

PEOPLE ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN THINGS

Second, people are more important than things. Give the people you care about your attention and let them know how important they are to you. Tell your family that you love them and tell your friends you care about them. Why, because we forget and take what we have for granted. We assume people know what is in our hearts and minds.

As a photographer, I photograph couples before their wedding to give them a chance to relax in front of the camera. One groom refused to smile. When I pointed this out, he said he was very happy and loved his fiancée from the first day he met her. I took the picture and showed it to him. I explained that although he knew how he felt, the pictures would tell a

different story. He looked like he was being let to slaughter. He laughed and agreed. He smiled and the pictures of the wedding were wonderful.

People are not mind-readers. You have to tell them, explicitly, how you feel. The awful truth is you might not be here tomorrow to explain.

For me, every phone call to a family member now ends with "I love you." Every visit ends with a hug and a kiss and "I love you." It is not rote for any of us. It is meaningful and important. I first started doing after my husband died and it was difficult since we were not a demonstrative family. We never know what each day will bring and no one should ever wonder if we cared about them. The words do matter.

As I typed this, my four cats took turns reading it. They were sitting on my hands, brushing up against my face, sitting on my draft and walking over the keyboard. They would not leave me alone until I promised to add that cats -- and pets -- are important too.

NEGATIVITY IS DEBILITATING

Third, negativity in any form is debilitating. As I was struggling to put my own life together, it quickly became very apparent that negative personalities depleted my personal energy and negative situations undermined my creativity and productivity. It also undermined my health making me sick and tired. The best way to remove negativity is to deal with it as soon as possible. Change it, diffuse it, remove it or walk away.

While it would be impossible to describe every possible scenario, I'd like to share my "Three BUT Rule" with you. It goes something like this...

In conversation with someone looking for advice or direction, when you hear their first "BUT," they cannot take the first step. However, they are willing to listen. The second "BUT" says they are resisting or on the fence. However, when you hear that third "BUT", stop. There is no chance of anything happening for them unless you do it. If this is not your job or mission in life, change the subject or leave.

Example:

- The hook: I'm having trouble finding a job.
- The conversation:
 - You: "Have you sent out your resume?"
 - Them: "I would, but I can't seem to get it down on paper."
 - You: "Have you gone to a resume service?"
 - Them: "I've called, but it's too expensive."
 - You: "Have you talked to a job counselor?"
 - Them: "I've asked around, but I can't find a good one."
 - The result: You will wind up doing it all for them if you are not careful – putting your life on hold for as long as it takes.
 - You: "Give me your card. If I hear of one, I'll let you know. Good Luck."
 -

Listen to yourself. You could be a "Three BUT" person and standing in your own way. Do it or don't -- and move on. This advice has saved me from indecision and endless conversations with myself and others.

THERE IS ALWAYS A CHOICE

Fourth, there is always a choice. Always. People who feel they have no choice suffer physical and mental medical problems due to stress and unhappiness. Have you ever heard anybody say, "I have no choice" in a happy voice?

There is always more than one way, each one with its own set of responsibilities and repercussions -- good and bad. But it is your choice. You are in control and doing what you want or have to do for yourself and your family.

I worked in a job that gave me health benefits, which I needed because I contracted Lyme Disease. The monthly expenses for medicine alone were close to six hundred dollars. During this time, I became very unhappy, depressed and withdrawn. I couldn't stay but I couldn't leave. I felt I had no choice.

Once I was symptom free, I found I could get health insurance from other sources. I left and became a business consultant with insurance coverage from the Chamber of Commerce.

NOTHING IS FOREVER

My final guideline is: nothing is forever – except, as we all know, death and taxes. Life is unpredictable, people change and things break. (Note: Except for the Bendix Washing Machine. The company went out of business because their machines never broke down or needed replacement.) Enjoy what you have while you have it. Make time for what is important to you. Good days and bad days end and, despite how you feel, the sun *will* come up the next morning. How you choose to spend each new day is up to you.

PHILOSOPHY IMPLEMENTATION

My next step was to put together a plan of action, a guide to operations, if you will.

- **Say yes.** You've got to be in it to win it.
- **Get rid of words: should, could, would, and what if.**
- **Eliminate feelings of deprivation.** You can have anything I want.
- **Exercise your choice.** It is the secret of personal power.
- **Do it.** The time is now.

SAY YES

Say "yes." There is no way to experience life if when an opportunity presents itself, your gut reaction is "no". "Yes" can be an adventure with unexpected results. For example:

- Went on a trip to Spain and Israel:
 - I left the elderly English speaking group for the younger French group and made wonderful friends – even though I don't speak a word of French;
 - I got a personal tour of Jerusalem and environs from a native Israeli. It was quite an adventure that will be a book someday;
 - I brought my camera and, after seeing the images, began my photography business;

- Sampled a number singles weekends in the Catskills, sometimes more dangerous than Israel;
- Accompanied a friend to the beach in Florida and learned to love the endless fascination of shelling; and
- Wrapped Christmas and Chanukah gifts at the Poughkeepsie Galleria, which became my favorite annual activity.

By saying yes, my life has been infused and enhanced with excitement, awareness and understanding.

GETTING RID OF SHOULD, COULD, WOULD, AND WHAT IF

Getting rid of should, could, would, and what if's has made a huge difference because they imply something wasn't done right. Even though this takes a lot of thought and rephrasing, it is worth it. By eliminating these passive and guilt ridden words, I no longer create anxiety in myself or others. Make the decision: Do it or don't. Done. Once you make the decision, stop beating yourself up and enjoy the choice that you made.

An interesting side effect is that you become less judgmental and more supportive. "You should" becomes "You might do it this way" or "have you thought about this possibility." "You should have done it that way" might translate into "Was the way you did it most effective?," "I was concerned about...," or "Will you take the time to look into alternatives for next time?" It isn't easy at first, but it does become second nature.

ELIMINATE DEPRIVATION

Eliminate deprivation. I can have/do/be anything that I want. Whether I choose to exercise my options or not, is a choice I have to make. Decisions carry responsibility and repercussions.

Is it important to have a 75 foot yacht? Do you want the payments and responsibilities that come with it? What concessions will you make to afford that lifestyle? Is it worth it? Choices only you can make.

For me, the yacht is not important. But I do like to shop. Think about this next time you are in the mall. If we agree you can have anything you want, in essence, everything there is yours. The stores are simply warehousing the items for you. You can go in, try on, sample, look, appreciate, touch your "stuff" anytime you want. Think of it as all of the pleasure and none of the responsibility. Buy what you absolutely need; evaluate what you want.

EXERCISE YOUR CHOICE

The times that I have been at my lowest energy and emotional levels are all marked by the belief that I had no choice. I had relinquished power over my life. If you find you are blaming others for what is happening to you, while it may be true, it is also true that you are not exercising your power to change your reaction, seek professional help and/or explore your options.

Next, now that you know you have a choice, make it. Making choices is like exercising - the more you do it, the stronger you get. Taking action is difficult on many levels, but regaining power over a situation is a personal triumph.

DO IT

And finally, do it. This assures something will happen and/or be accomplished. If you sit around wishing and hoping, by default you are waiting for someone else to make it happen. In general, most "someones" are not that dependable. The person you have to depend on is yourself. I have found it to be much easier to acknowledge that from the start and just do it.

CONCLUSION

I have shared my philosophy with you because it has helped me feel more open to life in general, closer to my family and friends and more in touch with my priorities than ever before.

The process of change is not easy. Defining what is important to you, what you really want to do with your time and energy, and with whom, takes time and thought, testing what works and what doesn't.

I can only urge you not to put it off until you have time -- make time. You only get one chance at every minute of every hour of every day. There is not much you can do about the past and the future is definitely not guaranteed.

Frame your philosophy. Give yourself the gift of a quality lifetime. You will have a more positive relationship with all the lives you touch, be it family, friends, co-workers, business associates or the community-at-large.

ROTARY THANK YOU

This brings me back to Rotary's motto: Service above self. And, the better you are, the better and more meaningful the service.

I will close with a quote from a sign in my chiropractor's office: "Life is a test, and only a test. If it had been the real thing, we would have been given a set of instructions."

Thank you.