

The Ordinary Life and Coca-Cola® – It's the Real Thing

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Prime Minister Winston Churchill proclaimed, “Never have so many owed so much to so few,” applauding the efforts of valiant fighter pilots in the Battle of Britain. President John Fitzgerald Kennedy admonished, “We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win, and the others, too.” American inventor Thomas Alva Edison declared, “What you are will show in what you do.”

Each of these great leaders recognizes the exceptional performance available to the talented man who applies himself with certainty, direction, and perseverance. The exceptional life is one to which most of us aspire, one that inspires but often leaves us falling short, left behind in the dust, mired in a life that never will quite meet our aspirations, our hopes, our dreams.

Perhaps our definition is what is holding us back? Perhaps our viewpoint has been skewed by our admiration for the few who seem to “have it all,” or at least to have the best public relations agents!

What is “extraordinary,” as applied to a life lived on this planet? Webster’s dictionary defines it as “going beyond what is usual, regular, or customary.” It derives from the Latin, meaning “out of course.” Synonyms help to expand our appreciation: “exceeding, phenomenal, rare, uncommon, unique.”

Do we seek to lead an extraordinary life? Ask this question of many teenagers and you will find that their dreams are far beyond the ordinary, they expect to accomplish great things ... even though most are not sure how to do it.

So the real question today is this: “Is it possible to lead an extraordinary life?”

The answer is yours to discover – and now we’ll review some pertinent thoughts.

In the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12), the setting is important. Christ has endured his temptation in the desert. He has called his apostles and embarked upon a mission of healing as part of the demonstration of His reality. Crowds have begun to gather, and on this occasion, He offers his longest sermon. He has called for repentance, and now He outlines the requirements of righteousness to inherit the kingdom.

Verses 5 through 8 are particularly relevant in our discussion:

- “5 Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
- 6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness,
for they will be filled.
- 7 Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy.
- 8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”

Each of these relates to a particular viewpoint, one that is most powerful because they are critical to center yourself on the path to righteousness ... and to enjoyment of the kingdom of heaven.

Interestingly, none of these – or the other eight declarations – describe characteristics of those valiant fighter pilots over London, those dedicated engineers striving for the moon – but they are reflective of Edison’s view that “What you are will show in what you do.”

In just such a way, the Twelve Points of the Boy Scout Law describe how a Scout shall live – lessons that he learns from his first day in Scouting and hopes to carry through to his last day of life. A Scout is ...

- ☛ Trustworthy
- ☛ Loyal
- ☛ Helpful
- ☛ Friendly
- ☛ Courteous
- ☛ Kind
- ☛ Obedient
- ☛ Cheerful
- ☛ Thrifty
- ☛ Brave
- ☛ Clean and
- ☛ Reverent.

These precepts are strikingly similar to those expressed in the Beatitudes. Perhaps our trail of discovery is leading toward a more powerful understanding of “extraordinary.”

The Boy Scout motto is “Be prepared.” How does one prepare should be the next question.

Observation might be the first step, learning to see what is really there to the best of your understanding. Perhaps the second step is to increase your understanding by learning more and more about your subject, gaining a fuller appreciation for whatever topic you are observing. At this point, you are better able to expect a future, to prepare for a course of action that might require your response. At no point is this admonition expecting you to prepare for war or for defense of your wellbeing ... but walking along a darkened street at night would suggest that you might better survive an unexpected assailant should you have already prepared yourself for that possibility.

What other possibilities could you prepare yourself for? How about the prospect of learning skills that would enable you to help others in need ... or even to rescue yourself from some rare but

possible event. Certainly those in Kansas build storm shelters not because a tornado is looming but because that possibility is a rare but possible event. “Be prepared” has many different meanings. In the context of the Twelve Points of the Boy Scout Law, it brings a fullness to life on a daily scale, in all our interactions with others.

Pastor Don Patterson offered in part this prayer, reminding us that we declare our own future:

“Thank you for mercifully letting my words become my own discipline as I have to live with the consequences they bring for me. By your miraculous power, purify my heart so that you can change what I was going to say into what I need to say. Make the words of my future (starting right now,) become a clear brook trickling out to refresh others. I want to be one whose words are a blessing and not a distraction.”

Does God change the words of our heart – or does he provide the opportunity for us to have a change of heart and, therefore, a change of our words ... both to ourselves, privately in prayer, and to others?

As part of my daily prayer, I offer thanks “for the gift and the privilege to come to Thee in prayer, hear my prayer O Lord and bless me, touch me with Thy hand and bless me, enlarge my territory, keep me from evil, and keep me from causing harm.” Can He keep me from evil? Can He keep me from causing harm? Not directly, not without interfering with my free choice in life. But He can keep me aware, through my readings and prayers and my observations of others, of the true value – to myself and to others – of my commitment to the Beatitudes, to the Boy Scout Law, and to other statements of the best in life.

How does keen observation alter our perspectives? We are raised to carry forth a certain level of suspicion, simply because bad things happen to good people. Bad people challenge our survival and wellbeing, often with little warning. We are wise to “keep our guard up.

But that doesn’t mean to live a guarded life. That means to live one expecting the best and being prepared for whatever might come. Our powers of observation, as they are finely tuned over years of living, are our best ally in detecting positive signs in the behavior of others ... or detecting ones that might pose a threat to us. Certainly these threats can come from the environment – such as being watchful for hidden rattlesnakes when walking through the desert in Arizona. But more worrisome are the threats that come from other humans. If we naturally expect the best in others, we can embrace the subtle signals that we receive through our observations, indications that things are alright or that something is amiss. If we are prepared to properly confront or necessarily avoid potential problems, then we have a far greater likelihood of minimizing any threat.

Birds have the ability to fly, so they can escape most ground-based predators. The greatest threats to most birds are other birds – vultures, hawks, owls, even eagles. By the same token, the greatest threat to humans are other humans. Our ability to distinguish signals of coming danger provides us the time and opportunity to prepare appropriately, to avoid calamity. But in the same manner, our ability to discern the goodness in others gives us the chance to bring forth the best in their nature, to minimize threats and to establish a foundation of common wellbeing. Even many “criminals” have families with whom they share trust and love, and news stories abound about

criminals who spared their victims because they felt a common human bond.

Birds who could be victims of attack by a hawk or owl or such make no attempt to attack ones that are keeping a distance and not displaying signs of aggression. But they are fierce in their resistance to predation when an attack is about to commence. They graduate their response to meet the situation at hand. Perhaps a lesson here is one of faithful expectation of the good in others.

To many of us, birds are simply “blue” or “black” or “red” or “gray,” and we might even distinguish male from female by their size or feathers, even their behavior. Most of us have no idea what messages are being conveyed to the others by their chirping or songs. Bird-watchers around the world have a much greater appreciation of the society of birds thanks to their finely tuned powers of observation. They easily distinguish different species of birds, even different varieties within a species. And they are keenly aware of whether birds perceive a local threat.

Perhaps we should take a lesson from bird-watchers, in that we should refine our powers of observation so that we can become aware that the vast majority of humans mean us no harm. In fact, many of them wish us well, even though they don’t know us personally.

How best to increase our powers of observation? We must learn to sit silently, simply watching “what goes on.” As we see the play of life go forth, we begin to understand the motives and motions of “the players,” other humans in this life. While many people confuse “contemplation” with “meditation,” the goal is different: contemplation involves quiet reflection of “what is” as it is happening, perceptively watching the behavior of others.

What might be surprising is how much the lessons of the Beatitudes are those enhanced by quiet contemplation and observation: the meek, the pure in heart, those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, the merciful, the peacemakers. And recall especially these precepts of the Boy Scout Law: trustworthy, loyal, friendly, kind, cheerful, reverent. These are all qualities of life that spring forth from within, independent of others, and each is honed by keen observations of others in life.

Let’s turn our attention to the ordinary life. Webster’s Dictionary defines “ordinary” as “the regular or customary condition or course of things.” Of the seven-plus billion people on this planet, that describes the vast, overwhelming majority – certainly not those few hundred pilots of the Royal Air Force in the Battle of Britain, not those twelve astronauts who walked on the moon, not those inventors of technologies that have changed our world.

So what value do those ordinary men and women offer to our world, to our future? Synonyms include “commonplace,” “everyday,” “normal,” “ordinary,” “routine,” “unremarkable,” “familiar,” “popular,” “insignificant,” “predictable.” So those of us who are “commonplace” look up with admiration to those whose feats are exceptional. We are merely their adoring audience.

Or are we?

Certainly articles in the press – newspapers, magazines, internet, radio, or TV – are written about the exploits of “the exceptionals” among us. Everyday activities, after all, are not

“newsworthy.”

But is it our goal to become the center of “the news”? Perhaps not.

All too often, those of us plying our trade everyday can slip into the feeling that we’re no more than “cogs in a wheel,” mere functionaries pushing forward the wheels of progress. Are we more than worker bees, doing our assigned jobs in the hive just so the queen can be nurtured? Are we more than worker ants, building the mound and searching for food for the entire colony, just so the queen ant can be nurtured?

Does nurturing matter? Simply stated, absolutely yes. Without a queen laying eggs, a bee hive or ant colony will falter and die. But the death of the group is also related to the failure to provide new workers for the hive or colony. So in a very different way, survival of the hive or the colony depends absolutely on both functions: the regenerative efforts of the queen and the supportive efforts of the workers. Which is more important? *Both!*

So perhaps the perspective that yields the most inspiration is to discover how “the common man” becomes uncommon.

Is that even possible? Could each of us possess a certain spark that makes us “uncommon” in the very deepest sense of the word?

Webster’s Dictionary defines “uncommon” as “not often found, seen, or experienced,” “not ordinarily experienced.” Perhaps therein lies the secret to becoming “uncommon” – how are we “experienced” by others?

The Buddha said, “Consider others as yourself.” The Talmud offered, “What is hurtful to yourself do not to your fellow man.” Mohammad declared, “Hurt no one so that no one may hurt you. That which you want for yourself, seek for mankind.” Even the Egyptian late period papyrus stated, “That which you hate to be done to you, do not do to another.” The Greek philosopher Epicurus admonished, “Neither harm nor be harmed.” Confucius said, “Never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself.” And of course, our Lord Jesus admonished, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Love thy neighbor as thyself.”

Love is the ultimate expression of freedom. As the Anglican Book of Common Prayer notes:

“Hear what our Lord Jesus Christ saith.

“THOU shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it; Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

Loving thy neighbor is the heart of the command to “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

We can appreciate the ultimate importance of this form of loving when we reflect upon The

Lord's Prayer, from Matthew 6:9-13:

“Our Father, which art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy Name.^[SEP] Thy Kingdom come.
Thy will be done in earth,^[SEP] As it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,^[SEP] As we forgive them that trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,^[SEP] But deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
The power, and the glory,
For ever and ever.
Amen.”

Every phrase is important, otherwise Christ would not have offered them as noted. But perhaps we should focus on one unique phrase: “And forgive us our trespasses, As we forgive them that trespass against us.”

This is the only *duty* expressed in The Lord's Prayer. We forgive others and, in the same manner, we are similarly forgiven. What then, if we fail to forgive others? Perhaps we'd best turn our attention to this point.

Do we lay claim to forgiveness, as a matter of right? Do we “deserve” forgiveness by the supplication in our prayers? Does our repentance alone justify our forgiveness, despite continued purposeful transgressions?

Webster's Dictionary defines “trespass” as “a sin or other wrong or improper act.” It derives from the Anglo-French meaning “overstepping” or “misdeed.” Traditionally a trespass is normally understood to mean the failure to act for the good and do the right thing.

Do others deserve our forgiveness? Do we deserve theirs? Do we deserve God's forgiveness? These questions assume an overwhelming importance when we realize that The Lord's Prayer involves a reciprocity, the only duty commanded in order to obtain a benefit of inestimable value.

Perhaps we should step back and take the larger perspective of the framework from which such forgiveness can proceed. Learning to forgive is seemingly not natural to a child, who early on appears to be a bundle of selfishness. Parenting is the socializing effort that brings each of us into an accommodation with others in the society. Through “good parenting,” we learn to be responsible, caring, and trusting people.

Webster's Dictionary defines “parenting” as “the things that parents do to raise a child.” Perhaps the Twelve Points of the Boy Scout Law serve as a reference guide for the teaching to be done by parents. While “forgiveness of trespasses” is not one of the twelve points, it should derive from adherence to the others.

“Forgiveness,” in the deepest sense, means a genuine “acceptance” of the reality of others.

Webster's Dictionary defines "acceptance" as "the quality or state of being accepted or acceptable," where "acceptable" means "passable," "satisfactory," "tolerable," even "respectable." In other words, we can learn to tolerate the actions of others. Perhaps we should have them act otherwise, but we can be accepting of their foibles and their virtues.

We teach our children by example. That is the most powerful form of parenting. So when we practice forgiveness of trespasses, we are acting in a most wonderful way, serving as an actual mentor to our children. If our children learn the forgiveness of trespasses as a way of life, they are at the threshold of the kingdom of heaven, such that their own trespasses might be forgiven.

The Ten Commandments serve as a stable guideline for all behavior. Parenting that serves as an example of life well led according to the commandments is even more powerful. Can we serve as loving parents, devoted each to the other and to our spouse and to our children? Of course we can. But it is a daily commitment to striving for the best that we can be – and a daily example of forgiveness when those around us fall short of what we might best expect.

Can we truly be happy – as parents, as children, as individuals? Happiness is not a product but rather a result. It is achieved indirectly, by producing something beautiful or useful or by making someone else happy. One of the deepest desires in *others* is to be accepted by *you*, by their significant others. Indeed, one of the deepest desires in the depths of our souls is to be accepted by those who mean a great deal to us. The search for happiness, it turns out, is one of the chief sources of unhappiness. Happiness *is* within reach, simply by following the traditional commandments and practicing forgiveness of trespasses ... acceptance not only of others but also of the failings you see in yourself.

The slogans long used by Coca-Cola® have some interesting insights to offer.

"Things go better with Coke®."

"Coke® Adds Life."

"Make It Real."

"Coke® Is It."

"You Can't Beat the Real Thing."

"It's The Real Thing."

Surprisingly the advertising suggests that a soda drink has real *value* in life. Kind of makes you wonder what "*It*" really is – and what "*The Real Thing*" really means.

We are unlikely to be fighter pilots saving a nation from disaster. We are unlikely to be astronauts walking on the moon. We are unlikely to invent a new product that sweeps the planet as a revolutionary item. In short, we are unlikely to be "exceptional" as we commonly define the word in our societies.

So the real question emerges: Have we defined the concept incorrectly?

If we can lead a life adhering to basic principles of good behavior, if we can parent children to grow in ways that allow them to lead lives adhering to such principles, if we can forgive trespasses and

teach our children to do so as well, are we leading ordinary lives – or extraordinary ones?

Do we have here the secret of becoming more than cogs in a wheel, worker bees in a hive, worker ants in a colony. Are we more than we actually believe or can we become so?

Forgive those who trespass against us. Love others as we would want to be loved. *What an extraordinary life. It's the real thing: doing the right thing, for the right reasons, at the right time.*

The Peace Prayer of St. Francis underscores the principle of *going first*. Often in life situations where relationships have broken down, the path to success is to be humble and ask for forgiveness at the same time that we offer it. Reflect on how this classical prayer offers us a hope of salvation.

“Lord, make me an instrument of your peace;
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.

“O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.
Amen.”

May we lead exceptional lives and may we be blessed to bask in the glorious salvation that is offered to us through the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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so that ever more of us can be blessed by living ordinary lives that we make *exceptional*.