

On Life (Things I Should Have Told You) was inspired by the author's desire to help her biracial daughters navigate their college years. The book previews the environment they will encounter, advice on how to make the most of their experiences and her beliefs about what matters most as they negotiate the journey towards adulthood.

On Life (Things I Should Have Told You)

By Kim Nelson

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KIM NELSON

On Life

(Things I Should Have Told You)



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PRINT ISBN: 978-1-64718-759-0

EPUB ISBN: 978-1-64718-760-6

MOBI ISBN: 978-1-64718-761-3

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2020

First Edition

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ON COURAGE

I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.

—Nelson Mandela

The world is a wonderful place but also a scary and an intimidating one. We are engineered to be attuned to danger—and we see it everywhere. This state of high alert is probably what kept us alive as a species

thousands of years ago. As Thomas Hobbes said, for much of human civilization, life has been “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” There have always been so very many ways to die and so much to be afraid of. In our modern world, however, what many of us are most afraid of is nothing more than experiencing failure or suffering embarrassment. These are universal fears. It’s helpful and smart to remember that you are not in any way unique if you have these fears or anxieties. *We all have them.* The difference is in *how* we handle them.

Fear can be debilitating and incapacitating. Courage is the ability to move through and past fear and take action. This is true in all arenas. It takes practice to conquer fear, but it is a worthwhile endeavor. Push yourself whenever you can to move toward what scares you in life. All growth happens in the margins, when we are interfacing with the unknown. Think of a child learning to walk. They are too young to fear falling. If they did, they would never learn to walk, for they will fall many, many times—and so will you.

When you and your sister were younger, you were gymnasts. One of the things I love about gymnastics is the routinization of failure. The entire sport is *all about* failure—falling off beams and bars, missing vaults, missing

tumbling sequences. Even the very best gymnasts routinely fail—publicly—at meets. I can't imagine how much courage it takes to do a double back handspring on a four-inch wooden beam four feet off the floor. When learning a new skill, gymnasts fail again and again and again, until they master it. How wonderful! I wanted you and your sister to learn that failure is *a part* of learning. I once heard a speaker at a sales meeting say she thinks about the word fail as an acrostic for her “first attempt in learning.” This kind of mindset is invaluable.

Of course, the situations you will fear as a young adult will be less about your physical well-being and more about saying or doing something embarrassing. You may be afraid to speak up in class to share your perspective if it seems at variance with those around you. You may be worried about how to act or what to say in a social setting that is unfamiliar. You may feel that others around you are smarter, prettier, or otherwise superior to you, and you may find that intimidating and fear embarrassing yourself. And so, you may silence or edit yourself—or avoid settings where you have to risk saying or doing the wrong thing. This would be a mistake and a terrible habit to develop.

There is also the matter of having courage to speak out when something is wrong or doesn't make sense. Or having the courage to speak on behalf of someone who is being wronged when they can't find their own voice. Sometimes something as simple as speaking the truth—especially to those in authority—requires courage. We call this speaking truth to power. You will grow stronger each time you overcome your fears and say and do what you know to be right.

The problem is that if you become too anxious to avoid failure, you will do only the things you know how to do and confine yourself to situations in which you feel comfortable. Beware of this temptation. It is extremely limiting. It will prevent you from trying new things that will be amazing for your personal development and growth. Get comfortable with discomfort. Hold yourself in the space of discomfort so you learn how to conquer it. All great endeavors in life require risk-taking, and inherent in risk-taking is the possibility, even likelihood, of failure. Embrace it.

It gets easier, by the way. The fear never goes away, but your confidence in navigating it strengthens. Like most things in life, if you practice, you get better. Each situation

you overcome builds confidence, and you'll have more courage available the next time you find yourself in a challenging situation. You just have to stick with it.



ON LOVE

*When it comes to matters of the heart, there
ain't a thing a fool won't get used to.*

—Michael McDonald

One of the greatest mysteries of life is why we love whom we love. And one of life's greatest wonders is that there is actually someone out there for each of us, able to love us completely, with wild abandon. In fact, there are many people out there just waiting to love us, because each of us is unequivocally lovable, warts and all. I think this is why love is the most powerful force on earth.

It reflects acceptance, which every human being craves. It enables sacrifice. It makes us selfless and calls us to be our best selves, and it brings us joy.

You will likely fancy yourself “in love” at least a few times in your life (and perhaps already have). All romantic love starts with attraction, which blooms into infatuation, followed by obsession. Infatuation is an all-consuming maelstrom that distracts you from pretty much everything else important going on in your life. You are thinking of the object of your desire constantly. Wondering what they are doing, what they are wearing, when you will see them again, and if they are thinking of you. It is such an intense emotion, and you feel so “caught up” in it while it’s going on, it almost feels like you are drugged in those heady first days, weeks, and months.

Here is the problem. Like most drugs, the high doesn’t last. If it’s not reciprocal, it’s a nightmare. You think it’s love, they think it’s sex—an age-old dynamic that always ends badly. If you are the object of someone else’s unreciprocated devotion, it’s flattering for your self-esteem for a minute, but gets annoying pretty quickly.

If it’s mutual, it’s amazing! For a while, anyway. Eventually the intensity of emotion subsides, and one or

both of you wake up one day and realize this person you thought was perfect actually has flaws. You gradually become less interested in spending every waking moment together. In mature love, you process the flaws, but decide the things that are amazing about the person outweigh the things you don't care for.

If this is not the case, you begin to feel trapped in the relationship and start looking for the exit—or they do. If you are the person dumped, it rips your world apart. I sound dramatic, but trust me, these words will be ringing in your ears one day (and maybe you have already experienced this wrenching pain). Losing love is absolutely soul-crushing. The good news is that the pain subsides over time, and you move on to new experiences, new loves. The first time is the worst.

The bad news is that you have to keep at it, if you ever hope to find “the one.” You have to keep taking the risk, taking that plunge, which is all the worse because after the first time, you *know* how bad it can be if you fall hard, and things don't work out.

But then, one day, things do work out. The infatuation fades but is replaced by a deep, passionate connection and enduring respect. These feelings strengthen the more you

get to know one another. The more time you spend together, the more “right” the relationship feels. You start to wonder if this might be the right person, the right time in your life. You start thinking, could he or she be “the one”? You start wondering what kind of parent they would be, what your children would look like. You start wanting the people you care about in your life to meet your loved one. Your friends. Your sister. You will know you are really serious if you want your father and me to meet them.

It will be an amazing time in your life.



ON DRUGS AND ALCOHOL

Drugs are a waste of time. They destroy your memory and your self-respect and everything that goes along with your self-esteem.

—Kurt Cobain

You will likely experiment with drugs and alcohol as you make your way through the next four years. I know we have talked about this ad nauseam, but I just

want to put my thoughts down on paper, because the situations you will be facing as you step out of your cocoon will be more intense and challenging than anything you have experienced in high school.

You will have a tremendous desire to fit in, to be cool, to make friends, to do what is done “in college.” This will all take place just as you are finding your footing and defining who you are; deciding what you want and don’t want to do. It is a tricky time in your life—and it can go horribly wrong, very quickly. I have seen this firsthand and have heard stories from friends a few years along on this journey with their kids.

For some reason, the stakes seem higher than when I was in school. You can really be hurt badly out there. Most bad things that happen do so in the wee hours when women are drunk or high and don’t have their wits about them. Ironically, when you are doing drugs or drinking, part of the effect of the substance is to impart a sense of confidence and invulnerability. You will think to yourself, *I’ve got this*, precisely when you most definitely do not. You are at your least competent when you are high.

Here is the deal. You don’t want to be “that girl.” You know which girl. Her eyes are glazed over, she’s slurring

her words, and she looks like she might hurl any moment, or maybe she already did but is so wasted she doesn't even realize it. There are guys around her, not girlfriends, because girlfriends would not allow her to be in this state in public. Not real friends. They would gently ease her out of there and get her safely to her dorm room where she could sleep it off.

But this girl we are talking about is vulnerable because she is impaired. Most young men are not going to take advantage of this girl. But some will. And the very small minority of young men around who are flat-out predators definitely will. If you doubt me, watch the documentary, *The Hunting Ground*. It should be required viewing for every high school senior heading to college—male and female.

The guys trailing this girl will be looking to find some way to get her alone. Afterward, she may make it back home that night, or perhaps it will be the next morning. She will be mortified. She will be humiliated. She won't want to report what happened to anyone. Or she may not remember, which is a kind of mercy and penance at the same time, because others will, and she won't know what they remember about her.

Do not be that girl.

There will be other guys at that party who will be embarrassed for “that girl.” They may laugh at her antics because they are not quite sure how to handle the situation. Even if they are laughing, they may be uncomfortable—but not uncomfortable enough to intervene. It takes a lot of courage to intervene. These young men are as susceptible to male peer pressure as anyone. They may even move closer to watch the spectacle.

The person you want to watch for is the young man of worth. This is the guy who has the courage and self-confidence to gently extract this girl from the predicament she is in. He will use humor with the other guys and draw on his own personal credibility. He will find a way to get her out of there, often with the assistance of a woman, and get her safely to her dorm. By the way, this is a rare person. Really special. This is the kind of guy you want to pay attention to.

Remember, once you start drinking or drugging, you lose your judgment and therefore your ability to moderate. Things can get out of hand quickly. I know you have seen this already in high school.

I do understand that you will want to experience all that college life has to offer and to experiment. You are an adult, and why should I try to stop you? I have had the privilege of forming my own beliefs based on my own experiences. Why shouldn't you? I don't want to stop you from experimenting. I couldn't if I wanted to, anyway. I just want you to be smart and safe. Be careful.

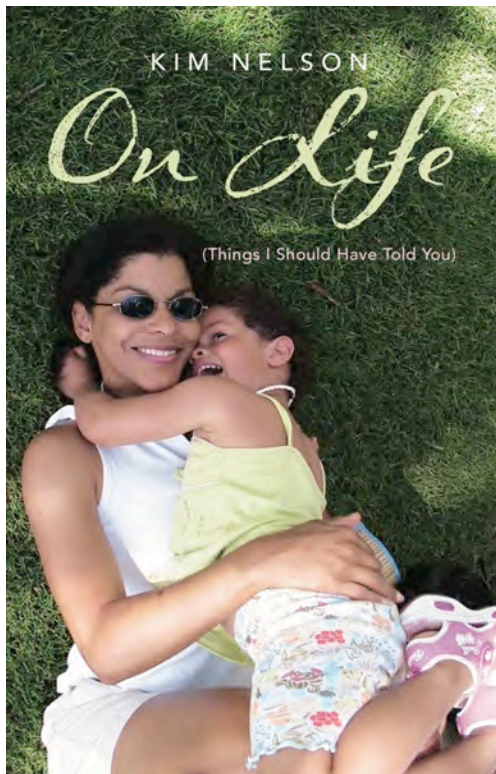
Make sure you always have one or two women (or men) around you whom you trust to make smart decisions for you if you can't. Think about your strategies for the evening in advance. What about sipping one drink all night? This way, you avoid people continually bringing drinks to you—and they will. Think about the language you will use. “I'm good,” or “I just got this drink,” or “I've got to use the bathroom.” Be prepared to witness behavior that will raise your eyebrows and be ready to stand confidently in the space of who you want to be.

It's good to have your wits about you in social settings. I never liked being out of control, because I like to know what's going on. I don't like slurring my words. I don't like falling down or knocking things over or bumping into people. I can better assess others if I am not impaired

myself. I want to have fun but not be unable to think clearly. Or worse, have to leave because I feel sick.

There is another risk to be wary of as you think about drugs and alcohol: addiction. You are smart enough to know that addiction is a real thing. No one starts out thinking, *I want to be an addict. I want this substance to take over my life and control my plan for each day and dominate my thoughts.* And yet, many people end up there, and not a few are first exposed in college. I know you have seen the vaping phenomenon play out in high school and have friends who became addicted, so you know this is real. The same thing can happen with drugs and alcohol. Trust me. If it were not true, there would be no rehabilitation clinics.

Go forth, enjoy the parties, have fun. But be safe, be smart, and be careful.



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