

Life is an adventure. Choose to ignore it and let life's winds blow you where they will or embrace your voyage and make the best of it. If you choose the second option this book has some provisions for your voyage.

Navigating Life: Commonsense Reflections for the Voyage

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**Navigating Life:
Commonsense Reflections
For the Voyage**

Joseph G. Langen

**Sliding Otter Publications
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Chapter 1. Appreciating Life around Us

Our world is full of unexplored marvels. We pass by them every day. These reflections encourage you to slow down, notice life's treasures, and enjoy them rather than rushing through life. I encourage gratitude for life's magic, the angels in your life, and your times of good fortune.

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The World of Blooming Buzzing Confusion

Try to find your deepest issue in every confusion and abide by that.

D. H. Lawrence

I was sitting on my porch the other day watching trees blooming and cars buzzing by. I thought of how the nineteenth century psychologist William James described the world as babies first see it, a world of "blooming, buzzing confusion." Other psychologists have since speculated that babies can make more sense of the world than William James first thought. The dispute does not seem to have ever been settled to anyone's satisfaction. But then, babies aren't prone to lengthy explanations of their world view.

As adults, our world still seems to consist of blooming, buzzing and everything in between. Trees, flowers and plants slowly and gracefully unfold to share their beauty with us. People often buzz by, not wanting to share anything with us. They just wish we would get out of their way.

I have wondered lately where everyone is heading in such a rush. If we work ourselves into a lather trying to save a few minutes, what are these few minutes like when we finally get them? Can we enjoy them or do we need them to catch our breath after rushing to wherever we are headed?

Sometimes I think we are preoccupied with where we are coming from and where we are going, forgetting to enjoy the journey in between. I remember when I was young and our family would sometimes take a ride in the country. We weren't trying to get away from anything in particular or heading any place special. The ride itself was the whole point of the adventure.

What would it be like if we looked at our lives as a ride in the country? What if we got our minds off what we were trying to accomplish with our lives, even for a little while, and instead concentrated on enjoying the journey?

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We don't often think to do this. Sometimes it is easier after a major illness or other setback. We are reminded that we won't be here forever. Even if we win the rat race, we are still rats.

We can slow down from time to time or even stop to enjoy our lives rather than letting them slip by as we race to our next destination. On holidays, we tend to take time out from our hectic pace, but often we find chores to occupy us rather than spending time with the treadmill turned off. We can even fret our way through vacations. We work hard to make sure we are having fun rather than just letting the vacation happen.

Do you remember the Simon and Garfunkel suggestion "Slow down, you're movin' too fast" from *The 59th Street Bridge Song*? I think they had the same reaction to the bridge that I had to the traffic whizzing by my porch. Our lives lie in the space between where we start and where we end. Don't let your life get away.

Life Lab Lessons:

- When was the last time you took time out from your busy schedule to just enjoy life?
- What was it like?
- When do you plan to do it again?
- What do you think you might have missed while rushing through your life?
- What would it be like to live your whole life in this moment rather than constantly pushing yourself toward the next goal?

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Nourish and Preserve Your Sense of Wonderment

*The possession of knowledge does not kill
the sense of wonder and mystery.
There is always more mystery.*

Anais Nin

Recently I found myself at a funeral home following the sudden death of a friend, Mary Anne Graney. Near the guest book was a stack of cards and the invitation to write favorite memories of her to share with her family. I stopped to recall memories of her.

My first thought was her ability to make everyone she met feel special. This trait, in my mind, made her special. It was not quite what I wanted to write, but the right words to describe what set her aside from other people did not come to me.

This morning I woke up realizing what I wanted to say. What was unique about her was her ever present sense of wonderment. Hers was a rare gift which I have noticed in only one other person on a regular basis. I can't recall a conversation with her in which she did not display her gift.

I don't think I would have recognized her gift had I had not learned about it from a priest I knew long ago, Father Augustine Paul. It is a little hard to define but it has also been described as "thinking with a child's mind," or openness to experience and suspending judgment.

Cynics would call this approach to life naïve. Life is serious. We are playing for keeps. This is no time to fool around. Some people become caught up in the practical. They leave no time for things which are interesting, fascinating or even wonderful. Dreamers can be annoying to people who want to avoid the nonsense and just get things done.

Religions have often started out with a sense of awe at creation and ended up becoming a justification for the way of life of its adherents. The writings of early explorers describe the wonders of their discoveries. Often the lands they discovered have become the

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focus of squabbles about how to use the natural resources they contain. A beautiful maple tree, which I admired for years each morning over coffee, was finally gobbled up by machines to make way for a store parking lot.

I have written before of the sense of wonderment children have. I still remember a photo I took of my son around age two, running through a field holding up a daisy he had found.

We become jaded by our pursuit of careers, possessions and money, known as the rat race. This is a good descriptive term which suggests roaring ahead full steam toward a goal with no awareness of our surroundings. Sometimes we lose sight of the goal and are aware only of the rat race.

We have another choice. We can reassess our goals and decide whether they are worth all of our energy. We can work toward a balance in our lives, taking some time to appreciate the wonders around us. We can also share our sense of wonderment with our more frantic fellow life travelers. Mary Anne thanks for your example.

Life Lab Lessons

- What makes some people special to you?
- How is your life better for your association with them?
- What have you learned from their lives?
- How could your life be more like theirs?
- Incorporate their best traits into your daily life.

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The Magic of Everyday Life

Surprise is the greatest gift which life can grant us.

Boris Pasternak

I learn daily of the number of American soldiers dying in Iraq. I hear less about the much larger number of dead Iraqis. I read of the ingrained hatreds among groups around the world and wonder how things could have come to this. The problems seem overwhelming. How could the world be a different place?

Just when things seem most hopeless, something happens to remind me that life is still full of wonderful surprises. They do not appear every minute or maybe they do and I just don't notice them. When I sense them, they remind me that people are on earth to enjoy what God has put before them rather than to find more efficient ways to destroy each other.

I have seen the most glorious sunset I could imagine at Sunset Beach in Oahu. I was present at the births of three healthy babies entrusted to my safekeeping. I looked down on the Grand Canyon from thirty five thousand feet in the air.

I have heard Dvorak's *Symphony From the New World* played in a park in Pittsburgh and the Queen of the Night aria from *The Magic Flute* sung in concert as well as whistled on the street. I have heard my grandson Joey talking a mile a minute after having to learn sign language because of his delayed speech.

I have smelled the scent of holly flowers meant to attract bumblebees. I have enjoyed the aroma of honeysuckle pervading the countryside and the fragrance of night blooming cereus wafting across my front porch.

I have tasted Evil Jungle Prince sitting in Keo's Honolulu Restaurant among the orchids, sipped Sangria at a modest restaurant in Gijon, Spain and relished Pat Davis's cakes at family celebrations.

I swam in the Sea of Cortez, felt my hair stand on end as I touched a Van de Graf generator and had my hand tickled by a salamander scooting across my palm.

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These are a few of the sensory experiences which have surprised me over the years. I did not plan or expect any of them to happen and they are by no means the only pleasant surprises I have encountered during my journey through life.

Thomas Moore in *The Re-Enchantment of Everyday Life* helps us regain a sense of wonderment about the many mysteries of the world waiting for our exploration and appreciation. Diane Ackerman in *A Natural History of the Senses* gives us a context for appreciating all that our senses bring to our life experience.

I am sure there are many delights I have encountered in passing but have not dwelt upon sufficiently and many others which I have not taken the time to even notice. I hope I can set aside my concerns to better notice the delights God has placed along my path. I also hope that delight in nature can help turn the world people's attention from its conflicts and give them a context in which to start appreciating each other better.

Life Lab Lessons

- Recall what has delighted you over the years.
- Think of the last delight you encountered.
- Which of your life experiences means the most to you?
- Think about how you could delight someone you care about.
- Set aside some time for wonderment about the world you live in.

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Things That Make Me Feel Grateful

*Let the man, who would be grateful
think of repaying a kindness,
even while receiving it.*

Seneca

Several years ago I started following the example of Henry Thoreau. He made it a practice not to get out of bed until he had written down things for which he was grateful that day. I usually have a cup of coffee but like to make my list before doing anything else. In honor of Thanksgiving, I thought I would use this column to share some of the things for which I am grateful

Thank you God for:

- The cloth-bound journal I found at the Bunch of Grapes Bookstore.
- The wonderful sunrises and sunsets this year which never fail to gladden my heart and raise my spirits. Even on gloomy days, I know that sooner or later one or the other will eventually grace the sky.
- The warm summer sand at Gay Head Beach on Martha's Vineyard and the lazy waves lapping at the shore.
- Attending two delightful weddings in one summer and meeting new people.
- The many teens honored at the Bishop McNulty Awards for parish service and the adults honored for working with youth.
- Sharing my perceptions of the world with my brother Bob and his understanding of what is important to me.
- My mother's acceptance and caring for every person I have ever brought to her door.
- My friend Smokey, the joy he brought to my life and his many friends I had the chance to meet if only briefly.
- Being able to publish three books and write a newspaper column for five years without losing my perseverance.
- Inspiration for my writing each time I get my fingers moving.

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- My muse, Calliope, and my ongoing conversations with her.
- Attending the celebration of Rose's and Russ's sixtieth wedding anniversary.
- Seeing Aunt Lucille's zest for life well into her eighties.
- Mike and Joe's delight in each other's company.
- Matt's ability to commune with nature whether anyone is around or not.
- Visiting England, Spain and Portugal.
- Peter's prolific pursuit of his artistic ability.
- Sue's professional competence and community contributions.
- Becky's caring for everyone she meets following her grandmother's example.
- Coming to a decision about Medicare coverage and its many options.
- Delightful conversations with many people I never thought I would meet.
- Sailing on cruises among the Caribbean islands in February.
- Having owned my own sailboat.
- Visiting a sugar plantation in Barbados.
- Rediscovering my friend Gerry and knowing I can count on his constant support and encouragement.
- A sense of prosperity after years of worrying about money.
- A growing sense of my spirituality and coming to terms with it.
- Visiting St. John the Divine in New York.
- My joints working well again after several years of feeling almost crippled.
- Carol's love, support and acceptance of me no matter what.

Life Lab Lessons:

- Think of some of the things for which you are grateful.
- List the people who have meant the most to you.
- Tell the ones who are still living how you feel about them.
- Do something in honor of the ones who have died.

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- Consider writing down a few things each day for which you are grateful.

The Care and Feeding of Angels

*Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing
some have unwittingly entertained angels.*

Hebrews 13:2

I wrote in the past about the angels among us, working quietly to make our lives better and easing the strain of our life challenges. They are often unacknowledged and sometimes unnoticed.

Even though I refer to them as angels, they are not just spirits. They have human needs too. However, in their efforts to care for the rest of us, they often forget about their own needs. They are just as prone to stress and burn-out as we are, although they are probably less attuned to these signs, since they are so focused on what others need.

I have often heard from people who are good listeners that no one cares about their concerns. No one imagines anything could ever bother them. Caretakers sometimes seem indestructible, or maybe it is just our wishful thinking.

Whose responsibility is it to care for the angels in our lives? First, it is their responsibility. Everyone knows that a car will break down quickly without regular service and maintenance. While people are not machines, they also need nourishment, rest, exercise, appreciation and support.

If you are an angel, stop to think how much you are doing for everyone else and also what you need. What do you do for yourself? In your efforts to care for everyone else, do you forget to take care of yourself? Do you listen to what your body is telling you? Do you pay attention to your feelings of stress, exhaustion and loneliness, or do you try to carry on as if you don't have any of these feelings?

You deserve to take care of your body, and especially of your spirit. Take time to sit quietly and be aware of your requirements as you do for everyone else. You have needs too. Once you are aware of them, set aside some time for yourself. It may seem selfish, but unless you do, you won't remain helpful to others.

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If you are not an angel but have one or more of them in your life, stop to think about what they may need. Encourage them to consider their own desires and what may please them. There may also be things you can do for them. It might be hard to figure out what they want since they do not often make their wishes known. They may seem like they can go on forever taking care of you as they always have.

It helps to let them know you appreciate all they do for you instead of taking them for granted. But this might not be enough, since appreciation might tempt them to work all the harder.

You might watch them and see what they need. They might appreciate being reminded to take time for themselves. You could let them know they don't have to be of service immediately or on call twenty four hours a day. Or you could find a way to be their angel at least on occasion.

Life Lab Lessons

- Discover who your angels are.
- Think about how they have enriched your life.
- Make sure you thank them.
- What could your angels use from you in return?
- Do it for them.

Thank Your Friends for Their Help

*Do not save your loving speeches for your friends till they are dead.
Do not write them on their tombstones,
speak them rather now instead.*

Anna Cummins

Dear Pat,

A while ago when I was visiting your house, you made a comment to me which seemed like no big deal. You had seen an ad in the paper for volunteers to take part in a study of rheumatoid arthritis. I have been struggling with arthritis for a couple years and thought I might have the rheumatoid variety, but so far had been unsuccessful in finding a rheumatologist.

I had been taking Celebrex and Tylenol for a while with little relief. But lately every time I moved my shoulder, I felt a crunch like I had no cartilage. I was about to resume my search for a rheumatologist, which last time led to a dead end.

The morning after you told me about the study, I called the number you gave me and set up an appointment. I was screened and accepted for the study and finally began treatment. The morning after I started, I woke up with not an ache, pain or discomfort anywhere in my body. I considered it a miracle and felt like a new person.

After being in the study for a couple weeks, I looked around my house and discovered stacks of unfinished projects. When I thought about it, I realized I had been depressed for some time. I work with many depressed people and somehow did not recognize the symptoms in myself.

Every morning since, I have woken up thanking God for leading scientists to the discovery of the medications I now take, for leading me to your house that afternoon, and for your thoughtfulness in telling me about the study. I think I sometimes take others' help for granted. Maybe it takes something this impressive to make me realize friends make many gestures which improve my life in less dramatic ways.

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We all get busy thinking about our own needs and how things affect us. I have had concerns that our society has been becoming more selfish and people are becoming so preoccupied with their own needs that they do not pay attention to those around them. It is sometimes hard to remember that people traveling their life paths next to us are also preoccupied with their own concerns at the people next to us and gain some appreciation of their struggles. Going further, we can find and share something which might help them a little. Getting in touch with their needs also opens up a channel between us and them and makes a connection with all the people they are connected to. The information you shared with me about the study led to my finding out about the study medications. I shared what I discovered with a colleague, who in turn passed it on to someone she knew with rheumatoid arthritis whom I have never met.

When I think back over my life, I can recall times when I was helpful to others, sometimes in ways which made a dramatic difference in their lives and sometimes in ways which may have made their way just a little easier. I have learned two lessons from your kindness. One is to acknowledge my appreciation for others efforts on my behalf. The other is to extend myself when I can be helpful to others and make their lives a little better.

Life Lab Lessons

- What have been the most difficult times in your life?
- Which of your friends have been most there for you at those times?
- How did they help?
- Did you thank them properly?
- It's not too late.

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Following the Relay for Life

We cannot direct the wind but we can adjust the sails.

Author Unknown

Recently I found myself in the Spencerport High School sports stadium. Tents rose throughout the infield; a band warmed up. The high school color guard marched in to the beat of their drummers. Among them I found the names of Carol, her younger sister and her nephew. Around me was a sea of people wearing purple shirts, all displaying a message on the back, "Survivor."

Everyone had gathered for the American Cancer Society Relay for Life, in honor of those who had survived cancer, those who had not and those who might eventually face it. We had been invited to attend several times in the past, but had not ever done so for one reason or another. This year was different.

The announcer read the names of all the survivors present, their type of cancer and how long they had survived. Among them were a five year old boy, people in wheel chairs and women with the tell-tale scarves covering their chemotherapy-induced hair loss. As their names were read, they assembled on the track. After the reading, they walked together around the track as those who loved them looked on in silence.

Toward the front walked Carol, her older sister Sharon and brother-in-law Gary. I took this in stride until they walked by me. I had not known Carol's mother or sister Marie who had died of cancer before we dated. I knew Carol's nephew, Tommy, who fought cancer for three years to have more time with his children Haley and Andrew.

For the past six months, Carol took on her own fight with cancer while I did what I could, often feeling helpless. We both focused on what had to be done and had little time to think about how we felt about the ordeal.

After supporting her through her diagnosis, surgery, radiation and chemotherapy, I stood beside the track watching Carol walk with

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the sea of other survivors. For the first time since her diagnosis, my emotions overcame me and tears came to my eyes. I felt remnants of my initial fear, sorrow that her family pattern of cancer had finally caught up with her, respect for her courage in facing her ordeal and gratitude that she had survived it.

I often wondered about cancer but had never taken it seriously in the past. My first question to her radiologist was, "Why do people get cancer?" I have seen and heard explanations on many levels but have yet to find one which adequately answers my question. Cancer has been around for centuries, but not to the extent it is today. Our environment, lifestyles and diet all seem to play parts. Still it is not clear, at least to me, why some people get cancer and others don't.

Carol's encounter has brought me to a new respect for life, how precious it is and my need to cherish it. I don't think I will ever look at Carol again and take her for granted.

Life Lab Lessons

- Think about how you live your life and how you treat your body?
- What would your body say about how you treat it?
- Find out what you can do to protect yourself from cancer.
- If you have lost someone to cancer, live part of your life in his or her honor.
- If you love any cancer survivors, find ways to show them how much they mean to you.

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