

# Life Lessons

Fifty Things I Learned in  
My First Fifty Years

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## *Preface*

“Someday, you’ll understand” is an admonition I’ve heard countless times over the years. Unfortunately, when I was younger and dumber or in too much of a hurry to get on with my life, I paid this concept scant attention.

I wish I had listened. I wish I had paid attention when people who had been on this planet a lot longer than me—men and women who had traveled farther down the highway of life than I had or who’d been dinged up pretty bad by adversity, affliction, or their own bad decisions—bothered to try and help me with a kind (or sometimes harsh) word of advice.

“Yeah, well, someday is a long way away,” I’d often think to myself. “I’ve got *all* the time in the world.” Well, life doesn’t work that way, I eventually discovered. You see, as anyone with enough gray in his hair will tell you, time marches on. Time waits for no man. Time is of the essence. Time keeps on slippin’, slippin’, slippin’ into the future, as someone once put it.

All of which means that there’s no time like the present to learn a good lesson. Or a few. Or *fifty* of them, as the case may be. I wrote this book as a kind of monument to all the times I’ve said to myself, sometimes wistfully, sometimes ruefully, “If only I knew then what I know now.”

Perhaps something shared in these pages will be useful to you and maybe even save you some time and trouble or heartache. That's my sincere prayer.

Anyone who's lived more than fifty years (I'll turn fifty-six soon) has surely learned far more than fifty important lessons, as is true for me. And, as you might expect, some of my life's lessons aren't appropriate for sharing here, not because they weren't meaningful or life-changing, but because I'm not nearly as brave as St. Augustine was when he wrote his classic autobiography, *The Confessions*, and let it all hang out. So, I've passed over in a discrete silence some of life's more distinctive pitfalls and entanglements that I've lived to tell about but that I have chosen to tell only to God and my confessor. That is as it should be, I believe. Something true for all of us, in the mercy and grace of God's loving providence.

Here's a bonus lesson before you get started:

God loves you just the way you are, but he loves you too much to let you stay that way.

If that little thought doesn't hit home right now, if it doesn't kind of bonk you on the head and shake you up a little, don't worry. Eventually, it will. Someday, you'll understand.



Patrick Madrid, 1966

## Chapter 1

### *Guilt Show*

SOME YEARS ago, as I pulled my rental car into the parking lot of the Catholic parish where I would be giving a lecture that evening, I glanced up at the large, new non-denominational Protestant church standing prominently on a nearby hill. What caught my eye was a large banner stretched across its facade that read in big, bold letters: GUILT SHOW.

“*Guilt show? What’s a guilt show?*” I asked myself, puzzled by the enigmatic message. It didn’t take long, though, before I had figured it out. Those Protestants up there on that hill were mocking Catholics, I reasoned indignantly. The folks who attend this parish have to see that banner every time they come to Mass. Why else would it be so prominently displayed?

“Guilt show” must obviously express those people’s disdain for the Catholic Sacrament of Penance. After all, those Protestants believe in the doctrine of eternal security: once saved, always saved. In other words, that “true Christians” cannot lose their salvation. They regard the Catholic emphasis on guilt, examining one’s conscience, and confession to be wrong and unbiblical. So I was certain that that’s what the banner meant. Clearly, those Protestants up on the hill were mocking Catholics!

I asked the parish secretary what she thought it meant. “Oh, I never really noticed it,” she said. But when I explained what *I* thought it meant a look of dismay crossed her face. It had never occurred to her that the next-door neighbors up the hill might be making fun of her and her fellow Catholics.

I decided to take the bull by the horns and call the Protestant church to ask them directly about the banner.

“Hi, I’m from out of town,” I told the friendly receptionist who answered the phone, “and I am curious about the banner you have out front. What does ‘guilt show’ mean? Is it intended to be some kind of message for Catholics?”

“Guilt show?” she asked, befuddled by my question. She paused for a moment and then said, “Oh, you mean the *Quilt Show* banner,” she chuckled. “Yes, we’re hosting a quilt show here next weekend and everyone’s invited.”

Boy, did I feel stupid.

Sheepishly, I explained that the banner must have been folded a little—just enough to make the Q in “quilt” look like a G as in “guilt.” She said she’d have the janitor smooth it out so it would read properly.

I thanked her and hung up, ashamed of myself for having so quickly jumped to the (totally erroneous) conclusion that “those Protestants” up on their hill were taunting Catholics. In my haste to account for the banner I had assumed ill will on their part, concluding without any evidence that their motives were dishonorable.

I had done, albeit in a minor way, exactly what Jesus tells us not to do:

“Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?”

Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.” (Mt 7:1–5)

The memory of that incident has never left me. Many times since, when I have been tempted to assume the worst of others based solely on appearances, or impute bad motives to someone who disagrees with me, or judge other people’s hearts, I’ve thought of that banner.

Maybe God intended it to read GUILT SHOW just for me. After all, it showed me I had something in my eye.



*“Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment” (Jn 7:24).*

## Chapter 2

### *The Beggar*

ONE EVENING, on my commute home from a long day at the office, I stopped at a gas station/mini-market to refuel and grab a cup of coffee. As I got to the entrance, a bedraggled young man of about twenty stepped nervously toward me from the shadows.

“Please, sir . . .” he said in a low, faltering voice. We locked eyes for an instant. I sized him up before glancing away with a grimace of irritation. He seemed kind of scared, as if he were about to cry. Ashamed of begging, perhaps.

“Please, sir . . . I’m . . .”

“Sorry,” I cut him off, raising my hand dismissively as I walked past. Once inside, I poured myself a steaming cup of freshly brewed coffee, tossed a \$50 bill on the counter, and told the clerk, “I’ll have this coffee and give me the rest on pump seven.”

I headed back out, sipping my coffee and thinking, *I hope that beggar is gone by now.*

No such luck. There he was, standing silently in the same place as before. I strode by, pretending not to see him.

I pumped the gas, got back in my car, and drove out of the parking lot, coffee in hand, as I thought about how nice it would be to get home to my easy chair and a glass of wine and the delicious dinner my wife had cooked for me.

That's when an explosion of remorse burst in my conscience. In a flash of shame, I realized just how selfish, uncaring, and hard-hearted I had just been to that young man who needed help. I had brushed him off with the contempt that often comes easily to those of us who have the comfortable necessities of life and then some. "Get out of my way, Jack," this contemptible attitude growls. "I don't care. I don't want to be bothered. Your problem isn't my problem."

What an insensitive, self-centered jerk I was.

I turned the car around and headed back to the gas station, this time hoping and praying that the young man would still be there. And he was. Still standing in the shadows.

I got out of my car and walked toward him, seeing the same despair and embarrassment on his face as before, but also something else. A flicker of fear crossed his eyes as I approached.

This time, I spoke first.

"I'm sorry," I said to him quietly in an unsteady voice clotted with shame. "I'm sorry I didn't help you. It's just that I . . ."

His eyes widened when I took out my wallet and, without looking down to count it, handed him a wad of cash, everything I had, maybe \$40.

"I'm really sorry," I stammered again as I turned to walk back to my car, my head down, tears in my eyes.

"Thank you, sir!" he called out to me. "God bless you!"

I've never forgotten that young man. Our chance encounter changed me for the better. Through it, the Lord gave me a searing glimpse of myself in the mirror of truth—the painful truth that though I had always thought of myself as a good and faithful follower of Jesus, I was really, in many ways, when you got right down to it, selfish and apathetic toward the poor and disadvantaged. My arms were loaded

full with the good things in life with which God had blessed me—a beautiful wife and family who love me, a comfortable home, plenty of food and drink, a nice car, a good job, some money in the bank—and yet, I couldn't be bothered to share even just a tiny portion of these blessings with someone who had none of those things. And to make matters worse, I very nearly walked away from a huge blessing from the Lord in the person of a beggar who helped me realize my own deep need for conversion.

I thank God with all my heart for that painful moment of grace, for nudging me to turn my car around, go back to that gas station, and help Jesus standing in the shadows. He changed my life.

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*“He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord,  
and he will repay him for his deed” (Prv 19:17).*

*“Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him  
who would borrow from you” (Mt 5:42).*

*“Then the King will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come,  
O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for  
you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry  
and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me  
drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was  
naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me,  
I was in prison and you came to me.’ Then the righteous  
will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and  
feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did  
we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and  
clothe thee? And when did we see you sick or in prison  
and visit you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I*

*say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me’” (Mt 25:34–40).*

*“But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him?” (1 Jn 3:17).*

## Chapter 3

### *The Waitress*

NOT LONG after the youngest of our eleven children was born, my wife and I decided to go out for a quiet meal at a nearby Italian restaurant. We wanted to, you know, have a *quiet* meal.

After showing us to a booth and handing us menus, our waitress started cooing over our infant son, Stephen, asking all the standard questions: “How old?” “Boy or girl?” Etc. Then, she asked the question that neither Nancy nor I particularly wanted to answer: “Is he your *first*?”

It wasn’t at all far-fetched for her to ask this, as my lovely wife is slim and young-looking (I’m very proud of how she’s kept her figure) and certainly doesn’t look like she has eleven children.

Nancy looked at me and, with her eyes, silently said, “Do *you* want to tell her?”

I smiled and shook my head, indicating, “Nah, you go ahead and tell her.”

Turning to our waitress, Nancy said breezily, “No, he’s our eleventh.”

“Wait. What?” the waitress gasped. “You have *eleven children*?!?”

“Yes, that’s right,” Nancy smiled back. “And this is our youngest.”

This was too much for our waitress. She scurried off and returned a few moments later with four or five other waitresses who were just as flabbergasted and incredulous as she at this shocking news. It was clear from the expressions on their faces that for a couple to have this many kids freaked them out.

“Why would you have that many kids?” one asked, eyes wide in disbelief. “How do you cope with all that stress?” asked another. As they looked at Nancy, and then at me, and back to Nancy, I could just imagine the pity they felt for her and their indignation toward me. Although none of the waitresses actually said to me, “You monster! How could you keep your wife pregnant all the time like that?” I’m pretty sure a few of them were thinking it.

And then, as if their disapproval wasn’t bad enough, the women started detailing their own personal contraceptive habits.

“I’m on the pill,” one announced. “We have two kids and that’s enough for me!”

“Yeah, well, after our first kid, I got my tubes tied,” said another matter-of-factly.

“Not me!” chimed in a third waitress. “Once we got our boy, I made my husband get a *vasectomy!*” They all laughed.

I sat there thinking to myself, *Come on, ladies. I just want to have a plate of lasagna, okay? I really don’t want to know all this stuff.*

That’s when my wife spoke up. Smiling up at the waitresses, she said calmly, “My husband and I believe that children are a blessing from God. We believe in being open to life so that God can bless our marriage.”

That’s all she said. But it was enough. Like pouring water on a campfire, my wife’s gentle comment was enough to

disperse the gawkers at this Big-Family Circus Freak Show. They all went back to work.

An hour later, I paid the check and we gathered up the baby and headed for our mini-van. As we were getting in, I heard footsteps running up behind us. I turned and saw that it was our waitress. In the light of the street lamp above I could see tears glistening in her eyes.

“I’m glad I caught you,” she said, slightly out of breath. “I didn’t want you to leave before I could say thank you.”

(I knew immediately she wasn’t talking to me, as I hadn’t left that big of a tip.)

She said to my wife, “What you said in there earlier, about how children are a blessing from God. That really stirred my heart. I realized that it’s true. You see, my husband and I have two kids, and I’m on the pill. But what you said . . .” she trailed off for a moment, wiping her eyes, “I mean, now, I know that what you said is true, and I’ve decided I’m getting off the pill. Tonight. When I get off work, I’m going to tell my husband. I don’t know how he’ll react, but I am going to do it because I want God to bless my marriage. *Thank you* for saying what you said.” She gave Nancy a quick hug, turned, and went back into the restaurant. We never saw her again.

I have to think that, someday, at least one person will come up to my wife in Heaven and thank her for speaking the truth about being open to life. “That was my mom you spoke to,” he or she will tell her. “Your gentle, providential words changed her life. If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t be here.”

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“A gentle response turns away anger” (Prv 15:1, NET).

Speak “the truth in love” (Eph 4:15).

*“Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is right? But even if you do suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts reverence Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence” (1 Pt 3:13–15).*