

That ought to be fairly obvious. But we still do it every day.



Life lessons are generally pretty simple. Never assume anything. Always realize that there is more to most folks than you might think. Always live life to the fullest, because it ain't over until it's over.

As an aside, never sit around drinking with little old ladies – they'll put you under the table every time.

I have pretty much learned all my life lessons the hard way. Over the years, I have burned my hand on many stoves, foolishly parted company with more money than I care to admit, and stuck my foot in my mouth so many times that I might as well gargle with cordovan shoe polish.

But on to this story. By way of a little background, I had, at age 30, decided to have a mid-life crisis early – the only thing I've ever done early in my life. I had pulled the plug on my career at the time, hauled up stakes after ten years of big city life, and moved to the beach to help run this seaside inn, thinking it would be a good way to take time out to come up with a new life plan. Failing that, I could at least have a real good time while living on front beach for free.

Reality, of course, is that, unless you already have more money than Croesus, life at the beach is hard work, so much so that you almost never actually see the ocean you live 200 yards from. I did a lot less managing and running things than I did planting flowers, pulling weeds, hammering nails, fetching, carrying, loading, unloading, ferrying help back and forth, and learning to be fairly obsequious to wealthy guests who would spend big bucks for the privilege of staying in an un-air-conditioned old house and sharing showers on the same floor.

I liked it well enough, but I missed playing music, and I knew there were musicians at the beach. So one evening, I heard about an open mike blues jam up the beach. Curious, I grabbed my trusty old bass, slung it over my shoulder, and set out to find the legendary Neal and Pam's Bar and Grill.

As it turned out, I never found my way off the back porch of the inn. It was about 7:30 in the evening, and some of the guests were enjoying the evening after supper, sitting on the back porch, playing cards, reading, chatting, whatever. As I walked toward the back door to the parking lot, a voice behind me suddenly said, "Excuse me, son; is that '71 Fender P- Bass?" I stopped dead in my tracks. Turned around. There she sat, well kept, dapper, with her snow white hair perfectly coifed, her bright, lively blue eyes intently scanning the New York Times. A tumbler of good Irish whiskey sat by her elbow and a cigarette burned in the ashtray. Apparently she had never heard of the Surgeon General or his caterwauling, and as far as I know, is still alive and well today.

But my first thought was, did this woman just ask me that question? "Close. It's a re-issue. How in the world did you know?"

"My husband plays bass. In fact, he's not here this week because he's on the road."

She then invited me to join her in a "wee dram," which I accepted, and asked me if I preferred my Irish neat or on the rocks. When I told her neat, she chuckled and said, "Good boy," then proceeded to pour us both monstrous shots.

"Cheers," she said, and tossed hers back. I followed suit and with a little effort, somehow kept it down and willed my eyes not to water like I had just been maced. She poured another round.

About an hour, and who knows how much Irish later, I was in terrible shape – triple vision, blurry, unintelligible speech, the works. She was not the slightest bit mussed, and in fact was quite the conversationalist. She would say things like:

"Personally, I believe NAFTA to be the most ridiculous and dangerous threat to the U.S. economy over the next decade, don't you?"

"Neeberduh shmeedth de shchmeet fluerg," I would respond ever so glibly. I do not recall how much I had that evening. I only know that she did not have the slightest hint of a problem. I on the other hand sort of slithered downstairs to my little basement room, where I would awaken some 12 hours later with a spectacularly throbbing head and a mouth that tasted like the entire NFL had just walked across my tongue in their dirty socks.

The lady – and her husband – turned out to be two of my favorite people I've ever known. She was a retired advertising copywriter -- worked for J. Walter Thompson in New York for years, doing very well in a business that pretty much shut the door on women in the 40s and 50s. Her husband, who I would meet the following summer, was an Englishman educated at the Royal Academy of the Arts in London as a classically trained double bassist. Somewhere along the way, he fell in love with jazz, threw caution to the wind, and immigrated to America from England with his bass and about 50 cents in his pocket. After knocking about New York for some time, scrounging gigs, sitting in with whoever would let him, he wound up playing with such jazz greats as Bennie Goodman and Lionel Hampton for many years.

They both lived in New York at roughly the same time, but would not meet until much later in life, both widowed, both in their seventies. They met at one of his gigs, fell for each other, and eloped – at age 72 or so – to New Orleans. In fact, they got married twice – the second time so their children could attend the ceremony.

I guess the point of all this is one needs to get the most out of this life however one sees fit. Those two certainly did it their way.

That's another pretty good lesson to take away.