



By Margaret Evans, Editor

It's graduation season, and all across America famous people are standing behind podiums, capped and gowned, offering sagacious advice to our nation's freshly minted adults.

Thank God I'm not famous.

I loathe giving advice. Not because there's anything wrong with it – especially the good kind – but because the older I get, the less of it I feel I have to offer. The longer I live, the less qualified I feel to counsel others on proper living. The less sure I am that there's a "right way" that applies to everybody. In fact, the longer I live, the less sure I am . . . period.

If wisdom means knowing how little you know, then I guess I'm getting wiser. And that, plus 23 cents, will buy you fifteen minutes of parking in downtown Beaufort.

Nevertheless, having lived over half a century now, there are a few tidbits I've picked up along this dusty path, things I wish I'd learned earlier. Don't think of this as advice, kiddos. It's more like a list of random observations. Some of it might edify you, save you some time on the learning curve. Then again, maybe it won't. What do I know?

Here goes, in no particular order:

- Getting outside is good for you. This is almost always true. (Unless there's "golf ball sized hail" involved. Or the "weather event" has a name.)
- "The Classics" – those books you found boring, or just too difficult, when you were forced to read them in school? They're "classics" for a reason. Give them another try when you're a little older and have some world-weariness under your belt. I'm currently reading *Walden* for the first time since college – nobody's even making me! – and it's blowing my middle-aged mind with its brilliance. Who knew? (Bonus tip: Many of these "classics" are free on Kindle.)
- Choral singing is cheaper and more effective than therapy or sensitivity training. Make music, not war! Imagine world peace; join a choir.
- Birds are not "filthy germ carriers," as I was taught as a child. Well, maybe they are, but they're also Wonders of Nature and Messengers from the Spirit World and *really, really cool!* – and they don't want to touch you any more than you want to touch them. Avoid being a cliché. Discover the joys of birding before you're old.
- I've never known an angry gardener, a depressed gardener, or a gardener who's a jerk. Whenever I'm feeling and/or behaving abominably, I'm fairly certain it's because I don't have a serious garden. Don't be like me; be a gardener.
- Despite what every smiling broadcaster on morning news is trying to make you believe, your teeth should not be whiter when you're fifty than they were when you were five. Don't buy in to the new normal. That shade does not exist in nature. I'm counting on this generation to stop the madness. #BringBackRealTeeth
- Belief in God does not make you a good person; disbelief in God does not make you a bad person.
- Most good people are also bad people. Including you. Remembering that will make you kinder and more forgiving of bad people, which will help tip your personal scale toward the "good people" side. (Sometimes, it even tips theirs!)

- As you age, you have a choice: You can continue to increase the time, money, and energy you spend trying to look “young” . . . or you can simply *decrease* the time you spend in front of a mirror. I recommend the latter. Not only is it more economical, but when you turn your gaze away from yourself, you’ll be astonished at all the wonderful things there are to see out there. (Yes, that was kind of a metaphor.)

- Exercise really is as important to your wellbeing as they say. (Sorry.)

And what about all those “inspirational words of wisdom” you’ve heard all your life, ad nauseam – the ones floating around in the ether, and in colorful boxes on Facebook? Well, I wouldn’t say they’re true; but I wouldn’t say they’re not, either.

For instance . . .

- “Money can’t buy happiness.” Agreed. But poverty can breed misery. Ironically, so can great wealth. The happiest folks I know are somewhere in between. “Just enough” is probably where you want to be. (Notice I said “probably.” I haven’t had a chance to experiment with great wealth, so the jury’s still out.)

- “Be in the moment” is a lovely piece of advice – but that moment is often enhanced if you’ve planned ahead. On the other hand, “the best laid plans...” (This one’s a wash, I guess.)

- “Be all that you can be”? Well, not exactly. That’s exhausting. I say be all you *want* to be. Let the other stuff go.

- “Find your passion!” Okay, sure. But that’s a lot of pressure, and it implies there’s just one “passion” allotted to each person. I say cultivate curiosity . . . and be passionate about what you find.

- “Follow your bliss.” I’ve noticed that bliss can’t be followed any more than it can be captured, contained, stored up or preserved. Bliss is an ephemeral gift that bestows itself from time to time. A butterfly that lights on your shoulder. You can create an alluring environment for bliss, but you can’t force it to materialize. You can invite it, you can savor it when it arrives, but if you try to follow your bliss . . . or stalk it, or chase it down . . . it will surely elude you. (Kind of like that summer romance you had at camp.)

- “Knock, and the door shall be opened unto you.” True. (Duh. It’s in the Bible.) And if you’re lucky – and cultivating curiosity, and reading the classics, and exercising regularly, and getting outside – you will walk through that door and find . . . another door.

And thus, the graduate becomes the freshman. Again and again and again.

In my partially-educated, still-developing, hopefully-humble opinion, this is the secret to happiness. One of them, anyway.

The great Christian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard (another classic) famously said: “Life is a mystery to be lived, not a problem to be solved.” The older I get, the more fully I endorse that sentiment. I find such freedom in it. And such joy.

Kierkegaard also said, “Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.” I’m still in the middle of my mine, y’all – still going forwards – so I reserve the right to change my mind about any or all of the above. And if I do, you know you’ll hear about it right here on this page. I’m not shy about self-correcting.

So kudos to all you graduates out there, of any “school,” formal or otherwise. May your mystery continue to unfold in marvelous directions – with beauty and wonder and butterflies galore – and may you never stop being a freshman at heart.

*Editor’s Note: This piece first appeared in Lowcountry Weekly in May of 2016.*