

An Essay on Discipline

We have all been guided in our growing process with the value of a lot of words ending in “ty” that are essential to the building of good character, things that potential employers, potential spouses, and real time spouses look for and expect in us. A sampling of these words follows: humility, honesty, integrity, loyalty. This is not a complete list but sufficient to make my point. These, as stated, are character traits, valuable all, that others look for in us. There is one other, not ending in “ty” that is more vital than any of these because without it, the others are worthless. I say again, worthless. That vital characteristic is discipline.

As parents, we discipline our children, teachers discipline their pupils, and we even discipline our pets. But unless we can discipline ourselves, the rest are hollow gestures, because absent self discipline, there is little hope of becoming a success in life. At risk of sounding like I am portraying myself as Saint Frenchy, I will press on with this theme, because I have a good deal of experience, some of it hard won, in the acquisition of self discipline.

As George W. Bush once said when confronted with the fact that he had been arrested for driving while intoxicated, “When I was young and foolish, I was young and foolish.” Many of us can say the same about ourselves, including yours truly. The more fortunate among us recognize the error of our ways and take the necessary steps to change them. I once was a smoker. I quit for nine years, without the aid of Chantix, then foolishly fell back into the nicotine habit. At a pack of cigarettes per day, along with four or five Dutchmaster Corona Deluxe cigars, one might even say I was kind of a heavy smoker. On the brink of retirement from the Navy, I deduced that my retirement years would be better enjoyed if they did not include the use of nicotine. So I quit again – 36 years ago, and this time for good, and without the aid of Chantix. It was purely self discipline – the ability to say “I don’t smoke.” Period!

There is another factor in my development, seldom mentioned by me, more frequently by my wife, and that was the consumption of alcoholic beverages. I got into them young, stayed with them far too long. I did stop once for more than five years, then gradually drifted back into alcohol again, until I retired from the Navy and made the correct deduction that my life would be better without the use of alcoholic beverages. I gave up on them and will never drink another – period.

There is a Japanese proverb which I will state only in its English translation because few readers understand Japanese, but all will understand this proverb: “The man takes a drink. Then the drink takes a drink. And then the drink takes the man.” I have zero experience with drugs other than nicotine and alcohol, but I am confident that the same can be said for all of them. Nancy Reagan was highly criticized for advising the younger set to just say NO. That, however, is where the answer lies – in the ability to just say no. By never taking the first one, there is no way to take the second one.

This self discipline thing extends well beyond the use of drugs, socially acceptable or otherwise. It also includes the ingestion of food. Not every obese person I see is suffering from a glandular disorder, unless the stomach is considered a gland. I just lost my hunting partner, a man of a mere 79 years, healthy in every respect but one – he was grossly overweight. At five feet, six inches, with a 50 inch girth and tipping the scales at 350 pounds, there is no other way to say it. He was overweight, more bluntly, too damned fat. We hunted together for eleven years, broke bread at the same table lots of times, and I often shuddered at the amount consumed by such a short stature man. I chided him only rarely because I know that is a fruitless venture, guaranteed only to destroy our relationship and destined to gain nothing in his improvement. You see, self discipline cannot be instilled. It is purely an inside job. Let me say that again – the acquisition and development of self discipline is an inside job.

And inside job though it may be, it is vitally important to obtaining success in life and to the quality of life itself. I have been heard to say “Don’t stop living while you are still alive.” Where does that fit in? It fits into the lives of the newly retired and those contemplating retirement. If you get in a rocking chair, at least make it rock, but better yet, come up with something, some form of activity, that

will actually be an activity other than sitting around the neighborhood eatery with a bunch of cronies, trying without success to solve all the world's ills. You must come up with something that makes you move. For my part, after I have retired from the Navy, we built a house – ourselves, paying only for the labor of insulating the thing because it cost less to have the professionals do it than it would for me to buy the insulation and stuff it in myself. Then we had to leave Arizona for health reasons, moved to fifty acres of raw land in South Central Washington, carved a homestead out of the wilderness, and built another one. That climate proved unsuitable for those susceptible to skin cancer (my wife) so we sold that one and moved into a ready built one in Western Washington – the cloudy, rainy part of the state. There however, we bought a ready built one, needing only a workshop to house my woodworking equipment, and completion of the workshop left me with a paucity of physically demanding activities. I decided to take up early morning walking. Admittedly, there was a two-sided reason for this. The obvious one was to stay physically fit, but I might have been able to do this by going to a gym. But I don't like the smell of gyms. I never have. My hidden objective was to stay fit so that I might continue to enjoy my favorite outdoor pursuits which include hunting and fishing, activities that require a good deal of walking, especially the hunting. Pretty simple – if I lose the ability to walk, I lose the ability to hunt. Started walking in 1997 after my workshop was completed and I am still at it. I correctly deduced that I could enjoy the walk more if accompanied by a dog and in the year 2000 I acquired a nice Labrador pup. I have not been without a canine companion since, save those brief interludes when one died and I had no immediate replacement.

Now, age 85+, approaching 86, I still walk – every day. There is no day that is too cold, too hot, too wet or too windy. When there is enough snow, I walk on snow shoes. How far do I walk? When Boomer died and I had to spend a dogless summer, I had lapsed from our 3.5 mile outings to 2.5 miles, often less. Enter Duck, energetic, imbued with boundless enthusiasm, infectious enthusiasm, and our outings are now routinely 3.8 miles, occasionally 4.0. I plan to hunt pheasants in South Dakota this October and whitetail deer in Saskatchewan in November, and I will continue to fish those remote Canadian waters for whatever the murky depths are willing to give up. I successfully hunted the Bighorn Mountains of Wyoming for elk last October, giving up on the pheasants mainly because Boomer was no longer up to it, and I look forward to another elk hunt as soon as Hubert (the elk) is gone from the freezer.

I suspect that is about all you want to hear from me on the subject of self discipline and I will sign off with a quote from an ancient Jewish philosopher: “Heed your own heart's counsel for there is nothing you can depend on more.” Ben Sira, from circa 200 B.C.