

ONE

# Don't let life happen to you

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*The will to do, the soul to dare.*

**Sir Walter Scott**

*Dost thou love life? Then do not squander time,  
for that is the stuff life is made of.*

**Benjamin Franklin**

## THOUGHTS ON DIAGNOSIS

We arrived back home at around 1.30am, way past my parents' bedtime if not mine. The Parent Teachers Association's annual Christmas fundraiser at my school had been a real success. Not least, because I won six out of the ten raffle prizes – a large ham from the local butcher, a bottle of Liebfraumilch, a Christmas pudding, two boxes of chocolates and of course the obligatory gift box set of Old Spice aftershave and deodorant.

The note from Dr Watkins was scribbled on a piece of paper and had been pushed through the letterbox:

Maurice,

Give me a call on 875419 whatever time you get in.

Dr Watkins

'Do you think that it's too late?' Mum said, as much to herself as to Dad. But he was already punching in the number.

'No, he knows we want to know the score as soon as possible.'

'Hello, Dr Watkins? Maurice Woods here. Right ... OK ... OK ... we'll see you in five minutes, then.' He put the phone down and crossed the kitchen. 'He told me that I should have a stiff drink and make him a cup of tea. He's on his way round.'

Mum put the kettle on and put out the best cups and saucers on a tray. I glanced at my brother Ian, Ian at my mum. My dad was staring into thin air, his mind working at a million miles an hour as it always did.

Dr Watkins arrived looking somehow older than when I had last seen him, two weeks earlier. He took a seat and launched straight into what he had to tell us.

‘I know you are all eager to find out the results from the biopsy. I have been chasing Mr Evans for news, but he was keen to get a second opinion.’ His hands holding the cup and saucer shook. Not just a little tremble: it was so pronounced, it looked like a hammy actor trying to do ‘nervous’. ‘But it has been confirmed now. You have an osteosarcoma, or bone cancer. You will have to have your leg amputated below the knee and six sessions of chemotherapy.’

Tears welled up in Dad’s eyes.

‘What if I don’t want to have my leg amputated?’ I asked.

‘Then you’ll die,’ was the instant reply. ‘Bone cancer is a very virulent type of cancer and this course of treatment has been proven to give the best prognosis. You will have one course of chemotherapy first, then your amputation, and then the other five bouts of chemotherapy.’

I left the room. In the kitchen I leant against the units and began to cry.

‘Don’t cry, mate,’ my brother said as he came in.

‘Why me?’

‘You’ll be all right.’

And then I thought about it. What would my friends and peers think? What would I think if it was one of them that had cancer? I’d probably be mildly concerned, but it wouldn’t stop me from living. It wouldn’t stop me deliberating over what I would have for my tea.

‘You’re right, I will be all right,’ I said. ‘People aren’t going to be that upset for me, so I won’t let it upset me. What happens to me isn’t going to stop them living, so I won’t let it stop me from living.’

I’m not sure how much logic there was in that thought, especially given the circumstances, but at the time it seemed to make me feel a whole lot better. I didn’t know if I had six

months, six years or sixty years left to live – but I did know that from this moment on, I was going to live my life to the full.

Until that moment, I had been the typical teenager, just happy to let life wash over me. But this was a pivotal moment in my life. It was the proverbial ‘kick up the arse’ and it made me realize that I no longer wanted life to just happen to me. From that point on, I wanted to take control of my own destiny as best I could.

## DON'T LET LIFE HAPPEN TO YOU

Before I was catapulted into the world of cancer, I was like most of the people I meet – I let life happen to me. From day to day, life impacted on me and I did very little to affect it.

As humans, we have a predisposition to die. Every cell, from the moment it forms, is programmed to die. Every skin cell, every hair cell, every blood cell has a spell of life that is planned, before it self-destructs. Scientists call it ‘apoptosis’: programmed cell death.

But sometimes, something goes wrong within the cell. Somehow the DNA gets damaged and the cell changes its attitude. A cancer cell is born and, given the chance, a cancer cell loves to live. It stops doing the tasks that its mother cell performed and then begins to divide, replicating itself with a view to hanging around for as long as possible. It doesn't self-destruct. Cancer cells are strong – they have character. All cancer cells are trying to do is live. The only way you can get rid of them is by poisoning (or irradiating) them into submission. That's what the chemotherapy does. Chemotherapy encourages the cancer cell to commit suicide.

People talk of cancer being sinister. They whisper about it under their breath as if the cells are listening. All cancer is trying to do is live, but it is life at all costs, life until its host is dead.

It was only when I came face to face with these cells, so to speak, and their passion for life, that I decided to be passionate about life myself. I was going to have an effect on my life and not just let life happen to me. It is amazing what it takes for some people, and I am including myself in this, to realize that life is a do-it-yourself thing.

Many people need a push in life before they actually start living. They cite near-death experiences, or the loss of a loved one, as events that have made them re-evaluate their life and how they want to live it. Such things can force a period of self-reflection so thorough that it affects the very nature of how an individual wants to spend the rest of their days. They make a decision about how they want to actively approach life. But what about the people who haven't suddenly been faced with their own mortality, or suffered a terrible loss or shock? Those people who are living life passively? I certainly don't recommend searching out such experiences; instead, let's try and learn from those who have been there.

## Extraordinary lives

History is full of examples of people who have grasped life with both hands; people who have got up off of their backsides, got on and achieved great things; people who have been proactive rather than reactive.

We all know about the great leaders, for example Sir Winston Churchill, or humanitarians, such as Mother Teresa. Their achievements are world famous. But these are not the only people who have seized the day and attacked life with

vigour. Root around a little in the archives of history and it doesn't take long to discover that there are countless less well-known tales of ordinary people living extraordinary lives.

In 1961, Jean Nidetch was an ordinary middle-aged housewife living in Queens, New York. Like many other women, she struggled to keep her weight down.

Nidetch could have muddled on, fighting the good fight against fat and trying out the latest diet fads, but – where keeping off those extra pounds was concerned – getting nowhere fast. Instead, she decided to take action. She invited six friends over to her apartment to discuss their common predicament. The next time they met, she handed out copies of a slimming plan she found in an obesity clinic run by the New York City Department of Health.

Within two months, that small group of friends had expanded to 40 or so people. Nidetch's waistline, however, like many others in the group, decreased substantially. Initially she weighed in at 193lb (13 stone, 11lb) but was soon down to 134lbs (9 stone, 8lb). The group dieting thing obviously worked.

Soon they were holding meetings at other people's houses. In 1963, the group having long outgrown her apartment, Nidetch hired a theatre in Queens. She was expecting about 50 people to come along – 400 showed up. Realizing the whole thing was getting a little to large for her to handle alone, Nidetch found a business partner, Al Lippert, and founded Weight Watchers.

Nidetch ran the company for 15 years before finally selling to the Heinz corporation in 1978. She remained a consultant with the brand she created until 1998.

George Mercer Dawson didn't get the greatest start in life. Born in Pictou, Nova Scotia in 1849, he contracted tuberculosis of the spine when he was a boy. It left him with a hunched back and restricted his growth development to the equivalent of a twelve-year-old child.

But Dawson wasn't about to rail at his misfortune, or languish at home an invalid. Initially he was too ill to go to school, so he was educated at home. But, after a lengthy period of recovery and recuperation, he went to study part-time at McGill University in Canada and later attended the Royal School of Mines in England.

Dawson returned to Canada in 1873, aged 24, when he was appointed geologist and botanist to Her Majesty's British North America Boundary Commission. For the next 20 or so years, Dawson travelled thousands of miles on geological surveys. He travelled from western Ontario to the Rocky Mountains, through British Columbia, and the Yukon, to the Bering Sea.

Little by little, he meticulously mapped out large tracts of Canada, covering the mountains, lakes and valleys by horse, railway, steamboat, canoe and even on foot. The physical challenges were immense, yet Dawson conquered them.

He was appointed as Palaeontologist and Chief Geologist of the Geological Survey of Canada (GSC) and later became a director. In 1896, he was elected President of the Geological Society of America.

As well as his scientific achievements, Dawson left a historical legacy in the archive of photos taken on his journeys. They are photographs documenting the birth of modern Canada, and the extraordinary career of a man who lived life with a flourish.

On a summer's day in July 1944, a young African-American woman got on a Greyhound bus heading for Baltimore. The

27-year-old mother of two was on her way to see a doctor. She sat near the back of the bus in the section reserved for 'coloured' people.

When she was asked to give up her seat for a white couple she refused, telling the women sitting next to her – one of whom was holding a baby – to stay put. The bus driver headed for the nearest sheriff's office, pulled up outside the jailhouse and called a sheriff onto the bus, who attempted to arrest her. At which point she tore up the ticket and fought with the deputy who dragged her off the bus.

She later recalled in an interview with *The Washington Post*: 'He touched me. That's when I kicked him in a very bad place. He hobbled off, and another one came on. He was trying to put his hands on me to get me off. I was going to bite him, but he was dirty, so I clawed him instead. I ripped his shirt.'

She was subsequently jailed for resisting arrest and breaking segregation laws.

That woman wasn't Rosa Parks, whom some of you might have heard of. It was a woman called Irene Brown, ten years before Parks stepped onto that bus in Alabama that would make her so famous.

In court, Brown pleaded not guilty to breaking the segregation laws but was found guilty and fined \$10. At that point most of us, with centuries of history and the weight of the US judicial system against us, would have probably paid the fine. Not Brown, though.

She appealed and her lawyers pursued the case to the Supreme Court which, in a landmark ruling, overturned the segregation laws in interstate transport situations. Although the Southern states refused to follow the ruling in *Irene Morgan v. Virginia*, Brown's actions led to a series of freedom rides. In the first, 18 black and white members of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) travelled throughout the South on buses,



whites at the back, blacks at the front, on a 'journey of reconciliation'. Many ended up working on a chain gang for 90 days.

Irene Brown went on to live a life that would have been impossible had it not been for her actions and those of others in the US civil rights movement. She won a scholarship in a radio competition and studied for a first degree in communications – aged 68. She got her masters degree in urban studies – aged 73. Before this, she ran her own childcare business in Queens, New York.

The problem for most of us is that doing things at 90% of maximum effort is easy. The extra 10% may be disproportionately difficult, but it is that little bit extra that makes us exceptional. The first step is to decide that this is a journey that you want to take. It is not a quick or easy process: it may well take far longer than getting the first 90% right. In fact, it may even take you the rest of your life.

## Just my luck

I was lucky: something happened to me to make me re-evaluate my life. I am one of many people who have had a major life crisis. It can be a serious illness, losing your job, losing someone close to you, a narrow miss, an accident, or an event that stops you in your tracks for a moment – psychologically, physically, or both.

Better still, for me, it happened when I was young enough for it to make a difference – although it can still galvanize you into action if it happens later on in life.

And, perhaps even more importantly, I was lucky enough to be the kind of person who took the positive, rather than the negative, from a situation. Not everyone would view such a major life crisis as positive.

Psychology professor Richard Wiseman, author of *The Luck Factor*, conducted research into people's attitude towards luck. A broad range of people took part in the study: at the two extremes, some participants considered themselves to be very lucky, others very unlucky, with a range of people falling somewhere in between. As part of the study, Wiseman proposed a scenario to the 400 participants and recorded the various responses.

The scenario was as follows:

*You walk into a bank to cash a cheque and, as you are standing in the queue, someone decides to rob the bank. In the confusion, a gun is fired and you are shot in the leg and wounded. But you survive. What would be your response?*

One set of people responded with answers such as 'Why is it always me?', 'I'm always in the wrong place at the wrong time' and 'Life is so unfair'.

Others replied along the lines of 'Well, it could have been a lot worse; we could all have been killed' or 'I am lucky to be alive'; and, in extreme cases, 'Wow, that's lucky – I could write a book about it!'

Obviously the scenario was the same for everyone, so it is only the individual's attitude towards the scenario that varied. No doubt you know which camp you fall into – the people who considered themselves to be generally unlucky in life; or those who believe luck is with them.

Personally, I feel that we make our own luck through the choices we make. We are all capable of positive and negative thoughts and attitudes; the important thing is to let the positive side control the negative and not vice versa.

## Bitterness

We don't have time to be bitter about events – it's far better to use them as a catalyst to spur us on. It's not always easy, but perhaps we should follow the example of Nelson Mandela. If anyone has a right to be bitter, it is Nelson Mandela. Twenty-seven years enduring the brutal prison regime on Robben Island, a place Mandela described as 'the harshest, most iron-fisted outpost in the South African penal system'. Incarcerated for struggling against injustice and subsequently exonerated by the actions of later generations.

Nelson Mandela was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in December 1993, along with F.W. de Klerk, the man who ordered his release and then helped to run the government with him, for 'their work for the peaceful termination of the apartheid regime, and for laying the foundations for a new, democratic South Africa'.

At the award ceremony, the chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee noted: 'many people have remarked on the apparent lack of bitterness that characterizes Mandela's conduct since he was released from prison. He himself has said that perhaps he would have harboured bitter thoughts if he had not had a job to do.'

Would Mandela have achieved what he has in life if he had wallowed in bitterness and hatred following 27 years in prison? Obviously not, and millions of people should thank him for his strength.

Not everyone, however, has the benefit of a life-changing event to spur them on. So what about these people? If that's you, then you may well be thinking, 'Do I really need to re-evaluate the way I live my life?' It's a fair question. Why should you bother?

Perhaps it is worth considering a few statistics.

- The average American spends 52 days a year watching television. That means a 70-year-old will have spent over ten years of their life watching television. Even if you exclude the first ten years, that is still 8.5 years.<sup>1</sup>
- In the UK, the average commute to work is 45 minutes per day. Over a year, that is the equivalent of 34 eight-hour working days. Over a working lifetime from 18 to retirement at 65, that is about four years and three months of your life spent travelling to and from work.<sup>2</sup>
- According to the World Toilet Organization – yes, such a thing exists – the average person spends about three years of their life on the toilet.
- If we live to 70 and assume that we get an average of seven hours' sleep a night, we will have spent the equivalent of a little over 20 years, 24/7, asleep.
- In China, people from Beijing spend one hour and 42 minutes eating daily. That's 25 days a year, and just short of five years 24/7 if they live to 70.
- The average person over 50 will have spent five years waiting in queues and one year looking for lost items.

In other words, just taking account of these few activities, someone who lives to 70 will have spent 47½ of those years, eating, sleeping, going to the toilet, travelling to and from work, watching television, waiting in queues and searching for lost items.

When you look at life in this way it makes you realize how little time we actually spend doing the things that matter to us. What value, for example, do you place on watching television or commuting to work, or sleeping, compared with doing things with your family, travelling or spending time with friends?

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<sup>1</sup> TV turn off network/AC Nielsen

<sup>2</sup> RAC Foundation report 2003

If you throw work into the equation, especially if you don't enjoy your work, then there is very little time left for you. Most people don't stop and think about things like this, or only very rarely – they are too busy getting through life, living from day to day. Because of my illness, I was forced to confront the way I lived my life and how I wanted to live it.

Surely, though, it would be better if it didn't take a major life crisis to make you think seriously about what you want from life and how you want to live it. That's one of the reasons why I wrote this book: I found out the hard way, but hopefully you can take a short-cut.

## BE PROACTIVE

My recovery has given me a second chance. Others don't get one and start from a worse position. I can't do anything about yesterday but I sure can about tomorrow. 'Tomorrow is the first day of the rest of your life'.

*Richard Shaw*  
*Teenage Cancer Trust trustee*

## LET'S GET IT ON

This book contains anecdotes and insights from my life experiences, and details of how I turned a major life crisis into a positive life-affirming outcome. It is not meant to be prescriptive: my illness and my subsequent experiences as a competitive swimmer have taught me some useful lessons about life. Take from them what you will.

If you follow some or all of them, I strongly believe that they will help you achieve your personal best in whatever it is you want to do.

If you are going to take on the challenge, you will need some weapons in your armoury, some ideas about how you can change your life for the better. In the rest of the book I will write about:

## Being the best you can be

Few of us appreciate what we are truly capable of. No matter what your starting point is, you can do more than you think: more physically, more mentally.

## Constant goal setting

There's little point in setting out on a journey if you don't know where you are going. People do better with goals than without them, provided those goals are well chosen.

## Motivation

It's the 'why' of what we do. It's the reason we get from A to B. No motivation, no goals achieved. The obvious motivation is that attractive carrot – money. But money isn't necessarily the best motivator. You need much more than financial reward for motivation if you are going to improve your personal best.

## Teamwork

We all work in teams of one sort or another. Don't believe me? Well if you are not in a formal team at work, you are probably in an informal one. Outside of work there is family

life, even if it is a team of two. If you live and work alone, there's your social network. And if none of the above applies, you are probably not reading this book but stranded on a desert island.

## Communication

Effective communication is at the heart of excellent personal performance. Communication isn't just about talking, though – much of personal communication, for example, is non-verbal. And listening is one of the most important communications skills you can master.

## Adversity

The path to doing well is rarely an easy one; there will always be setbacks and it pays to know how to deal with them. Stress is a big factor in modern life. It is hard to reach your true potential if stress is holding you back. Luckily, there are ways of combating stress that really work.

## Role models

We don't arrive in the world with an innate knowledge of how best to live our lives. We need guidance from somewhere. This is where role models come in. But not just any role model, not the conventional pop, movie and sports stars. Role models are all around us, we just need to find the right ones. Well-chosen role models and mentors help us help ourselves to get better.

## Prejudice

Prejudice does not just eat away at individuals and society, it impairs performance. Prejudice prevents you from finding out what people are really like and thus from developing useful networks and alliances. It gives you a misshapen worldview.

Learn how not to perpetuate prejudice or let it affect your life.

## The edge

If we can get a fair advantage, why not take it? It so often separates the excellent from the nearly excellent. There are many techniques that can help boost personal performance. Some may work for you, some may not – try them and see.

As you finish this chapter, ask yourself if you want to live life actively. Hopefully, the answer will be ‘yes’. Once you have decided to make the journey, you must commit to being the best you can be at that very moment in time. Not tomorrow, next week or next year, but right here and now.