



Martha Beck's Five Best Pieces of Advice

by Martha Beck



Illustration: Barry Blitt

When you spend almost all your time thinking about how people can achieve their best destiny, as I do, you often trip over little life lessons that had never occurred to you. (In my case, they're usually of the blindingly obvious variety.) On the chance that you may have missed some of these enlightening tidbits of instruction, I thought I'd write down a few that have improved my own quality of life with very little effort. So, without further ado, I offer you: My Five Best Pieces of Advice Ever.

A Little Pain Never Hurt Anybody

I once worked as a dishwasher in a restaurant, stacking clean plates and cups as they emerged from a spray jet of superheated water. One day an enormous metal pot came down the conveyor belt. Lifting it was like grabbing a hot stove burner. The belt was still moving, so I couldn't drop the pot without smashing dishes, floor tiles, and other people's feet. There was nothing to do but carry the pot to its shelf. As I did so, a fine new thought arose in my mind.

Oh, well, I thought, a little pain never hurt anybody.

The incongruity of this statement made me laugh—while still holding that scalding metal. I ended up with second-degree burns on both hands, but I was oddly relaxed about it. Somehow I'd managed to accept this particular physical injury without any mental resistance or fear. In the absence of those psychological components, the overall experience was strangely stress-free.

I wish I could say I've viewed suffering this way ever since. Alas, my usual mind-set echoes the immortal words of Daffy Duck: "I can't stand pain. It hurts me." It's only when I can't avoid something moderately painful—when my back goes out or my throat gets sore or a karate buddy accidentally breaks my finger—that I remember my dishwashing epiphany. *It's only a little pain, I remind myself. It won't hurt me.*

Unfailingly, the moment I stop fearing and resisting it, the pain changes. It becomes smaller, more manageable and docile, like an enraged wolverine morphing into a fussy hamster. I just tried this at the dentist and found that having a needle pushed into my gums felt like a tiny deep-tissue massage. I genuinely enjoyed it, which is even more gratifying than it is disturbing.

The same perspective works wonders on emotional irritants: embarrassment, frustration, confusion, nervousness. I have a friend with an anxiety disorder who has learned to say, in the middle of a panic attack, *It's just anxiety, nothing to worry about.* At one level she's freaking out, but she refuses to add insult to injury by thinking, *I can't stand this! It's got to stop!* She's one of the calmest people I've ever met. Variations on the theme "A little pain never hurt anyone" are so useful I'm thinking of having the phrase tattooed on my body. But I'm afraid it would hurt.

Sunscreen Is for Necks and Chests, Not Just Faces.

Because I live in Arizona, I spend lots of time with folks who've spent decades in the desert sun. Many have exquisitely youthful faces, attached to chests that look like dehydrated crocodiles. It's not the sun damage that bothers me (though that is a health hazard). It's the difference between the patches of skin the owner finds important and those dermal areas he or she clearly ignores.

The importance of complete coverage extends far beyond cosmetic issues. We all tend to focus on things we deem important while ignoring related items. One of my clients complained that she wasn't losing weight despite following her diet perfectly at every meal. She cheated only by consuming four candy bars as

snacks. Another client once said, "I'm a very honest person; I lie only when necessary." Psychologically speaking, this person had the face of a teenager and the chest of a dragon. Uneven application pervaded her life.

Sunscreen and values should be applied uniformly. If you believe in kindness, slather it on the janitor as well as the CEO. If you wouldn't excuse yourself for inflicting cruelty on another person, don't make excuses for other people who are mean to you. I remind myself daily that it's never too late to apply a protective layer of integrity to parts of my life I've ignored.

Television Is a Vitamin.

I frequently hear parents and pundits lamenting the brain-rotting, lowbrow practice of watching the "boob tube." Many couples I know strictly limit the time their children spend in front of the TV. Some of my friends actually hide from others the fact that they love TV; when pressed, they'll lie outright, claiming they're too busy reading Proust to think about popular culture.

While almost all of us spend a fair amount of time staring at televisions, many individuals, as well as social scientists and other ideologues, think TV is bad for us. I disagree. I think TV is like a vitamin: toxic if taken in large quantities, but also essential for social and personal well-being.

My family of origin fired up its first TV when I was 13. Because of this, I spent the first 12 years of my life on the Nerd Patrol. I didn't know what other kids were talking about, and vice versa. In my quest for entertainment, I turned to things like reading Shakespeare—and if you don't think quoting *Hamlet* will get a 10-year-old beaten up in the schoolyard, my friend, you have never been that 10-year-old.

When I finally did start watching TV, everything on it—even advertising—was like a window opening on my own culture. Television is a piece of furniture that lets us see the top of Everest, the Crab Nebula, the funniest and smartest and most athletic people in the world, a talking sponge in pants! To this day, it thrills me. It's a social unifier, a dispenser of useful information about trends (in fashion, slang, voting), scientific breakthroughs, the Zeitgeist of the moment. So, though you can overdose on television (which makes it feel boring and annoying), I believe it's a modern necessity when taken in moderate doses. I know I function much better when I get my Recommended Daily Allowance of Vitamin TV.

It Is Good to Be Wrong.

Do you perhaps disagree with me about television? Do you believe that TV is an evil invention that should be done away with entirely? Well, here's what I have to say to you, buddy:

You may be right.

I may be wrong.

I very often am.

Every time someone can demonstrate to me that I'm in error, a bright new bulb lights up my dim wit. That's why it's good to be wrong—not because we should hang on to our mistakes but because acknowledging error is the foundation of learning. I've watched countless people sacrifice relationships, careers, even life itself, on the altar of their own "rightness." One acquaintance used to rant that motorcycle helmet laws were dangerous because a helmetless rider, who could hear other vehicles coming, would never get in an accident. "But what if you're wrong?" I asked him. "I mean, statistically..."

"I'm not wrong," he said, "and I don't want to hear your statistics." Shortly thereafter, he died of head injuries sustained in a motorcycle accident.

Being open to new information and opinions, inviting people and events to let you know where you're wrong, is the best way I know to open the mind. I try to use the phrase "Tell me where I'm wrong" at least four or five times a day. Try it. You'll see that while insisting that you're right is gratifying, accepting that you're wrong can be transformative.

You Can Work Miracles.

Recently, while paging through an old journal, I rediscovered a daydream I'd written down years ago. It described my fantasy backyard, a desert oasis with natural plants, a rock garden, areas paved with natural stone. A surge of amazement and gratitude overwhelmed me. The description matched the backyard I

actually have right now. I'd connected with my heart's desire, and the desire was fulfilled. Miraculous!

Then I remembered something else. My backyard was once a stretch of grit sparsely inhabited by what I call Lady Mac-beth plants (the kind that stab people). I couldn't afford to have landscapers transform it, but I could afford to have them deposit 38,000 pounds of clean rocks and gravel near my back gate. Do you know how long it takes to shovel that much gravel into a wheelbarrow, trundle it to every corner of a fairly large lot, and rake it level? Almost as long as it takes to read a book on stonemasonry, install several hundred slabs of natural slate, and clean the mortar out from under your fingernails. (Hint: The fingernail cleaning alone takes about six months.)

In other words, while I absolutely believe in miracles, I think there's a good reason we say they must be "worked." A client once told me, "If God wants me to achieve big dreams, he'll make it easy and comfortable." I wondered which religion taught her that. Was she thinking about the Children of Israel, who endured 40 "easy and comfortable" years in the wilderness en route to the Promised Land? Or maybe the Buddha, who sought enlightenment through asceticism? Or perhaps Jesus—I mean, that whole thing with the cross was such a warm fuzzy, right?

Einstein supposedly said, "There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle." He also said, "If A equals success, then the formula is: $A = X + Y + Z$, where X is work, Y is play, and Z is keep your mouth shut." If you're hoping for a miracle, stop gabbing and start working. When you're completely exhausted, stop and play. Then go back to work. Persist, and miracles will start happening, all the more wondrous because you worked them yourself.

So there you have it: my current grab bag of epiphanies. If I act on them, I know from experience they'll sink deeper into my consciousness, until they're intrinsic parts of my worldview. Then new epiphanies will occur to me, and I'll get to work internalizing them. Because that's the way everyone's destiny unfolds.

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