



## Thirteen Life Learnings

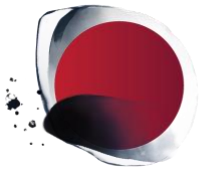
<https://www.brainpickings.org/2019/10/23/13-learnings-13-years/>



1. Cultivate that capacity for [“negative capability.”](#) We live in a culture where one of the greatest social disgraces is not having an opinion, so we often form our “opinions” based on superficial impressions or the borrowed ideas of others, without investing the time and thought that cultivating true conviction necessitates. We then go around asserting these donned opinions and clinging to them as anchors to our own reality. It’s enormously disorienting to simply say, “I don’t know.” But it’s infinitely more rewarding to understand than to be right — even if that means changing your mind about a topic, an ideology, or, above all, yourself.



2. Do nothing for prestige or status or money or approval alone. As [Paul Graham observed](#), “prestige is like a powerful magnet that warps even your beliefs about what you enjoy. It causes you to work not on what you like, but what you’d like to like.” Those extrinsic motivators are fine and can feel life-affirming in the moment, but they ultimately don’t make it thrilling to get up in the morning and gratifying to go to sleep at night — and, in fact, they can often distract and detract from the things that do offer those deeper rewards.
3. Be generous. Be generous with your time and your resources and with giving credit and, especially, with your words. It’s so much easier to be a critic than a celebrator. Always remember there is a human being on the other end of every exchange and behind every cultural artifact being critiqued. To understand and be understood, those are among life’s greatest gifts, and every interaction is an opportunity to exchange them.
4. Build pockets of stillness into your life. Meditate. Go for walks. Ride your bike going nowhere in particular. There is a creative purpose to [daydreaming](#), even to [boredom](#). The best ideas come to us when we stop actively trying to coax the muse into manifesting and let the fragments of experience float around our unconscious mind in order to click into new combinations. Without this essential stage of [unconscious processing](#), the entire [flow of the creative process](#) is broken. Most important, sleep. Besides being [the greatest creative aphrodisiac](#), sleep also [affects our every waking moment](#), [dictates our social rhythm](#), and even [mediates our negative moods](#). Be as religious and disciplined about your sleep as you are about your work. We tend to wear our ability to get by on little sleep as some sort of badge of honor that validates our work ethic. But what it really is is a profound failure of self-respect and of priorities. What could possibly be more important than your health and your sanity, from which all else springs?
5. When people tell you who they are, [Maya Angelou](#) famously advised, believe them. Just as important, however, when people try to tell you who you are, don’t believe them. You are the only custodian of your own integrity, and the assumptions made by those that



misunderstand who you are and what you stand for reveal a great deal about them and absolutely nothing about you.

6. Presence is far more intricate and rewarding an art than productivity. Ours is a culture that measures our worth as human beings by our efficiency, our earnings, our ability to perform this or that. The cult of productivity has its place, but worshipping at its altar daily robs us of the very capacity for joy and wonder that makes life worth living — for, as [Annie Dillard memorably put it](#), “how we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.”
7. “Expect anything worthwhile to take a long time.” This is [borrowed](#) from the wise and wonderful [Debbie Millman](#), for it’s hard to better capture something so fundamental yet so impatiently overlooked in our culture of immediacy. The myth of the overnight success is just that — a myth — as well as a reminder that our present definition of success [needs serious retuning](#). As I’ve reflected [elsewhere](#), the flower doesn’t go from bud to blossom in one spritely burst and yet, as a culture, we’re disinterested in the tedium of the blossoming. But that’s where all the real magic unfolds in the making of one’s character and destiny.
8. Seek out what magnifies your spirit. Patti Smith, in [discussing William Blake and her creative influences](#), talks about writers and artists who magnified her spirit — it’s a beautiful phrase and a beautiful notion. Who are the people, ideas, and books that magnify your spirit? Find them, hold on to them, and visit them often. Use them not only as a remedy once spiritual malaise has already infected your vitality but as a vaccine administered while you are healthy to protect your radiance.
9. Don’t be afraid to be an idealist. There is much to be said for our responsibility as creators and consumers of that constant dynamic interaction we call culture — which side of the fault line between catering and creating are we to stand on? The commercial enterprise is conditioning us to believe that the road to success is paved with catering to existing demands — give the people cat GIFs, the narrative goes, because cat GIFs are what the people want. But E.B. White, one of our last great idealists, was eternally right when he [asserted](#) half a century ago that the role of the writer is “to lift people up, not lower them

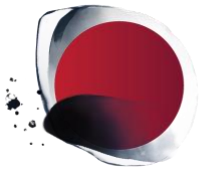


down” — a role each of us is called to with increasing urgency, whatever cog we may be in the machinery of society. Supply creates its own demand. Only by consistently supplying it can we hope to increase the demand for the substantive over the superficial — in our individual lives and in the collective dream called culture.

10. Don't just resist cynicism — fight it actively. Fight it in yourself, for this ungainly beast lays dormant in each of us, and counter it in those you love and engage with, by modeling its opposite. Cynicism often masquerades as nobler faculties and dispositions, but is categorically inferior. Unlike that great [Rilkean life-expanding doubt](#), it is a contracting force. Unlike critical thinking, that [pillar of reason](#) and [necessary counterpart to hope](#), it is inherently uncreative, unconstructive, and spiritually corrosive. Life, like the universe itself, tolerates no stasis — in the absence of growth, decay usurps the order. Like all forms of destruction, cynicism is infinitely easier and lazier than construction. There is nothing more difficult yet more gratifying in our society than living with sincerity and acting from a place of largehearted, constructive, [rational faith in the human spirit](#), continually bending toward growth and betterment. This remains the most potent antidote to cynicism. Today, especially, it is an act of courage and resistance.

And here are the three new additions, which refine some of the subtler ideas and ideals contemplated above:

11. A reflection originally offered on the cusp of Year 11, by way of [a wonderful poem about pi](#): Question your maps and models of the universe, both inner and outer, and continually test them against the raw input of reality. Our maps are still maps, approximating the landscape of truth from the territories of the knowable — incomplete representational models that always leave more to map, more to fathom, because the selfsame forces that made the universe also made the figuring instrument with which we try to comprehend it.
12. Because Year 12 is the year in which I finished writing [Figuring](#) (though it emanates from my entire life), and because the sentiment, which appears in the prelude, is the guiding



credo to which the rest of the book is a 576-page footnote, I will leave it as it stands: **There are infinitely many kinds of beautiful lives.**

13. In any bond of depth and significance, forgive, forgive, forgive. And then forgive again. The richest relationships are lifeboats, but they are also submarines that descend to the darkest and most disquieting places, to the unfathomed trenches of the soul where our deepest shames and foibles and vulnerabilities live, where we are less than we would like to be. Forgiveness is the alchemy by which the shame transforms into the honor and privilege of being invited into another's darkness and having them witness your own with the undimmed light of love, of sympathy, of nonjudgmental understanding. Forgiveness is the engine of buoyancy that keeps the submarine rising again and again toward the light, so that it may become a lifeboat once more.

**Image Courtesy of:** Ben White [@benwhitephotography](https://www.instagram.com/benwhitephotography)

*The Tim Dukes Method provides an opportunity for self-reflective individuals to cultivate the capacity to receive into consciousness hidden aspects of the self, claiming your unique gifts – ensuring that today's brilliance successfully transitions into tomorrow's wisdom. The Tim Dukes Method is designed and implemented by Dr. Timothy Dukes for determined creatives to ensure long-term viability — as a continuing investment in the well-being of yourself, your family, organizations, culture, society, and the Earth itself.*