

Kathy A. Fitch
Long Form Essay
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Dear Graduate,

As you finish eighth grade and prepare for the high school journey ahead, I wanted to share with you some of the things that I've learned about life so far. (Still learning, of course, so this is by no means a comprehensive list of all of the things anybody will ever need to know in his or her entire lifetime. Nonetheless, I've found this list pretty darned helpful over the years, and hope you'll find comfort, encouragement, and inspiration in these lessons, too.)

Details	
Words	1,327
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Paragraphs	13
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Making the Most of Your Life:

[An Extremely Brief and Incomplete but Awfully Helpful Instruction Manual](#)

Be Compassionate: People make mistakes. Friends, teachers, bosses, family members, and assorted acquaintances and loved ones will sometimes let you down, annoy you, frustrate you, tick you off royally, and otherwise entirely fail to live up to your expectations. Chances are, even God Himself is really going to bug the heck out of you from time to time. But here's the deal: you really need to let all of these assorted people (or deities, as the case may be) off the hook. Forgiveness is a magical thing. Everybody needs it. Everybody wants it. Relatively few people are good at giving it. But love and happiness are built always upon a foundation of forgiveness. So, whenever you can, extend forgiveness to the people who need it. And keep in mind that you are included in this group. When you goof up—and you will, because you are human, and that's what humans do—just pick yourself up, shake off the dust, and keep on going. Forgive yourself. I think you're pretty darned close to perfect, but we all know that not one of us is going to get through even a single day—much less an entire lifetime—without falling short of perfection. Don't worry about it. Ask for forgiveness when you've wronged someone, extend forgiveness to others, give yourself a break, and generally choose to extend compassion to all of your fellow creatures whenever you can.

Be Open to Random Joy: It's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that happiness is something that can actually be permanently achieved. Lots of people think that if they just have the right clothes, the right friends, the right car, the right house, and all the right stuff, then they will have happiness, at last. But, alas, it doesn't work that way. Way too many people are sitting around surrounded by all the stuff they've collected wondering why they aren't happy at all. And way too many people are sure that the reason they aren't happy is that they haven't collected quite enough stuff yet. But happiness is more of an attitude and an approach than a thing. You can't really own it, but you can be open to it. Any given

day is chock full of utterly unexpected joys: a certain angle of light on a building, the way the wind feels against your face, the way a friend laughs, the sound of rain against your window, the feel of your pet's warm fur under your fingers, a favorite old song on the radio. Well, there are a million things that can bring that little jolt of pleasure. Happiness is really about recognizing those little moments. Notice and treasure them. Try to remember to be thankful for them, too.

Make Plans, but Expect the Unexpected: It's good to have goals and dreams, and the energy and dedication to pursue them. Make the grandest plans imaginable. Shoot for the very stars. If you love something, and you're willing to devote yourself to it, there's really nothing at all that you can't accomplish. Remember, though, that things don't always go as smoothly as possible. Stuff happens. Too often, people give up on their dreams when they don't go exactly according to plan, but you should never allow yourself to do that. Sometimes, those unexpected twists and turns bring the greatest happiness into our lives—we meet new people, learn new things, and grow in ways we never imagined possible. Even what looks like a crisis can bring new opportunities. Just think of these unexpected events as plot twists in the really excellent novel that is your life. When in doubt, just yell, "PLOT TWIST" and keep on going.

Don't Worry Much about How People See You: There's an old saying that goes something like this: "When I was young, I spent all my time worrying about what people thought about me. When I was middle-aged, I didn't give a damn about what people thought about me. Now that I'm old, I finally realize that nobody was thinking about me." And that's the key. Everybody is so worried about themselves that they really aren't wasting too much time on you, and that's incredibly freeing. Don't worry about popularity or coolness at all. Be who you are, love what you love, be interested in and kind to others, and it all falls into place. The key is thinking about how you see others, not about how they see you. If you are really taking the time to look at and listen to the people around you, then you're doing it right. If you're thinking only about yourself, then it's time to crawl out of your own head and engage with the world. Cool is what you say it is.

Reach Out for Help When You Need It: The world is absolutely chock full of people who love to help. In high school, you can turn to friends, counselors, teachers, and coaches for support, and you can always come to me, too. The problem with suffering in silence is that the suffering and the silence both grow and grow. The minute you feel things going wrong, reach out to others. Sometimes, it's enough just to have someone listen. The earlier you reach out for help, the smaller your problems will be, and the faster they'll be resolved. Keep in mind, by the way, that this sounds easy but sometimes isn't. When you really need help, sometimes reaching out feels almost impossible. It's always worth it, though. It's a lot like forcing yourself to do some dull bit of homework that you really, really, really don't want to face. The longer you refuse to face it, the harder it gets to start. Same deal here. The longer you let a problem go, the harder it is to ask for help. So, reach out as soon as you can. It's a sign of strength and wisdom to seek assistance when you need it. Plus, it makes all those helpful types really happy.

Pray: God gets lonely, you know, so it's good to talk to Him on a regular basis. Doesn't matter what. He is capable of engaging in conversations about pretty much everything. Every single thing in life will be easier if you remember to keep reaching out to that creator to ask for help, to offer thanks, and to ask blessings upon the people that you love. Sometimes, you'll need to yell at God. It's okay. He understands, and He can take it. Over the course of your life, your conception of God is very likely to

change. That's okay, too. Just stay in that relationship. Praise and worship are central aspects of a full and healthy life. Being open to joy really requires being appreciative of the source of all joy.

Wow. What a short manual. Only six items! Note that the one thing they all have in common is love: love others, love life's little joys, love the day-to-day reality of life complete with all of its plot twists, love yourself, accept loving help from others, and love the one from whom all love flows. What a great thing it is to have a whole lifetime to learn those things! I love you, and I love watching you learn to master these six intertwined lessons. I know that life holds great things for you.

Love,

Mom