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After Their Bedtime

An extended commentary on
The Four Most Important Things

by Philip Siddons

Your life's philosophy – you live by it – consciously or not. If you had just a few minutes before you died, what advice would you give to your children or grandchildren to take along with them on their life's paths? Perhaps an engaging or inspiring high school or college instructor once asked you to write out your own obituary. It quickly got you in touch with your values.

What is most important to you? I'm laughing to myself as I remember some of the lines from comedies. "Think Plastic!" That was the answer in the movie: *The Graduate*. "Buy late, sell early." "Riley, do you love me?" Peg says and Riley responds, "Well, I live here, don't I?" (the early TV sitcom "The Life of Riley.")

It happens when we have a significant emotional experience – particularly when we become mindful of the brevity of life. "You

can't take it with you" echoes through our minds as we hear of the demise of the rich, famous and the powerful. That's when we finally pause long enough to ask ourselves what it is that we're passing along to our children and grandchildren. And if we tried, how would we say it so that a child could understand what is most important to us?

We've actually spent our entire lives instructing our family clan about our values. Consciously or not, we've taught them what we believe is most important. We've done this in the way we have used our power around the house and neighborhood. What is most important to us will be told in the stories they tell about us after we're gone. "Remember the time when ...?"

Our children have seen the theatre play of our lives for years as we've acted as the central actor of the script we've written. And while we may have reduced our children to subordinate characters in the novel of our life, sometimes assigning them only walk-on parts, we have unwittingly forced them to be our understudies.

Fortunately, our children always move on to other stages in their lives. Parental units aren't the only show in town and that's a good thing. Our kids have or will take on new roles and challenges. They'll create different characters of their own. Thankfully, they'll abandon some of the worn-out and antiquated values and opinions that we ourselves have neglected to update with the wisdom of our time.

Wondering what values we hope to pass on to succeeding generations is a life task that is thousands of years old. Imparting or hoping to impart values must be embodied in our DNA. It's who we are. It's in the Spirit of our very existence.

That's why, when we contemplate the certainty of our life's end (in psychology, philosophy or religion class or in a hospital waiting room after a physician's diagnosis) we struggle. We ask ourselves "What is (or has been) the purpose of my life?" "What will people say about my life when I'm gone?" We ponder this but we do not dare to verbalize it because we think it would sound self-involved. The whole idea of trying to write down our most impor-

tant values is new ground to most of us.

- We may have never clarified our values before because we can't make any money with it. It certainly wouldn't pay the mortgage.
- Whatever values we'd come up with would only be a mere drop in the ocean of religious and philosophical options. "Shouldn't we leave such things to the professionals like Jesus, Moses, Buddha or Mohammed?" How about Jerry Seinfeld or John Stewart?

Yes, but what play script are we following as we go through our life character's scenes from day to day?

"We wonder why someone doesn't give us a copy of the *Cliff's Notes on Life's Values* or a copy of *Most Important Things For Dummies*.

- "I am what I am!"
- "That's just the way I am!"
- "I know what my parents told me but I don't want to be like them!"

Every day we act in certain ways as we relate to those around us. How we act, speak, write and interpret our world is exactly according to the small number of things we believe are most important. Whether or not we have written them down, we have our own personal values. Our values list has come into existence from two sources: our pain and our passions.

Our Pain.

To some extent, we've experienced sadness and suffering from our experiences. Sometimes what we *don't* want – motivates us to pursue what we *do* want. How we were treated and the circumstances we've encountered have brought us challenges and sometimes hardships.

We've also found life-changing healing and renewal in life. The variety of colors and textures of life fill the novels, cinema, the art and the conversations around the water coolers, bars and the kitchen tables. We know what we have endured. We also know what it is and the people who have enabled us to survive those experiences and become whole again.

Our Heart

The second source of our most important values comes from the heart. Within us resides a wonderful and magnificent desire to connect with others in meaningful ways. We want to help. We want to be welcoming, nurturing and affirming. We want the best for others. We want the best for *all* others. Even those who live fearful and hate-filled existences. Even those who violently lash out at others whom they believe threaten their (temporary) control over their possessions or power. Yet majestically, irrationally, we wish the best for even them, despite their misery and the misery they inflict on others.

Somehow, enduringly, people are more good than not. We are each endowed with a Spirit of beauty, creativity, intelligence and compassion. We can look at an artist's drawing of a finger with a smiling face and project into it a childlike innocence. We attribute to a drawing a sense of trust and joy. We envision these things from a place within ourselves and from others. Maybe the last smile we saw on a child's face etched itself into our soul?

Writing Down Your Values

So try it. Try jotting down the four or five most important things in your life. There's no grading and nobody but you will ever know you tried it. It's for you.

Hard, isn't it?

That's what I did when I tried writing this book. Yet for me, it will always be a work in progress. In time, my most important things might become five or six. It might drop down to three. One thing or another might be replaced or modified. Things change.

About #1

**Remembering that we are
all connected is the beginning
of wisdom."**

Where is God in All This?

Those who are devout people of some reli-

gious tradition might already be working on their ulcer half way through the first most important thing. “How could you talk about what is most important, particularly the first thing, and no mention of the word “God?”

Well the nature of a living and personable Deity is a little complex for kids. Yet by the very way we treat them, in the short time ahead, they’ll clearly understand our sense regarding the existence or non-existence of a Divine Being. If you and I are ‘God figures’ in the lives of our children, what are they perceiving God’s nature to be? Is the ‘God’ they see in us somehow compassionately involved or distantly amused?

Fact is, children know more about our theology than we think.

I think I’m related to some of the ancients who felt that there is something – someone Who is ‘infinite, eternal and unchangeable (not rigid) in being, wisdom, power, holiness, goodness, justice and truth.’ (as the catechism said.

Some of the ancients felt that the Divine Presence was so holy that they dared not say

the word “God.” It wasn’t that they were superstitiously afraid of being struck by lightning. It was because they took the clues from the so-called ‘wisdom literature’ which suggested, a couple thousand years ago, that the “The *reverencing* of God (*fear* in their original wording) is the beginning of all wisdom.” Proverbs 9:10.

So how do you get from a reverencing of our Maker to a bunch of fingers that are all connected to a common hand? And don’t think for a nanosecond that I have forgotten your original question of where God might be in all this.

The presence of the Divine in these stories is the character Mount. The pronouncements of what is most important emanate from Mount. Notice that in the various incidences where there is despair, sadness or conflict, Mount intervenes with words of wisdom. Perhaps words by which to live.

Then there is the concrete thinking of children. Mount is only a metaphor of spoken wisdom. If we were to be exposed to an actual sighting of the Divine, what would the Creator’s appearance be like?

That's an interesting question to discuss with your kids. Ask your children to draw a picture of God. If they happen to believe in the reality of a Supreme Being, what would happen if this Being showed up and spoke with you and the kids at Starbucks?

Are you remembering that we are all connected? How does that relate to reverencing the Divine in order to start gaining wisdom?

My take on it is that if we sense that the Divine (spirit) is in every one of us, it means that we are all connected. We are all part of a unified whole of the best (and sometimes the worst) traits of humankind. It is the sense that despite humanities' fear and violence, each person, deep inside, embodies the spirit of love, compassion and life-giving nurturing for all other living forms. It is the sense that what is truly reverent and holy in human life is all of the goodness, kindness and love that resides in each of our souls.

If we are mindful of that alone, it would nourish our mystical connection with everyone. If it is kept in mind, it impacts how we respond to someone else who is doing something incredibly stupid or selfish or harmful.

Keeping that in the forefront of our consciousness makes us mindful of how we all are connected. It's never a matter of "us vs. them."

Consider the frantic behavior of Pointer in trying to have the "best" hat. The alienation and isolation of our rabid materialism is the product of our pursuit of "better" material



things or the financial power that we think would replace any loss in life. Think of the damaging outcomes of hoarding and not sharing in our culture and our nation with regard to others. Xenophobia, racism, sexism, chauvinism and heterosexism is certainly no less stupid than Pointer's obsession with hats.

Where is God in the world view of the haters?

That's where "holiness" and "reverence" can exist in our lives. Bob Dylan once sang, "

*Disillusioned words like bullets bark
As human gods aim for their mark
Make everything from toy guns that
spark
To flesh-colored Christs that glow in the
dark
It's easy to see without looking too far
That not much is really sacred.
[It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding) by
Bob Dylan]*

So here it is. What do we have in our lives that we consider sacred?

What is wisdom?

How do we get it.

Try talking it over with your kids. They probably have new insight on that.

About #2

Ok, I get that I'm loved – but do I have to love others?

No we don't. Many people are so worried about their worthiness that they are consumed by their own fear. They spend their entire lives fearful. I'm talking about through the teens, through the career-climbing and their family-building twenties. They spend the rest of their lives never changing. Sometimes we never get out of that "us vs. them" mentality.

In the story, Mount confronts Pinky with feeling questions. The first question was putting him in touch with how *he* feels inadequate in terms of his own height. Mount's second question forced him to come to terms



with how Metro feels about *her* sense of being too tall.

Try this. Think of some people whom you distrust. The ones who are decidedly different from you. You know, . . . “*them.*”

You sadly see this played out in the activities of Congress and the boardroom. You see it in our conversations in a car or at a neighborhood picnic. What would happen if the words coming out of our mouths (about people of other races, nationalities, sexual orientations or personality types) were put on billboards? What would happen if there was a video clip on television’s Comedy Central of what we think about others? Would we be embarrassed?

Try discussing empathy and compassion for others with your kids. Do they think these traits are among the most important things in life? There are many practical human acts of kindness that our kids encounter every day worth mentioning.

Are we teaching our kids to be kind persons? Consider reading the helpful book [Un Selfie - Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our](#)

[All-About-Me World](#) by Michele Borba.

Here's a tip to get you the best and most personal medical care wherever you find yourself institutionalized. *Be the patient who is the most caring, appreciative and nurturing to the staff.* When you ring your call bell, it will be a no-brainer whose call for help is answered first.

About #3

Remembering Other's Feelings

When everyone turned their back on Quatro they formed the character "Fist." Every character who formed that Fist was fearful of someone different (such as having a band aid). It drove them to be fearfully alienated.



Being different, in their minds, seemed to be interpreted as their own lack of conformity. One wonders if all the carbon-copy white droids working for the *Star Wars* demon Darth Vader symbolize the fearful rigid lock step conformity of the 'old white boy' regimes which dictators create.

Perhaps this needs no further commentary. 'Do to others as you would like them to do to you.'

On one hand, our competitive and striving culture has taught us all to be self-sufficient. "Pull ourselves up by our boot straps." Independent. Be self-reliant & successful. We should become outstanding in our own field. We should be in a domain of our own, un-touchable and invincible.

Inhuman, isn't it? Think Ayn Rand's "The Virtue of Selfishness" and the rest of her compassionless Social Darwinistic books. Think of the hate-filled and caustic outlook on people who have not pursued and achieved economic wealth and power. Social Darwinists may be the most pitiful human beings on the planet, not the poor and the disabled. They will likely go to their graves with their conspiracy theo-

ries, ignorant of the needless suffering they have caused.

Then there is mentoring. Think through your life when you were particularly inexperienced. Remember the few people who patiently extended themselves to help you out. Remember (this is harder) the people who were more mature and patiently waited until you suffered from your own stupidity or errors until you matured and started to become more mindful of the feelings of others.

You might have had a teacher who taught you that it is OK not to know something. Perhaps you've had a computer instructor who laughingly reminded you that none of us have photographic memories. We were relieved to hear that something would be wrong if you didn't get "information overload" after hearing many paragraphs of how-to instructions about software that is new to you.

If you were lucky, that instructor reminded you, in every class, that if you haven't retained something, it's because someone else hasn't invested the kind of training in you that is relevant to your job responsibilities and your personal learning style. I believe that com-

panies who ask technically individuals (who possess no training abilities) to “teach” others are setting their employees and customers up for failure. No one should ever feel ‘stupid’ in learning how to use technology.

The true mentors in your life were guardian angels who happened to take human form during your life. They were the ones who always made sure you didn’t feel ‘stupid’ and showed you how things worked – as often as was needed.

I like how Anne Lamott puts it. Essentially, all of us are “regular customers” of God. [See Anne Lamott, [Stitches, A Handbook on Meaning, Hope and Repair](#) (Riverhead Books, a member of Penguin Group (USA), New York, 2013)]

About #4

Doing Your Best

In the story, Metro was judging himself as inadequate every time he noticed the abilities of others.

Have you noticed how we try to master the waterfront? We tend to throw ourselves into everything and magically expect that we



should excel in whatever we try. But not for long. So it's all-or-nothing but we quickly pull back and focus only on a few things in which we might excel. The rest, we "leave to the professionals."

I've done this with cooking – mostly out of laziness. I've got to get off my butt and learn. I need to focus on following the directions in the recipe. I've also got to discipline myself to plan the shopping and meals ahead.

Rather than an all-or-nothing approach to 95% of our lives, we should grade ourselves on the curve. Maybe we need to allow ourselves to

be just average at most things in life.

You can take what I know about wine and put it in a thimble and still have room for your finger. I like Pinot Noir but I should just be content to listen to people who know their wines while I slurp down what is in front of me.

Maybe the Six Sigma formula works here. You don't try to change and improve EVERYTHING. We don't have the resources or enough years in life to try. We can best serve by figuring out our best capacity and apply it to what we believe will do the greatest good, given the resources we have.

Like Metro who could only keep the beat, she took what she had and the beat went on. She didn't have to know Photoshop, French wines or particle physics.

We might not have the experience or knowledge to gracefully support a child who is struggling with their gender identity or an adult. Neither should we always expect excellence as we deal with a friend who is at their wits end from losing their career and feeling

like they are worthless. They've spent their entire life defining themselves and their sense of worth by measuring what they produce.

Instead, we are called to use the abilities we do have and keep the beat going. We may not be up ahead leading the marching band and the parade with a big shaggy Uggs-looking hat with tassels flying from our shoulders.

What matters, though, is if we sometimes take the hand of someone near us. If we can work at being authentically present with them – with as much and as little as we know or can do – the parade will be a lot more fun.

About The Author

Philip Siddons was a literature major at Wheaton College. He received his MDiv at Gordon-Conwell and DMin degree at Colgate-Rochester where he focused most of his attention on feminist studies. His first book was [Jesus, Feminism and You](#) (Originally entitled *Speaking Out for Women* through Judson Press, 1980). Of course he developed enough sense to change the title, after it went out of

print.

Philip dabbled in serving as a minister for 15 years but migrated to using his communication skills in marketing, advertising and computerized publishing. Along the way, he tried to respond to the people he served, whether they were paying customers, readers or parishioners. He thinks any life work requires the same sensitivity and commitment to create a meaningful presence with others.

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Book Description

[The Four Most Important Things](#) is what you want your children or grandchildren to know so that they will find happiness and integrity in their lives. In the simplest form, it conveys the core values in ways kids can understand.

As characters have various experiences,

Mount dispenses the appropriate insight to help improve their lives.

These four stories delight children from two through 92. Some sophisticated HR departments might even adopt them as corporate best practices.

This document “After Their Bedtime” is an explanation of my thinking, philosophy and theology behind the four children’s stories.

Categories

Family & Relationships, Interpersonal Relations, Self-Help, Personal Growth, Happiness

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