

A person is seen from behind, sitting on a surfboard in the ocean. The sun is setting, creating a warm orange glow on the horizon and reflecting on the water's surface. The sky transitions from a deep blue at the top to a lighter orange near the horizon. The water is dark blue with gentle ripples and a prominent reflection of the sunset light.

For *the* Love of Katlyn

*principles and practices
for a better life*

Francis Alix

For *the* Love of Katlyn
principles and practices
for a better life

Francis Alix

BIG BROWN BOOKS

©2016 Francis Alix
Cover Photo by Jeremy Hicks
www.picsbyhicks.com
Designed by Brown & Company Design
www.browndesign.com

big brown books publishing
801 Islington Street, Suite 35, Portsmouth, NH 03801
603.436.7942

ISBN-13: 978-0692627150
www.fortheloveofkatlyn.com

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| Introduction. | 3 |
| Chapter 1 - Why are We Here?. | 11 |
| Chapter 2 - Love and Kindness | 25 |
| Chapter 3 - Acceptance | 47 |
| Chapter 4 - Understanding. | 71 |
| Chapter 5 - Gratitude. | 95 |
| Chapter 6 - Humility | 113 |
| Chapter 7 - Practice: LAUGH | 139 |
| Chapter 8 - For the Love of Katlyn. | 163 |
| Conclusion. | 207 |
| Appendix: Practical Applications | 217 |
| References | 233 |



Chapter 7

The Practice: LAUGH

Energy and persistence conquer all things.

—Ben Franklin

In previous chapters, we discussed principles to live by that could help us create a better life. The purpose of this chapter is to recommend how to put these principles into practice. The approach will be to evaluate the best practices that science, religion, and ancient wisdom have offered and recommend practical methods that may work for us. In order to respect individual differences in our life circumstances, the recommendations offered here are less prescriptive and more menu-based. The idea is to propose things we could try and see what works best for us individually. The precondition to this work is that we agree to take responsibility for our own happiness and well-being. This is not meant to minimize the injustices and pain we can experience from others. But we are not trying to change things we cannot control. However, with these practices we should be able to interact with others more skillfully, even in difficult circumstances.

What I recommend as a starting point is that we set an overall intention for our practice. If you were drawn to this book from a desire to relieve anxiety and experience more happiness and peace of mind, then this would perhaps be your overriding intention. If your main intention is to better serve God and someday get to heaven, or even to achieve enlightenment, hopefully the practices here can help you as well. Once our overall goal is set, more specific intentions that would help us achieve our goal would follow. Based on the previous chapters, I would offer that we could try to *LAUGH* more. That is, we could try to become a little more:

Loving
Accepting
Understanding
Grateful, and
Humble

This, of course, reflects the principles to live by that we've been discussing. They are supported by both science and religion, and the word *LAUGH* passes the first test for any practice, as it's simple and easy to remember. This does not, however, mean that it's easy to do. Hopefully, the practice we develop will be easy enough that it only requires a sustained effort to manifest the changes we desire in time. The other nice feature of *LAUGH* is that the word implies where we are headed. If you have ever encountered an enlightened soul or someone filled with the grace of God, their near constant smile and gentle laughter is what most distinguishes them. My mother was a beautiful example of this. Non-believers filled with these qualities would have the same joyfulness about them, as does my friend Bill Wetzel whom I mentioned in the first chapter. So learning to *LAUGH a little bit more* has both a symbolic and literal meaning. *LAUGH* also reminds us not to take ourselves too seriously, which is always a good thing. Finally, for those who are religiously motivated, you could use the word *LAUGHING* and practice the same principles *In the Name of God*.

In setting more specific intentions or principles to practice, one could argue for any number of virtues that are not presented here, and also argue for less. For example, if we were to set the intention to be *kind to ourselves and all others, at all times, without exception*, it would be clear how this could ultimately lead to happiness, enlightenment, or bring us closer to God, if only we were able to actually do it. Most of us have issues that keep us from making such quantum leaps that we need to understand and address. With that said, please feel free to set your own intentions and principles to live a better life. Or try the *LAUGH* principles and let go of whatever does not work for you. The key is that we have a simple and clear **intention** to guide our work and transformation. The practices we propose will hopefully work equally well for different intentions, so long as they are positive and life affirming in nature and involve only ourselves.

Once we have set a clear intention, we need to commit to a certain level of effort. We need both a desire to change and a willingness to work at it. Remember our discussion on how hard it is to retrain the elephant, which is the part of our mind that reacts based on our instincts and conditioning. Most of what the elephant thinks is automatic and hidden in our subconscious mind, so we literally don't know what is motivating us. Next, the people in our life and modern society are powerful influences that often run counter to the retraining we need. Lastly, deep inside we feel insecure or unsafe, so we either run from these feelings or go on the attack. The combination of these factors is what makes retraining our minds so difficult. So a consistent **effort** is required.

Fortunately, once we set a clear intention and commit to a reasonable level of effort, if our efforts are correctly applied, the change we want for ourselves is assured. In other words, it is our nature to be more loving, happy, and peaceful once we become aware of what limits us. The third key to change, then, after intention and effort, is **awareness**. This is where our efforts should be directed. The teachings of the Masters and the work of science show us that awareness is what is needed to change our minds.

That is, once we become aware of unconscious thoughts and feelings that are the cause of our suffering, we change them, not by our will, but just by acting in our own self-interest. It's the same way we learn not to touch a hot stove-top. No one needs to tell us what to do once we see that it hurts. This is the basis of cognitive therapy and meditation as well. Just gaining awareness. It's that simple, but still not easy. [Note: Deep emotional wounds are one exception as they are very difficult to heal. In more serious cases, such as with trauma or child abuse, specialized therapeutic interventions are often needed to heal the mind and restore normal cognitive abilities. We'll cover this topic in more detail in the next chapter.]

Gaining sufficient awareness to bring about change is where modern science can assist religion and ancient wisdom. These traditions typically tell us what to do, but don't say much about how to get there. When we look at the teachings of Jesus to *love our neighbor as ourselves* and not to judge others, the similar teachings in Islam, the Buddha's Eightfold Noble Path, the Eight Stages of Yoga, the Ten Commandments, and others, there is no shortage of instruction on *what to do*. If it were easy, though, we'd all be living in bliss. The Buddha perhaps gave the most complete direction on *how* to change our minds for the better, but modern science still has something to add. So our practice will focus more on how and why we change. It is up to us individually to decide what we are trying to do, or our intention.

In summary, our practice is to set a positive *intention*, commit to some reasonable level of *effort*, and then direct our efforts toward gaining *awareness* of what keeps us from meeting our intentions. Once we achieve this awareness, the change we desire is assured. In my experience, if we can't make the change we desire (such as becoming more accepting, for example) then we still don't understand what is limiting us. The proposed practice should help us see if this happens. The weekly model to guide our recommended practice and level of effort is outlined in the following table.

| | | |
|------------------------------|---|---|
| Morning Practice (5 Days) | MPJ - Meditation, Prayer, Journal | 10-30 minutes |
| | IOUs - Intentions, Observations, Understandings | |
| Daytime Practice (5 Days) | AOKs – Acts of Kindness | ~10 seconds each 20 minutes minimum |
| | M&HN - Movement & Healthy Nutrition | |
| | SIP - Staying in the Present | |
| Evening Practice (5 Days) | W4s – What Went Well & Why | 10-30 minutes |
| | IOUs - Intentions, Observations, Understandings | |
| | MPJ - Meditation, Prayer, Journal | |
| Day 6 Practice | MPJ Morning and Evening | 30-60 minutes |
| | Life Inventory, IOUs Review plus AOKs, SIP, and M&HN | |
| Day 7 Practice | MPJ Morning and Evening | As much as practical |
| | Rest and Recharge, plus AOKs, SIP, and M&HN | |

Let's go through the proposed practice model step-by-step. First, it assumes a weekly schedule, with 5 days of standard practice and a progress review each week on Day 6. For people working a standard Monday through Friday work or school week, Day 6 would normally be Saturday. The practice is focused on morning activities, with the preferred time immediately after we awaken, and evening activities, with a similar preferred time of immediately before we go to sleep. The last thing you may glean from the model is the recommended practice can be done in as little as 10 minutes in the morning, 20 minutes during the day, 10 minutes in the evening for 5 days a week, and about 30 minutes on Day 6. My experience is that this represents the minimal level of effort required. For many people, more may be better. I have found that 30-60 minutes in the morning, afternoon, and evening work well for me, both in terms of fitting into my life schedule and producing the desired results. Next we'll walk through each segment and describe what is intended.

Morning and Evening Practice Elements

Meditation and Prayer: We seek to start and end each day with meditation and prayer because this is where we look to connect with ourselves, our Spirits, and/or our God. So it's important that we try to minimize distractions. Some people can meditate and pray in any place and at any time. But for most of us, this is not possible once we get into our daily routines. Even monasteries, where monks often devote their entire lives to meditation and prayers, normally focus their prayer and meditation efforts at the start and end of the day. Since this is what the "experts" do, we could try that approach unless we have a reason to do otherwise. And if the idea of meditation or prayer is not appealing, we could think of this as a time for quiet *contemplation* and introspection.

Many reading this may already have meditation and prayer practices. For those initiating these practices or looking to enhance their existing practice, here are some thoughts that may be helpful. We could define prayer as connecting and communicating

with a higher power, such as God or a Universal Spirit, both of which we may see as residing within ourselves. In general, for purposes of this practice, listening to God or Spirit and prayers of thanksgiving can be most helpful, and prayers that ask God or Spirit for specific things may work against our goals. That is, if we are praying for specific things other than those associated with our basic needs, we are setting hopes and expectations and to a degree, basing our happiness on whether our prayers are answered. This may work against us taking responsibility for our own happiness and accepting things the way they are. As my mother said, *sometimes the answer to our prayers is no*. There is no right or wrong here, just an attempt to point out a possible trap. Asking for God's help or protection is comforting for many, including me. It's praying for specific outcomes, particularly those that involve others or that we don't control, that may pose a concern with regards to our practice.

For example, my morning prayer when I wake up in a hurry is simply, *Thank you, thank you, thank you. Please help me, help me, help me*. It may sound too simple, but it works for me. I like to start each day with gratitude for another chance to live my life and experience this world. We get to start over each day, so no matter how bad yesterday may have been or how many mistakes we may have made, each morning we have a fresh start and a new opportunity to create something better. My *help me* phrase is an acknowledgement that there is a higher power, or for non-believers even a higher nature within ourselves. I invoke this power in my quest to *LAUGH* a little bit more, as we have been discussing. This is my way of asking for help in retraining my inner elephant. The other important point is, my *thank you-help me* prayer is all about me and the things I can control, so it supports my practice.

Regarding meditation, there is plenty of good instruction available, so we don't need to add much here. However, it may be helpful to remember that the overall intention of meditation for purposes of this practice is to observe our inner thoughts and feelings to develop self-awareness. To do this, at minimum we should be comfortable and free of distractions. Nothing else is required. The

common technique is sitting comfortably, focusing attention on the breath, and gently observing thoughts that arise, then letting them go without judgment and returning to the breath. With consistent practice, our mind should become more focused and less scattered. The *Bhagavad Gita* says, *Whenever the mind wanders, restless in its search for satisfaction without, lead it within; train it to rest in the self.* With meditation, over time we can gain both new awareness and greater mind control.

By contrast, some meditation techniques are so detailed that we can lose track of what we're trying to do. So we should understand that meditation is primarily an observation technique that allows us to calm our mind and better understand our subconscious thoughts, feelings, and motivations. With this understanding, we can select or develop a meditation practice that works best for us. The only suggestion I would offer from personal experience is that it may help to meditate or pray with a slight smile. This aids us in relaxing and letting go of fear. And fear is what keeps us from seeing our pain. When we smile, we are also practicing where we're headed, as mentioned earlier when discussing the word *LAUGH*. In the end, prayer, meditation, and contemplation as used in this practice are about making an inner connection to slow down our thoughts and develop greater awareness of our subconscious mind, and the Universal Mind or mind of God if that applies to you. Once we gain awareness, the next step is journaling.

Journaling: In journaling we make an effort to write down our observations, thoughts, and feelings in the present moment. The process of writing them down provides a record and allows time to reflect and consider what goes on inside our minds. Over time, through review of our journal entries and introspection, we can gain insight into the causes of our unpleasant feelings. While journaling can be done any time thoughts or feelings arise, writing immediately after prayer and meditation can be effective because this is where we purposely make observations and often gain new awareness. I also keep a journal at my bedside because insights

sometime come to me at night from dreams or when I awaken and I don't want to forget them when I fall back asleep. Some people also experience deeper awareness and clarity while engaging in physical activities such as running, hiking, surfing, yoga, or dance. Having a journal available soon after to record thoughts, feelings, or insights that arise during these activities can be very helpful.

Intentions, Observations, Understandings: IOUs are the main output of our practice and are also written in our journal. The intentions listed in the journal are the ones we set at the beginning of our practice. Our daily intentions then, derive from our overall intentions. We could use one of the *LAUGH* principles each of the 5 days of the week. For example, Monday could be our *Love and Kindness* day, Tuesday, *Acceptance Day*, and so on. At minimum, on Monday, we could set the intention to *be a little more loving and kind*. If we know of a specific person (including ourselves) or issue that could benefit from a more loving approach, we might weave that into our Monday intention as well. With our daily intentions, then, we can bring aspects of our practice into real life situations. This is where we start to learn how to create our own happiness. The idea is simply to start out each day with a positive intention and write it down. Next we record any thoughts and feelings that come up during prayer and meditation. These are the “observations” we make that are the source of our ever expanding self-awareness. Over time, hopefully our growing awareness leads to deeper understanding.

In summary, morning meditation, prayer, and journaling help us grow in awareness and understanding of our negative thoughts and feelings that limit our happiness. These are normally in our subconscious, so we remain unaware of what is motivating us or causing our pain. For those that feel particularly depressed or anxious, professional help in the form of a therapist or counselor is the best option. There is no shame in this as we are all a product of our inherited genes, conditioning, and environment. It takes courage to recognize our limitations and seek help. I wish I had

sought such help twenty years sooner. Regardless of what path we choose, the process of gaining awareness and understanding of the source of our pain is gradual and requires a consistent practice and safe environment. Reading a book like this and coming to some intellectual understanding is not enough. We need a dedicated practice to experience these truths and come to know them, as Buddha said. When blocks in awareness or understanding arise, this is where a friend, family member, teacher, or therapist can be very helpful.

Daytime Practice Elements

Acts of Kindness: Acts of Kindness (AOKs) are one of three practice elements suggested during the day. The morning practice elements help us identify thoughts and feelings that cause our anxiety so we can learn to change our mind. This is similar to cognitive therapy and might be thought of as identifying and healing our emotional wounds. The other approach to gaining more happiness and peace in our lives is creative. Setting a positive intention each day supports this process. Such practices help us learn to create the conditions for our own happiness and are often identified with positive psychology, as mentioned earlier. Both types of approaches are important. As the Buddha stated, *Abandon what is unskillful. Cultivate the good.* Therapy, for example, helps us abandon what is unskillful. Setting positive intentions and practicing AOKs, Staying in the Present (SIP), and the gratitude exercise, What Went Well & Why (W4), which we discuss below, are among the most powerful exercises that help us *cultivate the good* and learn to create our own happiness.

We previously discussed how transformative a simple generosity exercise was for me. This is where I wrote down the kind things I had done in the past year for myself and others. As I took the time to think about it, I was surprised by the number of things on the list. Like our blessings, we tend to take the kind things we do for granted, as though we should always be doing more (the glass half-empty perspective). But when we take the time to recognize our generosity, we come to realize that we know the experience of

kindness and we must have this within us or we could not offer it. This then, is the first step in realizing that the love we seek is within us. We could not overstate the importance of this realization, because after survival and security, love and connection is our most important need. If the love we need is really inside of us, we are not as needy as we think and we can give this love to ourselves and others, and create the loving connections that we need instead of constantly looking for it from others.

Acts of Kindness have another power that is equally important. When we offer kindness to another, especially when it is unexpected, this can literally make a person's day. Using a little math, we can see the profound effect of this "investment." If we assume it takes 10 seconds to say something kind, and with that, you make the other person feel better for the rest of the day, let's say 8 hours, that is a huge return on investment. Based on time invested, if 10 seconds provides 8 hours (28,800 seconds) of better feelings, that is a whopping 2,880 times return on investment. This may sound silly, but it's not. The impact of kindness is real. I still remember a kind comment made by a teacher in seventh grade and another in high school. Their comments had a profound impact on my self-confidence and direction in life. In the terms discussed above, it was like I had won the lottery and they had no idea what they had done for me. And in each case, the kind words they spoke lasted only seconds. This is not a new concept as there are many books available on the power of kindness and generosity.

If we tried to imagine a world where we routinely encountered kindness, you could see how transformative this would be for everyone. It costs us nothing but an open heart and a little time. And with every act of kindness we not only boost others, but also help ourselves by proving we have kindness and love inside. Our problem is we think we need love like we need food, as though it is something we get outside of ourselves that we need to keep consuming. *But what we really need is to **feel love** because that makes us **feel connected** and not alone, and that helps us **feel safe**.* With Acts of Kindness, we take control of creating this *feeling of love and*

connection instead of looking for it outside of ourselves. Then we learn that love and kindness is available to us all the time and just part of our nature.

As a practical matter, the types of AOKs that are easy and effective are a smile, a touch or a hug (when appropriate), a thank you, holding the door, saying hello and asking someone how they are, letting someone go in front of you, offering a compliment or recognition, *I admire the wonderful work you did*, or a request for help that shows respect, *I was wondering if you would help me*. The AOK options are limited only by our imagination. Volunteering and charity are other forms of kindness that show us we have something worth giving and demonstrate we are valued by others. In the end, acts of love and kindness are not just powerful for what they give to others, but because they show us our higher nature and demonstrate our creative ability to fill our need for a loving connection.

Again, as Nelson Mandela said, *love comes naturally*. That is, we not only have an unruly and self-centered elephant inside us, but also the cutest little puppy dog that wants to wag its tail and jump on others to smother them with kisses. We never lose that aspect of our inner child, we just lose sight of it. It is no exaggeration then to say that *giving love and kindness to others can completely satisfy our need to feel love*. The child inside us that came into this world dependent on our parents for love does not believe this, but it turns out to be true nonetheless. We just need to do some healing and practice kindness before we can see it.

Movement and Healthy Nutrition: Ancient teachings and modern science both tell us that the health of our mind and body are inseparable. Therefore, we should not ignore our body if we want to change our mind and lives for the better. At minimum, we greatly benefit from healthy nutrition and regular movement each day. Being sedentary for most of the day, which is common in modern society, is quite detrimental to our physical health. By comparison, walking just 20 minutes a day has been shown to have a profound positive impact on health, adding years to our life by

dramatically cutting most major health risks. We should target at least 20 minutes of movement a day, such as a walk, run, or bike to and from work or school, or a similar exercise in the morning, at lunch time, or in the evening. It also helps to walk or use stairs whenever we have a choice. Practices that build strength, balance, and flexibility, such as dance, the martial arts, and yoga, can also be very beneficial. Of course, more extended and vigorous exercise can be even better for our health, especially when we are younger. Lastly, if you smoke, the most important thing you could do for your health is to stop.

Healthy nutrition comes from natural, whole foods, with limited processing. We should eat a balanced diet with fruits, vegetables, lean proteins, nuts, beans, and grains, and minimize consumption of sugars and unhealthy fats. The easiest way to change our eating habits is to buy healthy food. When junk food is around, it can be too hard to resist. It's also best to buy organic and non-GMO foods when possible. Organic foods have more of the nutrients we need and no dangerous chemicals like pesticides. And there's growing research on the dangers of GMO foods. One practice to help improve our nutrition is food journaling, where we record what we eat each day, along with the amount and type of calories we consume, to compare against a healthy diet plan. My experience is that food journaling for just two weeks changed my diet forever and helped me reach a healthy weight and sustain it. This reinforces that awareness and understanding is what we most need to make positive changes.

There is a fascinating book called *The Blue Zones* by Dan Buettner that examines five areas of the world where people live the longest—in Japan, Greece, Italy, the US, and Costa Rica. By researching behaviors in these areas, he developed a list of nine important lessons for living longer and better lives. Regular movement and a healthy diet are principal among them, as are other aspects of our recommended practice, such as meditation and prayer. My movement practice is to run or walk for 30 to 60 minutes each day on wooded trails, combined with 10 to 20 minutes of strength

and flexibility exercises at home. This keeps me feeling strong and energized in my late 50's, and it's a routine I could perform most anywhere and continue for the rest of my life. For purposes of our practice, then, we recommend movement and healthy nutrition every day in a manner best suited to your lifestyle and tastes.

Staying in the Present: Life can only be lived in the present moment. There are no “do-overs.” All of our power to create a better life is also in the present moment. So the vast majority of our time should be spent here in the present. When we dwell on the past or the future, we waste our energy on things we cannot change or control. Staying in the present does take effort, however. Our meditation practice helps us see where our mind constantly wanders and teaches us to gently bring it back to the present. When we bring this same focus on the present moment to our daily life, we notice that life becomes so much richer.

When we are fully present for our friends and family, for example, listening to them with our full attention, they will see and feel the difference. The quality of our relationships improves. When we eat our meals in the same way, the experience becomes much more enjoyable. We begin to feel a depth and beauty in life that we had previously missed. This truth is intuitive for us, but hard to put into practice. Sometimes using a little mantra as a reminder can be helpful. We could repeat a mantra such as *present moment* or *PM* to remind us of this during our day.

Our anxieties are nearly always about the past and the future. It is best to accept the past and learn from it, but not dwell there. And the future is mostly out of our control, so while planning for the future is appropriate, obsessing over it is not. It is good to work toward a future goal or destination, but even more important not to miss life's journey, because as a good friend once told me, *the journey is our life*. Anytime we are in the *present moment* and *feeling love*, which is what gratitude and kindness help us feel, we have attained the best that life can offer. Most of us have experienced this at times as a peaceful mind, light heart, joyfulness, or laughter.

We tend to dwell on things we want in the future and think we need so much more to be happy, but happiness is really more about finding feelings of love, joy, peace, and acceptance in the present moment.

Staying in the present and creating the feeling of love, then, is the key to our happiness. It is also within our own power once we have obtained the emotional healing we need. After survival and security, nothing else matters more. And it's something we can achieve with practice. Meditation helps us learn to control our minds and focus on the present. We also need to feel safe, which may require changes in our environment. Then we must learn to accept ourselves and our world, which again takes effort, but is possible with greater self-awareness and understanding. Once we feel safe and can accept the past, along with uncertainty about the future, we can live in the present and focus on kindness and gratitude, thereby creating our own happiness and well-being.

Evening Practice

What Went Well & Why: In the evening, the suggested practice is to repeat the meditation, prayer, and journaling we did in the morning just before bedtime, adding in the What Went Well & Why (W4) exercise mentioned earlier. The W4 practice is to write down things that went well each day and why. Acknowledging why they went well is important as it makes us aware of good people or things responsible for our blessings. Further reflection on our blessings shows us our creative power in bringing those good things into our lives. The number of blessings we write may not be critical, only that we recognize our blessings each day. When we add in “why” a blessing occurred, we should give consideration to our own efforts in creating the relationships or other conditions that are responsible. We may also find that our own Acts of Kindness mentioned earlier bounce back to us in ways that make us feel grateful. That is, we end up writing about our AOKs and the response of others as a blessing, showing us directly our power to create our own happiness.

Of course, the highest form of this practice is to feel gratitude throughout our day for our life, the air we breathe, our health, family, friends, home, food, and freedom from danger, as so much of humanity cannot even meet their basic survival and security needs. It is easy to take our blessings for granted, as modern society constantly tempts us with things that we don't need. We could also hold the intention to practice kindness at all times to the best of our abilities. When we consistently practice kindness and gratitude, we exercise our abilities to give and receive love. This shows us that we have the power to create the *feeling of love and connection*, which is what we most need.

Day 6 Practice

Life Inventory, IOUs Review: On the sixth day, which for many will be Saturday, the recommended practice is to take a *Life Inventory* that we'll describe below, and also to review the IOUs for the past week to see if there are new insights or understandings we can gain. We recommend practicing AOKs and Movement & Healthy Nutrition on Day 6 as well. The overriding goal of our practice is to set our intentions and over time to gently gain awareness and understanding of what is limiting us from meeting them. At the same time, we seek to build awareness of our power to create our own happiness and well-being.

The *Life Inventory* is a regular process of looking at our lives and asking ourselves some bigger questions, such as, *Who or what are my priorities and why? What was I expecting and why? What do I need to be happy? Where does my energy go and why? Where am I and what do I need right now?* The answers to these questions may not change each week, but over time they could change quite a bit. So regularly bringing such questions to mind is an important part of the practice. As with intentions, one could come up with any number of important life questions beyond what I have listed, so how we look at and review our lives is up to us individually to decide. As an example, however, we'll review these five questions to see how the Life Inventory might work.

Who or what are my priorities and why? As priorities, we might list our immediate family, closest friends, work or career, school and academic achievements, hobbies, our health, serving God and others, and our personal or spiritual development. The order of our priorities may also be helpful to think about, as in when our time is limited, what comes first? This is where we start to answer the question of “why” something is a priority and examine our purpose for living discussed at the beginning of the book. Our current priorities may not reflect our true nature, as many of our choices in life were likely based on trying to meet the expectations of others in order to gain the love and acceptance we crave. As a result, some of us are not satisfied with our careers or relationships, for example, and have yet to discover our real passion in life. So this question invites us to consider the fullest expression of who we are as individuals and to change our priorities or undertake new activities in order to discover our true passion(s) in life.

Once we review our current priorities and why, then acknowledge that these can change, there is one other rule I apply that may be helpful. When we need to keep something in mind, it should stay simple, as there’s a limit to how much the mind can hold while still functioning with daily tasks. So I use the *five-finger-rule*. If there are more items than I can put on the fingers of one hand, then I reduce them down to only the five most important. The *LAUGH* principles follow this rule. For my life inventory, then, my regular priorities are immediate family, close friends, personal development, health, and service. More specific priorities can come up from time to time as well.

What was I expecting and why? What do I need to be happy? We covered this in detail in a previous chapter when we spoke about the glass being half-empty or half-full. In general, the idea is that we may need a lot less than we think to be happy. Our unmet expectations can be a major source of our unhappiness. Another key point is we often set hopes and expectations around things we cannot control; for example, our success in attaining career goals, which are only partly within our control. Since we can only control

ourselves, expectations around things that depend upon others can lead to suffering. The goal in answering these questions is to bring awareness. Then we let our awareness and understanding bring about any changes needed in their own time.

Where does my energy go and why? Where am I (physically and mentally) and what do I need right now? We talked about how the need for distraction can be a defense mechanism that keeps us from facing our inner pain. When we look at where we spend our time and mental energy, we can evaluate if this is productive in terms of achieving our intentions. How is this working out for us? Are the things we spend our time on bringing us happiness and well being, or do they distract us, medicate away our pain, entertain our ego, and keep us stuck where we are? Another trap is thinking there is always more we “should be doing,” when what we may need is to slow down and ask what we need right now. We may need to go for a long walk or take a nap, for example. Insight and wisdom does not easily flow to the mind that is constantly busy or stressed. Again, the idea here is just to ask the questions and bring awareness, not to judge ourselves. Our increased awareness and understanding will lead to positive change by itself when we’re ready. This is the only way we can make sustainable changes.

When we try to change our negative thoughts or habits using our willpower alone, we most often fail. The first reason is that we don’t understand our underlying motivations, which are the things we really need to change. The next reason is because our mind focuses on the very thing that we are trying *not* to do, giving it more energy and power. Just try to not think about a word. Your mind will keep checking in to see how you are doing, and you will therefore think of that word far more than if you had never tried. Dieting is another good example, the more we think about the foods we are not supposed to eat, the more we crave them. There’s an old saying, *what we resist persists*. And as mentioned earlier, the elephant will most always win a battle of wills with the rider. It takes a well-directed and persistent effort toward greater awareness to retrain it.

Alternatively, when we seek to change using our new awareness and understanding, our actions can be done out of self-love as opposed to self-loathing. If we choose thoughts and actions that are positive, the negative ones fall away of their own accord in their own time. The idea that *when we know better, we do better* is true. Like the example of learning not to touch the hot stovetop; once we know it hurts, it's automatic to refrain. If we are losing weight or exercising vigorously because we dislike our bodies, for example, we are not likely to have long-term success, because we are constantly reminding ourselves that we are not good enough. If we eat healthier food and go for a walk everyday because we learn that it tastes good and feels good, and we want to be good to ourselves, then the change becomes self-sustaining, especially with this type of practice where we regularly focus on loving ourselves a little more.

In summary, the Day 6 Life Inventory and IOU Review is about assessing where we are each week in the hopes of increasing our self-awareness and understanding. Morning and evening meditation and prayer is always beneficial. Like the rest of our practice, we write our Day 6 observations in our journal. This is the point where a good friend to talk with can be very helpful, particularly a friend who is also going through this practice or something similar. The changes we seek are not easy to make and in general the influences we encounter daily are not supportive. It's common for people seeking positive changes to join groups that provide emotional support and helpful insights. Examples are churches or spiritual communities, exercise groups such as running clubs, weight loss groups, and even book clubs. For us, the support of a single good friend or family member who is empathetic could be extremely helpful.

Day 7 Practice

Rest and Recharge: The last practice day of the week, Day 7, is reserved for resting and recharging. As the name implies, this is about taking a break, slowing down, and doing something that is restorative and uplifting. The types of activities included should

be intuitive for most of us, but obvious examples are church services, outings in nature, long naps, reading a book, and participation in the arts such as music, dance, and museums. Family gatherings, trips, and meals, which were a staple of my childhood on Sunday after church, can also be quite uplifting. The point is to take a break from our normal routines, recharge our batteries, and allow time for our new self-awareness to sink in. Again, morning and evening meditation and prayer is helpful and practicing AOKs, SIP, and M&HN is recommended everyday.

General Practice Reminders: Now that we have reviewed the elements of our proposed Practice, there are two important reminders. First, we all need a practice that works for us, with the time and energy we have available, and with our individual intentions for a better life. The invitation here is to try this proposed Practice or something different to find out what works best for you. As long as we start with positive intentions to work on ourselves, and we commit some level of consistent effort toward gaining self-awareness and understanding, then the better life we desire is not only possible, but probable.

The second reminder is this Practice is like meditation itself; it sounds easy but can be difficult at first. The key is to not judge ourselves when we miss days or certain practice elements like journaling. We can always come back to it and start again. Even one or two days a week is better than nothing. Awareness and understanding is cumulative, like walking on a long journey. If in some weeks we don't walk far, it's okay. Every step counts and once we have started on this path, it is less likely we would regress. Hopefully, as we gain more experience with the Practice, it will become more natural and easy to do and we'll come to realize that we feel better on days we do it.

My experience is that the Practice always gives more than it takes. That is, the benefit is much greater than the time it costs, like acts of kindness. This should not surprise us, as the Practice is an act of kindness toward ourselves. When I wake with my Practice,

my day starts out much better and normally stays that way. Days when I miss parts of my Practice, especially the morning, are usually worse. The Practice is like exercise in that regard. When exercise is done correctly, the benefits in daily energy and positive feelings far exceed the time and energy cost of the exercise itself. But we have to experience this aspect of our Practice to come to know it. Once we do, we no longer have to struggle to find the time, energy, or motivation to practice. We do it out of self-love.

A limited discussion of some practical applications of the *LAUGH* principles is provided in the Appendix, which offers thoughts on relationships, conflict, parenting, who and what to follow, and teaching.

Chapter Summary

In previous chapters, we discussed principles to live by that could help us create a better life. The purpose of this chapter is to recommend how to put these principles into practice. The key elements of our practice are positive *intentions* combined with a consistent level of *effort* focused toward gaining *awareness* of what keeps us from meeting our intentions. Ancient wisdom, science, and our experience all tell us that once we achieve greater awareness and understanding of our negative thoughts and feelings, the positive change we desire is not only possible, but likely.

We have proposed a practice model that helps us identify our limiting thoughts and feelings through regular meditation, prayer, and journaling. The model should work equally well for any positive intentions that are focused on ourselves. We recommend using the *LAUGH* intentions to become more loving, accepting, understanding, grateful, and humble, as these are fundamental to leading a better life. We also recommend generic practice elements that help us learn to create our own happiness and well-being, such as acts of kindness, gratitude exercises, staying in the present, regular movement, and healthy nutrition. It is usually helpful to have a family member, friend, counselor, or therapist to support us as we try to make positive changes in our lives. Of course, we should also

feel free to adapt this practice model to what suits us best.

In the end, the understanding of how to best live our lives cannot be given to us, but only learned by our own journey. The recommended practice presented in this chapter is one approach, but there are as many possible variations as there are individuals. So, we need to keep our positive intentions in mind and strive to gain greater awareness and understanding in a manner best suited to who and where we are in life. Our minds want this “wisdom” right away, but there is no short cut. Like most everything else in life worth having, we need to devote our time and focused efforts to reap the benefits.

This chapter ends with two more tributes to Katlyn. This is from a family member:

We all sat around a fire after dinner and told ridiculous stories to each other, and when Jess and I left for home at the end of the night, I remember telling her ‘Katlyn is the nicest person I’ve ever met; easily the nicest person in your family. There’s no way she’s actually that nice in real life. She has to have some kind of alter ego where she robs banks, and plots to blow up the moon with a laser cannon like a James Bond villain.’ But no, you were actually that nice and that positive, and you were always very fun to hang out with when I was fortunate enough to spend time with you.

This one is from a fellow lifeguard:

You get to see your coworkers in certain lights that most others don’t. I’ll always be grateful for those windows into you and your life and what I learned from you. Along with all the ridiculous blunt filter-less (but totally polite) comments and endless laughs along the way... You were a kind and beautiful person Katlyn. And an integral part to the amazing, close-knit beach community that we became a part of summer after summer; one that will never be the same without you. You’re missed more than you’ll ever know polite girl.