

Lessons My Father Taught Me

by Alan R. Cohen

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This book is dedicated to my dad, Louis Cohen, the best dad anyone would ever want.



Louis Cohen

July 28, 1923 – April 4, 2011

Introduction

My dad, Louis Cohen, was my best friend. I'll proudly say that he was the best father that anyone would ever want. He was a family man and lived for his sons, Errol and Alan. His wisdom was combined with common sense, humor, street philosophy, and a great understanding of people.

My dad taught my brother and I some basic principles for success in life. By success, I don't mean to become a millionaire, but how to be happy, live an enjoyable life, and be a good person. However, these principles certainly won't impede your path to becoming a millionaire if that is your goal. My dad taught us that all business is people. If you don't like people, can't get along with people, you will have a hard time finding success in business and in life.

To your success,

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See the world through a lens of humor.

My dad's goal in life was to make people smile and to make them laugh. He was successful.

He always saw humor in life. If a person talked too much he'd say that person talked but said nothing. When someone was driving too slowly, he'd say that that person was taking his car for a walk.

Seeing life through a lens of humor is a good way to view the world. Life is full of unexpected events and small things that can get under your skin. However, if you can find something humorous in that irritating event, you'll have a little less stress in your life. It's easy for me to write these words, so let's look at some examples.

Nobody likes traffic jams. If my dad were caught in one, he would not get stressed because it makes no sense getting stressed over an event that you cannot control. He would smile and say, "Since all these cars decided to park on the highway, I guess we'll join them." When I get caught in a traffic jam, I think, "What humor would my dad see?" and how can I make the best of this situation? I always listen to classical music when I drive so I see a traffic jam as an opportunity to listen to more music.

Sometimes your workload is more than expected. My dad worked at the local post office as a financial clerk. The line at his window was much longer than expected. He would smile and think, "I guess I'm popular today." and greet each customer with a smile and a joke. As it turned out, many customers would purposely wait in line to hear him tell a joke.

People want to be acknowledged for the work they do. When your day is busier than normal, you have two choices, you can get stressed and angry or you can smile and enjoy that you are doing acknowledged for the good work that you do.

Smile, laugh, and see the world through a lens of humor.

You need to be friends with yourself before others will want to be friends with you.

Nobody likes to be with miserable, unhappy people. Well, maybe a psychiatrist. If you are not happy with yourself and you project that unhappiness when you are with other people, they will avoid you. This doesn't mean that you should avoid a friend when they need help or are going through a tough time in life, but if someone always complains and is always unhappy, people will avoid that person whenever possible.

There are many reasons why people are not friends with themselves. If you are suffering with depression or are living in an abusive environment, then get professional help. You owe it to yourself. However, many reasons can be resolved by you.

My dad told me that wherever you are in life, wherever you are in your career, there will always be people who have more in life than you and those who have less than you. There will always be people that are doing better in their career than you and those that are not doing as well as you. That is life. However, you have a lot to say about improving your life.

My dad hated complainers; he rightfully believed it was easier to complain than to fix the problem. You may not like what is going on in your life at the moment, but complaining won't solve it. It is your responsibility to do something about it. Not the government! Not the Democrats! Not the Republicans! You control your life!

Most importantly, be thankful for what you have. You may not like your job or you are angry because someone got a nicer office than you, but many people don't have a job and would love to have yours, even without an office or with all the things that you hate about your job. You may believe you are not getting paid what you are worth and that may be true, but that unemployed person would be more than happy with your salary.

My dad also believed in self-education. My dad loved electronics, woodworking, and building things. (I'm terrible with hammers, saws, soldering irons, etc.) As a child, I remember him showing me the U.S. Navy's electronics guides that were perfect for self-study. He bought many woodworking books from woodworking magazines which he subscribed to, and loved the magazines, *Popular Mechanics* and *Popular Science*.

My dad believed that nobody owed you a career. If you needed new skills for a promotion, find a way to get them and then do your best to get that promotion. There's no guarantee that you will but with your newly-acquired knowledge, new doors may open. This is a better path than complaining.

Today, it is easier than ever to self-learn. The internet contains many sites that offer free or reasonably-priced classes. There are many blogs that provide useful information. Not only does Wikipedia offer a wealth of free knowledge, but so do its associated sites Wikibooks (<http://www.wikibooks.org>) and Wikiversity (<http://www.wikiversity.org>).

You may not like where you live and don't have enough money to move. You may want a new car, new clothes, new whatever. First, be thankful for what you have. My dad would give you that humorous smile of his as he looked at the things you did buy and say, "You bought all these things you never knew you needed and will never use." That was his way of saying save your money and buy things that you really want and need.

Being happy with your life, being friends with yourself, is a choice that you make. Nobody's life is perfect and nobody has everything that he or she wants. However, we have the ability to achieve what we want in life. Complaining is easier than achieving. Then again, complaining leads to dead ends. Be friends with yourself and others will want to be friends with you.

Laugh, and the world laughs with you. Cry, and you cry alone.

As discussed in the previous section, be friends with yourself and people will want to be friends with you. Related to that principle is this one—Laugh, and the world laughs with you. Cry, and you cry alone.

Laughter is infectious. Everyone has problems in life and things that they don't like. If complaints and complaining were money, there would be no world poverty. Everyone would be rich.

Life is meant to be lived and to be enjoyed. Everyone has responsibilities and obligations. It is easier to complain but laughter is the better choice.

How do you bring more laughter into your life?

Every morning when you wake up you get to choose if you will be happy or sad, laugh or cry. Make that choice with everything that happens to you. I've had periods of unemployment in my life. There were times when money was scarce, when I had concerns about paying the rent and other worries that come with being unemployed. I also knew that I could laugh or cry. With either choice, I was still going to be unemployed. I chose to laugh and be happy.

During that time, I worked minimum wage jobs (minimum wage is always better than no wage), I taught English as a Second Language, ran for a local political office and won, learned new skills, made new friends, and got to spend more time with my dad. I also learned a very valuable lesson—the difference between things that I needed and those that I wanted. I eventually made it back to my career as a technical writer.

Life presents all of us with unexpected and unpleasant events. Some we will be able to control and others we will not. However, we can all choose our attitude, how we react to what happens to us in life. Laugh, and the world laughs with you. Cry, and you cry alone.

I worried about many things in life. Most never came true.

Everyone worries about things. What if my wife doesn't like the gift I bought her? What if I don't do well on the test? What if we don't win the game tonight? What if I don't get that promotion? What if I lose my job?

Some of these concerns are serious. Nobody wants to lose their job especially when jobs are hard to get. However, many things that we worry about don't come true. Worrying is not necessarily a bad thing. It protects us from being too sure of ourselves and from getting cocky. Too much worrying, however, is not good for your health.

How do you know what to and what not to worry about? Don't worry about things that you cannot control. Don't worry about traffic jams. If you can avoid one fine, but if you do get stuck in one, don't worry. You can't do anything about it. You may be able to reschedule events that you will be late for but you can't make the traffic move any faster than it is.

Some issues fall into a category that I call *limited worry*. Losing your job is a serious concern. I've been laid off a few times so I understand. Often, layoffs are about numbers, not skill sets or about how well someone does his or her job. It is not personal. Certainly, if someone is a miserable ass at work and no one likes working with that person, that person may be a top candidate for the layoff. Generally though, it is a number game. So, how do you limit your worry?

Plan as if the layoff will occur. Use this opportunity to review your finances and cut back on unnecessary expenses. Take advantage of the many free learning opportunities online and learn new marketable skills. If finances allows, take some classes at your local college to gain new skills. Test the job market. Hopefully, you won't lose your job but be proactive. Take as much control of the situation as you can. Create as many options and opportunities as you can.

Treat people with respect until they give you a reason not to.

Prejudging people can be valuable but it can also be dangerous. You decide that you need a new car. You are concerned that the car salesperson is going to screw you as much as he or she can. However, you are surprised that the car salesperson is honest and helpful. Treat people with respect until they give you a reason not to.

How would you feel if everyone thought you were distrustful, dishonest. How would you feel when people first met you their first reaction was "How will this person screw me!" You may think that people don't think about you in that way but if you have those feelings about others, chances are, they feel that way about you.

Some may call me naive and some may say that I see the world through rose-colored glasses. I believe that most people are good, honest people. I think it is better to see the world through clear glasses than glasses fogged through one's clouded perception.

Seeing the world through clouded vision blinds you of opportunity. If you see the world as always trying to screw you, you will miss legitimate opportunities and people who want to help you. People will see you the way you see people. Your distrustful attitude projects itself on you.

So, is the opposite true? If you see the world as being completely trustful will you miss the people who are taking advantage of you? If you truly are naive, yes, you will be taken advantage of. Evaluate, use good judgment, and your gut feeling. Treat people as you want them to treat you. Trust people until they give you a reason not to.

Give them the roses while they can smell them.

My dad always became angry when people said nice things about someone after they died. He would always say, "Give them the compliments and tell them the nice things while they are alive. Give them the roses while they can smell them."

Everyone likes to be complimented and acknowledged for the good they do. They may say that they don't, but they do. I was doing a favor for a friend, She told me there was a reason why God put me in her life. I'll admit at first I felt a bit uncomfortable, she was in tears when she said it. But, I did feel good.

This is the easiest lesson my dad taught me. If somebody does something nice, say thank you. Tell them that you appreciate his or her help. If someone is a nice person, tell them so. The *compliments* and *thank yous* should be honest; you are showing your appreciation. Don't worry that that person will develop an ego. If the person has an ego, you would probably not compliment him or her. He or she would be doing the complimenting for you. The key is to be honest and sincere with your compliments. Give them the roses while they can smell them.

Put your brain in gear before you put your mouth in motion.

This lesson took me time to learn. In fact, I still need to be on guard with this rule. I've learned that if my boss asks me how stupid do I think he or she is, it is in my best interest not to answer. I once did and lost my job.

We have all said things that we later regretted. You can't take back your words. Saying that you are sorry doesn't undo the problem. It may allow you to move forward, but the damage and hurt feelings don't go away.

When you are angry, take a few minutes before communicating. Take a short walk if necessary. When you do communicate your anger, criticize the behavior, not the person. We have all made mistakes and have all done stupid things. That doesn't mean we are bad people. Criticizing the behavior resolves the problem. When you criticize the person, that person becomes defensive and the problem escalates. You do not have to yell or scream when expressing anger. That also escalates the issue. You want to communicate, not escalate.

None of us are perfect.

If you have to tell people you are important, you're not.

This one is obvious. We have all met people who have talked about how important they are, how great they are, and so on. People that brag are not important, and often, those that don't talk much about themselves, are the ones who have accomplished much in life.

I remember watching a World War II documentary with my dad back around 2007 when he was 84. In the documentary, some soldiers received a Purple Heart. My dad turned to me and said, "I received a Purple Heart." I was surprised because he never talked about it although he did tell my brother and I other stories about his time during World War II. I asked him why he never told me and I wanted to see the medal. He said that he refused it because he only received a shrapnel wound while others waiting in line to receive the medal had missing limbs. He said that he walked out of line because he didn't feel that he deserved the Purple Heart.

Actions speak louder than words. Your behavior determines how others see you and whether they respect you or not.

Going to a house of worship doesn't make you a good person. It's how you treat people daily that does.

After my Bar Mitzvah, my dad told me that it was my decision if I wanted to continue going to synagogue. Those were great words for a 13-year old who found sports, music, and girls more interesting than going to synagogue. He also told me that going to a synagogue, church, or any house of God does not make you a good person. It is how you treat people daily that does.

Religion is a guide that can help you lead a good life ... if you choose to follow that guide. Religion is a verb, not a noun. You need to act. You need to do.

You can tell people how important you are and you can tell people how religious you are. However, your actions tell the truth.

Closing Thoughts

My dad taught my brother and I some important lessons. I'm sure your parents taught you lessons worth remembering. I'm also sure that you are teaching your children important lessons.

In the dedication to this booklet, I say that my father is the best dad that anyone would want. I'm proud to say that because I believe it to be true. I hope you feel that way about your parents. Hopefully, your children will feel that way about you.

So, what about my mom? She was also a good parent. My mom, Audrey, died when I was 21, on July 24, 1976. She taught me many valuable lessons. Most of them I learned from memories of her. As I got older, parts of my life echoed hers. Most importantly, she taught me to be compassionate, especially to those that live with emotional illnesses. I really learned to appreciate my mom through memories as I got older.

Enjoy life. You deserve to. Learn to see life through a lens of humor. Life offers you many moments to laugh. Take advantage of them.



Dad and Mom