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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 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. 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-actors 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 important values is new ground to most of us.

- We might never have clarified it before because we thought we can't make any money doing 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* 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. We know what we *don’t* want. These things motivate 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 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 marvelous connection with others in meaningful ways. We want to help. We want to be welcoming, nurturing and affirming. We want the best for *all* others. Even those who live fearfully. 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 little smiling face and take it in with a childlike innocence. We attribute to such 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 most important things in your life. There's no grading and nobody but you will ever know you tried it. It's for you.

Difficult, 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. One thing or another might be replaced or modified.

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 religious tradition might already be working on their ulcer halfway through this first most important thing. “How could you talk about what is most important with 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 we are involved 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 removed?

The 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 (not rigid) in being, wisdom, power, holiness, goodness, justice and truth" (as the catechism said).

Some of the ancients felt that

Commented [PS1]:

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 connected fingers dangling from 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, Mount shows up and 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 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. Remembering that helps us be 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, our hoping that money could somehow 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, all, are 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
Made 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.*

[Bob Dylan "It's Alright, Ma
(I'm Only Bleeding)"]

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 our 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. 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 frighten 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 [*UnSelfie*](#) by Dr. Michele Borba.

Here's a tip to get you the best and most personal medical care if you ever become institutionalized. *Be the patient who is the most caring to the staff.* When you ring the 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 whom they deem as different. It drove them to be fearfully alienated.



Being different is usually interpreted as another's 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 to "Pull ourselves up by our bootstraps." To be independent, self-reliant & successful. We supposedly should strive to become "outstanding." We should be in a domain of our own, untouchable and invincible.

Inhuman, isn't it? Think Ayn Rand's *The Virtue of Selfishness* passionless Social Darwinistic books. 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 theories, ignorant of the pain they have caused.

Then there is mentoring. Think through our own lives when we were particularly inexperienced. Remember the few people who patiently extended themselves to help us out. Remember the people who were more mature and patiently waited until we suffered from our selfishness until we matured and started to become more mindful of the feelings of others.

We might have had a teacher who taught us that it is OK not to know something. Perhaps we had a computer instructor who laughingly reminded us that no one has a photographic memory. 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 new to us.

If we were lucky, that instructor reminded us, in every class, that if we haven't retained something, it's because someone else hasn't invested the kind of training in us that is relevant to our job

responsibilities and our personal learning style. I believe that companies who ask technical individuals (who possess no training abilities) to “teach” others are sometimes setting their employees and customers up for failure. No one should ever feel ‘stupid’ in learning how to use technology.

The true mentors in our life were guardian angels who happened to take human form during our time on earth. They were the ones who always made sure we didn’t feel ‘stupid’ and showed us 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 entire waterfront? We tend to throw ourselves into everything and magically expect that we should excel



in whatever we try. So it's all-or-nothing but we are forced to 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 need to focus on following the directions in the recipe. I’ve also got to discipline myself to plan the shopping and planning ahead on the meals.

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’m 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. We shouldn’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 at 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 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.

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 work on feminist studies. [Jesus, Feminism and You](#) (It was originally entitled *Speaking Out For Women* by Judson Press, 1980). Of course, he developed enough sense to change the title to its current form.

Philip served 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 live with 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 the thinking, philosophy and theology behind the four children’s stories.

Categories

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

Key Words

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