

Sit Down & Shut Up



A Guide to
Simple Meditation
& Practical Wisdom

Thom Rutledge

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Teachers who offer you the ultimate answers do not possess the ultimate answers, for if they did, they would know that the ultimate answers cannot be given, they can only be received. -Tom Robbins / Jitterbug Perfume

What used to be a hunch or the occasional inspiration gradually becomes a working part of the mind. – The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous

Just because some of us can read and write and do a little math, that doesn't mean we deserve to conquer the universe. – Kurt Vonnegut / Hocus Pocus

SURROUNDED

BY THE CORONOVIRUS

(AN INTRODUCTION)

I began my book, *Embracing Fear*, by teaching how to differentiate between healthy fear and neurotic (not-so-healthy) fear, with one point being that fear is very much a part of an essential self-protective system that is necessary for our survival and should never be automatically considered a problem. Sometimes, it is part of the solution. We humans have unfortunately developed this neat little trick in which we can take an actual legitimate fear and magnify it to beyond terrifying. We can also make things scary that are really not a threat at all. For example, I actually have the capacity to be afraid that you don't like me even though we have never met. A friend of mine calls one of her inner committee members The Director of Fiction, the one who is constantly telling stories about everything that could possibly go wrong. Never one pleasant story with a happy end, she says. I think most of us have a Director of Fiction like my friend. Can I get an Amen?

Right now, which is Monday evening, March 16, 2020, I am sitting at my home near Nashville, Tennessee and like many of you, listening to the news about our newest arch enemy, the coronavirus. Don't panic we are told repeatedly and I am pretty sure that is good advice. But I can't quite shake the image of Barney Fife running around, flailing his skinny arms, screaming at the top of his lungs, "NOBODY PANIC. EVERYBODY STAY CALM!!"

Sit Down & Shut Up began as a book cover I shared as an April Fool's joke many years ago. I thought "sit down and shut up" as instruction for meditation was pretty funny. Only when I began hearing from people who wanted to order the non-existent book did it dawn on me that I may have stumbled onto something worth exploring. Even then, I didn't really take the idea too seriously. Instead, I wrote a few entries to go with the book cover and shared them with clients, workshop participants and on social media.

To my continued surprise, I kept hearing from people interested in purchasing the book that did not exist. So I decided that I could at least make an effort to fill in the blank pages and create an e-book. And that I did. The book about meditation by the author who claims no expertise in meditation became available as an Amazon Kindle e-book in 2018. When someone asks about the book, I can now give them a link where they can find it.

There is nothing in the book about the coronavirus other than this short introduction. It is a book that I hope you will discover to be entertaining and maybe helpful in living with the uncertainty we find ourselves collectively in right now. Next step, I'm going to offer to give this pdf format of the book away free to anyone who thinks it might offer some help or even just some distraction from our worries. Because it's quiet out there ---- too quiet.

-Thom Rutledge
March 16,2020
Ashland City, Tennessee

Part I

Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

Silence is a source of great strength. – Lao Tzu

Do me a favor: say that again but without talking. -Thom

WRITER'S BLOCK

I have the very best kind of writer's block. Throughout my writing career, without fail, the moment I sign a publishing contract, I immediately begin work on something that has absolutely nothing to do with the book I am supposed to be writing. When I signed my first contract (to write *The Self-Forgiveness Handbook*) I put the contract in the mail and began writing short stories. When it was time to write *Earning Your Own Respect*, I wrote poetry. I distracted myself from the last stages of *Embracing Fear* by writing political satire. Once I wrote a transcript of an interview with Oprah that made a very nifty April Fool's joke. Once I wrote a piece about how irritating disclaimers are but wrote it as one long disclaimer. And another time I thought it would be fun to write about meditation – a meditation guide by a guy with absolutely no credentials and very little experience to support any claim of expertise. It is that one that you are now dangerously close to reading.

Proceed with caution. Enter at your own risk. And I hope you enjoy *Sit Down & Shut Up*.

TO BEGIN

Is it possible to be so smart that you become stupid? We've all done it. And we will all do it again. And again. One of the great side effects of having a working human brain is that we are all in danger of thinking too damn much. The brain should come with a warning label: *Over use for no good reason may result in extreme stupidity.*

One of the most obvious – and therefore hilarious – ways I have experienced this side effect has been in my efforts to learn meditation. There is really no counting the number of books I have read on the subject, although closing my eyes and attempting to count them would probably be an excellent meditation. There definitely was a time when the number of books I had read about meditation was greater than the number of times I had sat down to meditate. What's wrong with that picture?

This little book will be my one and only book about meditation. If I write *Sit Down and Shut up, Volume II*, don't encourage me by buying it. I hope you will enjoy this one, however; and I hope you will discover it to be helpful.

HOW TO MEDITATE

Take a Deep breath. Count from one to five, or ten, or seven for that matter, then start over again. Sit in a comfortable chair. Or sit with your legs crossed like a swami, or not. Touch a couple of your fingers together. Sit in an uncomfortable chair. Sit in any position that will ensure that both of your legs will go to sleep. Stretch out on the floor, forming a giant X with your body. Repeat a syllable – a secret sound that only you know – over and over again. This will be your meditation password. Or just use the generic Om, or try ho hum. That is of course, two syllables: think ho on your inhale, and hum on your exhale. Repeat.

Read as many books as I have on the subject of meditation. And then, when you are confused – wait until you are *very* confused – try this: sit down and shut up.

BUT SERIOUSLY FOLKS

The more you worry about how to meditate, the less you will meditate. There is no right or wrong involved here, and there is no outcome or goal to be achieved. The object of meditation is to meditate. That's it.

Forget about enlightenment. It isn't going to happen. Or at least it isn't going to happen as long as you are seeking it. It isn't going to happen as long as you want it to, or as long as you believe you need it to. God has a sense of humor, but I don't think it's a very good one.

Just sit down and shut up, and call it meditating. Don't worry about how you will meditate, or whether to count your breaths or repeat the syllable or talk to your inner child or try contacting the guru within. If you spend a lifetime meditating, your experience with meditation will be constantly changing. Why? Because you are constantly changing.

Let your meditation teach you how to meditate.

QUESTION: What is the most important thing to know about meditating?

ANSWER: Show up.



QUESTION: Should I designate a particular place in my house for my meditation?

ANSWER: Whatever.

DEFINING MEDITATION

I have an **Oxford dictionary** that defines the word *meditate* as “to exercise the mind in contemplation.” That sounds a little strenuous to me, but I suppose it will do. I prefer to think of meditation as quiet time with myself, whether I like it or not.

RESTING RATE

Put this book down and take your pulse. If you do so while you are sitting still, that is your *resting pulse (or heart) rate*. Now, walk somewhere fast, or go up and down some stairs, or run in place. Take your pulse again. Sit still again, and continue to take your pulse until it returns to your resting rate. And it will return through no effort (quite literally) of your own.

Imagine that your mind has a pulse. Strangely, for most of us, when we attempt to mentally sit still, our mind's pulse *increases*. Can you identify with that?

Well, don't worry about it. That's just the way it is.

QUESTION: When I sit down to meditate, how can I quiet my thoughts?

ANSWER: I'm sorry, were you talking to me?

QUESTION: How can I quiet my thoughts?

ANSWER: You can't.

QUESTION: Are you serious?

ANSWER: Yes.

QUESTION: Meditation is not about quieting my thoughts?

ANSWER: Common misunderstanding. What we can do is focus on simpler thoughts, better thoughts. And stop trying to control the other thoughts.

BREATH COUNTING

One way that some people meditate is by counting their breaths. Some will count the inhale as *one*, the exhale as *two*, the next inhale as *three*, etc. Some will count *one* for the completed circuit of an inhale and an exhale, *two* for the next completed breath, and on like that. The one thing they have in common is that they all lose count – again, and again they lose count.

Personally, I like to make that the object of my meditation: losing count.

ONE

Speaking of breath counting, I have discovered a foolproof way of countering the argument of “I don’t have time this morning to meditate.” The key, as is often the case when we expect to succeed at something, is to drastically lower the expectation.

In the case of meditation, it works like this: Wherever I am when I become aware of the thought that tells me I don’t have enough time to meditate, I *stop right where I am* (stand or sit, it doesn’t matter) *close my eyes* (if that is feasible, but even that is not necessary), and *count one full inhale, and one full exhale*. I do make the effort, even though I am in such a rush, to breathe that one breath significantly deeper, and significantly slower than my usual breath. And that is my foolproof counter measure to being in too big of a hurry to meditate. I just dare myself to tell me I don’t have time for that.

Also, using this method, it is less likely that you will lose count. But nothing is impossible.

LISTENING

Just sit where you are, close your eyes, and listen. Focus your attention entirely on your sense of hearing. Do nothing more than to notice what you hear, and then keep listening.

Sometimes when I do this I marvel at how amazing it is that our minds are capable of automatically filtering out so many different sounds around us just so that we can go about the day's activities. As I do this exercise right now, I am aware of several different birds chirping outside, a clock ticking in the next room, the cat's intermittent purring (he sits in my lap when I write.), some mechanical humming sound that I can't even identify, the clicking sounds of the computer key board when I type these words, a small airplane in the distance, my stomach grumbling, and the sound of my own breathing.

I am certain that there is more, but I am impatient.

PRAYER OR MEDITATION

What is the difference between meditation and prayer?

- a. There is no difference
- b. Prayer is talking to God, meditation is listening
- c. Why does it matter?
- d. All of the above

THE COMMITTEE

When you sit down and shut up (aka: meditate), you may appear to others to be silent, but that is when the real noise begins. To sit quietly is to put your ear to the door of the conference room in your head – you know, where the committee meets.

Don't waste your time trying to get them to meditate. Just listen to them. Or better yet, don't listen to them.

RESTING

Today
my cat
didn't move
any more than
he had to.

Me neither.

The difference between us
is this damn voice
screaming
in my head.

MY FRIEND'S COMMITTEE

My friend, Ethyl, disagrees with me. Ethyl has more confidence in her committee, and for good reason. She has been successful in quieting the voices within her. She says I could do it too. But then, she's never even met my committee.

Ethyl sometimes sits down, shuts up, and walks boldly into the conference room in her head. No, she doesn't just "walk in," she *strides* in with an air of great authority. I think that's the key: *striding in with great authority*. She takes her position at the head of a long, well polished conference room table. It's polished so well that you can see two of Ethyl's committee: one sitting all around the big, long table, and the other, a reflection in the tabletop.

Standing tall at the head of the conference room table, Ethyl raises both hands into the air – sort of like someone just said, "Stick 'em up, Ethyl." --- and she screams at the top of her lungs, "QUIET!!" Her committee falls immediately silent, that quality of silence that can only exist just after someone has screamed at the top of their lungs. Having gained everyone's attention in this way, Ethyl informs her committee --- in a soft, but firm voice -- that she will now lead them in a meditation.

She says that they all follow her every instruction, to sit facing forward, straightening their spines, closing their eyes, relaxing their shoulders, and focusing on their breathing. That's what Ethyl says.

I don't believe a word of it. But there's no harm in trying it Ethyl's way.

SAY PLEASE

If you just listen to all the gurus currently on the market, you will hear an awful lot about the idea that we all deserve good things --- no, that we all deserve the very best of things. It's a nice thought, but a little difficult to get my head around on most days. I have witnessed what I believe to be a dangerous side effect of this "nice thought." Here's the side effect: if we are not careful, the belief that we deserve the best of things can (when we're not looking, of course) cross the line and become a belief that we are entitled to the very best of things. We've all known people who seemed to feel "entitled" to things. We don't like those people, do we? I think we call it "being a spoiled brat."

When you want something that you don't have, and you decide to meditate or pray about it, don't be an asshole. Do us all a favor and ask nicely. And remember to say please.

BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU ASK FOR

When you do want something, and you decide to meditate or pray about it, and you are going to ask nicely, and remember to say “please,” also don’t be surprised when you receive a response. Knowing that I would soon need to travel to New York City for business, and not having ever been to New York City before, and being anxious about taking my first trip to The Big Apple alone, I focused on resolving my situation in meditation. In my meditation I asked politely to not have to take my first trip to New York City alone.

Within a week of that meditation, I received a letter in the mail informing me that my wife and I had been chosen to be a part of a *Late Show with David Letterman* program. It seems that Letterman would be flying an entire audience from Nashville to see his show.

So the very next week, I took my first trip to New York City... with 479 other people.

BE SPECIFIC

My friend, Jay, had his office in a wonderful, hundred year old building. Jay and his fellow tenants were informed that the building had been sold and would soon be destroyed to make way for a new --- and I'm sure desperately needed --- Walgreens Drug Store. When the shock wore off, and Jay realized that he was going to need a new office, in mediation he asked for an office that would be similar to his soon-to-be-rubble office *and* he tossed in a request that the rent be less that what he had been paying (\$600 per month).

Jay told me this story while we were sitting in his *new office*: a beautiful suite of rooms with hardwood floors, in a well preserved old building on Music Row in Nashville. "I regret not being more specific about the rest," Jay told me. "The rent here is \$595 per month."

ONE BREATH MEDITATION, REPRISE

I am, by nature, restless. Having made many attempts at establishing a daily practice of meditation, and always feeling like I didn't have time for it, I hit upon the idea of a "one breath meditation." I knew that my "not having time" was just an excuse, although it was an accurate expression of my priorities. The one-breath meditation took away any and all excuses about time. After all, who can claim that they don't have time to take one breath?

The One-Breath Meditation: Before leaving home each day, sit down in a comfortable position. You don't need to designate a special meditation place, just sit anywhere comfortable. Keeping your back straight (plain old good posture), slowly take in one full breath. Breathe in through your nose. Imagine yourself filling up with clear, clean fresh energy throughout your whole body. At the end of the inhalation, wait to exhale for about three seconds. Then exhale, releasing your breath slowly through your mouth, imagining that you are clearing your body and mind of all that is used, stale, or toxic. Just when you believe you have completed exhaling, push a little more air out of your lungs. (You'll be surprised how much is left in there.) Lastly, while you are resuming your normal breathing, remain still for about five more seconds.

That's all there is to it. You will be surprised at how much relaxation can accompany one single breath. And you might be surprised at how quickly you will be thinking you don't have time for it.

SIX BREATH MEDITATION

In case I am not being clear, it is your meditation practice, so do it your way. For instance, when you read a meditation book that you really like or find a teacher you trust and they tell you that there really is a right way to meditate and that makes sense to you, please just forget I said anything about any of this.

In the meantime, experiment: try a six breath meditation, a 60-second meditation, a 43-second meditation. Or maybe an until-my-toast-pops-up meditation.

It is your meditation and as far as I know, there are no meditation police.

GOOD QUESTIONS

You cannot create lasting and positive change in your circumstances without changing yourself. No matter how much you know about what needs to change in the people and situations around you, the most powerful way to make things happen is to ask yourself good questions.

Some questions we ask ourselves will only leave us stuck, in that familiar endless cycle - these are questions like "Why can't I ever do anything right?" or "Why am I such an idiot?" Think about it: even if we just slightly change that question to "What can I do today to be less of an idiot?" it becomes a more productive question, even though it remains self-deprecating. It's a positive step in the right direction. Two of the best questions to ask in any situation are "What am I doing here that is not working?" and "What do I need to be doing instead?"

Practice tuning into your thoughts during times of stress and conflict; listen for the questions you are asking yourself. Change some of your questions, improve them until you have something worth asking. Keep a list of good questions.

MAGNET QUESTIONS

Good questions are magnets. When we make good use of them, questions will attract valuable information for us. We're not so much looking for the "answers" to the questions as we are looking for (and listening for) *responses*. Good meditation questions are good magnet questions. They are open-ended questions we can ask ourselves repeatedly and with each asking, inviting more information.

Consider one of the most powerful, yet deceptively simple, magnet questions: Who am I?

Sit down, close your eyes and ask, "Who am I?" Remain still and after 3 or 4 breaths, ask again. Who am I? 3 or 4 breaths – and again. Who am I?

WHO AM I?

This may feel counter intuitive, but don't worry about listening for responses to the question just yet. Sit, repeating the question several times for the next few days.

Who am I? one breath, two, three, four. Who am I?

QUESTION: What is the purpose of asking the magnet question and not listening for responses?

ANSWER: Don't worry, the responses will find you.

SELF-CRITICISM

We all have a self-critical voice inside. You know, the one that tells you that you can never get it right. And when you do get it right, the voice tells you it's just a fluke, a happy accident or the voice may just deny that you did anything right at all.

"I think I did that pretty well today," you might say.

The critical voice replies immediately with, "no, you didn't."

Because these critical voices have been with us so long, they have lots of credibility. So "no, you didn't" may be all it takes to contaminate your celebration, to stop you dead in your tracks.

QUESTION: Who am I?

RESPONSE: Wrong question.

QUESTION: What is the right question?

RESPONSE: Begin by asking who you are not.

BESIDE YOURSELF

Imagine that self-critical voice as a separate person. Think of that voice as a pushy, controlling person following you around, criticizing you whenever it feels like it. What an asshole!

By separating from your self-criticism, you will begin to recognize that you don't have to believe everything that you think.

QUESTION: Who am I not?

ANSWER: You are not the critical asshole following you around.

FOLLOW UP QUESTION: Really?

ANSWER: Yep. Really.

WHO YOU ARE NOT

Now that you are practicing being separate from your self-critical voice, sit face to face with that “person” and ask, “Who do you think I am?”

Notice that the self-critical voice will not hesitate at all. The moment you ask the question, “Who do you think I am?” it will begin to talk.

Seriously, you could ask that question one time, get up and leave the room and it would just keep talking. Don’t worry about it. None of that really matters.

QUESTION: How can I possibly believe that what my inner-critic thinks of me doesn't matter?

ANSWER: Trust me on that one.

QUESTION: WHAT?!

ANSWER: You heard me.

WHO YOU WANT TO BE

Of course, the only reason to learn to separate from your inner critic and get a better idea of who you are not, is so that you can discover more about who you really are. Sometimes the answer to that question is not immediately evident.

In your meditation, ask, "Who do I want to be?" Maybe even ask it out loud, and then sit quietly listening to whatever response comes. Once you hear a response, ask the question again and again listen for the response. And again.

You may be surprised how much information you can gather with this one simple question. Collect the responses.

QUESTION: What if I keep getting the same responses and I feel stuck?

ANSWER: Ask a different question.

QUESTION: Like what?

ANSWER: Yes, that's as good as any.

QUESTION: Will you give me some examples?

ANSWER: Probably.

QUESTION: What does that mean?

ANSWER: I like that one a lot too.

TRUST NO ONE (ENTIRELY)

Trust no one who will tell you that they have THE answer, THE way, THE plan, THE anything. There are probably as many different approaches to genuine self-improvement as there are people, or at least as many different approaches as there are professional people-helpers on our soap boxes telling you how to find what you are looking for.

Your meditation is a very personal, completely subjective thing. What resonates with you today may not in a couple of months. Some aspect of a daily practice may become a centerpiece for your life until the day you drop off the planet.

Trust yourself, of course. But even then, it pays to remain a bit skeptical.

STUDENT: What if I become confused by so many different ways to approach my meditation practice?

TEACHER: I'm not following. Are you suggesting that being confused is a problem?

STUDENT: Well, yes.

TEACHER: It's not.

STUDENT: What's not?

TEACHER: Confusion.

STUDENT: Confusion's not what?

TEACHER: A problem.

STUDENT: Now I am really confused.

[Student looks up to see the teacher has left the room.]

A NEW DEFINITION FOR WISDOM

Someone once described adolescence and early adulthood as the age of “anti-wisdom.” Developmentally, it is a time when we are certain of all the answers to life’s questions (no matter how insecure we really are) and “adults” who tell us otherwise are imbeciles, idiots and fools. It’s been quite a while now, but I remember being there. Do you?

As I have grown older, I have realized that not only do I not have the answers to life’s questions; I’m not even sure what the questions are.

Life has consistently presented me with lessons about how much I don’t know, and how much I don’t control. Strangely, these lessons have been positive, at times even comforting. If I could travel back in time to tell this to my 19-year-old self, he would surely laugh in my face. (And then go have a drink.)

Here is my current definition for “wisdom”: Wisdom is the increasing knowledge of all that I do not know, and all that I do not control. The two lists have been growing steadily, and I suspect they will continue to do so. Genuine wisdom is a humbling experience.

TEACHER: Sit down, shut up and spend quality time with yourself, just listing everything you do not know and that you cannot control.

STUDENT: That sounds overwhelming.

TEACHER: Sitting right in the middle of overwhelm can be a productive meditation.

STUDENT: I should have guessed that one.

WELCOMING THE WEIRD

I am reminded on a regular basis that when we work hard to make changes in our lives (changes in ourselves), achieving our goals will not necessarily feel good initially. I have come to recognize a particular word most people use when their personal growth efforts begin to pay off. The word is “weird.” That’s right, “weird.” Isn’t that weird?

When you learn to say no for the first time, when you pay attention to your own needs in a situation, when you start living by decision rather than default, it feels “weird.” It’s like a new pair of shoes that need to be broken in. The weirdness, the initial discomfort, will pass as you continue to practice the new behaviors and the new ways of thinking.

Later, success will feel like success. But first, it will feel “weird.”

In meditation, say hello to whatever feels new and uncomfortable. Say to the weirdness, “Oh there you are. I heard you were coming. Welcome.”

FAR FROM A FINAL WORD

So what we have here are a few collected reflections on meditation, offered from a fellow who has no expertise in meditation. I can only imagine what the real meditators might have to say about this. I just want to get out ahead of that criticism by making it very clear that I know that I don't know anything about meditation.

I am pretty sure that this conscious ignorance on my part either makes this entire project a joke or makes me highly qualified to write it.

Whatever. Shut up.

Part II Contemplations

*What we plant in the soil of contemplation,
we shall reap in the harvest of action. -Meister Eckhart*

I see that you are in contemplation. Are you going to eat those fries?. -Thom

RIGHT NOW

Have you ever tried to ride a unicycle? Well, it ain't easy. But as with so many skills, those who can ride a unicycle make it look easy. Maybe this is because once the skill is learned, it is performed "with ease," despite the difficulty of learning.

The same is true of the skill called "Living in the Moment." Present-tense living requires the same balance, the same focus and the same relaxed awareness as riding a unicycle. Leaning too far backwards (living in the past) or too far forward (living in the future) will always result in a fall. Being centered on the unicycle and holding a focus on where you are going will get you there. And as long as you hold your balance, you can always change directions.

Whether you are riding a unicycle or living-in-the-moment, you will be doing it with ease. There is no other way. The feeling of "ease" is how you know you are successfully performing the skill. Tension will throw you off balance.

Close your eyes. Imagine yourself on a unicycle. Breathe. Balance. Easy?

DISAGREEMENT

Do you ever argue with yourself and lose the argument? Some might think that is an indicator of insanity, but not so. The nature of consciousness is multiple, not singular. We all talk to ourselves. We ask questions and we answer. We even disagree with ourselves. Not a problem unless you believe that you are supposed to be singular minded. It really is normal to have more than one opinion and/or feeling about something.

The next time you experience confusion, sit down and listen carefully to see if you can identify at least two different opinions in your one mind. Experience what it is like to both believe something and not, or to identify distinct parts of yourself who have differing opinions. Even experience what it is like to disagree with yourself. Not only is this not an indication of insanity, it is the very definition of sanity. The more aware we are of the multiple nature of our minds, the better we can navigate whatever roads we are choosing.

FIRST GUY: I am having trouble making up my mind.

SECOND GUY: Is one answer right and another one wrong?

FIRST GUY: No, they are just different.

SECOND GUY: How many different options are you considering?

FIRST GUY: Just two.

SECOND GUY: Choose the second one.

FIRST GUY: I don't want to choose that one.

SECOND GUY: Well then, there you go.

MEASURING PROGRESS

One purpose of sitting down and shutting up can be to reflect on our progress, to consider how we are better now than we were this time last month or last year. Of course, we may discover a lack of progress. The most important question here is, “how do we measure progress?” Do we compare ourselves to others? Do we compare ourselves to some ideal that may or may not be reachable? I think the best way to measure progress is simply by direction. Am I moving in the direction I want to go? Six feet, sixty miles, six thousand miles, who cares? At the end of any given day, have I moved in a positive direction? How might you be different if you measured your progress this way?

ANOTHER DAY

When someone we know dies, we wake up. When someone we know dies suddenly, unexpectedly, we are awakened as if by a loud noise, startled out of a sound sleep. We forget about death and then we are reminded. We forget again, remember again. On and on and on. Forgetting is not a problem because we will always be reminded.

Death can be a good thing to remember on some mornings when we wake up. For just a moment, consider the people you have known who are already gone. I have a few people in particular I like to think about. When I close my eyes, I say their names, I see their faces. I promise them that I will do my best to have enough fun today for all of us. I remind myself that one day I will be in someone else's morning meditation. I get another day.

Ruthe Creighton, Quinton Short, Red McCarthy, Cindy Marietta, Randy Stevens, Bob Graham, Melinda Malouf, Corine Miltiades

GATHERING OURSELVES

Who am I? Who are you? Who do you want to be? Where is the best place to look?

Identity is not something we discover as a whole, but rather something we build over time as we collect the various pieces of ourselves along the way. It's less a big-reveal and more a scavenger hunt.

Close your eyes. Big breath. Exhale. Good. Understand that you never have to know who or what you will be once your hunt is over and your pieces assembled. Even when you think you know, you probably don't.

Stay alert, keep an eye out for yourself.

COURAGE

When we think about courage we tend to think about great acts of bravery, times when people risk life and limb to rescue someone or times when someone is so selfless that they make great sacrifice so that someone else might benefit. We hope that we will be one of those people who rise to the challenge should our time come today – or tomorrow, next month or next year.

But we don't have to wait for some dire circumstance in order to demonstrate courage. We can do that every day. Courage is not just something we do; courage is not something that either is or is not; courage is something that we can rehearse, something that can be a guiding principle in our lives.

Meditate on courage. Consider the values that are most important to you. Maybe you believe deeply in loyalty, maybe you always root for the underdog, maybe you believe in taking good care of our fellow man. In daily practice, courage is simply how we behave when we are living in congruence with our personal value system. My friend, Jana Stanfield, has a song in which she asks a powerful question: What would I do today if I were brave?

Put that in your pipe and meditate on it.

YOUR GUESS IS AS GOOD AS MINE

I have this little fantasy about dying one day, going to heaven or wherever God holds the post-earth-life Q & A sessions, and finally learning what its all about. After years to consider and hone the one question I will ask if I am granted such an opportunity when my life has run its course, I have decided upon the precise wording: “What was that all about?” That is what I will ask God if given the chance, and that is what I ask God in my little fantasy.

As I step up in line, ready to ask my question, I am of course betting that the answer will be something to do with “...and the greatest of these is love,” (The Apostle Paul, Corinthians) or “in the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make.” (Paul McCartney, Abbey Road, Final Track) When I reach the front of the line and ask my finely tuned question, God replies concisely.

Me: What was that all about?

God: Cars and money.

Me: Crap!

God: Next!

My fantasy was originally an entertaining way of pointing to my big fear of missing the point. Since then, I have decided that it makes more sense that each of us gets to decide what the point is. The meditation here can be on what I want my life to be all about or it can be pared down to what do I want this one day to be about.

Me: God, what was that all about?

God: You talking to me?

Me: Yes I am.

God: Repeat the question.

Me: What was that all about?

God: You know, in the beginning I would have known how to answer that question.

Me: And now?

God: Now? Your guess is as good as mine.

SELF-COMPASSION

I do not believe the old line, “You cannot love someone else until you love yourself.” If that were true I would have spent a significant portion of my life not being able to love anyone. And no matter how imperfectly, I know that I have loved others when I have not been so keen on myself. For that matter I have loved others even when I was close to drowning in self-hatred.

I no longer believe that self-love is even the goals of personal-growth work. Self-respect is much more behaviorally measurable and, in my experience both personally and professionally, self-respect is a realizable goal even for those of us not particularly wired for self-love.

I would not describe myself as a self-compassionate man, even after all the years of personal growth work, therapy, recovery, etc. But that’s fine. What I am is a man with a daily practice of self-compassion. That is part of my daily practice precisely because it is not my nature.

Don’t let anyone tell you how you should feel about yourself. But do yourself the favor of understanding that how we treat ourselves does not have to be based on how we feel about ourselves. Think of it as Applied INTRApersonal Ethics. Let’s treat ourselves with kindness and respect for the same reason we treat others with kindness and respect – because it is the right thing to do.

Student: If I treat myself with respect and kindness, if I do that day in and day out, will I come to feel better about myself?

Teacher: Probably.

DIVINE EMPTINESS

We humans hate uncertainty. More accurately, uncertainty scares the hell out of us. Familiar is perceived as safer than something new. Knowing feels much more comfortable than not knowing. And yet, here we are: people who are not comfortable just living in our comfort zones, people who feel compelled to push beyond the known, even though we know we just might be freaking ourselves out – again.

When we find ourselves standing right in the middle of that place where we know more about who we are not than we know about who we are. Big empty space of our own making. We cleared out this space. What to do now?

If you happened to read this page first, you can skip the rest of the book. Just find a strange, weird, uncomfortable place as near the center of this emptiness as you can. Then, sit down and shut up.

Student: I have so many questions.

Teacher: Good.

Student: May I ask my questions?

Teacher: You are aware that that is a question, right?

Student: So is that.

Teacher: Touche', Grasshopper.

Part III
Wisdom
(or Something Close)

The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing. -Socrates

When I was 20 I knew how the universe worked.

Now, at 64, it seems I have forgotten. -Thom

UNICYCLE

Have you ever tried to ride a unicycle? Well, it ain't easy. But as with so many skills, those who can ride a unicycle make it look easy.

The same is true of the skill called living-in-the-moment. Present-tense living requires the same balance, the same focus and the same relaxed awareness as riding a unicycle. Leaning too far backward (living in the past) or too far forward (living in the future) will always result in your falling off. Being centered on the unicycle and holding a focus on where you are going will get you there. And as long as you hold your balance, you can always change directions.

When you are riding a unicycle or when you are living-in-the-moment, you will be doing it with ease. There is no other way. This feeling of "ease" is how you know you are performing the skill. Tension will throw you off every time.

Important note: In learning to ride a unicycle, you must become willing to fall, to accept bumps, bruises, scrapes and worse. And you must remain committed to standing back up, picking up the unicycle and getting back on. Nothing less will do.

A LITTLE MORE ABOUT BALANCE

Balance and perfection are entirely different. When you strive for perfection, expect disappointment and self-resentment. When you strive for balance, just expect to be busy – because it is a life-long job.

ABOUT PERFECTIONISM

A perfectionist is not someone who does things perfectly. A perfectionist is someone who believes that they are supposed to do things perfectly. Perfectionism is more about self-judgment than it is about motivation.

Perfectionism is self-victimization; it is self-sabotage.

GATHERING

We tend to think of self-discovery in terms of light bulbs or maybe throwing the double doors open and BOOM! – “There I am!”

Not usually so. Self-discovery can actually be pretty boring. We don't so much discover the truth about ourselves as we gather many truths about ourselves. More like a life-long Easter egg hunt. Happy hunting.

IF I WERE BRAVE

We tend to think of courage in larger-than-life terms. We think of people who have face insurmountable odds or who ignore consequences to themselves as they stand up for others. We think of extraordinary people when we think of courage. But it is important that we remember that we have opportunities to be brave in our everyday lives. Saying what needs to be said even when it is scary. Speaking up when we witness mistreatment even though it would be easier to say nothing.

My friend, Jana Stanfield, wrote a song in which she suggests we ask ourselves a hypothetical question: What would I do today, if I were brave? I love her song and I love this question. It does not insist that I be brave but only that I consider what that would look like. Clever.

Sometimes courage will just happen but the predominance of courage in our daily lives will increase with practice. I am willing to bet that the day Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the Montgomery, Alabama bus in 1955 was not the first day Ms. Parks acted with courage.

EXPECTATIONS

A young woman who just bought a lottery ticket for a chance to win a multi-million dollar jackpot is interviewed on the 6 o'clock news. She is genuinely enthusiastic about the possibility of winning the jackpot. She already has plans for what she might do with the money. She even expresses fear that she might not be able to handle winning such a windfall.

Another young woman sits in my office talking about her search for a job. She has arranged several interviews and has already made a good impression with two potential employers, but she is not very optimistic about her chances of landing a job.

The first woman knows how much the odds are against her winning but she doesn't let that dampen her spirits. I believe the woman in my office actually knows that she is likely to get a job soon but she doesn't let that lift her spirits.

Expectations – we get to choose.

GOOD DAYS AND BAD

Anybody can have a good day on a good day. How we face the days of struggle, temptation, anger and fear is the measure of who we are.

Enjoy the good days. Grow stronger on the tough days.

RESPONSIBILITY

Genuinely accepting responsibility for the pain we cause others, past and present, is essential to our becoming better people. Manufacturing self-blame when we have done nothing wrong serves only to diminish us.

Shame is not responsibility any more than arrogance is authentic confidence.

OBSTACLES

When you want something, do you begin with a commitment to make it happen or a list of reasons that it probably won't?

Obstacles will stop us sometimes but don't be stopped before you even begin.

WAITING

If you are waiting for someone else to change or to “get it” before you do what you need to do, you are wasting valuable time and energy.

We can invite people to join us but we cannot force them. We might influence them but we will never control them. Trying to influence someone directly can be done with respect. Trying to control others is, by definition, disrespectful.

ACCEPTANCE

To accept something does not mean you like it. It means that you know you cannot change it. It means that you know you need to find another way. It means that you know it is time to let go. It means that you know it is time to move on. It means that you are ready to discover what is next.

Are you ready?

WHAT IS STRENGTH

Strength is not the absence of need.
Strength is resourcefulness in getting needs met.

Strength is not the absence of vulnerability.
Strength and vulnerability need to co-exist.

Strength is not the absence of feeling.
Strength is the willingness to face feelings directly.

Strength is not the ability to do everything yourself.
The strong know when, how and to whom to reach for help.

Strength is not perfection.
The strong understand that perfection is not an option.

Strength exists within us all, but does not develop automatically or easily.

Strength comes from decision, dedication, determination and practice.

LIVING

Most of us will not choose how we will die but we all choose – everyday – how we will live.

When you feel fear creeping in, remember that the healthiest fear is the fear of not living a life, no matter how short or long, that you can be proud of.

Live each day with gratitude, humility and kindness. Live each day as the best version of yourself you can be.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thom Rutledge is a psychotherapist, author, speaker and training facilitator in Nashville, Tennessee. For more information about Thom and his work:
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To keep current with what Thom is writing and what events he has scheduled, join him on Facebook: www.facebook.com/thom.rutledge.9. He keeps his Facebook Page politics-free.

Thom's Twitter account includes his political opinions. If you are interest in that, join him: [@thomrutledge](https://twitter.com/thomrutledge)



BOOKS BY THOM RUTLEDGE

The Greater Possibilities: 125 Reflections on the Method & Meaning of Genuine Success

What Love Is: Reflections on the Meaning & Authentic Practice of Love

Embracing Fear: How to Turn What Scares Us into Our Greatest Gift

The Self-Forgiveness Handbook: Treating Yourself with the Love & Respect You May Not Know You Deserve

Earning Your Own Respect: How to Take Charge of Your Life & Be Who You Intend to Be

Nutshell Essays: 52 Brief Lessons for Big Change

Simple Truth: Ideas & Experiences for People from Less Than Perfect Families

A Day of Mindlessness

Opening the Heart & Mind to Chaos

A ONE-DAY RETREAT

APRIL 1ST • 10:00 a.m. - Whenever

Facilitated by Thom Rutledge

*You've got to know when to hold 'em,
You've got to know when to fold 'em*

Please join us for a day of restless squirming and distraction. This is a time to let go of all you have ever tried to do to become centered, focused, and fully in the present moment. Forget it: it was a hopeless cause all along and you know it.

We will spend the day napping, playing games on our smart phones, texting random people and wandering around. Hell, we may go to the mall.

We will pay absolutely no attention to our breathing. I mean, think about it: if you have to concentrate on breathing you are in serious trouble. In the long-standing traditions of distraction and procrastination, we will share memories of our favorite episodes of The Andy Griffith Show and make obscure Seinfeld references.

We will practice refusing to sit still for even a moment and participate in group exercises to help dull our senses and forget about what is really important.

The day is facilitated by Thom Rutledge, a master of not knowing his ass from a hole in the ground, this daylong retreat promises to ... well, it promises nothing really. What do we look like, your baby sitter?

For more information, to answer questions, even irrelevant ones, or to register, contact lizzy@onsiteworkshops.com and ask as many questions as you can think of. And they don't have to pertain to the workshop. Just anything.

The following is an excerpt from Thom Rutledge's book, *Earning Your Own Respect*. The Second Edition of this book will be available October 2018.

EARNING YOUR OWN RESPECT A Handbook of Personal Responsibility

INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time, somewhere near Rapid City, South Dakota, in a place called the Golden Nugget Motel, in a meeting room full of self-help explorers, I heard the author Sharon Wegsheider-Cruse say, "We go to therapy to live. We don't live to go to therapy." I like that idea, and to a large extent, that is what this book is about.

I have been a psychotherapist for more than thirty years, and I am extremely grateful for having landed in such an interesting, challenging, and rewarding career. I owe much of the quality of my life now to therapists who have helped me along the way, both professionally and personally. One of the most important lessons we can offer the next generation is that knowing how, when, and to whom to reach for help is strength, not weakness, and that being aware and respectful of the many aspects of our personality within our "one personality" is wisdom, not an indictment of insanity.

But when we forget that therapy, personal growth seminars, and self-help books are means to an end, we're in trouble. All good things have a downside; psychotherapy and self-help exploration are no exception. I have come to think of therapy, for instance, as having potential side effects just like medication. We want to benefit from the good that can be done but need to be aware of the possibility of counterproductive, even dangerous, side effects. Here is a list of potential side effects of therapy that I give to my clients:

Excessive Analysis: Increasingly needing to understand— and explaining—the meaning of everything.

Pathological Fairness: Being so invested in "owning your own stuff," that you can no longer reasonably hold others accountable for their choices.

Process Dependency: Believing in the adage, "Life is a journey, not a destination," to the point of dropping all expectations to arrive anywhere. Consequently, you don't expect or strive for results; you just focus on one long journey.

Therapist Dependency: Consulting your therapist on all matters of importance; or asking yourself in these situations, What would my therapist think is best?

The 50/50 Delusion: Believing that relationship problems have a 50/50 responsibility split always. Never taking full responsibility for a situation.

The New-Improved Blame: Avoiding other people's confrontations of you by saying (or at least thinking), That's your issue.

Hyper-Jargon: Speaking in psychological terms (psychobabble) to the point where other people don't want to talk to you.

The All-Purpose Excuse: Using what you have learned about yourself in therapy to justify your less-than-responsible actions, such as That's just the way I am; I can't help it.

This book is about avoiding these side effects. It is about not getting caught up in getting ready to live that we forget to live. Imagine a football team that becomes so involved in planning their strategy for the big game that they forget to leave the locker room to go on the playing field, or the student who never applies the knowledge acquired from years of study. Psychotherapy, personal growth seminars, and reading books like this one are classroom time, locker-room preparation. The real deal is out there—in our day-to-day, unpredictable lives. The challenge is to live a life that you feel good about, to be the person you choose to be. On your deathbed, when you're 112 or so, and someone asks, "How do you think you did?" Most likely, you'll want to be able to say, "Pretty good I think."

Accomplishing this goal is very much like saving money. You cannot wait until the last minute, or even tomorrow—since tomorrow may be the last minute. You have to start now. You've probably heard countless times that if you want to save money, you have to "take it off the top." If you wait for the "extra money" to save, there will be no savings. A life that you feel good about will be built out of days that you feel good about. You cannot afford to wait for spare time to feel good about yourself, any more than you can wait for the extra money to save. Each day ask yourself, How do I think I did? and listen carefully to the answer.

The books I have written have been about what happens—or what I believe needs to happen—inside the locker room. This one is about what I believe needs to be happening outside the therapy room, outside the personal growth seminars, and outside the covers of the self-help books. For as much as I believe in what I do for a living, I also believe that we must balance study

with application, and preparation with action. As important as it is to break through the resistance to reaching out for help when we need it, it is equally important to learn how and when to rely on ourselves. The goal of any good therapy or strategy for personal growth should be to help set us back on our own two feet, to connect us with our own good judgment, to re-introduce us to the one person on this earth who we need to be able to trust above all others. Guess who?

Aligning Your Life with Your Personal Value System

In its simplest form, here is my thinking for this book: To earn your own respect you must live responsibly. To live responsibly you must identify and clarify your personal value system and act on a daily basis in accordance with that value system. In other words, you will respect yourself to the degree that you do not violate your own value system. This is one of life's offensively simple truths, something Alcoholics Anonymous refers to as simple, but not easy.

I worked as a magician off and on for much of my young life and still throw in a trick or two at my seminars and speaking engagements. When demonstrating sleight of hand with playing cards, I will sometimes show an interested spectator how I accomplish a particular effect. His response is often something like, "Oh I get it. That's simple." And then he attempts to duplicate the moves I have shown him, only to be frustrated again and again with each repeated attempt to follow my "simple" instructions. What he has not taken into consideration is that simple does not mean easy, and that by rehearsing my sleight of hand moves for years, I have created a secondary illusion: that the card trick is both simple and easy.

Taking Responsibility and Earning Your Own Respect

The same principles hold for the simple instructions for self-respect. Identify your personal value system, then act according to that value system. Presto, there you have it: self-respect. Oh I get it. That's simple. Yet, you hold in your hands an entire book exploring the meaning and practice of personal responsibility and self-respect, and the thoughts and ideas herein can barely scratch the surface of all that can be said about such an important subject. The subject of this book in its broadest sense is an exploration of our human condition. More specifically, there are two questions I want this book to introduce or reinforce in your mind; ask yourself: What do I really want to do with my one human life? Am I doing it?

Aspiring to Selfishness

Living responsibly requires a lifetime of rehearsal, and a dedicated, even selfish focus on the goal. Ironically, it is our acts of thorough selfishness that will often lead us to responsible lives and self-respect. Certain behaviors we think of traditionally as "selfish" are not, in the bigger picture, very self-serving. For example, the young man who has a gun in the face of the clerk at some

corner market right now may seem to be acting selfishly, but his choices will not serve him well. The woman who rushes into a burning house to save children she has never even met will appear to us to be acting “selflessly,” when in fact, it is a reflex of selfishness that drives her to the courageous act. Her value system is developed to the point where she knows instinctively that in order to remain congruent with that value system she must attempt the rescue. She is acting to avoid pain—the pain of violating her own value system.

Most of us will not often, if at all, face such dire circumstances in which our values are tested. But in more subtle packages, we are all presented with “values clarification” tests every day of our lives. To act in congruence with our value systems is to act responsibly, and this will serve us well. This is the selfishness to which we must aspire; this is the selfishness with which we will earn our own respect.

How to Get the Most from This Book

It has been a long time since I read a nonfiction book from cover to cover, front to back. I like to skip around. I have done my best to write *Earning Your Own Respect* so that you can skip around too if you want. But for those of you who still insist on reading a book from front to back, and for my publisher, who tends to value some sense of order, I wrote it from beginning to end, and it should read well that way.

Earning Your Own Respect is a follow-up to *The Self-Forgiveness Handbook*, but it is not a sequel. Reading *The Self-Forgiveness Handbook* is not at all a prerequisite for reading and benefiting from this book. I will suggest, however, that if you discover that you’re having difficulty separating from your self-critical messages, or if you are not able to recognize and reinforce your successes, you may want to read *The Self-Forgiveness Handbook*. A synopsis of the seven components of self-forgiveness is included in chapter 3 that may help you to decide.

Earning Your Own Respect is presented in two parts. Part I sets the stage with what I consider the essential foundation for the fully responsible life; specifically, open-mindedness and self-compassion. Part II introduces the seven components of personal responsibility. I have identified these components by interviewing clients, colleagues, and friends about what they consider to be the most important elements of personal responsibility. With these notes in hand—along with my own professional and personal biases—I sat down with some colleagues, and we determined what seemed to be the most commonly mentioned characteristics of the fully-responsible person. Here is what we came up with: self-esteem, congruence, motivation, power, purpose, courage and humility. And so go the names of the themes in part II of this book.

Responding

Writing in a journal as you read *Earning Your Own Respect* can be extremely enlightening. I believe that what I have to say is important—if I didn't I wouldn't write these books—but what you have to say or how you respond to what you are reading is infinitely more important than anything I can say when it comes to your life. This book is a resource, not an authority.

Even if you are reluctant to do so, I suggest that you try keeping a journal as you read. There is something about putting thoughts into words and words onto paper that will help you to tangibly discover the challenges that you need to face in earning your own respect. I have discovered that not only is writing a powerful tool to help internalize the material you are reading, but also that having the journal to look back on years later is better than an old photo album. The journal will be filled with snapshots of your consciousness at work.

If you are willing to give journal writing a try, I recommend that you find a notebook of some kind—one that you like the look, size, weight, and feel of. Don't treat it too gently; it is your workbook. Write in the margins. Doodle.

I have included sections called Responding throughout the book. These brief sections will offer something for you to consider, or ask questions in regard to what you're reading. I hope you will find my suggestions and questions helpful, but don't stop there. Let your journal also be your responses to your questions. After all, this is a book about your ability to respond.

For more information about *Earning Your Own Respect* and other books by Thom Rutledge, visit his Amazon Author Page:

https://www.amazon.com/Thom-Rutledge/e/B001H6NZWG/ref=dp_byline_cont_book_1

Last but not least, something from the guru, Groucho Marx ...

I'm not crazy about reality but it's still the only place you can get a decent meal.

