

39 Ways to Live, and Not Merely Exist

by Leo Babauta

"The proper function of man is to live - not to exist." -- Jack London

Too often we go through life on autopilot, going through the motions and having each day pass like the one before it.

That's fine, and comfortable, until you have gone through another year without having done anything, without having really lived life.

That's fine, until you have reached old age and look back on life with regrets.

That's fine, until you see your kids go off to college and realize that you missed their childhoods.

What follows is just a list of ideas, obvious ones mostly that you could have thought of yourself, but that I hope are useful reminders. We all need reminders sometimes. If you find this useful, print it out, and start using it. Today.

Love. Perhaps the most important. Fall in love, if you aren't already. If you have, fall in love with your partner all over again. Abandon caution and let your heart be broken. Or love family members, friends, anyone -- it doesn't have to be romantic love. Love all of humanity, one person at a time.

Get outside. Don't let yourself be shut indoors. Go out when it's raining. Walk on the beach. Hike through the woods. Swim in a freezing lake. Bask in the sun. Play sports, or walk barefoot through grass. Pay close attention to nature.

Savor food. Don't just eat your food, but really enjoy it. Feel the texture, the bursts of flavors. Savor every bite. If you limit your intake of sweets, it will make the small treats you give yourself (berries or dark chocolate are my favorites) even more enjoyable. And when you do have them, really, really savor them. Slowly.

Create a morning ritual. Wake early and greet the day. Watch the sun rise. Out loud, tell yourself that you will not waste this day, which is a gift. You will be compassionate to your fellow human beings, and live every moment to its fullest. Stretch or meditate or exercise as part of your ritual. Enjoy some coffee.

Take chances. We often live our lives too cautiously, worried about what might go wrong.

Be bold, risk it all. Quit your job and go to business for yourself (plan it out first!), or go up to that girl you've liked for a long time and ask her out. What do you have to lose?

Follow excitement. Try to find the things in life that excite you, and then go after them. Make life one exciting adventure after another (with perhaps some quiet times in between).

Find your passion. Similar to the above tip, this one asks you to find your calling. Make your living by doing the thing you love to do. First, think about what you really love to do. There may be many things. Find out how you can make a living doing it. It may be difficult, but you only live once.

Get out of your cubicle. Do you sit all day in front of computer, shuffling papers and taking phone calls and chatting on the Internet? Don't waste your days like this. Break free from the cubicle environment, and do your work on a laptop, in a coffee shop, or on a boat, or in a log cabin. This may require a change of jobs, or becoming a freelancer. It's worth it.

Turn off the TV. How many hours will we waste away in front of the boob tube? How many hours do we have to live? Do the math, then unplug the TV. Only plug it back in when you have a DVD of a movie you love. Otherwise, keep it off and find other stuff to do. Don't know what to do? Read further.

Pull away from Internet. You're reading something on the Internet right now. And, with the exception of this article, it is just more wasting away of your precious time. You cannot get these minutes back. Unplug the Internet, then get out of your office or house. Right now! And go and do something.

Travel. Sure, you want to travel some day. When you have vacation time, or when you're older. Well, what are you waiting for? Find a way to take a trip, if not this month, then sometime soon. You may need to sell your car or stop your cable bill and stop eating out to do it, but make it happen. You are too young to not see the world. If need be, find a way to make a living by freelancing, then work while you travel. Only work an hour or two a day. Don't check email but once a week. Then use the rest of the time to see the world.

Rediscover what's important. Take an hour and make a list of everything that's important to you. Add to it everything that you want to do in life. Now cut that list down to 4-5 things. Just the most important things in your life. This is your core list. This is what matters. Focus your life on these things. Make time for them.

Eliminate everything else. What's going on in your life that's not on that short list? All that stuff is wasting your time, pulling your attention from what's important. As much as possible, simplify your life by eliminating the stuff that's not on your short list, or minimizing it.

Exercise. Get off the couch and go for a walk. Eventually try running. Or do some push ups and crunches. Or swim or bike or row. Or go for a hike. Whatever you do, get active, and you'll love it. And life will be more alive.

Be positive. Learn to recognize the negative thoughts you have. These are the self-doubts, the criticisms of others, the complaints, the reasons you can't do something. Then stop yourself when you have these thoughts, and replace them with

positive thoughts. Solutions. You can do this!

Open your heart. Is your heart a closed bundle of scar tissue? Learn to open it, have it ready to receive love, to give love unconditionally. If you have a problem with this, talk to someone about it. And practice makes perfect.

Kiss in the rain. Seize the moment and be romantic. Raining outside? Grab your lover and give her a passionate kiss. Driving home? Stop the car and pick some wildflowers. Send her a love note. Dress sexy for him.

Face your fears. What are you most afraid of? What is holding you back? Whatever it is, recognize it, and face it. Do what you are most afraid of. Afraid of heights? Go to the tallest building, and look down over the edge. Only by facing our fears can we be free of them.

When you suffer, suffer. Life isn't all about fun and games. Suffering is an inevitable part of life. We lose our jobs. We lose our lovers. We lose our pets. We get physically injured or sick. A loved one becomes sick. A parent dies. Learn to feel the pain intensely, and really grieve. This is a part of life -- really feel the pain. And when you're done, move on, and find joy.

Slow down. Life moves along at such a rapid pace these days. It's not healthy, and it's not conducive to living. Practice doing everything slowly -- everything, from eating to walking to driving to working to reading. Enjoy what you do. Learn to move at a snail's pace.

Touch humanity. Get out of your house and manicured neighborhoods, and find those who live in worse conditions. Meet them, talk to them, understand them. Live among them. Be one of them. Give up your materialistic lifestyle.

Volunteer. Help at homeless soup kitchens. Learn compassion, and learn to help ease the suffering of others. Help the sick, those with disabilities, those who are dying.

Play with children. Children, more than anyone else, know how to live. They experience everything in the moment, fully. When they get hurt, they really cry. When they play, they really have fun. Learn from them, instead of thinking you know so much more than them. Play with them, and learn to be joyful like them.

Talk to old people. There is no one wiser, more experienced, more learned, than those who have lived through life. They can tell you amazing stories. Give you advice on making a marriage last or staying out of debt. Tell you about their regrets, so you can learn from them and avoid the same mistakes. They are the wisdom of our society -- take advantage of their existence while they're still around.

Learn new skills. Constantly improve yourself instead of standing still -- not because you're so imperfect now, but because it is gratifying and satisfying. You should accept yourself as you are, and learn to love who you are, but still try to improve -- if only because the process of improvement is life itself.

Find spirituality. For some, this means finding God or Jesus or Allah or Buddha. For others, this means becoming in tune with the spirits of our ancestors, or with nature. For still others, this just means an inner energy. Whatever spirituality means for you, rediscover it, and its power.

Take mini-retirements. Don't leave the joy of retirement until you are too old to enjoy it. Do it now, while you're young. It makes working that much more worth it. Find ways to take a year off every few years. Save up, sell your home, your possessions, and travel. Live simply, but live, without having to work. Enjoy life, then go back to work and save up enough money to do it again in a couple of years.

Do nothing. Despite the tip above that we should find excitement, there is value in doing nothing as well. Not doing nothing as in reading, or taking a nap, or watching TV, or meditating. Doing nothing as in sitting there, doing nothing. Just learning to be still, in silence, to hear our inner voice, to be in tune with life. Do this daily if possible.

Stop playing video games. They might be fun, but they can take up way too much time. If you spend a lot of time playing online games, or computer solitaire, or Wii or Gameboy or whatever, consider going a week without it. Then find something else to do, outside.

Watch sunsets, daily. One of the most beautiful times of day. Make it a daily ritual to find a good spot to watch the sunset, perhaps having a light dinner while you do so.

Stop reading magazines. They're basically crap. And they waste your time and money. Cancel your subscriptions and walk past them at the news stands. If you have to read something, read a trashy novel or even better, read Dumb Little Man once a day and be done.

Break out from ruts. Do you do things the same way every day? Change it up. Try something new. Take a different route to work. Start your day out differently. Approach work from a new angle. Look at things from new perspectives.

Stop watching the news. It's depressing and useless. If you're a news junky, this may be difficult. I haven't watch TV news or read a newspaper regularly in about two years. It hasn't hurt me a bit. Anything important, my mom tells me about.

Laugh till you cry. Laughing is one of the best ways to live. Tell jokes and laugh your head off. Watch an awesome comedy. Learn to laugh at anything. Roll on the ground laughing. You'll love it.

Lose control. Not only control over yourself, but control over others. It's a bad habit to try to control others -- it will only lead to stress and unhappiness for yourself and those you try to control. Let others live, and live for yourself. And lose control of yourself now and then too.

Cry. Men, especially, tend to hold in our tears, but crying is an amazing release. Cry at sad movies. Cry at a funeral. Cry when you are hurt, or when somebody you love is hurt. It releases these emotions and allows us to cleanse ourselves.

Make an awesome dessert. I like to make warm, soft chocolate cake. But even berries dipped in chocolate, or crepes with ice cream and fruit, or fresh apple pie, or homemade chocolate chip cookies or brownies, are great. This isn't an every day thing, but an occasional treat thing. But it's wonderful.

Try something new, every week. Ask yourself: "What new thing shall I try this week?" Then be sure to do it. You don't have to learn a new language in one week, but seek

new experiences. Give it a try. You might decide you want to keep it in your life.

Be in the moment. Instead of thinking about things you need to do, or things that have happened to you, or worrying or planning or regretting, think about what you are doing, right now. What is around you? What smells and sounds and sights and feelings are you experiencing? Learn to do this as much as possible through meditation, but also through bringing your focus back to the present as much as you can in everything you do.