Resolutions for a Life Worth Living: Attainable Aspirations Inspired By Great Humans of the Past
by Maria Popova

Life-tested wisdom on how to live from James Baldwin, Ursula K. Le Guin, Leo Tolstoy, Seneca, Toni Morrison, Walt Whitman, Viktor Frankl, Rachel Carson, and Hannah Arendt.

If we abide by the common definition of philosophy as the love of wisdom, and if Montaigne was right — he was — that philosophy is the art of learning to die, then living wisely is the art of learning how you will wish to have lived. A kind of resolution in reverse.

This is where the wisdom of lives that have already been lived can be of immense aid — a source of forward-facing resolutions, borrowed from people who have long died, having lived, by any reasonable standard, honorable and generous lives, lives of beauty and substance, irradiated by ideas that have endured across the epochs to make other lives more livable.

Here are ten such ideas (after many more highlighted in years past) that make for life-expanding resolutions, and an extra eleventh as an overarching ethos.

HANNAH ARENDT: LOVE WITHOUT FEAR OF LOSS

We will lose everything we love, including our lives — so we might as well love without fear, for to fear a certainty is wasted energy that syphons life of aliveness.

Long before she became America’s preeminent philosopher, having arrived as a refugee, Hannah Arendt (October 14, 1906–December 4, 1975) was a young Jewish woman in Nazi-inflamed Germany, in love with an improbable beloved, writing a doctoral thesis about love that remains her least known but most soulful work: Love and Saint Augustine (public library) — an exquisite meditation on love and how to live with the fundamental fear of loss.

Tracing Saint Augustine’s debt to the Stoics, Arendt considers how our attachment to the illusion of permanence and security limits our lives, and writes:

In their fear of death, those living fear life itself, a life that is doomed to die... The mode in which life knows and perceives itself is worry. Thus the object of fear comes to be fear itself. Even if we should assume that there is nothing to fear, that death is no evil, the fact of fear (that all living things shun death) remains.

[...]
Fearlessness is what love seeks. Love as craving is determined by its goal, and this goal is freedom from fear... Such fearlessness exists only in the complete calm that can no longer be shaken by events expected of the future... Hence the only valid tense is the present, the Now.

TONI MORRISON: CHERISH YOUR BODY

Partway in time between Walt Whitman’s declamation that “the body... is the meaning, the main concern and includes and is the soul,” and its affirmation by modern neuroscience, which is revealing how the feeling-tone of the body scores the symmetry of consciousness, Toni Morrison (February 18, 1931–August 5, 2019) serenaded the unselfconscious body as the supreme instrument of self-regard — the deepest place where the statement “I celebrate myself” begins.

In her 1987 masterpiece Beloved (public library) — which made her the first writer ensouled in a body with black skin and XX chromosomes to receive the Nobel Prize — she writes:

Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face... Love your mouth... This is flesh... Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms... Love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up. And all your inside parts that they’d just as soon slop for hogs, you got to love them. The dark, dark liver — love it, love it, and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts... love your heart. For this is the prize.

VIKTOR FRANKL: HAVE MORE MUSIC AND NATURE IN YOUR LIFE

PA century after Nietzsche proclaimed with his nihilistic grandiosity that “without music life would be a mistake” and a century after Walt Whitman observed with his life-affirming soulfulness that music is the profoundest expression of nature, the young Viennese neurologist and psychiatrist Viktor Frankl (March 26, 1905–September 2, 1997), having narrowly escaped death in a concentration camp, delivered a set of extraordinary lectures on moving beyond optimism and pessimism to find the deepest source of meaning. A lost companion to his classic Man’s Search for Meaning, these lectures were only recently published in English for the first time under the apt title, drawn from a line of Frankl’s, Yes to Life: In Spite of Everything (public library).

In one of them, Frankl speaks with passionate life-tested conviction to the two great pillars of aliveness that had helped him survive the Holocaust and that help so many of us, even in circumstances far less life-threatening, survive our lives — music and the natural world:
It is not only through our actions that we can give life meaning — insofar as we can answer life’s specific questions responsibly — we can fulfill the demands of existence not only as active agents but also as loving human beings: in our loving dedication to the beautiful, the great, the good. Should I perhaps try to explain for you with some hackneyed phrase how and why experiencing beauty can make life meaningful? I prefer to confine myself to the following thought experiment: imagine that you are sitting in a concert hall and listening to your favorite symphony, and your favorite bars of the symphony resound in your ears, and you are so moved by the music that it sends shivers down your spine; and now imagine that it would be possible (something that is psychologically so impossible) for someone to ask you in this moment whether your life has meaning. I believe you would agree with me if I declared that in this case you would only be able to give one answer, and it would go something like: “It would have been worth it to have lived for this moment alone!”

More than a century after Mary Shelley celebrated nature as a lifeline to sanity and survival in a world savaged by a deadly pandemic, Frankl adds:

Those who experience, not the arts, but nature, may have a similar response, and also those who experience another human being. Do we not know the feeling that overtakes us when we are in the presence of a particular person and, roughly translates as, The fact that this person exists in the world at all, this alone makes this world, and a life in it, meaningful.

LEO TOLSTOY: CHOOSE KINDNESS

One of the saddest tendencies in our present culture is an indignant intolerance for the basic humanity of being human. People of the past are harshly judged by the standards of the present (which their own difficult lives helped establish), and people of the present are harshly judged by impossible (and hypocritical, in the full context of any judger’s life) standards of uniform perfection across all regions of private and public existence. And yet the eternal test of character — our great moral triumph — is the ability to face our own imperfections with composure, reflecting on them with lucid and luminous determination to do better — an essential form of moral courage all the more difficult, and all the more important, amid a cultural atmosphere that mistakes self-righteousness for morality and suffocates the basic impulse toward betterment with punitive intolerance for human foible.

Luckily for Leo Tolstoy (September 9, 1828–November 20, 1910), and luckily for the generations of humans whose lives have been enriched and ennobled by his contribution to the common record of truth and beauty we call literature, he lived in a very different era. When he was approaching that era’s life-expectancy — which he would come to outlive nearly twofold — Tolstoy began reckoning with his own imperfect life, punctuated by the human inevitability of having acted unwisely and unlovingly in moments too mentally and emotionally threadbare to act otherwise, and set out to find the wisdom he had lacked along the way.

So began his Calendar of Wisdom: Daily Thoughts to Nourish the Soul, Written and Selected from the World’s Sacred Texts (public library) — a compendium of quotations by
great thinkers of the past, annotated with Tolstoy's own thoughts, which he compiled for two decades and published in the final ailing years of his life. (In some deep yet obvious sense, The Marginalian is my own lifelong version of such a compendium, commenced long before I first encountered Tolstoy’s book a decade ago.)

In the entry for January 7 — perhaps prompted by the creaturely severity and the heart-clenching bleakness of a Russian winter, or perhaps by the renewed resolve for moral betterment with which we face each new year — he writes:

The kinder and the more thoughtful a person is, the more kindness he can find in other people.

Kindness enriches our life; with kindness mysterious things become clear, difficult things become easy, and dull things become cheerful.

At the end of the month, in a sentiment Carl Sagan would come to echo in his lovely invitation to meet ignorance with kindness, Tolstoy writes:

You should respond with kindness toward evil done to you, and you will destroy in an evil person that pleasure which he derives from evil.

In the first days of February — the shortest, bleakest month, known in our part of the world as “the Little Ripper” — Tolstoy copies out two kindness-related quotations from Jeremy Bentham and John Ruskin, then reflects:

Kindness is for your soul as health is for your body: you do not notice it when you have it.

[...]

Nothing can make our life, or the lives of other people, more beautiful than perpetual kindness.

JAMES BALDWIN: HAVE TENDERNESS FOR HOW HARD IT IS TO BE HUMAN

Across epochs and cultures, in his famous indictment “it has always been much easier (because it has always seemed much safer) to give a name to the evil without than to locate the terror within,” James Baldwin (August 2, 1924–December 1, 1987) shone his piercing beam of truth upon the fundamental fact beneath Tolstoy’s insight that we only see as much kindness as we ourselves possess: We are untender with each other because we cannot bear the terrifying difficulty of being human, vulnerable and perishable as we are.

And yet, like Tolstoy, Baldwin thought deeply about what saves us — from ourselves and, in consequence, from each other — and, like Tolstoy, he recognized that, in the end, only love does. In his lifeline for the hour of despair — which remains one of his most
I have always felt that a human being could only be saved by another human being. I am aware that we do not save each other very often. But I am also aware that we save each other some of the time.

In the final essay from the same forgotten treasure, Baldwin revisits the subject in what can best be described as a prose poem of eternal truth:

The earth is always shifting, the light is always changing, the sea does not cease to grind down rock. Generations do not cease to be born, and we are responsible to them because we are the only witnesses they have.

The sea rises, the light fails, lovers cling to each other, and children cling to us. The moment we cease to hold each other, the moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us and the light goes out.

But to hold each other in the faith of love is no small triumph for our fear-frayed hearts. In one of his final interviews, echoing Rilke's insistence that “for one human being to love another: that is perhaps the most difficult of all our tasks,” Baldwin reflects:

Loving anybody and being loved by anybody is a tremendous danger, a tremendous responsibility.

And yet, as he told Margaret Mead in their historic conversation, it is a responsibility to our own humanity:

We’ve got to be as clear-headed about human beings as possible, because we are still each other’s only hope.

RACHEL CARSON: EMBRACE THE LONELINESS OF CREATIVE WORK

“Works of art are of an infinite loneliness,” Rilke wrote in reflecting on the lonely patience of creative work — patience needed not only in art but in every realm of creativity, including science, and perhaps nowhere more so than at the uncommon intersection of the two.

In her unexampled union of art and science, the marine biologist and poetic nature-writer Rachel Carson (May 27, 1907—April 14, 1964) neither romanticized nor rued the essential loneliness of creative absorption. Instead, she addressed it with the plain poetics of her lived experience.

Even after her lyrical writing about the science of the sea won her the nation’s highest
honor of literary art and her 1962 book Silent Spring catalyzed the environmental movement, making her the era’s most revered science writer, Carson continued making time to respond to letters from readers. In this superhuman feat — one downright impossible in our age of email, when millions of readers can reach a single writer’s inbox with the unmediated tap of a virtual button — Carson hauled trunkfuls of letters home, prioritizing those from students and young women asking her advice on writing. Responding to one of them, she offered:

Writing is a lonely occupation at best. Of course there are stimulating and even happy associations with friends and colleagues, but during the actual work of creation the writer cuts himself off from all others and confronts his subject alone. He* moves into a realm where he has never been before — perhaps where no one has ever been. It is a lonely place, even a little frightening.

In another letter, writing to a young woman in whom Carson saw her younger self, she deepens and broadens the sentiment:

You are wise enough to understand that being “a little lonely” is not a bad thing. A writer’s occupation is one of the loneliest in the world, even if the loneliness is only an inner solitude and isolation, for that he must have at times if he is to be truly creative. And so I believe only the person who knows and is not afraid of loneliness should aspire to be a writer. But there are also rewards that are rich and peculiarly satisfying.

URSULA K. LE GUIN: CONVERSE IF YOU CARE

Let me be clear that no part of me idealizes the bygone agony of waiting three weeks for a letter from your lover to cross the Atlantic — a letter that might never arrive from a lover who might be dead by the time it does arrive. But let me also be clear that, in another century or two, if humanity is wise enough to survive and reconsider its compulsions, posterity will look back on us gobsmacked that put ourselves through the agony of the three pulsating dots.

It is hard enough for one consciousness to communicate itself to another even with every epistolary, verbal, and gestural language we have. It is borderline impossible with only the most expressionless and tenorless tool at hand. Texting, with its ready-made emojis and its immediacy, is a superb medium for communication of levity and logistics. But where it triumphs in time-sensitive matters, it fails abysmally in matters of emotional sensitivity — I don’t know of a single relationship that has been improved, repaired, or saved by texting in those vital and vulnerable moments of emotional misalignment and miscommunication, where the medium’s immediacy becomes a gauntlet of mutual reactivity and its two-way disembodiment a way of avoiding the evidence of one’s emotional impact on the other. Here, conversation triumphs. Here, I am always reminded of Ursula K. Le Guin (October 21, 1929–January 22, 2018) and her exquisite manifesto for the power of real human communication, in which she writes:

In most cases of people actually talking to one another, human communication cannot be
reduced to information. The message not only involves, it is, a relationship between speaker and hearer. The medium in which the message is embedded is immensely complex, infinitely more than a code: it is a language, a function of a society, a culture, in which the language, the speaker, and the hearer are all embedded.

Reminding us that literacy is an incredibly nascent invention and still far from universal, Le Guin considers the singular and immutable power of spoken conversation in fostering a profound mutuality by syncing our essential vibrations:

Speech connects us so immediately and vitally because it is a physical, bodily process, to begin with. Not a mental or spiritual one, wherever it may end... The voice creates a sphere around it, which includes all its hearers: an intimate sphere or area, limited in both space and time.

Creation is an act. Action takes energy.

Sound is dynamic. Speech is dynamic — it is action. To act is to take power, to have power, to be powerful. Mutual communication between speakers and listeners is a powerful act. The power of each speaker is amplified, augmented, by the entrainment of the listeners. The strength of a community is amplified, augmented by its mutual entrainment in speech.

[...]

This is why utterance is magic. Words do have power. Names have power. Words are events, they do things, change things. They transform both speaker and hearer; they feed energy back and forth and amplify it. They feed understanding or emotion back and forth and amplify it.

SENECA: VANQUISH YOUR ANXIETY

Two millennia before the clinical concept of anxiety was coined, the great Roman Stoic philosopher Seneca (c. 4 BC–AD 65) offered a timeless salve for this elemental human anguish in his correspondence with his friend Lucilius Junior, later published as Letters from a Stoic (public library).

In the thirteenth letter, titled “On groundless fears,” Seneca writes:

There are more things ... likely to frighten us than there are to crush us; we suffer more often in imagination than in reality.

With an eye to the self-defeating and wearying human habit of bracing ourselves for imaginary disaster, Seneca counsels his young friend:

What I advise you to do is, not to be unhappy before the crisis comes; since it may be that
the dangers before which you paled as if they were threatening you, will never come upon you; they certainly have not yet come.

Accordingly, some things torment us more than they ought; some torment us before they ought; and some torment us when they ought not to torment us at all. We are in the habit of exaggerating, or imagining, or anticipating, sorrow.

But the greatest peril of misplaced worry, Seneca cautions, is that in constantly bracing for an imagined catastrophe, we keep ourselves from fully living — something on which he expounded in his most famous moral essay, On the Shortness of Life. He ends the letter with a quote from Epicurus illustrating this sobering point:

The fool, with all his other faults, has this also, he is always getting ready to live.

BERTRAND RUSSELL: BROADEN YOUR LIFE AS IT GROWS SHORTER

Two millennia after Seneca made his classic case for combating the shortness of life by living widely, the great British philosopher, mathematician, historian, and Nobel laureate Bertrand Russell (May 18, 1872–February 2, 1970) looked back on his eight decades of life — not yet knowing that he would live for nearly two more — to examine what makes it worth living.

In a short meditation titled “How to Grow Old,” later included in his altogether superb Portraits from Memory and Other Essays (public library), Russell places at the heart of a fulfilling life the dissolution of the personal ego into something larger. Drawing on the longstanding allure of rivers as existential metaphors, he writes:

Make your interests gradually wider and more impersonal, until bit by bit the walls of the ego recede, and your life becomes increasingly merged in the universal life. An individual human existence should be like a river — small at first, narrowly contained within its banks, and rushing passionately past rocks and over waterfalls. Gradually the river grows wider, the banks recede, the waters flow more quietly, and in the end, without any visible break, they become merged in the sea, and painlessly lose their individual being.

WALT WHITMAN: LIVE WITH ABSOLUTE ALIVENESS

Walt Whitman (May 31, 1819–March 26, 1892) was only thirty-six when he self-published, against a tide of indifference ruffled by a few mocking reviews, what would become his young country’s first great classic of original poetry.

In the preface to the first edition of Leaves of Grass (public library | public domain), penned decades before a paralytic stroke reaffirmed his credo of aliveness, the Brooklyn poet encapsulated in radiant prose the guiding spirit of his poems — an ethos certain to broaden and gladden any life at any stage in any era:
This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families, read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body.

AND ONE FROM ME: CHOOSE THE EYES OF LOVE

What we see is never raw reality, pure as spacetime — what we see is our interpretation of reality, filtered through the lens of our experience and our conditioned worldview. Always, the way we look at things shapes what we see; often, the lens we mistake for a magnifying glass turns out to be a warped mirror — we see others not as they are but as we are. (We know this the way the human animal best understands anything — by turning selfward: We all know that horrible, hollowing feeling of being seen by another not as we are but as they are, being achingly misunderstood and misinterpreted in our motives and the core of our being.)

It is a service to reality to see with greater charity of interpretation. It is a service to other human beings to look at them, confused and self-concerned as they may be, with the eyes of love and to resist for as long as possible letting the cataract of judgment occlude our view.

To place the wish to understand above the wish to be right — and to see, with Thich Nhat Hanh, that “understanding is love’s other name” — that is the greatest gift we can give one another.