



20 THINGS I'D TELL MY

20~Something Self

*Twenty things I've
come to learn from experience*

T S H O X E N R E I D E R

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This isn't a list of regrets, so don't get psyched up for a rambling rant about how I wish I had done things differently in my younger days. I tend to be rather forward-thinking, which means I'm pretty good at calling bygones what they are, shaking the dust off my feet, and moving on.

But of course, this doesn't mean that hindsight still isn't 20/20. I'm in my late 30s at the time of this writing, and while I'm no spring chicken anymore and wouldn't label me "with it" in the trends department (ask me to name who's on the cover of *US Weekly* and you'll be met with a blank stare), I sometimes still feel like I'm making up this grownup thing as I go. I wonder if that'll ever stop? I still have moments when I wonder if everyone else took some class I slept through, the one that explains amortization rates or how, exactly, the moon affects ocean waves. Because I've yet to learn a lot of that fascinating stuff.

Yet when I think back to my 21st birthday, when I sipped my first margarita at Hula Hut overlooking Lake Travis with a table full of friends, I realize how far I've come. That day, I learned that it doesn't always feel good to drink wine with the grocery store salad you bought for your lunch, followed by a beer as you got ready for your night out, chased with a tequila-infused sugary beverage alongside a heaping plate of enchiladas—especially if you barely had a sip of alcohol the 252 months of your life prior. But I've also gleaned wisdom about many more things; some of which really matter and others that don't.

The following list is twenty pieces of advice, lessons learned, maxims, a plea to the next generation, whatever you want to call them—here are twenty things I've come to learn from experience, that would have been handy to know when I was a bit younger.

1. YOU DON'T HAVE TO FIND THAT ONE THING YOU'RE GOOD AT. YOU CAN BE GOOD AT LOTS OF THINGS.

Our culture sometimes tells us that because we are Special Snowflakes, we must each go on a journey to discover that One Special Gift with which we've been bequeathed. Well, first off, I don't buy that we're all Special Snowflakes—yes, God made us each uniquely and for a purpose, but that doesn't mean our destiny is greater than anyone else's. Nor are we made to do just one thing. It's perfectly okay to love doing multiple things, and seeing how it's easier than ever to piecemeal a profession out of several jobs simultaneously, don't worry about having to jettison your many loves in order to live out your calling with one official title.

You can love both photography and chemical engineering and figure out a way to pursue them both. Being a good mom isn't mutually exclusive from running a business or painting with oils. Embrace the beauty that life is full of chapters, dimensions, and bends in the road. You're a complex individual, and that's gorgeous.

2. IT'S GOOD TO BE A STUDENT OF YOURSELF.

If you follow me on social media, you'll know that I'm a big fan of personality tests (well, the good ones, anyway). I can understand why some people run and hide at the thought of being put in a box by the results spit out from a collection of questions—who wants to be told you have to be such-and-such a way, just because you answered “b” instead of “d” on a random test? But I think the good tests aren't forcing you in to some arbitrary box, so much as putting flesh to the way you already are. They're

not prescriptive, they're descriptive. I've experienced the benefit of knowing how I'm really made, and not just knowing how I wish I were made, or how I feel like I'm supposed to be.

For instance, I didn't really know until a few years ago that I'm an introvert. For most of my twenties, I thought I was an extrovert because I sincerely enjoyed being around people, and I didn't think of myself as a recluse. Turns out being introverted simply means that your batteries are charged more from alone time than from time with people. Knowing this about myself has really changed how I spend my time and what I feel guilty about, and it's changed how I approach my work, my family, and my self-understanding. The specific tests don't matter as much as the importance of knowing who you are, but if you're curious, my two favorite indicators are the Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator and the Enneagram Test.

3. KNOW YOUR COLORS.

Alright, so maybe this isn't the most important thing in the world, knowing what colors look best with your skin tone and hair—but it'll save you quite a bit of money, frustration, and futility. Use trial and error, the opinions of others you trust, and the Internet to learn more about what makes your skin sparkle and your eyes pop. Stick to these colors, and you'll better enjoy what you own because they'll make you feel better. (You know what I'm talking about—think of that one shirt you're wearing when everyone compliments your appearance.)

Here's the one kicker about this, though: "your colors" are totally subjective. All the books might say you can't pull off mustard yellow, but

if that color makes you happier than a kid on her birthday, then hey, go for it. I'm not contradicting myself here, saying stick to the colors that work but also do whatever you want—I'm saying be intentional with what you buy and drape on your body. Don't just toss on a shirt because we're all supposed to like black t-shirts, or wear a sweater you hate because your mom likes it. Explore, learn, experiment, and then just go for it—wear those electric blue skinny jeans like they're going out of style. (Because they probably are.)

Helpful tip: Every skin tone looks good in eggplant purple. Who knows why, but it seems to be true.

4. READ THE HISTORICAL MARKERS.

My husband, Kyle, and I noticed the last time we were road-tripping as a family that we've actually become those people who read the signs in front of important houses and trees. Our kids are whizzing past us on to the next exciting thing, and we're parked in front of a plaque to find out that Lewis and Clark may or may not have passed through these parts in 1805. But you know what? We actually learn stuff when we slow down enough to read the tiny print.

Don't rush through life in such a hurry that you miss the significance of the seemingly insignificant moments. Savor the little, daily events in your life and treat them as learning experiences. Even when those moments feel as torturous as being in the backseat of your parents' minivan in *The Middle of Nowhere*, find that metaphorical historical marker in the situation, and make the best of it.

5. IN MOST CASES, GO FOR QUALITY OVER QUANTITY.

I know this is a hard one to believe when you barely have two nickels to rub together, but if you save up those nickels to buy something amazing instead of five ho-hum tchotchkie, you'll have less clutter, you'll better enjoy the one thing you do have, and it'll probably last longer because it's better made. This seems to be true for both the tangible and intangible in life—I'd rather enjoy a meaningful conversation over coffee with one kindred spirit than chatter in a room with 20 acquaintances who don't have much interest in a real relationship. (That last example is spoken as an introvert, of course—I know there are plenty of you out there who like a room full of people you barely know and will never see again. I'm just not one of them.)

Scour the thrift shops for the diamonds in the rough, but if you can't find exactly what you're after, it's usually better to save up and wait for the real thing than settle for almost, not quite. I'd prefer ten exquisitely-made items that fit perfectly and go with everything in my wardrobe than a hundred poorly-made almost-not-quites. In all the wrong colors, of course (see number three).

6. DON'T BOTHER YOUR BRAIN CELLS WITH CELEBRITY GOSSIP.

There's nothing in those celebrity rags that apply to your actual life, so don't spend your precious time soaking up who wore what best, who's dating who, and who had the gall to not lose all the baby weight three weeks postpartum. There's so much better out there—to read, to watch, to

listen to, to care about. As comedian Jim Gaffigan says, the celebrity gossip sort-of stuff is McDonald's. It's cheap, it's unhealthy, and it's everywhere.

7. BUT IT'S OKAY TO RELISH SOME LIGHT-HEARTED REVELRY.

Downtime is good for your body and soul—in fact, if you don't get enough of it, you'll burn out. Not everything has to be intentional continuing education, or deep and purposeful, or otherwise eternally significant. Just look for the quality light-hearted merriment—the smart comic book, the magazine that isn't full of catty gossip, the well-made, makes-you-laugh-so-hard-your-sides-hurt YouTube videos. Veer away from the silly that hurts or objectifies real human beings, but don't turn every single thing into a spiritually-significant quandary. Lighten up a bit.

8. IT'S A REALLY, REALLY GOOD THING TO HAVE TO WORK (EVEN IN COLLEGE).

I had to work part-time during my entire five years at the University of Texas. I dabbled in bank teller-ing and holiday gift wrapping for snooty stores, but most of the time, I waitressed at some of Austin's finest (and weirdest) establishments. At the time, I seethed with envy at my friends who didn't have to work; whose parents could foot the bill for everything from tuition to rent to a fun night out. It felt like I was in the minority when twenty-five or so of my hours every week were devoted to earning a paycheck in between hitting the books and attending class. Many of those days, you wouldn't exactly say I sported the best attitude about my situation.

Years later? I can honestly say those time cards were some of the best things that happened to me. Those late night and early morning shifts poured into me much of the work ethic I have today—and a willingness to work hard has been my friend. If you have to work in order to eat, don't resent it. Most people in life are in the same boat. Use your time on the clock to your advantage, learning all you can about how you best work and what sort of work fuels you. If you don't have to work? Work anyway, even if it's just a few hours per week, or only during the summer breaks in college. It's good for your soul. Plus, money.

9. BE ABLE TO DEFEND YOUR ENTERTAINMENT CHOICES. AND YOUR OPINIONS.

Now, I'm not saying you have to constantly defend why your bucket list includes seeing Green Day live (but really—why?), but do be able to explain why you like certain movies, music, TV shows, books, and other forms of entertainment when the topic arises. Don't just like stuff because everyone else does. If you like *Dazed and Confused* or *Office Space*, great—but know why you like them. Don't just like them because it's cool to like them. Decide for yourself. Form your own opinion.

This maxim could go a step deeper than entertainment, in fact; you should also understand why you admire a certain thought leader, or why you agree with a particular pastor or writer. The Internet is a breeding ground for viral lemming-style jumps off cliffs, and it's frustrating at best, dangerous at worst when the masses form opinions based on the loudest voices instead of knowing what *they* honestly, actually believe. Disagree with that super-popular church leader on Twitter? Okay—tell

me why. Believe that homeschooling isn't a good idea? I'd love to know what brought you to that conclusion. Love that one band that's no longer cool to love because they've become too popular? Awesome. Tell me why you think they're still great.

Run away from bandwagons, in other words, and stand confidently in your own opinions.

10. COLLEGE IS THE RAREST TIME IN YOUR LIFE—WHEN YOU HAVE THE MOST FREEDOM COMBINED WITH THE FEWEST RESPONSIBILITIES. SOAK IT UP.

There was a golden afternoon, I think it was the spring of 1997, when I fell asleep on a warm patch of grass on the South Mall at my alma mater's campus, the University of Texas. I was studying, and the delectable April air had lulled me to a delicious nap, backpack as my pillow. When I woke up? I hadn't missed anything. I had slept for about an hour, and still had a good hour or so until my next class. I walked to the food court and grabbed a salad, then continued studying in solitude until I wandered over to my class where we'd discuss the merits of Dickens. I don't remember anything specific after that, but if it was a work day, I would have taken the bus to the restaurant and tied on my apron. If my evening was free, I would have taken another bus back to my apartment, where I'd either study some more or hang out with friends.

Sigh... college.

I know it's easy to look back with rose-colored glasses, and fifteen-plus years after my graduation, I no longer think about the cold walks through campus carrying books weighted with lead, or the impossibly hard astronomy

class that turned out to be a science class disguised as math. But in all honesty? Those years are amazing. Amazing. Your main priority is to learn stuff. How glorious is that? You have at your disposal experts in their field, behemoth libraries, free museums, free gyms, discounted sporting events, opportunities to study abroad, and to top it all off, you probably still fit in your skinny jeans. Life's pretty great during the college years.

I promise you, it'll fly by in a wink, and you'll then graduate and enter the workforce, which can also be pretty great if you learned the rules of the game. But seriously—take advantage of being a student when that's your season. Don't wish it away too fast. Time will whoosh by, and before you know it, you'll be changing a diaper or navigating office politics, looking back on that class about Proust with nostalgia.

11. SAVE MONEY. USE YOUTH TO YOUR ADVANTAGE.

Have you heard of compound interest? If not, google it. Make it your best friend. The super simple explanation is that it's interest you can earn on interest. If you take a thousand bucks and earn two percent a year in compound interest, at the end of the first year, you'd have \$1,020. In the second year, you'd earn interest on the entire amount, leaving you with an extra \$20.40 instead of \$20, for a total of \$1,040.40. That doesn't sound like much, I know. But think about this:

Let's say Sally starts investing \$100 per month on her 20th birthday into money market accounts that earns ten percent interest, then continues to add \$100 monthly for the next ten years, until her 30th birthday. Thanks to the magic of compound interest, she'll have earned \$19,124.91. Now listen to this—let's say she doesn't add one more dime to that account, and just

lets it sit there until she retires at age 65: she'll have earned \$537,456.58. Because she first set aside \$12,000 during her twenties.

Now let's look at her friend, Jane. Jane decides to wait and invest until her 30th birthday, when she starts tossing \$100 per month into the same account as Sally's that earns ten percent interest. She continues to put \$100 into this account, every month for the next 35 years, until her retirement at 65. Jane will have earned \$325,229.24. Not bad, but still over \$200,000 less than Sally, and with having first set aside \$42,000—compared to Sally's \$12,000 (a \$30,000 difference).

All because Sally started saving at age 20 and not age 30.

Now, if you're like I was in my twenties, you'd say that you can't spare even \$100 per month for savings. Funds are tight, and you have to pay your rent and buy groceries, much less do something grownup like *invest*. I hear you. So do only \$20 per month until you're 40. Really. If you calculate using the same, generic ten-percent interest account and don't touch it until you're 65, you'll have earned almost \$150,000. Not bad, for first setting aside only \$4,800. And something tells me by the time you hit 40, you'll be better able to increase that monthly savings to \$50 for two more decades—if you did, you'll have earned a million and a half dollars.

Find a good investment banker who doesn't scoff at someone young and without a lot of cash. Let them teach you the ins and outs of responsible investing. And don't blow it off, thinking you're too young to think of such things—your 65-year-old self will thank you madly for it.

12. ALWAYS BE READING SOMETHING.

To me, books equal learning. Even the just-for-fun poolside novel can

teach you something about the power of words, the deliciousness of a clever plot, or why you'll never take up lodging at an abandoned hotel during the winter. When you read, even if it's just a few pages a day, you're telling your brain you want to keep it alive and kicking. You're taking a learner posture about life, which will never steer you wrong, and there's an endless amount of perspectives, experiences, and stories available to teach you about life. It's one of the cheapest educations available (make the library a regular part of your week), and even on e-readers, the written word's inherent luddite technology means it's here to stay. Reading means access to both thoughts thought thousands of years ago, and thoughts thought earlier this morning.

13. HATE TO SAY IT—BUT A LOT OF THE TIME IT REALLY IS ABOUT WHO YOU KNOW.

This isn't as evil or Wall Street-y as it sounds, but in my experience, relationships really are the strongest form of currency when you're in the market for a lift up or a door in. (I'm referring to work and career sorts of connections, obviously; please don't start treating all relationships as currency, as though they're only as valuable as their earning potential.) Build up all the Twitter followers you want, or hustle to make as many sales as possible in a work day, but at the end of the day, it's that genuine friendship with just the right person who'll help you take your next step. You could have all the right numbers and accolades on your resume, but it's that one reference from That One Guy who'll ultimately land you the job.

It works the other way as well. Use what leverage you have and what experience you've gathered to mentor and support others—it'll never steer

you wrong. I've never once regretted being generous, even if it doesn't technically "get" me anything in return. Winning in the work world is equal parts hard work and genuine nicety. Scratch people's backs, ask for scratches when you need them, and round and round it goes. At minimum, the payoff is solid sleep at night, guilt-free from being a jerk.

14. PEOPLE AREN'T THINKING OF YOU NEARLY AS MUCH AS YOU THINK THEY ARE.

So much of my twenties was about self-discovery, but it was easily clouded with the opinions of others. Or rather, what I *thought* were the opinions of others. I blush now when I think about how much weight I gave to what I thought were other people's sizing up and measuring of my life. For good or for bad, most people aren't thinking about you all that much—they're thinking about themselves, and about what other people might be thinking about them (and on and on goes the cycle).

Don't make your choices based on what you think other people might be thinking, because chances are, they're not thinking about it at all. If you want someone's opinion, you could always ask. Otherwise, assume that the important people will let you know if they have something to say about your life. Dr. Seuss had it right—those who mind won't matter, and depending on what we're talking about heres, those who matter won't mind.

15. SLEEP. FOR THE LOVE OF ALL THAT IS HOLY, SLEEP. ALSO, DRINK WATER. AND FLOSS.

I know, I know; I'm now starting to sound old. But all those things your

parents nagged you about in your younger days? They're really true—how you take care of your body in your twenties will repay you later, good or bad. It may seem like you can eat six brownies in one sitting without regret, but it won't be that way forever; you're actually telling your body that it's okay to switch to survival mode because thanks to those half-dozen brownies, it has to focus on processing all that sugar (which acts more like a drug than a food) instead of thriving. And because water is the most important physical thing we need for survival, drink it by the gallons—always have a glass of water nearby and sip, sip, sip. Also? Flossing may seem like a waste of time, but your teeth won't take care of themselves forever.

And sleep. Sleep is one of God's greatest gifts, and he made our finite bodies require daily refueling and recharging, using sleep as the primary conduit. I know, it's fun when you're young to stay up ridiculously late, but I have a theory that we're all born with a pre-determined, limited amount of all-nighters on our punch card. Once you use them up, you're done. You don't get more. (Keep this mind for the future, if there are ever newborns in your life. Don't say I didn't warn you.)

16. LEARN THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE URGENT AND THE IMPORTANT.

In the 1960s, a man named Charles Hummel penned a pamphlet that still gets circulated in seminars, board rooms, and training sessions today. It's called *The Tyranny of the Urgent*, and in it, Hummel describes the subtle but significant difference between the things in our life that don't actually matter but vie for our immediate attention, and those things that wait patiently for our focus and ultimately matter most. (It's a few bucks

on Amazon—grab it if you're able and keep it on your shelf for an annual shot in the arm.)

Urgent tasks require immediate attention and usually put us in reactive mode, because they scream *Now!* Important tasks contribute to our life's long-term mission, goals, and dreams, and they tend to be well-mannered because they wait patiently for us to respond rationally. Differentiating between the two calls for a bit of intuition, because it's terribly easy to believe that urgent tasks are actually important. Sometimes they are—changing an explosive diaper, or calling 911 when the house sets ablaze are both urgent and important, I'd argue. But these occasions are much rarer than we'd assume, based on our culture's default modus operandi of living from one crisis to the next.

When you learn to tell the difference between the urgent and the important, you're able to prioritize your life's many options, both long-term and day-to-day. You're not operating in crisis mode. You'll sleep better, have more energy, and be more at peace with your daily decisions. It's a valuable skill.

17. LEARN HOW TO GRACIOUSLY DISAGREE.

You will run in to all sort of people throughout life, and chances are, most of them won't agree with absolutely everything you believe. And that's okay. Sometimes they'll have sound reasons for disagreeing with you—you might even be persuaded to join their side. Other times, they'll have ridiculous rationale, contradicting what you say just for the heck of it. With both these groups, learn to disagree graciously.

Sure, you could share your thoughtful justification for believing that

the earth revolves around the sun, but no matter how many proofs you have stored in your arsenal, you may never convince that bald uncle of yours who also manages to bring up politics and religion at Thanksgiving. It's unfortunate. But it's also okay, because it's not your reason for living to convince everyone to see things your way.

Learn the gracious art of disagreeing well. Keep your arguments on topic, don't attack the adversary directly (that's called "ad hominem"), and know when to walk away when you need to cool your emotions. Then learn how to say, "Well, we just may have to agree to disagree," smile, and pass the potatoes. This skill comes in handy both at family dinner gatherings and on Facebook.

18. BECOME FRIENDS WITH PEOPLE WHO ARE REALLY DIFFERENT THAN YOU.

This is the flip side of the coin mentioned above, in number 17. You're missing out if you walk through life only surrounded by people who see things exactly like you, so go out of your way to find people you wouldn't naturally hang around. It doesn't have to be anything formal, but it can, if that's your boat—a cooking class, a bookstore's book club, neighborhood block parties, or a running group are great places for meeting people with which you potentially have one thing in common and little else. Not only will you learn more about someone else's perspective, it'll spice up your own life with fascinating conversation.

I've found this adage to be particularly true for evangelical Americans, those of us who grew up in Christian bubbles surrounded by people who all see things the same way. Believe it or not, there is more than one way

to read the Bible, interpret international policy, and hear the nightly news. Reach out and purposely make friends with people with whom you know you'll disagree—and don't do it as a project, either, with a game plan to change their minds. Just be friends with them.

19. EVEN WHEN YOU FIND THE BEST PERSON TO MARRY, YOUR LIFE ISN'T GOING TO MAGICALLY CHANGE.

You might get married in your twenties—I did, at age 25, and I felt wizened and mature at the time, as though that was somehow an old age for matrimony. Little did I know that by my late thirties I'd feel younger than ever, more sure than I've ever been of how little I know. A marriage certificate doesn't automatically create maturity, nor does it create an immediate oneness of mind and body with your spouse. Sure, the Bible says that when a couple marries they become one flesh, but you'll still remain two very different people with different life experiences, opinions, and preferences. And that's a good thing. God made it that way.

After the honeymoon, and after the thank you notes for the wedding gifts, life goes on. You're married, yes, and the plan is to be with that one person the rest of your life, so your priority should be them. But you'll still have your same strengths and weaknesses, your same proclivities for *Friends* reruns and cheesy board games, your same general knowledge about the universe. Don't wait for marriage as though once it comes, everything will be perfect, or even perfectly imperfect. It'll still be a chore to pay the bills. It'll still be a chore to do the chores, too.

Marriage is great, don't get me wrong. But it's not the end-all, be-all to life. You're a whole person whether or not you ever sport a wedding ring.

20. AT THE END OF THE DAY, IT'S BETWEEN YOU AND GOD.

Most people will come and go in your life, and even those who stay will ebb and flow in importance and influence. At the end of the day, when all is said and done, your life is about you and your response to God. (I mean, I think that's what life's all about—I'm still in my thirties, after all, so I've got lots to learn.) There will be seasons in your life chock full of one particular person, or of one specific place or event, and in just a few years later you'll look back and think, "Why did I make choices based on her?" or, "Why did I let the excitement of that moment carry me into making that decision?" Life is fleeting. It always has been. But God is not.

Sure, decisions have a price tag, but it'd be a shame if you continually made choices based on people who won't be in your life a year from now. The same God who is with you right now will be the exact same God with you in your old age. In fact, He's the same God who was with Abraham in his old age. He hasn't changed in all that time.

Your life, and your living it out creatively and intentionally, is between you and God. Immerse yourself in the things that bring you closer to your Creator, and move forward, joyously. He's got you, in the here and now. And he'll be with you in all your remaining decades. Don't give a higher priority to anything else.

I'm not writing this list as though I've somehow arrived; I have little doubt that I can add twenty more things in just a few years when I turn 40. You can probably make your own list, too—I love reading people's experiences and gleaning wisdom from fellow sojourners in life. In fact, I'd love to do

just that with you. Now that you've read this, I'd love it if you tweeted me @tsh and told me something you've learned that you'd like to tell your younger self. Use the hashtag #youngerself, if you like. Let's talk about what life teaches us, and let's learn from each other.

In the meantime, I'm going to exercise point number seven and enjoy my cup of tea. *Friends* is on, and it's the episode where Joey wears everything Chandler owns.

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