***Life Lessons***

***Taking Care of Your Body***

***So it can Take Care of You***

In some very important ways, our bodies will always be like children, and so we will always have to discipline and take care of them. For example,

* they are inherently ***self-centered***: they pay more attention to what’s going on inside their skin than what’s happening outside it. So they have trouble with *relationships*.
* They are ***now-centered***: their instinctual reflexes from the lower brain react more to the immediate situation than to the past or the future. So they have trouble with *responsibility*.
* And they are inherently ***gut-centered***: their view of the immediate situation is more colored by hormones and emotional instincts we share with animals than by the problem-solving insights of the frontal cortex that only humans have. So they have trouble with *reality*.

To be successful in life, we have to keep training our bodies to respond more adaptively to the troubling challenges of reality, responsibility, and relationships. The problem is our bodies inherently *run from pain*, and pain has three important purposes: it draws our attention to our problems (reality), motivates us to solve them (responsibility), and bonds us with others who can help us (relationships). Without pain, we lose touch with all these.

But our bodies will naturally seek out **Pain-Killing Escapes (PKE’s).** The most commonPKE’s are

* ***substances*** (like drugs, alcohol, tobacco, and junk food),
* ***habits*** (like sex, gambling, working, hoarding, spending, and all manners of screen addictions), and
* ***people***(likeour families that we want to fix or figure out, people we want to live for and through).

Our bodies become easily attached and addicted to *idols* such as these, which take away our freedoms. It’s much healthier to live instead for a higher purpose and power, ones that we dedicate our bodies to achieve. What kinds of higher powers and purposes are best for our health?

We need authority that calls us on a mission. Healthy authorities and missions, healthy powers and purposes, won’t compete with our reality, responsibilities, and relationships. They will *fulfill* them. They won’t limit our freedoms and powers, they will expand them. They won’t leave the world depleted and damaged, but a healthy power and purpose will leave the world a better place for all who live within it.

By this common-sense definition, religion can be sick or healthy. We will know pastors, churches, and religions by their fruits. We need to look around at our family of faith, and within ourselves. Does our faith inspire gluttony or physical fitness? Not only that, does it inspire laziness or enthusiasm, resentment or peacemaking, deceitfulness or honesty, selfish pride or humility?

How do we avoid pain-killing escapes, idols, and unhealthy higher powers? It helps to strengthen beliefs like this through prayer and meditation:

* **I am not my body. I am a living soul, a person who takes care of my body.**
* **I can educate and discipline myself to give my body what it needs instead of what it wants.**
* **If I take good care of my body, it will respond with obedience when I ask it to take care of me.**
* **Nobody else can take care of my body successfully unless I am doing it.**
* **My body isn’t actually mine, as it’s on loan to me for a higher purpose than my own wellbeing.**
* **My higher power is personal, a being that gives me reality, responsibility, and relationship.**
* **My higher power is present and alive, living both around me and within me.**
* **This higher being inspires all the healthy fruits, and none of the sickening ones.**
* **My higher power gives me the freedom to do anything, and will help me learn from it.**

If we are to act on these beliefs in a critical time of choice, we’ll need to have prayed and meditated on them regularly beforehand. Otherwise, our lower animal instincts will kick in to seek pleasure and safety the way it used to do as a child. And we’ll act on *sickening beliefs about our idols*, the habits, chemicals, and people we’re dependent on. It helps to weaken beliefs like this, by using prayer and meditation to see how misguided and harmful they really are:

* **My idol brings me good times, and bad times come when people take it away.**
* **My idol makes me feel strong, beautiful, and worthwhile, like nobody else can.**
* **My idol is the best thing in my life, and it gives me life.**
* **When others criticize and attack my idol, they are criticizing and attacking me.**
* **Even when everyone else pulls me away from my idol, I will remain loyal to it.**
* **Enjoying my idol is the one freedom I would give up any other freedom to preserve.**
* **The people who support my idol are my people, and I don’t trust anyone else.**

One important aspect of physical health is a *positive body image*. Young people and especially young teens can make themselves sick comparing their bodies to those of their peers, to those of media celebrities, or worst of all, to the bodies of their friends who get more attention in real life, or in social media. Young boys can feel terribly inadequate if their abs, pecs, shoulders, biceps, height and weight aren’t what they idolize. Young girls can easily get hyper-critically obsessed about almost *any* aspect of their bodies. And teenagers’ self-image/self-worth can be way too much about their bodies, and not enough about their minds, hearts, and faith, not enough about their accomplishments, talents, or relationships. When people don’t esteem their bodies, they often punish, distract, or comfort themselves with addictive chemicals, habits, or relationships. These choices just trigger another downward cycle into lower self-esteem, and more hatred for their bodies.

Here are some strategies for reversing the curse of a poor body image:

* Listen to your recorded voice slowly affirming your version of the positive body beliefs listed above.
* While doing that, listen to instrumental praise music, and in a spirit of gratitude, look at your body in a mirror.
* While doing the three things above, work out, not to sculpt an idol, but to get stronger and healthier.
* Through prayer and meditation, pray to see yourself as God does, through God’s eyes, created just as God made you to be.
* In the same way, ask God to help you see both your positive and negative body images, as if seeing yourself in two separate mirrors, one that is real in God’s eyes, and one that’s false in your own.
* Then ask God to help you see the mirror as framed and full length, and see yourself walking through the mirror frame into your positive body image.
* Make yourself home in that body, and thank God for your new home.
* Discipline your eyes and your mind’s eye to avoid focusing on the bodies of other people, especially celebrities, and the pictures of friends on image-driven social media.
* Focus instead on people’s insides, their hearts, minds, an souls, praying for what they need.
* Create a peer group for healthy mutual support of each other’s body images, adding and subtracting members as needed by group consensus.

In taking care of your body, remember ***it needs a mission statement.*** The respect you have for your body and your motivation for taking care of it will grow in response to the calling you give for its life.