

HOW TO MEASURE THE THREE DIMENSIONS OF LIFE

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When I think of life,
I think of three dimensions:
length, breadth, and depth. ¹

Rabbi Harold Kushner provides a useful perspective on life: “I will insist to my last day that life should be measured in three dimensions, not only length but breadth—how many other people does it reach out to embrace?—and depth—what values do I stand for, even in my somewhat diminished condition?” (2015, p. 150).

Length

Length is the measure of life that is the most publically recognized, yet it may be the least important. Even when an event is less than a day old, we can already be aware of how important the length—or brevity—of one day can be. Even when milestone anniversaries or birthdays are reached, we live only one day at a time. For many reasons, focusing on today—just for today—is one of the best ways to approach life. That is, we can make the best of life today as if it is our last day, and as if it is the first day of the rest of our lives. In her book *The Writing Life*, Annie Dillard observed, “How we spend our days is of course how we spend our lives. What we do with this hour and that one is what we are doing” (1989, p. 32). In other words, how we live today is how we are living our life.

Depth

Depth is the dimension of life reflected in the underlying foundation of the values and principles by which we live. For those of us who are introverts and focus on the interior life, it is the dimension that matters the most.

Foundations are unseen but, without them, nothing stands. Depth is measured not only by the virtues we believe, but by the virtues we practice in our actions: humility, patience, kindness, and gratitude. We practice humility by being humble to those who are at their lowest. We practice patience by being patient when we feel like being in a rush. We practice kindness by being kind to those who seem like they deserve it the least. We practice gratitude by expressing appreciation for the smallest of things we can notice.

Breadth

Breadth is the measure of life that is counted by the number of lives we touch. It is the dimension that matters the most to extraverts and those who are outgoing. It is what we establish as we interact with family, friends, and strangers. Historically, breadth has been measured by the number of children, grandchildren, and descendants that we give to future generations. Yet for those of us who will never be blessed to pass on our DNA to future descendants, we can actualize our generativity in a never ending number of ways. Not only by being the favorite aunt or uncle of a dozen nieces and nephews, but also by touching the lives of others each day in our offices, hospitals, universities, and houses of worship. We can leave people, places, things, and events just a little bit better than we found them when they crossed our path. In doing so, we never underestimate the power of a gentle act of kindness or an uplifting word of encouragement.

Thomas Merton, one of my spiritual mentors and the Cistercian monk whose first guest master at the Abbey of Gethsemani I met on my first silent retreat at the Monastery of the Holy Spirit, once wrote words that I recite to myself on almost a weekly basis. In *No Man is an Island*, Father Merton said, “The beginning of love is the will to let those we love be perfectly themselves, with the resolution not to twist them to fit our own image. If in loving them we do not love what they are, but only their potential likeness to ourselves, then we do not love them: we only love the reflection of ourselves we find in them. Can this be love?” (1955, p. 168).² Merton’s words highlight the spiritual principle of acceptance as the cornerstone of any quality relationship. Without acceptance, we have no relationship with another, but only with projections of ourselves onto others. With acceptance, we can experience genuine love, which has little to do with our emotions and everything to do with our actions.

There are few among us who are naturally blessed with the virtues of humility, patience, and charity. Just standing next to them makes us feel improved in our own lives. There are many among us who are not naturally endowed with these virtues. Yet we can learn and practice them in our actions, until they become part of our natural behavioral repertoire. We can practice them in our beliefs and thoughts, until they become our habits. We can practice them by our belonging to and connecting with others – particularly those who practice them in their own lives. Eventually, these virtues become part of our character.

References

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Notes

1. As pointed out by book editor and spiritual director Deborah Midkiff, MS, NCC, SD, the use of the definite article “the” in the title implies that the article refers to the definitive three dimensions of life (i.e., rather than simply three dimensions of life). Of course, there are many dimensions of life, and the use of the definite article in the title is simply a literary device to add impact and to pull the reader into the text.
2. The quoted material in this text is also contained on pages 176-178 in Chapter 9 (“The Measure of Charity”) of the 2005 publication, which is a smaller size and paginated differently than the original 1955 version from which the quote was taken.

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