

The Three Life Imperatives

by E Douglas Kihn

“There are two things to aim at in life: first, to get what you want; and after that, to enjoy it. Only the wisest of mankind achieve the second.” -Logan Pearsall Smith, British writer, from *Afterthoughts*

An unlimited life span means a lot of living. Therefore, we should be clear about why we want to live so much, why we get up each morning and face the prospect of a new day. Fear of Death is only part of the equation, and will supply only part of the motivation needed for squarely facing our ever-changing and disconcerting future. The exploration and understanding of our Life Imperatives will furnish us with powerful incentives for avoiding death indefinitely, possibly for a very long time.

Life Imperatives are reasons to carry on, minute by minute. Life Imperatives keep us alive. They are priorities that command the obedience and respect of all life forms, from single-cell plants and animals to human beings. The conscious adherence to Life Imperatives is a way of affirming one’s commitment to growth and a continuous movement toward life. The violation of Life Imperatives means facing away from life and orienting towards death.

Multiple Life Imperatives operate in harmony with one another and do not conflict with one another. Any clash between two Life Imperatives distorts both, leading away from life and toward its opposite.

A Life Imperative is not the same thing as the meaning of life. I don’t know the meaning of life. I don’t pretend to know it, and I don’t believe it is knowable at our present stage of evolution. Only when the Third Life Imperative – to understand everything – has taken us as far as we can go will we know the meaning of life.

There are at least three Life Imperatives. There may be even more, which we might discover as we continue to evolve and learn. I discovered these three mainly from observing my cat Romulus. They are: **Love**, which includes the protection and promotion of our own selves and our community; **Fun**, that is, to have as much fun as possible, for as long as possible; **Understanding**, our innate curiosity that pushes us to understand, ultimately to understand everything.

There are plenty of instances when humans and other life forms do not adhere to Life Imperatives. Humans will commit suicide and homicide, destroy communities and environments, engage in activities that are not fun, and refuse to learn or understand. Every such violation represents a turning away from life and an orientation toward death.

1. Love

The First Life Imperative is part of the “survival instinct,” the part that holds in high regard our individual lives, the communities we belong to, and the environment that sustains our existence on Earth, all of which are in reality thoroughly integrated and interdependent. The promotion of one means the promotion of them all, and an injury to one means an injury to all.

My cat Romulus exemplifies this First Life Imperative. He is compelled through self-love to promote his own life as well as the well-being of his neighborhood community of cats. He takes care to spray foul-smelling urine along the borders of his domain, driven as he is to maintain peace and order among his fellow felines.

He takes great interest in promoting his own personal *catness*, taking care to fill his belly with nutritious food when he's hungry, lap up plenty of water when he's thirsty, defecate and urinate in hygienic fashion when the urge strikes him, groom his pelt and claws regularly, sleep when sleepy, exercise his body and mind on the hapless wildlife that inhabit his "kingdom," and maintain good relations with his human provider (me).

Our individual lives

Every life form is driven to protect and advance its own life – to move toward life and away from death. Every action Romulus takes is in the furtherance of his health and in the opposite direction from sickness and injury. Some of his self-promoting activities are instinctive and some are conscious. And so it is with us, although many people in our hierarchical society struggle with self-loathing, self-criticism, and self-sabotage.

The communities we belong to

A community is any group of people that we have a connection with. They may be people who live in close proximity to us, or they may be those who share our passions through the internet. Community includes those who share your roof, live in the same neighborhood, attend the same school, work at the same job or worksite, join the same clubs, share the same class interests, and even, and especially obvious in this global age, live on the same planet.

Romulus doesn't need other cats in order to hunt or beg. Nevertheless, he is acutely aware of his local community of cats. That is why he regularly sprays his scent on the boundaries of his territory. He is essentially keeping the peace and thereby promoting his community. But contrasted to Romulus, we humans are far more social in our instincts. The 17th century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza wrote that man is a social animal, arguably the most social of all animals. An upright posture freed the hands of our ape-like ancestors, allowing them to carry food obtained from all ecological niches back to the community to be divided up. Super-nutritious meals shared by the group allowed brains to grow to enormous size and complexity, permitting speech and cognitive abilities to flourish, further enhancing teamwork abilities.

Tightly knit communities of humans allowed for the specialization of labor. This means that some people could grow wheat, some could raise animals, some could intercede with forces beyond understanding – the "supernatural" - to ensure a steady production of food, and some could specialize in the martial arts that would protect this productive machinery from external threats such as wild animals and other communities of people.

While the impressive social abilities of bees and ants allow them to carry out a number of complex tasks, all without the aid of speech, communities of humans can populate the entire globe, walk on the moon, destroy ninety-nine percent of life on Earth, and (this century) extend human life indefinitely. These accomplishments and potentialities raise the concept of communal cooperation to unprecedented heights.

Without community, we as individuals will suffer and wither. Community furnishes us our material needs, but just as important, nourishes us with love. Community bestows upon us a sense of belonging to something bigger than our individual selves. We are consciously and unconsciously driven to contribute to and promote the welfare of the community.

In the words of Albert Einstein, the father of modern physics, "One should guard against preaching to young people success in the customary form as the main aim in life. The most

important motive for work in school and in life is pleasure in work, pleasure in its result, and the knowledge of the value of the result to the community.”

Our environment

Every life form is impelled consciously and unconsciously to preserve and improve the environment that sustains it. Our environment includes the Earth’s biosphere of land, water, and air, as well as the physical structures that maintain and extend our lives and the well-being of the communities upon which we depend.

Romulus is particular about keeping separate the places where he eats and sleeps from the places where he eliminates waste. He is also very tidy with his waste, taking meticulous care to bury his solid waste in the soil. Romulus is an accomplished hunter but generally only kills what he eats. He never goes on killing rampages aimed at wiping out or chasing away all the birds, squirrels, mice, rats, and possums that are citizens of his realm. Thus he manages and sustains his hunting grounds.

Likewise, life necessitates that we conserve and improve our surroundings, both for practical and aesthetic reasons. The requirements of life compel us to fully develop and depend on renewable energy sources even as our global demand for energy soars. The threat of global warming is a serious challenge to our continued existence. The technologies to reverse global warming already exist. The only thing in the way of their immediate implementation is the profit system that dominates the world, promoting greed, selfishness, and myopia.

Our need for beauty requires that we preserve as many other species from extinction as possible, as we restore their wilderness ecosystems to pristine conditions. The inherent unwholesomeness of cities require their eventual elimination, when advanced means of transportation and communication will allow humans to live in small interest-based communities of volunteers. Until that time, our Life Imperative obliges us to modernize and beautify all private and public buildings and other structures.

2. Fun

The German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer wrote in *The Play of Art*, “Those who have looked deeply into human nature have recognized that our capacity for play is an expression of the highest seriousness.” In fact, playful fun is a matter of life and death. Scientific studies abound demonstrating the truth that fun prevents and heals disease, while lack of fun causes disease. According to a May 22, 2007 report in the *Journal of the American College of Cardiology* that confirms what everybody knows anyway, long term anxiety – lack of fun - significantly increases the mortality risk in heart patients.ⁱ In another study published in the November 2004 issue of the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, it was discovered that people who worry a lot age rapidly at the cellular level.ⁱⁱ A report published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* in February of 2007 found a high correlation between obesity and psychological disorders such as depression.ⁱⁱⁱ

Watching Romulus day after day, I have to conclude that almost all of his voluntary activity has an element of fun in it. For one thing, he sleeps and snoozes about 20 out of every 24 hours, and while he’s asleep, he has a look of utter bliss on his furry face. Then there’s the eating, which never fails to elicit boundless enthusiasm. He always appears to be having loads of fun while he’s licking and preening himself. He only crawls into my lap for fun and good times, and of course stalking, catching, and torturing small game appears to be enormously entertaining

for Romulus. Even sitting in the window sill and staring out to the street must be in some measure fun, judging by his peaceful and contented expression and body language.

The idea that we are driven by the need for fun, indeed that we even have the right to have fun, is an increasingly subversive concept in our world today, especially for those of us who are not privileged with wealth. We are taught that too much fun is for slackers, for self-indulgent underachievers, for those failures in life who don't make a lot of money. You have to ask yourself, is this restriction of fun natural or healthy? Is it consistent with life, with nature?

The survival of our genetic inheritance

What about the most fun experience you can possibly have, the most pleasurable, physical feeling available to us? I'm talking about sexual activities, especially the achievement of sexual orgasm. The sex drive is thoroughly attached to the Second Life Imperative. The reason it feels *so good* is to motivate animals to frequently take the trouble to donate genetic material to a new generation. Nature can't take chances on something that important.

Our genetic inheritance is contained within the elaborate coding of DNA strands of chromosomes that are found in each cell of the human body. This genome is the stuff that makes us human. It is what the ancient Chinese refer to as *pre-natal jing*. When a sperm penetrates an ovum, the two sets of chromosomes combine to form a human embryo with its own set of genes. These new genes are composed of coding factors from the mother and father. In other words, genetic elements from both parents are passed on to the embryo, which eventually becomes an adult and presumably a father or mother. This is how genes are sexually transmitted from generation to generation.

As long as sexual activity is consensual and safe from disease and unwanted pregnancy, it represents the very highest order of fun. In the world of our fun future, sexual activities will become very popular indeed.

Anything can have an element of fun in it

One of the big lessons one learns from reading the "self-discovery" Eastern philosophy books popular in the 1960s and 1970s, like *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* and *The Tao of Pooh*, is that all activities and situations, even some that seem aggravating or painful, have an element of fun and adventure within them, if one is looking for it. When your motorcycle breaks down on the highway, fixing it can be highly enjoyable, if your mind is open for fun. When you devour all the honey in the jar that you were going to give to your friend, you can still give him the fun gift of a storage jar, if you're looking for fun. Just about any situation can contain elements of fun in it.

What about the "fun" of abusing alcohol, killing human beings, or setting forest fires? Since these activities indicate the mistreatment of one's own body and mind, as well as injury to community and environment, they violate the First Life Imperative and thus turn the fun-seeker's face toward Death.

We are driven to seek fun and pleasure. It is natural and healthy to wish that the fun "never" end. It is imperative that we do so. The type of fun we choose will fit seamlessly with the other two Life Imperatives for those who are living natural lives and wish to avoid death indefinitely.

3. Understanding

All cats are curious and my cat Romulus is no exception. Romulus tries to understand everything, even things that have nothing to do with daily needs or survival. Trying to understand something seems to be, for him, a great deal of fun as well as a promotion of his own mental health. In this case, the Third Life Imperative is connected to the first two. Any closet or cupboard door left open, any new smell, any strange sound, any visitor, any mysterious movement in the room elicits immediate interest and investigation, in his attempt to understand a new puzzle. Contrary to the old adage about “curiosity killing the cat,” curiosity keeps him young like a kitten. Of course his brain is small and minimally developed compared to ours, and so his capacity for understanding the universe around him is more limited than ours. Regardless, he cannot and does not shrink from new learning and understanding, but rather enthusiastically seeks it out.

Imagine our first large-brained ancestors curious about why thunder booms or why bees are attracted to flowers or why we are born into this world and are forced to die. In the 1959 MGM/Stanley Kubrick film *Spartacus*, from the book with the same name by Howard Fast, the lead character, Spartacus, played by Kirk Douglas, has recently freed himself from Roman slavery, as he ponders the Third Life Imperative with another freed slave named Varinia, played by Jean Simmons:

Spartacus: I’m free. And what do I know? I don’t even know how to read.

Varinia: You know many things that can’t be taught.

Spartacus: I know nothing. Nothing. And I want to know. I want to . . . I want to know.

Varinia: Know what?

Spartacus: Everything. Why a star falls and a bird doesn’t. Where the sun goes at night. Why the moon changes shape. I want to know where the wind comes from.

Understanding is the ability to grasp the meaning or nature of something or someone. Understanding is a consequence of knowledge, which is a general awareness or possession of information, facts, ideas, truths, or principles. The great 16th century Renaissance philosopher Francis Bacon once stated that knowledge itself is power. This is true only in the sense that knowledge of facts makes possible an increased understanding, which can then empower us to *action*. Power is the ability to influence the objective world by *acting* appropriately, based on an *understanding* of knowable facts.

“Everything” includes, but is not limited to, those complexities and problems encountered in daily life that impede our attainment of specific goals. Here, the Third Life Imperative is connected to the First Life Imperative, since we are compelled to understand how to secure for ourselves food, clothing, shelter, love, support and all the other necessities of life.

But is it imperative that we understand *everything*, or that we even try to understand everything?

“I now want to know all things under the sun, and the moon, too. For all things are beautiful in themselves, and become more beautiful when known to man. Knowledge is Life with wings,” wrote Kahlil Gibran, the Lebanese-American poet.

There is an intrinsic and poetic value to learning new facts and understanding new puzzles. Samuel Johnson, the eighteenth century British lexicographer and writer said, “All knowledge is of itself of some value. There is nothing so minute or inconsiderable, that I would not rather know it than not.”

The brilliant nineteenth century biologist Thomas Henry Huxley advised us to "try to learn something about everything and everything about something."

But do we really *understand* anything? The British poet Lord Byron wrote, "All that we know is, nothing can be known." The Chinese philosopher and moralist Confucius told us in *Analects*, "Real knowledge is to know the extent of one's ignorance," and of course the famous Greek philosopher Socrates – "question everything" – would agree with him. His student Plato told us that the ideal of anything cannot be thoroughly understood by anyone because it is the *ideal*. Shakespeare's Hamlet told his friend, "There are more things in heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." Modern physicists working with quantum theory would tell us that we cannot really understand and predict the workings of an atom because, to witness and measure the behavior of an atom would require interfering with and changing that behavior.

And then there are the cynics like the novelist Umberto Eco, who said, "I have come to believe that the whole world is an enigma, a harmless enigma that is made terrible by our own mad attempt to interpret it as though it had an underlying truth."

Perhaps the truth is that we cannot understand *anything* completely until we have understood *everything*. True understanding results from connecting bits of knowledge together. We certainly cannot understand everything within the few puny decades of life that our genes currently give us – 120 years maximum – or with the meager knowledge obtained by our primitive and underdeveloped biologically-based minds. The Yugoslavian-American philosopher and educator Thomas Nagel wrote in *The View From Nowhere*, "We are finite beings, and even if each of us possesses a large dormant capacity for objective self-transcendence, our knowledge of the world will always be fragmentary, however much we extend it."

With technology (shared accumulated knowledge) increasing at an exponential rate, the future seems loaded with every imaginable and unimaginable possibility, once we tear down the barrier of the limited life span with its mandatory sentence of death, and assuming we survive the approaching political crisis. Genetic manipulation of the cells that make up the organ called the brain as well as artificial intelligence implants will give us learning abilities that we cannot presently imagine.

If you're bored with life and don't think there's anything left worth learning, certainly not enough to make it worthwhile sticking around for the Singularity, I would tell you that you aren't paying attention. The American evolutionary biologist Edward O. Wilson wrote in *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* that we are compelled to drive toward total knowledge, right down to the levels of the neuron and the gene. Right down to the smallest sub-atomic particles and outward to the farthest galaxies.

For author Ray Kurzweil, there is only one Life Imperative, which he expresses throughout and in the last line of his book *The Singularity Is Near*: "In my view the purpose of life – and of our lives – is to create and appreciate ever-greater knowledge, to move toward greater 'order.'"^{iv} But I have to wonder, what is the purpose of ultimate knowledge and order, if not to *understand everything*?

I want a thorough understanding of biology, geology, chemistry, physics, history, psychology, and every academic subject there is or ever will be; I want to know every fact and opinion that is or ever will be on the World Wide Web; I want to experience every country, be fluent in every language, understand every culture, visit every planet, star, and galaxy there is or ever was; I want to know every individual human being, including myself, every animal, plant,

and extra-terrestrial life form there is or ever was; I want to be adept at every sport and physical activity ever devised; I want to understand every micro-moment in the entire past and future of our universe and every other universe. . .and understand everything about all other categories I have left out!

For curious biological slaves such as us, complete freedom comes from complete understanding - freedom from pain, doubt, alienation, and powerlessness. From an evolutionary perspective, Stone Age *homo sapiens* broke free from a complacent hand-to-mouth existence because the Third Life Imperative forced them to. They had to develop hierarchy and technology in order to prepare for the ultimate establishment of universal abundance of the material requirements for life, to be used as a platform from which to extend human life spans indefinitely and thereby allow us the time and means to *understand everything*.

When we as a species have understood everything, perhaps we become “God.” Perhaps we even choose “Death.” I have no idea, because my meager few decades of life and primitive biological nervous system have allowed me to understand so very little of reality.

It seems reasonable to assume that learning and understanding will be with us for as long as we are “alive.” The American educator and author Lewis Perelman said, "Learning is what most adults will do for a living in the 21st century." I would expand that to say that learning, teaching, and taking care of one another will be everyone’s “job,” once material scarcity has been universally eliminated and all political emergencies are behind us.

ⁱ “Anxiety increases the mortality risk in heart patients”; *Journal of the American College of Cardiology*, May 22, 2007

ⁱⁱ “Stress ages immune cells”; *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, November 29, 2004

ⁱⁱⁱ “Mental woes common in weight-loss surgery patients”; *American Journal of Psychiatry*, February 2007

^{iv} Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Near*, p. 372