



Twenty years ago I cut this article out of an airline magazine on the way to Australia with my wife Leah. I've kept it ever since. I talked with the author recently, and asked him if I could share it with others - as I had found it beneficial through the years to re-ground my own life. I hope you will benefit from it's wisdom as I have - and I especially hope that you might *also* save it, and pass it along to others who you feel may have lost their way. I believe it's message would make a great gift to newlyweds, college graduates, and - most especially- our own kids.

Live- Love - Give

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "J. Coughlin".

Joe Coughlin
Coconut Joe's

Making It

By Bruce A. Baldwin

After finishing school, young men and women eagerly look forward to making it in the big world waiting for them. Never mind that they are naive and idealistic and green as far as the real world goes. They have their hopes and their dreams to carry them through any initial hardships. At their age, they have plenty of energy and are eternally optimistic. After preparing themselves educationally for years, they can't wait to begin living the "good life".

Now let's fast-forward for a moment to 10 or 15 years down the road. Boy, have things changed. From this vantage point, these now-established men and women are singing a different tune. The hopes, dreams, and unbridled optimism of youth have virtually disappeared. Because they are responsible and have a solid work ethic, at work they are doing what needs to be done and are doing it well. At home, though, life after work is simply not fulfilling anymore. There's no fun involved in being with the family, and marriage relationships have become strained. Because there seems to be no relief from the pressure they feel, these men and women have begun to fantasize about running away.

Inside, there are persistent nagging questions with no clear answers: "Is this all there is? Is this what success is all about? Where is the life I always thought I'd have now? Is this what I've worked so long to accomplish? Is there something wrong with me? Why don't I feel close to my spouse anymore? What's happened to me - why don't I feel good about anything these days?" Then comes the answer to these many questions, and it's tinged with anger: "If this is really what success is all about, then I'm not sure that I even want it!"

Certainly, there is more to life than work. Life can be rebalanced between striving for achievement and success on one hand, and loving relationships, quality time shared together, and stimulating leisure activities on the other. Before it's possible to get there, however you must first understand what has happened over the years.

Lifestyles of the Young:

To gain perspective on the lifestyle changes that occur during adulthood, it is necessary to contrast two age groups. First, there is young adulthood, men and women who are 23 to 25 years of age. Once they have graduated, these young adults tend to flounder for a year or so. Many are not sure of themselves or their personal directions quite yet, and as a result, changes in community or in employment are common. Perhaps the job they really wanted wasn't available. Maybe they didn't like its geographic location. For some, the positions they thought they wanted just didn't turn out to be so great. However, most settle into a community and into a specific career within a year or two.

It is at this point that young men and women begin a process of establishing themselves. That is, they strive to gain all the basics necessary for a middle-class way of life. For most, to accomplish this requires a decade or more of hard work. However, for the first few years, the lifestyles of these young men and women are characterized by three adjectives: simple, healthy, and fulfilling. An examination of life at this age reveals why.

Career: These young men and women have been hired into entry-level positions at work. As such, they have not yet been overwhelmed by the responsibilities that come with promotions and career advancements. In these early years, the workday is usually eight hours, and income is limited.

Family: More often than not, there is no family in the picture at this point. Young men and women are waiting longer to marry and have children. These days, the average age of marriage for both sexes is 24 or 25, and kids may not come until several years later.

Home maintenance: Because young adults have not accumulated an economic base yet, there is a tendency to rent apartments, duplexes, or condominiums, and often the cost is shared with roommates. When there is a problem, the maintenance department is called immediately.

Community involvement: Young adults tend to live primarily as free agents and are relatively aloof from the community at large. They are not found heavily involved in volunteer work, civic organizations, or their churches or synagogues.

Leisure: At this stage, there are plenty of friends who are seen regularly. Time is readily available for team and individual sports, going to the beach, or other recreational activities. Socializing is important and is arranged at every opportunity. Overnights or weekends out of town for fun and relaxation are a routine part of life.

Life priorities: If raised with a solid work ethic, these young men and women work hard at making it economically and advancing in their careers. However, when they come home from work, another life priority is quite evident: "How am I going to enjoy myself today?" They follow through and do just that.

In a nutshell, these first few years of establishing themselves are relatively simple for young people. It is a healthy lifestyle because it is nicely balanced between work, achieving, and the pursuit of success on one hand, and seeing friends, leisure activities, and having a good time on the other. This is done on a shoestring because there isn't much money at this age. These young men and women are actually living "the good life". **The problem is that they won't realize it until later!**

The Established Couple:

From this nicely balanced and personally fulfilling lifestyle of the mid-20s, a solidly middle-class lifestyle begins to emerge with the years. In every facet of life, changes almost imperceptible on a day-to-day basis have been taking place. For the most part, however, these changes are not positive.

To put it bluntly, these men and women, now well-established in their communities and in their careers, are living very differently than they were in the early years just after school. The good life they had expected is nonexistent. Instead, these couples are experiencing incessant pressure and high levels of daily stress in their attempt to hold everything together. No wonder - look at what has taken place.

Career: By now, this hard-working young man or woman has advanced several steps up a career ladder. With experience, promotions have come, bringing a better income but more responsibilities at the office. Work boundaries have disappeared. There are often more expectations for productivity, entailing longer hours at the office and work that needs to be brought home.

Family: The free and single young adult who once socialized a lot falls in love and marries. Within just a few years, the children begin to come along. The individual is now a family man or woman, and constant energy must be expended to meet the needs of a spouse and children. Life at home is increasingly tense.

Home maintenance: An essential part of the American Dream is home ownership. As young men and women marry, they almost immediately begin to save for their own home and eventually purchase it. Now they own one, but when something goes wrong, they're responsible for fixing it.

Community involvement: The couple with children is now living in a home and is part of a neighborhood. When the first child is born, the couple becomes re-involved in a church or synagogue. Daily, they are taking the kids all over town to after-school activities. They stay in touch with the schools and teachers and go to P.T.A. meetings, and they are part of civic organizations and volunteer time to the community.

Leisure: The enjoyment of life has diminished dramatically over the last decade or so because there is no time. Once good friends are hardly seen anymore. Fishing rods, tennis racquets, and golf clubs are now in the closet or basement gathering dust. By Friday night, there is only enough energy left to get a bite to eat and go to bed. Husbands and wives may get out for a little while on the weekend - if there's not too much to do at home.

Life Priorities: The healthy life priorities of the young have become completely inverted over a decade or more of striving to become established. These men and women in their 30s and 40s are obsessed 24 hours a day with one thought: "How am I going to get everything done that needs to be done today?" But they'll get up the next morning and do the same thing again. Enjoying life has dropped to the absolute bottom of the priority list.

The Shattered Dream:

The changes that take place between young adulthood and established adulthood are profound and potentially very destructive to a marriage and family life. However, to truly understand what has happened psychologically, another reality of adult lifestyles as they are lived today must also be understood. Whether realized or not, once adulthood is reached, every man or woman encounters a minimum of 10 to 15 minor aggravations or frustrations each day.

Day in and day out, at work and at home, life's frustrations and minor problems pile up without cease. As each day progresses, an internal pressure builds within. However, within young adults who have regular leisure activities, relaxation time, and interesting diversions in their lives, the internal tension these problems create are regularly diffused. When pressures build up, they are reduced to healthy levels through relaxing activities.

However, as young adults move toward their 30's and beyond, three realities collide in slow motion. This collision sets the stage for the creation of many marital problems and the slow destruction of the once-anticipated good life that was to be lived together. Here's what creates the crunch.

The individual's strong sense of responsibility: When young men and women are raised well, their work ethic becomes manifested in a strong commitment to meeting all personal responsibilities.

Each year there are more things to do and get done: With increasing responsibilities in career, marriage, child rearing, and home maintenance, there are more demands on time and energy. As the years pass, it becomes more and more difficult to keep up with all that needs to be done each day.

The fact that there are just 24 hours in a day: This is certainly the harshest reality of all. For each and every person, there is not a second more or less than 24 hours in each day. And an individual's energy level permits only a given number of hours that can be worked each day without negatively affecting well-being.

What is left out of this lifestyle crunch is very clear: all the leisure activities and interesting diversions in your life. The slow but sure elimination of these activities has an extremely destructive effect.

As those pursuits that permit a person to get away from it all are eliminated over the years, daily pressures and frustrations create a growing internal emotional pressure within the individual. Without being regularly reduced through relaxation or leisure activities, there is a cumulative effect of these everyday problems over time. When this internal pressure finally reaches a critical point, it is then emotionally transformed within the individual, and emerges as a pattern of feeling that can lead to a personal and/or marital crisis.

Feelings of DREAD:

Because there is a commitment to meeting all of life's responsibilities, the individual consistently gets done what needs to be done at work and at home. On the other hand, inside, this husband or wife is unhappy and personally dissatisfied with life as it has evolved over the years. A number of feelings keep building up within; five are common in particular, and can be remembered by the acronym DREAD.

Defensiveness: With lowered self-esteem, this husband or wife is extremely sensitive to any kind of criticism, especially from a spouse. With deepening personal distress, even innocuous feedback or attempts at discussion cause an emotional overreaction and sometimes a counterattack. This sensitivity tends to shut down communication and diminishes closeness.

Resentment: Deep inside, there is a growing anger typically manifested as high levels of irritability toward loved ones. There is often a belief that "I'm giving and giving but no one is giving back or cares about me." The basic reason for this resentment, however, is that very important and critical emotional needs are not being met in this marriage partner.

Escape: More often than not, there are fantasies of leaving and never coming back. There is a perception that life has become too difficult and too complex. Life has also become much less personally fulfilling. This generates that dream of escape to live the good life elsewhere because it doesn't seem possible in the here and now.

Anxiety: There is an internal pressure that just doesn't seem to go away. Sometimes there is so much anxiety that the individual feels ready to explode inside, or the tension may be transformed into impatience with everyone and everything. Physically, there may be tight muscles, sleeplessness, and other manifestations of ongoing stress.

Depression: Mixed in with all the other feelings is a low-level depression. It does not interfere with work but rather creates persistent feelings of pessimism, disillusionment, dissatisfaction, and discouragement. This may either be expressed to a mate or held inside.

The Road to Recovery:

The erosion of marital relationships is virtually par for the course in couples once they have established themselves as part of the Great American Middle Class. The negative feelings within, the distance between them, and the lack of shared time spent together lead many couples to just live together while steadily drifting farther apart. Without realizing it, they begin to live separate lives under the same roof. Many others, unfortunately, divorce in an attempt to find a more fulfilling life.

Ironically, these personal and marital crises tend to occur just when couples are established and the good life is within their grasp. Getting better together is entirely possible, but as a couple you've got to know how to go about it. For marriage partners intent in moving toward renewed closeness and good times together, here are suggestions that are ways to begin.

Confront the childhood myth that the good life always comes later: Children are told constantly by parents and teachers that if they do everything society mandates - educate themselves, get good grades, work hard, sacrifice - there will eventually come a day when, magically, it will all somehow fall together and they will live happily ever after. Hogwash! That's a sure prescription for unhappiness. **If you are beyond 30 and reasonably established, the future is not later, it's today.** Don't sit around waiting for it all to fall together. It won't. Instead, begin to make life happen for you right now - no more waiting!

Realize and accept that you always have choices: One of the most common complaints of couples who are experiencing personal or marital crises is that their lives are out of control. Because of the perception that there are no real choices, there is a trapped feeling that breeds all the DREAD feelings. The reality is that you always have choices, but they're not always easy. Don't forget that your present unhappiness developed through many choices you've made over the years without thinking them out. Now begin to take active control of your life by making better choices that reflect a commitment to taking care of yourself emotionally and meeting the needs of your marital relationship.

Immediately stop taking your cues from what others are doing: In this society, it is very sad to see just how many men and women subscribe to values that are shallow, unfulfilling, and highly materialistic, because they ultimately erode personal contentment. These same couples, instead of thinking through what they want from life and from one another, begin to take their cues from what they see everyone else doing. They become trapped by peer values that are superficial and simply not healthy. Instead, begin to adopt life values that are deeper, more enduring, and more personally satisfying. Then, together, commit yourselves to those values.

Define a joint vision of the good life for you as a couple: This takes time spent together and ongoing discussion. Start by talking about the good old days when you were both young and just starting out. You had less materially, but you were happy together and more personally fulfilled because you had time to share together, time to sit back and relax. Now, shift to how you are living these days and the changes you must make to meet those basic emotional requirements within your marriage. As you redefine your priorities, begin to implement those changes one at a time.

Move beyond a materialistic orientation to life: The fact is that you are already established in terms of an adequate income, demonstrated career skill, a home, and your family, and you're part of a community. It's far past time to begin to think in terms of meeting your emotional needs instead of being driven by materialistic wants. **The biggest-and-the-best-of-everything ethic is not only shallow, but its pursuit is one of the royal roads to personal unhappiness.** Strive to get your finances in order. Reduce your debt load. Resist the temptation to buy and buy more. Learn to value life's simple pleasures and to enjoy what you have.

There is no time like right now to rectify this too-common condition. Keep in mind that real success in life can be defined by moving steadily in the direction of experiencing together what is truly fulfilling for you and for your loved ones. As you begin using this definition to guide your choices as a couple, you will also be striving for an enhanced quality of life - together.