

We are all individuals, and we all have stories. My story is not unique or special in a way different than any others stories, except for the fact that we all have a special and unique story which is our own. I am a believer that for the most part, people and their consciousness' are a result of their experiences and ability to integrate those experiences into their lives. I feel very fortunate to be alive and have the memories that I have, and am eager and willing to live through what is left in the path which I follow.

I have the best mother in the world that showed me how to succeed, and had an alcoholic father who caused his own demise through a lack of willpower and desire to live. I've helped friends clean up the dust after watching their homes burn down and lose everything. I've been blessed with some of the best friends one could ask for and watched them strive and succeed and grown with them. I've had to say goodbye to best friends' lives after they took their own. Loved and lost people, hated, and rejected others. I've experienced wonderful successes and even worse failures. I have seen my friends go through the emotions of rape, murder, abuse, heartache, physical impediment, mental impairment, and death; and through it all done my best to help them through it, because if we didn't help each other, there would be no one left to help. This world is too big to tackle on our own. I've scuba-dived to 250 feet under the surface of the ocean, climbed to 22,841 feet without oxygen, jumped out of a plane at 13,500 feet, and stood at sea level dreaming about space exploration. I've ridden a century, ran a half marathon, and completed a sprint triathlon. I've walked on Antarctica and climbed in Alaska, walked on 1000 foot deep ice field, and in the Egyptian desert. I competed in downhill snowboarding, XC mountain bike racing, Crossfit Sectionals. I have had the opportunities to learn from the best and also attempted to teach others. These experiences have made up my story and if my story was to end tomorrow, I would feel blessed and content. However thankfully I still have many pages left to write, and fully intend to fill them up as best as I can.

Here is an excerpt for an essay I wrote in college about the first tattoo I have.

*My idea for a tattoo is simple yet complicated. My design is of a man, human, who is being held down trying to reach up and break free. It is not too detailed but detailed enough. He is down on one knee, with his arms being held down by thorny vines. He wears little clothes and is defined but not extremely muscular. Dripping down his arms is blood from the wrists where the vines have cut him, and on his body are scars from painful past experiences that he carries with him. He is trying to stand up against the force of the vines, and on one arm, is breaking free of its grasp. He looks up as he reaches for his goals and struggles to break free. On his face is the anguish and pain that he feels in his body and soul, but also determination to break free of the pain that holds him down. On his chest is a tattoo of a spiral; a simple, but important spiral. In the center of the spiral is its starting point. As long as the spiral lives, it continues to spiral and grow. It will grow until the day that the spiral dies.*

*Life is full of experiences, good ones and bad. We must always take in the good with the bad. In my opinion, the good ones far outweigh the bad and are always worth it in the end. In my memories some of the most drastic growing I have ever done was during the times when I was in the most physical and emotional pain.*

*This tattoo represents many things. The man being held down trying to stand up represents the constant battle that humans often fight with themselves, others, and the world. The vines represent those things that can get us down, the pain and abuse from others, the pressure and confusion from ourselves, and the unbearable unexplainable experiences all of which scar us in some way. Breaking free in one arm represents that it is possible to overcome anything that is put in your way, and that any goal no matter how far away from your current position is always possible. Any problem you overcome makes you stronger and gives you one more tool to help conquer future obstacles. The spiral represents a constant growth. Everything you do in life you can grow from if you allow yourself to. Sometimes this is*

*the hardest part. The spiral being tattooed on the man represents that he himself is growing on the inside, despite what he is going through. This image is a somewhat dark and also raw one. However what it is meant to portray is something good and inspiring. It is meant to inspire me, and remind me down the road to never forget who I am, and to never ever give up on life, or anything else which I truly desire.*

What is more important as adding to our own stories, is learning about and being a part of others stories. It is a personal goal of mine to meet as many people and learn as much about them as I can. I have immensely enjoyed meeting everyone I have and hope to keep them in my life.

I was recently given a book called "The Ultimate Gift", which is a fantastic short read written in 2006 by Jim Stovall. It only takes about an hour to read and is exceptionally powerful. I highly suggest this one if you haven't heard of it. It is a story about a challenge of learning the true gifts life has to offer. Today in society we really get caught up with material things, fruitless endeavors, and to a major degree have forgotten some of the things that are important. We are all victims of this at one point or another, and no one is really to blame unless they don't try to better themselves. Here is the list of the true gifts.

The Gift of Work: Something acquired or gained has infinitely more reward and satisfaction when that thing has had to be worked for. Also hard work gives us a stronger individuality, a stronger mind, and a more determined heart. There is no substitute for hard work. None. – *"He who loves his work never labors"*

The Gift of Money: Money is a tool to do the things one desires. When one desires money, they strive for only that, and end up leading a hollow, empty existence. But when one desires interactions with people and experiences and knows how to use money; everything is in its proper perspective. – *"Money is nothing more than a tool. It can be a force for good, a force for evil, or simply be idle."*

The Gift of Friends: A friend is one who puts you in front of themselves; friendship is a mutual exchange of this feeling. When you worry about yourself, you become disappointed and enveloped in the things which you did not do or get. When you think about others first and their well-being, everything works out the best for both of you. – *"It is a wealthy person, indeed, who calculates riches not in gold but in friends."*

The Gift of Learning: Wealth can be measured in different ways, and people who have a passion to learn and a true passion for it, are really quite wealthy. If you do not continue to learn you have become stagnant, and are no longer living. – *"Education is a lifelong journey whose destination expands as you travel."*

The Gift of Problems: Problems are really a blessing in disguise, a problem is only a problem until you figure out how to solve it, and then it is now a solution. Obstacles are only apparent until we discover how to get past them. Problems should be treated as a gift which is given to you for the lesson it will teach you and the better person it will make you. Never back down from a problem. Ask for help if you need it. – *"Problems may only be avoided by exercising good judgment. Good judgment may only be gained by experiencing life's problems."*

The Gift of Family: Family is a gift which we all have and most create. They are created by bonds which connect us and keep us strong. People become families when they add love to their relationships, if they do not, then families are just people who share a line on a family tree. Families can only be destroyed if that love is lost. – *"Some people are born into wonderful families. Others have to find or create them. Being a member of a family is a priceless membership that we pay nothing for but love."*

The Gift of Laughter: Life begs to be enjoyed. Not all things are good, some are bad, but they can still be enjoyed. If we learn to laugh at both the good and the bad, you will continue to find all

the things that life has to offer. – *“Laughter is good medicine for the soul. Our world is desperately in need of more medicine.”*

The Gift of Dreams: Life has been given to all of us with a sense of love for everything around us. Our passion and dreams and goals are the outward manifestations of the love we feel inside. With dreams come ambition, drive, imagination, creativity, and innovation. – *“Faith is all that dreamers need to see into the future.”*

The Gift of Giving: When you give something away, you have only given up something material, you are not left with less than you had before. In reality, when you give out of the spirit of giving, both the giver and the receiver have more than they started with. – *“The only way you can truly get more out of life for yourself is to give part of yourself away.”*

The Gift of Gratitude: The appreciation of the giving spirit is the only way to enjoy the wonderful things that we have been given. If there is no appreciation for the people who give to us, we can't truly enjoy what we have been given. – *“In those times we yearn to have more in our lives, we should dwell on the things we already have. In doing so, we will often find that our lives are already full to overflowing.”*

The Gift of a Day: Life is made up of seconds, minutes, hours, and days. Every day is a gift where we make choices to work, use money, see friends, solve problems, enjoy family, laugh, dream, give, and receive. If we do not use every day for some or all of these gifts, then we are not truly living, only continuing to breath. – *“Life at its essence boils down to one day at a time. Today is the day!”*

The Gift of Love: When we give or receive the gift of love, it changes us as people; Always for the better. Without love there is no hard work, no usage of money, no friends, no learning, no true problems, no family, no laughter, no dreams, no giving, no gratitude, and the day is only a rotation of the planet. – *“Love is a treasure for which we can never pay. The only way we keep it is to give it away.”*

The Ultimate Gift: The ultimate gift is simple, it is to live life to the fullest, every day, and to appreciate every gift which is listed. Do not waste your life. Chase what you desire, beg for what you truly need, work for what you want, love whatever makes you happy, and respect yourself and all others including nature.

I really enjoyed this book and it kind of put some words to the way that I try to live my life. We all have set backs and sometimes take 2 steps back for every 1 step forward, but it's important to keep striving, keep trying, and to never give up, and also don't forget to learn and grow for your experiences!