

Now They Tell Me

**50 Life Lessons I Didn't
Learn in School**

By Ed Harris



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This book is based on actual events. However, certain names have been changed.

Biblical quotations are from the online Hebrew/English version of the Jewish Bible:

www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Bible/jpstoc.html

To my parents, Anita and Richard Harris. The lessons
you taught me are priceless.

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Fifty Shades of Schwarz

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Murphy's Bed

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Preface

This book is about how formal education failed me, despite the fact I generally did well in school for most of my academic career. Fortunately, they did not take any points off for being obnoxious; otherwise the statement above might not be true. As a student, I earned good grades, got high scores on standardized tests like the SAT, and accumulated a number of honors and awards. (I am sorry if that sounds like bragging; I'm just trying to set the context for what follows.)

My dedication to studying resulted in an undergraduate degree and an MBA, both from well-regarded universities. Once college catapulted me over the campus walls and into the rest of my life, I considered myself smart and well-educated.

But my self-confidence shattered like a delicate Lalique vase being battered with a sledgehammer as I tried to make my way in the so-called "real world." I discovered that despite the grade point average I had been so proud of, I was often a blithering idiot outside of a classroom.

My nearly infinite capacity for being an imbecile is not helped by the fact that I am a man. The male brain can often be remarkably dense, adding to the challenge of being “street smart” as opposed to “book smart.”

Throughout the course of my life, I have made dumb mistake after dumb mistake, each time slapping my forehead and wondering how I could have been clueless. Finally, I realized I wasn’t entirely at fault: public education woefully prepares us for adult life.

Schools are self-contained little universes, with limited capacity for correcting their mistakes or making improvements. In the business world, when a venture doesn’t succeed as planned, such as a big-budget movie that bombs in theaters, the lack of ticket buyers is pretty obvious. If a restaurant sits empty, it eventually closes; same with a store that doesn’t sell its wares. Flops are allowed to flop, and then it’s back to the drawing board. In the school world, harebrained concepts and bad practices can live on forever because there are no genuine customers except taxpayers held captive to the

system. To consider how long things that make no sense can persist in the artificial realm of education, note that we still close schools in the summer so kids can help out on the family farm, even though the US Department of Agriculture reports that only about 2 percent of the nation's population live on farms, a number that has been in consistent decline for the past 100 years.¹

But, since John Q. Public maintains the cash flow, there is no incentive for schools to adapt or improve. The outside world constantly evolves but schools remain static. With the passage of time, formal education, like a penguin's wings, is increasingly less relevant to the requirements of daily life. Poor saps like me, and I suspect many of the rest of us, are stuck with the consequences.

In the hope that I can help others avoid future disappointment, I have decided to chronicle the most important aspects of the real world where school leaves us unready for the future. Perhaps if I share my own history of lumps and bruises, I can help others sidestep similar unfortunate consequences. I hope you gain valuable information and enjoy the

ride along the way.

Like me, this work is a combination of data and opinions. In regard to the various facts, statistics, and figures, I am solely responsible for any errors, omissions, or misstatements. In regard to opinions, they are entirely my own. It is not my intention to give offense—on the other hand, it's hard to make an omelet without breaking eggs.

The creation of a book is a team effort. In my case, I rely heavily on the support, insights, good judgment and patience of my wife, Anne. As always, I am grateful for her help. And the kids keep me on my toes at all times.

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Chapter 1: Things Are Better Today

One of the things you constantly hear from adults, especially authority figures such as teachers, is that the current generation of kids is rotten compared to when those same teachers, by extraordinary coincidence, were kids themselves. If the adults are to be believed, the past was truly golden: less crime, more respectful youth, and an orderly and civilized society. Even the music was supposedly better, which is a claim that has been made by every generation since the first caveman bounced a stick off of a rock and liked what he heard.

Lies, all lies.

In the “good old days,” America was infected with many grave sins, racial discrimination among the worst. During my childhood in the 1960s I closely followed baseball, including many great African-American players who were then current stars, like Hall-of-Famers Willie Mays and Hank Aaron. They would sometimes be complimented, in a patronizing way, “a credit to their race.” Apparently, they should have been further lauded, in addition to their athletic

exploits, for resisting the temptation to hold up liquor stores on their way home from the ballpark.

Even though the Civil Rights Movement demolished legal barriers, it took a long time for social attitudes to catch up. To many whites, a polite, articulate, law-abiding black person was something to be celebrated, supposedly an exception to the general rule. Real progress came slowly.

No, life is better today, unless you'd like to bring back a set of practices that most people would consider repugnant, such as openly tolerated discrimination against blacks. Let me modify my claim about how life has improved. It's better now for everyone, except the racists. Even homophobes are having a rough time of it these days.

Chapter 2: Don't Be Afraid to Be Wrong

One of the problems with school is the emphasis on there being only one single exact right answer to every question. This creates a way of thinking that is dysfunctional in adult life because often there are many different paths to the truth. The answer key to exams may reflect a certainty that is black and white, but most of life contains shades of gray. And even when things seem obvious, the correct answer might change over time. For example, rock and roll music was once considered a sign of moral decay and sexual degeneracy. Now it's gone corporate. Recent Super Bowl halftime acts have featured Beyoncé, The Black-Eyed Peas, Madonna, and The Who. By contrast, at the first Super Bowl, held on January 15, 1967, at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, the performers included The University of Arizona Symphonic Marching Band and The Anaheim High School Drill Team.

A common, recurring development of the last 4,000 years of human civilization is for older adults to complain about new ways of doing things. I recall in

business school, we reviewed a case study about a large bank that implemented a major restructuring to improve the efficiency of their operations. I studied for my MBA from 1983–85, so the material was probably written a few years earlier, in the late 1970s or early 1980s. The bank decided they needed an overhaul of their business processes, so they decided to hire a senior finance executive from a global manufacturing company, even though he wasn't a career banker. One of the interesting aspects of the case study was that after the potential new CEO was offered the job, he told the board of directors he wanted to discuss it with his wife and see if she supported a family relocation to New York. This was, at the time, regarded as a major departure from how business was normally conducted.

For example, there was an inside joke at IBM that the letters stood for "I've Been Moved." If you worked at "Big Blue" and were offered a promotion, there was no discussion with the family. You simply went home and told your wife to pack. The idea that the missus should be involved in the decision was as unthinkable as a simple parishioner asking the Pope if

they shared similar opinions on the concept of purgatory.

Fast forward to today. I imagine that a husband who came home from work one day and said, “Honey, I accepted a promotion and we’ll be on our way to Dallas next week” might find himself banished to the couch come bedtime. The realities of modern life and the social attitudes that go along with it constantly change.

So the next time you are sure you have all the right answers, just wait, because before you know it, they’ll be wrong.

Chapter 3: Experts Aren't

In the 1960s, one of the bestselling books was *The Population Bomb*, in which author and Stanford Professor Paul Ehrlich predicted rolling global waves of mass starvation as a result of overpopulation. The future was going to be a giant disaster for humanity. In fact, most of his major predictions failed to materialize. Fertility rates in developing nations, the countries supposedly the most responsible for the “bomb” that was going to destroy humanity, plummeted. According to the World Bank, the fertility rate in India, which a generation ago was perhaps the poster child for global poverty, has fallen by nearly half since 1980, from 4.7 births per 1,000 women to 2.6 today.² Fertility rates in Brazil (1.81) and Thailand (1.56) are now lower than France (2.0) and Sweden (1.98).³ One of the biggest challenges for several industrial nations, such as Germany (1.36) and Japan (1.39), is the fear of a population bust, as birth rates have fallen to levels that point to future population decreases. Over the same time period, living standards rose around the globe.⁴ Yes, there is

still a lot of poverty, which is regrettable, but the average level of calories consumed by the world's population has gone up substantially, not down, since Ehrlich's doomsday scenario, with the rate of increase in developing nations exceeding that of industrialized economies.⁵

In the 1970s, environmentalists took the same message and made it even gloomier—the air and water around us were being poisoned, and we were running out of natural resources, in particular fossil fuels. A leading group of intellectuals known as the “Club of Rome” predicted a long-term decline in living standards as the world gradually ran out of everything (except, I suppose, dire predictions).

Once again, wrong, wrong, wrong. *The Wall Street Journal* reported that oil production in 2012 rose in the United States by more than any year since 1859, the earliest date from which records have been kept by the petroleum industry, and an even greater increase is predicted for 2013.⁶ The Saudis are starting to get nervous. Economic growth in developing nations has been remarkable, especially in places such as China, Brazil, India, and Korea. The

air and water in western nations are cleaner, not dirtier. The EPA reported air pollution in the United States declined by 59 percent over the 20-year period from 1990 to 2010.⁷ You can even swim in New York's East River, provided you avoid the victims of organized crime hits bobbing in the current.

The next time an "expert" predicts with great certainty that we are all doomed due to global warming, or because we will be overrun by immigrants, or the government will collapse in a last gasp of fiscal insolvency, you can count on one thing for sure: his or her crystal ball isn't any clearer than yours.

Chapter 4: Not Ready for a Restaurant

I came home from a year of backpacking at age 19, determined to save up enough money to finance another extended trip overseas. Unfortunately for my parents, this plan forced their plans to send me to college to be indefinitely postponed. I moved back into my childhood bedroom, juggled multiple part-time jobs, and held discretionary expenses close to zero. I managed to save nearly my entire combined take-home pay of \$100 a week. I took service standards to new lows as a waiter at a restaurant located at the Molly Pitcher rest stop, near exit 8A of the New Jersey Turnpike. (As the New York joke goes, when someone tells you they are from New Jersey, the response should be, "Oh really, what exit?")

My transgressions were legion. I forgot orders completely amid busy rushes, which left frustrated patrons to give up and return to their cars in hope of better luck farther down the road. I dropped a scoop of ice cream on the floor near the freezer in the back of the kitchen and then picked it up and put it back on the plate once I determined no one had seen me. I also had my employee pin out of place on a day the

CEO of the parent company was scheduled to visit, which led a coworker to fear that I might be fired on the spot if he saw me on his inspection.

I also had a particular issue with toothpicks. The restaurant served club sandwiches with decorative toothpicks inserted through the center of the bread and festooned with brightly colored foil at the top. As a result, a part of my brain learned the rule (as if I was a pigeon in a Skinner box trained to peck for food pellets) that at our establishment “some dishes come with a toothpick sticking out of them.” The menu consisted of items that were either salty and greasy or overly sweet, and which all shared the distinction of being something one would only eat if stuck on a New Jersey toll road with a single food provider holding an exclusive contract. Given how awful the quality was, I paid no mind if the toothpick added any appeal to the dish it accompanied. With or without any decorative sliver of wood, the fare still looked like an unappetizing plate of empty calories one would avoid eating except under the duress of turnpike travel.

In addition to the club sandwiches, we also kept

individually sliced pieces of pie in a refrigerated case with a toothpick stuck in the middle of each. I later realized that the toothpick's purpose was not to distract the patron from the unappetizing mass of congealed industrial dough and syrupy goo that had just been placed in front of them but to keep the plastic wrap from adhering to the crust. More than one customer unfortunate enough to be seated in my section remarked they had never seen a piece of pie served with a toothpick stuck into it, to which I replied, "Neither had I, until I started working here." My understanding is that the chain which ran this restaurant has long since pulled out of the turnpike food service business to focus on hotels. A wise decision.

Had I continued in this job much longer, I would inevitably have been fired for my bad service, despite having not been seen by the big boss on the day of his visit. Beating management to the punch, I quit instead, taking a busboy job at a popular steak and seafood restaurant in Princeton. Their strategy was to get patrons bloated on the relatively low-cost unlimited salad bar served on full-size dinner plates,

thereby encouraging hearty portions, along with a loaf of freshly-baked bread and a tureen of soup. Most customers would consume an amount of salad equivalent in size to a Halloween pumpkin suitable for carving into a jack-o-lantern, along with half a loaf of bread and a couple of servings of soup, dulling their appetites before being served the smaller (and higher cost) entrée.

One of my responsibilities as busboy was to open up several massive institutional-size cans of the day's soup, empty them into a vat, and then put the vat into a warmer in the kitchen so that it would be ready to serve when the restaurant opened. On one unfortunate day, after I filled up the vat, I dropped it onto the floor in the kitchen and spilled about 500 servings of soup in the process. That incident doomed any hopes I may have had of ever rising in the ranks to waiter. Other busboys got promoted on the basis of seniority while I languished at the very bottom of the hierarchy. One day the assistant manager explained to me in passing, in regard to how he made personnel decisions, that in the restaurant industry it was really important to emphasize

performance. I may have been a naïve youth, but I had enough horse sense to realize his comments translated to my chances of promotion to waiter being about even with that of hell freezing over.

And so it went. I endured a dirty job bussing tables in return for low pay and meager tips. After a few months, I had saved up enough money from the restaurant and my other two jobs to resume backpacking. The trip my menial labor financed led to, among other things, marrying the cute Dutch girl next door to me on a kibbutz, which proves that good can come out of bad. Busboy was my last position at a restaurant, and the industry must have heaved a collective sigh of relief when I took my talents, such as they were, into the world of business and finance.

Chapter 5: Bob Dylan Was Right

Pot is not nearly as bad as its critics claim. It's not just that the potential harm is grossly exaggerated—think of the movie *Reefer Madness*—but the benefits are probably greater than anyone ever realized. Not only does ganja have a whole bunch of legitimate medical uses, such as relieving pain, nausea, and other negative side effects for seriously ill people, but it also can boost appetite and just plain cheer you up. And even for ordinary, healthy folks who aren't in agony or trying to recover from depression, having fun is fun, and something you just can't get enough of. Besides, Cheech & Chong movies are unwatchable unless you have at least a mild buzz. Cannabis is now legal for personal consumption in two states—Colorado and Washington—and approved for medical use in about another 25 or so. People seem to have finally figured out that to put people in jail for the possession of Mary Jane is outrageously stupid and a poor use of taxpayer resources. It seems inevitable that the legal code will inevitably catch up with social attitudes. And with Twinkies back on the

market, the timing of a pot boom couldn't be any better.

Chapter 6: Marry Young

We are all influenced by our surroundings. I was raised in a comfortably middle-class family, with a Jewish emphasis on education and learning. The values we embraced, of studying hard in preparation for the future, have become widespread across American society. As a result, more people attend college and wait until they establish their careers before they get hitched. This might not be the only factor: changes in traditional attitudes toward morality mean “getting any” was a lot harder for guys in the era of black-and-white television, and marriage carried with it certain sexual benefits that are probably less germane today. This change in behavior and widespread acceptance of doing the horizontal mambo outside of the bonds of holy matrimony is shown in the steady rise of the age of first marriage.

According to Pearson Education, publisher of the website Infoplease, data from the US Census Bureau shows that the average age of first marriage has gone from 22.8 years of age for men and 20.3 years for women in 1950 to 28.2 for men and 26.1 for women

in 2010.⁸ If this trend continues, our grandchildren will begin marrying in their mid-30s, about the same time their knees begin to get creaky and the human body begins its gradual transformation from youth to something grimmer.

But is it a good idea to wait? The choice to defer the establishment of your wedding registry until you work at a job that offers a 401(k) and Internet access to alleviate the boredom seems logical enough. By the time you are through your mid-20s and the dreaded big “three-oh” is on the horizon, much of your life’s trajectory is set. You’ve probably completed your formal education and have begun to establish yourself in the work world. You have also likely gotten much of the prolonged partying that college students and young adults enjoy out of your system. And chances are you have had several sexual partners, which means you seek to enter relationships with a balance of both physical attraction and potential compatibility. With this moderation of the first heat of sexual ripening, you are likely to become more prudent in your judgment, but that need not always be the case. The term

“trophy wife” wouldn’t even exist but for the phenomenon of middle-aged men who trade up to new arm-candy once they achieve sufficient financial success.

But there is one big problem with the choice to bide one’s time to exchange “I do’s” until the age you first start to pay serious attention to those erectile dysfunction commercials: the older you become, the more set you get in your ways, and the pickier you get in your habits. As you continue to build your life as a single person, the harder it becomes to figure out how to make the adjustments required to intertwine your day-to-day existence with someone else. Everything, from simple issues like what you will have for dinner, and where and when you will eat it, to more complex matters such as the home you live in, become a negotiation. When you’re single, if you want to scarf down a burrito in your car while driving home from work and then stop at the driving range to hit a bucket of golf balls, no one will stop you. Add a significant other to the equation, and it’s no longer so simple.

“Oh, you wanted to go out tonight? I thought we

were getting together with Mandy and Bikram for drinks tomorrow.” Eventually, marriage starts looking like the plans for a corporate merger. Together with your potential mate, you’ve got two residences, two sets of furniture, two different career paths, and two separate lives that need to be combined into one. How to make that combination work is as complex as any business deal, maybe even more so given the emotions involved. Which regional fulfillment center will be closed in the consolidation, Phoenix or Albuquerque? Who gets the corner office at headquarters? Which set of living room furniture do we take to Goodwill?

Consider the advantages of marrying young, like my wife and I did at ages 20 and 21 respectively. We were flat broke, with no college experience, and we considered adulthood a phase of life we had yet to enter. We felt like, and genuinely were, kids. At our wedding celebration in Amsterdam, in the summer of 1978, my new bride tried to pick the lock on the bathroom door with her seven-year-old niece and four-year-old nephew in the hope they could catch me with my trousers down around my ankles as I was

busily engaged with urgent matters. I bet that this kind of thing doesn't happen when you tie the knot at age 41 instead of 21.

One of the great things about marrying at today's legal drinking age is that, if you indeed have met the right person, as I was fortunate enough to do, then you get to spend more of your life with them. And the time you spend together, in your early 20s, is exactly when you will have the greatest sense of fun and adventure. To a certain extent, you grow up together.

I recall one particular lunch with my parents at their country club. The table next to us was filled with middle-aged businessmen. We happened to overhear one of them say, "So who do you think shot J.R.?", a reference to a plot gimmick from the TV show *Dallas*, when a season ended with bad guy J.R. Ewing being shot by an assailant out of camera range. The idea was to keep viewers on tenterhooks for an entire summer before the shooter was revealed in the first episode of the following season. And despite being a gimmick, it worked, and believe or not, there was once a summer where all of America asked, "Who

shot J.R.?”

After the lunch, on the drive home, Anne and I were both surprised that adults talked about frivolous TV shows. We overestimated the level of maturity of the adult world, a sign of how ridiculously unprepared we were for marriage. We didn't even know what constituted regular adult conversation.

We had no sophisticated tastes and preferences that we had to blend in together. We didn't have to argue about which restaurants to eat dinner at because we couldn't afford to go out. We couldn't afford almost anything. We spent our 20s going to college and graduate school, our 30s raising small children, our 40s raising older kids, and now in our 50s we finally can see the finish line, as our youngest son, Izzy, enters high school. (Although we'll likely be too financially, emotionally, and physically depleted to fully enjoy our free time once we have it.)

Meanwhile, our daughter also married at the insanely young age of 21. Did she make a mistake? I don't think so. Like my wife and me, she now has the opportunity to build a life together with the man that she loves. I don't want her to copy her parents too

completely because that would mean a wait of another decade for grandkids. I think I'm old enough to be a grandpa right now.

Chapter 7: Money Doesn't Buy Happiness

A couple of years ago, on a rainy Sunday afternoon (we have a lot of those in Seattle), I took Izzy to the movies in order to alleviate what might have become a fatal case of boredom. From a distance, I noticed a local billionaire that I had met on several occasions in prior business dealings and saw that he was with his young son as well. Even if you are stupendously wealthy, damp and dreary Sunday afternoons in Seattle are still a drag.

Many years ago, by coincidence, I discovered that among the patients of my dentist was a prominent local Microsoft multibillionaire. Even if I was one of the wealthiest men on the planet, I could not possibly have received better dental care. Imagine that. Plus I was married to the woman of my dreams. All of which led me to conclude that indeed money does not buy happiness.

Chapter 8: Money Can Stave Off Unhappiness

In the previous chapter, I argued the belief that wealth leads to happiness is an illusion. However, that doesn't mean the opposite, being poor, is a ticket to contentment. Some extra cash in the bank can't make you happy, but it can help keep unhappiness at bay.

When I was in college, one day in a marketing class, we had a discussion about the telephone business. This was years before cell phones came along. The professor remarked that the industry had a 90 percent market penetration rate which meant 10 percent couldn't afford phone service.

One of the students in the class was incredulous. "There isn't anyone," he protested, "who can't afford a phone."

What he really meant was, "I come from a middle-class background and attend college. There is no one in my personal universe that I am aware of who can't afford telephone service. Therefore, I have concluded, from this small sample size, in regards to

the entire population of the United States, that *everyone* can afford a phone.”

This fellow schoolmate of mine failed to realize he was limited by the paucity of his own experience. In fact, there is a segment of the population that is desperately impoverished. There are homeless people who sleep under freeway underpasses. (I might join them if I don't sell enough copies of my books.) There are millions of people who live on the very edge of subsistence.

For example, according to a 2011 study entitled “The Dental Access Gap” funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, only about 70 percent of the United States population has regular access to dental care because they don't have enough finances to pay for it.⁹ When poor people who cannot afford to see a dentist have a toothache, their tooth hurts and they take aspirin. When it gets really bad, their teeth start to fall out of their mouth. I think a little bit of extra money might improve their lives.

Beyond a certain level, surplus cash clearly does not make you any happier. More possessions can also mean more headaches. Meals out in restaurants can

be fun. However, on a daily basis it is no longer a special event but just another humdrum part of life. Above a certain level, money helps prevent a lot of misery. My advice in financial matters is to aim for somewhere slightly above the middle, where you have material comfort but don't have to worry about the impression you make on anyone else. Leave the headaches of the rich to the rich.

Chapter 9: God Is Male

Here is a simple thought experiment for you. If you ignored the obviously patriarchal language of the Bible and just had to guess, what gender would you think is appropriate for God? Well, you might start by considering that for most of our evolutionary history, we lived primitive hunter-gatherer lifestyles. You couldn't pick up the phone to order a pizza or call 911 in an emergency. And one thing that pre-modern humans certainly didn't have access to were modern toilets or running water. If you had to go to the bathroom, then you simply walked a few steps away from the encampment into the underbrush, hoisted up your animal pelt, and relieved yourself. And as anyone who has ever gone on a long hike or a camping trip has ever noticed, men are at a decided advantage to women for the more frequent type of bathroom visits. We simply stand upright and casually void our bladders, manhood in one hand and smart phone in the other. Women, meanwhile, have to squat in an extremely undignified position. And this was the human condition for 99-plus percent of

our existence and still is today for people living outside of civilization—those poor souls who do not have access to *Family Guy*.

Now I ask you, can you possibly imagine a deity who created the universe and gave men such a decided advantage over a critical part of survival without being male himself?

I rest my case.

Chapter 10: God and Religion Are Not the Same

It's been a bad 500 years for organized religion in Western society. Truths that were once taken to be immutable, such as the earth being at the center of the universe or created a mere 6,000 years ago, have been proven wrong by science. The universe is exceedingly larger and older than our limited human brains can grasp.

The Catholic Church and other Christian denominations for many centuries insisted on the Bible being understood as a literally accurate record of the natural history of the cosmos. Like an argument over which is the best *Star Wars* movie, the debate still can arouse strong passions today. However, the track record of religion vs. reason regarding discrepancies between Scripture and scientific discovery has generally been lopsided, like that of the perpetually overmatched Washington Generals against The Harlem Globetrotters. Yes, some people claim the reason dinosaur fossils appear in layers of sediment is because they were deposited

there by the receding waters of the biblical flood. However, this fanciful notion is not taken seriously by legitimate scientists.

Another issue that the major faiths have grappled with is how to deal with their ancient prejudices. The dominant religions of today originally developed when slavery, the oppression of women, total warfare, and other great evils were tolerated as integral parts of existence. It was taken for granted as simply the way one did things a few thousand years ago, that when you conquered an enemy on the battlefield, you sacked the major cities, destroyed the temples, killed all the men, took all the young women as sexual possessions, and enslaved everyone else. Unless you decided to simply annihilate everyone in your path instead. That was just the normal state of affairs in the ancient world and even the Jewish Bible commanded the Israelites to wipe out the inhabitants of Canaan as they entered the Promised Land.

*Howbeit of the cities of these peoples,
that The Lord thy God giveth thee for an
inheritance, thou shalt save alive nothing*

*that breatheth, but thou shalt utterly
destroy them: the Hittite, and the
Amorite, the Canaanite, and the Perizzite,
the Hivite, and the Jebusite . . .*

(Deuteronomy, 20:16-18)

Religion has also strived to avoid change. All prior practices, even those of questionable moral value like barriers against women, at one time or another have been termed “traditions.” And great crimes like the oppression of gays demonstrate that old hatreds die hard.

What is often lost in this debate is that while religions claim to be based on belief in God that does not necessarily mean He reciprocates and believes in them. You might insist that the Lord has commanded you to burn witches at the stake, a common practice for much of European history. But the Creator might disagree that He ever sent that memo. Even self-proclaimed atheists often acknowledge a spiritual dimension to the universe. But to profess a belief in God does not mean that you speak for Him. If you think slavery was a pretty good idea or gays should

not be allowed to participate fully in all of the legal rights of society, then argue the case on your own merits. Don't disparage God by dragging Him into the debate. The Mormon Church says it received a "revelation" in 1978 that blacks should be allowed to assume positions of leadership. I think that message had been out there the entire time; it's just some folks down here on earth have a hard time distinguishing the signal from the noise.

Chapter 11: There Is No Santa Claus

In the fall of 1976, I responded to a classified ad from a temp agency seeking department store Santas for the holiday season. I arrived at a strip mall store they rented to fill out an application. I got hired on the spot and then stayed along with another 20 or so newly minted Kris Kringles to participate in a half day of training. It seemed the agency must have been fairly savvy about self-promotion because a reporter from the local paper showed up to cover the event. A quote of mine made it into the article that ran the next day, where I stated something along the lines of being Jewish not an issue because Santa was about making little kids happy. Of course I really meant I was short on cash and happy to find a paying gig.

The modern commercial version of Christmas had been mostly fueled by Jews like songwriter Irving Berlin (“White Christmas”) and the Jewish merchants who built up the first generation of big retailers, including Abraham & Strauss, FAO Schwarz, Gimbels, Saks Fifth Avenue and Macy’s. And most of the schmaltzy holiday movies were produced by studios

run by Jews such as Samuel Goldwyn and Lewis G. Mayer.

Going home with a costume that only fit my 140 lb. frame if I put a pillow under the jacket, I was told to report to Teterboro Airport in North Jersey at 8:00 a.m. on the Friday after Thanksgiving to be flown by helicopter to the parking lot of Brunswick Square Mall, where a huge crowd was expected to be anxiously awaiting Santa's arrival. My dad gave me a lift to the airfield, and the pilot, Jim, was there waiting for me, fueled up and ready to go. It was my first and to this day only helicopter ride I have ever taken. Jim explained that for short trips such as this one, he flew at low altitudes and simply followed the roads below to get to his location, the same as a car would travel. We arrived at the mall in about ten minutes, and as we descended, I was surprised by how few people awaited us. I had been told to expect hundreds of families, and instead, there were just 25 or so people on hand. Stepping out of the chopper and waving to the sparse and shivering crowd, I was driven to the main entrance, where I ascended my throne in the mall's center court.

After dutifully showing up to work for a week and enduring an uncomfortable, heavy outfit with an itchy fake beard while small children laden with all manner of infectious germs scrambled across my lap, the agency called and informed me I had been fired. I asked for a reason. They said I had been terminated because I had arrived an hour early to the big Friday morning helicopter event.

Apparently, there had been a mix-up in communications. The agency had been told to get Santa there at 8:30 a.m. but the mall had advertised the event for 9:30 a.m. An hour after I had touched down, the mall manager had been forced to go out to the parking lot and issue an apology to a throng of disappointed parents and their small children. It had turned into a public relations fiasco and made the manager furious.

“But ... but ... but how could you blame me? Not only had I shown up when I had been instructed to, the helicopter was there waiting for me and the pilot had been given the same schedule. Didn’t that prove it wasn’t my fault?”

“Oh, by the way,” the lady from the agency told me over the phone while she ignored my plea, “they also said you were too skinny.”

Chapter 12: You Do Use Your Whole Brain

When I went to school, teachers occasionally said that we only used 80 percent of our brains. They delivered this statement in the tone of an accusation. The implication was that it was their burden to teach lazy students. We kids supposedly didn't use all of our mental faculties, consistent with the same general sloth that led us to not make our beds or turn in our homework. Perhaps what they really meant was that teachers only use 80 percent of *their* brains.

However, modern scientific research has shown that this supposed "fact," like many others from my school days, is false. Science has begun to discover that what we are consciously aware of is only a small part of the total amount of brain activity, like the visual portion of an iceberg. Most cognitive processes, such as hearing, seeing, breathing, and motor coordination, occur at the subconscious level, which is why we can walk and chew gum at the same time. The complexity of the human brain is truly staggering. Some scientists believe there are more

neural connections in the human brain—over 100 trillion—than there are stars in the known universe.

Even more amazing is the riddle of consciousness. We can identify many facts about the world, such as the subatomic structure of matter and laws of physics. But there is, as of today, no explanation for how three pounds of wet, gray, organic material produces the sensation that there is a person inside of us with a distinct identity and sense of “me-ness.” And while, for example, we can understand the makeup of the electromagnetic spectrum, there is no explanation for why we can look at an object and experience it as the color red or why red-colored lingerie is considered sexy.

It turns out that we use all of our mental capacity. Yet the many varied and wondrous ways in which our brains work, such as the ability of certain people to be able to tell the Kardashians apart, still remain a mystery. But researchers are hard at work on an answer.

Chapter 13: Kid Life Is Better Than Adult Life

When I was a kid, I couldn't wait to get older. Age represented progress. When you are five years old, the thought that you will someday be ten means you can look forward to a time when you will be bigger, stronger, smarter, and more independent. You'll be able to cross the street by yourself, go over to friends' houses whenever you want, ride your bicycle around the neighborhood, and know much more about how the world operates.

And then, when you get to 16 or 17, you'll really be bigger and stronger and smarter. Forget about the bike—you'll drive a car! And at some point, you'll even get laid, the thought of which truly boggles the imagination. (I still believe that my lost virginity was a more significant event in American history than the first man on the moon.)

And when you reach those high school years, college seems like an even greater stage of development. There really will be sex, and lots of it, even if high school was not quite the bacchanal you

hoped. (For me, high school was a desert, sexual speaking; there was always an oasis over the next sand dune, but I could never quite reach it.) Suddenly, all those articles about the college hookup scene will seem incredibly tantalizing. And there will be drugs and alcohol. And even better, no parents to harsh your buzz. Okay, you'll have to go to the occasional class and turn in a paper every once in a while, but that doesn't seem all that heavy of a burden, if you take into consideration the non-stop orgy that awaits.

And once you've gotten to college, the next rung on the ladder seems even more enticing—the chance to earn money. You'll get a great job, because after all, you're a smart, special person. Even your mom agrees with that. Once you are on a first name basis with some serious cash, then all kinds of possibilities open up: a great crib, fancy vacations, a new car, and an all-around whirlwind of fun activities.

Unfortunately, after you get out of college, the reality of the cold, cruel world hits you with the force of a karate chop in the solar plexus. The first thing you realize is that adulthood, which seemed like it

was full of freedom and excitement, is also very heavy on responsibilities. You've got to pay the bills, and trust me, after more than 30 years of experience at it, they are endless. Then there's all the chores: laundry, groceries, meals for the family, housework, car maintenance, etc.

Life is filled with financial obligations and responsibilities. And much of the labor is tedious and unrewarding, like rooting for the Chicago Cubs.

Then there is the physical decline. As early as your 20s, you begin to realize no matter how hard you partied or energetic you were in your teens, your body has already begun to slow down. Just about everyone who turns 30 feels like it's a bit of a joke—*what, me a kid at heart, 30 years old?* But the joke starts to wear thin with the passage of time. Trust me, by 50 you stop laughing.

That is not to say that life is grim and awful. You can still find the journey fulfilling and rewarding—you just need to remember to make sure you get enough fiber in your diet and are under the covers with the lights out by 10 p.m. You need a good night's rest because you've got a lot of bills to pay and chores to

attend to tomorrow.

Chapter 14: Most Jobs Are Soul Deadening

As a teenager, I held the position of cashier in a local supermarket. During busy times, incredibly long checkout lines, with waits of over 30 minutes, were common. In those situations, I always felt sorry for the customers. At least I got paid, even if just minimum wage. The supermarket had a couple of baggers—I got promoted from that position myself—but generally most cashiers had to ring up and then bag the merchandise themselves. On occasion, customers frustrated by the long lines, once they got to the register, would position themselves at the end of the conveyer belt and help load in order to speed up the process, a practice that I am still in the habit of to this day.

On one particularly crowded day, I suggested to a person on my line, a woman who appeared to be in her mid-30s, that she could help bag if she wanted to, in order to get out of the store faster. I thought I did her a favor by sharing this information. She did not respond. About 10 minutes after she left, the store

manager came over and started yelling at me.

“Don’t you ever tell a customer to bag again!” he said, his face twisted with rage.

I wanted to explain that I tried to be helpful but decided not to expend the effort required to explain my actions. I simply assumed that the manager could not be intellectually reasoned with and that the course of least resistance consisted of letting him yell at me as I silently seethed with contempt.

I quit a few weeks later in order to take a summer job as a camp counselor and then applied at another local supermarket when the new school year started. By coincidence, my best friend, Howard, also applied at the same time, and we were both hired together. The store manager told us his preference was not to bring on high school seniors because he wanted to get at least two full years of employment before he had to replace them. We were both juniors, so we met his criteria. However, once work started, I almost immediately regretted my decision. The full-time employees effectively ran an organized theft ring and shoplifted all of their household grocery needs. It appeared they regarded the

opportunity to rob the store blind a mere fringe benefit at an establishment with such poor oversight by management. They must have thought to themselves that the steaks were just sitting there, almost asking to be stolen.

Howard had accumulated enough credits to graduate high school early, so he decided to start college in what would have otherwise been his senior year. And I left for a different job at the local drugstore. Again, by coincidence, after a shared first day on the job together, a mere two weeks later, we both resigned at the same time. When we informed the manager of our plans, he erupted in anger, with a degree of outrage that would have been appropriate had we stolen his car, not merely resigned our positions. I endured his tirade with equanimity. Had I cared enough to respond, I would have let him know that Lincoln freed the slaves and we likewise were allowed to leave his employ anytime we pleased.

I was able to get a little bit of karmic justice, as a few months later my mother needed to return a package of cottage cheese that had spoiled. I brought it to the service counter, and the store manager

chose not to look up or make eye contact. He silently returned the cash. Call it even. I then took on an alternative minimum wage position in a local pharmacy. This business had better working conditions and coworkers with a higher level of integrity.

A short aside on this point. My high school had a program in which all students, due to overcrowding, participated in a mandatory activity outside of school one day per week, in theory to give them some “community” experience. Several of the options included volunteer work for local nonprofit organizations, but most consisted of slave labor at menial jobs in regular businesses, including, believe or not, being required to pump gas at a service station. I had a friend who did his community service as an indentured servant in the same pharmacy that employed me. He put in a compulsory full day of work for no pay. This took place in the era before bar codes and scanners, so my friend would routinely swipe merchandise that he could readily hide in a jacket pocket, such as cigarettes, candy, and gum. He figured if he got cheated out of a paycheck, he had a

license to find a way to generate his own compensation.

In Israel, while I served as a volunteer on a kibbutz, one of the work details assigned to me involved sorting tangerines on a conveyor belt as they went past at a rate of about 10 per second. I had to pull off the bruised pieces of fruit. To my untrained eye, the conveyor belt looked like a blur of orange. I tried to spot the damaged fruit to the best of my rather limited ability. My supervisor came over, looked at the produce I had removed, and started to reprimand me in the same type of moral indignation used by the biblical prophets.

“Why did you remove produce suitable for export? Are you an idiot?” he asked.

I knew enough Hebrew to understand what he said. Determined not to get yelled at further, I gouged each piece of the soft fruit that I pulled off with my thumb, leaving it with a highly visible defect. I finished the rest of the shift bored out of my skull but free of criticism.

In college, I worked for several months in an East Coast chain convenience store that was comparable

to a 7-Eleven in size, merchandise, and customer base. The emporium closed at midnight. If you got the closing shift, then you had to complete a number of time-consuming tasks before you could leave the premises: restock the cigarettes behind the counter, clean the deli, shrink-wrap the meats and cheeses, vacuum the store, and throw out the trash. A steady stream of last minute customers, particularly nicotine addicts making one final cigarette run lest they be caught between midnight and daybreak without any smokes, made closing on time a challenge. We couldn't actually lock the door until precisely midnight, and when we did, the store usually contained a couple of customers who still had to be rung up at the register. As a result, I couldn't punch out until a few minutes after the official closing time. I was being paid minimum wage, \$3.35 per hour back then, so the additional 4 or 5 minutes on the clock amounted to mere pennies.

After I worked there for a month or so, the assistant manager approached me. She told me that management expected employees to finish the closing shift at midnight. I explained to her the

various obstacles that made closing on time impossible.

“Oh, I totally understand,” she told me. “It’s just that they want you to punch out your time card by twelve.”

In a job where I was already paid minimum wage, ownership wanted me to spend a portion of my shift off the clock.

Here’s another example of how miserable work can be. My first job out of college, in a Dickensian pension actuarial firm, had a coffee pot in the kitchen. Employees who arrived at the office before the official start time of 8:30 a.m. could help themselves to a free cup of joe. However, the clock in the kitchen was set 10 minutes fast, and I commuted in a carpool that traveled on the traffic-choked Garden State Parkway, which meant I never got to the office early enough for a cup on the house.

I’m sure that these few examples could be multiplied by the millions. Somewhere along the line expect to encounter bad bosses. If that weren’t the case, then there would be no hit song entitled, “Take This Job and Shove It.”

Chapter 15: There Are No Heroes (Part One)

Jews, despite what seems like an outsized influence on world events, number a mere 14 million. Rounded to the nearest whole number, Jews comprise zero percent of the world's population.

So, even though all the major monotheistic faiths consider the Jewish Bible, or Old Testament, to be part of their Holy Scripture, the various religions approach this document in different ways. For Christianity and Islam, it is preamble to be followed by later works that are also considered to be the Word of God. For us Jews, the Old Testament is all we've got, so we focus on it with greater intensity. And the part we concentrate on the most is the beginning, the first five books, which Jews refer to as the Torah.

The Torah contains all of the great Jewish patriarchs and leaders. These are holy men. Or are they? Consider their track records:

Adam is given only one commandment

to follow, not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. Lucky enough to live in the Garden of Eden and with only a single law on the books, what does he do but violate it?

Adam and Eve have two sons, and one of them, Cain, kills his brother Abel. In a world with a total population of four people, they can't find enough elbow room to get out of each other's way, and the first nuclear family in human history contains a murderer.

Noah is characterized as a "righteous man of his generation." Jewish commentators regard this as a backhanded compliment, meaning for a guy who lived in a time that was so sinful that God destroyed the entire world in a flood, he was merely okay.

Abraham is willing to sacrifice his son

Isaac because he believes that God has commanded him to do so. Today, someone who makes such a claim is regarded as deranged and locked up in a mental institution. Isaac goes mutely along and appears willing to have his throat slit in order to appease an invisible God.

Joseph's brothers, jealous over the beautiful coat of many colors that their father Jacob gave him, throw him into a pit and then sell him into slavery.

For Jews today, many of our prayers start out with a recitation of our patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. As the inheritors of a religion that we believe commands us toward ethical behavior, we revere spiritual ancestors who were deeply flawed individuals, yet contained also greatness within themselves.

This is not quite the paradox that it seems. Judaism holds that each individual has two impulses

in perpetual conflict, the inclination to do good, or the *yetzer hatov*, and the inclination to do evil, the *yetzer hara*. While these might seem to be polar opposites, Jews understand them to be more interrelated. For example, lust, which Christianity considers to be on the bad side of the ledger, leads to procreation, children, and families. Sexual desire, single-minded as it is, (there is a Yiddish saying: when the penis stands up, the brains get buried in the ground), can still lead to positive outcomes. Greed can motivate entrepreneurs to take great risks and found successful businesses that lead to economic growth and make all of us better off. And “good” impulses, like study, if pursued too ardently, can cause a person to be removed from the world and indifferent to human concerns.

According to a Jewish anecdote, when a rabbi saw a religious man deep in concentration over his books, ignoring the cries of his young child, he rebuked the man and said, “I don’t know what you think you are studying, but whatever it is, if it causes you to ignore a crying child, then it isn’t Torah.”

So we’re all flawed. Even the heroes we worship.

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Yours truly,

Author Ed Harris