

Life as a Highway

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Note: As I always maintain, everything I say below is only my opinion, which is based on my own experiences and observations. – Swami Devanand

The highway of life has multiple lanes

You must have all heard the song “Life is a highway”, right? I think it’s a beautiful song with some interesting philosophy. But, it misses to make any mention of “lanes”, and that is what I would like to discuss in this essay.

One of my favorite radio programs is Garrison Keillor’s “A Writer’s Almanac”. At the end of every show he says, “Be well, do good work, and keep in touch!”

It is best to view life as a multi-lane highway. Each lane represents an aspect of human life or human well-being. For example: intellectual, emotional, material, spiritual, professional, physical, artistic, etc. I suppose you could add more lanes. The “material” aspect is about making money and meeting the material requirements of yourself and your dependents. The “professional” aspect is about building a career and having a professional activity that is challenging and meaningful. And so on.

You have the opportunity to use as many lanes as you want – sometimes many simultaneously, sometimes one at a time. The key is to try to make progress and enjoy as many lanes as appeal to you. Indeed the more lanes you can handle, the richer your life will be.

As you can see, this view of life is quite broad and allows us to live a “balanced” life. It is never possible to ride all lanes all the time. Sometimes (like for a student) the “material” or even the “professional” aspect may not be very relevant. But, it helps to periodically review progress on each of these fronts. Also, when you experience lack of activity (or even failure and hence frustration) in one lane, you can console yourself by the progress made in the other lanes.

The lane of physical well-being:

First of all, physical well-being involves having a healthy body. Our body is our greatest tangible natural asset, and as such, has the greatest impact on our happiness. So it must be taken good care of – through regular exercise and proper eating habits. There is no excuse for not spending at least 30 minutes every day to perform physical exercises. There is a great variety to choose from: yoga, surya-namaskar, pranayam, aerobics, martial arts, sports, etc. What matters is not the choice of exercise, but consistency. Morning is the best time to perform exercise, and one trick to ensure that you do it regularly is to start your day (i.e. do every other morning chore) after the exercise. Playing an outdoor sport is a fantastic activity – it not only exercises the body, but also is very relaxing for the mind. One must spend the time to know at least one sport and play it regularly.

Physical well-being includes having a pleasant personality. An important aspect is communication skill (written and spoken). One must pay attention to developing these skills in whatever language(s) one is interested in. There are numerous information sources on this topic that describe what is meant by good communication skill and how to develop it. It is important to note that good communication ability includes the physical aspect (pronunciation and rendering), the intellectual aspect (thought process and articulation), and the social aspect (how to build relationships).

The lane of intellectual well-being:

Intellectual health involves feeding our powerful brain with challenging and nourishing work. We must constantly accept challenges in our respective walks of life, or even as a hobby, and challenge our brain. Our intellectual capacity is unlimited; but it is sadly rarely used beyond mundane day-to-day problem-solving.

Life-long learning is an important technique to stay intellectually healthy. There are literally hundreds of things to learn: music, drawing, painting, building things, cooking, swimming, skating, playing chess or bridge, programming, and so on. There is no point trying too many things at once. But we must constantly learn something new. And do it sincerely.

Building a good personality and good habits are part of intellectual development. Good habits include time management, being organized, being independent (doing all your daily things yourself and not depend on your wife/mother or housemaids), etc.

Intellectual growth includes developing awareness about the world around us. This can be done by looking up information sources, or by joining certain groups that focus on certain activities. The idea is to get more familiar with the history, geography, politics, and sociology of the world around us. It is not just about collecting knowledge but understanding how the human race has evolved.

The lane of emotional well-being:

Emotional health involves understanding our emotions (there are quite a few!), distinguishing the positive ones from the negative, and ensuring that on the whole our positive emotions are more powerful and prevalent than the negative ones.

Emotional “downs” are usually temporary, and there are sometimes genuine causes that contribute to them: age transitions (from adolescence to youth or youth to middle age), status transitions (leaving the parental shelter to become more independent), transitions in social status (being forced to interact with a lot of strangers), and so on.

Self-identification, i.e. developing the feeling (which may or may not be true) that you are different from others, can cause emotional disturbance, especially since it usually coincides with the age transition mentioned above. You cannot mix up well, cannot enjoy gatherings, cannot enjoy parties, cannot participate in certain group activities, feel lonely, etc. The trick is to first

accept that you are different. Once you accept it, make sure your perceived unique needs (like the desire to learn, the desire to do interesting and challenging things, the desire to do adventures, etc) are taken care of. You will need to look for people with similar interests (they may not be in the same town or of the same age) and keep in touch with them. Such people are few, but they do exist. You just have to be patient, and keep looking.

Emotional health involves building and maintaining healthy bonds with fellow humans. A healthy relationship consists of respect, love, and action (acts of help and affection). Building a social network is all about taking more interest in people around you - your relatives, friends, classmates, teachers, anyone. The idea is not to go after each and everyone, but to become more active in interacting with people - even if you feel you are different. If someone shows interest in you, definitely respond. If you find someone interesting, try to go and talk. You sometimes have to do things that others do - like spend time chatting, go see movies, or whatever. Of course, you **MUST NOT** get into bad habits. Building relations can be difficult, painful, frustrating, and tiring. But it is worth the results. Even if you make a few good contacts through this effort, it is very satisfying. The goal is not to just make friends, or fall in love (these should happen naturally). Instead, the goal is to create a network of humanity in which you feel connected in some way without any expectation. You have to manage the tricky balance between getting too involved in anyone - especially in their emotional problems, and being unsympathetic and careless.

The lane of spiritual well-being:

Contrary to popular belief, spiritual happiness need not involve pursuit of God or being "religious". It actually involves building a personal philosophy and value system that allows you to be at peace with yourself and your way of life (the decisions and choices you make and the returns you get). Mahatma Gandhi, for example, decided that truth and non-violence were the guiding lights for everything that he did in life. Creating such a value system for oneself is an important part of spiritual pursuit.

Spiritual well-being can be achieved by helping others: the joy you get when you help someone (without any selfish motive) is a spiritual joy.

Spiritual well-being can be achieved by pursuing understanding of Nature and things around you, and pursuing answers to deep questions regarding your existence, meaning and purpose of life, etc.

To develop our capability to pursue spiritual well-being we must develop interest in philosophy, reflect on deeper questions in life, and divert attention from ourselves to others.

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