

THE ART OF LIVING

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With Rev. Richard Maraj

So these three brothers grew up with a mom who was very, very critical. And they were always trying to get her approval. So they grew up and became very wealthy, and they all decided to give their money a gift that would impress her and hopefully win her approval. The first son bought her a huge house. The second son bought her a limousine with a driver that was available 24/7. And the third son: he bought her a parrot that could, not just talk, but could read, because he remembered that the mother loved to read. And as she was getting older, it was getting harder for her to read. And she particularly loved the Bible and could recite any Bible verse on demand. And he also thought the parrot could be a good companion for her.

And so they all received their thank you notes. And the first son: his thank you note said, *"The house you bought me is way too big. I only live in a small part and I have to clean the whole thing by myself."*

The second son's said, *"I rarely ever leave the house anymore, so I hardly use the limousine you gave me, and when I do use it, the driver is always rude."*

And then the third son's thank you note said, *"My darling baby boy, you know just what your mother loves. Thank you! The chicken was delicious!"* [Congregation laughs]

Alright. [Laughs] Alright. Whew!

So today [laughs] the talk is titled, "The Art of Living." And I love that, because this concept, idea and philosophy really offers a profound perspective on how we can live in a way that will enrich our lives. I like it because it sees how we can live with a depth of understanding of the texture and nuance of the things that we experience during the course of our lives ... of the vast range of experiences, emotions, relationships and challenges and triumphs and missteps and mistakes that we make in life as we try to live -- and put it all together -- to live our best life.

The fact is: Life is not easy. And it is not simple. Sometimes we even make it more complicated and challenging. But the art of living knows that we're all unique. Knows that there is no one right answer or right way to do -- no perfect way to handle things. However, the art of living really is about certain principles and practices and approaches of how we could live more fully, and how we can learn to live more artfully and masterfully.

So today I want to talk about the four pillars of artful living.

And the first one is from a quote from Socrates. When I heard this as a kid, I had no idea what it meant and, in fact, I didn't really like it, because it sounded very negative. And here's what Socrates said. He said, *"The unexamined life is not worth living."*

And I thought, *"Boy, that sounds kind of negative,"* until I realized that what he's saying is the exact opposite to what it might be. And he's saying that life is so worthwhile -- life is such a precious and wonderful gift, and a blessed opportunity -- that it behooves us to pause and step back and examine how we're living it.

To examine how we're showing up. To examine how we are interacting with others. To examine it and ask ourselves, *"Is this the way I'm meant to be living? And is this what I'm meant to be doing?"*

You know, to examine one's life is to step back and look at how things are going and ask ourselves the Dr. Phil question: *"So how's that working for you?"* To look at our lives -- how we're living it -- and asking: *"Is there anything I need to change? Is there anything I need to improve? Is there something I need to heal? Is there something I need to face and deal with? Is there something I need to open up to?"*

This whole idea of **EXAMINING OUR LIVES** is also looking at: What are our values? And what are our priorities? What level of priority is our family? Our self-care? Our spiritual practice? Our social life? What

is the priority of helping others? And what, in the area of our priorities, should be higher than it is now? And what should be, maybe, lower?

Examining our lives also includes asking the question: *"What do I want people to think about me and say about me when I am gone?"* Or even better, *"What would I like people to say and think about who I am while I am here, and what's going on right now?"*

You know, at the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, there's three famous aphorisms. The first one is, *"Know thyself."* The second one is, *"Nothing to excess."* And the third -- my favorite: *"Certainty brings insanity."* That's a lot of wisdom! That's a lot of wisdom there, but the one I want to talk about in the whole idea of examining our lives is to *"Know thyself."*

If we want to live a better life, we need to know ourselves fully. To know our dreams; our thoughts. To know our sadness and our woundedness; our strengths and our weaknesses; our character. To know our humanity. To know our divinity; our spirituality. And to truly accept who we are and embrace our individuality.

And that sounds really easy, doesn't it? *"Know thyself."* But the fact is that, sometimes, we don't know. There was a Star Trek episode, and Jean-Luc Picard ... is that how I say his name? Oh, good! And somebody asked him, *"Have you ever been a stranger to yourself?"* And his answer was, *"Yes; many, many, many times."*

Because sometimes I think we are disconnected from what we want and what we feel. Sometimes we don't really know who we are. Anybody remember the movie, *Runaway Bride*? Julia Roberts ran away from three guys at the altar? And one of my favorite things that showed how she didn't know who she was: her friend said to her like, when she dates a guy who likes scrambled eggs, she orders scrambled eggs. When she dates a guy who likes poached eggs, she'd get poached eggs. And a guy who likes sunny-side up ... And he said, *"What are you doing? It's like you don't even know who you are! You don't even know what kind of eggs you like!"*

And it sounds silly. But the truth is: sometimes we don't know who we are. And if we want to live a better life, we need to know ourselves. All of our ourselves and all aspects of ourselves. To examine our lives is to examine ourselves, because it is only by knowing all aspects of ourselves that we can live our lives more artfully.

So my question for you is: How well do you know yourself? And are you willing to do some examination of how you're living your life; how you're showing up; and who you're about to help you live your life more intentionally or consciously? And more artfully?

The second thing -- the pillar of artful living -- is to **LEARN HOW TO LET GO**. Sounds simple. One of my favorite quotes -- Havelock Ellis; he said this: *"All the art of living lies in the fine mingling of letting go and holding on."* All the art of living lies in the fine mingling of letting go and holding on!

And here's what I think: Sometimes we hold on to things we should let go of and let go of things we should hold on to. And so the art of living is to understand and apply knowing what to hold on to and what to let go of.

I've come to believe if there's an area in our lives where we're stuck or things aren't clicking or moving forward, or we're feeling unhappy, the most important question is to ask ourselves is: *"So what am I holding on to? What am I still dwelling on? Where in my life am I still stuck in the past? And what am I holding on to that isn't healthy or serving me in the greatest way? Where am I holding on to a grudge? Or where am I still attached to something?"* Maybe attached to my "glory days." Or attached that I have to have this thing to be happy? Sometimes that attachment of holding on to "how things should be and I won't be happy until I get that thing." All those aspects of holding on can keep us stuck.

We, as human beings, tend to have a tendency of wanting to hold on. We associate the idea of holding on with being safe. Holding on is being tough and strong, and it's a wise decision and persevering. All these ideas that holding on is the best thing for us.

So we hold on to stuff. We hold on to the past. We hold on to old relationships. We hold on to everything, thinking that will make a better life. And then we're afraid to let go, because we think it'd be scary: *"If I let go, I'll get lost."* *"If I let go, everything will fall apart."* *"If I let go, I'll fail."* *"If I let go, I'll lose everything."* But you know what the truth is? The exact opposite to that! Holding on actually blocks our happiness and our success, and letting go actually liberates us and frees us to move forward with ease and grace.

Thich Nat Hahn in his book, *The Art of Living*, says, *"The first step to happiness is letting go."* The first step to happiness is letting go. Because when we let go of things, the first thing we feel is a sense of peace. A sense of freedom.

You know, sometimes we think that addition is the key principle of a happier life. *"If I have more friends; if I have more money; if I have more stuff ..."* Addition! Add more = should be happier. But the truth is: Sometimes subtraction is the key to happiness. Sometimes it's downsizing and simplifying and letting go and releasing of things that we hold on to lighten ourselves, and to feel a greater sense of peace.

There's a story about Lord Krishna speaking to some of the people. And he said, *"I have a great gift for you! It is the gift of immortality! Come and reach and you can take it!"*

And some of the people said, *"Thank you, but we can't right now, because we have a handful of mangos."* [Congregation laughs]

And Lord Krishna said, *"Put down your mangos, and then your hands will be free, so you can accept this gift!"*

And they said, *"Lord, we like our mangos, so why don't you just give us our gift. And we promise we'll let go of the mangos later."*

And it's just a silly story to show the human tendencies of our resistance to letting go.

You know one of the keys about letting go? What it's really about? It's about trust. Do you trust that, if you let go, everything's going to be okay? Do you trust that, if you let go, there will be something greater that will come forth in its place? Immediately there will be peace if we let go of the resistance; let go of the attachment; let go of the fears. But also being aware that, when we let go, we open a space to allow even more good to come into our lives.

Letting go is one of the toughest -- yet one of the most liberating -- of all spiritual practices, and absolutely necessary if you want to grow spiritually, or even move forward in our lives with greater peace.

And it isn't as complicated as you think. It's just a thing! *"What is this thing that I'm holding on to?"* And just be willing to let it go. Be willing to release it to God and free yourself from the past.

So my question for you is: What do you need to let go? What is it that you're holding on to that isn't helping you? And are you willing to practice this pillar of artful living? Of letting go?

So the third pillar is to **ROLL WITH AND FLOW WITH LIFE**. How many people have ever had some part of your life go differently than you expected? Anybody ever have that happen? [Congregation laughs] Anybody ever found that suddenly something went wrong, and your life moved in a completely different direction than was expected?

You know, one of the things in life is that things will never always go our way. And one of the key principles to live an artful life, and a happy life, and a successful life: willing to be flexible. Willing to roll and flow with how life goes. An openness; a willingness; an adaptability about life.

Because sometimes when things go wrong, all we can do is see the bad. All we can do is resist and get angry that it didn't go the way that we wanted to. And we get blinded with frustration; blinded by disappointment. But the interesting this is: Life is always showing us experiences. We like to label them as "good" and "bad," and sometimes they can feel that way-- either way! It is important for us to roll

with it; to be open to it: to how it might teach us or show us a different perspective; how it might help us! And instead of wasting our time resisting, hating and being angry, is to actually roll with it! To go with it; learn with it; and see what it has to teach.

I read this children's story about this turtle that got flipped upside down. And when turtles get flipped upside down, they could just die, because they could not flip back up. And so this turtle gets flipped over, and at first it's panicking; freaking out; getting mad; yelling; screaming, "*Help; help; help!*" It feels all alone. And then after a while, laying there upside down, the turtle realizes, "*Hey; I never saw the sky like this before. Hey; I've never seen trees from underneath like this before. I've never seen birds fly; I've never seen the stars at night.*" All of these things! And so suddenly he just calms down.

And the fact is: whatever it is that didn't go your way, life is showing you some different perspective if you'll pay attention and not keep resisting it and being angry. That it might have something to show us. It might have something to teach us. Eventually, the turtle did get flipped back up! [Laughs] But I still think it appreciated the fact that it got shown a new perspective. I bet you its life was more diverse and joyful because it got exposed to something new. And just because it's different doesn't mean that it's "bad." We have to look for what life is trying to show us and teach us.

Charles Morgan said this. He said, "*The art of living does not consist in preserving and and clinging to a particular mode of happiness, but allowing happiness to change its form without being disappointed by the change; happiness, like a child, must be allowed to grow up.*"

One of the things is: life is going to change, with or without our permission. The question is: Are we going to resist it? Or are we going to go with the flow and learn and gain from it? The message here really is about: Don't be rigid; be flexible.

So my question is: How well do you roll and flow with the changes and the unexpected challenges of life? And we need to heed the advice of the great Beatitude that said, "Blessed are the flexible, for they shall not be bent out of shape." [Congregation laughs]

So the final pillar -- the fourth and final pillar -- of artful living is to **PRACTICE MINDFULNESS**. Everybody knows that mindfulness is about living in the present moment. It is being in your body and the here and now being aware of what you're feeling, and all the experiences and things that are going on in our lives. Because there is power in the present! There is peace in the present! We are most alive and engaged in ourselves and our relationships when we are fully present.

Sometimes you'll think, "*Well, what's the big deal about mindfulness?*" Well, the reason mindfulness is important is that often we're just not there. And when we're not there, that means we're either in the past or the future, and that means our mind is either regretting or worrying or anxious or fearful. And we end up rethinking things over and over again and creating a lot of inner turmoil, and robbing ourselves of peace; robbing ourselves of mental focus; robbing ourselves of the ability to make better choices and live more creatively, consciously and intentionally.

You know, when we come back to the present, there can be two sets of situations: You live in the present, and it is a more positive experience. It is more joyful; you notice how beautiful the world is; you're engaged and connected into the things you're doing; and that is a beautiful, wonderful way to live.

And the second one is coming to the present and sometimes it's uncomfortable. Sometimes we're going through grief; we're going through sadness. Sometimes life has experiences that are not happy and comfortable. And our initial reaction is to not be in the present. To avoid and run and pretend these things don't hurt, or avoid it long enough, thinking, "*It'll get better if I just push it aside.*"

But the truth is: it doesn't. It actually festers. Eckhart Tolle calls it a "pain body" when we have this energy that's stuck in us. All the emotions and pains and all the things we went through that we "stuffed" and denied that's always there, and gets triggered by other things, because that energy there is dense and we haven't dealt with it.

And so it is said that the best way to handle those situations is to be present to them. To move through the sadness; to move through the grief. And then it actually just moves through us. It comes in and through us.

But if we try to resist it, guess what happens? It gets stuck and stays in us! So being mindful and in the present to feel these things and move through them is actually the healthiest thing we can do to be liberated from them. And we actually can gain from them.

And how do we do mindfulness? By meditation. By quieting the mind and bringing ourselves to the present by prayer.

And of course, the universal one is by following our breath. So everyone, just take a deep breath, and notice the air as it comes in, and then follow the air as it leaves your body. Again, notice the air as it comes through your nose; notice the air as it leaves your mouth. Again, feel the air as it comes in. And one more time, feel the air as it leaves.

As simple as that activity is, it is amazing how it brings us away from the past, away from the future, and brings us right to the here and now. It is the consistent practice of being present. And, yes; your mind will wander! And you just keep bringing it back.

But when we do bring into every experience mindfulness -- being fully present in the here and now -- we actually live our lives more fully; we're more alive and more engaged; and even the simplest things can find joy and happiness.

Here's what Thich Nat Han says. He said, *"The time of brushing your teeth is not lost time It is also life! Don't just do it to get it done. Enjoy being mindful, and concentrate on the act of tooth brushing."* [Congregation laughs] *"This is the art of living. You don't need to think of anything else; you don't need to hurry. Just relax and enjoy brushing your teeth. When you do this, you encounter yourself and you encounter your life deeply in the present moment."*

That being fully engaged in the simplest things, from doing the laundry to stacking the dishwasher -- whatever it is -- actually brings more meaning; more peace; more joy; and keeps our minds away from the past or future. But we are most fully engaged in life now. Because sometimes we can just go through the motion and just zip through things, and not even be aware of what happened.

Anybody ever eat your food so fast you didn't even taste it? Anybody ever have an experience where you looked at your watch or your phone, and then you looked away, and you don't know what time it was? Because you just really didn't actually look or pay attention?

I remember once, when I was in seminary, I used to live on the golf course, and it was really beautiful. But I was late, and I just got in my car and booted myself there. Got out of the car and booted myself into the chapel. And someone said, *"Hey; how's the weather out there?"* And I said, *"I don't know!"* [Congregation laughs] I was so not in the moment that I did not even pay attention to what the weather was outside.

We've been given this great gift of life. It is really a great gift! And it doesn't last forever. We don't get ... Our spirits might be eternal, but our bodies have a limited shelf life! And so life is a precious gift. Jesus said he came that we might have life and have it more abundantly. An abundant life isn't about quantity; it's about quality. And to me, living in the present moment is the way to enrich our lives. It gives more meaning and greater fulfillment.

And the four pillars of abundant living are

One: To examine how you're living now. Look at your life and see if there's something that you want to change. And get to "know thyself" -- know who we are. Because the better we know ourselves, the better we can live our lives.

The second one is to let go and think: What is it that I'm holding on to? That should always be a question when we feel stuck: "What am I holding on to?" And just practice consciously letting it go.

The third one is to roll with life, because everything isn't going to go our way. We've got to be willing to be flexible; roll with it; and learn whatever it might have to teach us and show us.

And finally, practice mindfulness. Bring our attention back to the here and now. Because life is now. Love is now. The greatest power that we have is in the here and now.

Again, life isn't easy. But it can be enriching and joyful and more meaningful when we practice the art of living.

God bless you! [Congregation applauds]

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