



ADVICE TO EMERY

A grandfather distills decades of wisdom and love by Charles Johnson

One of my greatest pleasures, as a grandfather, is watching my 6-year-old grandson Emery discover the world around him. He's a beautiful, brilliant boy, who says that the cluttered study where I co-author with his mother Elisheba stories for a children's book series, *The Adventures of Emery Jones, Boy Science Wonder*—yes, the protagonist bears his name—is really his study. There, he plays video games on my PC, writes and draws his own books at my drawing table, does his French lessons, plays his guitar, and regales me with stories about himself and his friends. He's confident and curious, as comfortable as any kid could be with creativity, and he loves learning. A friend of mine calls him my "mini-me."

So it's true, then, that I see so much of myself in my grandson. And that, of course, makes me wonder: What will his world be like as he grows into adolescence, then young manhood? Do I have any "wisdom," based on my 70 years of experience, worth sharing with him? Are there any perennial truths that I—as a trained philosopher, a Buddhist practitioner, and an artist—can impart to Emery that might make his journey through life easier or more rewarding?

Looking at the problems I see in the world around me, I realize that there are so many things I want to say to him about the goodness, truth, and beauty that life offers. And I want to warn him about the dangers, too, all the minefields I feel he should stay away from in order to know happiness and avoid unnecessary suffering. The problem is that grandfatherly "wisdom" is probably as plentiful as blackberries—I have too much to tell him. And yet, as I think about all I might say, I suspect that the highlights I've learned from circling the sun 70 times can be reduced to 10 simple ideas:

1 The first kernel of advice I'd share with my grandson is a challenge that comes down to us from the ancient Greeks: Know thyself. It's a challenge closely related to another Greek idea: The unexamined life is not worth living. I want Emery to revisit those statements and wrestle with them during every season and stage of his life.

2 As a Buddhist, I want my grandson to glimpse the truth behind what spiritual teacher Ruth King means in her book *Mindful of Race: Transforming Racism from the Inside Out* when she says "Life is not personal, permanent, or perfect." Life is not personal because we have no enduring, unchanging self. We are verbs, not nouns. Therefore, we can always change

our lives to fit new circumstances and reinvent ourselves. Put another way, we are always free. As King says, "We are a series of ever-changing elemental processes, all arising and passing away. Who we are emerges out of interrelating causes and conditions." What happens in life is not permanent because all phenomenon are ever changing. Finally, life is not perfect. "Shit happens," writes King, "and we are not in control of having things go our way."

3 I want my grandson to see that "whatever it is, it's you." What do I mean by that? Simply this: Whatever you are experiencing, whether it be a person, place, or thing, you are in one way or another meaningfully connected to it.

4 I would ask Emery to read Dr. Martin Luther King's favorite sermon, "The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life." This is the speech that earned King his first job as a pastor at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, AL, and he also delivered it in London at St. Paul's Cathedral when on his way to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. In this speech, he reminded his audience that the first dimension of a complete life was self-acceptance, development of one's personal resources, and doing life's work "so well that the living, the dead, or the unborn couldn't do it any better." The second dimension was learning "that there is nothing greater than to do something for others." And the third dimension for King, a theologian and this nation's most prominent preacher and moral voice in the 1960s, was the quest for the divine, because "We were made for God, and we will be restless until we find rest in him." Like King, we should never forget or ignore the spiritual register in our lives.

5 I want my grandson to understand that pain is something that comes in life, but suffering is voluntary or optional. In other words, life will bring as much pain as it does pleasure, but pain need not become suffering if we (or our egos) do not dwell upon or nourish the pain (or the pleasures) by becoming attached to them, because pleasure and pain, like everything in this universe, is impermanent.

6 I would advise him to learn the practice of meditation, especially mindfulness training during his adolescent years, and to include

in his life every day the experience of beauty, whether that be in music, nature, a painting, literature, or anywhere he can find it in a world that offers too much in the way of ugliness, falsity, confusion, delusion, and evil.

7 He should also understand the Buddhist wisdom in the phrase "open mouth, already big mistake." What this means is identical to the Muslim wisdom that tells us that before we speak we should pass whatever we say through three gatekeepers. The three gatekeepers are questions: Is it true? Is it necessary? Will it do no harm? If our speech can pass these three gates, then it is worthy of sharing with others.

8 I would urge him to be a lifelong learner. But also to understand the importance of epistemological humility, that is, to see in a universe as vast and mysterious as ours that our knowledge is always incomplete, and that our views and opinions are merely that—just limited views and opinions shaped by our conditioning in the social world.

9 He should also understand that he is already perfect and whole, that nothing needs to be added to his being for him to experience happiness. After all, it takes an entire planet, indeed an entire universe, to support and nourish his being.

10 I could go on and on, sharing with Emery his Grandpa's experience with blue-collar jobs, earning academic degrees, supporting a family, my encounters with workplace bullies, supportive coworkers and friends, with romance, and martial arts training. But I think what is most important is the spirit or intention he brings to whatever he does. And so the final thought I would share with him is that there is no greater experience that we can have than love. Unselfish love for and service to someone or something in this world. For that is the wellspring from which all good things flow. 🌀

Charles Johnson is a MacArthur Fellow and professor emeritus at the University of Washington. His fiction includes Dr. King's Refrigerator, Dreamer, Faith and the Good Thing, and Middle Passage, for which he won the National Book Award. His new collection of short stories Night Hawks, was released this spring. He lives in Seattle. ©Charles Johnson all rights reserved