

What I Wish I knew Then, What I Know Now.....(Or THINK I know!) Stephen Salamunovich

Whenever someone gets asked to give a commencement speech, I imagine there's a very common theme that gets picked. Namely: What is it that I wish I knew then, that THINK I know now.....or things I've learned over the years that I think are valuable....or something along these lines. I'll warn you right now that this talk is going to follow along that well-worn path. Some of them are hard-learned and some are not. Some I haven't learned and am still working on, having realized at least how worthy of pursuit they truly are! At any rate, I can only hope that this information will be useful to you but I have to also include the standard disclaimers: "Void where prohibited and your mileage may vary."

When I graduated from high school 40 years ago this week, I had my life all planned out. I was going to be a musician since I was already on that track pretty much all of my childhood and was the son of a musician. So the other aspects of life just weren't that interesting to me with the possible exception of girls. I was given a wonderful private school education and barely made it out of there with passing grades and a few athletic records. Not because I tried and only accomplished the minimum but because of my previously-mentioned myopically funneled interests. And we had things like beginning philosophy, political science and language arts and many other things that have since become incredibly valuable to me having since realized how much more important they have impacted my quality of life! I was that guy who studied in the car before a test and pulled a C. And I have a bizarrely amazing memory for trivial facts and figures like the members of Kennedy's cabinet or the dates and times of Charles Lindbergh's takeoff and landing in the Spirit of St. Louis, many baseball records and who did which songs! But don't ask me where I put my keys or my wallet this morning!

I enrolled in college as a music major and had a big head of steam going in that direction without much distraction opposing it. Then fate stepped in and my sister died suddenly my freshman year. It changed me and my outlook on life greatly. It took the wind out of my sails quite a bit too and I took some time off before resuming my education. I had been set on being a studio musician since that was the standard procedure for musicians from the 5 square mile area where I'm from. (You guys did the song "Hold The Line" by Toto and they were the band from my neighborhood and I played with their guitarist in high school and their keyboard player who wrote that song is actually my cousin.)

Anyway, once I started getting into the recording studios of Los Angeles in the early 80's, I found out a dirty little secret that there were a lot of people who were talented enough to do the work. So whether you got hired or not had to do with other things like, how much fun and entertaining you were, who you knew and the worst, whether or not you brought cocaine to the gig. Not fun for me! Slowly but surely, the work environment started getting more "political" and since I wasn't built for that and didn't like cocaine, it wasn't long before I started feeling like a fish out of water. A friend who I had known my whole life was a casting director and on the occasions I used to discuss actors and her work with her, she had gotten the impression I'd be good at that type of work. On days when I didn't have a session, she started asking if I would come in and run sessions for her. I didn't have any specific experience or training to do that but in the bands I'd been in, I always knew the difference between what I wanted to hear and what I was hearing and how to ask for the prior instead of the latter. And directing talent for casting sessions didn't turn out to be much different. She and her partner kept offering me a job and I kept turning it

down stating that I was a musician! But eventually, after one really heinous recording session, I accepted. The next five years of intense apprenticeship more than prepared me for a career as a professional film and television casting director.

I moved up here 27 years ago having had enough of Los Angeles which bore little resemblance to the town in which I grew up. Over the past 31 years, I've run close to a third of a million auditions. Some with Academy-Award-winning actors and I've worked with Oscar-Winning directors too. And just this last week, I retired from casting! I've been fortunate enough to win the highest award in my profession as well and while doing that, I've still managed to forge a parallel career as a musician working with name artists. I'm in the editing stages of a book I've written about the very thing I'm doing now. Presenting and communicating publicly. I've also managed to coach people appearing on television shows, live performances and radio as a parallel career during the time I was in casting as well.

OK enough of my background. Here's what I can tell you after having been through all of that and more than I can say here.

1. You are not defined by your successes or your failures. You're defined by how you handle them and I can tell you that if you want to handle them well, grace and a sense of humor will be significant components for you to develop for the bad ones..and gratitude and humility are necessary attributes for the good ones!...
2. You can't spend fame at the grocery store. No matter how much unwarranted importance society places on it, it doesn't make you more talented or a better person. It just means more people know who you are. PERIOD!
3. Gratitude is the most valuable state you can choose. It attracts more for which to feel grateful.
4. People choose you for friendship because of what they get out of it. Just as you choose them! And that time when one or both of you aren't getting something from it, may end. Grace will allow you to navigate the ebb and flow of friends in and out of your life and release or embrace them with understanding and compassion for both of you.
5. As soon as you define and label yourself, it's a little "death". The end of possibility. The inquisition of the never-ending question is far more gratifying a place to live and will propel you through life.
6. The most intelligent people I've ever known are the ones who are the most curious. The number of degrees they have is no barometer. They're also never bored because there's always something to learn or figure out.
7. If you place more importance on what you have inside to give and then actually give it, you will find you have more to receive than you can ever imagine!
8. Even though 60 seconds will always equal a minute, it is with great certainty that this same interval of time and all others above it, will begin to speed up more and more rapidly as you get older. Even though this doesn't make sense, it's true!

9. And as James Taylor said, The Secret o' Life is enjoying the passage of time. And therein lies the art of it!
10. The sooner you learn about and understand the Karpman Drama Triangle, the better. It will save you years of therapy. Look it up!
11. All your problems are rooted in the past and based on what could happen in the future. The solution?? Live in the present time exclusively!
12. If you're going to speak, always tell the truth. It's far too much work to keep track of where and to whom you told lies to properly cover your butt!
13. Rather than wasting time trying to impress people, instead focus on experiencing a life that's so stimulating you wouldn't have had time for trying to impress people anyway!
14. Reality television is an oxymoron! (It's almost all entirely scripted!)
15. Figure out that we are all connected and are regularly fooled by our five senses into believing the fallacy that this isn't true!
16. If your belief in scarcity is strong enough to make you decide to treat anyone shabbier than you'd treat yourself, then plan on that scarcity coming back on you not because it exists or because of "karma" but because your beliefs are powerful and create your reality. And your beliefs about Reality go both ways!
17. People you love will pass away. Don't let them do it without knowing how you feel!
18. The telecommunications Act of 1996 has made it harder for you to get a diversity of news as the majority of media outlets are now owned by just six companies! Exercise critical thinking as it's more important than ever to second and third guess what you hear from the American press!
19. If you're feeling afraid, ask yourself what it is that you actually fear. After you get an answer, ask the following question over and over until you have a "bottom line" one: "Because if that happens, then? Many times, you'll find that the actual thing you REALLY fear at the bottom of it all, isn't likely to be an outcome of whatever it is you're thinking about doing!
20. Someone defined for me the difference between a stand and a position as this: A position is something you decide just for yourself like "I like pizza!" A stand is something you declare that also has a mutual benefit to others like "I believe that pizza should be available for anyone who wants it!" Try whenever possible to take stands as I mentioned, we're all in this together!
21. It's far more powerful to move in the direction of what you want, (Love) than away from what you don't want. (Fear)
22. Remember that no one attacks you out of love. So it's got to be fear as those are the only two things that motivate us in life as every influencer can be reduced down to one or the other. This should help you figure out what to do about that when it happens.

23. Instead of trying to avoid darkness, shine your light so bright that darkness has to move down the block a fair piece.

24. Peace and joy don't just happen to you even though a relatively happy childhood seems to train us into thinking they do. You have to choose them regularly to make them a habit.

25. Although you'll eventually find this out when you have kids, your parents weren't given an owners manual for parenting either! Most of them are just doing the best they can and stuff you think shouldn't have fallen through the cracks on their watch, will. Forgive them and hope your kids eventually do the same.

26. You can never go wrong quoting Mark Twain and I especially love this one! He said, "When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years."

27. When Abraham Lincoln was chastised by his wife (Mary Lincoln tended to do that a lot!) for appointing a political enemy to his cabinet, He replied, "But madam. Do I not vanquish my enemies by turning them into my friends?"

28. There will be times you'll want to rid yourself of your ego because it can sure get you into trouble. But it's necessary so keep it busy using it to be creative! That's actually what it's for!

29. If you choose a life partner, try to be the type of person you want to attract so you're bringing the same things TO them that you expect FROM them. And spend more time considering how much you can bring to them instead of get from them!

30. Flags and anthems and pledges are great! But instead of just jingoistically saluting, singing or reciting them, consider that any great nation, EARNS those tributes and allegiances. And it should do so every day. Not by merely standing on its past laurels and especially not by international showings of wealth and power above all else. It earns them with the application of compassionate benevolence, wisdom and stewardship. Not just for itself and its citizens, but for ALL the citizens of the world, for other species and the planet herself.

31. And whether you call it God or love or the universe or whatever you want, there is an energy that governs the laws of the universe. That energy either pulls something toward you or pushes it away based on how much you express love or fear as there are no two other energies that command it as we already mentioned. Choose love whenever you can!!

And regarding that last sentence. Every single problem that we face as a people is caused by a condition I've heard described as the "pre-supposition of separateness." In other words, we have these five senses that essentially blind us to the reality of our energetic connection not only to each other but to the planet and everything on it! We know from quantum physics that two things can occupy the same space but in different dimensions. And energy is what allows this phenomenon because it transcends what we can access with our five senses. But this energy and our connection to everything is more true than the physical universe we THINK we experience so concretely every day. Once we get that we are truly connected to each other, to our planet, to the animals living on it, to the energy of love which is expansive, we can solve

every single problem that we have today! Every one! If we can make this “quantum” leap in our understanding and really live that way, we can be granted the opportunity to stick around on a planet that otherwise, will bounce us un-ceremoniously off this spinning ball as natural selection is a very harsh mistress! But if we can pull this off? We’ll look back on the time when we waged war on each other and financial scarcity and marginalization because of ideology, race, gender, religion or any other difference, just like we looked at the time we used to think the world was flat. Here’s hoping for that time!

And the last thing I want to leave you with is best epitomized in a scene from a film from 1981 that won the Oscar for Best Picture called, “Chariots of Fire.” The lead character, a young man in his early 20’s named Eric, is having a conversation with his sister. She’s dismayed that he’s so interested in running track and doesn’t seem to want to come back home to be a minister like his father and grandfather. Finally she asks him, “Why do you like running so much anyway?” He answers, “Because God made me fast. And when I run, I can feel his pleasure!” There’s no better reason to do anything in life. I wish you always, God’s pleasure in all you do!
Congratulations!