

There have been three distinct occasions in my brief 33-plus years in which I truly believed I might die.

The first occurred in 1991 when two college buddies and I traveled to beautiful Hawaii for vacation. On one sunny day, we drove to the North Shore of Oahu to enjoy the sand and surf of the world-famous Pipeline, a legendary beach and surfing mecca. After arriving at the beach, we staked out our claim of sand space and boldly marched our egos towards the watery widow-maker. During the short walk to the water, we noticed numerous signs indicating that not only was this particular stretch of shore not monitored by lifeguards, but that additionally flippers were required for any would-be swimmers, due to the strong current and undertow. While our compatriot Sean sported such nautical devices, Matt and I were flipper-less. Regardless, we flippantly dismissed these silly signs and dove into the water.

Indeed, fools rush in where angels fear to tread, or so I thought as my heart soon raced while I seemingly treaded water for what seemed like a lifetime in an attempt to swim back to shore. The harder I swam the further from shore I got. Luckily, the natural surf eventually dumped me onto the shore with angry admonishment some several hundred yards away.

The second near-death experience occurred in 1993 while skiing with my friend Dave in Jackson Hole, WY. Nearing the end of the day, for our last run we decided to finish with a run down a challenging area off the back of the mountain. Though not officially off-limits, the area did have warning signs posted stating the difficulty of the terrain. Despite the darkening skies and potential danger, we felt we were up for the task.

The trail required us to cross-country ski about 100 yards uphill across a cat-track, meaning that once we began there would be no turning back. Upon reaching the beginning of the trail—as best we could tell—we knew that we were in for a bumpy ride.

The tops of the mountains were encompassed in fog, and vision was no better than the hand in front of your face. We made it down the slope one mogul at a time, crying out a vocal check to each other with each slippery slide of progress. We finally reached the bottom some 45 minutes later, a trip which earlier in the day had taken us but five minutes or so.

The last experience took place at a Grateful Dead concert in San Francisco, I believe in 1994. Suffice it to say, I found myself somewhat short of breath at one point in the evening. I'll let your imagination fill in the rest.

The one thing that these three experiences all have in common is that they were all preceded by obvious warning signs, signs that were foolishly ignored. It is much akin to the 'hot stove scenario', where your Mom told you, "don't touch the stove it's hot", so of course you **do** touch the stove when she's not looking.

Life is not as simple as these stories. Many times, the lessons of life do not come with obvious warning signs, or textbook instructions. The lessons of life are hidden deeper than

the surface of everyday events, and may not be realized until much, much later, maybe years later. Tonight I will present you with two such lessons from my life.

During the summer of my sophomore year at college, I returned home to NH to work at a landscaping job for a friend of my sister's. Joining a crew of about 9 or 10 other workers, I vividly remember my first day of work. I spent the entire day working side-by-side on a two-man crew with the company foreman/owner, Doug. The weather was, in a word, miserable. It was pouring rain for most of the day, a day in which we were laying mulch. In effect, we spent the day throwing around fertilizer and mucking around on our knees.

At the close of the day, Doug and I were driving back to the company garage and I remember him asking me candidly, "so, what did ya' think of your first day", I imagine, perhaps, expecting a glowing response, despite the conditions. I responded equally as candidly by saying that it was "not quite what I expected." I'm not sure how he took that.

I worked there the rest of the summer, and for two more summers after that, even following my senior year of college. The group of people with whom I worked was some of the best, most genuine I've ever known. It is only now, upon looking back, that I realize what a great experience that was for me. True, I was not explicitly using much on the job that I'd been taught in a collegiate classroom. But I was learning something much more important. I was learning how great it felt to put your heart and soul into a day's work and finish the day, completely exhausted, yet fully satisfied and proud of what you've accomplished. I'm not sure I've had half as many fulfilling days in my professional life as I had during those three summers.

The next lesson occurred in the fall of 1990. Though I'd only recently begun my first professional job, having completed college I was confident that I was mature and intelligent enough to understand what life was all about. While training in Tampa, FL, I began dating a girl several years my younger named Yvonne. I enjoyed her company and the time we spent together, but honestly felt that she did not approach life with a true sense of maturity nor prioritization of what really mattered. I was quite serious about my work, and felt that I needed to convey this seriousness to other aspects of my life. Yvonne, it seemed, wanted to live each day in pursuit of fun, albeit always with a smile on her face.

Later that year, I returned to Washington, DC, to continue my work for the local office. Yvonne and I kept in close touch, and even met up with each other in DC in early 1991. But as time wore on, we began to communicate less frequently. Perhaps for the better, I thought, since I needed to focus on my "real-world important work stuff" and Yvonne needed to enjoy life in her own way with her friends.

In the summer of 1992, I returned home from work one night and spotted a message my roommate had left me that simply read, "Dennis called." Odd, I thought, since I could not place the name. Later that night, the phone rang and I answered. It was Dennis, calling back again. Very shortly I realized that it was Yvonne's father. He was calling me to make sure I knew that Yvonne had died earlier that week in a car accident.

It has taken me the better part of almost 10 years to understand what a special person Yvonne was and the great things she innocently taught me. She taught me to not take life so seriously, and that sometimes the best part about life is living it every day. It was a simple enough lesson, indeed, but one that I could not easily comprehend when I first met her.

Not long after her death, Yvonne's parents wrote to me and asked that I share with them some special memories of her. I'd been ashamed since receiving their note, feeling that I did not truly appreciate how special each person can be, and how much we can learn from each other. I finally believe that I'm ready to send them that letter.

The stories I've told today are but two examples from my personal experience. Each of us will have dozens of such learning experiences throughout our lifetimes, but it may take a great deal of time and introspection to understand these experiences. The challenge for each of us is to grow and recognize their meaning. The challenge for each of us is to become a student of the lessons of life.