

NOW AND THEN

Fred Krieger, C'72



There is, of course, no sight like hindsight. One of the luxuries of hindsight is that it allows one to give advice with knowledge of how things turned out. But, in another sense, one doesn't know how things would have turned out if some other path had been taken.

Let me give you a simple example. I have changed jobs and careers a number of times. If my new advice to my younger self were to have stayed in one of those jobs, one cannot assume that all else would have gone unchanged. In fact, quite the contrary, a new set of actions and counteractions would have taken place that could have exposed the old self for the charlatan that most advice givers deserve.

That said, let's offer some advice that doesn't necessarily change a specific choice the young self-made, but the perspective around such choices.

1. Parents' perspectives are flawed but not worthless. In part reflected by our being part of the baby boomer generation, we thought we knew pretty much everything needed to make a decision in our youth. There are books written about this. See Howe and Strauss, Generations, which discusses our generation and others, and how history is cyclical. Here is a good illustration of a different perspective of the Great Generation, most of our parents, and the Boomers. When my dad opened up his first Apple computer and could use it almost flawlessly, he remarked how brilliant Apple had been at designing the computer, to make it so intuitive and easy to use. When my friends opened up their first Apple computers, they thought its ease of use showed how brilliant and intuitive the users were. Parents don't have great insights about the new generation's social mores and the like, but they have some useful perspectives about some basics of life, like the importance of constancy in relationships, the importance of family, and basic measures about health and frugality.
2. My next piece of advice to the younger self is to focus on staying in the present and not always worrying about the future. Another way to put this is to focus on experience and relationships; not accomplishments. One variant on this is the emotionally bleakest goal for life: the one who dies with the most toys (or prizes), wins. I would caution the young self to live in the present and to temper one's ambition with being a caring, decent person. The older self would say, the one who dies having cared for the most people, wins. Let me give you an example. Many of us Ivy Leaguers looked at accomplishments as a big deal. I know I did. Actually, I felt like a failure compared to many of my classmates. My high school grade point average was good but not stellar, My SAT scores were below the class median. So, I already felt like an under average dope when freshman year began. Eventually, I got some passion about my studies during college and

graduated with honors, but my studies were always laced with regret—the one more extracurricular activity that I didn't have, the one higher prize I didn't achieve in my academic performance.

The older self wishes I could have instilled in the younger self a better sense of perspective: the inner peace of knowing that one is learning a lot and enjoying friends, family, professors. I wish I could have advised the younger self not to treat academic and then work experiences as a series of hurdles to jump over, but as a series of experiences and adventures that are exhilarating to go through. One author I read a few years ago recommended writing one's eulogy now; not when one is dying. That way, one can see what is really important—I got as far as sketching out the eulogy. In performing that exercise, the message to me became clear and obvious—the accomplishments part of what I wrote sounded like a letter for a job interview. The *real* accomplishments were how I've taken care of others. Acts of kindness, decency, and teaching are important as opposed to titles, recognition, or money.

3. My final piece of advice for the young self is to be honest, almost to a fault, but that honesty needs to be presented thoughtfully and not harshly. Of course a little dishonesty isn't too bad, like telling the person who is white as a sheet a week after a heart attack that they look good. But, it is easy to fall into the trap as a younger person to say what one thinks others want to hear instead of telling the truth. No, I am not talking about cheating or lying overtly. Everyone should know that those are corrosive and destructive behaviors. I am talking about just trying to please without a strong core of integrity. Actually, I think I figured this out over the years from my wife, Alice, who was one of the most honest people I've ever met. Alice equated honesty with freedom. She was right, and my young self is grateful to have eventually learned the importance of this value. Alice and I were married 42 years when she passed away last New Year's Eve. Early in our marriage we argued over this honesty thing. I used to say that everyone lied, and the only difference was degrees of dissembling. She disagreed. She acknowledged that little lies of kindness were ok but not lying about matters of central importance to oneself. Alice was also kind and demonstrated that being honest didn't mean having to be harsh. She was remarkable at finding the good thing to say, even about very imperfect people. We were at a formal dinner one night and were seated next to a lawyer with a distinctive name. She asked if he was related to a well known federal judge in Philadelphia with the same last name. He said, proudly, that he was the Judge's son. The Judge had a reputation for being xenophobic about the Japanese, stemming no doubt from his military experience in World War II. I was wondering what Alice would now say to the proud son. She said, cheerfully, "Your father is a very patriotic man."