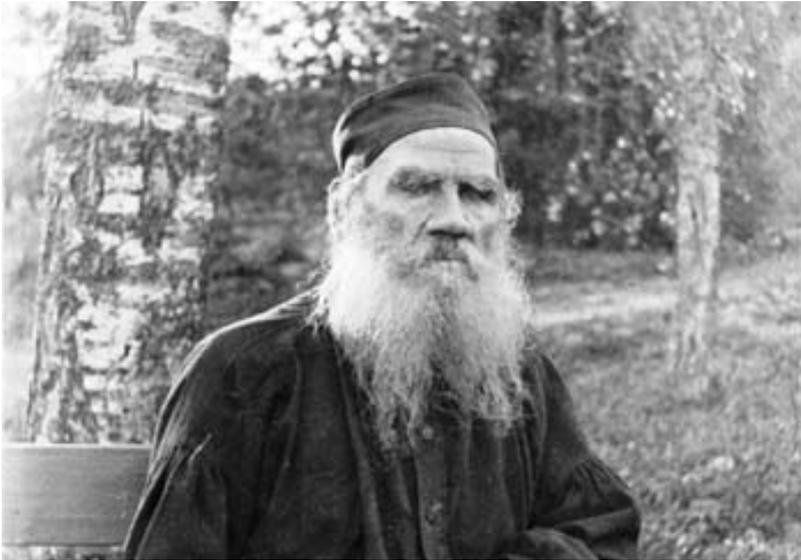


A Novel Approach

Written by Stuart Sheldon, BT Contributor
February 2019

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Just finished *War and Peace*, Leo Tolstoy's 958-page roller-coaster ride through Napoleon's 1812 invasion of Russia. Surprisingly, this epic treatise on military madness riveted me not for its historical precision, but for Tolstoy's uncanny insight into the essence of happiness and the ingredients of love. Basically, it's a very, very long guidebook for a family's emotional health, one whose lessons I will share with my wife and children.

Born in 1828 into an aristocratic Russian family, Tolstoy fought in the tsar's army, all of which informed this complex historical narrative, published in 1869. It resonates fully with today's world stage; megalomaniacal rulers unapologetically wreak death and destruction on millions of unsuspecting people who, through it all, continue to worship these unhinged leaders. One hundred fifty years later, it begs the question: *Will we ever evolve beyond collective brutality and blind faith?*

But it's Tolstoy's understanding of the human condition that kept me spellbound. He captures, in sublime phrasing, the frailty and power within each of us. This simple sentence, "The spoken word is silver but the unspoken is golden," reminds us that we need not fill each quiet moment and that silence is necessary in any healthy relationship. This precursor to the *Hamilton* lyric "Talk less, smile more" is sage advice for a chatterbox like me.

As parents, we all aim to instill confidence, strength, and grace into our children. As people, we seek personal growth. Here are a few of my favorite quotes and what they teach me about both these challenging endeavors.

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"We imagine that when we are thrown out of our usual ruts all is lost, but it is only then that what is new and good begins. While there is life, there is happiness. There is much, much before us."

We tend to pick a lane and stay in it long after it feels stale, often for a lifetime. That is folly, and I want my sons to be bold enough to make seismic, disruptive changes when their bellies tell them something is not right within. I agonized leaving Wall Street to pursue art, fearing I'd be mocked forever; yet that turned out to be one of my best decisions.

I want my children to understand that they control their destinies, and even when they don't, their dilemmas and "failures" -- be they academic, social, or internal -- are mere signposts on the road to evolution and, eventually, inner peace.

"It is not beauty that endears, it is love that makes us see beauty."

I've been with my wife 15 years and love her more now than ever. The very first time I saw her, I thought she was cute, because she is. But today, her physical beauty is a minor ingredient in my deep and abiding admiration. The essence of my love resides in her unwavering courage and selflessness throughout our journey. She meets the daily challenges of raising our children with preternatural gentleness and patience. And she's always game for good times and worldwide adventures. Seen through the prism of this time-tested bond, her physical beauty shines more each day.

"Pierre's insanity consisted in not wanting, as he used to do, to discover personal attributes, which he termed 'good qualities,' in people before loving them; his heart was now overflowing with love, and by loving people without cause, he discovered indubitable causes for loving them."

We are rarely, if ever, who we appear to be. We all contain a complex story that includes primal wounds and secret joys. I want my children to love "without cause" and view each person they encounter with fascination, compassion, and generosity. Their lives and relationships will be infinitely richer if approached with intention and communication skills focused on uncovering the superhero hiding beneath the surface of each person they meet.

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“Previously he had talked a great deal, grew excited when he talked, and seldom listened; now he was seldom carried away in conversation and knew how to listen so that people readily told him their most intimate secrets.”

The old adage tells us we have two ears and one mouth, to listen twice as much as we speak. For much of my life, “listening” was waiting to impress the speaker with stories about me, always poised to interject some clever anecdote based on what the other person said.

I now strive for “active listening.” In place of telling stories about myself, I drill down into the speaker’s comments with probing questions, uncovering deeper and more fascinating aspects of the speaker’s life and heart. Ironically, I find that the less I say, the more interesting the speaker finds me to be.

“Yes, I may very well be killed tomorrow.”

Life is indeed short. Live it up! Stuart Sheldon is an artist, author, and Miami native. Follow him on Facebook, Instagram @stuart_sheldon, and his blog at FancyNasty.us.

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