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On the Highway of Life

*A guide book for life, aimed at teenagers
... and adults*



*I dedicate this book
to my children
with love, pride and confidence.
May the book help and guide you.
I wrote it for you.*

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Introduction

*The learner needs to know the fact.
The assistant needs to know where to look it up.
The professor needs to know someone who knows where to
look it up.
(old saying)*

School is a precondition for your education. School is a foundation on which you can build your own life.

You are right: one subject or another will be irrelevant in your later life. Still, it is part of the overall picture, and worth learning in outline in that context.

Education is fundamental. It is there to give you your sense of direction in life. Without it, life is a trudge. And education does not end on the day you leave school; it continues until the day you die. I would claim you start the education you need for life ... only after you have left school.

You often pick up along the way the knowledge and attitudes you will need for a happy and fulfilled life. Along the way, not at school. But school is the first step you need, and the starting point for what is to follow.

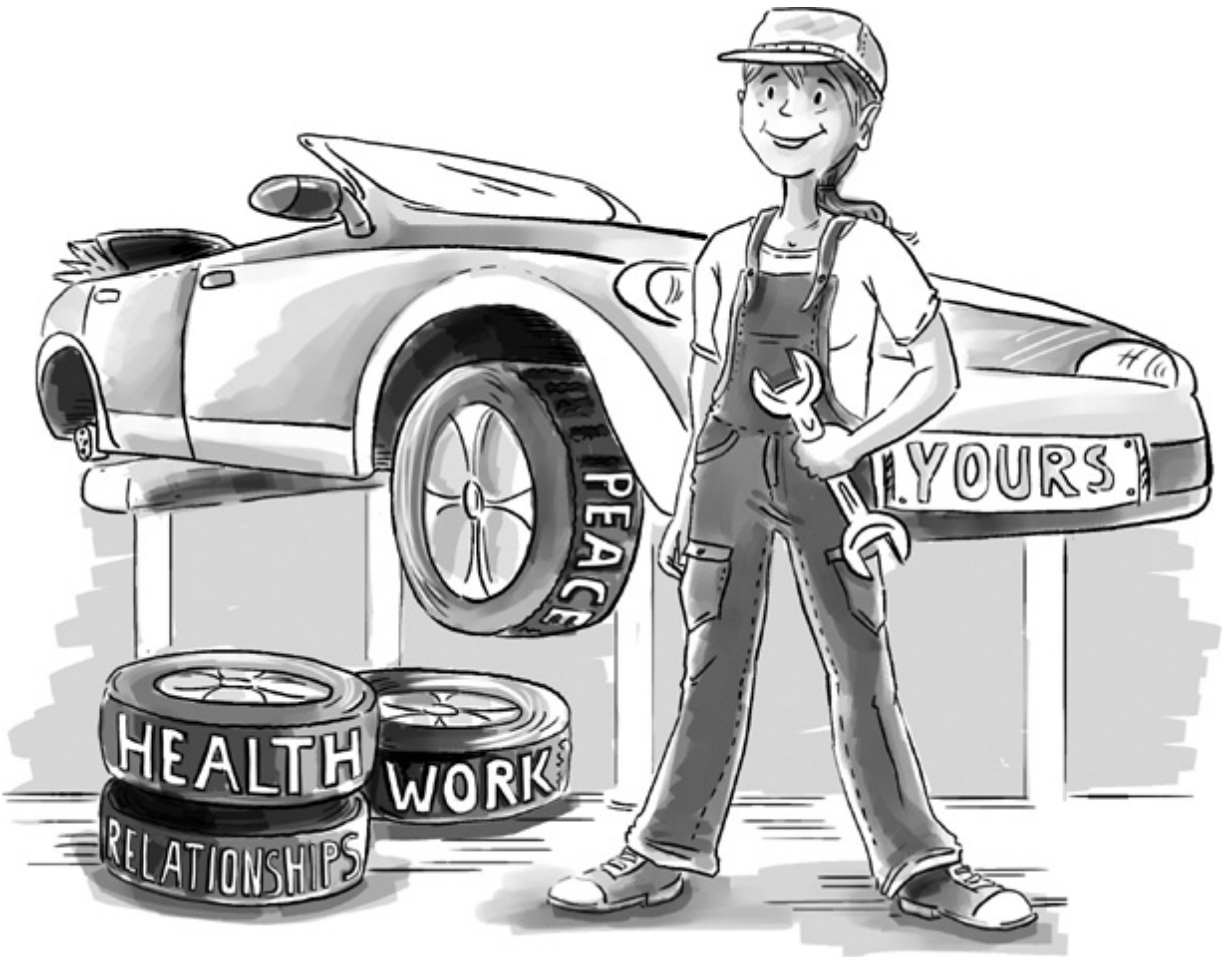
In this book, we will soar like eagles. An eagle is the king of the air. The eagle looks down on its vast territories from a great height, and it runs little risk of getting lost in the morass of distracting details. From that survey of the whole territory, the eagle identifies what is of interest - and then pursues just that, with success.

I will try to help you with a survey of life: your life. I would like to see you soar like an eagle, and for you to plan your route along life's highway, seen from now to the end. I would like to sharpen your vision for the things that matter in life, so you can read the off-ramps and the on-ramps, the service stations and the construction sites for what they are. I want you to lead a successful life.

In this book we will look at school days and the life that comes after them. Whether you follow up on school with an apprenticeship, with further studies or indeed with no plan, to begin with, you will be in a change process. You can't escape that change. It is part of life, and to be welcomed. At this moment, while you are still at school, you can lay stable foundations for the life to follow, and this book may help you as you do so.

Look forward to life! It is worth living.

This book is my invitation to you, to set out on a journey. A journey through life. Let us drive together along the highway of life, in your life car. I will show you the wheels on the car, each one representing a specific component of your life. And I will make suggestions on maintenance, so that your life car performs well and for a long time.



But before you hop into the car of your life, you need a few run-outs of driver training. No driver training, no driver's license. This book represents the theoretical part of the driver training, and the overview. As for the practical part, you have to do that yourself. Nobody can take that over from or for you.

I have a clear vision and a goal. I want to equip teenagers and young adults with the tools and techniques they will need to lead a happy and successful life. I want you to believe in yourself, to start out and continue with no hang-ups, self-aware and confident, joyful and affectionate, to construct your own life and find your own role as an adult ... independently of your social or family background and the material environment in which you have grown up.

When I write about jobs, in many instances I shall have to choose a gendered terminology. That simplifies matters for me as a writer. It has nothing to do with my being male or not liking females. So, please, girls and women, you should feel that I am addressing you just as much as I am 'him' over there. Thank you.

This book does not have biblical aspirations. I wag no forefinger; and nor do I intend to instruct anyone. But I do hope to reflect publicly on my own experiences of the last forty years as I navigate the highway of my life. I aim to show you what seems to have worked for me, and experiences that I imagine have relevance also for your life.

Of course even I cannot hope to apply the knowledge contained in this book, all the time. I make mistakes, like everybody, and I have to live with the consequences. Clearly, there are things I would not do the same way if I had the chance to repeat them; but I feel as though my decisions were the right ones for the time and place I found myself in.

Life is a process, one of continual learning and improvement. For, as the old German saying has it:

If you don't move with the times you'll be moved, by time.

I am thrilled that you bought this book.

Are you ready for life's highway? I am looking forward to our ride together.

Hop aboard and let's go!

My stories

All the tales that I will tell over the course of this book are based on things that really happened. Whatever I claim to have experienced, heard, read, felt and suffered: those are the situations and effects. I hope they will entertain you, make you smile; and I hope also that they will trigger reflection. Maybe they will encourage you, give you some hope, and clarify that there is some sense in whatever happens in life.

In many instances I became aware only years later that the experiences I recount had become a kind of turning point in my life. Funny, but my growth was triggered by just these difficult, challenging, unfamiliar and even unpleasant events. They taught me to approach issues in a different way, or to look at them from an alternative perspective.

Writing the stories has helped me throw off the spiritual weight and clutter they encumbered me with.

At the time a crisis is in full swing it feels like a threat. Often, in the rear-view mirror, one sees it differently.

And I am happy I was able to experience them the way I did. Happy now, in retrospect.

CHAPTER - What is Most Important in Life?

Most important? Find your place in life, and go for it. All the way. What do we mean, a place in life, and going for it? Which are the key components, and how thoroughly can you make them your own? Anyone's life consists of ...

Work
Relationships
Health
Quiet.

These are the wheels on the car of your life, the rolling surfaces on which you progress. No wheels: you're going nowhere. Or you're driving on the rims, chewing on your gums and not on your teeth. No wheels, frankly, no car.

I will work through these components, one by one, in depth, over the course of the book. I really need you to understand why they should be important for you - each one individually, and all working together. Each chapter is a critical component of the car of your life.

Sadly, I cannot promise you that you can compensate for a lack in one area by excelling in one or two of the others. You need to be competent in all four, pay them equal attention and acquire them all as habits. By all means focus on one or the other over a period; or neglect one for a while if you're busy on other activities. No problem. It gets to be a problem when you overlook one of them for a long period, and that one starts holding you back. You can't drive a car if only two or three of the wheels are doing their job, or one has a wobble or an underinflated tire. Your speed and accuracy

take the hit; but you are also wearing out the rest of the vehicle, and your comfort level suffers.

What does balance look and feel like? We call this state happiness, or satisfaction. And it is an automatic consequence of balancing your life areas. You will be happy and satisfied - long term - if you have all four wheels turning. And like a car on cruise control, you will find life takes away the pressure on you, the driver.

So your life is in balance, or in harmony with your goals. This is a state of high contentment, and this state represents the 'it' you have been 'going for'. This balance, or harmony, is what this book is about; and it represents my wish for you and your life.

What tools will you need?

You need an entire kit of tools to drive through life. The starter pack consists of:

- Humanity
- Fairness
- Reliability
- Trust
- Love.

These tools are adjustable. They will help you screw on the wheels and maintain them through the challenges ahead. They all work, on each of the life components. Even (and especially) in emergencies, you need to remember you have these tools in your trunk, and remember to use them.

You have some basic questions to review about your aims in life before we set off on our journey:

- Do you just want to work enough to get through the day? Or do you seek fulfilment through work?
- Do you want to make enough money in life to keep the refrigerator stocked? Or is money a tool in itself, one that sets you free to achieve enjoyment and other significant life goals?
- Do you regard good school grades as a tool towards your aim of leaving school? Or are they a necessary part of being the ideal candidate for your ideal job?
- Do you need a partner in life so as not to be alone? Or is a partner someone for and with whom you will go through thick and thin?
- Do you want people around you so as not to feel lonely? Or real friends who will support and advise you as you make your way through life?
- Does your health consist of keeping your belt closed and your pill consumption down? Or do you seek the kind of health that keeps your body looking and feeling good up to a ripe old age?
- Do you need a break now and again, to refresh body, mind and soul? Or is rest for you a real way to recovery and free time, something to be enjoyed in great big gulps?
- And finally ... Is your aim for life that you will get through it somehow, depending on what fate throws at you? Or do you see a role for yourself in shaping that future life, and living it the way it deserves to be lived?

Avoid the half-hearted approach. Make conscious decisions about how you approach every step and every topic in your life.

Observe the universal rule of Give and Take. In that order. And for each of life's four components:

- At work, show first what you can achieve and what more you might achieve. More money, more responsibility and more autonomy will follow.
- In relationships, show yourself first to be a good pupil, student, teacher, neighbor, colleague, friend, spouse and lover. Recognition, trust and love will come your way.
- In health, show that you take seriously your duty to yourself and others to nourish yourself properly. Be active and take care of your weight, general appearance and self-discipline. As a result of this, your body will impress and attract others.
- Even in the area of quiet, show respect for your own needs. Take a break or a rest. Listen to your body, and take time for yourself when you need it. You will receive in exchange the priceless gifts of equanimity, satisfaction and a soul at peace with itself.

Beyond these maxims, learn to identify and work on the essentials in life. If you don't know which is the switch that matters, you can be flicking switches at random for a long time; or you'll be running around like a hamster on a wheel, exhausted and having gone nowhere. This really is a fundamental truth, so I emphasize it once more.

How can you tell, in life, what is important and what is not?

I will try with an illustration, using a large glass or a vase. You may have come across one or other variant of this illustration. Well, here's my favorite.

Take a large glass. Fill it with quite large pebbles. Is the glass full? No.

Take a bucket of sand. Strew the sand into the glass, over and around the pebbles. Is the glass full now? No.

Take a vessel of water, and pour the water into the glass along with the pebbles and the sand. All the way, up to the

rim. Is the glass full now? Yes!

The glass, in my illustration, is your life. You are filling it.

The pebbles are the fundamentals of your life, in all four component areas. Your job, perhaps, or money, your partner, love, your family, nutrition, health, sport, relaxation, learning, religion, and so on.

The sand represents elements in your life that are secondary: shopping, dusting, cooking, cleaning, the washing up, tidying, gardening ... Some people even find these activities irritating. They are part of life, yes, but not always so important.

And the water? That represents the truly optional: gossip (especially about people who happen not to be present), things one is trying to avoid, very many duties or apparent duties that one takes on or allows others to give one. That kind of thing.

So what does the glass with the pebbles, sand and water tell us? Fill your life first with the stuff that really matters. The non-essentials will find a way in, and so - whether you like it or not - will the other stuff, the water. It'll get in there, but there's nothing to be gained by worrying about it.

If you try to imagine tipping the glass over, spilling all those pebbles, sand and water across the table ... and then try to put the sand or the water back in, as much as you can of the mess you have just made on the table ... you will find you can fill the glass surprisingly well. And if you then set about putting the pebbles in, you will find there's not enough space for them all. However cunningly you approach the task, one or two pebbles will be left over.

So, if you fill your life with unimportant stuff, the really significant items - perhaps just one or two of them - will get left behind.

Pay attention, then, to the sequence in which you focus on getting things done. Fill your life with the pebbles first. The rest can wait, and most of it will happen anyway.

The analogy is good for an entire lifetime. Your lifetime is finite. Some people live a long time, others have a shorter life. Life's like that. Spend some time thinking about how you want to spend *your* time: where and with whom. Do not waste *your* life with activities or people you dislike. Otherwise, as the end of your life approaches, you will be asking yourself how you could have wasted so much of your time. Once you have spent time, it's gone. For every moment you spend, please take the trouble to say a positive: 'Yes, for me that is worthwhile'. Or even: 'No, my time is too valuable for that'.

Now don't start again on school ... school and training courses are an important element in establishing foundations for whatever you want to do once they are over. No education, no qualifications: a happy and fulfilled life will not be yours.

Problems, changes and hindrances will inevitably come your way. They are part of life on this planet, and you will have to develop strategies to deal with them. Living is all about change, and so development is a normal dimension of living. Anyone who does not develop is fossilizing.

Whatever you believed at age 15, you may see differently when you are 35. And if you like wearing those clothes when you are 20, you may find your tastes have moved on when you hit 40. There is a strong likelihood that by age 50 you will no longer be engaging in some of the activities that made up your life when you were 25. This is normal. It is part of life.

The trick is to remain yourself, somewhere between the old and the new, the known and the changing. Build on the things you know and remain open for change. If you can

manage this trick, your life will be happier and more fulfilling, across all its dimensions.

And retain some freedom in your life.

Abandon complete certainty: that is an illusion.

Nobody will guarantee you your job or your money.

Nobody will guarantee that your partner will not abandon you.

Nobody will guarantee your health and security.

Nobody will guarantee your peace of mind.

Freedom, on the other hand, has a different character from these states and circumstances. Make freedom your own, across your life. Freedom is the air that you breathe, and freedom is what makes you an autonomous adult. Let no-one take your freedom from you, whatever they promise in exchange.

'They who can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety, deserve neither liberty nor safety.'
Benjamin Franklin

CHAPTER - The Highway of Life and You

Life is like a drive on a huge highway. The highway of life will lead you to countless places, stages, as well as past many off-ramps, and some of these you will pass by repeatedly, each time more mature, more grown up. There is a cyclical character to all this: again and again you are one of those thousands of cars, all speeding along, big limousines, luxury cocoons, as well as those that just have 'rust bucket' written on them. But yours is a very special car, because YOU are a very special person.

When you are a child, you are on the rear seat of your parents' car. Your parents made you, gave you life; in the early years they are there for you whenever you need them, and they give you whatever it takes.

The rear seat is your kingdom. Make yourself comfortable there and observe the world as things happen. Over time, you perceive and even get familiar with life's highway. You may not realize it all the time, but without your parents you would not have got where you are today.

You suppose for a long time that your parents always take you along on journeys. But one day, you will want to get out of their car at a given off-ramp. Your parents can't drag you along forever. From this point you will be making your own driving decisions, without your parents, and you will be in your own car. At this point you are an adult. It is quite a special moment in anyone's life. You drive, and you decide on the destination. You carry the responsibility for the decisions you make. Now is the time to figure out what it means to stand on your own two feet. And you will be

grateful to those who have taught you what you have learned so far.

You will encounter each of life's four components; and I am here to show you what tools to use with each, how and when.

On your journey along the highway of life you will pass countless parking lots, signposts and tourist attractions. You will encounter highs and lows, charming and threatening landscapes, the beautiful and the beastly, the funny and the sad. You will bump up against tragedy, and on occasions you may experience life-or-death situations. This is to be a journey with joys and sorrows, meetings and farewells.

Sunshine and rain, dry roads and icy stretches will all be there. At times the road runs straight, at other times it's just one bend after another. You will be blinded by oncoming headlights or by fog. As the fog clears, you will see the amazing landscape through which you have been driving.

Some stretches of the highway give you a boost, just as breakdowns will bring you back down to earth. Obstacles and opportunities will be there, on familiar roads and sometimes on unfamiliar routes you have taken to avoid a known tricky stretch. Sometimes you can floor the accelerator, and once in a while you will practice your emergency stop technique.

Along the way, and on the passenger seats, are discoveries waiting to be made: your siblings, cousins, friends and even the love of your life. They are traveling, too, and they will be delighted to accompany you on part of your journey.

You will see many unknown cars as they pass by. Many more pass by but you remain unaware of them.

Still, they are part of life. Part of your life.

Some human beings have not enjoyed the luck you had. Some have physical or mental handicaps. Our society includes such people.

Buses and coaches, put at our disposal by our society, can help especially people with disabilities as they undertake their life journeys. There is a seat for everyone. Everyone, in his or her own way, has a right to be taken along those stretches they can't manage for themselves, and a duty to make the lives of their fellow humans comfortable and enjoyable.

Be grateful for the privileges you enjoy.

And one day, even your journey will come to an end. No-one knows when that day will be. But the journey on the highway of life will continue, just without you as part of it. When your day comes, your place on the highway should be filled with happy memories; and your children and grandchildren should take a piece of your contribution with them on their journeys.

CHAPTER - A Journey needs a plan

Before we embark on our detailed survey of your four wheels and start the journey, I have a number of fundamental questions for you. These questions are about your body, your life and your journey.

So please do your best to answer the questions, honestly, for yourself:

- Where do you think you're headed?
- Have you input that destination in the sat-nav?
- Do you have the knowledge to get you there?
- The money?
- Insurance policies in place?
- Are all four tires correctly inflated?
- What state is your basic equipment in?
- Are you equipped for emergencies?
- What kind of breakdowns would you be able to deal with?
- What sort of car is it that you're driving?
- Have you filled up the tank?
- Is the handbrake still on?
- Is the car regularly checked and serviced?
- Are any of the warning lights blinking?
- Do you take a recovery break often enough?
- Is your braking circuit in order?
- Does your car look like it should? Do you like your car?
- Does the car attract others?
- Could you pick up an extra passenger if opportunity permits?
- How do you feel about the other occupants?

- Is there rubbish lying around in the car?
- Do you lug useless stuff around?
- Do you know where things are, for when you need them?
- Do you feel at home in your car?
- Are the tires sufficiently grippy?

CHAPTER - WORK

'Don't work hard, work smart.' [attr. to] Chiara Doran

Zero input, zero output. A familiar saying. And what is more, it's true. A hard worker thinks about the task, has ideas, puts the ideas into action ... and reaps the rewards. Work is the basis of his daily existence. You work to serve society, to produce something, to earn money, to finance your life. An enjoyable job with a purpose brings you a considerable distance toward finding sense in your life.

Work is a necessary precondition for anything happening. Nobody was born to laze around all day.

Some people are born to be 'son of', or 'daughter of' somebody else. Sorry, that is not enough. Inherited wealth or position involves becoming part of a system that you have had no role in creating. Take some responsibility, to perpetuate the system. If you don't work, the system will crumble. Relaxing on a sofa of your father's or mother's laurel leaves is an unsustainable way of life, and deserves no admiration.

Some people win the lottery. Great. Is there enough money to finance you in the style you enjoy, until the end of your life? Or might you run out? If you're not a competent manager of money in small quantities, large quantities have a habit of defeating you too. You lose money because you've never learned to manage it. And if you stopped work because you didn't need the money or the sense of purpose work gives, life can become hard. You find yourself driving on the wheel rims instead of the tire marked Work.

Still, working all the time doesn't help, either. You run around like a hamster on the famous wheel, at the end of the day you're exhausted, and at the end of the money there's still some month left over.

Working hard is nevertheless an important component in successful work. But you need to have your brain in gear too. You need to develop a sense of when extra input is required, when you need to step on it or an emergency is about to occur. Then the emergency is your exclusive focus. Other days, you can ease back a little; and on certain days you just need to stamp on the brake, or your hard work will drive you over the edge.

Work should be fun. Yes, you heard right. Look at your work. Try to figure out what it is really for. Look at your job from your customer's point of view. Whistle while you're at it (so long as you're not disturbing others). Identifying with your job, going to work contentedly and consistently ... these things correlate with high levels of professional satisfaction. Your purpose on this planet is not to hop on the hamster wheel in the morning and slide off it, exhausted, in the evening. You are paid for doing a professional and thought-through task, one that profits your employer and society, and that enables you to go home with a sense of fulfillment. If this seems like Dreamland to you, then I urgently suggest you look again at your work to check it is the work you want. A huge chunk of waking life is devoted to it.

In what follows, we will take a look at what to expect in the course of your life, when it comes to work.

School and work

If you know nothing, you must believe everything.

Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach

Oh no, not school again. Hmm, what can I say? School is compulsory. You derive from it the principles that are aimed at equipping you for life. Free of charge.

If you are thinking of dropping out of school and wangling your way through life, go right ahead. Do it. Then run around, through the world, thick as a plank, letting other people make the decisions for you.

And when you realize, years later, how stupid you were, don't come crying to me. I wasn't the one who dropped out of school.

And then, if you go back to school later in life, it'll cost you time and money, time out of your own life. But, as I said earlier, it's your life.



At school, you always try your best. Best? Yeah, grade A. Doesn't matter what subject, grade A is the one to go for.

Maybe at the end you get a B, or lower. But the key point is that you were aiming for an A.

A high jumper does not get the bar set at 1 meter 70, aim for that and then retire, satisfied, when he clears it. He sets the bar at 2 meters and aims for that. At the end, perhaps

he clears 1 meter 90. He might have missed his ultimate best (grade A) but he achieved a great deal better than 1 meter 70. School is the same.

Aim for that A grade. All the time, every test, every exam. Prepare for the test as though you need to know everything to get that A. Program your subconscious to shoot for the max, for success. What would happen if you went for a C? Your subconscious knows all about it: 'Oh, I'll be happy with a C, and I can't get more than that anyway.' And what happens? Taraa! Your brain is programmed for a C and that is what you will likely achieve.

Even if math or sports are not your best subjects, go for an A in those too. Just act as though it's possible. And I guarantee that you will get a good grade (assuming you did the preparation and practice). We saw it earlier: zero in, zero out.

And just how does one study the right way?

Studying the right way begins in class. What kind of a learner are you, visual, acoustic or practical? You need to know.

Visual learners learn through their eyes. They are happy to read the text book, and they alertly read the teacher's words on the board. They write a lot of notes, and they concentrate hard.

Acoustic learners use their ears. They listen to the teacher in class, and learn a huge amount just through listening. They tend to take fewer notes, but they listen intently.

Practical learners are a combination of the above. They learn through watching others demonstrate or teach. They

observe, listen hard, and commit what they have learned to memory.

It really is important that you figure out what kind of learner you are. I know for myself that I am a visual learner. If I attended classes at school and university, they were of limited use to me, because I could not listen and write at the same time. So my preference was always to go through the textbook carefully at home.

If your preferred learning style is a visual one, then take what notes you can in class, and review the notes once you get home. Learn the material and cement it in place!

If you are an acoustic learner, listen hard in class. Make your notes after the class, and learn from the notes. Of course you can't completely avoid taking notes in class, if that is what the teacher requires. But to the extent you can, focus on listening in class, and write your notes up afterwards.

If you are a predominantly practical learner, use the classes for asking questions. Ask why, or why not. And if you can get the teacher to demonstrate or try out, so much the better. This method should work best for you.

How best to learn vocabulary, poetry, biology, history, music and so on? By heart. Yes, sorry. Take a blank sheet of paper and lay it over the material that is to be learned. Remember the first item of vocabulary/line/verse. Say it aloud. Correct? If so, move on to the second item. If not, cover the whole page again and start over. Maybe you'll get all the way through, and then forget the next but last. No matter. Back to the top! No mercy. Here's the advantage: most of the material on the page will be repeated, intensively. You are only done with the task when you can get the entire