

The Twelve Principles of Personal Leadership

Principle #9 – Meaningful Relationships

-One Leader's Perspective

By Greg L. Thomas



Jean Paul Getty was an American industrialist and the billionaire founder of the Getty Oil Company. He inherited a fortune from his father who was in the petroleum business, but was also a successful businessman in his own right. He lived the later part of his life in England and *struggled* with finding personal fulfillment. Married 5 times he was once quoted as saying, “A lasting relationship with a woman is only possible if you are a business failure.” He was also later to remark that he would *trade* all his wealth for *one* happy marriage. How important is having a *meaningful* relationship to life? It is so important that literally every human culture on earth is centered on this

universal need. Mankind has written thousands of poems, love stories, movies, songs, and even erected great buildings like the Taj Mahal to express the need for a *meaningful* relationship with another person. Yet, for many enjoying a loving bond with another person seems to be an elusive *dream* that consumes their energy as they stumble from one unhappy relationship to another.

From the moment of birth we are intended to be a creature that needs and values loving relationships. Unless prohibited by accident or unfortunate circumstances, we are nurtured by a loving mother who teaches us the need for bonding and affection. If we are blessed, we also have a loving father who models valuable masculine characteristics like patience, kindness and character for us to observe. As we go through life we have exceptional opportunities to develop and maintain meaningful relationships. What do I mean when I use the term *meaningful* relationship? First, I mean a loving emotional connection of *bonding* between two people that provides affection and pleasure. This interrelationship is something special because it adds an additional dimension to life including a deeper purpose, and a *sharing* that we can't receive through acquaintances or friendships. Secondly, these relationships may be between parent & child, siblings, a spouse, distant relatives or just a very close friend.

Why are these relationships so important? They allow us to have an *emotional* connection that is uniquely human. They provide a *richer* sense of purpose as we do rewarding things *with* and *for* someone we love. It is a relationship where we can be real and candid, confidentially communicating our deepest thoughts, hopes or frustrations. We can have complete trust, and allow ourselves to be vulnerable without fear of humiliation or betrayal.

We can have an *intimate* bond with another that fills a natural and healthy longing we have had since birth. It is in this kind of a relationship we can feel comfortable laughing, crying, rejoicing and mourning together. It provides a level of contentment, oneness, and sheer pleasure we can't find anywhere else, or in any other way.

How are your relationships? Are they truly meaningful or just superficial? Are there relationships that need to be mended or strengthened that you have avoided or are taking for granted? Strengthen these relationships now! Don't allow the effects of time to make these decisions for you or alter your options. You probably won't like the decision that it makes. There is no better time for you to begin or mend meaningful relationships than *right now!*

We just simply assume that there will be many tomorrows. We sometimes act as if we are *entitled* to a long life...as if it is *owed* to us. This is a false assumption because no one has been given the promise of another tomorrow in this world. In western society we don't even like to discuss death. We want to mask its reality with words like "passed away" or "departed" or "no longer with us". We sanitize the prospect of death by sending many of the dying to hospitals and we use modern embalming methods to make the dead seem like they are *still* alive...only sleeping. But the reality is that life is short and *if* we receive the *gift* of another day...only then... will we be here tomorrow. Everyday is a precious endowment and each morning, as the first waking consciousness of a new day enters our minds, we should be thankful for the gift of another day of life.

The distinctive impact of every day is that it holds the promise of a fresh new start. It provides the opportunity to do something different, start something new, break a bad habit, or establish a good habit. In other words, it gives us the power to choose a new course of action or a new direction. So why don't we usually appreciate this fact and fresh opportunity? Why do we continue to do and "choose" the same old things every day, including some that are detrimental to us? The answer lies in our lifestyle and mind-set. We are socially programmed to desire comfort and resist change. We often *know* we should change things and we promise ourselves we will do it... someday. The problem is that "someday" seldom comes and eventually we all run out of someday's. This self-imposed "comfort zone" convinces us that change is always something we can do tomorrow. But, here is an absolute truth...today is a gift, and tomorrow is promised to none of us! If you are in a hurting relationship that can be healed, or should be healed, the time to do it is now!

The study of science reveals that the law of "cause and effect" is alive in the universe and that includes events in our lives. What we are tomorrow is determined by the *choices* we make today. Just like the present has roots to our past, the future has roots in the present. This law called *cause and effect* is neutral and of itself is neither bad nor good. If we sow bad seeds we will someday reap a bad harvest. If we sow good seeds we will someday enjoy the positive benefits of a good harvest. It is important to remember that life does have a sort of "layaway plan". Someday the decisions we make (or refuse to make) will come to harvest. In fact, even *indecision* over time becomes a way to make a decision. We either *choose* to decide and control our own options, or time will make the decision for us. For a person interested in their own *personal* leadership, to live is to choose...

So what are some of the attitudes or actions that get in the way of having meaningful relationships with others, including our parents, children, spouse, distant relations and friendships? Let's look at some qualities that are guaranteed to eventually harm or *destroy* virtually any possibility of affection or bonding between two people.

Selfishness is a serious *personal* problem that can destroy any relationship. This selfishness may be either on our part, or the part of another. It destroys trust and erodes the glue that bonds people together. The reason is because selfishness is not concerned with the needs and wants of both parties, it is only concerned with “me” 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Even when a selfish person *outwardly* does something good or kind for another person there is usually a *hidden agenda* beneath the action. On the other hand, trying to please a selfish person is frustrating. No matter what you do it is never enough and soon forgotten. Selfishness is an emotional toxin that will poison any relationship.

Familiarity or just taking a person for *granted* is another problem that can kill a relationship. This becomes a problem in many marriages. It is easy to just assume that a friend or relative will be available forever. They may even appear to be content outwardly. This is a dangerous mindset because all good relationships must be nurtured and cultivated to become or remain healthy. If you plant a nice garden of vegetables or flowers but don't nurture or cultivate the garden it will eventually become overrun with *other* things. The plants may grow for a while but will be stunted. Eventually they will become overwhelmed and shadowed by bigger plants. The same is true of our personal relationships which also need time, love and care. Without nurture and appreciation any bond between two people will become overshadowed by allegedly bigger issues. Eventually, taking a relationship for granted tells the other person you really don't care about them like you used to or perhaps not at all!

Insecurity and fear is a common problem in many relationships. This is where one individual has a personal problem with trust or commitment, usually due to a past traumatic experience. This individual has trouble communicating and sharing because they don't want to be *vulnerable* to another person, even someone they love. In time, this can harm a relationship because the *other* person wants and needs someone they *can* communicate with. This void of trust and sharing makes the relationship unfulfilling. This incompatibility of each other's needs and level of commitment will ultimately harm this relationship.

Chronic jerkism is a catch-all phrase I use for an attitude that feels it must *always* be right... always argue... always have the last word. Frankly, this is a *severe* personality dysfunction that repels people. It is typically caused by a lack of self-worth and insecurity. The effect is that it incites an individual to constantly want to *prove* how right they are. This is a frustrating person to have a relationship with, and eventually it will become noxious to those who are exposed to it for an extended period of time.

So how do we establish and maintain positive and meaningful relationships? Here are some things to consider...

First, some relationships are *toxic* and should have never been established in the first place. Some *potential* relationships should be avoided because of the harm they will create, especially if you have *different* value systems. We should be kind and friendly with everyone, but before we invest the time and emotional energy to take friendship to the next level of a meaningful relationship we should consider the consequences involved. I have known some fine people who were taken down the path of drug abuse, financial ruin, and serious emotional trauma because they formed a toxic relationship with another person. My point here is that not every friendship or person we are attracted to should grow into a deeper relationship simply because of convenience or opportunity. Remember life is full of choices... therefore choose wisely.

One way we establish or grow a meaningful relationship is to *invest* in that relationship. If I were to be given a large amount of money, and I wanted it to *grow* to become more beneficial, I would need to invest that money. This investment would require my time, attention and patience to ensure long-term growth. In a similar way, a meaningful relationship requires spending time with others, providing our full attention, personal concern and loving patience to maintain the relationship even with obstacles like distance, or a difference of opinion on certain issues.

Years ago I remember a College Chancellor remarking in a forum that there are basically *two* ways of life. One is the “way of give” and the other is the “way of get”. To have a meaningful and satisfying relationship with another person requires practicing the *way of give*. Every aspect of a healthy bond between two people is about giving. When you sit and *listen* to someone you are *giving* of your time. When your advice is solicited and you provide it, you are *giving* of your knowledge and wisdom. When you do enjoyable things together and laugh, play or cry you are *giving* your intimacy. When you buy dinner or give someone a loan, you are *giving* of your financial resources. If both individuals in a relationship are “givers”, it is an ideal meaningful relationship that can’t be beat!

However, what if *you* are a giver but someone you love and have a meaningful relationship with, is *not* a giver? Perhaps they are not entirely selfish but don’t seem to have the same desire to give to the relationship as you do? The first thing I suggest is to *lead* by example. Like most things in life a *balance* is required here. Take an interest in their life and discover an area where you may be able to help them. Then offer to help in a small but significant way that shows you have a genuine concern for what is going on in their life. Don’t make the mistake of giving too much, or you may actually harm the relationship. You don’t want to create a dependency or an obligation of debt on their part toward you. This can lead to resentment and the *appearance* that you are doing these things to manipulate or control them. Let them know you care for them and want to help them in reasonable ways. Occasionally ask, “What can I do to help?” Eventually, this person will recognize your kindness and consideration, and will begin to respond in a similar way toward you if they esteem your love and friendship. Also keep in mind that many people are not givers because they don’t feel like they *have* anything to give. Perhaps they have been offended in the past by someone they loved or trusted, or perhaps they lack the resources to feel like they can give very much. Be a mature person and willing to give without expectation that you will receive something in return.

What if you are trying to heal a damaged relationship that is hurting? Nothing is as *effective* as a heartfelt apology and a sincere admission of error. You might start by sending a card. Be specific about what *you* did wrong and *ask* for their forgiveness. Do not negate this effort by pointing out or mentioning something *they* did wrong. Do not use something they said, or did, as an *excuse* why you did something wrong. Only *they* can come to see their own error and eventually respond back to you in a similar manner. After sending the card, allow a little time and ask them out to a meal at a public restaurant. Again, apologize to them and candidly acknowledge the things you did that were wrong. Expect the other person to *vent* or show anger toward you. Allow them to “let off steam” and release thoughts they have probably been containing for a long time. Don’t cut them off, or attempt to correct them. Listen intently and take responsibility for your *own* actions. Offer no excuses, finger pointing, blaming or scapegoating of others. Do *your* part and personally ask for forgiveness. If you did something serious, or have done something repeatedly, I encourage you to get professional help. If this is the case, let them know you are taking responsibility and “ownership” of your problem and are getting professional help. The rest is up to them, and depends on their level of

commitment to the relationship. Hopefully they will quickly respond in the same way. If not, at least you did the right thing and in time they may come to see their need to apologize for their actions and reach out to you.

Why is all of this important? It is because *meaningful* relationships are the most gratifying and joyful parts of life. Other things may come and go... money, prestige, titles, or power. Yet, to possess these things *without* meaningful relationships still results in a feeling of emptiness or incompleteness in life. This is so true that wealthy or powerful individuals are willing to spend large amounts of money, or risk their reputations just to discover even *one* meaningful relationship that will make them truly happy. If necessary, they are willing to *buy* love or sex as a poor temporary substitute for a relationship that could provide them a greater purpose and pleasure. On the other hand, I have known people who *lost* their money, their titles, and their powerful positions. What sustained them, and gave them the *greatest* satisfaction they ever experienced were the personal relationships they came to value.

In conclusion, everyday let your *loved* ones know just how *special* they are. You may not get another *chance* in this lifetime. Too many people *delay* spending time with their loved ones thinking they can do it on vacation...or when we retire...or during the holidays. Like the need for personal growth, it is often put off until it is too late. This is especially if you have parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles or elderly friends and relatives. Talk to them today... because each day is a gift. If you have a poor relationship with someone you should have a special bond with, make a serious effort to heal the breach and rebuild a new relationship.

Remember people are more important than possessions...

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