**Myself and Other More Important Matters**

**By Charles Handy**

**Book Excerpts**

**Chapter One – Are You Sure?**

* The two zones of work and friendship operate best when they don't overlap, because the perceptions of who we are do not become confused.
* The truth is that we all behave differently, in a way are different people, in different circumstances. Those who claim that they aren't have probably not stretched those circumstances far enough or seen themselves as others see them.
* We are perpetually filling out our identities, which get firmer and more consistent as we age and begin to discover the spheres of the life that fits us best.
* We often de-skill ourselves by relying too much on the skills and talents of our partners, which leaves us incapable and bewildered if they depart.
* A compromised life can end up as a large chunk of wasted time.
* Life, I now think, is really a search for our own identity. Sad is he or she who dies without knowing who they really are, or of what they are really capable.
* A sobering thought is that individuals and societies are not, in the end, remembered for how they made their money, but for how they spent it.

**Chapter Two – Irish Beginnings**

* I now realize the force of one's early environment. I can begin to see how easy it is to grow up believing that there is only one way of seeing the world and to accept it without question. That is particularly so if you never meet conflicting views, if you only read the same papers as the rest of your clan - the Irish Times in my case - if you go to the same schools, the same parties, join the same clubs and societies.
* In a new land you cling to your roots as a way of keeping your identity.
* Now that the physical things of life are so much easier... We have to find a purpose beyond just living. That's tough. We also have to be good enough at one thing so that we can earn enough to buy all the other things we need. That's tough, too. It pushes you towards selfishness, to care for yourself before you're ready to care for a neighbor.

**Chapter Three – Greek Wisdom**

* … There is no such thing as absolute objective truth. It all depends - on the context, the perspective, and the starting assumptions.
* For Plato, all that we see or know is but a shadow of the thing itself. It is our perception of the truth, not the actual reality, something that will always remain unknowable.
* …If you continue to ask ‘Why?’ three or four times you will eventually get to the bottom of someone's often unconscious motivations.
* It was Aristotle who first introduced me to the idea of ‘enough’ through his concept of the golden mean. Virtue, he said, was not the polar opposite of evil. It lay in the middle ground between too much and too little.
* Happiness to Aristotle is not a state but an activity.
* *Eudaimonia* is better translated as ‘flourishing,’ or doing your best with what you are best at. Intriguingly, it also applies to organizations...
* We alone of all the species are not driven only by our appetites and impulses. Our task in life, therefore, is to make the most of what we start with. Everyone can be successful.
* Relying only on what worked yesterday will not help you today; It may hinder you.
* I have now got around to Aristotle. He has helped me to make sense of my later life, to rely less on the approval of others, to be focused my life on *eudaimonia*, and, above all, to cultivate the companionship of my family and friends, another of Aristotle’s great themes.
* Wisdom comes later in life.

**Chapter Four – Borneo Lessons**

* If all your experiments with life workout well then you probably haven't pushed yourself far enough. There may be lives out there that you could have lived had you dared more.
* A degree, I suddenly realized, is just a license to go on learning, the beginning of an education, not the end.
* …If you really want to learn something, try teaching it to someone else.
* Shell had taught me, perhaps unintentionally, that warehoused learning doesn't stick. Unless the lesson and the experience are tied together, the learning of evaporates, even if, as in my case, the experience sometimes comes first.
* The appraisal systems that business organizations conduct are what they say they are - appraisals. Whatever the intentions they are inevitably judgmental and lead to defensive reactions.
* I learned that in most human situations there is no textbook answer, that everyone is different and that you have to make your own judgments most of the time, take your own decisions and then stand by them.
* Experience plus reflection is the learning that lasts.

**Chapter Five – The Golden Seeds**

* We often underestimate the problems of role underload. It is a great cause of stress as the overload that can affect busy people. At least they feel useful and needed, even if exhausted, overwhelmed and at times unable to cope. The underload that I was experiencing was more psychologically distressing. I felt useless and undervalued.
* When Elizabeth and I wrote a book about people we called ‘The New Alchemists,’ entrepreneurs of one sort or another, a striking feature of their lives was the intervention of some respected figure in their early lives who had given them the self-belief and confidence to set out on their own.
* I know now, from my own experience, that teachers, parents, partners, even managers, have to live vicariously. That is, they have to take private satisfaction from the public achievements of those they have nurtured, taught or directed, because those who have benefitted seldom realize it at the time, or, if they do, take it for granted as only their due.
* Acknowledged or not, the planting of golden seeds, by deed or word, is one of the most pleasing and perhaps important things that anyone can do for someone else.
* Americans claim to want both liberty and equality but seem quite prepared to trade economic equality for individual liberty, with the result that they have the most economically unequal society in the developed world.
* Winston Churchill once said that if we wanted a wealthy society we would have to tolerate wealthy men. In America they didn't tolerate them, they admired them, provided always that the wealth had been decently earned.
* In America philanthropy is not charity but a way of investing for a better society.
* I carried back from America that other message, that the future is ours to create, that everything is possible if you care enough, that people should be allowed and encouraged to use their initiative.

**Chapter Six – Schools for Business**

* Managing a business, or any organization, I came to see, was more practical art than applied science. Yes, there were some useful disciplines, as in any art form, but what worked best could not be wholly determined in advance. Every situation was different. The actors, the motives, the resources, the constraints were never the same.
* …schools, at every level, prefer to teach what can be taught, rather than what needs to be learnt.
* … you have to oversimplify things sometimes in order to begin to understand them. Only when the basic frameworks are established can you add in the qualifications and complexities.
* I have found that knowing what one ought to do in a situation is easy; It is the doing part that is tough.
* We all go through life accumulating a bundle of private learning. Much of the time, however, we don't know that we have it. It is lodged in our subconscious. To make it more readily available when we need it we have to drag it out into our conscious mind.
* Management, I had discovered, is not something mysterious or conceptually difficult. Its difficulty lies in applying the ideas, not in the ideas themselves.
* Experience and learning have to go hand in hand, and in the same time frame. Providing the concepts before the experience is to store learning in a mental warehouse in the hope that it will come and be useful later on.

**Chapter Seven – The Antigone Challenge**

* Most of us grew up being assured that our elders know best, that those in authority have the right to expect us to do what they say, that professionals of all sorts know what they're doing and can be trusted to tell us what to do, what can be done and what can't. Doctors, architects, lawyers, and financial advisors - I am predisposed to accept what they say even though I know that they are only human, can't always be right, and that some seem downright stupid when they are outside their area of expertise.
* I have learnt from painful experience that although professionals may know more of the answers than I do, it is important that I know the questions to ask them.
* …much of the time, most of us are ethically lazy. It is easier to do what we are asked without questioning it too much if someone in a white coat or serious looking badge is doing the asking.
* How much do we each value integrity, I wonder, when the pressure builds?
* The world may admire the truth-tellers, but few will want to employ them.
* Should one follow the market or try to lead it? Is the customer always right, or are others better placed to know what is likely to be the best for them? Should one follow the consensus or have the confidence to do what you believe to be better? It isn't always an easy decision.
* Great leaders seem to live with a mix of humility and confidence, which includes the ability to admit on occasion that they are wrong.
* No one has the right to challenge your deepest beliefs and convictions. The decisions are yours alone. Only you can weigh up the private costs of denying yourself against the very obvious pains of sticking to your truth.
* Management will always be largely a matter of acquired common sense and each individual will have to discover what approach will work best for them. The personal skills that are needed can best be developed by careful mentoring, and, more usually, by trial and error. It will always be useful to reflect upon those trials, and particularly those errors.

**Chapter Eight – My Father’s Death**

* ... most of us need pain and trauma, or rejection and disappointment, to trigger a change of life.
* I developed the theory of the Sigmoid (or S-shaped) curves to explain how a business grows, yet can ultimately fail, but the curves apply equally well to our own lives. The first sigmoid curve demonstrates almost everything, from empires to organizations to products, starts by taking in more than it gives out. In business this is the investment that every new venture needs. As individuals we call this our education. Then, all being well, the output builds up, the firm grows, success beckons. Inevitably, however, what worked so well at first sometimes falters later as better or cheaper rivals catch up. The curve turns down until failure looms. It is only then that most businesses begin to desperately think about alternatives. Too often it is too late.
* By the time people realize that things are no longer going so well they have spent the reserves they had, are frightened, stressed, and depressed. Only a major restructuring can save them...
* The right time to think about developing a new life, to start a new job or a new interest, is when things are still going well.
* If you feel totally comfortable and in command of your life or work, you may be mistaking the illusion of security for complacency. It is always dangerous to rest on one's laurels, in private life as in business.
* …as one door closes another opens, often a door we had not noticed before, or had ignored because we were so busy with the first curve.
* When you test the waters you don't necessarily mean to swim.

**Chapter Nine – Home Is a Castle**

* Money, and profit, is essential to the survival and growth of any enterprise, but if it is the only or even the main purpose, it will be seen as selfish and may lead to a neglect of the wider responsibilities that business owes to society.
* I came up with the metaphor of a ‘portfolio life.’ The idea was that more and more people would be driven, or might choose, to become independent workers, putting together a packet of different jobs, clients, and types of work.
* We broaden the portfolio idea to include all the different varieties of work that people undertake. They included what we call ‘waged work ‘and ‘fee work’, both forms of paid work, although independents typically charge fees in place of salaries or wages. The distinction is important. A fee is money paid for work done, a salary or wage is for time spent.
* There was also ‘gift work’, volunteer work of one sort or another, ‘study work’, with more and more mature students finding that study was indeed serious work, and finally, ‘home work’, the uncounted, unpaid work involved in looking after the house or caring for relatives.
* ‘Work-life balance’ is, in my view, a misleading expression because it implies that work in life are two different things. Portfolio thinking holds that most of life is work, some of it boring, some lucrative, some worthwhile in its own right. It is the ‘work balance’ that matters. Even those in full employment need to consider the balance of their portfolio. To try to get the balance in one package from one job will always be difficult, but not impossible if the employer understands.
* … In midlife most of us begin to lose some of our energy and enthusiasm for the daily grind. We hope, perhaps optimistically, that our diminishing energy is replaced by increased wisdom. But wisdom is needed in smaller bites.

**Chapter Ten – St. Michael and St. George**

* Death is a useful deadline, a reminder that life is our brief opportunity to create something that might outlast us…
* Organizations may be necessary but too many of them can be prisons and their warders more concerned with their own welfare than that of those in their care.
* Anyone who's had to speak to large groups of people knows that, to hold their attention, you are well advised to tell stories to illustrate your point and, wherever possible, to show pictures because most of us remember images more easily than concepts.
* Stories offer what I term ‘low definition’ concepts. They don't tell you precisely what to do. They offer clues to a misty idea.
* We, each of us, die a lot of little deaths in the course of our lives, I reflect. But none of them should deter us from starting again, or from using that new start to make amends for anything we did in the past. Be brave, begin now on your new life…
* Call it prayer, or worship or meditation, it is a way to draw back from the busyness of life and ponder the whys of it all.
* In this increasingly secular world a new role for the churches, I believe, would be to become vehicles of philosophical education, teaching us how to think, not how to behave.

**Chapter Eleven – A Portfolio Life**

* Two more lessons from life - don't offer something you don't really mean, and don't fish for compliments or reassurance. They may not come.
* Freedom is fine, but freedom from what? Is more difficult to answer.
* There are a few things more uncomfortable in life than being used for purposes that are not yours by people you don't always respect.
* Money is never the only criterion of success. That is not news. What is strange is the way so many people nevertheless act as if it was. For many it is a means to an end, the way to provide a better life for one's family, to pay for all the good things in life. That, however, can turn into a Faustian bargain, if they become trapped in doing what they come to hate because of what they need to have.
* Adam Smith, that wise Scotsman, who observed that economic growth was obviously a good thing, and that it made life easier for everyone, also said too much of it for too long would result in a surfeit of all manner of unnecessary things. Looking at the shopping malls of our cities today I can't help feeling that he was right.
* If you are a doctor, success is measured in the patients you heal; if a teacher, in the students who learn and thrive; if you are in business, success is measured by the money you make. It's the way you keep the score.
* The research on happiness has remarkable consistency across societies. It seems that where the average income in a society is under $10,000 a year per head then more money does result in more happiness, as recorded by answers to standard questionnaires. Above that level, however, more money does not increase the average levels of recorded happiness.
* Unless and until we can define what ‘enough’ is for us in terms of money we will never be truly free - free, that is, to define our real purpose in life. We will, instead, be volunteer slaves to our employer or profession, subordinate to the priorities of others.
* We have to become open and honest about what we really value, about how we wish to define ourselves and how we want others to view us.
* Money is nice as long as it is not the most important thing in life.
* In life's new supermarket of abundant choices of how to live and what to do, we either dither hesitantly or, again, go for the old familiar ways and habits when we could be questioning, searching, making the world work for us rather than the other way around.

**Chapter Twelve – The Property Business**

* Corporate social responsibility has all the right language but no teeth. When times get hard, the goodwill gets going.
* The purpose of a business, in other words, is not to make a profit,.. It is to make a profit in order to enable it to do something more or better. What the something else is becomes the real justification for the existence of the business. Owners know this. Investors needn't care. They are anxious only for their share of that profit.
* Social enterprises put their purpose before their profit while recognizing that profit is essential to their survival and growth; it is, as they see it, a tax on the present to pay for the future. More conventional businesses may one day begin to see things the same way.

**Chapter Thirteen – Kitchens and Studies**

* Some years back we calculated that if you add together the 52 weekends, the 20 days of paid annual leave that most people get and the eight public holidays, we were all entitled to 132 free days each year, over a third of all the days in the year, all on full pay. That's a lot. It is a puzzle why some people want to add to it with ‘duvet day’ and false sick days. They must find their work truly distasteful or stressful.

**Chapter Fourteen – Kennels for Kids**

* A school is where the child is first exposed to a formal organization or meets any adults other than the relatives for the first time. It is where one learns about power and who holds it, about the pitfalls as well as the pleasures of relationships, whom to trust and whom to avoid. There are lessons here about how to succeed and what counts as success.
* … There are no measures to assess whether, in the long term, schools are achieving what they say they're trying to do - to produce well-rounded, competent citizens, able to exercise all their talents. As it is, the formal measures only calibrate academic achievement...
* A well-balanced education... should of course embrace analysis and the acquisition of knowledge. But it must also include the exercise of creative skills, the competence to undertake and complete tasks and the ability to cope everyday life, and to do all these things in cooperation with other others…
* If the students were treated, organizationally, as workers, as they seem to be in the primary schools I had visited, the atmosphere would be very different... Workers in well organized factories and offices have particular tasks to do. They work on projects for much of the time, in conjunction with other workers. Their tasks normally have a beginning and an end. They can see for themselves from they succeed or fail. They are not afraid to ask for help. They know themselves what they can do best and what others can do better. If they are sensible they collaborate. A good organization makes sure that they have learnt all the skills and techniques that they need to do their job.
* I firmly believe that we can learn anything, provided that we want to enough. The problem is that most of what we are asked to learn in schools does not excite or interest us. We are asked to take it on trust that it will be useful to us in some distant future, and when you are fifteen, thirty is an age away, out of sight and of mind.
* The family, whatever form it takes, is our first and, for a longish time, or only model of how the world works, how people relate to each other, of what is right and what is not acceptable.
* Who we are always speaks louder than what we say. The way we walk is more memorable than the way we talk.
* If religions are losing their grip in the Western mind and relativism is on the rise, people have to be taught how to make up their own minds. You can do that in any subject if you are presented with problems rather than facts. But one subject concentrates solely on thinking. People, both young and old, need, in short, to study philosophy.
* As with all philosophical questions there are no right answers, only an investigation of the issues and the challenge to be clear where you stand yourself. If we don't know where we stand on the big issues of morality and ethics, we lay ourselves open to those who want to impose their definitions on us, or to a laissez-faire attitude of anything goes. Both are dangerous.

**Chapter Fifteen – Family Matters**

* Entering a new family is not unlike going to live in another country. You have to learn the ways and customs and earn in the right to residence whilst still retaining your own identity. Like countries, families have their histories, which shape their cultures.
* … you don't fully know someone until and unless you know their family.
* Most people, I now observe, seem more real to me once I meet their close family. Only then do I see them in the round, without the protective screen of their public persona, the mask that we all wear until we know someone well enough to take it off.
* The mere fact that we have the same roots will never guarantee that we have the same values or interests. Families aren't always easy. And yet, and yet. When you need them, like them or not, they are the people most likely to be there for you.
* Giving more unwanted advice to my son I urged him not to settle for passion or physical attraction as the basis for a long-term relationship but to look for someone who would one day end up as his best friend, in a friendship that could deepen as life went on.
* To love and seek for no return is altruism at its best...
* … We tend to put too much of the wrong sort of pressure on our children. We want them to be conventional successes from the beginning, even if the curriculum of their school does not fit their talents.
* The awful truth slowly dawns that their real education was at home while you were busily engaged trying to live your own life. They watch and study you and then decide later to do the opposite or to imitate, and you can't be sure which is better because, most of the time, you were not modeling ideal behavior.
* Marriages work best when there is room for each to be separate as well as a bonded couple.
* In a world that sometimes seems to be fragmenting in every sphere, we all need somewhere to belong to as of right. Organizations won't do - they don't last long enough and are apt to cast one adrift when one’s skills run out. Neighbors move on and lose touch. Too many relationships turn out to be shipboard romances - intense at the time but evanescent. The family, however, is always there even if it has to be dug out from time to time.

**Chapter Sixteen – Guru Times**

* Talent is non-ageist, colorblind and unaware of disabilities.
* Organizations are not machines that can be neatly designed, mapped, measured, and controlled. The fact that some particular operations can be and have to be managed in that way has deceived people into thinking that the whole organization is just one super-project. That is what logicians call a category error. For too long management theorists appropriated the language of engineering to describe the way organizations worked. People were human resources, things that could be costed, allocated, controlled, and shunted around as the need arose; they were managed, in short. In everyday language it is things that are managed, not people. It is sensible to speak of managing the audio-visual equipment, but not to lump the technicians in with it.
* People do not like being seen as things, nor as problems to be coped with or got around to.
* The essential task of leadership (a word from political theory, unlike the word ‘manager’) is to combine the aspirations and needs of the individuals with the purposes of the larger community to which they all belong.
* In general, if people know what they have to do and why, if they have the skills to do it, are trusted to get on with it as best they can and are appropriately rewarded when they succeed, the community will be more likely to succeed in its mission.
* ... It is only common sense that people are more likely to be committed to a cause or mission they have had a hand in shaping it. This does not need research to prove it. Nor do you have to see the research to know that groups are likely to produce better results than the same individuals acting on their own.
* We all have different talents and personalities. Put the right people with the right companions and everything clicks; Get it wrong and there can be chaos. That is only common sense, even if it isn't common in practice.
* Above all people know instinctively that there has to be trust if any organization is going to work; Trust between those in the group, that they will do their best and won't undermine you, as well as trust in their leaders. People implicitly understand that the trust involved has to be earned and can't be assumed, that it depends as much on who you are as on what you do, that it is fragile and, once lost can seldom be restored.
* Too much time is spent in organizations making sure that what should have happened is happening. If people know what they have to do and are competent to do it, they should be left alone to get on with it.
* More organizations are dependent on the skills of their people, they are having to treat those people, even those at the lower ends of the organization, as professionals, people with recognized skills and talents.
* I am also convinced that people find it easier to remember images than concepts, that pictures live longer in their mind than technical terms… Good stories and good metaphors can also conjure up images in people's minds.
* I believe that organizations are, in a broad sense, the servants of society. They exist to provide us with the things and services we need or want. We rely on them to do so efficiently and effectively. Ideally, their interests and ours should be coincide, but they will prosper most if they define their purpose as something bigger than their own survival. Those organizations, as well as those individuals, who work only for their own benefit, eventually discover that they are their own worst customer, because they are never satisfied, seldom thanked, and leave no legacy.

**Chapter Seventeen – Travel with a Microphone**

* A joined-up world is a restless place, one where it is unwise for a country to stand still, where each success seems to be only the prelude to yet another problem and, worst of all, where it is unclear where the road leads to in the end, if indeed, there is an end. The journey may well not be worth all the hassle, progress might be an illusion, but there seems to be no alternative anywhere but to keep traveling.
* The relentless search for competitive advantage keeps the busy capitalist bees on an endless search for the newest and cheapest nectar. That drives the costs and the prices down, but it also leads to the bees to move to ever newer territories, spreading their know how wider and bringing jobs and wealth in their train that is good news. The bad news is that when they move on they leave a vacuum behind them unless the territories they leave have been able to use the injection of money and expertise to build their own talent bank and hold it within their borders.
* The faster an economy grows the bigger becomes the gap between the income of those at the top and those at the bottom...
* … a nation can't move forward unless it accepts the past and puts it behind it, and that if it can’t face up to the truth about itself it will be stuck with the old problems.

**Chapter Eighteen- A Seventieth Birthday**

* … as death edges nearer, there is less to lose in being honest with yourself about the sort of life you have lived… Aristotle advised us to take the deathbed test, to imagine ourselves on our last day in life and to consider how we should evaluate our lives.
* if there is any kind of immortality it lies in the minds and hearts of others.
* The deathbed discipline helps to keep me focused on what really matters, even if, like most of us, I don't always manage to keep to my resolutions. The good news is that it gets easier as one gets older. Ambition fades, as does the envy of others who are ostensibly more successful. That's mostly because the opportunities have long passed and because, by then, we have rationalized our past and any of its failures in order to allow ourselves to live comfortably with it.
* As age progresses, there are also fewer people left that one might want to impress. So, one might as well speak the truth as one sees it, live as one wants to, spend time only with those one values.
* Do your best with what you are best at, is my translation of Aristotle’s principle of *eudaimonia*. We can't all be good at everything. Don't try to be what you aren’t.
* ‘Know Yourself’ was, Juvenal tells us, one of the messages inscribed on the temple of Apollo in Delphi in ancient Greece. Difficult. But the corollary, ‘Accept Yourself’, is just as difficult.
* Whatever portfolio of activities we create, some of it should earn money. Apart from the practical usefulness of money, it does provide some reassurance that you still have some value to offer.
* Most of us set out with high hopes and ambitions, determined, as I was, to leave our footprints in the sands of time, only to settle in the end, like Voltaire’s Candide, for cultivating our garden. Voltaire also said, ‘How infinitesimal is the importance of anything I do, but how infinitely important it is that I do it.’ Exactly.