

10 Things I Wish I'd Known When I Was 21

By Mark Rutland

You might think you're smart when you get out of college, but I suggest that the real education is only just the beginning.

In an Amish kitchen in Pennsylvania, in the heart of Dutch country, I saw a sign I'll never forget: "Too soon old, too late smart." When I saw it, I thought it was memorable but hardly meaningful. I was 21. Now the words are meaningful, but I can barely remember the farmhouse. I am 62.

Sometimes I have the fantasy that I will sit up on my deathbed and cry out, "Oh, I get it, "and lie down again and die. The Amish have it right.

Recently a friend said he wished he were 21 again. The thought held little interest for me, but he made an intriguing counteroffer: What if you could be 21 and know what you know now?

That held more allure, but it begged a question: What, if anything, do I now know that I wish I had known at 21?

1. Inner Healing Is Greater Than Outward Success. It is probably impossible to arrive at 21, let alone 62, without wounds in the inner person – deep wounds that need God's healing grace. The more I see of inner healing and the more I face up to my own inner wounds, the more I wish I had let Messiah touch my deepest hurts earlier in life. That childhood hurt, that hidden outrage, that long-suppressed horrific memory can lurk like a monster in the basement waiting for years, even decades, to rise and wreak havoc.

Hiding the monster, denying that it's down there, is a dangerous game. The temptation is to create an alternative reality where success and accomplishment and appearances seem so very real and the monster but a mirage. If I were 21 again I would bore down into the inner world of me and find Christ's healing touch in the darkness under the floorboards.

2. Mercy Is Greater Than Justice. I have found that many in the church want the wayward to "get what's coming to them." Too often, there is a shortage of mercy among the followers of Christ, who blessed the merciful in His most famous message, the Sermon on the Mount. Were I 21 again, I would learn and practice mercy, knowing that later I would need it.

Churches, boards, denominations and individual believers who hanker for justice when a colleague stumbles may be planting for a bitter harvest. They gloat over the sins of others, humiliate the fallen and demand their administrative pound of flesh.

Competitiveness and legalism are the death of mercy. Mercy makes love real, acceptance and understanding a practice, and tenderness a way of life.

3. Kindness Is Better Than Being Right. Just before my friend Jamie Buckingham died, I asked him for a word of wisdom. He said, “It is better to be kind than to be right.”

At 21, I advocated my positions too aggressively. I argued with an eye toward winning, unconcerned about the heart of my “adversary,” who may not have been adversarial at all. I made debate a contact sport. In preaching I let the bad dog off the chain, to the applause of the gallery.

Should time travel be mine and were I to be back in the land of 21, I would be kinder and less concerned with being right. Too many young adults give little thought to kindness. Then Twitter hurtful words like poisonous birds. Their humor is mocking, acidic and unkind. And they are more concerned with being thought clever than with being kind.

The value of gentleness has declined on the world market; if I were 21 again I would wish to know the worth of a kind word.

4. Serving Is Better Than Being Served. Encircled by their entourages, the “success” merchants of modern Christianity place high dividends on being catered to. When I was a pastor, the church I led invited a singing group to come minister. Their list of special demands, including a particular type of orange cut into equal fourths (I kid you not), was five pages long. We canceled.

I wish I had known at 21 how hollow all that outward stuff. I wish I had known that caring, not being cared for, is what Christ had in mind.

I wish I had changed more diapers instead of leaving that to my wife. I wish I had served more meals, carried more bags, held more doors and lightened more burdens.

5. Brokenness Is The Doorway To Wholeness. This mysterious paradox was hidden from me at 21. I feared brokenness. I ran from it, and when it got too close fought it off with all my might.

If I had but known brokenness was the key to my healing, it would have lifted such fear from me. I thought it would maim me at least and maybe even kill me. Now I know that there is very little real wholeness that does not emerge from real brokenness.

6. Truth Is Liberating And Devastating. Jesus said, “You shall know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” My friend Jamie tacked on, “But first it will make you miserable.”

How true. There is a phrase popular among many young adults that I quite like despite my usual distaste for pop jingoes. It is “Keep it real.” I am not sure of all that is meant by it, but I know what I mean by it.

I wish I had known not to fear the truth about myself. I wish I had known that the temporary misery of the truth was worth going through to find the freedom that it brings.

7. Learning Is Greater Than Education. I am university president, and Oral Roberts University (ORU) is a great university. I am not saying that higher education is unimportant. What I am saying is, I hated getting educated.

At 21, I was a miserable college senior. I was a miserable student from the first grade right through high school and on through three degrees. I was miserable because I did not understand the connection between education and learning.

If I were 21 again, I would still go to college. But this time I would go to learn not just to graduate. I would unleash my curiosity, embrace the process, worry less about my grades and enjoy learning.

How strange that I love to learn at the age I am now. I read voraciously – any subject. I want to know, to understand, to go deeper. If I were 21 again I would take that to college.

8. Giving Is Sweeter Than Gaining. I believe in the laws of the harvest. If there is any place in the world that understands “seed faith” it is ORU. Seed faith is not a new idea to me. I believed it at 21. I practiced it and am blessed today because it is real.

Yet I wish that at 21 I had known the sheer joy of giving. I know God will bless us when we give, and sometimes we have made this merely a method to gain. I wish I had realized the joy of generosity. I would have given more and delighted more in the good that giving does and less in the returns it provides.

9. Forgiveness Doesn't Fix Everything. Not the happiest truth I wish I had known, but it's among the most sobering. Had I known this I might have been less callous, less reckless and more mindful of the cost.

There are things, relationships and hearts that once broken cannot be fully “fixed” by forgiveness. The wound, the uncaring and insensitive word – they may be forgiven, but the damage from them may never quite be right again.

When I was 21 I just wanted to be forgiven. I wish I had known to do less damage.

10. Prayer Is More Powerful Than Persuasion. In all of life, at every age, conflict is an inescapable reality. I wish I had known younger that in conflict and crisis talking to God works better than talking to people. At 21, due perhaps to youthful arrogance, I thought that I could talk my way through everything.

Self-sufficiency, a dangerous habit, breeds prayerlessness. The older I get I find that crisis drives me faster to my knees and more slowly to the phone.

I have seen God turn hearts around, change organizations and melt opposition by prayer alone – when no persuasive speech could have made a difference. If I were 21 again, I would spend more time talking with God and less (far less) persuading others to do what I want.

I wish I had known more than I did at 21. I might have considered one or two of these truths, but I doubt I would have fully appreciated their value.

I do not think I want to be 21 again. But if I had to, if some evil genie made me go back and live it all over, then these are the things I would want to know and the things I would want to believe.