

P R E F A C E



*Sapere aude! Have the courage
to use your own intelligence!*

IMMANUEL KANT

Perhaps you have sensed, as I have, a great spiritual hunger in the world. People want to believe that life is worth more than bottom-line entries on corporate spreadsheets, more than sporting event scores, and more than following the next fad. They seek something far more valuable: They are searching for meaning. I say, who better to figure out what that meaning is than those of us with enough life experience that we can't be fooled with platitudes, clichés, or doublespeak? For the generation now in the fall and winter of life, it's time to take Kant's advice and summon the courage to use our intelligence for the sake of posterity.

September University, in concept, is a metaphor for intellectual maturity and represents an ambitious quest on behalf of future generations. *September University*, the book, is a call to action, a social forecast, and above all a passionate argument that a bright future depends upon the experiential wisdom of aging citizens. The exploration you're about to begin has the potential to transform your worldview, heighten your aspirations, and elicit reflections about your personal legacy and the spiritual meaning to be derived from the last season of life.

Throughout most of human existence, older people have sustained civilization as repositories of knowledge. Historically, elders have been revered for passing information and culture from one generation to the next. But printing and advanced methods of storing information have eroded the perceived value of learned experience, resulting in an ever-persistent devaluation of aging citizens. There are, of course, exceptions. Some cultures still adhere to a tradition of revering their seniors, but lately there are signs that the time-honored esteem, so lavish in the past, is lessening. Nevertheless I'm hopeful.

If I've learned anything in my decades of self-education, it is that things are never as they appear. Although it may seem that knowledge gained through the experience of aging may be of decreasing value, precisely the opposite is true. Never before has perspective grounded in the wisdom of thoughtful experience been more important to the future.

In prehistoric times all humans lived in small groups, and survival depended entirely upon experientially based knowledge. Of particular concern was the immediate present—taking the wrong path or choosing the wrong thing to eat could result in death. Knowledge was critical, but wisdom from exceptionally alert and thoughtful individuals sometimes yielded breakthroughs that changed everything for the better. Reading the signs of the times was crucial to our ancient ancestors, and it is still so today. Through research in neuroscience and evolutionary psychology, and from computer modeling applied to social behavior, we now have compelling evidence that our culture is steeped in the practice of false attribution. We see connections where they don't exist and don't see them where they do. We are often irrational even as we perceive that we are reasoning. What we've always accepted as common sense is often little more than common deception. And what we think of as human nature is often egregiously out of sync with the realities of our social behavior.

In many ways the lives of our early ancestors required levels of alertness and attention to detail that were anything but primitive, and for us to judge them as simple beings is a big mistake. But environmentally we have very nearly come full circle. Today a person without a great deal of knowledge and experience is as far removed from the reality of what to do next as our ancient ancestors were from knowing which path to take. The dilemma of having so many choices presents a challenge that our brains were not designed to cope with. Now, like then, danger is everywhere. And while we no longer live in fear of being eaten alive if we make a false move, today the very complexity of our society is such that everywhere we look there is risk and confusion. Nature's savagery has been replaced by levels of complexity that we are ill equipped to cope with. According to the World Health Organization, psychological depression is escalating worldwide at alarming rates and is becoming a major cause of disability. Moreover, the sheer volume of advice available, some of it exceedingly wise, is far beyond an inexperienced individual's ability to sort through with confidence.

Never before has the quality of our lives been so dependent upon wise counsel. And yet, in spite of our best-intentioned educational theories, our long history of championing reason has created the false impression that we always reason first and then act, failing to appreciate the fact that what we actually do most of the time is the reverse. We depend upon an emotionally internalized moral guidance system to navigate our way through daily life. We act intuitively, relying on stored memory receptors in the emotional regions of the brain, and then we reason away the aftermath of our actions with explanations that sound profound but very often have little to do with the real motive.

We are surrounded by self-interested agents of every stripe, who tell us that they are looking out for us and that we have only to do this or that to succeed. More often than

not, however, it's not our interests but theirs that are best served by doing what they ask. Thus, of necessity, one has to be aware that sometimes the very suggestion of reward may be reason to suspect deception. We are virtually drowning in information; promises of access to vital knowledge are ubiquitous. Yet so much deceit and so many ideological black holes reside in our midst that matters of trust have never been more central to the safety and security of daily existence. Whereas a misstep can still cost a person their life, today it's more likely that a bad decision can lead to an existence drained of vitality. Paying too much attention to what others think one should do in personal or career matters can result in a long-term life trajectory from which one eventually awakens and realizes that the major enterprise of their daily existence is bound up in living out someone else's arbitrary ideology.

Many people experience lives today steeped in such seething mediocrity that the beast-ridden savannah of our ancient past seems inviting by comparison. Whereas life may have once been "nasty, brutish, and short," these days it can be confused, pointless, and headed toward a disaster that most people don't have time enough to recognize is coming. Never before has reading the signs of the times been more essential, and never has it been so imperative that the concept of wisdom be a holistic notion favoring humanity over the special interest of some excessively needy individual, group, corporation, or nation-state.

When the hair on our heads turns gray, chances are that the fruits of our brains are as ripe as they will ever get. The saying "use it or lose it" becomes exceptionally pertinent now to addressing our serious problems. It's time to turn up the heat on our politicians and our media who choose the topics for public attention. For people who, because of economic necessity during the "earning" years, have lived on borrowed opinion, it's time to pay off the loan. It's time for those of us who've always expressed strong opinions about subjects that we've never really investigated

to actually do the research or keep quiet. Better yet, look it up, think it through, and speak out. If inspiration and some kind of mindful accomplishment for the sake of posterity do not precede our death, we must ask ourselves why, then, did we live?

The last few chapters of life are an appropriate time to apply the whole of our life experience and educational perspective to what it means to have been afforded the life of a human being. It's time to face life-stage theorist Erik Erikson's profound realization that our legacy is that which survives us and that our strength lies in a "detached yet active concern with life bounded by death, which we call wisdom." To confirm this sage advice we've only to recollect those who have passed on and then recall why we remember them.

Indeed, when we let go of our personal involvement with the present and contemplate a future that we will not live to see, the existential danger signs of today stand out as clearly as the fresh tracks of a saber-toothed cat stalking our ancestors in prehistory. I trust you will find in this book the kind of thinking that could cause our descendants to associate generativity with the tracks our generation leaves behind. The twenty-first century needs the wisdom of adults with a critical mass of life experience that's contrary to convention for convention's sake. We need people willing to confront the Stone Age mindsets and cultural contradictions that served us well in simpler times but today threaten our very existence. We need a fresh perspective about learning.

In spite of noble efforts on the part of our educational establishment, a liberal education has never been an adequate descriptor of what a person needs to know in order to sustain a level of authenticity far above a life of clichés, slogans, and platitudes. Deep down many of us with a half-century or more of life experience know this to be true. What a person needs, in my view, is an *existential education*. My hope is that you will find that this book provides a

good start not only in helping you make insightful progress in existential matters, but also in helping you embody the kind of living example that inspires others do so as well. An existential education, in the sense that I have in mind, lessens one's fear of death, and ironically, even though it helps one to appreciate the practical limits of knowledge, it simultaneously increases one's curiosity and thirst for exploration. Perhaps most importantly an existential education has the power to dissipate our predisposition for bias against *otherness*.

Thomas Paine may be best remembered for his assertion, "These are the times that try men's souls." And thus, a hallmark of our culture has become that, regardless of the problems we face—flood, drought, earthquake, storm, war, disease, economic depression or recession—we expect it's fatefully ordained that we will prevail. In his pamphlet *Common Sense*, published in 1776, Paine declared that "we have it in our power to begin the world over again." At the time, the population of the thirteen colonies stood at about one-thirtieth of the size of today's baby-boom generation. Today each of us as an individual has the communication capabilities of a Thomas Paine pamphleteer writ large. If only a small percentage of us take up the mantle of Sept-U with the notion of shaping the future, we will represent a revolutionary force that has to be reckoned with.

Sept-U rests upon a simple equation: age + experience + curiosity x attitude = a greater quality of life and hope for humanity. If you haven't already done so, please enroll metaphorically in September University and encourage others to do so, too. The future depends on it.