

TRIED & (Still) TRUE



ERIK TYLER



TRIED & (*STILL*) TRUE
EXCERPTS

Also by Erik Tyler

The Best Advice So Far

and coming soon

You Always Have A Choice

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“Frog on a Penny Farthing” (& bugs!)

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1st Edition

USA

*For my mother, Barbara,
for preserving an invaluable family legacy
through story, and for exemplifying both
wisdom and humility with your own
life story.*

**I've learned
that I still have a lot to learn.**

Maya Angelou

introduction

TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY AMERICANS are obsessed with *new*.

While Notre Dame has stood proudly in Paris for more than eight centuries—drawing as many as 50,000 visitors from around the world daily—we in the States seem all too quick to bulldoze our history in favor of gleaming office buildings and freshly paved strip malls, losing irreplaceable treasures in the process.

From seasonal fashions to smart phones, cars to careers, religion to relationships, we've become conditioned to believe—to accept as fact—that *old* is inherently bad while *new* is not

only good, but *necessary*. Even “old” body parts are subject to being replaced with newer, younger ones.

I completed my last book, *The Best Advice So Far*, exactly one year to the day after I’d started. I still remember typing the period after the last word of the last sentence of the last chapter. It was exactly 3:18 AM. I was so into what I’d been writing that, when my fingers finally stopped typing, it was a good minute or two before the realization set in: *I just finished the book*. I didn’t know what one should feel or do on such an occasion. All I could think to do was to drive to the all-night convenience store, buy a Nestlé Quik strawberry milk and drink it in the aisle, as a sort of toast to the occasion.

There was a sudden flurry of activity around the e-book release. Reactions were overwhelmingly positive, including endorsements from a *New York Times* bestselling author

and a vice president from Google. Even the title itself was based on exclamations from a lifetime of mentoring that had led to that point: “Thank you! I never would have thought to try what you suggested. It really was *the best advice* I’ve gotten!”

It was a rush. It all felt so... *new*.

I’ll never forget receiving the first print copy about a year later. The anticipation of opening the box. The heft of it. Even the smell. Again, it was the beginning of a new adventure.

Any author will tell you that we succumb just as easily to the lure of *new*. There’s nothing quite like the feeling of having a *new* release. Conversely, if we’re being honest, there’s a sort of—how to say it?—*tarnished* feeling, as the gap between the copyright date and the one on the current calendar widens. That is, in simplest terms, *old* to a writer begins to feel synonymous with *bad*.

And yet the words and thoughts and stories inside *haven't changed*.

Our collective addiction to *new* has us continually scrambling to read the latest releases by hip, young motivational writers who promise to reveal their “five secrets” and never-before-heard solutions to our problems—all neatly packaged in slick and impressive sounding buzzwords.

I went to great pains with *The Best Advice So Far* to point out—across social media, on my blog and inside the book itself—that I take no credit for having *invented* the advice in that book. While the book was new, the ideas it contained were *not*.

In that respect, even from its first day out in the world, the book was very *old*.

Let me suggest here, as I did at the start of *The Best Advice So Far*, that if something is true—if it *works*—then it's *always* been true. The best

anyone can do is pay attention, discover it, put it into practice, and pass it along to others.

Put another way, while language and culture may change with time, wisdom itself is *old*.

Timeless.

That is all to say, our grandmothers and great-great-grandpappies (all of whom, mind you, were young and quite hip in their day)... *knew stuff*.

Important stuff.

They were smart people. Tenacious. Resourceful.

And despite their not having had laser teeth whitening or social media followings or audiences of thousands paying \$500 a head to attend conferences in order to hear what they had to say, they'd learned a thing or two about what *really matters*.

How to live at peace in a war-torn world.

How to stretch a dollar during the worst of times.

How to navigate conflict and to be a good neighbor.

How to have character in the face of trials.

How to be truly happy, come what may.

To modern ears, the speech these old souls used may sound quaint, outdated—even archaic. Yet the principles for living remain every bit as powerful as they ever were.

It is my hope, within the pages that follow, to blow the dust off some moldering maxims from yesteryear, to give them a good spit-shine, and to introduce a new generation of discerning thinkers to the inimitable insights, sheer brilliance and just plain common sense captured by these tried-and-(still)-true gems of practical wisdom.

what to expect

THROUGHOUT THIS BOOK, I use stylistic conventions that do not strictly adhere to the standard rules of grammar and mechanics (for instance, my chapter titles are all in lowercase, and I use frequent sentence fragments). I trust this won't upset the apple carts of any English language purists. I assure you, I'm a flag-waving, card-carrying grammar nerd; and yet my approach to writing has always been guided by two superseding "rules": 1.) know the rules so that you can break them *on purpose* rather than willy-nilly; and 2.) where proper grammar would inhibit mood, intent,

personal impact or clarity of message, allowances must be made.

Regarding layout, each chapter of this book is organized into six parts, and it will be helpful for you to understand what to expect from each of these distinct sections at the outset.

The opening of each chapter, which is unlabeled, contains an observation or story that serves as a lead-in to the central proverb for that chapter. It's intended to provide real-world context and personal connection to a topic, before revealing too much more about the proverb itself.

The remaining four subheadings are drawn from parts of the book title. I'll list each of those subheadings on the following pages, along with a brief description of its purpose.

Finally, each chapter ends with a section called "Questions & A Challenge," which I've

included to provide you or your group further opportunity for discussion and application.

TRIED

chapter proverb introduced

In this section, I give a history of the proverb and how it came into English. I then say a good deal about the lives of the people to whom credit should be given for the survival of the proverb to our day. My intention isn't merely to talk about origins, but to help the reader connect with these writers and to see that they weren't dusty old men sequestered away in molding libraries; rather, they were young, modern (for their time), real people, living full and interesting and complex lives, just like you and I.



This section may contain fun facts, trivia or tangentially related points of interest. As the subheading suggests, this information is literarily secondary to the main points. So don't rack your brain trying to pull all the pieces together into a linear flow. Just take it at face value (and then enjoy how cool you'll seem at parties when you casually bring up what you learn here).

***(Still)* TRUE**

This section is all about application: putting feet to the proverb in everyday life. To that end, you'll find anecdotes, examples, personal challenges—and plenty more stories.

Not TRUE

The closing section is included for the sake of hammering out what the proverb *doesn't* mean. It's an extension of the “(Still) TRUE” section; and yet it's unique in that it's designed to expel common misconceptions, prevent misinterpretation or remove excuses or other barriers that might otherwise prevent the reader from experiencing the full benefits of using the wisdom in real-world situations.



Questions & A Challenge

Here, you'll find questions for group discussion or self-reflection, along with a challenge related to the chapter.





know

UNTIL MODERN TIMES, written wisdom was rare. It had a weight to it, an *otherness*. And so it was approached with a kind of reverence.

The earliest human writing—cuneiform dating back to before 3000 B.C.—was etched into clay tablets or stone. I wasn't there, but I'm guessing that, given the sheer work involved, those ancient Mesopotamians weren't breaking out the chisel every time they saw a goat do something they thought was cute.

Not long after, papyrus and parchment came along; yet even as something akin to modern paper finally hit the scene around 100 B.C., it was still regarded as precious. And writing was an uncommon skill, as was reading.

Thus, over the course of nearly five millennia, one will notice a distinct absence of Sunday funnies. Likewise, as far as we know, not a single scribe of old was beckoned to jot down celebrity gossip.

Like paper, ink was a valuable resource. There were no erasers. Putting words in print, therefore, was a solemn undertaking—one prefaced by days of contemplation, reflection and much mental editing before a quill was ever dipped. It was called *committing* one's thoughts to writing because it did, indeed, require a commitment.

Consequently, the things people wrote down *mattered*, both to writer and reader (or, more often, listener) alike.

Even after the printing press made mass publication possible, notable quotes continued to be etched into the architecture, as if to say, “This is enduring wisdom. Pay heed. Remember.”

The Library of Congress, established in 1800, is adorned with many such quotes using Latin fonts depicting “U” in its early “V”-like form, including this one by sixteenth-century poet Sir Philip Sidney:

**“THEY ARE NEVER ALONE THAT ARE
ACCOMPANIED WITH NOBLE
THOUGHTS.”**

I saw an intriguing Sondheim performance at the nearby Huntington Theater. Built in 1925—

which is relatively recent in the scope of things—it too bears gilded lettering above the stage, a quote from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*:

**“TO HOLD AS ‘TWERE THE MIRROR
UP TO NATURE”**

By the early 1990s, as I was finishing college, wisdom and inspiration were still largely the stuff of books or plaques. However, statements of self-expression or inspiration had also been adorning walls since the late 1960s in the form of posters. Still, even these were an *investment*. You went to specific stores to find them. You spent time flipping through scores of designs in hard plastic protectors hanging from sliding racks—*clack, clack, clack*. And they weren’t cheap. So unless you found one that *perfectly* aligned with your particular aesthetic and credo, you most often left empty-handed. Then, there

was also the matter of wall space. Often, putting up a *new* poster meant deciding, with a mix of angst and nostalgia, which existing favorite would first need to be retired. This is all to say that, given the cost to the owner in terms of money, time and thought—the words printed on posters still *meant something*.

Not so any longer.

The twenty-first century stands in stark contrast with the entirety of written history that came before. From cafes, couches and cars, fingers or thumbs fly across keypads to indulge our every whim where words are concerned.

“Line at Lucky’s = so long... zzzz”

“I just saw a mangy squirrel!”

“Peanut butter! Yum!”

If only the prolific proclamations were all so innocuous. Alas, we’ve also become comfortable with publishing just about *everything*—however fleeting or trifling,

however ill-informed or ill-crafted,
however hateful or hurtful,
however careless or tactless,
however argumentative or condescending or
simply inane—all without a moment's
hesitation.

Of course, it's not all bad. There's lots of good
in the mix as well.

Lots and lots.

I myself have been blogging since 2011, trying
along with many other bloggers out there to
make a positive difference in people's lives
using every available means. Yet do you know
how many blogs there are across the world as
I'm writing this page? Go ahead, take a guess.

The first blog post was published in 1994.
Here, a mere 25 years later, the best estimate is
that there are nearly half a billion blogs on the
web.

Half a billion.

And that is *blog sites*, not *posts*. WordPress alone estimates that nearly 80 million blog posts per month are published using its platform.

Add to this the never-ending stream of inspirational quotes—memes set against gorgeously photographed backdrops—scrolling up our screens.

And yet, how often do we actually stop to ponder the implications or applications they tout?

Scroll, scroll, scroll.

Like, Like, Like.

Share. Retweet. Repeat.

When you really think about it, the fact that you just read the last three lines and *understood them at all...* well, it says something. Because prior to the latter half of the 2000s, those words would have been construed as utter gibberish. I guess what I'm trying to say is that we've got

access to more words than ever before. *And yet they mean continually less.*

It's a perpetual rain of inspiration, yet we collectively die of thirst for lack of drinking any of it in.

Let me offer one more analogy. Imagine yourself pushing your shopping cart up and down the grocery store aisles, surveying all of the food. You smell the fresh basil and thyme. You press your nose against the deli glass, admiring the wares on the other side. You smack your lips as you pass by the peanut butter. You ogle the oranges. You pinch the peaches and point at the peppers, oohing and aahing and exclaiming how much you *like* them.

But you don't buy anything.

You don't eat any of it.

You don't digest it.

You don't let it *become a part of you.*

I ask you: *What good would all the admiration do you?*

The same holds true with knowledge and *potentially* life-changing wisdom or advice. Agreement alone isn't enough. Pressing "Like" is fine; but if there's no act of intention to integrate into your life what you read or hear, it's like that inspirational trip to the grocery store. Unless you eventually pick some of it up and take it home and eat it, you'll starve.

The thing is, truth isn't any less true now than it ever was. Wisdom hasn't become any less wise. What's more, the intrinsic power of words to provoke choice and change—both in ourselves and in the world—is no less powerful today than at any point in history.

In other words, the problem isn't the words. The problem is *our relationship with them*.

And that is precisely why I set about to write *Tried & (Still) True*.

TRIED

Know thyself.

If I'm going to be offering a compilation of noteworthy written wisdom, we may as well begin at the beginning.

Many people attribute "Know thyself" to Socrates. Truth is, no one knows for sure just when the saying came about or who should be credited with having said it first, though most scholars seem to agree that it hails from as far back as Ancient Egypt.

One thing's for sure: it's *old*.

And it certainly sounds plenty *deep* as well, evoking images of some robe-clad and wizened sage speaking in hushed tones to eager neophytes.

Moreover, *something* about this age-old advice has caused it to stick around for millennia, right up to our present day.

Yet for all of that, what does it actually *mean*?



The fact that you're reading this book right now demonstrates your openness to learning new things.

I myself love learning (and then sharing) underused words.

Let me introduce you to one:

aphorism | ¹*A pithy observation which contains a general truth*

Stated another way, an aphorism is a way of saying a lot with a little. And as far as

aphorisms go, you'd be hard pressed to find a more shining specimen than "Know thyself." After all, it's only two words. Yet despite its compact size, it packs real punch. Socrates himself was purported by Plato to have held the saying up as the exemplar among aphorisms, "twisted together, like a bowstring, where a slight effort gives great force."

As it happens where "Know thyself" is concerned, I'm not the first to pose the question "But what does it *mean*?" And Socrates would have responded—as he undoubtedly did with countless pupils of his own—that it's not so much important what it means, as what it means *to you*.

In this way, aphorisms are like fine art. Both have genuine value. But the specifics of that value lie in the eye of the beholder. *It's personal.*

I'll never forget my first trip to Paris. I suddenly found myself in the heart of art and culture. Sculptures and paintings I'd seen countless times within the pages of books or depicted in films were suddenly right there before me, mere inches away. And not replicas, mind you. The *originals*.

I remember one Monet hanging at Musée d'Orsay: a golden field dotted with flowers below a blue sky with puffs of white clouds. To describe it to you in words, it was nothing special. Another painting of another landscape. To be honest, I can't even recall the name of the painting; I can only say that its name wasn't a key part of my experience.

I stood so close I could have traced the brushstrokes with my fingertips. I considered the *real person*, long since deceased, who'd been alive and vital, and who had painted this very work onto what was once a blank canvas. I

wondered how long it had taken him to complete it, whether he'd ever doubted his talent, and what he'd have thought at the time if he'd known that some of his works would one day be bought for over eighty million dollars apiece.

All the while, it occurred to me that there was nothing preventing someone from destroying this masterpiece in an instant if they'd had a mind to. There was a vulnerability to it somehow. All I know—is that I cried.

My encounter with the Monet could never have been what it was unless I'd created space for unhurried reflection and allowed things to get personal.

Know thyself.

So often anymore, amid the onslaught of words, we just want someone else to *tell* us what things mean. “Don't make me think; I've got 79 unread texts, emails and social media alerts to

get to.” We’ve lost patience, and with it the ability to *come* to conclusions rather than *jumping* to them.

I don’t suppose much of what Socrates hoped to impart to his students would have sunk in if they’d sat around the steps of the Parthenon all day, checking their Instagamma accounts instead of contemplating what he had to say.

It seems ironic, then, that we’d ever expect someone else to be able to spell out for us the significance of “Know thyself.” You must know *yourself* what “Know thyself” means.

That said, I’ll share with you some starter thoughts to get you going—a few notions of my own regarding this **tried-and-(still)-true** axiom. As with every bit of wisdom and advice you’ll find throughout this book, it’ll be up to *you* where you take it from there.

(Still) TRUE

The more I inspect this little gem, the more facets I glean from it.

As I touched on above, I certainly hear an admonition to discover or verify things (“know”) *for yourself*, rather than taking them at face value or relying on hearsay. We all rail against “because I said so” as teens; and yet, so often as adults, we default to adopting positions and beliefs based on whoever happens to be the loudest, most popular or most influential at the moment. As such, I suspect that the value of independent thinkers will only increase as time goes by.

The ancients believed that to “Know thyself” was to see a glimmer of the Divine, a common thread linking humanity. In this light, to reflect on (“know”) *why* we ourselves think and act and react the way we do can provide vital insight

into others—what we refer to as *empathy*. We can't hope to deeply understand or connect with others if we are not in tune with ourselves.

Along those lines, the Greeks of Socrates' day acknowledged that "Know thyself" was tantamount to "*Be* thyself." Live wholly and freely, unshackled by the expectations or preferences of others.

Seen from yet another angle, "Know thyself" also carries a sense of minding our own business. If we were to focus on ("know") *our own* flaws and shortcomings, and to continually commit to the hard work involved in personal change, we'd find ourselves with precious little time or energy to worry about what everyone else is doing.

Not TRUE

On the other hand, “Know thyself” hardly means to know *only* thyself. A focus on self and self-interest at the expense of others is *egoism*. And the world has known innumerable atrocities as a result of it.

Nor does “Know thyself” suggest that we can somehow, through enough introspection, achieve ultimate and complete self-awareness. That which ceases to grow—*dies*.

And while “Know thyself” may caution us to be realistic about our own weaknesses, that *does not* imply that we should do so at the expense of being realistic about *our strengths*.

When one of the kids I mentor gets down on himself, which they often do, one of my go-to responses is “Tell me three good things about yourself.” The first time I ask this, the reaction is usually the same as if I’d asked them to

divulge their deepest and darkest of private secrets to me. Awkwardness. Squirming. Grimacing. And inevitably, a drawn-out “Uhh... I don’t know.” After much cajoling, I may get a sort of backward concession, such as “Well, I guess my vocabulary isn’t terrible.”

But ask them to tell you about their *failures*, or the things they wish they could change about themselves—well, *now* you’ve got yourself a conversation.

I’m famous for saying that adults are just kids in older bodies. So it is not surprising that I often encounter reactions similar to those above among friends, conference attendees, readers—just about anywhere really.

Most people are adept at exclaiming their own faults. Sometimes it’s even an ongoing conversation in their head. But identifying and speaking about their *positive* qualities feels—wrong somehow. Like conceit. Yes, in certain

social settings, people might brag about this ability or that exploit. But it seems to me that, in real conversation away from the crowds, the majority of people tend to define themselves in terms of their shortcomings and not their strengths.

However, consider this. If we do not identify and feel comfortable with our positive qualities and abilities, how will we be able to develop them and use them to their fullest potential?

By way of example, I know that I am a good teacher. I enjoy teaching. But beyond that, when I speak or teach, *people get it*—often for the first time, despite much prior explanation elsewhere. I see listeners become *learners*. They engage. Perhaps most satisfying is when someone becomes so excited about what they've just heard or read and the way in which it finally got through to them, that they go and share it with others.

Do I sound like I'm bragging? I hope not. It just happens to be one of "my things." And if I didn't accept this about myself, *I would not be a good teacher*. In fact, I might not teach at all. Knowing that teaching is both a passion and a strength helps me to feel confident when something needs to be learned. And that confidence is actually part of the reason that I am an effective teacher in the first place.

For instance, I can honestly say to a kid who's struggled for years in reading, "Listen, I know you've had a really tough time up to now. But this time will be different. The way I teach is different, so the way you learn will be different. I know you can do this. It's not your brain, it's how you've been taught. It just didn't connect with your style of learning before now. But I understand brains. And if you help me, I can understand how *your* brain works best." Just in saying this with confidence—not false

confidence, I really believe it—students approach “this time” differently.

They believe me—because *I believe me*.

I am also a singer. I have a very good ear, and my voice moves easily where I want it to go with little effort. In addition, I’m able to communicate real emotion when I sing. Because I *know* this about myself, I sing a certain way. I don’t hold back. I *believe* that I can tell a story with my voice, and so I *do* wind up telling stories with my voice. If I did not acknowledge that I could sing, I would approach it much differently—perhaps even allowing other perceived weaknesses (such as wishing I had a higher range or more natural grit) to hinder my performance.

If I don’t *know* that I have money in my pocket, I cannot spend it. It only makes sense that we can’t intentionally use or benefit from something we don’t acknowledge that we

possess. Likewise, if I don't know the strengths and good qualities I possess, I will not use them very often or very well—if I use them *at all*.

This leaves me dwelling primarily on—you guessed it—my faults. And as I ruminate on those faults, it stands to reason that I will evidence them more frequently. If I'm unable to see my strengths, then I am left to see only my weaknesses. And if I perceive myself as a sum total of my weaknesses, change seems an impossible goal. It is too overwhelming.

All shadow and no light.

In fact, to make changes in an area of weakness implies that the goal is to move toward a position of strength in that area. Yet if I cannot be realistic about my strengths, I have no marker for where I'm headed or how far I've come.

Further, knowing my strengths can actually help me to *address* my weaknesses.

Growing up, it was all too easy for me to fall into unkind conversations with friends while people-watching. I'm embarrassed now to admit it, but we would make sarcastic and hysterical comments about those at the mall, or in an airport, or passing by on the street. Some years back, I realized that this was not a quality that I wanted to keep. It was treating people as "things" for my entertainment, and I didn't want to do that any longer. However, I acknowledged that compassion and listening were among my *strengths*. In identifying these strengths, I was able to apply them to the people that would otherwise be the subjects of my not-so-nice asides. I would think something like, *If I were to sit down with that person, what would he tell me about his life? What is hard for him in life? What does he like to do for fun? When is the last time he got to do that?* This imaginary "listening" brought my compassion to the

forefront, and being witty at the person's expense just didn't seem all that appealing anymore.

By using my strengths to redirect my thoughts, I was able to see real change in an area of weakness.

Know thyself.

What are your own strengths? I hope you're up for a challenge. Grab a piece of paper and write down three things that are strengths or positive qualities you possess. Strip them down to this form: "I am _____." This may make you feel uncomfortable, but that's why it's called a *challenge*. And don't ask others, "What do you think are my good qualities?" Take the time to work through identifying them yourself. Go ahead. I'm not kidding. Take a few minutes and do it now.

All done? Now, take that list with you for a week. Put it someplace where you'll see it

several times a day. And act on those strengths. If you wrote “I am a good cook,” then use your cooking to make something special that will cheer someone up. If you wrote “I am an encouraging person,” then remind yourself of that and look for opportunities to encourage those you encounter.

“Know thyself” practiced out of balance results in self-loathing or self-conceit, neither of which is virtuous. You can be realistic about your good qualities and still be humble. I’ve often suggested that humility does not mean being silent or demure, but rather knowing your rights and then willfully giving them up for the benefit of someone else. Similarly, holding an accurate perception of your strengths is the only way to put those strengths to use in positively influencing the world around you.



Questions & A Challenge

1. How well would you say you “know thyself” at this point in your life?
2. What’s one facet of yourself—habits, traits, motivations, emotions, thought patterns, etc.—that still feels like more of a mystery to you than a known element?
3. This chapter covered a lot of ground. What is one specific concept that caught your attention and that you’d like to spend some more time pondering? Write it down, or if you’re in a group, consider sharing it aloud.

CHALLENGE: This first chapter poses its own challenge, but it’s worth repeating in hopes that seeing it again

here, you'll *stop now and do it*. Write down three things that are strengths or positive qualities you possess. Strip them down to this form: "I am _____." This may make you feel uncomfortable, but that's why it's called a *challenge*. And don't ask others, "What do you think are my good qualities?" Take the time to work through identifying them yourself. When you're finished, take that list with you for a week. Put it someplace where you'll see it several times a day. And act on those strengths.



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And watch for Erik Tyler's new release

You Always Have A Choice

coming in 2020

about the author



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Erik is an author, speaker, blogger, mentor, facilitator, people-lover, creative force, conversationalist, problem solver, chance-taker, noticer and lover of life. He lives in the Boston area.

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