

All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten

by Robert Fulghum

Credo

To begin with, did I really learn everything I need to know in kindergarten? Do I still believe that? Here is the original essay, followed by my editorial reaction.

Each spring, for many years, I have set myself the task of writing a personal statement of belief: a Credo. When I was younger, the statement ran for many pages, trying to cover every base, with no loose ends. It sounded like a Supreme Court brief, as if words could resolve all conflicts about the meaning of existence.

The Credo has grown shorter in recent years—sometimes cynical, sometimes comical, and sometimes bland—but I keep working at it. Recently I set out to get the statement of personal belief down to one page in simple terms, fully understanding the naïve idealism that implied.

The inspiration for brevity came to me at a gasoline station. I managed to fill my old car's tank with super deluxe high-octane go-juice. My old hoopy couldn't handle it and got the willies—kept sputtering out at intersections and belching going downhill. I understood. My mind and my spirit get like that from time to time. Too much high-content information, and I get the existential willies. I keep sputtering out at intersections where life choices must be made and I either know too much or not enough. The examined life is no picnic.

I realized then that I already know most of what's necessary to live a meaningful life—that it isn't all that complicated. I know it. And have known it for a long, long time. Living it—well, that's another matter, yes? Here's my Credo:

ALL I REALLY NEED TO KNOW about how to live and what to do and how to be I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate-school mountain, but there in the sandpile at Sunday School. These are the things I learned:

Share everything.

Play fair.

Don't hit people.

Put things back where you found them.

Clean up your own mess.

Don't take things that aren't yours.

Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.

Wash your hands before you eat.

Flush.

Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.

Live a balanced life—learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some.

Take a nap every afternoon.

When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.

Wonder. Remember the little seed in the Styrofoam cup: The roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that.

Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even the little seed in the Styrofoam cup—they all die. So do we.

And then remember the Dick-and-Jane books and the first word you learned—the biggest word of all—LOOK.

Everything you need to know is in there somewhere. The Golden Rule and love and basic sanitation. Ecology and politics and equality and sane living.

Take any one of those items and extrapolate it into sophisticated adult terms and apply it to your family life or your work or your government or your world and it holds true and clear and firm. Think what a better world it would be if we all—the whole world—had cookies and milk about three o'clock every afternoon and then lay down with our blankies for a nap. Or if all governments had as a basic policy to always put things back where they found them and to clean up their own mess.

And it is still true, no matter how old you are—when you go out into the world, it is best to hold hands and stick together.

Deep Kindergarten

As I write this I am sixty-five years old. Not so old, really, but I have been around awhile. Kindergarten is a long way back there. What do I know now?

The Kindergarten Credo is not kid stuff.

It is not simple. It is elemental.

The essay answers the questions asked sooner or later by every one of us who once stared out a classroom window wondering: Why am I here? Why do I have to go to school?

We are sent to school to be civilized—to be introduced to the essential machinery of human society. Early on in our lives we are sent out of the home into the world. To school. We have no choice in this. Society judges it so important that we be educated that we must go. It is the law. And when we get to school we are taught the fundamentals on which civilization rests. These are first explained in language a small child understands.

For example, it would do no good to tell a six-year-old that “Studies have shown that human society cannot function without an equitable distribution of the resources of the earth.” While this statement is profoundly and painfully true, a child cannot comprehend this vocabulary. So a child is told that there are twenty children and five balls to play with; likewise four easels, three sets of blocks, two guinea pigs, and one bathroom. To be fair, we must share.

Likewise a six-year-old will not understand that “By and large it has been demonstrated that violence is counterproductive to the constructive interaction of persons and societies.” True. But a child can better understand that the rule out in the world and in the school is the same: Don't hit people. Bad things happen. The child must understand this rule is connected to the first rule: People won't share or play fair if you hit them.

It's hard to explain the cost and consequences of environmental pollution and destruction to a six year old. But we are paying a desperate price even now because adults did not heed the

instructions of kindergarten: Clean up your own mess; put things back where you found them; don't take what's not yours.

"The history of society is more defined by its understanding of disease than its formulation of philosophy and political theory." True. Basic sanitation. Keeping excrement off our hands as well as out of our minds is important. But it's enough to teach a child to use the toilet, flush, and wash his hands regularly.

And so on. From the first day we are told in words we can handle what has come to be prized as the foundation of community and culture. Though the teacher may call these first lessons "simple rules," they are in fact the distillation of all the hard-won, field-tested working standards of the human enterprise.

Once we are told about these things, we soon discover we are taking a lab course. We are going to be asked to try and practice these precepts every day. Knowledge is meaningful only if it is reflected in action. The human race has found out the hard way that we are what we do, not just what we think. This is true for kids and adults—for schoolrooms and nations.

I am sometimes amazed at what we did not fully grasp in kindergarten. In the years I was a parish minister I was always taken aback when someone came to me and said. "I've just come from the doctor and he told me I have a only a limited time to live."

I was tempted to shout, "What? You didn't know? You had to pay a doctor to tell you—at your age? Where were you the week in kindergarten when you got the little cup with the cotton and water and seed? Life happened—remember? A plant grew up and the roots grew down. A miracle. And then a few days later the plant was dead. DEAD. Life is short. Were you asleep that week or home sick or what?"

I never said all that. But I thought it. And it's true. The idea was for us to have the whole picture right from the beginning. Life-and-death. Lifedeath. One event. One short event. Don't forget.

There's another thing not everyone figures out right away: It's almost impossible to go through life all alone. We need to find our support group—family, friends, companion, therapy gatherings, team, church or whatever. The kindergarten admonition applies as long as we live: "When you go out into the world, hold hands and stick together." It's dangerous out there—lonely, too. Everyone needs someone. Some assembly is always required.

What we learn in kindergarten comes up again and again in our lives as long as we live. In far more complex, polysyllabic forms, to be sure. In lectures, encyclopedias, bibles, company rules, courts of law, sermons, and handbooks. Life will examine us continually to see if we have understood and have practiced what we were taught that first year of school.

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