

## Book Review

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# Delving Beneath: Book Review of *30 Lessons for Living: Tried and True Advice from the Wisest Americans* by Karl Pillemer

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Asking and answering questions are at life's foundations. Beginning with the two-year-old's series of "Why?" questions, queries about others and ourselves are embedded in the bedrock of all cultures. Questions surface throughout the Bible, sometimes with answers provided. Questions are not the spice in the soup, they are the soup.

What makes Karl Pillemer's book, *30 Lessons for Living: Tried and True Advice from the Wisest Americans*, such a unique contribution to mainstream media is that it opens the door to questing and questioning adults who are outside of the circles created by organizations like *The International Institute for Reminiscence and Life Review, University of Wisconsin-Superior*. Without oversimplifying the essence of personal inquiry, Pillemer has decoded both designing life's questions and intently listening to the answers. Because both the book's structure and the stories move beyond platitudes, internal dialogues (as well as conversations among family, friends, or newly formed groups) might well be prompted and stimulate fresh insights.

Pillemer's sources are individuals 65 and older, whom he refers to as "experts" in order to avoid age-ist terminology. Pillemer's synthesis of their responses to questions about life turns into a wealth of guidance. Rather than limiting the book to a series of quotations strung together, the reader is continually drawn back to the broader frame. Reading is more similar to a conversation than an immersion in a research study, as illustrated in the quotation from near the end of the book, below:

As you have read the ... previous chapters, it may have struck you that although the specific topics differ, the advice has an underlying coherence to it. Like recurring motifs in a symphony, particular themes wind through the experts' recommendations for how we should live our lives. These ways of viewing the world

appear and reappear no matter what subject they are discussing. You've probably noticed, for example, how they emphasize time and the importance of spending it well, their deep knowledge of human vulnerability, their sense of the importance of close relationships and open communication, and the role of honesty and integrity that surfaces in many of their narratives. (Pillemer, 2011, p. 199)

If such a style intrigues you, this book is one to explore. It has the potential to illustrate the process of reflection to individuals about to embark on life review. It also could provide companionship, after individuals conclude their own reflections. The book also could be the basis of conversation across generations, with time taken to consider life conclusions often left unexpressed. The study design and overview of the content are provided below, along with identification of some of the limitations of Pillemer's approach, concluding with an illustration of how the book was used in a recent research pilot project.

## The Study

Pillemer specifically decided to avoid a formal study, but his approach took advantage of his sociological background and career-long experience as a gerontologist. Making use of the resources at the Cornell Institute for Translational Research on Aging, which he founded, he and his researchers gathered information via a three-phase process. *Phase 1*, the pilot phase, involved university alumni age sixty-five and over, as well as individuals who responded to a website created by the researchers. The initial group of 500 (average age not provided) responded to a single question, "What are the most important lessons you feel you have learned over the course of your life?" A content analysis of these responses led to the creation of general categories. After testing questions in the new general categories via in-person interviews with 80 participants, *Phase 2*, a National Random-Sample Survey, was developed. Telephone interviews of 314 individuals (average age of 74) went beyond the initial question of *Phase 1* and included more targeted questions about the life lessons in specific categories (e.g., health, parenting, career), as well as open-ended questions. Interviews

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averaged 20 minutes and validated the findings obtained from the initial group. *Phase 3* consisted of systematic in-depth phone interviews with 240 individuals (average age of 81), giving participants an opportunity to review the interview topics in advance. The participants in this final phase had been nominated by colleagues and agencies as wise, self-reflective individuals, and interviews lasted an average of two hours. Content of interviews from all three phases of the study was analyzed using typical qualitative techniques, yielding an identification of six themes and thirty sub-themes (“lessons”).

### Six Themes Illustrate Wisdom

The themes organize the book. Three explore major life events: *marriage* (“Great Together: Lessons for a Happy Marriage”), *career* (“Glad to get up in the morning: Lessons for a successful and fulfilling career”), and *parenting* (“Nobody’s perfect: Lessons for a lifetime of parenting”); while the other three identify additional aspects of life while highlighting concerns that make sense for this population: *aging* (“Find the magic: Lessons for aging fearlessly and well”), *purposeful living* (“I can look everyone in the eye: Lessons for living a life without regrets”), and *selectivity* (“Choose happiness: Lessons for living like an expert”). Five lessons within each theme serve to highlight major subthemes, presented as verb-first direction. Pillemer provides a combination of personal stories, narrative connections, and personal reflections, to make each lesson resonate.

Because his own self-inquiry process is unguarded, and since he chooses to wrestle with the guidance he receives without trying to make himself look astute, he serves as a partner for readers in the inquiry process. He invites readers to follow his lead, as he comes to terms with the absence of absolutes; he welcomes ambiguity and curiosity. He twines together his own process with his insights about what he has heard from others. In presenting Lesson 16, “Being old is much better than you think,” he offers readers the opportunity to face their own qualms about aging and then illustrates a range of reflections from individuals ages 76 and older. He then shares this observation:

My ... surprise was the experts’ view of *aging as a quest*. They acknowledge that growing old is uncharted territory, a transition to a world that does not have the clear road map of middle age, with its defined career ladder and child-rearing responsibilities. But many experts described it with a sense of exploring a new land, of novel opportunities to be seized and interests to be developed. Rather than a time of decline, many of America’s elders see aging as an adventure. (p. 132)

In refusing to carve the ideas he heard up into neat, non-contradictory axioms, he offers all readers the opportunity to be part of the conversation the book begins.

### Limitations

Readers who are drawn to stories about life’s struggles, and who argue with simplistic recommendations, will find much to admire about this book. A diversity of voices emerges in terms of values, experiences, and expectations. Readers can draw their own conclusions from the wealth of primary source materials provided throughout the book. Because Pillemer has chosen a highly accessible approach, there are only 14 references to other sources within the book, with no attempt to put themes or lessons he has identified into a broader context.

Pillemer explains that, given the intention that the study was specifically *not* designed for a publication of findings that would appear in a scientific journal, but rather to offer individuals of all ages access to the reflections of over 1,200 people who had lived long lives, no quantitative analysis was completed. What this means for the reader, however, is that the frequency of response – a potentially valuable resource to use to interpret the findings – is missing. Even with the expectation that the primary audience for this book would not need quantitative data, many readers might have found a factor analysis, as well as presentation of demographic variables of the study’s participants, to have been useful.

Pillemer’s deliberate style prevents the reader from considering how the identified themes would fare if placed within a broader sociological context. For example, Lesson 1, “Marry someone a lot like you,” might be considered the norm for these participants (whose birthdates occurred during the first half of the twentieth century), but younger readers might dismiss such guidance as leading to hopeless stereotyping. The opportunities to hear the voices throughout this book might have been enriched if more were known about the backgrounds of the people speaking.

### Making Use of 30 Lessons for Living

In spite of reservations, *30 Lessons for Living* consistently prompts discussion. It gives multiple perspectives for every lesson. The authentic search for meaning of the author and the experts cannot be doubted. As a result, the book has the potential to bridge the gap between those well-versed in the demands and results of life review, and those who have no knowledge of the field.

In designing a program for reflection for two groups, (1) older adults and (2) museum docents of all ages, I made use of the 30 Lessons. At the end of each chapter, Pillemer summarizes the lessons for each theme, with a two-sentence summary of its main points. I shared this summary and used it to open up conversation. Inevitably,

individuals found several lessons that pertained to their own experiences. Lessons led to conversations within the group and were incorporated into the final products put together by each individual participant. “Talk to each other,” Lesson 4, within the “Marriage” theme, and “Happiness is a choice, not a condition,” Lesson 27, within the “Choose Happiness” theme, both led to novel ways of looking at personal experiences for participants whose life experiences were dissimilar. Individuals used illustrations, personal photographs, and words to explore the lessons and found useful springboards to new self-understanding.

### In Conclusion

Karl Pillemer has opened a door to personal inquiry. Rather than limiting himself to scholarly articles (of which

he has published many) or academic books, he has created a front porch for conversation about life’s important questions. His earnest humility emerges from every page of this book, inviting readers to shed their preconceived notions about what is important, and consider new options. Nearly every reader will dispute some of his conclusions, be touched by others. If he can enable readers to grasp the importance of Lesson 25, “Time is of the essence” (within the “Choose Happiness” theme), likely he (and his experts) would consider this book to have accomplished its goals.

### References

Pillemer, K. (2011). *30 Lessons for living: Tried and true advice from the wisest Americans*. New York: Hudson Street Press (Penguin Group).