

**This Is NOT
Your Practice Life
Volume I: Mental Mapping
and
the Significance of Place in
Your Life**

**Points of Departure
for Your Own Insightful Thinking**

101 Brief Essays

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This Is NOT Your Practice Life

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This Is NOT Your Practice Life

To Donna, with whom I experience every
place as a wonder

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FOREWORD

By Dr. Christian Conte

Once there lived a man who tried and failed, helped and hurt, loved and lost, and in the end, his life was shorter than he hoped. The lessons he learned, he wished he knew sooner, but part of him always believed there'd be more time (that's only natural to think, after all). And whether he believed this life was one of many or entirely the only one, the overwhelmingly harsh truth of reality he ultimately faced was this: This life counted. It was not, even if he wanted it to be, his practice life.

And the same is true for me. And the same is true for you.

Logic tells me that others might ask why I might say that I grew up with the greatest possible father I could ever have. After all, one could argue that I didn't live in another family with another father, so it seems reasonable to assume that others might feel the same about their fathers. But my opinion stands because he pushed me to become the best version of myself mentally, physically, and spiritually, and he led by example. He is an intellectual who reads voraciously and pursues knowledge incessantly. He taught me to use logic, to love learning, and to remain ever-open to feedback.

Of all the lessons my dad taught me growing up, two phrases he used stand out to me the most. The first was simply, "Think!" And he often said it emphatically. Regardless of how he said it, however, he included it at the end of every send-off he gave me, whether I

was heading to the local mall or far away to college. The second he used on me from the time I was a teenager, and you've heard this phrase already because it's the title of this book. He would look at me and say sternly, "This is *not* your practice life," and he would always emphasize the word "not" pronouncedly.

Like everyone else on the planet, I didn't always immediately implement every life lesson the instant I encountered it, so I'm grateful he repeated both phrases as often as he did. First, it's a good idea to think in life. And before you say, "Thanks, Mr. Obvious," humbly recall how many foolish mistakes you've also likely made by not following that seemingly conspicuously commonsensical advice. Second, he's right about this not being our practice life.

In this book (and the subsequent series), you will get to experience my father's advice firsthand, because the words I'm writing now aren't simply a sentimental throwback to olden times, they are a foreword to his current advice. In these pages, he is not merely saying "Think," he is actually providing you with thought-provoking essays. He is not sternly saying, "This is *not* your practice life"; he is offering dynamic information that makes life all the more enjoyable to experience.

Yes, most definitely this life of yours indeed counts. And to make the most out of it, consider both learning from the incredible breadth of knowledge presented in these pages, as well as learning how to find and map out the vast, incredible connections that are in your own life. Along the way, keep in mind that your brain

will not only be learning about the mental map of life, but also mentally mapping out a way to map *Your Way* (a sentence well worth re-reading after you read his book).

And all of it is fascinating. Every blog-turned-chapter of this book is flat-out interesting. I'm awed every time I read them. I either learn something new or I learn new ways to see what I already knew. Either way, I'm confident you will, too. I recommend reading only one per day to give your brain time to assimilate and create. If these essays do act as points of departure for you insights, they will open up doors to new personal insights and send you down paths to new perspectives.

—Dr. Christian Conte, founder of Yield Theory and author of books on emotional management, including *Walking through Anger: A New Design for Confronting Conflict in an Emotionally Charged World*.

Sacred Ground

Place, as I repeatedly say, is primary. It can also be sacred—even for “nonbelievers.” Because religion mantles the planet, both believers and nonbelievers can identify certain places that some group considers to be sacred: local houses of worship, for example. Internationally recognized “sacred sites” include the Temple Mount (or Harem al-Sharif), St. Peter’s Basilica, the Great Mosque of Mecca, the Mahabodhi Temple, Stonehenge, and Varanasi. To those and other religious sites, you could probably add places that have become sacred by virtue of what occurred, in, on, or near them or by what they memorialize. Every country or region has such sacred ground.

For Americans, Gettysburg attracts nearly three million annual visitors, and other Civil War sites also attract large numbers of people. Some Revolutionary War battle sites or events also attract many people, as does the Alamo. At many of these sites people wander through museums with artifacts and walk past monuments to the people who fought for one cause or another, people who gave limbs or life in defense of their cause and who, because of their sacrifice, made the ground sacred. In Washington, D.C. the memorials include the Vietnam War Memorial with 50,000 names etched in stone commanding reverent silence.

Around the world the reverence for sacred ground manifests itself wherever people remember events or people who shaped their culture or country, such as World War I’s Battle of Verdun, where nearly 300,000 soldiers died in 1916. The sacred ground might even be a sports arena like the Boston Garden or Wrigley Field. In Pittsburgh’s Oakland one can see the

remnants of a brick outfield wall preserved by the city because it is the Forbes Field barrier over which Bill Mazeroski hit a World Series winning home run against the New York Yankees in 1960.

In 1939 a great athlete called the end to his career in Yankee Stadium. Lou Gehrig called himself “the luckiest man” because played baseball on ground made sacred by those who preceded him and those with whom he played. And he was, himself, one of the reasons that Yankee Stadium became “sacred ground.”

The other day I went to see a baseball tournament game. Parents, grandparents, and friends with coolers filled with snacks, sandwiches, and drinks sat on aluminum bleachers, on portable lawn chairs, and on blankets spread along a grassy hill next to the first base line to watch teens play a game that Gehrig, one of the game’s great players, said he was lucky to play. As I watched the boys dive for balls on the dusty infield, make clouds of dust as they slid into bags, and landscape the dirt on the pitcher’s mound or around home plate as they came to bat, I heard someone outside the confines of the field call, “Mom, Mom, Mom.”

The call came from the younger brother of one of the players. He had Down Syndrome and was playing in a pile of soil next to the bleachers. As he dug with his hands, he uncovered a lump of dirt in a concretion about the size of a basketball. Fascinated by it, he lifted the heavy mass skyward in joy, calling to his mother as he did so. He held the dirt ball like a bishop holding a monstrance in reverence. He held it like a professional hockey player holding the Stanley Cup or a football player holding the Lombardi Trophy.

The event seemed to go largely unnoticed by all because their attention was centered on the sacred ground within the fences and the “heroic deeds” of the players as they struggled for victory. I could not see whether or not the mother responded to his call or his action.

Maybe all present should have noticed. To that child the dirt was sacred ground.

Through the Unopened Door

The Golden Retriever called Sunshine is a pleasant and obedient dog, quietly playful, and very friendly. When she needs to leave the house, she goes to the full-glass storm door and raises her paw to the door handle until someone lets her out.

Last week, Sunshine's family needed a new storm door. When the installer put the door in, he needed to make an adjustment before he could insert the full-glass panel. For a few days, the door was just the hinged frame without anything in the middle. During those days Sunshine went to the door as usual, poked her nose slightly through the space where the glass would normally be, and then reached her paw toward the handle. She would not cross the plane of open space. Instead, she waited until someone opened the empty door frame.

Okay, Sunshine is a conditioned dog. She had never seen a door through which she could step. She has always known the glass barrier that some human had to open, and, even when nothing but air separated her from the outside, she did not cross the nonexistent glass. She waited for both help and permission to go through the unopened door.

If you find yourself living in a physical or mental place behind a barrier created by conditioning, remember the story of the dog.

Step through the door.
There's nothing to stop you.
Don't be Sunshine.

No Grass like Your Grass

Some of the grass on the other side of the fence really is better than some of the grass on your side of the fence. Just remember that from the other side of the fence your grass is the “grass on the other side of the fence.”

Obviously, there are times when your side of the fence is uncomfortable or even dangerous. That’s the nature of living in a risky place called Earth. So far, you have survived even the most harrowing experiences you’ve had; otherwise, you wouldn’t be reading this. Before you seek that grass on the other side of the fence, you might consider the level of risk? Let’s see.

Where there are active faults, such as those in northern Turkey and western California, unpredictable temblors can happen though they occur in somewhat identifiable zones. However, the deadly Northridge, California, earthquake occurred along a “blind fault.” In 1976 an earthquake in Tangshan, China, killed more than 240,000 people who would not have gone to sleep that night if they knew their city would be destroyed at 3:42 a.m. In America’s Tornado Alley the unpredictable twister can occur, though its likely occurrence might be forecast an hour to a day earlier. During the afternoon of March 18, 1925, tornadoes, particularly one called the Tri-State Tornado, killed about 750 people. Many coasts are subject to hurricanes, tropical storms, and tsunamis with varying predictability and strength. On November 12, 1970 the Bhola hurricane killed approximately 500,000 people in Bangladesh.

Then there are the places with infrequent risks, such as those places where rockslides, mudslides, lahars, eruptions from long dormant volcanoes, sinkholes and fires destroy property and endanger life. And don't forget flash floods; they damage property and destroy lives. Actually, there's no place on the planet free from risk. On December 13, 2014 a small tornado hit a ten-block area in Los Angeles, California. Six months earlier a tornado outbreak hit England. Though unlikely, tornadoes could even hit high latitude places like Antarctica. Then there's lightning. If they weren't dead, you could ask four Russian thieves about it. Fleeing after robbing a church in December, 2014, the thieves died when their getaway car exploded after it was hit by lightning. One more: On October 16, 2013 a space rock hit Chelyabinsk, Russia, damaging buildings and injuring people. Yes, Earth's a risky place to live.

But here you are in your place. Whatever Earth has thrown at you so far, whatever humans have thrown at you so far, and whatever space has thrown at you, you have survived. Though disasters and social upheavals have destroyed property and killed people, none have ended your existence. You're here. Regardless of its dangers, your place isn't as bad as it could be. Some of the greener grass really is on your side of the fence. Be safe, but just to be sure you are, try fertilizing and watering that grass. You could make an even more attractive lawn on your side of the fence.

Indefinite Number of Intersecting Passageways That Lead to...

Stories of “comebacks” abound. We love them. Someone, down and out, rises like a phoenix from the ashes of injury, rejection, addiction, accident, disease, disorder, or disaster. Up, down, back up. The comeback can be thought of as a courageous and persistent journey through unpredictable and intersecting passageways.

Comebacks, by their very nature, imply an “up” phase. While Mario Lemieux, star of the Pittsburgh Penguins, was on top the world of professional hockey, he was afflicted with Hodgkin’s disease, but he became a “comeback kid” by returning to the team after radiation treatments and by winning the individual scoring championship. Comeback Kid, a Winnipeg punk band, took its name from a newspaper story about Lemieux’s successful return to the game. The group has a song called “Wake the Dead” that is about not losing hope and about shaking off regrets.

Comeback kid: The term has been used for many return-to-success stories. Joe Montana, football star, was called “Comeback Joe” for his ability to rally his team to victory. Bill Clinton, President, labeled himself “comeback kid.” Ulysses S. Grant, Mexican War hero, disillusioned, possibly alcoholic, became Captain Grant at remote Fort Humboldt, and, seeing no future in the military, left the army in 1854. Over the ensuing half dozen years, he failed at numerous business ventures, and then, desperate for a sustaining job, private citizen Grant worked for his father. Through a series of passageways foreshadowing the Winnipeg band’s music, Grant, in the death of obscurity, woke.

Death brought him back to life, that is, war brought him back, first as an organizer of a volunteer troop from Galena during the Civil War, and then as commanding officer of the Twenty-first Illinois Volunteer Infantry.

You know the rest: Brigadier General Grant in 1861, Major General Grant in 1862, and then, another setback in his life. Major General Halleck, his immediate superior, gave him a desk job in April after Grant's forces suffered heavy casualties at Shiloh. Back in command of forces (the Army of the Tennessee) by October, General Grant took Vicksburg. In 1863 Lincoln appointed Grant as commander of the Military Division of the Mississippi (the armies of the Cumberland, the Ohio, and the Tennessee—named for the rivers). Next came a third star, and Grant became the General in Chief of the northern armies, and, as everyone knows—well, not everyone—eventually led the North to victory. On March 4, 1869, President Grant was sworn into office. From disillusioned marginal alcoholic, business failure, and demoted soldier to President: Now that's a comeback.

Think you're done? Think your efforts lead to nowhere? Think you are at a dead end? Wake yourself up to the many intersections where new passageways lead to...

Before You Sling Dirt

Nearly 2,300 years ago a guy in an audience threw some dirt on the toga of a Roman ambassador to Tarentum. That small act precipitated a war in which thousands died and Tarentum changed.

Things didn't start with the guy in the audience, however. Tarentum was a Greek city lying within the heel of Italy's "boot." It was a city of educated people that went to plays and thought of themselves as being better than Roman "barbarians." During an incident in Tarentum's harbor, the Tarentines seized some Roman ships and killed the Roman sailors. In response, the Romans sent Lucius Posthumius to demand both an apology and compensation. Lucius was a dignified calm person. As was the custom of his city, Lucius wore a toga, an unfashionable garb in Tarentum.

When he arrived in Tarentum, Lucius met a rowdy crowd that mocked his outfit and his Greek pronunciation. Nevertheless, Lucius remained calm. At the conclusion of his speech, a Tarentine, mocking him, threw dirt on the toga. Then the otherwise calm Lucius showed the soiled toga to the audience and told them that his clothes would be washed clean by their blood.

Returning to Rome, Lucius told his story, inciting the Senate to declare war on Tarentum. Back in Tarentum, the Tarentines realized they had no effective military leader, so they called upon Pyrrhus of Epirus in Greece to help them defend their city. When he arrived in Tarentum, Pyrrhus took control of the city, shut down the theater and other

entertainment, and made the citizens train to be soldiers. Gone were the heady days of elitism in Tarentum. Gone were the fun and games. War was upon them with a virtual dictator in control of their fate. The Pyrrhic Wars continued for about five years with the eventual defeat of Pyrrhus and the capture of Tarentum by the Romans. A bit of mud-slinging ultimately changed the nature of a city and a culture.

Such a tale comes with lessons, of course: How elitism usually leads to some embarrassment or downfall; How the devil you know is often better than the one you don't; or How insulting someone else can lead to one's own injury.

You need not look far for examples of these lessons. Watch the news or check out social media to see many modern day incarnations of a Tarentine, Lucius, and Pyrrhus. A Tarentine, provoked it seems by what Thomas Carlyle called "motiveless malignity" will start a Twitter war. A Lucius initially maintains an aloof decorum of rationality until a Tarentine provocation exceeds the limits of patience. And a Pyrrhus takes advantage of those who seek remedies from others, becoming a juggernaut of runaway political power and repression.

You can name names if you wish. I would simply caution against putting any contemporary of yours into the camp of a Tarentine, Lucius, or Pyrrhus because of your own bias.

Majestic

Here's how I picture you. You look confident as you stand on the crest of a hill with a sweeping vista. The sun is rising in the distance, filling all beneath you with golden light. Your eyes mirror the sun. You are in command. You have my respect, my admiration. You climbed over obstacles. From some unknown source uplifting music like the beginning of Strauss's "Also Sprach Zarathustra" or Copland's "Fanfare for the Common Man" envelopes you.

How do you picture yourself? If your image is less majestic than mine, feel free to borrow what I just wrote. You deserve a day of uplift.

Tilforladelige Efterretninger om Island

Would that our lives would be free from dangers!
Would that we might have no worries! Hey, are you
afraid of mosquitoes that carry malaria, Zika,
Chikungunya, Dengue and Yellow fever, Eastern
Equine and St. Louis Encephalitis, and West Nile?

Scary stuff. Then there are spiders, the brown recluse
and black widow. What about crocs in the
Everglades? Want to swim in the ocean but are afraid
of sharks and poisonous jellyfish? Then there are
steps. Yes, steps, not in themselves much danger, but
couple them on occasion with gravity, and Boink! Are
there dangers everywhere? I didn't even mention
snakes. Sneaky, aren't they? You're sitting outside at
a picnic, and there, uninvited and at first unnoticed,
beside you, to use Emily Dickinson's words, lies a
"narrow fellow in the grass."

There's always that trip to Iceland you've been putting
off. In probably one of the most famous chapters in all
of scientific writing you can find your motivation for
that trip to the Far North or motivation for continuing
your happy life in the Land of Fire and Ice. The book
in which the famous Chapter 72 lies is *Tilforladelige
Efterretninger om Island*, basically, *The Natural
History of Iceland* by Dane Niels Horrebow. Dr.
Samuel Johnson playfully mentioned the nineteenth-
century work when he claimed he could recite the
entire chapter from memory.

Let's put you to the memory test. See how long it
takes you to memorize the English translation of
Horrebow's entire Chapter 72. Take a deep breath.
Ready? Here it is in full. Go:

“There are no snakes of any kind to be met with throughout the whole island.”

Yes, that’s all of it. That’s the entire chapter. But the point of this little exercise lies in what Horrebow writes.

Even though you might get wiped out by a volcanic eruption on the island, you can rest assured that you won’t have to deal with at least one danger: Snakes.

Packing your bags? Have your picnic in Iceland. Otherwise, learn to live with the dangers that surround you by anticipating what you can and holding onto the handrail when you walk down steps.

The Author

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