

Time Wounds All

By Holly Lisle

So now I'm forty-eight.

The frenetic activity of the past two weeks has settled down. I've had some spare moments to think. I'm trying to wrap my head around being forty-eight, but it's too new.

I have a pretty good grip on what forty-seven was, though, and it was huge. Difficult. Life-changing.

I'm getting a good, up-close look at Time, and what it does to us. I figured out nine rules that got me through the preceding twelve months, and that with adaptation will get me through the next twelve months.

You might find them useful. So here they are:

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Bodies wear out. Get healthy.

I discovered halfway through being forty-six that the diabetic tendencies I'd been developing (and which I dealt with when I felt like it) had evolved into full-blown adult onset (Type II) diabetes. I was seriously overweight, I had high blood pressure, my two-hour post-meal blood sugars were running 280 mg/dl, I was suffering from horrible reflux nearly every night, and I felt sick. Slow. Unhealthy.

Matt discovered on the same date, at the same time (my daughter's 24th birthday, in fact) that he was in the same boat, but his blood sugars were worse than mine. We found this out when he looked at my blood glucose results and said, "The monitor's broken, test me," and

his came back 430 mm/dl. So we tested the kid, and his was normal. And the strips, read manually, gave the same results as the monitor. Monitor not broken. We were, though.

I don't have health insurance, but that's okay, because I'm not interested in being a guinea pig for the drug companies anyway. We decided we'd alter our diet and exercise, and would take care of the problem that way. For four months, we ate ADA-recommended foods in ADA-recommended quantities, and we did not get better. We did not lose weight, we did not see an improvement in our health. We were still overweight, still sick, still in trouble.

Matt went online and started researching, and found **Paleolithic eating**. He bought a book on the subject, The Paleo Diet, by Loren Cordain, Ph.D., and we made a massive change in the way we ate. We were too fat to exercise, but we did not cheat on our foods.

And, without exercise, he lost about 70 lbs during the following year. I lost around 50 lbs. He started throwing in exercise earlier than I did. My excuse is that he's younger and male... but that is just an excuse. Where exercise is concerned, I'm basically lazy. I eventually saw what exercise was doing for him, though, and I ended up deciding it was worth the bother.

He's up to around a hundred push-ups a day using the Perfect Push-up grips, and doing lots of Hindu squats (exercises from Matt Furey's **Combat Conditioning**), and other stuff. Me, I can do about thirty push-ups on the Perfect Push-up grips (though I'm still doing them from knees rather than toes). And I'm doing other **Combat Conditioning** exercises. It's funny, but I just checked, and my weight/height ratio would be acceptable for my age in any branch of the military. And I'd be way under

what I'd need to enlist (if anyone was enlisting women pushing fifty).

So that's the obesity. But what about the blood sugars, the blood pressure, the reflux, the constant feelings of being sick, of there being something wrong, of occasionally feeling like I was just going to die?

Without drugs, medical supervision, expensive doctor bills, or health care, my blood sugars are now normal. My blood pressure is now normal. I haven't had reflux since we changed to eating Paleo. And I feel great.

We made a decision to fix our health, we took responsibility for what was wrong with us, and we got better. If I had not made these changes, I would not have had the strength or stamina to work the insane hours I've been working since June.

I now insert the mandatory medical disclaimer. My results were my results. I cannot suggest or promise that they will be your results. This is not medical advice. You are solely and personally responsible for your own health, and if you make changes, I must suggest that you consult your physician before doing so.

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There is no tomorrow. Take on the big challenges now.

The challenge came at me sideways, and at the time it didn't look any bigger than the challenge of writing an average novel. I offered to create some big courses and some little courses, and asked people what most interested them—and by a significant margin, they were interested in learning how to “think sideways.” “Thinking sideways” is my term for the manner in which I

come up with project concepts, work through story ideas, and make logic leaps that land me in interesting territory. I started out a lefty but was switched to my right hand when I was six or so, and my unprovable theory is that this had some interesting effects on my neural pathways. All my life, I've seen things from strange perspectives, and this view has been a career blessing through more than one career. When I considered how I got to point B from point A by way of 2, 11, cookie, brown, and cold, I decided this was something I could teach.

Admittedly, I didn't think that developing the *How to Think Sideways* was going to be anywhere near the challenge it has turned out to be. I had no idea that I'd do one lesson that ran 17,732 words, or that putting a movie together was going to take me roughly 20 hours most of the time, or that in creating the course and doing it the way I wanted it to be, I was committing myself to six months of 70-hour weeks, on a schedule where I cannot be late, even once, because my students are running two lessons behind me, and I must preserve that two week margin for a real emergency.

I had no idea that my average written lesson content would be about 7000 words, and that just the lesson portion of the course, without including the handouts, of which there are many, would fill at least three 4" D-ring binders. (I'm just finishing writing month four, so this is a guess. It could end up being even bigger.)

I also had no idea how much **I** would learn by so thoroughly dissecting my creative processes and the way I get from "no idea" to "finished novel." In a funny way, the course is turning out to be as much about life as it is about writing, and I did not anticipate that, either.

I did not anticipate the feeling of camaraderie and kinship I have with my students, who ask questions, post comments on the boards, send me e-mails, blog their survival techniques and progress, and whom I have noticed have started referring to the course as “boot camp.” I never promised anyone that the course would be easy. It isn’t. And I cannot begin to describe how thrilled I am that no one—no one—has asked for it to be easier. It is this fact about them that has made it possible for me to keep pushing myself, to keep demanding that I dig deeper, put more into it, find the best solutions to the hard problems. We’re all in this together.

Had I known how all-consuming this course would turn out to be... I would still have done it. Granted, I leapt blithely in with no idea what I was getting myself into, assuming that it would just be a more extended version of the courses I have in the HollyShop.

I figured the course would be no more challenging than writing a novel. On average, writing a novel, I put in about 30 hours a week. Ditto those little courses.

From this, however, I have learned more about my own writing process, and my own methods of dealing with life, than I expected. Writing the course is changing me in good ways. It’s sharpening my vision. It’s making me understand my own processes—some of which I never looked closely at before, and some of which I never even realized were processes until I slowed them down and dissected them. It’s giving me some new directions on my own fiction career. It’s paying me back while letting my pay forward. And I’m building up a hunger to write my next novel that is just insane.

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Do as much as you can, as well as you can.

Over the past year, I have taken the following precepts to heart, and have followed them strictly:

Take responsibility rather than waiting for it to be given you. Make your work yours, do it as if it were the only thing in the universe that mattered, give more than full value. If your value is not recognized or appreciated, move on. If your value is recognized, then keep going. Use every bit of work as experience to be applied to the next work. Never do the least acceptable amount at anything.

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But triage.

I have discovered that I cannot do everything, so I have had to put some things by the wayside until I finish my current big challenge. This writing diary has suffered, because doing Think Sideways is writing about writing. And this is writing about writing. And after 70 hours a week of writing about writing, I don't have anything left to say here.

I tried including my Twitter posts as part of the weblog—and they were fine for creating a permanent record of who won what during the birthday bash. But they are not interesting to read out of context. You won't be seeing anymore of them, though I remain active on Twitter.

I've had to massively curtail the newsletter, which has gone from one essay and one series of questions and answers every week down to about two sporadic

newsletters a month for the duration of this.

I've worked in ten-minute intervals at writing fiction, but only rarely.

What time I have left over after work is family time. Only.

When I'm done with this, I'm dropping back to my novel-writing schedule and write the two books that have been getting under my skin. And while I write them, I will once again have some time for other things. I expect the weblog to get livelier. The newsletter, too. At this point, both are simple variations on "No, I'm not dead. Hang with me a bit longer."

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Decide what matters, then do what matters.

I only have a set number of days and hours left. I cannot know the number on my clock, but I know if I died today, I would consider my life well-lived. I know that I have not wasted my time; that I have pushed myself to create stories that matter, that I have loved the people I love well, that I have worked every day to make my chosen part of the universe better than it was when I found it. I've screwed up parts of my life, and of course I have regrets.

My regrets, however, have been regrets of commission. I acted, and my actions were mistakes. I cannot think of a single regret of omission—a single thing in my life that I wish I'd done but didn't because I was afraid to try. I've tried things I failed at. I've tried things that were wrong for me—that did not fit who I am. I've made myself miserable. Sometimes I've hurt other people, and

that I truly regret.

But at the end of my life, whenever that may be, I will not say, "I wish I'd tried..."

Because I did. What mattered to me, I gave my all.

I have three kids. I would have had more if I could have. The first two I had young because I wasn't interested in waiting until my career was established to start a family. Women are on a brutal clock, and having kids after the age of 27 gets more unlikely with every passing year. And I wanted four. I just discovered after the second one that I didn't want to have any more with the man I was married to back then.

The third I had when I was 37, and knew I couldn't have any more kids. We wanted a kid so much, but it just couldn't happen... until it did.

The three of them were expensive, time-consuming, frustrating, maddening—and wonderful, funny, intelligent, challenging, and worth every minute and every effort. I am grateful every day for every one of them. They are the best things I've ever had a hand in.

I've also been an RN working ER, ICU, med surg and nursing supervision. I've silkscreened T-shirts, worked as a sign painter, sold newspaper advertising, and asked, "Would you like fries with that?" at McDonalds. I baby-sat as a kid, was a pool attendant at a camp, scrabbled bucks in high-school doing artwork for my fellow students and occasionally for teachers. I taught beginning guitar. I sang in a couple of restaurants. And I wrote, and wrote, and wrote, and wrote. Essays, how-tos, and fiction. Mostly fiction.

There are a million things I haven't tried, of course. I looked at them, too, considered the cost of pursuing

them versus the value of attaining them, and decided that they were not important enough. I did not pursue a career in science, though I love science and it fascinates me—theoretical physics, genetics, marine biology, and the study of the mind. I did not pursue a career in archeology, which I love as much as science. What I love most about these disciplines, I can get by reading books, writing books, and traveling from time to time.

I will not regret having skipped those roads. I am content to read about the travels of those who did choose to travel them.

I did not fall into my life. I chose my paths, and because I chose, I am now where I want to be.

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Dare to make big changes.

Okay. I have to confess that I consider dieting a complete waste of time. People diet, they hit their magic weight number, they stop dieting...and then they blow up like balloons, generally ending up fatter than they were before. I know this because when I went from 110 lbs to 125 lbs during nursing school, a couple of my fellow students felt it was their duty in life to point out that I was getting fat. At nearly 5'7", I wasn't even close, but people are like that. Unfortunately for me, I didn't tell them where they could shove their "just trying to be helpful." Instead, I went on a diet that consisted of drinking two diet shakes a day and eating air the rest of the time. Yeah, I lost the weight. And when I went back to eating like a human being, I gained it back, plus friends. And began a process of yo-yo-ing that pursued me for the next twenty

years, until I just gave up. Got fat. Stayed fat. And then got sick.

So I had no faith whatsoever in Matt's paleo eating find, but when the American Diabetic Association food list turned out to be worthless (for anyone actually wanting to get rid of diabetes, anyway), his remark, "We have to do something or this is going to kill us" resonated with me. Better to do something and fail than do nothing and fail.

It was an enormous change, and we didn't ease into it, either. We dumped the food in the house that wasn't paleo, we switched to foods that were, and we stuck with it. The first two weeks, we had constant headaches and we felt like utter crap. The next two weeks, we had intermittent headaches, and we felt like intermediate crap. But our blood sugars, both fasting and post-prandial, were dropping. Slowly, but they were dropping. We toughed it out.

The start of week five, we both realized we didn't feel like crap anymore. I weighed myself and discovered I'd lost about seven pounds. We were no longer having food cravings, we were no longer hungry all the time. And I suddenly realized I hadn't woken up once in the middle of the night with bile in my throat since we changed over.

It was a huge change, and one I frankly thought was stupid and a waste of time. I was wrong.

It was the change that gave me back my health. And doing it a little at a time would have just been a reason to look at it, say "it isn't doing anything," and go back to killing myself with food. It was the fact that it was a big change that made it work.

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Learn new skills.

In the last twelve months, I learned to dissect thought processes. That's been pretty cool.

I also taught myself to design hand-knit sweaters, to knit seamless sweaters on circular needles, and, with my latest knitting project, to design and knit a seamless entrelac sweater while knitting backwards on the reverse sides of the tiny entrelac squares so that I don't have to turn the work. I can't wait until I get to the shoulder decreases—I have how I'm going to do it pictured in my mind, but I won't know if my images will work until I actually try them out. I think this will be very challenging, and a lot of fun.

I've studied marketing and product creation and delivery, because great ideas are worthless if you can't put them in a form people can use and get them to the people who will benefit from them. All of these have helped me stay on track with doing the Think Sideways course.

I've continued my study of quantum physics, and have used what I've learned to develop an idea for a series of novels I hope to pitch to my agent after I've written the first one in its entirety.

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Embrace joy.

I have come to the conclusion that joy is a choice. Not happiness—happiness is a flighty thing, and if pursued cannot be caught. Happiness lands on you when you're doing something that matters to you. It only comes to you when you're not looking for it.

But joy...joy is the feeling of having made your place in the world. It is embraceable the instant you decide to live your life on your terms, to take control of your choices, to pursue what matters to you, and to accept the outcomes, good or bad, and keep on going. I have discovered that joy is a choice, and on the days that I wake up and remember to be grateful for air to breathe, for a mind that can think, for a body that keeps me alive, and for challenges that allow me to test myself, joy is easy to reach.

It's easier to complain about what goes wrong than to be attentive to what goes right. But the easy choice is almost always the wrong choice.

If we choose to exercise it, we have so much control over our lives. We can't control where we end up, but we can control how we travel, and with whom we make the journey, and how we live each day.

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Keep one eye on your legacy.

Every human being on the planet will leave behind a legacy. Most of them, frankly, won't amount to much, because most people never choose a purpose for their lives, or identify what matters to them. The legacies that matter leave your bit of the world better than when you found it. No one will be able to judge the value of what I leave behind until after I'm gone, but I can tell you now what I'm shooting for.

Family

I want my kids to have meaning and purpose in their lives, and to find their own paths to joy. My husband is already there. He'll do fine without me.

Friends

I want to have made their lives better while I'm here—I want to have been fun and funny to hang around with, and I want to have been there for them when they needed help, and to have been worth knowing.

Writers

I want to have had a hand in bringing along the next generation of novelists. I want to have inspired writers to write the best books they could, the books that mattered to them, heart and soul—not just product to fill a publisher's list, but books that have meaning to the writers who write them. I want to help create new markets for good books.

Readers

I want to write stories, essays, and courses that entertain, that amuse, and that leave something afterward that encourages my readers to think about their own lives, and to make them better. I don't claim to know what "better" is to any given reader; I have no interest in **saving the world**. No other human could tell me what is the best way to live my life; and I couldn't tell anyone else. But if I can encourage my readers to figure out for themselves what they can do to make their own lives better, my time will not have been wasted.

My legacy will have nothing to do with curing diseases, or ending poverty. It won't be me leaving a bunch of money to a research center or some non-profit agency. I've chosen to help people one-on-one where possible, and personally and privately even where one-on-one isn't possible.

But when I'm gone, I want to have mattered to the people who matter to me. Family, friends, writers, and readers.

When I was a kid, I used to lay awake nights, a corner of the

curtain by my bed pulled back so that I could see the stars. I'd lay there and tell God that when I died, I didn't want to go to heaven. I made it clear I didn't want to go to hell, either, but heaven sounded boring and pointless to me. I wanted him to let me travel to the stars, to visit all the worlds out there that had other sorts of people and other sorts of life on them. I wanted to see everything, forever. When I grew up, I gave that life to myself. In my work, I travel among the stars, I visit other world and see other sorts of people.

Sadly, I have discovered that it won't last forever. Time moves on, and there will come a day when I don't get to move on with it.

I don't know what happens after that. I've discovered, though, that it doesn't matter. I have not wasted my time here. If I can leave you with just one thing to hold on to before you go, it would be that.

Time eventually takes away everything we own, everything we've pursued, everything we cling to, everything we love.

What Time cannot touch is what we choose to leave behind.

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