

Experience Is the Greatest Teacher

By Dennis Payton Knight

Experience is the greatest teacher. This I know, or claim I do, from experience, as you might have guessed. And to back that up, I dug up the words of Albert Einstein who said, "All knowledge of reality starts from experience and ends in it."

That great teacher, experience, tells me I have already made my point, and that this is a perfectly good place to end. So naturally, I won't. Instead, I've dug up some other quotes on the subject.

The Hindus recognized the core value of experience with their proverb, "No physician is really good before he has killed one or two patients." The Chinese are a bit more cynical about it in their adage, "Experience is a comb which nature gives to men when they are bald."

A writer named Don Marquis opined once that "An optimist is a guy that has never had much experience." Oscar Wilde added, "Experience is the name everyone gives to their mistakes."

Pete Seeger, an American folk singer in the tradition of Woodie Guthrie, had his own take on knowledge acquisition, saying "Education is when you read the fine print. Experience is what you get if you don't."

While experience is the greatest of teachers, Douglas Adams recognized there is a certain percentage of us who simply don't bother to get taught. "Human beings," he said, "who are almost unique in having the ability to learn from the experience of others, are also remarkable for their disinclination to do so."

At least as often as I consult Einstein, I go to Mark Twain for wisdom. The colorful bard from Missouri, through his many jobs, places and adventures, confirms experience as an effective teacher, writing, "A man who carries a cat by the tail learns something he can learn in no other way."

Twain saw the value of experience for his relatives, too. "When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years."

Twain offers other perspectives on the topic, recognizing that experience is important as far as it goes, but cautioning us not to put too much stock in it. "We should be careful to get out of an experience only the wisdom that is in it – and stop there; lest we be like the cat that sits down on a hot stove-lid. She will never sit down on a hot stove-lid again – and that is well; but also, she will never sit down on a cold one anymore."

Much of all mankind's knowledge gained through experience has been recorded in books for the enlightenment of future generations. There's much there, and it should serve us well, but do pay attention to Mark Twain when he says, "Be careful about reading health books. You may die of a misprint."