A LITTLE BOOK OF life
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RUSKIN BOND
Introduction

As a schoolboy with literary inclinations, I read almost everything that came my way, from the plays of George Bernard Shaw to the thrillers of ‘Bulldog Drummond’, a forerunner of James Bond. A book that left a strong impression on me was a handsome volume called Words to Live By, in which various ‘achievers’ or people of eminence selected passages from the classics and various works of philosophy or religion. These passages or lines had inspired them at crucial moments, or during difficult periods of their lives.

This prompted me to keep my own little notebook or diary in which I put down the ‘words of wisdom’ that I came across in the books I read. Seventy years later, I am still doing it; as much out of habit as out of a need for advice from the great and the famous.

Well, there is always something to learn no matter how old we are, and I still turn to my little book in order to find words that might cheer me up when I am down in the dumps—as we all are, from time to time.

Perhaps you, dear reader, will find it helpful too. And I have asked my publisher to provide you with a few blank pages between sections, so that you can jot down your own thoughts, observations, or favourite quotes.

Keep this little book by your bedside, or on your desk, or on the kitchen shelf, and turn to it from time to time. It will have something comforting or helpful to say to you.

Ruskin Bond
Believe in yourself.
Soon others will believe in you too.

Love the beautiful,
desire the good, and do your best.

Study the face of nature and you will never be bored.
‘Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards.’
—Søren Kierkegaard

‘Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body.’
—Joseph Addison

‘Never tell an unnecessary lie. The truth has great authority.’
—P.D. James

Do not pray for an easy life. Pray to be a stronger person.

Help a stranger in distress, and one day you will receive help when you least expect it.
Most ideas never work—unless you do.

‘Light suppers make long lives.’
– Granny’s kitchen proverb

If you live for yourself alone, you are in great danger of being bored to death.

‘Never seek to tell thy love,
Love that never told can be;
For the gentle wind does move
Silently, invisibly.’
— William Blake

We take it all for granted when we are young—the leaping, the running, the loving, the fighting…

You have to be old before
you can appreciate being young. And then, of course, you can only look back on youth with a certain wistfulness.

Winston Churchill: ‘We are all worms, but I do believe I am a glow-worm.’

By all means observe the conventions, but remember that it is only in personal independence that happiness is to be found. Stay free!

The greatest victory is the one you win over yourself.

Courtesy is a powerful weapon—the more so when it is used in the face of arrogance and hostility.
If you rest on your laurels, you are wearing them in the wrong place.

Grandmother defined a true gentleman thus: ‘He must be gentle as a woman, and manly as a man.’
‘Politics is the art by which politicians obtain campaign contributions from the rich and votes from the poor on the pretext of protecting each from the other.’
—Oscar Ameringer

He who is always trying, is
Life will always give us what we know we are worth. It never fails to take us at our own valuation.

Almost anyone can do the first half of anything; only the people who do the second half arrive.

Adversity is always intermittent; and therefore, if effort is constant, you are bound to win.

A Depression is a period when people are obliged to do without things their forefathers never had.

If you can smile when
you feel hurt, the hurt is half cured.

Go and do things. You are bound to succeed in some of them.

You will sometimes be punished when you do not deserve it. Before giving vent to your indignation, reflect on how often you have deserved punishment without receiving it.

And here’s a good Arabic proverb: ‘When your son grows up, make him your brother.’

Don’t be depressed by your surroundings. That pebble at your feet has as much beauty as any great work of art.
Praise all countries, but live in your own.

If you want to travel fast, keep to the old roads.

When too much work accumulates, take a holiday.

Travel is a pleasure only when I have no particular destination, and plenty of time in which to get there.

‘When all men say you are an ass, it is time to bray.’ —English proverb

Expect good, and good will come.

‘Beware of all enterprises
Most people are better than life allows them to be.

‘If you have much, give of your wealth.
If you have little, give of your heart.’
—Arabic proverb
There is money to be made in the marketplace but under a shady tree there is rest.

Your room must have a window.
Look at the clouds, look at the stars, look at the good earth.

Step out lightly, step out brightly, and luck will come your way.

When one man is indispensable, no man is free.
Sow an act, reap a habit.
Sow a habit, reap a character.
Sow a character, reap a destiny.

Be courageous. But if you don’t have courage, have strong legs.

A great idea will always run faster than any censor.

Avoid quarrels. You will find that most quarrels are weak on both sides.

‘The turtle only makes progress when it sticks its neck out.’
—James Bryan Conant

Let no man take your dream away.
It will sustain you to the end.

Keep an open mind.
Different books, different faiths, often say the same thing.

If we fear someone, we give that person power over us.
Be gentle, but don’t allow yourself to be trod upon.

Don’t let petty-minded people prevent you from doing your thing.
The dogs may bark but the caravan moves on.

‘Never measure your generosity by what you give, but rather by what you have left.’
—Bishop Fulton J. Sheen
Avoid long speeches. The less a man knows, the longer he takes to tell it.

If you have good health, you are young; and if you owe nothing, you are rich.

Those who keep good gardens are usually contented folk. Always make space for flowers, even if all you have is a window ledge.

Be as interested as you possibly can in all things—and especially interested in some things.

‘Nobody grows old merely by living a number of years.’
—Samuel Ullman
Failure is not defeat, it is just learning how to succeed.

If 100 per cent seems impossible, let us achieve the 95 per cent that is possible.
We have as much right to cry as we have to laugh.

Men given to tears are good men, goes an old Greek saying.

One courageous thought will put to flight a host of troubles.

Something attempted may fail; inaction must fail.

Believe in God.
Believe in people.
Believe in yourself.
Then go ahead!
‘The strongest man in the world is the man who stands alone.’
—Thomas H. Huxley

Be true to yourself, and you will be true to others.

To find happiness, look halfway between too little and too much.

Don’t give up. One success will erase many failures.

Try loving your enemies. If nothing else, you’ll confuse them.

Think of others as if you were the others.
The difficult can be done immediately; the impossible takes a little longer.

Stay still within, even if the world around you is all sound and fury.

Feeling down and out? Lift up your head and shout—‘It’s a great day!’

Now and then there comes a time in our affairs when courage is safer than prudence.

Be like water. There’s no stopping it. No matter how tiny the trickle, it’s going to get somewhere!
It’s of no great consequence in this world who lets you down, so long as it isn’t yourself.

How many dreams might have become happy realities but for that terrible little sentence, ‘Too much trouble!’

When it pays better to talk than to listen, change your company.

To succeed in anything, you have to care desperately for the thing itself and not for what it brings with it.

What have we to expect? Anything.
What have we to fear?
Nothing.
What have we to hope for?
Everything.

Most men want their children to be a credit to them.
Wise men try to be a credit to their children.
‘Life may be short,’ said Granny, ‘but a smile is only a second’s effort.’
May you have the wisdom
to be simple,
And the humour
to be happy!

One of my favourite writers, John Buchan said,
‘Trying to see something solid in the mist is the whole fun of life, and most of its poetry.’

Be honest, give your opinion for what it’s worth; that is, if you are asked for it.

‘Good courage breaks bad luck.’
—Proverb

It is only through humility that we are able to preserve our dignity.
We have a lot to learn from children. A good teacher will always learn something from a good pupil.

The wisest man is he who doesn’t think he is.

There are no fresh starts in life. But there are new directions.

‘What is truly beautiful needs no adorning.’
—Sataka

Do what you know best, and do it well. Act impeccably. Everything will then fall into place.

‘Everything that depends on others gives pain,
For any beauty you possess at sixteen, be very grateful. For the beauty you have at sixty, you may be proud—it is of your own achieving!

There is always a suitable work for every season, not to be done out of season. That is why we need not fear old age.

‘A lost battle is a battle one believes lost.’
—Joseph de Maistre

The great successes of the world have been the result of a second, a third, even a fiftieth attempt.
‘Well begun is half done.’
Yes, but remember ‘half done’ is only half done.

When a difficulty presents itself, remove it at once if you can, for the longer you look at it the less you will like it.

‘If at times life seems a battle,’ said Grandfather, ‘well then, enjoy the battle. Make it a good battle.’

What if you failed yesterday? Today is not yesterday, is it?
‘Live and let live’ is a good maxim, but ‘live and help live’ is better.

The moment we can visualize possibilities, actualities are not very far away.

‘God gave us our faces,’ said Granny, ‘we give
ourselves our expressions.’

The reason why few people succeed in moving mountains is that few of them practice on molehills.

‘The torment of envy is like a grain of sand in the eye.’
―Chinese proverb

‘What you think of yourself is much more important than what others think of you.’
―Seneca

‘A soft answer turneth away wrath; but a grievous word stirreth up anger.’
―Proverbs 15:1

If you can rule your own spirit,
you are stronger than the man who rules a city.

A picture on the wall is not just something to look at. After a time it becomes company.

‘A merry heart doeth good like a medicine: but a broken spirit drieth the bones.’
— Proverb 17:22

Value good friends. Remember Coleridge’s words: ‘Friendship is a sheltering tree.’

Consider yourself dead that you have completed your life up to the present time; then start living as though your life has been gifted to you again.
Those who are overly religious are well-practised in self-deception.

Every writer worth his salt suffers from a keen sense of failure, because he knows he could have done things better. It’s the bad writers who are always pleased with themselves.

Chart your own course through life. What the stars foretell is strictly for astrologers.

In the spring the mountains always look as though they have just been created.
'Fanaticism consists in redoubling your efforts when you have forgotten your aim.'
—George Santayana

Egotism is really a failure of sympathy, a failure of proportion. To recognize this is the first step towards becoming a loving, just and well-balanced person.
‘No sacrifice is worth the name unless it is a joy.
Sacrifice and a long face go ill together.’
—M.K. Gandhi

Be tranquil.
Do not plan life too early.
Follow your intuitions; take gratefully the joys of life;
take its pains hopefully;
do your business cheerfully.
And leave the rest to God.

There are some who go about proclaiming with complacent pride that they have no time to read or think. What then will they be able to give their children, apart from a fat cheque book?

‘A thing is not necessarily true because a man dies for it.’
—Oscar Wilde
Grandfather said: ‘If you cannot win, make the fellow ahead of you exert himself to the utmost.’

Written somewhere: ‘We die only when the will dies.’

‘Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind.’
—Ralph Waldo Emerson

‘Destiny is simply the strength of your desires.’
—J. Garfield

It is good that others should succeed. Do not allow their success to cast a shadow on your own efforts.

Before you get upset,
Old age is not to be confused with growing old. We can grow old at any age—twenty-five, thirty, forty. And we can be young at seventy, seventy-five, eighty.

Never despair. But if you do, then work on in despair. There is always a light at the end of the tunnel.

‘The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.’
—Lao Tzu

Friends for the table are easy to find; but rare are those when danger is near.
The trouble with rich people is that they never seem to have any cash in their pockets. Afraid of pickpockets?

‘You know, the way love can change a fellow is truly frightful to contemplate.’
—P.G. Wodehouse

‘Experience is the knowledge that enables you to recognize a mistake when you make it a second time.’
—Franklin P. Jones

Sympathy is what one woman offers another in exchange for details.
Have you noticed that both the Sun and the Moon look twice their natural size just when they are coming and when they are going? So it is with troubles.

‘Whoever scorns the poor reviles his own Maker.’
—Proverbs 17:5

Nothing really ends happily ever after, but if you come to terms with your own isolation, then, paradoxically, it becomes immediately possible to find a friend.
It is a human being’s privilege to fashion his inner life for himself—without the interference of priests, pundits, popes, babas, and other peddlers of spirituality.

Don’t complain too much. Things will come right by themselves.

‘It is impossible to enjoy idling thoroughly unless one has plenty of work to do.’
—Jerome K. Jerome

Wherever you go, most of your life will have to happen in your mind.

Adversity is always intermittent; and therefore,
if effort is constant, 
you are bound to win.

If you visit your bean and 
lettuce merchant 
every day, you won’t have 
to visit your chemist.

Be guarded in your speech. 
Don’t talk too much. Many 
words invite many defeats.

Happiness: He who has 
happy children is 
greater than a king.

‘If death was a thing that 
money could buy, 
The rich they would live, 
and the poor they 
would die.’

—J. Sheridan Le Fanu

Do what you feel you must
do. Don’t listen to other people. Let them go to the devil. It’s your life, not theirs.

‘By doing nothing, one wins the world. But when one grasps, the world is beyond winning.’
—Lao Tzu

To be successful, one has to pit one’s wits not against people, but against life.

What I valued, I lost; What I gave, I gained.

Never be dismissive of the young. Never be contemptuous of the old.

‘To handle yourself, use your head; to handle
others, use your heart.’
—Eleanor Roosevelt

Do things at your own pace. And know when to stop!

Some people believe in a world where people do this or that because they are good or evil. In the real world people act because they have to.

‘Money often costs too much.’
—Ralph Waldo Emerson
‘There is no cure for birth and death save to enjoy the interval.’
—George Santayana

Anyone alive who wishes to preserve his sanity must first of all preserve his sense of humour. And then his sense of wonder.

There are no general
truths. But there are particular truths: who did what, when, why. Especially why.

‘Success is doing what you want to do, when you want, where you want, with whom you want, as much as you want.’
—Anthony Robbins

The trouble with marriage is that it sets you on a very predictable course.

In the long run, ability counts for more than personality. (As I depend on the former—for I am a realistic man—I should keep public appearances to the minimum!)

Simplicity must never be confused with simple-mindedness.
'A great man is always willing to be little.'  
—Ralph Waldo Emerson

‘An old man loved is winter with flowers.’
—Old German proverb

One of life’s greatest pleasures lies in watching a plant grow—from seed to seedling, to green branch to bough, to flower, to fruit.

Life is not something to be put up with, but a gift to be enjoyed with zest.

‘A mirror is brighter when polished with grit.’
—Amir Khusrau
I wouldn’t go so far as to say that a garden is the answer to all problems, but it’s amazing how a little digging and friendly dialogue with the good earth can help reactivate us when we grow sluggish or morose.

‘A strong man and a waterfall always channel their own path.’
—Anonymous

Each one of us is a mass of imperfections, and to be able to recognize and live with our imperfections, our basic natures, defects of genes and birth, makes for an easier transit on life’s journey.

You can generally get success if you do not want victory.
Epicurus says, ‘Death does not concern us.’ It is not something we live to experience—we cannot lose what cannot be missed.

It’s the simple things in life that keep us from going crazy: a pigeon in the skylight, sunshine, birdsong, the bedside book, the potted geranium…

After years of striving, and finding and losing and striving again, now, past seventy, I think I have learnt something of the value of stillness; I don’t fret so much; I laugh at myself more often; I don’t laugh at others; I live life at my own pace. Is this wisdom, or is it just old age?
One of the most effective forms of healing has been largely neglected by doctors and patients—that’s healing by reading. If you are in the dumps or in bed with a bug, or recovering from a serious illness, or waiting for a fracture to heal, get hold of books by your favourite authors and read as much as you can. You will start feeling better far sooner than if you simply lie on your back and feel sorry for yourself. (If the books put you
to sleep, all the better.) And it’s safe, too: I have yet to hear of anyone dying from an overdose of reading.

Winners hang on when losers let go.

You will find life exactly as you take it, make it, live it, and give it.

Aim at a lovely simplification of life, and so give your soul room to grow.

Bad times are good times to prepare for better times.

If you are capable of smiling, no one will bother whether you are good looking or not.
‘There is skill in all things, even in making porridge.’
—Granny’s kitchen proverb

‘There is no dependence that can be sure but a dependence upon one’s self.’
—John Gay

The only truly educated person is the self-educated.

To live in peace with others, first make peace with yourself.

‘Your own friend, and your father’s friend, forsake not; neither go into your brother’s house in the day of your calamity: for better is a neighbour that is near than a brother far off.’
—Proverbs 27:10
Authors should be read, not heard.

Often, it isn’t poverty that makes us poor, but the inability to cope with hardship. Life is as unfair as it is fair and fate is blind; only our ability to carry on, regardless, is our wealth and fortune.

A purpose is something to achieve, not talk about.

‘The beauty of life is nothing but this, that each should act in conformity with his nature and his business.’
—W. Somerset Maugham

‘Let your neighbours discover you before you make yourself known to them.’
—Zen wisdom on modesty
‘I never knew a person so poised that he wasn’t disconcerted when a doorknob came off in his hand.’

—W.C. Fields

When we walk close to nature, we come to a better understanding of life; for, it is from the natural world that we first emerged and to which we still belong.
Death moves about at random, without discriminating between the innocent and the evil, the poor and the rich. The only difference is that the poor usually handle it better.

We don’t have to circle the world to find beauty and fulfilment. After all, most of living has to happen in the mind. ‘The world is only the size of each man’s head.’

To quote an anonymous sage:
‘Whoever boasts himself of a false gift is like clouds and wind without rain.’
—Proverbs 25:14

Follow instinct rather than intelligence, and it may result in a modicum of happiness.

The value of stillness—while the hands are busy, the heart cannot understand!

Happiness is as elusive as a butterfly, and you must never pursue it. If you stay very still, it may come and settle on your hand. But only briefly. Savour those moments, for they will not come your way very often.
‘Whatever you have, spend less.’
—Samuel Johnson

‘If you want to make sure that your wife will listen to what you have to say, do your talking in your sleep.’
—Anonymous

‘Nothing can be loved too much, but all things can be loved in the wrong way.’
—W.H. Auden

‘I’ve seen more tears run down the pretty faces than the plain ones.’
—Evelyn Nesbit

There is no harm in sitting in an office and making money, but sometimes you must look out of the window. And look at the changing light.
‘Two things a man can never hide—that he is drunk and that he is in love.’
—Anonymous

‘If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
And if I am not for others, what am I?
And if not now, when?’
—Hillel

How much time do we spend counting and cataloguing what we possess—people, objects, money? Life usually happens when we stop doing that.

Before you enumerate another’s faults, take time to count to ten…

ten of your faults.

Maxim from my
grandmother’s recipe book:
‘Let not your tongue cut your throat!’

‘About the time we think we can make both ends meet, someone goes and moves the ends.’
—Herbert Hoover

Napoleon: ‘Never awake me when you have good news to announce, because, with good news, nothing presses; but when you have bad news, arouse me immediately, for then there is not an instant to be lost.’

‘Insist on yourself; never imitate.’
—Ralph Waldo Emerson

There are definite limits on a man’s wisdom, but absolutely no limits on his stupidity.
A new thinker or teacher is often one who does not know what the old thinkers have thought.
Fame is like the wind.
It blows in all directions,
then vanishes
without warning.

He who laughs with you is
a friend. He who laughs at
you is an enemy.
The greatest truths are full of fiction, the greatest fiction is full of truths.

A fool always tries to appear wise. The wise man is not afraid to play the clown.

‘Success is where preparation and opportunity meet.’
—Bobby Unser

The egoist? He’s the one who does not think of you.

Contentment is easier to attain than happiness. I take as my guide the small ginger cat who arrives on my terrace every afternoon, to curl up in the sun and slumber peacefully for a couple of hours.
When a man says money can do anything, that settles it. He hasn’t any.

Arthur Wellesley: ‘Nothing except a battle lost can be half so melancholy as a battle won.’

‘No great thing cometh suddenly into being, for not even a bunch of grapes can, or a fig.’
—Epictetus

A West Indian proverb: ‘Every day no Christmas, an’ every day no rainy day.’

Select wisely the person you must live with forever—you yourself.

‘Come, friend, let us lose
tomorrow’s grief
And seize this moment of life:
Tomorrow, this ancient inn abandoned,
We shall be equal with those born seven thousand years ago!’
—Omar Khayyam

Let this little book be a garden in your pocket.
MAY YOU HAVE THE WISDOM
TO BE SIMPLE,
AND THE HUMOUR TO BE HAPPY!

Ruskin Bond, India’s most loved author, puts together his favourite sayings, aphorisms and quotations in this delightful little book on life and living. Drawing on his own observations and life experiences and those of his favourite authors, he presents thoughts on nature, friendship, love, family, money, enemies—in short, pithy statements. This is a book you can dip into anytime, and come up with something that will make you smile or think with its wit and gentle common sense.

Ruskin Bond has been writing novels, poetry, essays and short stories for over half a century now. He has also compiled and edited a number of anthologies over the years. He was awarded the John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize in 1957, the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1993 (for English writing in India), the Padma Shri in 1999 and the Delhi Government’s Lifetime Achievement Award in 2012.

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Non-fiction

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