

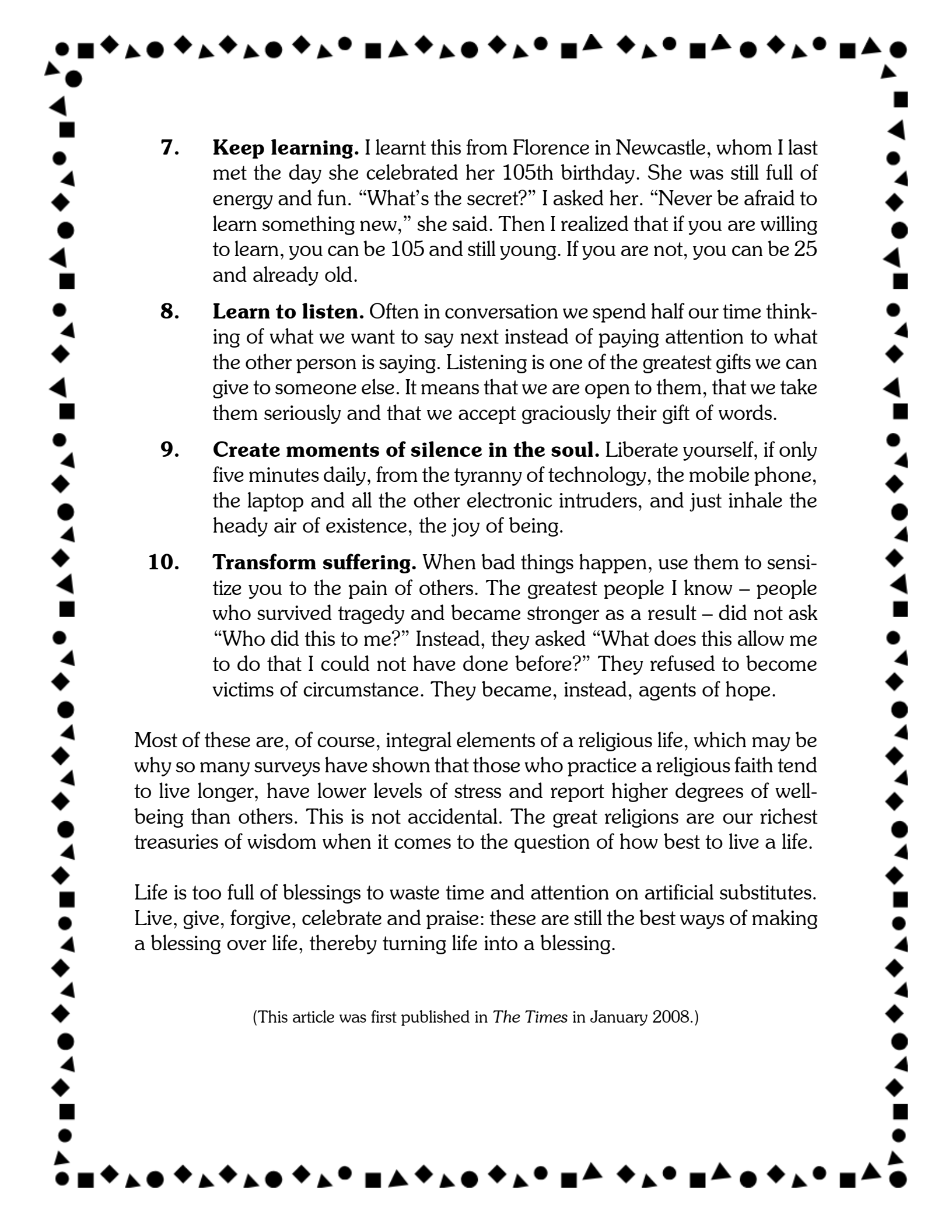
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Count Your Blessings and Begin to Change Your Life

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Have you made any resolutions for the coming year? If not, try the following. Each is potentially life changing.

1. **Give thanks.** Once a day take quiet time to feel gratitude for what you have, not impatience for what you don't have. This alone will bring you halfway to happiness. We already have most of the ingredients of a happy life. It's just that we tend to take these for granted and focus on unmet wants, unfulfilled desires. Giving thanks is better than shopping – and cheaper too.
2. **Praise.** Catch someone doing something right and say so. Most people, most of the time, are unappreciated. Being recognized, thanked and congratulated by someone else is one of the most empowering things that can happen to us. So don't wait for someone to do it for you: do it for someone else. You will make their day, and that will help to make yours.
3. **Spend time with your family.** Make sure that there is at least one time a week when you sit down to have a meal together with no distractions – no television, no phone, no e-mail, just being together and celebrating one another's company. Happy marriages and healthy families need dedicated time.
4. **Discover meaning.** Take time out, once in a while, to ask: "Why am I here? What do I hope to achieve? How best can I use my gifts? What would I wish to be said about me when I am no longer here?" Finding meaning is essential to a fulfilled life – and how can you find it if you never look? If you don't know where you want to be, you will never get there, however fast you run.
5. **Live your values.** Most of us believe in high ideals, but we act on them only sporadically. The best thing to do is to establish habits that get us to enact those ideals daily. This is called ritual, and it is what religions remember but ethicists often forget.
6. **Forgive.** This is the emotional equivalent of losing excess weight. Life is too short to bear a grudge or seek revenge. Forgiving someone is good for them but even better for you. The bad has happened. It won't be made better by your dwelling on it. Let it go. Move on.

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7. **Keep learning.** I learnt this from Florence in Newcastle, whom I last met the day she celebrated her 105th birthday. She was still full of energy and fun. “What’s the secret?” I asked her. “Never be afraid to learn something new,” she said. Then I realized that if you are willing to learn, you can be 105 and still young. If you are not, you can be 25 and already old.
 8. **Learn to listen.** Often in conversation we spend half our time thinking of what we want to say next instead of paying attention to what the other person is saying. Listening is one of the greatest gifts we can give to someone else. It means that we are open to them, that we take them seriously and that we accept graciously their gift of words.
 9. **Create moments of silence in the soul.** Liberate yourself, if only five minutes daily, from the tyranny of technology, the mobile phone, the laptop and all the other electronic intruders, and just inhale the heady air of existence, the joy of being.
 10. **Transform suffering.** When bad things happen, use them to sensitize you to the pain of others. The greatest people I know – people who survived tragedy and became stronger as a result – did not ask “Who did this to me?” Instead, they asked “What does this allow me to do that I could not have done before?” They refused to become victims of circumstance. They became, instead, agents of hope.

Most of these are, of course, integral elements of a religious life, which may be why so many surveys have shown that those who practice a religious faith tend to live longer, have lower levels of stress and report higher degrees of well-being than others. This is not accidental. The great religions are our richest treasuries of wisdom when it comes to the question of how best to live a life.

Life is too full of blessings to waste time and attention on artificial substitutes. Live, give, forgive, celebrate and praise: these are still the best ways of making a blessing over life, thereby turning life into a blessing.

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