

SELECTED WRITING

HOW TO BEGIN A WONDERFUL LIFE

Drew Taylor



InkTears

As most things do, it started with an apparently innocuous question framed inelegantly. The question was, "How do you get to be Prime Minister?" He had the answer. "You fill in a form."

Although he was certain his answer was correct, which it was, because she looked at him with an expression of puzzlement he went on to explain, "You fill in a form and post it off with a payment of one pound forty nine. If you want to pay by cheque it should be made payable to The Queen. There's no refund. And don't forget to put a stamp on the envelope."

She was surprised it was that simple. "Is that it? You fill in a form? Anyone can fill in a form and get to be Prime Minister?"

"Not just anyone," he corrected. "They take all the forms and put them in a hat. Then they draw the winner out of the hat. That's how you get to be Prime Minister."

She had a good question, or so she thought, so she asked it. "Is that how Mrs. Thatcher got to be Prime Minister?"

He didn't hesitate. "How else? She'd never have got the job any other way."

She frowned.

"The same goes for the rest of them," he added in answer to her unspoken question.

While she thought this might be true, which it was, still she was sceptical about the procedure.

"Where do you get the forms?"

"From the Post Office."

"Really? From the Post Office? You don't have to send away for one - like, to The Queen or anybody?"

"The Post Office has application forms for many, many things: TV licences, licences for a job sweeping the streets -"

"You need a licence for that?"

"Of course. Otherwise everybody would be sweeping the streets. It's the ideal job but only the best need apply. You ask any street sweeper what university he went to. He'll probably reply Oxford or Cambridge. There are more university graduates sweeping the streets than ever before. Ask yourself why."

"What other things can you apply for at the Post Office?"

"Insurance, savings accounts, forgiveness, membership of the College of Cardinals if you're over eighty..."

"Did you say forgiveness?"

"Oh, yes. But every time I go, they've run out of application forms. I reckon they must be used up very quickly such is the demand."

She thought about this for a minute. "What did you need forgiveness for? Was it bad? Was it really bad?"

He wondered how best to reply. He decided not to be too specific. "Worse than you could imagine. But that's the beauty of the system – you fill in the application form, post it off – with the right payment, of course – and they send you a certificate saying All is forgiven."

"Does it cost much?"

"For really bad things, nine pounds ninety nine pence. Discounts are available for multiple applications. The cheapest certificate costs fifty pence, but that's for children who don't know any better. That's only fair, don't you think?"

"It's only nine pounds ninety nine pence for something really bad? That's not much! Why bother getting a certificate if it's that cheap?"

He gave her a look which said there was a very good reason. "Being able to produce a certificate saying All is forgiven might definitely come in handy one day. Who knows when you might be asked to explain yourself?"

She thought about it. It seemed a fair point. "I suppose you're right."

Later that day, she came up to him and said, "I've got one. I've got one of the application forms from the Post Office. The woman behind the counter said they were all out of application forms for forgiveness – just like you said – and she said it will be another two years before forms are available for anyone wanting to apply to be Prime Minister, but she gave me this one instead." She handed him a form. It was headed Application for A Wonderful Life. "The woman behind the counter had to search for it, but eventually she found it at the back of a drawer. That's why it's so crumpled and old looking – see that brown stain down the left hand side where it's a bit faded? It must be the last one." She pointed to the brown stain and handed him the form.

He was surprised. He didn't know such a form existed.

"Will you help me fill it in?" she asked. "See question 10?" Taking the form back she read, "Question 10: What is a wonderful life? How do I answer that?"

What is a wonderful life? He had a vague notion of what a wonderful life would be. Happiness featured. Contentment, certainly. Joy. Yes, there should be a certain amount of joy in living. An optimistic outlook must be a characteristic of a wonderful life, surely. Friendship? Love? Of course love featured! Someone to love and someone who loved you; that must be essential to a wonderful life.

She didn't wait for his answer before going on to the next question.
"Question 11: How do you think you can achieve a wonderful life?"

He had no idea.

"Question 12: Are you thinking only of yourself?" She pondered this.
"What does that mean?"

He had the answer this time. "It means that a wonderful life is something which affects others."

"How?"

"For the better. I suppose a person with a wonderful life can't help but share its benefits with others."

"But the application form is just for one person."

"Read question 13."

She read. "Question 13: Do you want to share your wonderful life?"

"The answer is yes."

"What if I answer no?"

"Your application will be rejected. I can guarantee it."

He sounded so adamant, she was prepared to accept his answer.

"Well how about this? Question 20 – the last one – Do you deserve a wonderful life?"

He knew the answer to that. "Everyone deserves a wonderful life, whether they apply for it or not."

"So why bother applying?"

"Because your application might be accepted. Here, let me see the form." He studied the front, then the back, until he found what he was looking for. "Fee: £2.50. That's the cost for processing your application."

"I don't have that much money."

"Sadly, neither do I. How much do you have?"

"Fifty pence."

"And I have two pounds. It looks like I'll have to lend you two pounds."

"What about the stamp for the envelope?"

He looked at the form again. "It's Freepost. No stamp required. We're in luck."

Luck; that was it. To have a wonderful life you needed some luck.

"We're in luck," she agreed with a smile.

A matter of days later, the wonderful life arrived in the post. It was self assembly with written instructions which were not easy to follow. After quite a few mistakes and false starts and innumerable blunders, finally

the wonderful life was assembled and ready to start. But there was one problem.

"How do you start it?" she asked.

He was studying the instructions with that very same question in mind. Meanwhile, the wonderful life did nothing. It just stood there waiting for someone to begin it.

"I'll bet there are plenty of people who give up at this point," she commented. "It was difficult enough getting it together. Now this! We can't even work out how to start it!"

"Maybe it starts itself," he suggested. However, despite close study the written instructions appeared not to include any directions on how to start it.

"What if it doesn't self start?" she moaned. "We might have a wonderful life that never begins. What good is that?"

"No good."

"No good at all!"

He considered how the problem might be solved. There must be some trick to it, some device or magic word or key which would make it start. "Try throwing money at it. That might make it start."

She found some coins and threw them at the wonderful life. The coins bounced off it onto the floor. It didn't budge.

"What else can we do?" he wondered. "I know! Read it some poetry. Something which moves the soul. That might stir it into action."

But no amount of first rate poetry recited with passion or otherwise seemed to have any effect.

"Music?"

Nor music.

It was a puzzle, a conundrum. They'd spent two pounds fifty pence and expended a lot of effort to build a wonderful life which wouldn't start.

"Maybe we should ask for our money back," she suggested.

"Unfortunately, we can't. There's a no refund or return policy. We're stuck with it."

"Well if we can't get it started, we can't leave it here. There's not enough room. It's in the way. Where are we going to put it? "

"Where else can we put it? The hall cupboard is full. The bedroom's overcrowded with your stuff. It's too big to go under the bed. We can't leave it in the hall because it'll be in the way there too. The kitchen's too small. Any suggestions?"

"We'll have to put it in the corner until we can think of somewhere better."

"I suppose you're right, but it's going to be depressing looking at it every evening when we come home from work and seeing it standing there in the corner of the room doing absolutely nothing."

"What else can we do?"

She was right. They had no other option. No amount of repeated readings of the instruction leaflet or searches of the box in which it had arrived produced any clues on how to start a wonderful life. They manoeuvred it into the corner of the room, and there it stood, unused.

The days dragged on. Each evening they sat and looked at the wonderful life, but it never showed any sign of starting. They spent as much as possible of their weekends out so that they didn't have to look at it. Even when they had to be inside, they would often deliberately stay in the kitchen or the bedroom to avoid it. It was getting them down having a wonderful life. Eventually, they decided to get rid of it once and for all.

So late one night while no one was about they carried it out the door and out on to the street and as far as they could before it was too much effort to carry it any farther. They ended up next to a park. It was dark inside the park and the gates were locked, but with great effort they managed to manoeuvre the wonderful life over the park railings and into the darkness where they abandoned it.

Back home, they were mightily relieved to be rid of a wonderful life. Exhausted by their efforts, they went to bed and slept soundly for the first time in weeks.

In the park, the wonderful life stood silently in the dark. It was ready to start. It always had been.

The next morning, an old man and his granddaughter were walking in the park when they came across the wonderful life.

"Granda, look! What's that?"

The grandfather recognises it for what it was. "It's a wonderful life."

"What's a wonderful life, Granda?"

"Somebody must have abandoned it here deliberately. You don't go throwing away a wonderful life without good reason. Maybe it's broken." He ran his hand over it. "No, it's not broken. So why would anyone abandon it here?"

"Can I have it, Granda? Can I keep it?"

"It's not yours to keep. It belongs to someone else. Besides, it wouldn't fit. You're too small. Wait until you grow up and if you're good you can have your own wonderful life."

"Granda, why does everything have to wait until I grow up? Why can't I have a wonderful life now?"

Her grandfather instantly compared his childhood with that of his granddaughter and replied with justification, "You are. You just don't realize it."

But the child was paying no heed because she had run off after a squirrel which hopped its way ahead of her forever out of reach before climbing quickly up a tree trunk to safety.

The park was on a hill. By a trick of the light, the grass was always greener on the other side of the hill. No one had worked out the scientific explanation for this but it was an observable fact. So when two young lovers wandered through the park hand in hand, as lovers do, and happened to see the wonderful life on the other side of the hill they were not fooled. It was an optical illusion, a mirage, just like the greener grass. Because they were in love they considered they already had a wonderful life. And because they were in love they firmly believed it would continue just the same as it was now and nothing could ever happen to change it, so there was no need to go searching for one. There would be no point.

However, by the afternoon there was quite a crowd gathered around the wonderful life. Individuals and some couples too tried it on for size, but it didn't fit any individual or couple particularly well. With some, it just slid off. With others, it looked good to begin with but very soon went awry. Someone suggested it might be shared out so that many people, rather than just one or two, might have at least a year or so of wonderful life even if the remainder of their lives were nondescript. It would be better than nothing. But opponents of this ostensibly democratic scheme raised the objection that even if they could find a way to share it out, which was a task in itself, how would a person feel if they had a year or two of wonderful life after which they went back to their humdrum existence? The beneficiaries might just be getting used to living a wonderful life when it came to an end and they were thrown back into everyday banality. The trauma might be more upsetting than simply continuing as they were, with banal and humdrum lives. There were those willing to risk it, but the mood of the crowd was there had to be either complete consensus on fair shares for all or complete consensus that nobody got anything, with no in between, which was typical crowd mentality. Somebody suggested that rather than divide it up there and then it could be invested, because if invested it might

bring sufficient returns for all to enjoy at least something. And that something could, hypothetically, be more than the odd year or two which dividing it up now would produce. But how do you invest a wonderful life? Invest in what? It was an interesting idea but impractical. There was a market for wonderful lives, it was true, but not in futures in wonderful lives, which was what was being proposed. All were agreed and resigned to the fact that there was no future in a wonderful life; it had to be lived in the present or not at all. And as had been proved to all present that day, wonderful lives were tailor made and not available off-the-peg. They either fitted like a glove or they didn't fit at all. So it became pretty clear to the members of the crowd that it was pointless spending anymore time on the problem of how to recycle a wonderful life which had been abandoned by its owner or owners even if it was in pristine condition and to all appearances perfectly viable. Only those who had seen fit to abandon it could live a wonderful life. If they chose not to, it would stand alone in the park forever until eventually it faded away as eventually everything did. There being nothing more to be said or done, the crowd dispersed. Yet, some regretted they could not find a way to start the wonderful life because it seemed such a terrible waste for it to lie unused.

After some days had passed, the pair who had abandoned it found themselves back in the park looking at the wonderful life.

"It looks none the worse for wear," he observed.

"Looks good as new to me," she agreed. "It hasn't faded. Not even at the edges."

They stood in silence, just like the wonderful life.

She said, "It seems a shame to leave it here on its own. It might be lonely."

He nodded.

She said, "We shouldn't have abandoned it. It's not its fault."

He nodded again. "What shall we do?"

"Let's take it home. It must be cold and miserable on its own out here at night. I know I would be."

"So would I."

Together, they carried it home.

Back in its corner, it somehow didn't look out of place anymore.

"I think it looks rather nice," she said.

"It brightens up the room," he agreed.

"I'm glad we rescued it."

"Who knows what might have happened to it if we hadn't. Somebody might have stolen it. That wouldn't be right."

"I was worried about it," she said. "I was worried it wouldn't be there when we went looking for it."

"So was I," he replied. "Strange, isn't it, how you can miss something you never thought you'd miss? We tend to take things for granted."

They felt better now that it was back with them.

She leaned her head against his shoulder. "And who knows? Someday we might work out how to start it!"

She laughed. He laughed. They laughed together. They felt better for not abandoning the wonderful life to its fate. Now that they had it back everything was going to be fine, even if all it did was stand in the corner doing nothing. They went to bed and made love.

The fact is, unknown to them a wonderful life had begun.

WRITER PROFILE



Drew Taylor was raised in Clydebank, a quaint village on the banks of the River Clyde west of Glasgow. He attended the local High School then Glasgow University from which he graduated with a degree in physics. Following a spell working in oil-related industry in Aberdeen, Newcastle and offshore, he returned to university to study law, graduating from Aberdeen University. He has since worked in Aberdeen, Glasgow and now Edinburgh.

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