

Image credit: Bantam Press <https://openlibrary.org/works/OL2714517W/Notes_to_Myself>



Image credit: Steve Northup

**Notes to Myself: Looking Back at Hugh Prather**

 **By Bill Yazbec**

*“Live as if everything you do will eventually be known,”* is a line that got me from Hugh Prather’s 1970 bestseller, Notes to Myself. It’s still in print today and has sold over 5 million copies. The book is full of aphorisms, short observations, and poetry about trying to understand one’s place in the world. It’s interesting how books seem to find us at exactly the right time in our lives telling us exactly what we need to hear with deep resonance. This slim tome found me when I was 19 and searching for *meaning*. I still grapple with meaning, but perhaps not quite with the same white-knuckle earnestness as 25+ years ago. In fact, the full title of Prather’s book is, Notes to Myself: My Struggle to Become a Person. I cringe at the second part of the title. It makes me feel a bit silly that I subscribed to something seemingly so breathlessly conscientious, but there is no denying this little book of axioms was a contributor to the genesis of my personal philosophy of what it means to be human.

 My philosophy about books is that they’re meant to be found and then passed on to another in some way- either by word of mouth or by literally gifting the book to someone else. One can’t always call it a gift though- to give gifts sometimes is seen as uncouth or inappropriate or implies wanting something in return- but it can be labeled as “lending.” This lending is done with the tacit understanding that the book will likely not be returned and if the unspoken pact is kept, the book will be passed on to someone else that needs it. I don’t remember who passed this book on to me. There are a few suspects: an old metalhead friend that was a closeted intellectual, a blonde pixie-like girl, younger and more inexperienced than me yet who I was certain was deeper and more profound than I could ever hope for, the hippie dude with dreads that I listened to the Smashing Pumpkins debut record *Gish* with for the first time in a smoke-filled room illuminated only with Christmas lights and candles on your typical American college campus.

 Ultimately it doesn’t matter. This book has been on my shelf through more moves than I can count, across the country and back, in good times and bad, up and down and over and out. I buy it whenever I see it in a used bookstore. Prather wrote down the thoughts that became Notes to Myself in a little notebook as he moved through his life in his twenties and thirties and thought himself something of an aspiring poet. After multiple rejections of single poems, he sent the whole little notebook to a little-known publisher called Real People Press in Moab, Utah as a kind of barbaric yawp to the publishing world. They saw something in it, published ten thousand copies, and through word-of-mouth, sold out quickly. Bantam picked it up, marketed it to the earnest kids of the Baby Boom generation fresh off the muddy exuberance of Woodstock before the sinister dankness of Nixon and Watergate, and it became a best-seller.

 *“Now that I know I’m no wiser than anyone else, does this wisdom make me wiser?”* is a short read into the unnumbered pages. I have looked to this book for wisdom over the years and for a time convinced myself- okay, maybe I still do this- that if I was struggling, I could open Notes to Myself at random and find what the universe needed me to hear. It’s like my magic eight ball. Honestly, I don’t know if it works any better than a horoscope or a trip to a palm reader, but I like to think it does. Prather’s book found me in a searching phase, a lot like many 19-year-olds. In a relatively short time, I read and was impacted by On the Road by Kerouac, Jonathan Livingston Seagull and Illusions by Richard Bach, and Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance by Robert Pirsig. I looked for serenity to salve my restlessness by reading and analyzing Rod McKuen’s poetry; tried to understand Nietschze, Mill, and Hume. I can’t quantify what I got from all of it and I can’t objectively say they are all great books now with twenty years of teaching writing and literature behind me, but I can say they collectively helped me understand that the *journey* of life is the point.

 Prather is easy to poke fun at. Jack Handey’s “Deep Thoughts” skit from SNL in the 80s was based on Prather. Some say he was the precursor for the Chicken Soup for the Soul series. He always looked like he had made a poor choice of hairstyles with his various perms. He capitalized like hell on his little book and milked it as much as he could. He got more and more non-secular as time went on to the point it was cloying, critcs say. Prather died in 2010 sitting in his hot tub on his estate. I saw him speak kind of by chance in Memphis in 1998. I saw the advertisement 45 minutes before he was to begin his free talk at a church in a city I’d just moved to. There was too much Jesus in his talk for me. I was looking for the hippie I’d found years before who seemed to have better answers for me than this middle-aged guy who came across as a televangelist. I thanked him for his words along with other well-wishers- there were about thirty people there- shook his hand and he smiled at me. I forgot to ask him to sign the copy of Notes to Myself I’d brought, but I flipped to a page once I got to my car that I’d driven down from Wisconsin days earlier and it told me exactly what I needed to hear.