

# **All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten Study Guide**

**All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten by Robert Fulghum**

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# Plot Summary

"All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten: Uncommon Thoughts on Common Things" by Robert Fulghum is series of personal essays on a wide variety of topics. The author started writing random thoughts, observations, memories, and hopes many years ago with no plan to publish. The thoughts or essays were written for self expression and as pieces to be given to family and friends or shared with the author's Unitarian congregation. The pieces entertained and inspired people. Soon, the essays were traveling from one person to the next, making their way across the country. The fundamental rules of life, such as sharing, washing hands and playing fair began to find their way into elementary schools. One day, a child's mother found one of the author's essays in the boy's backpack. The mother, a literary agent, contacted Fulghum and asked if there were more things he'd written. Although the author never thought of collecting the essays for publication, the literary agent encouraged it and "All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten: Uncommon Thoughts on Common Things" was born.

Robert Fulghum has used the essays to express childhood dreams, hopes, experiences, and regrets. The lives of the Fulghum children are mentioned with a kind of wistful sadness, and one can tell that the author misses those days when the children were little.

Observations on human behavior play a big part in Fulghum's work. There are stories about Mr. Washington, a neighbor, civil rights activist and lawn care fanatic; the laid back people of San Saba, Texas; the heroic Russian soldier Nicolai Pestretsov; the activist lawyer; Larry Walters; the man in a flying lawn chair; and many more. Fulghum's characters may or may not be embellished. The stories are so entertaining that the reader won't care one way or the other. The images are vivid and play like a movie. Each character represents a belief system and personality that will resonate and remain with the reader for years to come.

Fulghum is fond of pointing out ridiculous customs and behaviors. There are many frustrating habits in others, and the author must learn to deal with them. The book also points to the author's own flaws as well, making self-effacement a humorous act.

"All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten: Uncommon Thoughts on Common Things" is Robert Fulghum's most famous book. The observations and stories that inspired this book have also inspired many others, and the author will undoubtedly keep track of every interesting event to share with the reader in upcoming works.



# Chapters 1-4

## Chapters 1-4 Summary and Analysis

Starting in Fulghum's youth, every spring, the author sits down and writes out a list of personal beliefs. The first list was quite long because the author wanted to make sure every base was covered in the written statement. Over the years, the list has become shorter; first, it was idealist; today, it may be cynical, comical, or boring. One day Fulghum put high octane gas into an old car, which couldn't handle the high octane and bucked the whole way home. Fulghum realized that the credo was much like the gas; if there is too much to process, it will be no good to anyone. From that day forward, the credo became, in essence, everything he had learned in kindergarten. Examples of these rules include playing fair, sharing, cleaning up after yourself, and taking naps every afternoon. Fulghum likes to do laundry because he's good at it. One day, while the author is doing laundry, the washer quit. The dryer followed suit, leading the author to believe appliances are like old married couples and can die of a broken heart when the other half passes on to the other side. The author had to go to a local laundromat. Fulghum feels some nostalgia about being in a laundromat on a Saturday night since it was a regular activity in college. If such a laundry soap existed for humans, people would be wrinkle-free, soft, happy, sparkling clean, and smell good.

The lady next door exited her house, only to run face first into a spider web. She screamed and did a jerky dance. The woman fled into the house, most likely to shower, change, and search the house for the eight-legged creature that must have been in the web. The author likes to think of this story from the spider's point of view. Imagine the spider is working on her web, thinking about breakfast when all of a sudden there is a tornado or an earthquake. The spider has caught a human and has no idea what to do with a human. If the spider lives, she will most likely tell the story of the human with huge jaws and was "THIS BIG." The author thinks of "Eensy-weensy Spider" and the lesson of the song—persistence makes all creatures survivors.

A favorite story is of a group of villagers in the Solomon Islands, who believe they can fell a tree by yelling at it if it is too large for an ax. They start at dawn and yell at the tree for thirty days, after which the tree's spirit dies and it falls. The villagers claim that this method never fails. The author considers the villagers to be primitive and naive. The poor people don't have modern technology to yell at like the rest of the civilized world. The author yells at his wife, the television, the children, and even the sky. The author's neighbor is fond of yelling at the family car. During the last summer, the same neighbor spent an entire afternoon yelling at a stepladder. Perhaps the villagers have it right. Even if sticks and stones can break our bones, yelling at people can kill the spirit.



# Chapters 5-8

## Chapters 5-8 Summary and Analysis

The abacus will never go out of style and is both a calculator that needs no electricity and a work of art. The older an abacus gets, the more beautiful it gets and never needs a software upgrade. People pit modern technology against the ways of yesteryear to prove that today's machines are far superior. One man set out to show he could accomplish the same task faster with an abacus than a computer. The computer was forty-four seconds faster than the man with the abacus, but the computer's answer, unlike the abacus was wrong. There will always be a place for the tried and true and it should offer one a sense of comfort.

San Saba is a quiet town in central Texas, formed in April of 1757, when Colonel Diego Ortiz de Parilla and five priests began a crusade to convert heathens to Christianity and to destroy the newly-saved Apaches. There was also treasure to be had and the men were driven to find it. The men built a fort and a mission chapel and settled in to wait for the Apaches and the treasure to arrive at their door. Comanches showed up in war paint. Things did not go well for the crusaders. The remaining members ran back to San Antonio, beaten and treasureless. An historical marker in the San Saba town square gave this information. San Saba was a great place to visit on the weekends, and though the times have changed, San Saba maintains its small town charm. One can buy a goat for as little as twenty dollars. The author was sorely tempted.

Many believe that Russians are immoral and that they have caused most of the strife in the world. The author introduces Nicolai Pestretsov, a sergeant in the Russian army, who was stationed in Angola. Pestretsov's wife visited him, and the couple stayed in the nearby village of N-Giva. A surprise attack from the South African military kills Mrs. Pestretsov and many others. The sergeant was left alive but refused to abandon her body. He was thrown into a South African prison. All because the man honored the marriage covenant to "love, honor, and cherish unto death, so help me God." Charles Boyer was famous for having love affairs with the most beautiful starlets in film. In real life, Charles spent forty-four years devoted to only one woman, his wife Patricia. Patricia developed liver cancer and the doctors told Charles, who could not bear to tell Patricia. Instead, Charles sat by his wife's bedside every day to comfort Patricia, who died in Charles' arms. Two days later, Charles committed suicide. As an explanation, Charles said, "Her love was life to me." Instead of judging Charles' actions, Fulghum finds comfort in knowing it is possible to love someone so much for so long.



# Chapters 9-15

## Chapters 9-15 Summary and Analysis

If it weren't for department stores, many people would miss holidays altogether. Fulghum believes kindergarten teachers are even more efficient in that they plan all year to make each holiday a spectacular event. Children are given supplies to create works of art for their parents. A favorite gift from one of his children was the "gummy lump," a Valentine's Day box made with macaroni, gum drops, and small confections. The candy has melted, giving the box a gummy texture and a homely look. Fulghum has placed other items from the children inside the box, which is now a treasure trove of memories. No treasure is as special as one's very own gummy lump, which is there to save the day. A cottage in the wilds outside of Seattle, surrounded by thickets of blackberry bushes; its exterior was inhabited by creatures of all kinds, most notably raccoons. The mating ritual of the raccoon is like a three-alarm fire or a cat fight times ten. Of course, they mate under the cottage at three in the morning. Unable to sleep because of the noise, Fulghum took a flashlight and shined it under the house to reveal the two raccoons growling and covered in blood and mud. As the raccoons go their separate ways, he wondered why love is at times messy and painful. Then again, the raccoons probably wonder why spouses yell at one another.

The beetle has a small sack attached to its back. When the larva molts, the skin catches on a fork-like appendage and falls into the sack, along with any fecal matter. When an ant approaches the larva, the beetle throws the sack at the ant, allowing the beetle to get away. Scientists call this maneuver the "fecal shield."

A lawyer friend enjoys visiting Seattle. The lawyer is not the type of person one would expect to practice law. The lawyer has taken all kinds of trips in a VW bus with words such as "peace," "light," and "love" painted on the exterior. The lawyer has delved into every kind of philosophy and has extensive experience with everything from nudism to palmistry to civil rights to macramé. On the last trip the lawyer said he has disposed of old ways and believes that one should just BE. The world is full of lies; everyone lies; your senses lie. Every time one tries harder, the worse things get. Ignorance is bliss. The lawyer confessed to attending a National Lawyers Guild conference, which puzzles Fulghum. As to why he lives such a contradictory life, the lawyer simply says, "I might be wrong." What a great bumper sticker that would make.

Crayons are one of the greatest things on earth. Imagine world leaders using crayons to create colorful masterpieces for the family refrigerator. Crayons are not mysterious—they are made with color, wax, and a binder. No matter what the age or profession, magic happens to people in the presence of a box of Crayons. The author has a godson in training, who is learning to smoke cigars, drink beer, experience Beethoven, and tell dirty jokes. Fulghum feels it is his duty to teach the boy about Crayons. After a while, the concept of coloring hit the child and the boy was off and running. Fulghum buys the child a box of Crayons and gave each of the parents a box of sixty-four with the built-in



sharpener. The author bought the Mercedes of Crayons. When presented with Crayons, adults often feel silly; however, it's usually not long before one starts to tell stories of crayons and various techniques to create new projects. The author believes that if one wants to have an interesting party, the only things that are needed are cocktails and Crayons. The Department of Defense should replace bombs with Crayons - the Mercedes box. Instead of a bomb, thousands of little parachutes, each carrying a single box would fall. When the Crayons reached the target, each person would have the same peculiar reaction at first. Soon enough, however, the world would be covered in colorful imagination instead of devastated buildings and dead bodies. Suddenly, it doesn't sound so silly.

Everyone has secret desires and Fulghum's happens to be chicken-fried steak. The author reveals the proper way to prepare the meal and how one should eat it. Fulghum is a connoisseur of the chicken-fried steak and rates restaurants that serve the best. The winner is in Payette, Idaho—Maud Owens' Café, which receives five stars for the well-prepared, large portion and accompanying side dishes. Maud's offers free toothpicks and mints and one even gets a map of Payette as a placemat. The waitress gave Fulghum a kiss on the cheek; he gave the waitress a two-dollar tip. When one gets tired of hearing how rotten the world is, Fulghum thinks of Maud's.

Hide and Seek has been played in probably, every country. Everyone knows the simple rules. The goal is to find those who are hiding and tag them before they make it back to home base. A kid in Fulghum's neighborhood who was too good at hiding. Eventually, the other kids gave up. The hider would get mad, reminding the others that it was called "Hide and Seek," not "Hide and Give Up." Perhaps the kid is still hiding out there somewhere.

A doctor with terminal cancer decided not to tell the family and he died. The family felt as if they weren't needed and were robbed of the chance to say goodbye. In his own way, the doctor chose to hide too well, just like the little boy. Maybe sometimes one just needs to be found.



# Chapters 16-26

## Chapters 16-26 Summary and Analysis

James Brill pretended to be a foreigner with poor English in New York and hired thirty-seven taxis, to test the cabbies' honesty. Only one cab driver tried to cheat him. Brill sometimes asked to be taken to a location a short distance away. Several drivers explained the short distance to Brill and even got out of the cab to physically demonstrate where to go. The author suggests that when one gets into a "people are no damned good" mood, one should think of Brill. Fulghum believes Americans live in a car culture and it's the image, not money. Most people buy cars to fulfill an image. Fulghum went looking for a replacement of his worn out car and fell in love with a Mercedes that had leather everything and was perfect; the bank did not agree. A BMW motorcycle with a sidecar felt right; Mrs. Fulghum disagreed. The author thinks of childhood when he rode in the back of his uncle's ancient pick-up. The group enjoyed the night air, sweet milk, and cookies while sitting on inner tubes in the truck bed. Fulghum realizes that the ancient truck with stars above is truly the way to travel.

The author once lived in a charming cottage on a hillside. "Cottage with charm" is defined as "shack with a view". Still, the Fulghum's loved it. Up the hill a neighbor was obsessed with the perfect lawn. Fulghum took the natural approach, and weeds and flowers grew with abandon. Mr. Washington was not happy. The only reason he didn't run Fulghum off was because Fulghum made the best chili and had the best power tools. Despite racial differences during the height of the civil rights movement, Fulghum and Washington became friends. Neither was racist and enjoyed the other's company, often playing poker, sharing musical interests, and participating in political marches. One morning, Fulghum finds Mr. Washington spraying dandelions in Fulghum's yard. Mr. Washington didn't think Fulghum would mind; however, Fulghum did mind saying that dandelions are flowers, not weeds. They grow in all kinds of conditions, are pretty, have hundreds of uses, and best of all, they are free. If dandelions were rare, they would be expensive and coveted.

There are people who are completely organized with tools hung on pegboards, flashlights easy to find, closets and car trunks clean and neat, and taxes kept in a filing cabinet. Fulghum is not one of those people. The author has a stick-polishing fantasy. Because one is good at heart and well intentioned, disorganization does not matter. You will go to a place that is calm and peaceful with no responsibilities at all except the job to polish a stick. The people supply a piece of wood, rags, and lemon oil. The stick can be polished as much or as little as one desires. Elders later return and praise the stick-polishing task. The stick polisher returns home with a new sense of self-respect and the admiration of the entire neighborhood and will have his photo in the newspaper and appear on television. Because he polished the stick, the man will no longer have to clean the garage, take care of the taxes, or clean the gutters. All will be done for him simply because he polished the stick. A neighbor has a very tidy lawn and rakes leaves and shovels snow. Fulghum thinks this is a waste of time. Though friends, each has





his own beliefs and will not give up trying to reform the other. Fulghum believes he wins because someday everyone will be a part of the earth.

A neighbor tells people he is a professional gambler in organized crime. The man is an insurance salesman. Both men share a love of poker, and the author has taken note of the neighbor's betting policies, particularly when it might pay to bet both ways, just in case. Mr. Washington pointed out to the author that hair grows half an inch in one month. When Fulghum calls his barber, the author learns the barber left the profession to go into building maintenance. Fulghum was crushed. The men had spent years teasing, joking, arguing, and learning from one another. It was almost as if there had been a death in the family.

Giants, Wizards and Dwarfs is a favorite game of the author. The author teaches the game to eighty children. There are two teams and each had to decide if they were going to be Giants, Wizards, or Dwarfs. One little girl wanted to know where the Mermaids were supposed to stand. Fulghum explains there are no mermaids, but little girl said that she was a mermaid. The author tells the little girl that as a mermaid, she would stand next to the King of the Sea, which was Fulghum. The children played and Fulghum and the little girl watched. This experience led Fulghum to believe that no matter what the rules are, there is always a place for mermaids.

The author is confused about Christmas. It's hectic, commercialized, and doesn't make a lot of sense. One Christmas, the family had received almost no Christmas cards. Perhaps Fulghum was just in a crummy mood but being ignored by family and friends was upsetting to him. One August day, the author went up into the attic and found a box of unopened Christmas cards. The memory of tossing the cards aside to be read later returned.

The author put on Christmas carols before opening the cards. As he read the warm wishes and affectionate notes, Fulghum cried. A neighbor found Fulghum weeping over the cards and also cried. Although Christmas doesn't make much sense, there is something about it that makes one feel a sense of joy. Just before Christmas, there was a knock on the door. A child in a Santa mask yells "Trick or Treat!" The author gave the child a dollar. The little boy showed that he was one of the Vietnamese refugees that had recently moved to the neighborhood. Fulghum was still baffled by the holiday mix up, especially since the child had been at the house on Halloween. The boy asked if the author wanted to hear Christmas carols. There was no choir, just the boy. The boy sang, and brought unexpected tears to Fulghum's eyes. Although he may be a cynic about Christmas, the boy had somehow managed to bring back the joy.



# Chapters 27-33

## Chapters 27-33 Summary and Analysis

A man at a Christmas party was upset over the cheap gift he received. The man announced that it is not true that it's the thought that counts. If it is a good thought, then it will be a good gift. God gave good gifts and the wise men didn't take knick knacks to Jesus. Fulghum tends to agree. The only thing he has wanted for many years is a wind up toy that makes noise and runs around doing funny things. Actually, the author wants his childhood back. He's not likely to get that, either. The author has always wanted a cuckoo clock and decides to buy one for his wife as a Christmas present. Cuckoo clocks are expensive; however, an overstock sale netted a nice clock for Mrs. Fulghum. The author had to assemble the clock. The bird didn't come out and only made three sounds. The author kept working until it was broken and the bird inside was on its side, a spring wrapped around its neck. He gave the clock to his wife, dead bird and all. It remained a joke in the family for many years.

Next door is an unmarried, modern couple who decide to have a contract and live their own lives. The couple bought a tandem bicycle to save energy and spend time together. The man rides in front and the woman rides on the back. The man thinks he is stronger and has a better sense of direction. The woman rides in the back, taking the opportunity to relax and take her feet off the pedals. The author believes that liberation is about not doing objectionable things and being able to live with compromises.

One autumn afternoon, a small boy hands the author a note asking if he can rake the leaves in the yard. The Fulghums have decided that one half of the yard will be raked and the other half will remain natural. Come summer, the scientific experiment will prove whose theory is correct. Donnie, the boy, is deaf. Fulghum struggles with the decision. Donnie is good at raking and manages to get every single leaf out of the yard. Fulghum had intended to scatter the leaves over the ground after the boy left. When he sees how much pride Donnie takes in his work, Fulghum gives up on the experiment and vows to try again next year.

One day a woman asks the author if he ever suffers from depression. Fulghum admits that he experiences deep depressions. She needs to know how he beats the blues. The answer is simple. Fulghum listens to Beethoven, who did not have a good life. Beethoven's dream was to be a singer and virtuoso at the piano; however, he began losing his hearing at an early age. By age forty-eight, Beethoven was deaf. At fifty-three, the virtuoso composed the famous Ninth Symphony. The author is amazed by a man who can defy destiny and create such a beautiful and powerful piece of music. Beethoven only heard the music in his head. When the author feels depressed, he puts on headphones and listens to the Ninth Symphony.

There is a clay tablet in the British Museum that dates back to 3800 B.C. from Babylonia and is the first recorded census. Most of the world takes a census. Billions of people are



born and die and every person is a unique being, just like a snowflake. In addition to being unique, a person will take something and leave something behind while on this earth. This is proven through Locard's Exchange Principle. A person passing through a room will unknowingly take something away and leave something behind. Modern technology proves this theory.



# Chapters 34-43

## Chapters 34-43 Summary and Analysis

Fulghum is convinced that Elias Schwartz is the 145th incarnation of the Haiho Lama, who died in 1937. Monks have been searching for his reincarnated spirit, but the new Lama has not been found. The author believes that Schwartz is the reincarnated Haiho Lama because the cobbler fits the description. The Lama will go around saying wise things and do the will of God without even knowing it. This is Elias Schwartz. The author took a pair of loafers to be repaired, and Schwartz announces they are beyond repair, though the cobbler took the shoes into the back room before returning them to Fulghum. At home, the author finds inside each shoe a cookie wrapped in wax paper. There was a note that read, "Anything not worth doing is worth not doing well." What wisdom. The author has no intention of telling the monks about Elias Schwartz. After all, Fulghum believes that we need all the Lamas we can get.

Moving reveals a lot about people. Although one might think he is orderly and clean, moving will prove otherwise. After all the furniture is moved out, there will be a lot of "Stuff" left behind. The stuff is gray and fuzzy and not easily identified. One becomes embarrassed and hopes that nobody sees the "Stuff". Scientists have proven that the "Stuff" is mostly organic and natural. It is made up of dead skin cells, bug parts, dust, and the residue from meteorites. Meteorites fall from the sky every day and end up as cosmic dust that collects behind desks and refrigerators. The author believes that every person is made up of stardust and that by having it in our homes we are simply trying to return to our origins.

As a minister, Fulghum is often faced with death—funerals, cemeteries, the dying, and the dead. When the author wants to escape the dying for a while, he goes to the Buffalo Tavern, which is a place "Mongrel America" loves to congregate. The people are often unkempt, such as a motorcycle gang that showed up one night. The bikers were not in costume, and the body odor that accompanied them added a touch of realism. Shortly after the bikers arrived, an old Indian sporting two long braids entered the tavern. The Indian was ugly. The Indian asked a biker chick to dance and the woman accepted. On the dance floor, magic happened. The Indian spun and twirled the girl until she collapsed. The Indian kept dancing and was the only one on the dance floor. Finally, the Indian stopped the music and asked what everyone was waiting for. The author took it to heart and wondered what everyone was waiting for and why they didn't dance, too. For a moment, no one died.

Some people think men are born with mechanical knowledge. The author's lack of knowledge got him into more trouble when he came upon a couple from Idaho who had a dead battery. The two men looked inside the hood. Fulghum informed the man that the battery had been stolen. The wife told the men that the battery was located under the backseat because it was a foreign car. The men told each other in confidence that he had no idea what to do. The Idahoan confessed that he had taken sex education and



auto mechanics at the same time in high school and had been confused ever since. The jumper cables were hooked up with a prayer and engines started. There was a flash and an arc of electricity, frying the car's ignition and knocking the man's hat off his head. The wife went in search of real help. Some time later, Fulghum received a gift from the wife - a pair of foolproof jumper cables.

In June 1783, a balloon was released from its moorings in Annonay, a small town near Paris. The balloon rose and landed in a field a few miles away and was attacked by farmers with pitchforks because they thought the balloon was a harbinger of evil. Eventually, advances were made on the balloon and farm animals were sent up into the sky. The animals survived, dispelling the belief that the sky was full of poisonous gases. Two brothers wanted to fly and spent their lives improving the balloon. Two years after the men died, another Frenchman tried to fly across the English Channel but didn't make it. This story simply shows that imagination is more important than knowledge. Those who can imagine stand on the shoulders of those who came before, proving that anything is possible. Larry Walters has always wanted to fly but never had the money or resources to do so. Larry attached helium balloons to his lawn chair and rose eleven thousand feet in the air. Larry became famous. When asked why he did it, Larry replied, "You can't just sit there." There will always be cynics who say man can't fly. While this may be true, you can bet that somewhere there is someone in a garage, taking vitamins and flapping his arms.

The author's Aunt Violet was a snob and social climber. Fulghum visited Aunt Violet in the summer of his thirteenth year. The pair got along great until Violet's big dinner party. Fulghum offered to help and was given a bag of mushrooms to clean and slice. Fulghum knew mushrooms were fungus and the disgusting places they grew. Thinking it was a joke, the author threw the entire bag of mushrooms down the trash chute. Aunt Violet was extremely angry. Years later, the author is reminded of the incident and studied up on mushrooms. Mushrooms are a fungus and therefore are responsible for breaking down organic matter into the earth. In essence, without fungus, there could be no life. Today, when faced with mushrooms, Fulghum eats them with respect.

V.P. Menon was a significant figure in India after World War II. Menon was not well bred or rich, dropping out of school at age thirteen and becoming a laborer. Through brilliant skill and integrity, a job as a clerk in the Indian administration turned into a position of power. Menon possessed two characteristics - impersonal efficiency and personal charity. When Menon arrived in Delhi, he was robbed of everything. Menon would have to return home on foot, so he approached an elderly Sikh, told his story, and asked for a loan which he would be sure to repay. The Sikh gave Menon fifteen rupees and said that Menon should repay it to a stranger in need. Just before Menon died, a beggar came to his house to ask for new sandals. At her father's request, Menon gave the man fifteen rupees. The author heard the story at the Bombay airport when he realized that he did not have sufficient change to pay the baggage claim ticket. A man standing nearby paid the small fee and told the story. The man's father had been Menon's assistant, and the deed was passed down from father to son. The author wonders if those who have been the recipient of such generosity allow themselves to understand the gift and pass it on.



Music knows no boundaries or limitations. It doesn't matter what the musician looks like, what his beliefs are, or what he had for dinner. All that matters is the music. The San Diego Zoo is supposed to be one of the best in the country, if not the world. The author went to the San Diego Zoo to experience it for himself. The zoo allows one to escape reality for a while. There are rare and interesting creatures that make one wonder. The giraffe is a favorite since it is an amazing creature but seems to have no real purpose. Fulghum says that if he ever gets to heaven, he's going to ask about the giraffe. Many say that the unexamined life is not worth living. Looking at the lion surrounded by six lionesses waiting to serve him, Fulghum isn't sure he agrees. Imagine what it would be like to be in the zoo, with not a care in the world. The author thinks that he might give it a try, as long as it isn't for too long.



# Chapters 44-53

## Chapters 44-53 Summary and Analysis

The Fulghums once lived on a long street near a dead end. Although there were signs posted, people often drove to the end of the street. Day or night, young or old, people would drive to the sign, sit and stare at it. Some tried to find a way around it. Others turned around, crushing marigolds and blackberry bushes along the way. All of them sped away as if fleeing some great evil. This was puzzling to the author, so he asked a psychiatrist friend about the strange behavior. Apparently, people think that certain things don't apply to them; that no matter what, the road will continue. But it does not.

A man was despondent because he was considered to be a failure. The man complained to a rabbi that he failed at half of what he tried to do and begged for wisdom. The rabbi thought about it then told the man to read page 930 in the 1970 edition of the New York Times Almanac. The man read the Almanac and returned to the rabbi, somewhat puzzled. Page 930 contained the batting average of the legendary Ty Cobb, who batted .367. The rabbi pointed out that Ty Cobb only hit one of every three pitches. The man complained that he couldn't accomplish half of what he set out to do. If Cobb could only hit one in three - amazing by all standards - what did the man expect?

Many people have the habit of peeking into others' medicine cabinets. In fact, most people do it. Beyond curiosity, looking in someone's medicine cabinet and drawers in the bathroom is the best way to learn about the person who uses that particular restroom. A friend of the author's who was working on his PhD in Sociology claims that most people look. It's human nature. No one talks about it though because it seems strange. The author recommends that everyone look inside his own medicine cabinet. The author's own medicine cabinet makes him want to cry. People who go to the Fulghum house need to use the bathroom before they arrive. Theirs is closed to the public.

Despite the firm vow to never attend a class reunion, the author did just that. Upon seeing classmates, Fulghum realized that everyone was getting old. Within minutes, the author began thinking about his will and walking with a limp. Then Fulghum remembered two men in their sixties who were riding bicycles 5800 miles just for the hell of it. Suddenly, the author felt young again and decided to follow suit. Fulghum plans to make the same trip as the old men to attend the same rodeo in Calgary and plans out what he will be in the upcoming years.

Fulghum spent an evening with five young cardsharks playing Old Maid. The author suspects the boys of cheating but can't prove it. Fortunately, moths saved the day. The moths were on kamikaze missions, heading straight into the Coleman lantern. One moth jerked out of orbit and landed in the middle of a spider web. The spider had the moth wrapped up and consumed in the blink of an eye. This ended the game of Old



Maid. One of the boys began chasing and killing moths. All moths are bad was his motto. The other boys agreed. Moths are ugly and eat your clothes. Butterflies are pretty and do no harm. The author left the game, saying that he refused to play with killers. The next day, one of the young boys came to Fulghum carrying a dead moth. The boy said that the moth looked like a teddy bear with feathers on its head. This made the boy sad. This reminded the author that one must look at all things without prejudice and appreciate things for what they are.

Grandfather Sam loves football, particularly hometown football. There is something miraculous about a team who is the underdog, playing against a team that is bigger, better, and has new uniforms. Sometimes the planets align just right and nothing can go wrong. Every day is filled with small miracles. The dropped glass that doesn't break, being in the best lane in a traffic jam, and finding out a tumor is benign are just a few of the things that are overlooked as miracles. Grandfather Sam appreciates miracles. Every night before bed, he thanks God for having eaten but not having been eaten. One night after perusing new holiday catalogs, the author and his wife discuss what they really want. It turns out that the true desires of their hearts could not be found in the catalogs. The author wants a living grandfather since he'd never had the experience of that kind of relationship. The grandfather would call and talk about the solar system, what it was like to see Halley's Comet, and want to sit with his grandson and admire the stars. The concept of a grandfather is confusing to Fulghum. The grandfather in his mind is mostly imagination. Then again, people tend to create or see many relatives in a different and sometimes imaginary light. People see themselves the same way - a meshing of what we are and what we wish to be.

There is a woman who disturbs Fulghum to a great degree. The woman does not know him but affects every day life in such a way that it is impossible to ignore. The woman is Mother Teresa, who lives the life of the Good Samaritan. When others are talking about doing, Mother Teresa does. There is no talk. In December 1980, Mother Teresa was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Amidst all the famous rich and powerful people in the world, Mother Teresa accepted the Nobel wearing a faded blue sari and sandals. Many people may wish for power and resources; Mother Teresa uses power and resources, all to help humanity. Mother Teresa once said that one cannot do great things, only small things with a loving heart. The only way the world will ever realize true peace is if everyone stops talking and starts doing.

Fulghum ends the book as it began, talking about the literary agent who first read this book. The agent wanted to know if there was more material to be read. Fulghum said there is more material and that it seems to be a never ending cycle. When the Fulghums' oldest son was small, the author read bedtime stories to him. Before the story began, the small boy wanted to know what happened before the story started, like a prequel. At the end of the story, the boy wanted to know what happened next. It's a never-ending, cosmic circle and in the end, there's always more.





# Characters

## Robert Fulghum

Robert Fulghum (1937 - ) is a best selling author, philosopher, and artist. Fulghum grew up in Waco, Texas but has spent most of his adult life in the Seattle, Washington area. As with most artists and writers, Fulghum has had a wide range of jobs from newspaper carrier to ditch digger to singing cowboy. The author also spent 22 years serving as a parish minister in Unitarian churches of the Northwest.

Fulghum is married with four grown children and nine grandchildren. The author and his wife reside in Seattle with a second home on the island of Crete.

Fulghum has many artistic pursuits. The author has published seven best selling books over the past fifteen years. Fulghum is also a painter, journalist, sculptor, and musician. Fulghum was one of the founders of the literary rock band the "Rock-Bottom Reminders," which features members such as Dave Barry, Stephen King, and Amy Tan. Fulghum is a singer and plays guitar and the mando-cello.

"All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten: Uncommon Thoughts on Common Things" was simply a collection of random thoughts, ramblings and anecdotes that the author had gathered over the years. The stories began to travel around the country and eventually the author was approached with the idea of publishing the work. That step has led to many books containing thought-provoking, sentimental and humorous essays.

Fulghum's latest book, "What on Earth Have I Done?" is due to be released in September, 2008.

## The Lawyer Friend

Robert Fulghum has a long-time friend who also happens to be a lawyer. The man is no ordinary lawyer, however. In fact, it seems like the lawyer is against everything, perhaps even his own profession.

The forty-seven-year-old lawyer has taken every opportunity to live life to the fullest. Since the sixties, the man has experienced war protests, the civil rights movement, ten kinds of yoga, Zen, palmistry, LSD, Vietnam, vegetarianism, crystals, macramé, various religious movements, and nearly anything else that may have been exciting and new.

Although he has a thriving practice in California, the man likes to take trips with his wife, two daughters, and a small boa constrictor. The family still travels in a VW bus, with things such as "peace," "Light," and "love" painted on the exterior.



Most recently, the author's friend has decided that the world is full of lies. Everyone lies; your senses lie. The harder a man tries, the worse things get. Ignorance is bliss.

Curious as to why the friend chose to attend a National Lawyers Guild conference, Fulghum asks why the man still practices law if he really believes what he preaches. As an explanation as to why he lives such a contradictory life, the lawyer simply says, "I might be wrong".

## **Elias Schwartz**

Elias Schwartz is a middle-aged Jewish cobbler. The author believes that Schwartz is the 145th reincarnation of the Haiho Lama.

## **Grandfather Sam**

Grandfather Sam is not actually the author's grandfather but offers great wisdom on such things as miracles.

## **Nicolai Pestretsov**

Nicolai Pestretsov is a soldier who chose to go to prison rather than leave his wife who had just been killed in an attack on a remote village.

## **Colonel Diego Ortiz de Parilla**

Colonel Diego Ortiz de Parilla was the leader of the group who tried to "civilize" San Saba.

## **Charles Boyer**

Charles Boyer was a romantic film actor and devoted husband.

## **Fulghum Children**

There are four Fulghum children who appear in various stories throughout the book, mostly to demonstrate how memories can be as powerful as the actual event. The story of the gummy lump is a great example.

## **Louise**

Louise was the girl from San Saba, Texas that the author dated during his late teens.



## Larry Walters

Larry Walters is Fulghum's hero. A forty-three-year-old truck driver, Larry Walters realized his life long dream of being able to fly by tying helium balloons to a lawn chair.

## Chan Kai Kit

Chan Kai Kit is the Chinese shipping clerk who took the challenge of performing math skills with an abacus against a computer. The computer won, but Kit's answers were right.

# Objects/Places

## Seattle, Washington

Seattle, Washington is the location of the Fulghum home. The family has lived in several places in Seattle and the surrounding area, from a "shack with a view" to other small dwellings, and finally, their current home.

Many of the places in which the Fulghums have lived have been fairly rural. There are often wild animals to contend with and yards, gardens, and woods to enjoy. One of the largest bones of contention with Fulghum is altering the landscape of the region. Many believe that lawns should be sculpted; leaves should be raked, and snow shoveled. The author heartily disagrees, saying that Mother Nature creates these things for a reason and he, as a mere man, has no right to mess with them.

Despite frequent disagreements with the neighbors over this policy, Fulghum shows that the people in the community are friendly and warm. They share recipes, gossip, and responsibility. There are still over-the-fence conversations and the sharing of both grief and joy.

The rural parts of Seattle are still more civilized than places such as Payette, Idaho. This fact tickles Fulghum and for a time, he enjoys strolling through towns much like those in his childhood, reminiscing and still getting a good deal on a pair of boots and an ice cream cone. People still rely on and trust one another in Fulghum's world, and the author frequently must remind himself of this fact.

## San Saba, Texas

San Saba is a small town in Central Texas. The town was formed in April 1757, when Colonel Diego Ortiz de Parilla and five priests journeyed to the center of the state to begin a crusade. The intention of the men was to convert heathens to Christianity and then to destroy the newly-saved Apaches. There was also treasure to be had and the men were driven to find it.

During their stay, the men built a fort and a mission chapel. It was nearly a year before the Comanches, invited guests of the Apaches, showed up in red and black war paint. Those who survived the attack fled back to San Antonio, beaten and treasureless.

Fulghum visited San Saba fairly often when he was eighteen. There was a special girl in town and someone his age could buy beer. The author likes to return to the town from time to time to reminisce.

San Saba is still behind the times, in a good way. Food is still plentiful and cheap; people still take a man on his word, and the town still has the best goat-roping gloves



and boots anywhere in the country. Fulghum became fascinated by goat-roping at the local rodeo in San Saba. So much so that he nearly bought a goat for \$20.

## **Payette, Idaho**

Payette, Idaho is the location of Maud Owens' Cafe, home to the best chicken-fried steak in the country.

## **Mr. Washington's House**

Mr. Washington lived next door to the Fulghums. Washington often invited the author over to listen to John Coltrane and other classic jazz musicians. There is always discussion and humor at the house. The exterior is pristine and the yard and garden perfectly kept.

## **Bathrooms**

A bathroom is a mysterious and telling place, revealing many secrets about its owner. One can learn a lot about another by peeking in the medicine cabinet, looking through drawers, and examining robes and night shirts.

## **Fulghum Home**

The Fulghum home is the center of many tales, from the mating of the raccoons to forgotten Christmas treasures to a small child's bedtime stories.

## **Calcutta, India**

Calcutta, India is the home to Mother Teresa and her humanitarian work with the poor and diseased.

## **Nobel Peace Prize Ceremonial Hall**

Nobel Peace Prize ceremonial hall in Sweden is the site of Mother Teresa's Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech.

## **Kindergarten Class**

The kindergarten class is the magical place where all holidays are celebrated to the highest degree.



## **The Back Yard**

Yard work is a recurring theme throughout the book. Fulghum believes that nature should do all the yard work. The neighbors and his wife try to convert the author to no avail.

## **San Antonio**

San Antonio, Texas was the originating location of the five priests who traveled to San Saba hoping to convert the Apaches.



# Themes

## Belief

Robert Fulghum refers to himself as a philosopher; therefore, the author shares his beliefs on many topics, mostly about mankind, God, and optimism. The author is also a minister, which makes the opinions on God even more interesting. Fulghum is no ordinary minister. He believes that the Christmas story seems irrelevant today but can see things in today's world that convey the same message. Fulghum has great reverence for Mother Teresa and her work with the poor in Calcutta. However, as much as the author admires Mother Teresa, he does not share her concept of God. Fulghum is also open minded, however, and doesn't deny anyone the right to her/his own belief system.

Despite all the news of corrupt and bad people, Fulghum believes that good people still exist. The evil people in the world are shown on the news because they are the exception. Good people don't make good news. This point is best illustrated in the story of the man who pretended to be a foreigner to test the honesty of New York City cab drivers. Only one out of the thirty-seven cabbies cheated the man. Most were cooperative and helpful above and beyond the call of duty. The man who tested the cabbies was a PhD candidate for a degree in sociology; he learned a lot that day about the true nature of mankind.

Although there are times when the author is faced with staunch opposition, he stands by his beliefs. There may be compromises but without faith in oneself, one has nothing.

## Miracles

Miracles occur every day. It's true that a burning bush hasn't been seen in quite some time. That doesn't mean that miracles are absent from everyday life. One only needs to be aware to notice.

A good example of a miracle watcher is Grandfather Sam. Sam believes that a miracle occurs when an underdog football team beats a formidable rival and that sometimes the planets align so that the opposite of Murphy's Law is true. Sometimes things just can't go wrong.

Fulghum uses several examples of small, everyday miracles. Imagine coming out of work to find out that your car lights have been on all day and the battery is dead. Fortunately, the car is parked at the top of a hill and can be clutch started. One drops a fragile glass into the sink only to have it bounce several times without breaking. A glass that has been knocked over doesn't result in spilled milk all over the floor. One finds a tumor that turns out to be benign. Maybe you'll find a parking meter with time left on it just after you've run out of change. A check arrives in the mailbox on the day when



you've spent your last dollar. All of these things may seem like luck when in fact they can be classified as miracles. We just need to pay attention.

## Observation

Robert Fulghum prides himself on being an observant man. Much of the humor in the book comes from observing everyday happenings among everyday people. There were the characters in the laundromat with one man telling another how to get puke off a suede jacket. The tale of the raccoons mating underneath the house was pure observation, as were the stories of Mr. Washington and the fastidiously maintained yard.

Observing one's own behavior is also an interesting topic. The author often has observations and realizations about his own actions and behaviors, right or wrong. Fulghum learned some things about himself when he couldn't undo the hard work of the leaf raker and discovered that he still maintained some prejudices, even though he thought that they had all been conquered. There is self-effacement in some of Fulghum's observations, which keep them humorous. Perhaps this is because the author shares many things which we observe in ourselves, often causing a light bulb to go off above the reader's head.

Many careers have been made from observing human behavior. Regardless of culture, race or geographic location, observation is something we all share.





# Style

## Perspective

The essays contained in "All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten: Uncommon Thoughts on Common Things" are thoughts, ramblings, anecdotes, and observations straight from the mind of the author. The stories have been collected over a long period of time and include tales from all phases in the man's life, as well as a bit of fascinating history.

Fulghum was born in Waco, Texas in 1937. The opportunity to travel around the country before settling in Washington State has permitted the author to experience many things not available to the average man. Most of these things revolve around places of interest and perhaps more importantly, people of great character. Those experiences show up in unexpected ways in various essays. For example, in the story of San Saba, Fulghum talks about dating a girl in his teen years and the adventure involved with being able to buy his own beer for the first time.

Robert Fulghum's career choices, from ditch digger to singing cowboy to teacher and artist, have obviously influenced the author's opinions and experiences. The stories are from the mind of a wanderer, husband, father, neighbor, and minister.

Although Fulghum spent 22 years as a parish minister, his beliefs are not the norm. The author openly questions the relevance of the Christmas story and wonders aloud how it can be relevant in today's world. The author admires Mother Teresa and her work for the poor and diseased but does not agree with the nun's views on God.

Fulghum's stories are about life, happiness, and most of all, hope. Although there are many cases of pessimism, anger, frustration, and despair, there is always someone who arrives to show the author a new way or remind him of what he already knows.

## Tone

The tone of "All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten" is that of a man who is on a quest. The essays are written in a slow, thoughtful manner, expressing memories and subjective observations on everything from mating raccoons to lawn care.

The author says that the book doesn't need to be read in one sitting. Rather, one can take a great deal of time, reading a chapter here and a chapter there. There is no rush. The reader will feel like he is sitting on a back porch rocker on a lazy summer day.

While the tone of the book is clearly subjective, Fulghum has a way of writing that captures the heart and mind of the reader, whether or not the reader agrees. The language and tone effectively convey the author's thoughts and feelings. One begins to



remember similar situations or is able to picture the characters so clearly that it's almost as good as being there.

The author tells many stories of sadness regarding days gone by. Childhood is sadly out of reach, and the gentler times passed by too quickly for the author's taste. There are stories to make one laugh, usually surrounding some absurd development or self-effacing quip. There are also stories that inspire frustration and hope. Each bears Fulghum's definitive voice and charm.

## Structure

"All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten: Uncommon Thoughts on Common Things" by Robert Fulghum contains 196 pages separated into 53 chapters. The chapters are not numbered, and each stands alone as a complete entity. The shortest essay is 2 pages and the longest is five pages. The average chapter length is 3 pages.

There is no table of contents for the book, nor are there titles on the essays. Essays are separated mostly by blank separator pages, although a few are decorated with a clip art design.

Each chapter is a story unto itself, and there is no rhyme or reason to the order in which the essays appear. The chronology is not of importance to the author and some stories may refer to places, happenings or characters in a previous essay. There are a couple essays that share the same topic or character. These stories are often loosely connected but still bridge two chapters or more.

The short page length for each essay makes the book easy to read. The format may be structured this way to encourage the reader to pick up the book from time to time to skim a particular passage, almost as one would with a book of proverbs or daily affirmations.



## Quotes

"All I Really Need to Know about how to live and what to do and how to be I learned in kindergarten."

Pg. 6

"Sitting there waiting, I contemplated the detergent box. I like Cheer. I like the idea of a happy wash."

Pg. 13

"Nature so works in that everybody gets a turn at getting what they deserve in one way or another."

Pg. 46

"Crayolas plus imagination (the ability to create images) - these make for happiness if you are a child."

Pg. 50

"There must be billions of sheets of paper in every country in the world, in billions of boxes and closets and attics and cupboards, covered with billions of pictures in crayon."

Pg. 51

"The winding down of summer puts me in a heavy philosophical mood."

Pg. 53

"You will continue to read stories of crookedness and corruption - of policemen who lie and steal, doctors who reap where they do not sow, politicians on the take."

Pg. 60

"If dandelions were rare and fragile, people would knock themselves out to pay \$14.95 a plant, raise them by hand in greenhouses, and form dandelion societies and all that."

Pg. 68

"If you ask my next-door neighbor what he does for a living, he will tell you that he is a professional gambler involved in organized crime. In truth, he is an insurance agent."

Pg. 76

"Place your bet between turning-the-other-cheek and enough-is-enough-already."

On gambling, pg. 77



"Ever since I got the word about Santa Claus, I've been a closet cynic at heart."  
Pg. 94

"If you were to line up on the other side of the earth every other living thing that ever was or will be, you'd find that the creatures on the people side would be more like you than anything over on the other side."  
Pg. 118

"Through some unimaginable error in the cosmic switching yards, the Haiho Lama has been reincarnated as Elias Schwartz. I have no doubts about it."  
Pg. 120

"Why aren't there any traditional Halloween carols?"  
Pg. 147

"Despite swearing I would never do it, I went to the thirty-year class reunion of my high school class."  
Pg. 169

"If ever there is truly peace on earth, goodwill to men, it will be because of women like Mother Teresa."  
Pg. 192

"If the fabric of existence is truly seamless, the weavers still must sleep."  
Pg. 196

## Topics for Discussion

Do you think Robert Fulghum would have published the book if he hadn't been encouraged by a literary agent? Explain.

How might Fulghum's experience in the Laundromat differ if he'd engaged in conversation with the other patrons?

Besides dandelions, what other things might become coveted if they were rare?

Which of Fulghum's philosophies on gambling is most like your own? Explain.

Explore the stereotype of man having innate knowledge of cars.

Does the absence of reason make an animal's life more or less joyful than man's? Explain.

Fulghum refers to a Gallup poll that shows 70% of the people believe that most other people can be trusted most of the time. Do you think this statement is accurate? Explain.

What other animal roping activities might be as amusing as goat-roping? Explain.

Do you believe that miracles can occur for anyone on any given day? Explain.

Do you believe that a yard must be landscaped to perfection or left to the whims of Mother Nature? Explain.