

A Thing or Two: Nonno's Book of Stuff He's Learned

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*Incidentally, it's easy to write prescriptions, but difficult to come to an understanding with people.*¹
–Franz Kafka

This quote from Kafka's *A Country Doctor* is relevant to Marc Tunzi, MD's self-published book *A Thing or Two: Nonno's Book of Stuff He's Learned* in that his goal is to "see if we couldn't learn something and find an answer together" (p. 3). While Tunzi's writing style shares nothing with Kafka, his book, like Kafka's works, encourages the reader to think about big ideas (eg, identity, epistemology, ambiguity, humanity, community, virtue, and living a meaningful life). He raises thought-provoking questions in each chapter, suggests further readings on multiple topics, and emphasizes the importance of learning, growing, and finding purpose throughout life.

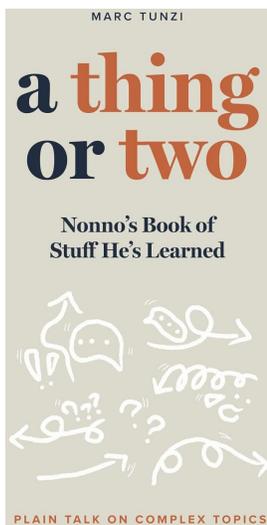
Tunzi has been a family physician for more than three decades, primarily in leadership roles in a residency program. He has many publications,²⁻⁴ especially in the field of ethics. He holds a master of arts in bioethics and medical humanities as well as a certificate in health care ethics. Based on his writing, he clearly enjoys learning about a variety of topics and pondering questions such as "Who am I?" "Why am I here?" "Is there a God?" and "What is religion, and why does it cause so many problems?"

While his answers to questions are quite serious, he writes in a direct and straightforward manner with warmth and humor. His tone is generally positive and hopeful. He states that he is writing for "average, thoughtful people" (p. 5). He encourages being curious, dreaming, setting goals, and making efforts. He is practical in his approach and prompts the reader to have humility, be open, and show compassion while rising to challenges.

For example, he advocates seeking to understand others with different beliefs. He suggests that no single viewpoint is completely right and that differing experiences and beliefs have value. He returns to this theme several times: the idea that all answers have some truth and that no answer has all the truth. He encourages awareness of the human tendency to have personal biases, values, and priorities. Nothing is simple or black and white with the author, even giving examples of times that $1+1=2$ is debatable depending on context and definitions. Shared perspectives are needed because "in the land of reality things are messy" (p. 122).

His discussion of knowing versus believing includes looking at how historical times influence "facts" and standards upheld. Context matters in crucial ways when having to act or make decisions. He describes current times focusing on efficiency and not allowing for the time-consuming process of "hanging together and listening to and working through all the multiple voices that we bring forward from all of our various communities" (p. 133). He argues that pluralistic societies benefit from diverse approaches to problems; however, they have a hard time creating the solidarity needed to govern.

Regarding types of knowledge, he is aware of having expertise in general medicine rather than in a specialized field. As a family physician, Tunzi reports often being the one who figures out that the specialists are prescribing things "at odds with each other" (p. 43). He is the one "who sees the patient as a complete human being needing help, not just as a person with a set of organs needing attention" (p. 43). Again, Kafka's quote about understanding patients seems apt.



The book covers a variety of topics that overlap in meaningful ways rather than being repetitive. Tunzi's recommendations for further reading are well-placed as are his many quotes. He is upfront about his religious background and beliefs. He focuses on religion and science providing answers to completely different questions rather than competing with one another. At times, he quotes religious texts but offers substitutions of more secular terms that still make his point.

Minor criticisms of the text include the few times he slips out of his wise tone and expresses his impatience with certain people's ways of thinking. The irony of this is not lost on this reader. While showing his irritation makes the author more human, it is a bit startling given his overall message of being open to others' perspectives. Some minor points seem debatable, such as the value of the Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator and minimization of sensitive periods for the brain to learn. But none of these interfere with grasping the author's fundamental points. Overall, this book is an easy but compelling read that promotes self-reflection, learning, thoughtfulness, contextualization, and ways of connecting with others.

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