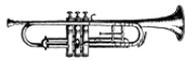


Live Like Louis!



Inspiring Stories
From the Life
Of Louis Armstrong
To Help You Lead
A More *Wonderful* Life

Phil Lynch



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6 *That's My Home*

*in which Louis and his wife, Lucille,
remind us to appreciate our home*

In the late 1930s Louis got an extended gig playing at the famous Cotton Club nightspot in Harlem. One of the dancers, Lucille Wilson, caught his eye. Louis found her very attractive, plus she seemed very down-to-earth for someone in entertainment. Here was a young woman with no real aspirations to stardom, dancing only to support her mother and siblings, even selling cookies to the entertainers every evening. The smitten Louis started buying all her cookies each night.

He decided to make a move. If you're ever in need of a pick-up line, here's how Louis recalled approaching Lucille. It doesn't get much more straightforward than this: "Lucille, I might as well tell you right now, I have eyes for you, and have been having them for a long time. And if any of these cats in the show [are] shooting at you, I want to be in the running." It worked. The fact that Louis was an extremely personable guy and a star entertainer probably didn't hurt either. After asking if

the Northern girl could cook red beans and rice, he invited himself over for dinner, ate "like a dog," and the courtship was on. They wed in 1942.

By that time, Louis had been away from his only home, New Orleans, for twenty years. He had lived in hotels and apartments. Lucille, however, didn't aspire to an entertainer's rambling existence, but to a stable middle-class life. Though she joined Louis on the road, living out of suitcases, it just wasn't to her tastes. At Christmastime she got an inkling that Louis himself would appreciate some stability. While Louis was on stage she set up a small tree in their hotel room. When he returned, Lucille recalled,

he took one look at it and he just clammed up, you know? Louis isn't very emotional; he doesn't say much when he's overwhelmed. . . . We went to bed. And Louis was still laying up in bed watching the tree; his eyes just like a baby's eyes would watch something.

It was his first Christmas tree.

The next day, the band was due in another town, so Lucille was going to leave the tree. Louis, however, would have none of it. Lucille ended up carting the tree from hotel room to hotel room well into January. Louis even wanted it mailed home, and his wife had to convince him that was unworkable.

In 1943, after Lucille had returned to New York ahead of Louis, she went to the working-class Co-

rona neighborhood of Queens. There she purchased a house from a white family she had known as a girl. It was a fairly imposing structure, two stories with a squared-off roofline, suggesting to my Midwestern eyes a segment of a townhouse. Architecture aside, there's a small twist in the tale: Lucille bought it without Louis's knowledge, giving him only an address to seek when done touring.

After many days on the road, Louis's band bus arrived in New York. He hired a cab and gave the cabbie the address. One long ride later, Louis arrived in the sedate, racially-mixed Queens neighborhood, a far cry from Harlem. He thought the cabbie either had gotten it wrong or was fooling him, but he was tired and in no mood for jokes. "One look at that big, *fine* house, and right away I said to the driver, 'Aw, man, quit kidding and take me to the address that I'm looking for.'" But he took a chance and went up to ring the doorbell. Who should open the door but Lucille in a silk nightie and curlers?

She showed him around the home she had bought and decorated. Louis loved the house, especially appreciating the care Lucille had put into furnishing it. "The more Lucille showed me around the house the more thrilled I got. . . . Right then I felt very grand all over it all. A little higher on the horse (as we express it). I've always appreciated the ordinary good things." After twenty years on the road, Louis had a real home.

He didn't spend too many days there at any one stretch until the last few years of his life. It was more Lucille's house than his, but Pops knew he

had a home, a stable life awaiting him whenever he came off the road. In his later years, he loved being in his upstairs den listening to records and writing many long letters and personal essays there. On his state of the art tape recorders, he made 650 reel to reel tapes of readings, music, impromptu monologues, and discussions with friends. Then he would decorate the tape boxes in a fascinating collage style using photos, clippings, and other bits and pieces. In the 1950s Louis even collaged-over the walls in his den. Unfortunately, the ever-tasteful Lucille had them removed.

You can actually visit Louis's inner sanctum and soak up some Satchmo karma. His beloved house is not only still there, it's a wonderful museum, operated by Queens College. It's restored to look just as it did when Louis and Lucille lived there, including a turquoise "kitchen of the future" and a gold-fixture bathroom featured on the show "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous."

But no matter how fine and decorated it might be, a house is not a home. That takes people and the life they live together. Though Louis had three wives before Lucille, the fourth time was the charm. Louis and Lucille stayed together 'til Louis's death parted them in 1971. Louis wrote in a private letter,

I love my wife, Lucille + she loves me. Or else we wouldn't have been together this long. Especially doing the crazy things I usually do for kicks. That's why I love her, because she's smart. The average woman would have quit my ol' ass – long, long ago.

Lucille was in her twenties when they were wed, but the Armstrongs never had children of their own. This was not through any lack of trying, if we believe Louis's many candid remarks about their love life. Louis did have an adopted son, though. When he was fourteen Louis had taken it upon himself to support his sick cousin, Flora, who had been taken advantage of by an older white man. Louis and his relatives were unable to afford the doctor's two-dollar fee. Flora died, but not before entrusting her baby to Louis's care by naming the child Clarence Armstrong.

Louis took his duties very seriously. At age seventeen when he married for the first time, he adopted Clarence, too. Clarence was mentally handicapped, which Louis blamed on a fall off a high, wet porch when he was three. Nevertheless, when he moved to Chicago Louis sent for Clarence and raised him, keeping Clarence with him as he went through two more marriages. Eventually Clarence was installed in a home of his own in the Bronx, which Louis visited often.

Home Includes the Neighborhood

Louis spent most of his life on the road until his last years. But he and Lucille were still an integral part of their Queens neighborhood for decades. Louis wrote in 1970 how Lucille would roast a turkey or ham for neighbors when there was a death, and how he enjoyed walking two blocks to Joe's Artistic Barber Shop for a trim. Dinner at his favorite Chi-

nese restaurant would often grow cold due to the number of autographs he'd sign for neighbor kids. Those children were very important. He wrote,

During my 54 years traveling on the road playing one night stands, and when I would return home, all of those kids in my block would be standing there right in front of my door waiting to help me unload my luggage and take it into the house.

Close friend Phoebe Jacobs recounts how when Louis came home off the road, "very often the neighbors would have banners out, 'Welcome Home, Pops.'" On nice days "he'd sit on the front steps of his house and buy kids Good Humors. And he'd ask them, 'Was your homework good? Were you a good boy?'"

Pops had a little balcony off his den and would play his horn there in the evening. If a couple of days went by without hearing his trumpet, neighbors would call and ask about his health. Lucille would let them know he was merely occupied with other matters. Once when his health truly wasn't good, after being released from the hospital with heart problems, neighborhood adults and children alike were careful to be quiet in the vicinity of the Armstrong residence. Their respect made quite an impression on Louis.

In the 1950s and '60s, Louis went from being a star to being an American institution. Lucille and his manager tried to get him to move, either to a bigger house in a neighborhood outside the city, or

out to sunny Los Angeles, capital of the entertainment biz. Louis was adamant: he would not be moved. The home in Queens was fine enough for him, and he wasn't one to put on airs:

We don't need to move out in the suburbs to some big mansion. . . . What for? What the hell I care about living in a "fashionable" neighborhood? Ain't nobody cuttin' off the lights and gas here 'cause we didn't pay our bills. The Frigidaire is full of food. What more do we need?

Plus, he treasured the specific connections he had made with the people in his neighborhood. Why cut those ties just for a "nicer" address and swimming pool? Pops remarked,

We've both seen three generations grow up in our block where we bought our home in Corona, white and black, and those kids when they grew up and got married – their children – still come around to our house and visit their Uncle Louis and Aunt Lucille.

The regard people in his "Elmcor" neighborhood had for Louis is seen in a very touching photograph taken just after his death. A group of Little Leaguers holds homemade signs reading "Elmcor loves you," "Elmcor will never forget our Louie," and "Satchmo will live forever in our community."

Wanting What You Have

True confession time: these stories about Lucille, Louis, their home, and how he treasured it are the tales from this book I most need to hear. Not that I don't need the reminders we find in the other chapters. But valuing my home and family comes hard to me. In fact as I write this, it's summer vacation for us teacher-types, and where am I? At school, writing. Why? It's quiet. You see, I'm an introvert who likes calm and order. At my relatively small house are three teenagers, their friends, their stuff, two cats, and a dog: not exactly the recipe for calm and order. More like *The Family Circus*.

When the noise and clutter get to me, I find myself obsessing about what's wrong, rather than seeing and hearing what's right. I get to feeling like Jimmy Stewart's character, George Bailey, in the classic film *It's a Wonderful Life*, when he comes home in a dark mood. One kid is practicing the same song over and over on the piano, another is asking him how to spell some word, one is upstairs with a cold, and the little one keeps following him around saying, "Scuze me." All that (plus his *really* bad day at work) makes him flip out. I know you've seen it: he yells at the kids and smashes a model of a bridge that's symbolic of his unrealized dreams of doing "big things." Luckily George gets enlightened (by an angel named Clarence, ironically) and comes to see everything in a new light. Instead of bridges and fame, he enjoys a loving wife, decent kids, a roof over his head, and a town full of friends. He ends up wanting what he already has, a

pretty sure recipe for happiness.

Nicolas Cage portrays a man in a similar situation in *Family Man*. His character is a well-off single guy who wakes up in an alternate future, with kids bouncing on his bed in suburban Jersey. Though he initially wants his old single life back, he comes to appreciate the love that comes with the chaos. Some days I feel like I could use a visit from an angel to see what I'd be missing if life had turned out differently. I'll settle instead for the extended stay I'm getting with Satchmo and try to remember to use the practices at the end of this chapter.

I'm mindful that you who are reading this may be in a different situation, but still not treasuring your home. Perhaps your household feels not too noisy, but too empty. Or your apartment is too small, or your town is not to your liking. I would urge you, as I urge myself, to look on the positives that *are* there if we'll only have eyes and ears for them. Peace and quiet can give you important room to think or create or volunteer. Louis and Lucille were childless, but took it as an opportunity to bless many children in their neighborhood. A difficult neighbor or neighborhood can be an opportunity for prayer or service.

Very often no situation is absolute, but what we make of it. As Hamlet observes, there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so. The Hebrew scriptures even tell us that as we think, so we are. The apostle Paul instructed a group of early Greek Christians that their life would be enhanced if they would see and focus on the good: "Whatever things are true, whatsoever things are honest,

whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things." May you and I look for and think on whatever is good about our homes. Just like Louis.



Practices

Our attention is essentially a one-track system. While we are consciously focusing on the positive, we cannot – at that moment, anyway – be thinking of the negative. And since our thoughts and feelings interconnect, while we focus our thoughts on the positive we'll also feel better.

Take a few moments and jot down five things that could be viewed as good about your home or living situation. Write things about your household, family, dwelling, neighborhood, whatever. Bad things that aren't present also count (for example, "Our roof doesn't leak anymore").

If you get stuck for positives, acknowledge a negative feeling you presently have – no harm in being honest – then write a way it could be worse: "My house may be cramped . . . but at least the roof doesn't leak anymore." Or, "The dog is annoying to me . . . but she doesn't chew on my stuff."

If appreciating what you have is as difficult for you as it often is for me, remembering and writing your blessings will help you want what you already have. Try doing it several days in a row. You can expand it to other areas of negativity (if you have them) and make it a part of your morning routine. The repetition can even retrain your mind. What brain researcher Dr. Daniel Amen calls ANTs

(automatic negative thoughts) can eventually become stamped out, replaced by positive thoughts.

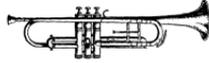
Extra Credit

1. Buy an old 78 record of Louis's "That's My Home" via Ebay.

2. Hang it in a prominent place near your front door so you see it as you enter.

3. See how it affects you.

Yes, your author actually did this, and frankly, on its own, seeing the record every day didn't affect me much. But it looks cool and has started a number of conversations with guests wondering why I have an old Satchmo record hanging on the wall. Discussing Louis Armstrong can't help but raise a home's happiness quotient, right?



Listening Suggestions

*Links to audio and video files are found at
www.livelikelouis.com.*

I've seen "That's My Home" described as "saccharine" and I suppose it is. But Louis's 1932 recording of it is very moving, an example of his ability to transcend and transform the material he often had to work with. His friend and long-time bassist, Arvell Shaw, heard Louis's real self coming through every time Satchmo performed this number, one of his most requested tunes: "I listened not so much to the timbre of the voice, but to the *feeling*, because it was something that went deep inside. . . . When he would sing, 'I'm always welcomed back, no matter where I roam; it's just a little shack, to me it's home sweet home,' so help me I'd have to fight back the tears. Now *every night* we'd do that!"

Louis and Clarence

A friend advised me not to use specific website sources for these listening examples. But if there's any justice in the universe, Ricky Riccardi's aforementioned blog (dippermouth.blogspot.com) will be with us a long, long time. If anything ever qualified as a treasure trove, it's Ricky's blog: in-depth articles on Satchmo's recordings and life, with

countless rare recordings and video clips. If you access it and search for the June 15, 2008 (Father's Day) entry, you'll be rewarded with an audio clip from a very early TV show featuring Louis and his son, Clarence. Ricky is right, in his observation that Louis's pride and love for Clarence come shining through, even in a one-minute exchange.

6 *That's My Home*

"*Lucille, I might as well*": Giddins, *Satchmo*, 115.

"*He took one look*": Nat Hentoff, *The Jazz Life* (New York: Dial Press, 1961; repr., Boston: Da Capo Press, 1975), 26-27.

"*One look at that*": Louis Armstrong, "Early Years with Lucille," in *Louis Armstrong in his Own Words*, 144.

650 reel to reel tapes: Many photos of Louis's tape-box collages are found in the marvelous coffee table book, Steven Brower's *Satchmo: The Wonderful World and Art of Louis Armstrong* (New York: Abrams, 2009).

"*I love my wife*": Louis Armstrong, "Letter to Joe Glaser," in *Louis Armstrong in his Own Words*, 158.

Louis wrote in 1970: Louis Armstrong, "Our Neighborhood," in *Louis Armstrong in his Own Words*, 176-177.

"*During my 54 years*": Louis Armstrong, "Open Letter to Fans," in *Louis Armstrong in his Own Words*, 183.

Close friend Phoebe Jacobs: Ward and Burns, *Jazz*, 450.

"*We don't need*": Charles L. Sanders, "Louis Armstrong: The Reluctant Millionaire," *Ebony*, Nov. 1964, 138.

"*We've both seen three*": *Ibid.*

a very touching photograph: Ward and Burns, *Jazz*, 452.

"*I listened not so much*": Ward and Burns, *Jazz*, 316.