



The Stuff of Life

Asif Zaidi

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Philosophical and inspirational, these essays wind toward grand ideas.

In his collection of essays, *The Stuff of Life*, Asif Zaidi takes on a series of often grand subjects and makes them relevant to the lives people lead, distilling the wisdom of thinkers both ancient and modern to assist him.

Divided into categories such as “Soulful Reflections” and “Human Relations,” Zaidi’s essays approach a wide range of subjects, more often large than small, with one essay providing an overview of human evolution, while another expounds on the history of liberalism.

The collection is at its best when the essays are more instructive than contemplative, as in the chapter “On Forgiveness,” which asserts that forgiveness is not felt, but deliberately done. The essay uses the example of Nelson Mandela forgiving a cruel prison warden as inspiration, concluding, “Forgiveness is a choice we make regardless of the content we are grappling with.” Such lessons are plain and useful.

Other high points include essays that entail personal disclosures, such as “Saying Goodbye to Corporate Life,” an essay on retirement that explores some of its great benefits, as well as its surprising challenges. Essays benefit from the inclusion of details from their author’s life, which provide a firm basis for the insights that are on offer.

Some of the essays in *The Stuff of Life* lack that firm basis. “Know Thyself” complicates a Platonic imperative, asking whether there even is a self that may be known. Zaidi addresses the subject in an erudite fashion, but without a palpable sense of purpose or direction. Such essays do not move toward conclusions so much as they do dwell on their topics with skepticism.

Some subjects are too grand for short essays, as with “God or No God: A Moral Question?” Paragraphs sometimes assert disconnected ideas within essays, leaping from one aspect of a problem to the next. The writing is clear, and the ideas are plain, but often the points of essays are lost.

“The Joy of Reading,” on the other hand, is an essay-length admission that Zaidi rarely finds the time to read the way he wishes he could, with full attention to what he is reading, without distraction, and in which the author’s personal insights into his own life and mind result in a collection high point.

The Stuff of Life takes on a broad range of subjects, using the words of great thinkers and the author’s own insights. For readers with a casual interest in philosophy, and those in search if some inspiration of their own, there is much here that is rewarding.

ROBERT FOREMAN (February 14, 2017)

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