

My View: Guitar strings are as good a metaphor as any for a well-tuned life

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I caught a clip of Eric Church's commencement speech a few weeks back. It was part song, part sermon where he broke a guitar down to its six strings and, string by string, built a philosophy of living.

I haven't been able to shake it since. In fact, I watched it three times. The more I sat with it, the more it read like a checklist for the life I've been building for 40 years.

Start with the low E, the foundation. It doesn't show off. It just holds everything else up. That's faith: the thing you lean on when circumstances get hard, the instinct you trust when nothing else is certain. Let that string fray and everything above it goes out of tune. I've learned to guard mine carefully.



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Next is the A string. Family. The kind that shows up when you're hard to love, when you're at your worst and still not alone in the room. That string gets tested most in the years you least expect it. Showing up when it costs you something is the whole point.

The D string is the heart of the guitar right in the middle. It carries the emotion, tied to your most important decisions. The decisions that matter most aren't about shared interests. They're about shared values. Interests change. Values are the compass.

Then the G string: ambition and resilience, pulling opposite directions. Nobody hands you a permission slip to go build something. You take it. And nobody builds anything without getting broken a little along the way. Hemingway had it right: the world breaks everyone, and afterward some are stronger in the broken places.

The B string is community. Plant yourself somewhere and know people by name. Not networking. Knowing. It's the string that pulls you back when you get lost, because a rootless life has nothing to tune against. Buffalo has been that string for me.



Joe Kreuz took away some good lessons from a commencement address.



Last is the high E. The thinnest one, bent easily by outside pressure. This is the string of other people's opinions. The comments and criticism that will reshape you if you let them. Curate it. Decide what gets to touch that string and what doesn't.

Here's the thing about six strings: they all drift a little more every day as life sands your edges down. The answer isn't to panic about it. It's to notice, to stop, to listen, and to tune. A guitar – or life – left untuned still makes sound. It just isn't right.

There's a lyric about a cabin, a phone call from home, a voice telling you to come back and the singer realizing it already feels like home. I thought about my own version of that call: telling someone you miss them like crazy, no occasion required. Tune the instrument before you need it, not after. Call home.

Character, integrity, values, and a moral compass are the four pillars I try to stick to. My instincts, left alone, would chase a deal at full speed with no plan. Same as our first dog, Porky, who jogged with me every day, no leash, just instinct. One morning I misjudged a crossing on a busy street. He followed. A car hit him. He lay in the road, and for one long second I thought he was dead. Fortunately he was just knocked out. He came to in my arms, and off we went again. I was his D string that day, the thing that turned him around.

Six strings. One instrument. Keep running. Keep tuning.

