

“Living in the Betwixt and Between”  
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Joanna and I attended our alumni luncheon at Moravian Theological Seminary on Friday. It was the first alumni event I’ve attended since I graduated in 2000 --15 years ago! (Which seems unbelievable.) I didn’t know who else would be there, but it turned out that 3 of the people at my table were former classmates of mine. It was really good to catch up with each other.

If any of you have ever been to a class reunion, you know that phenomenon where the face of the person you remember from the past suddenly merges with the now-older person you’re looking at? I was glad to see that no one I knew had changed THAT much in 15 years, but what was very different was where these people are in their lives now. And there were a number of the ministers from my class are retiring, or have already retired.

The woman sitting to my right, I found out, had just retired about a month ago. I was interested in hearing about how she was envisioning her future. She told me that the only plan she had for the time being was to clean up her house! She said, “I really want to get my house in order. There are a couple of rooms where…” and she went like this (show stuff piled up). “Other than that,” she said, she was keeping it open. I really hope things go well for her. I hope she has some idea of what she’s getting herself into.

The early years of retirement are a phase that our society has failed to give the attention it deserves. We usually don’t acknowledge what a complex time of life it is. We assume it’s pretty straightforward. You work, you retire and then you reap the benefits of all those years of hard work –finally, you have time to do whatever it is you’ve been looking forward to, whether it’s getting the house in order, traveling, relaxing, having fun. We look forward to no longer being under pressure, to not having so much responsibility. It turns out that there’s a lot more to it. Retirement is one of the most significant changes we will ever experience in our lives.

We see thousands of self-help books on how to deal with other life changes, but where are all the books on how to “do” retirement? What should we anticipate? What might be helpful for us to know ahead of time? Oh, there’s advice on “Planning for your Retirement” all over the place, but they’re talking about the financial aspect. (Which is important.) But they’re not talking about the rest of it. What about, “How to Plan The Rest of Your LIFE”! How do you reimagine your very identity! There can be significant emotional bumps and jolts for which many people find themselves very unprepared.

Several years ago, a mother-daughter team, Jane and Peggy Thayer, did groundbreaking research on the retirement years. They interviewed over 100 retirees and they published the results of their work. They were able to explore some of the common threads they discovered, and they include portions of the stories of many of the people they talked with.

The Thayers call the people in this stage of life “elderescents,” like “adolescents.” They found that initially, many elderescents are excited about the prospect of freedom --a freedom they have long dreamed of, which finally has become a distinct possibility. They’re ready to “smell the roses,” to do what they want, when they want.

And some people delight in that freedom once they have it. For others, though, the endless freedom becomes a burden. As Shakespeare put it in "Henry IV, Part One": “If all the year were playing holidays / To sport would be as tedious as to work.” Rather than each day presenting delicious possibilities, the hours that lie ahead can feel like a huge emptiness once the novelty wears off. One man felt a great space which he had previously filled with his career. He characterized the idea of retirement as “a sudden silence after the roar of work.” (John Mosedale)

For most of us, our professional self or the primary role we play is the major way that we identify ourselves. It can be a huge loss when that identify is gone. And to make it even harder, other people look at us differently when we’re retired. A lot of people report that they’re no longer respected the way they used to be. And then there’s that shock at realizing that people see us as old!

It helps to have a sense of humor. Walter Cronkite used to tell a story about an encounter that he and his wife Betsy had while they were traveling out west after

he retired. They were in Yellowstone National Park, and a woman came up to him and said, “Did anyone ever tell you that you look exactly like Walter Cronkite before he died?” and then, “Except I think he was thinner.” So then she turns to his wife and says, “Walter Cronkite is dead, isn’t he?” And Betsy replies, “Yes. I think he died of thinness.”

The phrase, “betwixt and between” was first used to describe adolescence, the transitional time between childhood and adulthood. But I think it applies equally well to the time of life that I’ve been talking about this morning.

Everyone’s experience of retirement will of course be different. But retiring is by its nature a transition. And there is definitely that “betwixt and between” aspect to it. As one businesswoman put it, “Change is difficult and retirement is no different from any other live-altering event. You learn to adapt, put aside that which is gone and move on to new adventures.”

When we find ourselves in a time of transition, we need to be kind to ourselves. We need to give ourselves permission to truly mourn the old before we can wholeheartedly embrace a new beginning. Some new retirees dive into lots of new things and find themselves busier than ever. Others talk about feeling a loss of momentum, of being a “has-been,” or of being stuck in a place of uncertainty and even despair. Over-busyness and underactivity can both be ways of avoiding the natural mourning process. And we now know that whenever we lose someone or something that has been a part of our lives, it really helps to acknowledge the loss.

Then, we might be in a better position to address some of the big questions, like, “Who am I now?” Or, “Who am I to become?” And, “What is the meaning of my life?”

And, on a more practical level we might want to know how we can best help ourselves to move forward. Again, that answer will be a little different for everyone. One woman the Thayers interviewed, Margaret, I found to be especially courageous and thoughtful as she navigated the “betwixt and between” period of her life. She found that writing was extremely helpful. “Writing is a tool to find out what you don’t know you know,” she said.

Margaret asked herself, “If there is an inner woman other than the woman I see in the mirror, who is that woman? Are we our names, where we were born, our ancestors, where we live, our friends, our occupations, our appearance, our feelings, our family?” After she examined all of these, it became clear that all of these aspects of ourselves are illusive. None of them captures the essence of who we are.

What within us, then, endures? Through writing, Margaret answered this question for herself: “My integrity, my heart, my love of nature, my values, my innermost being” are what endures. These are the aspects of her true self that give her life meaning.

All of this questing for answers takes years, and maybe we never reach our “final answer.” Because to be alive is to grow. As Dorothy Cole said, “As long as eyes can see, or ears can hear...I will grow...as long as I can grow I am alive.”

If we can be brave enough to let go and face the loss of what we’ve known and who we’ve been, we will find our authentic self. Facing loss requires courage. But courage doesn’t mean the absence of fear. It means not allowing fear to overwhelm us.

Margaret came to recognize that her best antidote to fear was realizing that living her life in fear was losing it. Because when we fear, we’re not really here. We’re lost in the anticipation of what might happen next, which of course, we can’t predict anyway. There isn’t always tomorrow, but there is the present moment, clearly and limitlessly.

Carl Jung (The Stages of Life) offered guidance for the elderescent’s journey, which is to reflect on one’s life “in a spiraling or circular way that recognizes the unrealized desires of our soul...[that] elicits a creative, continuous process of becoming other than what we were, but at the same time, becoming more authentically what we are meant to be.” “...becoming other than what we were, but...becoming more authentically what we are meant to be.”

I know that right here in this room, we have a wealth of experience and thoughts about that “betwixt and between” transition between the ending of our working

years and the beginning of retirement. So I'd like to open this up for discussion. And, I have a couple of questions for you.

1. If you have retired, what is something that you've found challenging and how did you work through it (or how are you still working through it), and
2. If you're not retired, what are some of your thoughts about your future retirement?

The only ground rule I ask for is that we each speak for ourselves, rather than talking in generalities. That usually makes the discussion more meaningful.