

## Miles to Go

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There is a section of the instrument panel in my car that reads "Miles to Go" alerting me to the distance I can go before running out of gas. Glancing idly at the numbers while driving recently I recalled the phrase ... *but I have promises to keep and miles to go before I sleep* from Robert Frost's *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*.

Suddenly the distance indicated on the pane) seemed a metaphor for the time I have left to spend on this earth, a subject I have pondered considerably since my 85 birthday in April. Humm. "*miles to go before I sleep ....*" Sure, I had been aware of the years passing as I entered my 60's and 70's. In fact, the shock of realizing that one is no longer young comes to most of us in our 40's and 50's. But to tell the truth I avoid the idea of aging, in fact, I detest the very word, and yet I must now prepare for what Walt Whitman described expansively as "the grandeur and exquisiteness of old age." Of course, he was only 41 when he said that.

And so my ponderings in the past few months have taken on an even sharper focus and urgency. Since every day from now on is really a bonus, I had better stop spending precious moments on tasks and concerns that bring me little satisfaction or pleasure. Instead I needed to decide exactly how I want to arrange or rearrange the days ahead. The Rubaiyat says it so well: *Come fill the cup, and in the fire of Spring/ Your Winter-garment of repentance fling: The Bird of Time has but a little way to flutter, and the bird is on the wing..*

One of the things I want to rearrange is my attitude towards aging itself and accept the fact that I cannot physically perform many activities as well as I used to. (My steadily rising golf handicap is a good reminder.) As James Russell Lowell wrote, "There is no good in arguing with the inevitable. The only argument available with the east wind it to put on your overcoat." That kind of advice seems to have been taken by both Solomon and David, recounted in the little jingle, *Oh King Solomon and King David led very merry lives, with very many concubines and very many wives, until old age came creeping, with very many qualms, so. King Solomon wrote the Proverbs and King David wrote the Psalms!*

I want to change my practice of developing an agenda for each day. I have always been a dedicated "list maker," following a kind of stressed-out pursuit of efficiency based on things I feel I "must" do and "should do (I call this one "The Should Monster) which left little or no time for things *want* to do. Sometimes I remind myself of the man in the

old ditty: "He never romped, he never played, he never even kissed a maid, so when he upped and passed away insurance was denied; for since he never really lived, they claimed he never died!"

While I am not entirely of the same mind as Brother Jeremiah, much of what he wrote reflects my own feelings. He said, "If I had my life to live over ... I would relax. I would limber up. I would be sillier than I have this trip. I know of very few things I would take seriously. I would be crazier. I would be less hygienic. I would take more chances. I would take more trips. I would climb more mountains, swim more rivers, watch more sunsets. I would walk more. I would eat more ice cream and less beans. I would have more actual problems and less imaginary ones ... You see, I am one of those people who live prophylactically and sensibly and sanely, hour after hour, day after day. Oh, I've had my moments and if I had it to do over again I would have more of them. In fact, I'd try to have nothing else. Just moments, one after another instead of living so many years ahead each day. I have been one of those people who never goes anywhere without a thermometer, a hot water bottle, a raincoat, and a parachute.

"If I had my life to live over... I would play hooky more. I wouldn't make many good grades except by accident. I would ride more merry-go-rounds. I'd pick more daisies.

Taking a tip from Jeremiah, I'm going to start my days more frequently without any agenda for the day, doing whatever I damn well please, maybe even doing nothing. As someone has said, "A poor life this, if, full of care, we have no time to stop and stare." Walt Whitman liked, as he put it, "To loaf and invite my soul." I'd like to do more of that. At Walden Pond Thoreau would often sit in the doorway for hours, and just watch, just listen, as the sun moved across the sky. He said, "There were times when I could not afford to sacrifice the bloom of the present moment to any work, whether by head or hand." (Don't you just love that, "the bloom of the present moment.")

The title of a book by Jon Kabat-Zinn says it well: *Wherever You Go, There You Are*, How many are the unaccounted-for hours that vanish unappreciated because we are preoccupied or distracted. Too many times in my life so far I have failed to be "moment oriented." Storm Jameson, in an article entitled *Here and Now* has written: "I believe that only one person in a thousand knows the trick of really living in the present. Most of us spend fifty nine minutes a hour living in the past, with regret for lost joys or shame for things badly done (both utterly useless and weakening) - or in a future which we either long for or dread. Yet the past is gone beyond prayer, and every minute you spend in the

vain effort to anticipate the future is a moment lost. There is only one world pressing against you this minute. There is only one minute in which you are alive, *this minute*, — *here and now*. The only way to live is by accepting each minute as an unrepeatable miracle. Which is exactly what it is - a miracle and unrepeatable."

My feelings about my life so far were pretty well summed up by Scan O'Casey who wrote "*A lament and a song! I have found life an enjoyable, enchanting, active, sometimes terrifying experience, and I have enjoyed it completely; a lament in one ear, maybe, but always song in the other* "

I was somewhat encouraged when I ran across a book recently entitled *One Hundred Over One Hundred, Moments With One Hundred American Centenarians*, It features photographs and interviews with people who have reached the century mark and are living active, meaningful lives. "They don't necessarily make old age look easy but they do make it look worthwhile," says author Jim Heynen. What struck him most forcefully was their unswerving focus, which persists in a kind of gusto, a nonaggressive determination, or "soft fortitude." In other words, a relentless involvement with life.

Attitude, a positive attitude, is at the core of successful aging, as it is, of course, vital to one's happiness at every other stage of life. Listen to the comments of other elderly people as they grow older: Hear the artist Goya, whose drawing of an old, old man — painted at eighty with desperately failing eyesight — bore the triumphant inscription "I am still learning." Hear the Montessori teacher — vivacious, amused, alert — who says, "I'm nearly ninety one and I'm arthritic from the top of my head to my toes ... but I see well so I read. Thankfully, I read. Oh books, how I love you!" Here is Maggie Kuhn, the a founder of the Gray Panthers say, at eighty six, "The secret of thriving and surviving is having a goal. It is absolutely essential, because it gives you the energy and the drive to do what you must do, and to get up when yon feel like staying in bed." Here is Stanley Kunitz, the poet, eighty six, who says, "I'm really too busy to think about being old. There is too much work to be done. I'm as curious as I ever was. I can't wait for the day to begin and get going." Here's M. F. K. Fisher, writer, in her eighties,, who says, "As for myself, I feel very excited about life and people and color and books and there is an excitement to everything. I want to live with as much enjoyment and dignity and decency as I can, and to do it as long as possible." Listen to Eve Merriam, writer, who at 74 said, "I think that love for the ordinary is most important as one ages ... to get the joy out of the daily-ness, that's what struck me as I hit my sixties. I thought, good heavens, I'm getting so much pleasure out of my breakfast. I didn't know grapefruit juice could taste so good.

This is really amazing. It's as though some kind of slight film over the world has been stripped away and there is now a clarity that one didn't have before."

As I begin to rearrange my life I am more than ever inspired by that wonderful suggestion from Joseph Campbell: "Follow your bliss." Few pleasures top my love of books, and yet sometimes I don't know whether I have been blessed or cursed by it. The delight of visits to the library and the book store is tempered by the obvious fact that I am never going to read all the books I want to read. As Tennyson puts it in *Ulysses*, "...and yet all experience is an arch, wherethrough gleams that untraveled world whose margin fades forever and forever when I move."

However, the time to enjoy new discoveries is compromised by my recent practice of re-reading what has given me so much pleasure the first time around. For example, William Mansfield's haunting memoir, *Goodbye Darkness* and his biographies of Churchill and Douglas MacArthur; Doris Goodwin's *No Ordinary Time*; Will Durant's *Interpretations of Life*; Gracian's *Art of Worldly Wisdom*; Thomas Moore's *Care of the Soul* and his *Re-Enchantment of Everyday Life*; favorites from Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, Kipling, Tennyson, Arnold, Gray and Poe; and of course, *The Bible*, always *The Bible*. Yes, there's a bit of conflict in allocating my time, but how I am blessed by my love of books! As Jorg Louis Borg put it, "I have always imagined that paradise will be a kind of library."

From here on I want to do a better job of handling worry than I have in the past. I have spent far too much time worrying about things that never happened. What a waste. The many uptight hours robbed me of much peace of mind. I struggled with money worries forever it seems, resulting in part from a depression childhood in the thirties when my father was unemployed and we lost everything. However, all my worries in subsequent years didn't change a thing, and yet it all worked out, the bills are paid, and things are fine. I am determined not to let worry contaminate again what has been an essentially wonderful life.

I have a letter from a dear friend, Dick Walter, roughly the same age as I who reminds me of some of the remarkable things we have seen come to pass in our sojourn on this planet. He writes, "We were here before television, penicillin, Xeroxes, frozen foods, contact lenses and the pill. We were here before credit cards, radar, split atoms, ball point pens, panty hose and computers. We thought fast foods were what you ate during Lent, and having meaningful relationships meant getting along with cousins." I think friends can be classified in three ways: friends for a reason, friends for a season,

and friends for a lifetime. Dick Walter fit number three: a friend for a lifetime.

As the years have passed I have become more and more aware of how important friends are to a well-lived life» and how important it is to continually make new ones as I grow older and as those I value pass away. That's just one of many reasons I have relished being a member of the Literary Club for the past 15 years: the opportunity to make new friends and to continue to enjoy warm relationships with old ones. Several years ago my good friend Bob Hilton, now no longer with us, checked the birth dates of members and came up with an average age of just over 70. Which I guess accounts for occasional (and sometimes too frequent) memorials for recently departed members.)

Forgive me if I soliloquize briefly on the subject of friendship itself, having found it so priceless as I review the subject from a standpoint of 85 years. Few assets in life are more valuable than friendship. What other investment will yield greater rewards? "Friends are a second existence," someone has said so wisely. Robert Louis Stevenson said once, "A friend is a present you give yourself." A friend is an asset that is guaranteed over time to increase in value, a true measure of wealth. Friendships nurture our bodies as well as our spirits. Blair Justice, in his book. *Who Gets Sick*, says that" the quality of our relationships may have more to do with how often we get sick and how soon we get well than our genes, chemistry, diet or environment. When social contact is increased or loneliness reduced, the immune system seems to strengthen." As cancer surgeon Dr. Bernie Siegel put it, "Friends can be good medicine."

And so we have learned that getting older does not have to be a cause for unease or melancholy. It can be a cause for celebration. By living a long time we have learned some things that work — and some things that don't - that contribute to a satisfying life.

We have learned about love and friendship and how important they are in the scale of our priorities. We have learned that enduring happiness is not based on material things but on caring relationships and peace of mind. And we have learned that there is something that calls us to a higher awareness, a spirituality that, though indefinable, nevertheless makes us aligned with the infinite, the immortal.

As we contemplate the future we can choose one of two very different paths, and indeed, we do have a choice. We can choose the path of regret for past mistakes, and there are some. We can sorrow for lost joys and opportunities, and there are some. We can become over-concerned, even obsessed, with our physical ailments, and surely there are some. We can drift into reveries about "the days that are no more," reveries that only detract from our ability to enjoy the pleasures of the present

Or we can take the positive path. As Alan McGinnis says in his book *The Power of Optimism*, "Optimism is not saying everything is getting better and better every day in every way. Nor is it saying that our worst days are behind us. We don't know either of these things. What we do know is that this world, for all its faults is filled with good things to be savored and enjoyed."

We can deliberately decide that no matter what happens or doesn't happen we are going to focus our thoughts on what is still going right in our lives. We can become more sensitive to the beauty around us, watch for the first stealthy signs of spring or the first tinge of color in the leaves in the fall. "Beauty is God's handwriting," said Emerson, "a wayside sacrament." Kafka noted that "Anyone who keeps the ability to see beauty never grows old." And Picasso sagely remarked, "It takes a very long time to become young."

And so, this remark by the famous painter seems a good place for me to conclude with this promise to myself, a promise to keep before *I* sleep: a promise to die young, at a very old age.