

Good News and Bad News: We're All a Year Older

Big Sky Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

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We are three days from the end of 2008. Another year has passed, and all sorts of events can get another hash mark by their age. It has now been 232 years since the United States declared its independence. Gold was discovered in Last Chance Gulch 144 years ago. Montana became a state 119 years ago. The Vietnam War ended 33 years ago.

And each of us is precisely one year older than we were on this date in 2007. Time marches on.

Now if you are 16 years old, or 18 years old, this is unqualified good news. You have passed a gateway, to a driver's license, or to adulthood, either way toward independence. At this age, you welcome the passage of years.

If you are in your 20s, the passage of a single year really doesn't make that much difference. The 20s are a wonderful decade of youth. And you know in your heart, in defiance of all the rules of mathematics, that this wonderful decade will last, if not forever then nearly so, before you have to worry about growing older.

The arrival of your 30s is often not the most welcome event.

When I was in my early 20s, I worked as a reporter for a newspaper in Oklahoma City and I was covering the state Legislature. A friend of mine was turning 30, and the Washington correspondent for her newspaper decided on a prank. He got her name on the White House sympathy card list. So when she arrived at the Capitol press room on her 30th birthday, she found a dozen roses

covered by a black veil, and a somber card telling her that, quote, “President and Mrs. Nixon wish to extend their deepest sympathy to you in this, your hour of sorrow.”

Still, once you are in them, you discover your 30s are also a wonderful time. You are not as naïve and uncertain as you were in your 20s, and you are still young enough to live life with exuberance in all its dimensions. But for the first time, there are serious inklings that this glorious youth won’t last forever.

Turning 40 is tough on a lot of people. When I was growing up there was a comedian named Jack Benny, who was in his 60s at the time. His standing joke, whenever anyone asked his age, year after year, was to pause, look into the camera, and respond dead-pan, “Thirty-nine.” It always got a huge laugh, and I could never understand why because, of course, to a 10 or 12 year old, 39 was really, really old. Now, I understand that it can be a threshold of seriously mixed emotions.

Turning 40, it’s no longer possible to deny middle-age is on its way, only to alter your definition of what that means. Some people face mid-life crises in their 40s. Some people are defeated by mid-life crises. But it can still be a time of vitality and excitement, of exploration and discovery and new experiences. A measure of maturity, and perhaps even some financial security, becomes part of your life.

As for me, I was particularly lucky in this decade. I moved to Montana and met Joyce when we were both about 40, and that first decade of us together was perhaps the happiest of my life, rivaled only by my 50s.

But by the 50s, it's not even possible to fudge about middle-age. The author Victor Hugo once said that 40 is the old age of youth, while 50 is the youth of old age. By our 50s, for the first time, we must clearly accept the fact that our life comprises more yesterdays than tomorrows. There is a growing awareness of mortality. For the first time, one begins to notice the obituaries in the newspaper, and that some of the names listed are younger than us.

But there's a brighter side. By our 50s, for many of us, children are either gone or near leaving; for parents, there is a feeling of accomplishment and completion, and life can once again focus on us, our growth and satisfaction. Usually, we are more settled, more financially stable, more capable of making our lives full and complete. It can be a time of fun and discovery and excitement and satisfaction. Oliver Wendell Holmes once said that men do not quit playing because they grow old; they grow old because they quit playing. Many people in their 50s can joyfully embark on play.

I can't really speak for the decades beyond 60; I only turned 60 two months ago, but I hope that I deal with those coming years with zest and enthusiasm.

As the early 20th century poet Samuel Ullman said, Nobody grows old merely by living a number of years. We grow old by deserting our ideals. Years may wrinkle the skin, but to give up enthusiasm wrinkles the soul.

Or put more simply by author Pearl Buck: You can judge your age by the amount of pain you feel when you come in contact with a new idea.

Whatever the decade we inhabit at this moment, it is the time of the year when we mark one more completed, and it is human nature for us to look back, over the year, over our lives. And how we look at our past and experience the present can affect how we deal with our future.

Over the years, I've had the chance to look at pictures of Joyce as a child. And I've been struck by one thing. In every picture, every blessed one, whatever the age, she is smiling a smile that looks like pure joy. Often she stands by her sister Janice, and Janice didn't smile like that. Janice had a difficult life in some ways, and I've wondered if that smile, or its absence, says something about why they experienced life differently.

Joyce tries to live her life with joy. She did then and she does now. That is one of the things about her that I fell in love with. But there is also an element of envy on my part there. Some people are not so blessed with a naturally joyful outlook on life, and, unfortunately, I am one of those.

Two things I happened to read in the past few weeks brought that home.

The first was a piece by Judith Warner, an author and columnist for the New York Times. Warner frequently writes about parenting, and in this column she was writing of her relationship with her 11-year-old daughter, Julia. As Warner was driving Julia to school one morning, her daughter, with all the impertinence of childhood, was listing all the things that were wrong with her mother. And among them was: "Number 10: You always remember all the things you've done wrong, but never the things you've done right."

And I thought, "Hm....."

A few days later, the monthly Quest newsletter of the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Larger Fellowship arrived – and by the way, these have some wonderful pieces, and there is a stack of them downstairs by the library bookshelf for you to look at and take home.

This one included a column by Kelly Crocker, a minister of the First Unitarian Society of Madison, Wisconsin. Crocker wrote about visiting her parents, and having her mother haul out a trunk in which she had kept all the papers from Crocker's school days. As they looked through them, her mother pulled out her fourth grade spelling tests and leafed through them: 100 percent, 100 percent, 100 percent ... and then, 95 percent.

"I actually remembered that," Crocker wrote. "I remembered the word I had spelled wrong – innocent. I had mistakenly spelled it with an 's' instead of a 'c'. I remembered that day because I could still recall how I had beat myself up for weeks over that one simple word, that one test. I remembered because it was my goal at that moment to be perfect."

When I read that, my mind immediately flashed back, to 1957, William McKinley Elementary School in Tulsa, Oklahoma. I was in the third grade, and I was my classroom's representative in the school spelling bee. I was on the stage in our auditorium, before the whole school, and I missed a word and was eliminated. I remember being overcome with feelings of shame and failure.

The word I missed was "chimney." I left out the "n."

That was more than a half century ago. But to this day, whenever I come across the word "chimney" in text – I don't exactly obsess over it. But I can't stop

my mind from flicking back, for just a split second, and once more feeling just a twinge of shame and failure.

This is not healthy. I know this. I am sure a mental health professional would diagnose it as some kind of neurosis, and there probably is a specific name for it. I hope it is not a serious neurosis.

And at one time, I thought it might be unique or at least rare. But after reading those two pieces, I Googled the phrase “dwelling on past mistakes,” I got 201,000 hits. It appears to be not as rare as I thought.

I don't know if any of you might share my neurosis. I hope not; it really is not pleasant. But some of you might share the more common version of being more aware of your mistakes than of your successes, more aware of your shortcomings than your contributions. And so I want to do a short exercise in our remaining time.

I'm going to pose a series of questions or scenarios, and I want you to answer them in your mind; no need to speak aloud. Some of them apply to all of you, some will not. Some of them speak more to the past year; others to your whole life. So let your memory flow.

Ready?

If you put some money in a Salvation Army kettle before Christmas, picture in your mind's eye a family burned out of their home, sheltered and fed in part by your contribution.

If you gave food to Food Share, picture in your mind a single mother feeding her children the food you gave.

If you are an activist, if you attended a rally or signed a petition or wrote a letter, imagine the spark you may have inspired in someone, and how that spark could spread.

If you performed an act of kindness, of any kind, remember that act, and remember the expression on the face of the person you befriended.

If you are a teacher, or have been a teacher, remember the expression on a student's face when he or she suddenly understood what you were trying to convey.

If you are a student, or have been a student, think of a time when you helped a classmate through a tough spot, either in schoolwork or in life.

If you work in service profession – and most people do, directly or indirectly – think of a time you went the extra mile to help a client or a patient or a customer to cope or to achieve.

If you are married, or you are in a relationship, think of an occasion when you did or said something that brought joy to the face of your partner.

If you are a parent, remember the very first time you realized that your child was a unique individual, with his or her own personality and intellect, and that you brought this precious life into existence.

If you voted this year ... enough said.

I want to state something that is glaringly obvious, but which should, on occasion, be said aloud anyway, to make sure it does not get lost in the hub-bub of daily life. And it is this: You are all good people. Each one of you is a good person.

It is true that we face a troubled world, with war and economic turmoil. But this is also true: The world on this day in 2008 is a better world in many small ways than it was on this day in 2007, because you have been a part of it. And while there is a danger in excessive self-congratulation, it is OK on occasions such as the end of the year to recognize your own positive contributions to our world, and to savor what you have accomplished.

And as one who has been one of the beneficiaries of your presence, I want to add my own thanks to you, for being part of my world. Shalom, and Happy New Year.