

## **One Precious Life**

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There are many descriptions of human development, the most famous being Erik Erikson's eight stages of human development, half of which occur before the age of 12, suggesting we adults undergo less development than children. Bill Plotkin recently set forth his eight stages of human development in *Nature and the Human Soul*, which reaches late youth, completing college, before reaching the half-way point of our human development. Now the age at which humans reach certain developmental stages can vary, you may be early or late, or skip a stage altogether, but drawing upon brain research of lifelong brain development and changes, I'd suggest most of us undergo developmental challenges for most of our lives. Hence we don't reach our midpoint developmentally until middle age. Each stage of our life has its own challenges and its unique rewards.

We begin with childhood: who here is 12 years old or younger? Plotkin says the setting for a good childhood is "a loving and protective environment that nurtures [the] child while he or she undergoes the earliest phases of physical and psychological development." He says each child's task is to learn "the givens of the world and our place in it (discovering the enchantment of the natural world and learning cultural ways)." A child brings innocence, its luminous presence, wonder, and joy to their community. A deprived childhood is one where a child does not have a loving and protective environment in which to grow. The later stages of childhood are, at their best, filled with wonder. Richard Lewis calls these our grasshopper and salamander days. He writes: "In our grasshopper and salamander days, who among us didn't ask why the grasshopper could jump so far – or why the salamander had black dots on its orange body? We trampled leaves with our feet just to hear what kind of sounds leaves made. We threw flat stones over the surface of streams to see how far the stones would skip. We listened to crickets cry in nights far beyond our grasp of what the darkness was.... In those days we knew as much as we had to know in order to ask what we didn't know. Our ignorance wasn't just innocence, but the foundation from which we offered ourselves the daily surprise of discovering another question, another way to uncover something mysterious, something we hadn't understood yesterday. We lived by wonder, for by wondering we were able to multiply a growing consciousness of being alive." Oh, I so loved my own childhood with its hope and wonder!

But with puberty comes adolescence and youth. Who here is between 13 and 21? The earliest stages of youth involve "fashioning a social presence that is both authentic and socially acceptable." Alex Page seems to have handled it very well, but this was so painful a process in my own children's middle school years that we took to calling it the muddle school. From a spiritual perspective this stage often involves abandoning our innocence in our search for our unique authentic self. Plotkin writes, "If your soul is your ultimate place in the world and you

need to live from that place to be fully yourself...as individual human beings, we must, when developmentally ready, wander deeply into the world in search of our ultimate place, a place that may or may not have anything to do with a particular geographical location. Then we must learn to inhabit that [place]... Perhaps the journey to self-knowledge that we each must take – the conscious discovery of our ultimate *individual* place – is the prerequisite or path to full human consciousness and the ability to fully savor the grandeur of this world.” You perhaps heard this in the essays from our high school seniors. They are each ready, in their own way, to discover their own *individual* place in the world, and we cheer them on their way.

Plotkin writes: “Any healthy high school student knows [the world was made to be free in]... It is this promise of freedom that inspires her... Responsible adulthood, holding down a job, paying the mortgage, getting the kids to school, is what we say we want for our youth, but the truth is, it’s not even what we want for ourselves. Yes, most of us are responsible, but this is not what motivates us, excites us, or inspires us. Just like us, the majority of teens do not fantasize about becoming dependable grown-ups; they are not inspired by the prospects of a secure job and a pension plan. Selling out for a safe and banal existence is not what they have in mind for their lives. Healthy young people want to *live*, not survive. Spirited teens want to become, not responsible adults, but animated, passionate, engaged, vital, alive, contributing, joyous adults – in love with the world, their lives, and others.” A deprived youth is when a culture of drug or alcohol addictions short circuit this search for early being. I personally really loved my freedom at college! So seniors, I hope your college years are every bit as tumultuous as mine were, and that you discover who you are!

Then comes the soul initiation that our culture calls young adulthood. Who here is between 21 and 35? I enjoy socializing with our young adults doing something we call Theology on Tap, talking about soulful subjects at a local pool hall. This stage of life can be about trying on various adult roles and discovering which fit your emerging self the most clearly. This can be a joyous time of life, but it is generally also an anxious one, as we discover which of our dreams can come true and which we must abandon as youthful fantasies. There can be a natural temptation to move faster, to try harder, to grab a hold of adulthood with all of our being; or its inverse of slacking off, giving up before we fail, in order to avoid being a failure. This stage is deprived of its joy when we load too many expectations upon ourselves or our young adults. Young Adulthood can be a time for challenging our sense of self, and even our very sense of joy. But Richard Gilbert writes: “There are times when we feel overwhelmed by being. We are on a treadmill walking hurriedly, going nowhere; the images of our lives fly past us as on a movie screen. At such times we need to gather ourselves together, slacken our pace, blank out the screen, ignore the clock. Then we can remind ourselves that we are in charge of our lives – it is we who dictate the pace, that we can set the rhythm of our own lives. It will not be easy...the demands on our time and energy are endless; we cannot fully control our environment. We are, after all, finite and flawed creatures. But out of that finitude comes a yearning for meaning. Out

of the flawed nature of our being we yearn for purpose. Out of the hectic rush of events we can still set our own pace. We are the only ones that can.” As young adults, Loretta and I got married, bought our first house, had children, and advanced our careers. For us young adulthood was a busy and anxious time, yet I remember those days very fondly, we didn’t have much, but there was joy in the act of our becoming adults.

Who here is between 36 and 50? Middle Adulthood is finally a time for being dependable, because many others have finally come to depend so deeply upon us, as employees, as parents, as children of elderly parents, or as dear friends. For most of us there is less of an experience of adventure, and more of an experience of comfort, assurance in life. For some, unhappy with their lives, this stage can lead to a mid-life crisis. For others it feels more like a mid-life passage to full adulthood. To thrive in this stage, it helps to adopt the attitude of Rumi’s *Guest House*. “This being human is a guest-house, every morning a new arrival. A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. Welcome and entertain them all! Even if they’re a crowd of sorrows, who violently sweep your house empty of furniture, treat each guest honorably. He may be clearing you out for some new delight. The dark thought, the shame, the malice, meet them at the door laughing, and invite them in. Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.” What new thing will you welcome in at mid-life?

My middle adulthood, with a tumultuousness that made my college years seem tame, left me markedly changed, in fact this middle crossing is what brought me to seminary and why I stand before you now as a minister. For some this stage is disrupted by unbalanced addictions: whether to work, alcohol, sex, or other pathological behavior. Mary Oliver captures the essence of this middle crossing in her poem *The Journey*: “One day you finally knew what you had to do, and began, though the voices around you kept shouting their bad advice – though the whole house began to tremble and you felt the old tug at your ankles. ‘Mend your life!’ each voice cried. But you didn’t stop. You knew what you had to do ... little by little, as you left their voices behind... there was a new voice which you slowly recognized as your own, that kept you company as you strode deeper and deeper into the world, determined to do the only thing you could do – determined to save the only life you could save, [your own].” The spiritual task of this middle passage, if successfully navigated, leads to the deeper joys and sorrows of senior adulthood. How will you navigate this middle passage?

Who here is between 51 and 65? I am in the early stages of senior adulthood, and Rev. Martha is slightly more advanced, a time particularly apt for ministering to a community, for mentoring younger people working with you, for parenting. The joys of this stage can be lost when medical conditions or life circumstances circumscribe our innate generative impulses. Perhaps the losses associated with this stage of life are also the same sources from which comes the beginning of wisdom. We seldom embody true wisdom without some pain or loss. Alice Walker captures the

sense of this life stage in her poem entitled *Until I Was nearly Fifty*: “Until I was nearly fifty I barely thought of age. But now as I approach becoming an elder I find I want to give all that I know to youth. Those who sit skeptical with hooded eyes wondering if there really is a path ahead & whether there really are elders upon it. Yes, we are there just ahead of you. The path you are on is full of bends, of crooks, potholes, distracting noises, & insults of all kinds. The path one is on always is. But there we are, just out of view, looking back concerned for you... Oh youth! I find I do not have it in my heart to let you stumble on this curve with fear. Know this: surprise alone defines this time of more than growth, of distillation, ripeness, enjoyment, of being, on the vine.” I love this deep sense of senior adults slowly ripening on the vine.

Of course, then comes Elder-hood, which often finds its first blossom in retirement, when your spirit can move beyond caring primarily for a particular community to caring for the world. Who here is older than 65? Elders often have an instinctive sense of the web of life. Albert Einstein, in his elder years, captured this cosmic sense of being when he wrote: “A human being is a part of the whole, called by us ‘universe’, a part limited in time and space. We experience ourselves, our thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest – a kind of optical delusion of consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.” Chronic depression, loneliness, or chronic pain can make this last stage of life a misery; transcending them is the key to joy. Pay attention to your need for joy; even in the midst of misery, limitations, and losses, there can still be joy!

Plotkin defines an elder as ‘someone who, after many years of adulthood, consistently occupies his ultimate place without any further effort to do so.’ Alice Walker suggests that those approaching elder-hood “contemplate giving away possessions and practice giving away your self. Talk to the young; offer whatever you have learned that might be of use... Keep track of family members; talk with them, work and plan for the future with them, vacation with them, take them with you when you have something joyful to share.” We now face an ever larger portion of our society living beyond their mid-60s, with growing numbers living into their 70s, 80s, and even 90s. The later stages of elder-hood, for those who live into their 80s and 90s, can be a lonely, frustrating, terrifying time; a time when the core spiritual task seems to be coming to terms with loss. As my mother say, “It seems that getting old is not for sissies!” There is loss of dear friends, loss of bodily function, growing pain and suffering, loss of hearing, sight, and connection, and yet there is also opportunity for joyful encountering of being.

These bonus years, beyond the age of 80, can be a time of reflection and some joy in the midst of pain, suffering and loss. Whatever our age, stage, or life circumstances, we need to continue to pay attention for our need for joy in our lives. Anne Sexton in her poem *Courage* captures the sense needed to live each stage of our life as fully as possible, and to take each new suffering,

loss, and new possibility, in stride. “It is in the small things we see it. The child’s first step, as awesome as an earthquake; the first time you rode a bike...the first spanking when your heart went on a journey all alone. When they called you crybaby, or poor, or fatty, or crazy... Later, when you face old age and its natural conclusion, your courage will still be shown in the little ways, each spring will be a sword you’ll sharpen... and you’ll bargain with the calendar, and at the last moment, when death opens the back door, you’ll put on your carpet slippers and stride out.” So may it be for us, as we struggle to live each stage of our life fully and authentically in light of our own true being. Let us celebrate the role of this community in giving us someone to lean on when we need it, and may you always remember you can lean on me. Amen.