

Greetings. On December 11th, 2005, I was the lay speaker at the Open Circle Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Boulder. I thought what I had to say might interest you. It says a lot about my life at present but didn't seem appropriate for a Holiday letter. Feel free to pass it on to adult children as well as elder elders!

Ciao,
Michal

Writing the Last Chapter

It is not usual to begin a presentation with a preface, but given the nature of my topic today, I think it will clarify my perspective if I do.

For background, I am living today with a formerly cheerful, upbeat, gregarious fellow who is disintegrating before my eyes, I am a non Hodgkins cancer survivor which included four rounds of radiation and two of chemo therapy.

When I started to write this, I planned to include lots of examples from friends and family. Upon further thought I realized that while I might regale you with some sad, funny and /or painful incidents from the lives of others it would really constitute an invasion of their privacy. So I am left with talking about myself and using personal examples. I think I am talking for a large segment of the elder elders in our society but it will be up to you to decide if I am right.

What I am not going to talk about is special diets, supplements, exercise programs, living wills, medical directives, joining Death With Dignity, keeping your mind limber by doing crossword puzzles, moving to smaller homes or retirement communities etc all of which are readily accessible in the media. As with most things today, on the subject of aging /dying gracefully we are in information overload and the individual challenge is to cherry pick what works for you. And, finally, this is a service about a state of mind-tips perhaps but not a bunch of recipes.

The idea for this conversation began when on of my regular early morning walks I bent to pick up some trash and realized I might not be able to stand up without falling down. That is to say, my legs, which are really quite strong for my age, were not getting the right message from my brain. That day I came face to face with the notion that I had entered a different stage of my life and it was, in fact, the end chapter. Like name recall, dropping things, miscalculating distances, slipping, misplacing things, finding myself wandering all over the side walk instead of walking in a straight line all of which you have experienced at one time or another, these incidents were becoming too frequent to ignore.

My neighbor who is considerably younger likes to call these evolving experiences "selective degradation" I think of them as "system failure." Recently the transmission on our car has been sympathetically mimicing my symptoms which I find rather ironic. It slips a bit or it responds jerkily to pressure on the pedal. There is not yet a consistent pattern that can be reported to the mechanics but my husband gloomily predicts that it won't be long, any day now, when the transmission will fail. Kaput. Just like me.

So, we all know it's coming. If you are lucky enough to have advance reminders as I and my transmission have, you get to make some choices. That's what I want to talk about today.

In my mind and experience, this period of my life is a separate chapter is quite distinct from just aging past say 75. It is more than just aging. Part of it is moving past recovery of mental or physical skills. You may be able to slow things down, but not much. Another part is letting go of interests and interactions that may have been characteristic of you most of your life. Another is preparing

those around you. Another is moving into a period of life which is almost consistently effortful. Nothing comes easy anymore and many things even turning over in bed can no longer be done in a casual, thoughtless fashion. And finally if you value life you can't afford to waste a day. In other words there is an agenda for the last chapter which with slight variations we all face.

I am well aware that there are some who go sailing through into their 80s and beyond with few if any aches and pains, who retain their love of and capacity for learning new things, who can eat almost anything and not wake up at 3:00AM with a stomach ache, who still enjoy large parties and can tolerate the noise levels that are prevalent in most restaurants today. Bless them. I just don't happen to be among them and I think there are many like me which is why I have the temerity to stand up here and talk about myself and what I am discovering.

On my desk is a postit that says "Change is mandatory, stress is inevitable, misery is optional". There is also a wonderful picture of two dear friends smiling and happy perched on a parapet in the sun the morning of the day they died in an unexplained car accident in Spain - a regular reminder that life is fleeting and fate is quirky.

They say something about my approach to life and the last chapter in particular.

If you are to write the last chapter of your life rather than just live it or drift through it or accept it or deny it, I think you must start by being present. As anyone who has ever tried meditation or self hypnosis or myriad other ways of being in the world knows this is not easy. It is in fact hard work and few of us can do it for more than a few minutes at a time. If you want to test this thesis, sit somewhere with eyes wide open and time yourself for just 30 seconds, writing down as fast you can everything you are see, hearing, smelling, thinking, feeling...just record, no judgements.

The point I am making is there is a huge amount of static in the system so your messages to yourself can't always get through. You have to work at noticing them.

On the sidewalk that day, I found that I needed to stop and say, Hey, what's going on here? Is this something I need to pay attention to? Does it mean anything?

Since that day, just like our poor transmission, I have had a few other freezes...So, I get to make some choices -leave picking up the trash to others, walk somewhere else so I don't get pissed at the slobs who are dumping on my neighborhood or....Well, my choice was to continue and start bringing my grabber so I can pick up with minimal effort.

I have been a life long political activist. I began walking precincts and checking voting rosters on election day when I was in college. In 2004, I walked my last precinct. By the time I got done, I was a basket case. This year I converted my effort to creating a large poster which sat on an easel by the sidewalk at the end of my driveway with literature in a pocket, and hanging out at the local coffee shop with it on Saturday or Sunday morning nabbing whoever I could.

>First you become aware, then you choose, then maybe you figure out a way not to give up entirely.

I have tried, unsuccessfully I fear to save and involve the neighborhood in transforming the Nomad theatre which is the oldest non profit theatre in Boulder. I wrote a letter to the Editor of the Camera, I took the Chair of the Board of Directors to lunch, I talked to neighbors on my walks about their willingness to help. These were all manageable steps and if unsuccessful, at least I know I made a good faith try.

On Tuesday I was invited to attend a Board meeting at the theatre. Suffice to say, the whole enterprise is hanging by a thread but a new group of hardy souls has stepped forward as part of a new enlarged Board and one of them was there because she saw my letter in the Camera. It is

pretty easy during the last chapter to let George do it or say I've done my share.

>During the last chapter you have to be attentive and inventive as you look for ways to live your values.

There are some things that have to be abandoned. When I was 61 I ran the Bay to Breakers and finished to my amazement in the top 20%. In 2001, I did some test walks to see if I could walk the Bolder Boulder. I had waited too long. I could no longer walk that far and certainly not in the requested time frame.

I took a Life Long Learning class on digital cameras this fall. It was a mistake. I can no longer sit in a school chair for an hour and a half without a break and get much out of it.

At the last art class I took when we were painting blind folded after 4+ hours on our feet...I managed to inelegantly slump to the floor and lay there brush in hand peacefully waiting for the rest of the class to finish. I think the teacher was unnerved but I thought it was rather creative solution to a difficult situation.

>I find it is important not to give up or abandon activities you have always enjoyed without one last try.

There are some things I am not willing to give up, and I may yet get myself in hot water. In October while visiting DC we boarded the Metro returning from a show at the Kennedy center and my son in law confronted a very large young black woman who had decided to occupy a full seat by sitting sideways. When he asked her to move, a string of invective poured out and she refused to move. Luckily, her companion who was doing the same thing, reluctantly allowed him the window seat. I was one seat up and could not resist confronting her..The conversations went something like this.....".You are not the only one who can say fuck and I don't fucking like what you are doing. You don't own this subway.".."Well, what fucking business is it of yours?" "I happen to be with him. You should get your mouth washed out with soap"... At that point some of her male companions who were standing up ahead of us started talking back and forth across the car in largely incomprehensible terms but the gist was they did not approve of what she was doing. Several stops later when she left the train ahead of us, I noticed and loudly said"HOORAY".. That might have been enough, but at the next stop a youngish woman who was not white, tapped me on the shoulder and complimented me and said she appreciated my speaking up. At least a third of the subway car was involved in this mini drama.....

>I find I am not yet ready to abandon confronting injustice and public rudeness, if I can speak up. My daughter said she would have avoided the whole mess and moved elsewhere, but I felt great..I think it was part of the "I'm still here!" syndrome.

One of the smartest things I have done in my life was to shift gears when we moved to Boulder and pick a post retirement activity that was vastly different from what I had been doing in my adult years. I took up color pencils and for the past four years have been filling drawers with all kinds of drawings. It requires only me, I can stop and start any time I want. I don't have to talk to anyone. I don't have to meet any goals or deadlines unless I feel like setting them for myself. Tucked away in my mini studio in the garage with my books on tape and music , I frequently lose track of time until my back and hands protest. A person who has a hobby they love and can pursue during the last chapter can't help but be happy. if you want to see what I'm up to Google Michalsgallery(one word) or go directly to www.michalsgallery.com. Sadly, my husband who is an ex jock has chosen to continue biking and golf and experiences endless daily frustration and an immense amount of pain with a body that refuses to accommodate to his desires.

With a shortened time horizon, I have found it useful to plot my days as much as I can so so I can wake up in the morning and know that something nice will happen that day. If nothing is scheduled, I try to create it. In our household this past year we have invented something we call EOLs. These are purchases/extravagances which we could very well do without but the the punch line is End of Life-why not? My husband is showing up whenever he can these days in a sweater we purchased in Canada this summer that will most certainly outlast him and cost twice as much as any sweater he has ever owned. We could repair our present car for a few thousand dollars and we have loved it, but instead we are searching for a new one and will, I'm sure, enjoy all the new bells and whistles even if for a rather short time. Not all of our choices are expensive, but they share one characteristic- they add to our comfort, convenience and enjoyment and are a conscious statement that we do not have to opt for practical over pleasure-right up to the end.

Boundaries are another significant issue in the last chapter. This is most obvious with family and close friends. I faced a hard one this summer when following a pre 80th birthday cruise, I decided I needed to tell my husband of 59 years, I could no longer manage the logistics and restrictions of travelling with him. Nor will I wait until 9:00 PM to start a video rental while he takes a nap after dinner. I have announced in advance, I do not want an all family gathering for my birthday but would prefer a longish weekend with my three children only. I have asked them to stop calling us during dinner time which is probably more convenient for them and less for us.... I have told our children that they need to manage their relationships with us now so they will have few or no regrets when we are no longer around.

All of this may seem a bit petty or inconsequential, but, believe me, bit by bit and piece by piece it is an important part of feeling you are still in charge of your own life.

It is my obligation to recognize, choose and negotiate with my own family and friends but I can't do a lot about the rest of the world so I am going to close by taking this opportunity to give you some feedback about how to treat people like me. Here come the tips.

First of all try to avoid saying "How are you?" In response, I have to lie or relate a litany of woes you do not want to hear about and I do not want to relate.

Secondly, acknowledge older people in particular with a smile, a wave or hello wherever you see them. It goes on all the time but when you are older is depressing to have people on the sidewalks, in line, everywhere look right through you as if you didn't exist. Teach you children to do the same. I cannot tell you how much it means to me to have a young person smile or wave to me as they walk or bike toward or past me on my morning walks. And while you are at it remind them that it is positively dangerous to approach from the rear without signalling-walking or biking.. Older people just can't get out of the way fast enough.

And finally pay attention to the older people who are closest to you. Listen to what they say, but respond to what they do. Ask your questions now- the ones you will wish you asked when they are gone. The boundary between you and the elders in your life is that you need to ask the questions and it is their choice what and how they answer. Please don't guess for them.

I'm out of time or I would talk about the reverse issue which is how much younger people should volunteer about their lives. Shielding your elders from what you think might/will upset them is a bag of worms. Just realize that when you do so, you are in a real way shutting them out of your lives. This creates emotional distance and has it's consequences.

I'd like to close by reading a few sentences from a Miss Manners article about the questionable

practice of characterizing cancer patients as victims. Edited it works pretty well for elder elders.

“But these are not warriors and old age is not a fight, much less a fair fight. Old people do not need the implication that better strategizing and fighting harder would lead to victory. What they need is the recognition, expressed in countless different ways, that they are still the same individuals they were before they got old”

By Michal E. Feder

For UU Open Circle December 11. 2005

P.S. Some of you will have noticed I have said nothing about spirituality today which may seem strange for a religious service. That was a deliberate choice. Hopefully you will have figured out your relationship to the universe and the meaning of life, or better yet, the meaning of your life before you get to the last chapter. I feel that I have.

That's probably the essence of another service and I already have the title.- “When Did You Wake UP?”