

When I'm 64

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When I'm 64 – well, that would be today – although I can recall a couple of times in my life when I couldn't imagine ever being that old.

The first was when I was in second grade in 1956. We learned about calendar years and the year 2000. I did the math and figured out that I'd be 51 in the year 2000 – impossibly old and, for me, unimaginable. I dismissed the idea as unthinkable.

The second was when I was 21 years old in 1971. I was diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer, a kind that people didn't survive. I didn't expect to live to 25, much less 51 or 64. But, here I am at 64 – alive and thriving more than ever before!

It seems that life can take us on some pretty strange journeys, whether we want to go or not. There have been quite a few attempts to describe the shape of some of the basic journeys we take. One way has been to outline the developmental stages people go through as they grow. Erik Erikson's 8 developmental stages tend to serve as benchmarks in our Western culture. He describes the challenges we face in infancy, early childhood, preschool, school age, adolescence, young adult, middle adult, and maturity. What I find interesting about this model is that it focuses on the first 20 years of life. Of its 8 stages, only three come after that, stages dealing with relationships, productivity, and, finally, coping with the despair of old age. This matches and confirms the dominant view of development in our culture: once we reach adulthood, the process is pretty much over. There are no more real major developmental milestones to be reached. We carry on as long as we can, enjoying things as best we can until we fall apart and die.

Other cultures have seen this differently. Hindu culture, for example, posits four life stages. The first one, child/student, includes all five of Erikson's early stages. The second stage is householder, with its challenges of family and

professional life. The third stage is already off Erikson's chart. In this stage, one becomes a sage, studying, meditating, and retiring from worldly life, offering advice and counsel to those still active. And in the fourth stage one retires completely to a contemplative life to more fully embody the spiritual values that previously had been, perhaps, more ideals than experiences.

Our Western view of age has little sympathy with the words of Robert Browning, who wrote, "Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be, the last of life, for which the first was made . . ." This view is that age is not so much a loss as an opportunity for a radically new and renewed adventure, that things are just getting really interesting!

This matches Carl Jung's view that there was no point in trying to address people's deepest problems before middle age. He saw the first half of life as the beginning, the preparation, for the soul's true work. This view sees the mid-life crises common in our culture as evidence of our failure to understand that a profoundly different kind of development becomes possible as we grow older. Failing that understanding, our earlier goals grow steadily less meaningful and rewarding as we remain stuck in stages we can't abandon because we don't know that there is more to life than identity, security, and gender.

All the spiritual traditions of the world begin with stories of leaving home, abandoning the safe and the known for something completely other.

Abraham and Sarah left their home in Ur; Moses left his adoptive family, eventually leading the Hebrews to leave their home in Egypt to wander in the desert; Joseph was forcibly torn from his home by his jealous brothers. The Buddha left his kingdom. The list goes on and on – the first stage of any true journey of spiritual development is the "leaving," of the safe and familiar, of one's home and family, or, even more to the point, of leaving behind the identity and selfhood created in the first stages of life.

Joseph Campbell outlined this in his description of "The Hero's Journey," a popular but little understood description of the transformative tasks of the second half of life.

Richard Rohr gives us a good overview of the steps of this journey in his book, "Falling Upwards: a spirituality for the two halves of life." Heroes, he says,

1. “live in a world that they presently take as given and sufficient; they are often a prince or princess and, if not, sometimes even of divine origin, which of course they always know nothing about! (This amnesia is a giveaway for the core religious problem, as discovering our divine DNA is always the task.)

2. “They have the call or the courage to leave home for an adventure of some type – not really to solve any problem, but just to *go out and beyond the present comfort zone*.

3. “On this journey or adventure, they in fact find their real problem! They are almost always ‘wounded’ in some way and encounter a major dilemma, and the whole story largely pivots around the resolution of the trials that result. . . the great epiphany is that the wound becomes the secret key, even ‘sacred,’ a wound that changes them dramatically.

4. “The first task . . . is only the vehicle and warm-up act to get him or her to the real task. He or she ‘falls through’ what is merely *his or her life situation* to discover his or her *Real Life*, which is always a much deeper river, hidden beneath the appearances. Most people confuse their life situation with their actual life, which is an underlying flow beneath the everyday events. The deeper discovery is largely what religious people mean by ‘finding their soul.’

“The hero or heroine then returns to where he or she started . . . but now with a gift or ‘boon’ for others . . . a person must pass the lessons learned on to others – or there has been no real gift at all. The hero’s journey is always an experience of an excess of life, a surplus of energy, with plenty left over for others.”

This process always involves a death and rebirth, a loss and a finding, a radical transformation into a new depth of experience, of unity. But even if we are called to the journey, Rohr points out that, “If you have spent many years building your particular tower of success and self-importance – your personal ‘salvation project’ – or have successfully constructed your own superior ethnic group, religion, or ‘house,’ you won’t want to leave it.”

The Bible story of Jonah tells us what happens when someone resists or denies the call to embark on this journey – disaster after disaster. Odysseus, too,

meets with hardship, temptation, and disaster on every step of his journey until he finally finds and accepts the divine gift he has to share with others.

My journey has had this quality, too. Like many in these stories, I didn't seek the departure, but had it thrust upon me.

It began when I was 21 years old and newly married. I was a budding musician and songwriter. I was also a student of religious philosophy and practice, seeking the depths of transformative understanding that those ancient traditions promised, in order to translate those insights into music that would change the world. I was ambitious and athletic, filled with youth's certainty as well as its naïve sense of invulnerability.

This is the point at which I was diagnosed with three virulent strains of cancer that had spread to the lymph system up my spine. People didn't survive this kind of cancer in 1971, but they tried, so I endured a torturous series of treatments. Two mutilating surgeries and 12 weeks of daily radiation therapy left me broken and weak, unable to eat or walk, shrunken to skin and bones.

This was a wound and departure as extreme as any hero's journey, and I responded to it as such. It was clear that my life was soon to be over, so I devoted myself to preparation for death. I used the spiritual techniques and disciplines I'd learned in order to mourn for my loss of vitality, strength and promise, as well as life itself. I practiced meditation constantly, letting go of my life, and achieved a profoundly transformational sense of serenity and peace. I was ready.

But we now know what I didn't know then: I survived. But even as my recovery moved beyond months into years, I couldn't feel safe – the mortality rate for my condition, even after treatment, was 99.5%.

So I doubled down on the remains of my life rather than living the dreams I'd had. I stayed in a bad marriage that wouldn't have lasted if I hadn't gotten sick, and, like Odysseus with Circe, dedicated myself to a family life that was not my true destiny.

As my survival became clear, the sense of journey also returned with renewed vigor, but in the form of another wound, the loss of my marriage and family. Like Odysseus, I voyaged to another place and tried another way forward,

this time on the path of material prosperity. I spent a decade building a business but then lost everything when that enterprise foundered on the rocks of betrayal.

Set adrift once more, I renewed my voyage, returning to spiritual practices in search of the hidden treasures of inner peace and wisdom. I also went to school – first community college, then university, and then graduate school – in order to become a Unitarian Universalist minister.

But I was still on my journey. These were all wanderings, learning this and that, experiencing various adventures, challenges and victories, but the grades and diplomas were not the end of the journey, just proof of my travels.

When I entered the Unitarian Universalist ministry, I thought I had arrived, but soon found I had much more to learn. There were challenges and troubles everywhere I went. I served a one-year interim with a church that was deeply conflicted. I served as assistant minister for two years under a senior minister who disliked me intensely. And then I was called to serve a church in Indianapolis, Indiana.

It felt as though this was my home, the safe harbor at the end of my spiritual journey, but this, too, turned out to be an illusion. Significant numbers of its members took a dislike to me and agitated for my removal. Incredulous, unable to believe that I was that unlikable, I stayed, sure that things could be resolved. But after four years of deepening conflict I was sent packing. Once again, my ship had broken up on the rocks of a failed journey.

Then I developed a severe case of pericarditis, a life-threatening inflammation of the lining of the heart. I spent weeks and months motionless, lacking the energy even to assemble my personality into a cohesive entity, much less function in the world.

But a strange thing happened. When I stopped doing, I mean really stopped trying to do or achieve anything at all, either within myself or in the world, when all I could do was watch thoughts, feelings, and memories bubble up from the darkened swamp of my consciousness, something else emerged: me. But it was a Self I did not recognize. I recalled a lyric I'd written long ago, "You know how to do you too well." When I gave up trying to create myself, name myself, or

even claim myself, it created a space where my true Self could emerge. Little by little, step by step, my life changed from then. The homeward voyage had begun.

I realized that the hero's journey, whether in myth or religious tradition, always entailed death and rebirth, loss and resurrection. Even with my many profound lessons and losses, I hadn't let go of my self, I couldn't let myself trust that a deeper Self would emerge.

I had begun my voyage with a profound spiritual gift. My illness taught me that all security is temporary; that suffering and death are inevitable. Since that time, death has been my teacher and ally, sitting on my shoulder, reminding me always to be ready to let go. But when I was battling cancer, even when I was meditating and preparing for death, it was always MY death.

When I lost my family, it was MY loss.

When I lost my business, it was MY loss again.

When I began my studies for a new career, it was MY career. When I began the ministry, it was MY ministry. When I was called to a church, it was MY church. Every time I moved out of my comfort zone, I took ME with me.

As Richard Rohr pointed out, the two halves of life require two different approaches. In the first half, we properly concern ourselves with issues of identity, security, and gender. But there's a tendency to accept those issues as the only ones there are. Our culture certainly supports this mistaken belief. But unless we move beyond these foundational concerns, we never fully mature, we cannot complete the hero's journey. Once we've built a sturdy container of self, it's up to us to consider what the contents might be, what use we might be to the world.

This is the gift that age can offer if we're ready to accept it. Rohr calls the small, defensive, self the loyal soldier. We need that loyal soldier to protect us in the first half of life, but we also need to thank that soldier and let him retire so that our true Self can emerge. I am frequently overwhelmed with gratitude that I lived long enough for this to happen.

Rohr says that the two most effective barriers against moving out of the first half of life into the second are wealth and religious belief, because both riches and religious dogma give us the certainty that there's nothing we need to

change because everything's already taken care of. But secular intellectual certainty can be just as effective a barrier to change. Only those who are willing to enter into the radical unknown beyond boundaries of the self can discover the profound depths of strength, joy, and wisdom that lie hidden within. This is the point where ideas like "God" begin to actually make sense. Whatever the name, there really is something there.

But we can only find it if we let go of who we think we are. As my lyric said, "You know how to do you too well." If we can stand aside from the busy-ness of being ourselves we can create an emptiness into which the healing richness of mystery beyond understanding can flow without resistance.

Carl Jung said that there was little point in doing serious psychotherapy until a person was at least 42 years old, because people aren't ready before that. They're preoccupied with the first half of life. But he also said that "One cannot live in the afternoon of life according to the program of life's morning – for what was great in the morning will be little at evening, and what in the morning was true will at the evening have become a lie . . . What is a normal goal to a young person becomes a neurotic hindrance in old age."

I invite you to join me, wherever you are on your journey, in finding the means to do the amazingly risky and rewarding work of letting go of yourself without being the one doing the letting go. I think this is what is meant by the Taoist term, "wei wu wei," or action without action, or effortless doing. This is the true hero's journey, the most magical and rewarding journey there is. Come, grow old along with me! The best is yet to be.

May it be so.