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I Thought
He Was
Dead

Ralph Benmergui
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Stents,
Radiation
and the
Dawn
of
Mortality

A Leaf Falls

It was 5:15 a.m. and the dead of winter. As usual I had dressed in the dark, tiptoed downstairs and was on my way to work as a jazz radio morning show host. I opened the front door and as the first blast of winter air filled my lungs, I felt what I can best describe as a clutching scream of sorrow in my chest. Was this anxiety? I had had anxiety attacks in my early twenties. Now, at fifty-four, was this an encore?

I had been through a divorce, remarried, and now had two teenagers half the time along with two more boys under three tucked away upstairs. I took a second breath, and again felt that clutch at my throat, my chest and my upper back. I thought about turning around and going right back into the warmth of my house, but when you host a daily morning show you can't just call at the last minute and tell them you're not quite up to it today. If you do, the last question you'll be asked is whether you're all right. I went to work.

As the days passed, I felt as if my batteries were wearing out. I was tired, profoundly tired. Eventually I went to see my doctor. A note on his door said the office was temporarily closed. I groaned. Now I had to go to the walk-in clinic. I didn't have time for this crap. Still, I went.

Strange thing about doctors. You're supposed to be on time, they're supposed to listen to every patient, and in the end, you sit and wait, wondering what the person sitting across from you in the reception area has. Eventually you are called, but only so that you can wait even longer. This time alone, surrounded by anatomy charts and tongue depressors. Finally, the wait is over, the doctor enters.

This practitioner was cold, aloof. He held himself in a way that said, ignore this clinic, I'm better than this. He stared at his sheet and asked what brought me in. "Well," I replied, "my doctor doesn't seem to be around so I came here."

"Who is your doctor?" He asked. I told him the name. "Oh, him. He's dead."

I was shocked, both at the news and at how remarkably insensitive this man had been in telling me. I liked my now dead doctor; he was a kind, casual practitioner. He would enter the waiting room with a flourish and call your name with a "Come on Down" sense of event. His office was piled high with papers, the walls covered with golf memorabilia he had collected through all those afternoons when he closed the office early and hit the greens. He usually had a Diet Coke in hand. I found out later, by returning to his office and speaking to his loyal and loving receptionist, that he had died alone on his couch from insulin shock. Turns out he was severely diabetic.

Deeply distracted, I sat staring at this other form of healer, the kind that, for whatever reason, seems to leave their heart outside the examination room. I proceeded to tell him about my chest pains.

"Does cold air affect you more?"

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“Yes, it does.” I replied.

“Are you running out of breath after climbing stairs?”

Much as I didn’t want to admit it, that too was correct.

“You’re describing angina,” he said. “I can’t help you. But I can refer you to a cardiologist.”

I thanked him and left. My doctor was dead, I was in trouble, and life, my life, was changing. It all seemed so fragile. I walked up the street and back to my house, my family, my job.

The cardiologist was kind. I sensed that he knew me from my work on radio, something that I find often leads to a certain generosity that most patients don’t benefit from. It was a way of saying thank you for keeping me company, if only as a disembodied voice.

With the niceties out of the way the diagnostics began. The progression of the symptoms was, by the look on his face, profound. I failed the stress test. I failed most of the tests. I had begun the journey across the bridge from a person of interest, as they say in the crime world, to prime suspect in the case. Meanwhile I stayed on the air doing my morning shift from six to ten every morning, five days a week. I was unhappy and scared. It seemed like I was living someone else’s life. How could this be? I had just started a second family and now I was letting everybody down.

Like most men I know, I had been raised to provide, to satisfy the primal imperative as an urbanized hunter-gatherer – granted, a very winded hunter-gatherer. Finally, after excusing myself from almost all my household chores and lying on the couch trying to keep my breathing shallow so as not to rouse the angina beast, my wife had had enough. She was scared, and that fear came out as anger.

I felt I knew what she was thinking: “How could you do this to me, leave me with these children to raise? I should have known. What was I thinking, marrying an old(er) man?” She took me to the hospital

where my cardiologist checked my vitals and pronounced, “You have to go to a hospital, across town, right now. They will be waiting for you. You’re getting an angiogram so that they can look inside and see what’s happening.” I gathered up my car keys, looking into the very worried eyes of my wife, who couldn’t decide whether to comfort me or give me a stern lecture about taking lousy care of myself. The doctor, seeing the keys in my hand, stopped me as I shuffled towards the door.

“You’re not thinking of driving, are you?”

“Yes,” I muttered. “It’s the only time the pain goes away.”

“If you insist on driving I’m going to have to call the police.” He turned to my wife, “Under no circumstances is he to drive.” She took my keys.

Three hours later I was on a table, catheter inserted through my wrist straight in to my heart with an inky dye being injected into clogged arteries. I was awake and watching the screen. The blockages were clear to see. The doctor made that sound that contractors make when renovating your kitchen. You know where they cut out a piece of drywall and look at your electrical wiring and go, “Oooh, no, yeah, mmm.” At this point he left.

A second doctor appeared. This one, I was told, was proficient in the art of passing drug-alluded stents, little tubes really, through my body and lodging them in place so that the plaque filled damn could burst. When he achieved that small miracle, the arterial tree that runs through my heart came back to full flower. I felt the pressure build in my chest and then, relief. It was over. I was told that both arteries were 95 percent blocked. One, the LAD, or the “widow maker” as they call it, was within days, if not hours, of bringing on a massive heart attack.

At that moment my world view began to change. I went from what others described as a young fifty-ish broadcast personality to a

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man with heart disease, two chaotic teenagers and two little boys. This was my first inkling that life, indeed, is not a rehearsal. It ended my delusion that death was something that other people did. It ended my self-sustaining myth that I was in no way finished with what I had to do here, and because of that my number, quite simply, could not be up.

It's quite spectacular, really, how we can wake up every morning and convince ourselves that others may die, indeed will die, but that we are not part of the conversation. If you ask me, I'll say, well of course I'll die. But deep down, I feel that if I carry that cold hard stone around with me in any real way, then meaning and purpose will fade away.

All these existential thoughts, lovely as they may be, were rudely interrupted when the stents that had been working fine, at least for the first six months, started acting up. I had a re-stenosis, as they call it, where the artery for the crucial one, the widow maker, had over-healed, building a new blockage. It was back to the hospital where a third stent was inserted.

During the next while, I found myself in a rehab centre as part of the healing regimen offered by the hospital. I was suddenly surrounded by dozens of people who had heart disease. At least half also had diabetes. I started the program with a stress test, where you walk on a treadmill with a plastic mask strapped to your head and a tube between your teeth attached to a monitoring device of some kind. I stood there on a treadmill feeling awkward, like I was on a space station a la Stanley Kubrick's classic film *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

I was snapped back to earth by the cardiologist who had positioned herself in front of a bank of machines and asked without looking up, "Before we begin, any questions?"

"Yes." I lifted the mask from my mouth. "Why me? I mean, no offense, but I don't look like any of those men in the waiting room. They're big and old and tired looking."

Her back was still to me as she checked on the machines I was attached to. “Tell me about your family heart history.” She said.

I began to rattle off all the cardiac ‘events’ in my family history – the list was impressive – heart attack, stroke, bypass, angina. She stopped me somewhere in the middle of this depressing litany of broken hearts.

“It’s mostly genetic,” she told me. I was immediately comforted. In fact, I was downright brimming with a newfound arrogance. This had nothing to do with getting older, or years of stress, smoke and ambition. This was fated, and there was little to learn from it. It was in my genes, I thought, as if my genes belonged to some other fool, not me.

Part of the vulnerability that comes before a diagnosis is some portion of guilt. What did I do? What didn’t I do? Sometimes when sharing news with friends about someone’s grave illness or death there emerges a stream of conversation that revolves around what they, the afflicted one, did wrong. Implied in that is the idea that we deserve our fate. I drank, I smoked, I definitely ate too much pizza. If I had just done it ‘right’ I wouldn’t have failed. I wouldn’t have to die.

The inference is that death is for others, that a moral and good life, including apparently a rather healthy portion of dark green leafy produce, will save me from this end. Regardless of the facts, and they are irrefutable, we dance into the night sure that if we just get the foot work right the sun will rise yet again.

Having just become a man with little drug coated tubes in my arteries, it was incumbent on me to not fail. I had to eat right, take lots of daily meds, and above all, keep moving. Hell, they even wanted me to jog. When I see people jogging, I find it annoying. Especially the ones that carry on a full conversation with their running partner as they motor along as if to say, I’m not even winded. Gasping is for wimps. Me, I’m good for another 7K. “Now as I was saying . . .”

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So in spite of my rehab coach's best intentions, I knew this jogging thing wasn't in the cards. We settled on a gentler path, walking, quickly, and a lot. At first, we did this on an indoor track at the rehab facility. I started out doing inner fist pumps as I lapped my fellow walkers. Eventually I realized the ridiculousness of my achievement unclenched my inner fist and just concentrated on getting my times down, my humility up and my heart rate steady.

What Doesn't Kill Ya

So here I was, a fifty-four-year-old man with heart disease. I can't deny that I felt a certain sadness when I began to process what I had just been through. It was as if Death itself had suddenly and without warning given me a little shake, saying, "Hi there, just checking in with you. That could have been it, you know. If I hadn't tipped you off with the angina thing you would have been another one of those guys who just does a face plant on the sidewalk on an otherwise lovely day. You'd have been mine before you hit the ground."

Odd as it may sound there is something comforting in that face plant thing, really. No long slow battle with some hideous ailment, no burden to family and friends, and most importantly, no suffering. That is what we fear most. The suffering. But, as concentration camp survivor Dr. Viktor Frankl said: "If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an

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ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death, human life cannot be complete.”

If that is true, then why do we compound our suffering by taking such great efforts to avoid it? Are we so driven to seek pleasure that we can learn nothing from our pain? I have always thought that the only real teacher in my life has been pain. What pushes me forward is not the desire driven moments of escape and fleeting euphoria – those moments are small, sweet fruits. It is the pain – if I bring myself in to relationship with it, breathe through it and turn the anxious fear into some ability to be available to it – that sears, scars and focuses me. When I am wounded, I’m given the opportunity to tend to that wound and in the caring bring forth a loving attitude towards myself and an unfolding compassion for others.

Stephen Jenkinson, the author of *Die Wise*, spent decades in palliative care, or as he calls it, the death industry. He sees suffering as a product of our wanting, and the pain we feel when relief is denied. “Suffering . . . comes from an unwillingness in this culture to recognize how on the take we have been through the entire course of our lives, how willing and able we are to wring from the world all we desire and require from it, as if it is the reason the world is here at all.”

Jenkinson sees the bitterness some encounter as they enter in to their dying this way: “So many people I have work with died with the grudge of being owed something by life that they now won’t live to collect on. Their deaths were a theft and a betrayal.”

In thinking of my own demise I sometimes get the nagging feeling that I will waste my last breath’s feeling hard done by. Feeling really sorry for myself. Why me? I wasn’t finished. I have things I want to say, do, feel. There have to be a lot more awful people who should go before me. But let’s not get ahead of ourselves.

*

For now, there was something strangely comforting in identifying myself as someone with heart disease. Perhaps I could jump the bitter last days queue. Just go about my business and then, just drop. A clutch of the left arm, heart attack and . . . out. But I still needed time to digest all this new and not so wonderful information. I felt quite secretive about my new condition. I only told certain people and I certainly wasn't going online to share my trials and tribulations with 'friends' and 'followers'. That would signal that I was headed for the sidelines, moving to the back of the sidewalk as the parade passed by. I had already had a taste of that in my forties with back surgery. I had been stricken with sciatic pain, a powerful searing pain like a toothache that travels from the lower spine, down the back of the leg, and into the foot. While I suffered from this, I was still walking to the nearest transit stop and slowly making my way to the CBC broadcast studios; there I had to stand on set and host a one-hour town-hall talk show, five days a week. I walked to the train very slowly as people thirty years older breezed past me. Every step was excruciating.

Through that pain I gained humility. I had typically ignored stories about people with lasting injuries, but now I cried to think of these poor people who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, often described in newscasts as having sustained serious but non-life threatening injuries. Perhaps they were looking left when that car, approaching from the right, came out of nowhere and changed their lives forever. My heart went out to them as I started to get an inkling of how so many people suffer, chronically and without respite.

You see, every passing malady confronts the false sense of entitlement we all have that author Stephen Jenkinson speaks about in *Die Wise*. We wrap ourselves in the nostalgic fog of the ego, the urge to

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stay the same, forever and for always. Our hair never turns grey; our clothes stay tight to the body. We yearn not for wisdom, but for a kind of vitality that reassures us that we still have utility, someone will need us, pay us, hear us. Read, Tom Cruise or Jennifer Anniston in their fifties, grabbing you by the voyeuristic eyeballs. Challenging you to think of them as anything other than sexy twenty-six-year-olds.

In a world where so much is commodified, we become a demographic, in this case one that apparently ambles to the drugstore for the seniors' discounts. Or, if the fifty-five-plus magazines are to be believed, we spend our days travelling the world, hang gliding into our late seventies and getting a little 'work' done on our appearance. We must prove that we are still vital, active, and – most importantly – buying stuff. When you're thirty-seven, you still have at least four more car purchases ahead of you. By sixty-seven, you're looking for a vehicle that has some lumbar support and, the good lord willing, heated seats.

So I've had my brush with mortality, my wake up call. But let's tap on the brakes here. I was still in my mid-fifties, with a second family, including two new boys under four. I had been blessed through my working life with many meaningful opportunities. Still, I was feeling the need to retreat from parts of that life.

I had been a broadcaster and a public figure for a long time and some of it had been hard for me. I was aware when someone would walk by and whisper my name, impressed not necessarily by me, but by the fact that I was from the land of television. I, like many of my colleagues, always felt a bit awkward about that. Sometimes a person would stand in front of me, looking me over like a department store mannequin and say to their friend, "Do you know this guy? Wait, don't tell me your name. You're on TV. It's one of those funny names, Brent, Brent something."

"No Ben! It's Ben something," her friend would pipe in. I have

to tell you these folks must be angels sent down to poke your ego in the eye. If so, good job. It works. Yet, I had seen so much beauty, interviewed so many fascinating people, and reaped the comforting rewards that come with being a public person in Canada. But now, with what I had been through a door had been opened – this door had been open before in my life, I just hadn't walked through it. The lessons of life can only be heard when we are ready to listen.

Goodbye, Papa

I remember the day, in my early thirties, when I got the call that my entire family had been anticipating. After three years of major and minor strokes, my father was in the hospital again. I had gone to visit him the day before and looked at him lying there, curled up on the gurney. My father was now so much smaller than I wanted to remember him as. He could no longer form words, but upon seeing my two young boys, one, just a year old, crawling on the bed beside him, he managed a small soft sound and a weak smile.

He was leaving us, but I had no ability to sit with that. I had never really appreciated my father. I wanted him to be tougher. To fight back at all the ignorance and condescension he had lived with as a nursing assistant, shuttling people to another floor of the hospital for X-rays. Cleaning up after them. Enduring constant “Where are you from?” questions because of the darker colour of his skin and his obvious

Spanish accent. I wanted him to stand up to my mother when she got mad. But that was not his way. He preferred to avoid confrontations.

On the way home that day my first wife gently said, “He’s not long for this world. He’s going.” I shrugged it off. I had often claimed that I was okay with death and sometimes encouraged people to appreciate the trail of love that so many of us leave behind instead of dwell on their passing. But this time I didn’t want to hear what I had been professing. The next night, late in the evening, the phone rang. I answered, and a member of the hospital staff told me that my father had just died. Not like the storybook says, with his loving family around him, but alone, in a hospital room, in the dark.

It’s wonderfully strange what we remember sometimes. Of all the time we had together, I found myself plucking out this one moment. I was five, and we lived in social housing in a place called Regent Park in the east end of Toronto. For the record, no good comes of grouping together people who are either newly arrived or generationally poor, and mixing in a good dollop of stigma and hopelessness. The result is a toxic social stew. Luckily, as social planning goes the ideas that spawned that particular experiment have mostly faded away. Nonetheless, there we were in the middle of this really bad idea, trying to get by and get out.

Coming from Morocco, the game of hockey was not in our cultural wheelhouse. One day I was standing with my father outside of our cream-coloured townhouse and he gave me something. Now my father, like me, was no handyman, but he had nailed together a wooden shaft and blade that resembled a hockey stick. I don’t remember how long that stick lasted but the gift stays in my heart. This man, lost in a new world where all the rules had been changed, had found some wood and made me a stick, so that I could fit in even though he could not. I can only imagine that he had seen other kids playing hockey and

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perhaps me standing there, his youngest, just watching. Now, thirty years later, that act of kindness percolated up in my heart.

My father was a good man, and I have always regretted not having spent the kind of time with him that he truly deserved, but I did absorb some of his wisdom. He always taught me that each person is to be taken as they are. No, not every Italian is over-the-top passionate, not all Jewish people are good just because they are Jewish; we are people, and the thing to do is pay attention to the person right in front of you.

If you ask a deeply diverse group of people to move to another part of the room if they think of themselves as shy, or the youngest, or the class clown, all their preconceived barriers dissolve. They did that once, on a Nordic television program, and it brought tears to my eyes. These people all assumed that they were of a certain group, as it were, truckers, academics, artists, lefties, righties, but once you ask them to rearrange their identities not according to their professions, skin colour or country of origin, but instead to stand together if they were stepfathers, or take daily medication, or if they had been the class clown they became what we really are: human beings. My father believed in that, even though he identified strongly as Jewish, Moroccan, and Spanish, in that order. He knew we were above all human.

This was not a wisdom that was shared equally in my community growing up. Instead, there was a defensive kind of exceptionalism. The hollow assertion that we were just better, better than the horrible things they had done and said to us for millennia. Our mothers cooked better food, our religious services were more meaningful and appropriate. Luckily, for me, these messages missed their mark.

I still long for my dad and as the father of four children, two now well in to adulthood, and two still quite young, I often try to bargain with God so that I can have enough time to watch them all grow into men. The negotiations go something like this, “God, if you let me

stay for another twenty years, I can make sure that they're okay. I'll settle for fifteen, but twenty would be nice, keep in me in good health till then." But in truth I don't believe in a transactional God who grants wishes. That's a Santa Claus God. Keeper of the naughty or nice list as he sits on a great chair with his long white beard. I'm just trying to say that wanting a long life isn't really about me, it's about my boys, my grandchildren, my wife, those that I love so deeply.

As I wrote these reflections on my father I received a shock. A dear soul, with a warm and loving way, died suddenly. He was a man in his forties who had a smile for everyone and a deep generosity. He had a caring and loving wife and a little girl. He, by his own admission, was out of shape, but he wanted to change that. One night while he was out running, his heart seized up. He had a massive heart attack and died later in hospital. Just like that. In the middle of his life. With a little girl waiting at home.

At times like this it can seem that our lives are part of some cosmic mockery. A cursory glance at his social media profile feels like an exercise in futility. Marketing: Developing and executing marketing and communication strategies that deliver results. Specialties: Experiential Marketing, Social Media Strategy and Execution, Search Engine Optimization, PR and Strategic Communications.

Who needs all these skills if it is all for naught? "Here, have a life, for a little while, oh and by the way, I'll take it whenever, for no great reason and regardless of your best, or worst for that matter, intentions." There is no logic which we can hang our threads of hope on.

"Hey, what the hell did he do to deserve this?"

He was a good man, a young man with a loving child and wife.

He was a servant of the community. What'd you kill him for? There are plenty of better candidates for the injustice of an early death."

But what if we let go and find a different lens through which we

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can see our demise? As Stephen Jenkinson writes in *Die Wise*: “Life, as I said earlier is not “the human life span.” Life is by every measure is a bigger thing, a more devout and devotion inspiring thing, a truer thing, than the human life span. Life is that which the human life span, for a while, partakes. Jenkinson continues:

“Our secular humanist religions will not tolerate it, but let us be humble on this point: Life is not a human thing, it is what gives us the opportunity to be human. It is not the stage upon which we play out our humanity or our lack of it, though merely players we surely are. It is the play. And the play’s the thing.”

This notion that our life is not ‘life’ itself but that the human moment is a shooting star of indeterminate luminosity does not sit well when news arrives that a decent, worthy fellow fell to the ground and died without closure. It seems cruel to talk of the eternity of the soul when the press of human flesh and that warmth it can bring have disappeared. Did I not fashion this life to make things better for others?

My father never had fulfilling work after he came to Canada. It was hard to see him put on good clothes every day, drive my mother to work, and then slip out of his suit and don the scrubs of an orderly. He was a proud man and this job was one of the few that he felt he could get in a new country, with four children to feed. He did try, he made a brief escape into the world of property management. Aced the test, found a job. Then the company went under and no one else was willing to give a man in his fifties another chance. But, truth be told he wasn’t much of risk taker. He returned to the work he knew, where, as a union man, he earned a decent wage. Once again he fell in to the daily routine arriving at work, changing into hospital-issued greens and helping patients as best he could. He found his solace in other places, in Synagogue and community life. He served once as synagogue president, and always took the same seat for services in

the sanctuary. There he had comfort and found a measure of dignity.

I was able to attend my father's retirement party at the hospital where he worked. His co-workers and a few of his family were in attendance. I was visiting from Winnipeg where I then lived, and I stayed with my mother-in-law in suburban Toronto. That night, after the retirement party, I got a phone call. My father had suffered a massive stroke.

I rushed to the hospital. I'm still not quite sure if he had died and was resuscitated, but I knew that he would never be the same again. His official retirement was three days away. He would be confined to a wheelchair for three years till his passing. His bags were packed for a journey with my mother to see relatives in Venezuela, instead he embarked on a journey into debilitation and decline. In essence my father never got to grow old, to walk in to the forest of his life, as the Hindus say. So one night, three years after his retirement, I got the call. He was dead.

No great cry left my throat. This wasn't the movies and the grief would manifest slowly over many years, catching me by surprise when it did. That night I quietly got dressed and headed to the hospital alone to wait for the Jewish community's burial society members to arrive. My brothers lived out of town. My sister would follow later. I entered the room and saw my father there.

I went up to him and stroked his forehead. Some parts of him were warm, some, like his hands, had already gone cold. Then I looked into his eyes. They had gone from clear to hooded and a milky white residue was forming. I had never seen a dead person before. We hide the dead in our culture until we can dress them up in some strange mockery of life. When I looked into those eyes I realized that my father was no longer there. Where he was I could never pretend to explain or know. Simply, I was looking at a shell, what Ram Dass calls

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a “spacesuit” that we are given to inhabit this life, this exploration.

I came to two realizations through this experience. One, that mystery deserves a place of honour in our lives. Not all is rational and, sad as it may be, the result of not respecting that path is that we are reduced to a collection of body parts that are inventoried and maintained like some mid-sized sedan. And two, that essence, that spark that animates our lives, was no longer behind those eyes. His soul had departed, only the body remained and that would now begin to dissolve.

I believed strongly at that moment and from then on that we have souls. It is the universal embodied in the particular. Our soul connects us to each other and our soul’s work is the task of our lifetimes. To refine the soul is to deepen the meaning and connection that our everyday lives present to us. Good deeds make our souls shine brighter.

Our sense of self-worth, however, cannot be content with these answers. In his book *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker writes:

“Against the encroachment of nothingness, we fill our lives with stuff. Against the ultimate negation, we strive for success. Against the hard information that we came from nothing and end there as well, against the resulting suspicion that we might, in fact, be nothing all the while, we struggle mightily to construct identity, but we’re never quite persuaded by it. Some deep instinct keeps whispering to us that it isn’t real, and the walls keep falling down, and the city finally collapses, and the identity we have been laboring so desperately to shore up collapses along with it.”

This life is fragile; this life is not a rehearsal. What my father had spent a life waiting for, what so many of us wait for, is release from who we think we must be. What we lose so often is who we really are.

The Palace of Loneliness

Years ago a close friend of mine embarked on a pilgrimage. He went to the small town in Sicily where his parents were from. One morning, as he sat at a local café, luxuriating in the island sunshine and sipping an espresso, he saw the child of one of his cousins, who still lived in the town, walking down the narrow ancient street. The child saw an old man sitting in front of his apartment. The boy stopped, not just to say hello but to talk. They stayed that way chatting back and forth for a good ten minutes before the boy took his leave, tossing a *ciao* over his shoulder at the smiling gentlemen. My friend was struck by what he witnessed. Mostly because he had never seen it play out organically back home. We, I think, have lost so much.

For many, aging is accompanied by the terrifying notion of being warehoused, pining for a visit not from someone paid to be near you but someone you love. I came face to face with this when I had to fulfil

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chaplancy hours while I completed my training in Hashpa'ah, Jewish Spiritual Direction, a path in the area of rabbinical studies. I could have worked these hours at a local hospital or even a hospice centre if they would have me, but I chose a local, mostly Jewish, retirement home. I looked forward to the experience, I felt I had a chance to be useful to people in their late sixties, seventies and beyond. The facility was well maintained and the staff seemed content. My job was to knock at people's doors as I went up and down the hall of the long term area, introduce myself and see if they wanted to have a chat. Easy, I thought.

Not so much.

I was terrified as I entered the rooms. These people had not asked to see me. They were often sitting quietly or with the TV going like an endless, soulless companion in the background. The loneliness that often filled these rooms was thick, sorrowful, and palpable. This was not the end result of a life of community and connection. This was much smaller than that.

As I walked through those doorways, I often felt that the people I was visiting allowed me in mostly because they had abdicated the private space that allows us to decide who comes and goes in our lives. Nurses, PSWs, specialists, orderlies with food trays. They came and went mostly devoid of love or malice.

As time went on I learned to sit with these elders as they unspooled bits of their lives. One day I entered the room of a man I had not met before. The walls were covered with pictures of family, his wife in a classic posed portrait that she must have sat for decades ago, the children and their offspring, mostly orthodox, as was obvious by their clothing, and as I looked around the crowded room I noticed many religious artifacts arranged around his sleeping area, almost like a moat in their positioning. His head was covered by a yarmulke, well worn, black and secured by hairpins, his back curved and his

gaze pointed downward. He had some difficulty moving his head from side to side. Sitting across the room from him in an oversized leatherette chair was a personal care worker, a small Filipino man, absentmindedly scrolling through his phone. As I entered he left.

The old man had obvious and severe tremors in his right hand which, occasionally, as we talked, shook violently. He was intrigued by my last name. “Benmergui. That’s a Sephardic name. Where are you from?” he said, his voice soft and quivering.

“I’m Moroccan,” I replied. I have grown accustomed to explaining my origins. It was clear with a last name like mine that I wasn’t from eastern Europe-Ashkenazi. The *Fiddler on the Roof* Jews, as I would sometimes call them when explaining the difference to non-Jewish friends.

Once we had established my Jewish credentials, we entered a different space. There was a deep sorrow that hung about this frail old man. As we spoke together it became clear that he was tortured by regret. His wife had died, he told me, and he felt responsible for her death. He hadn’t done enough to save her. He repeated that phrase several time and his voice became thick with emotion. Without saying it explicitly, I knew he was telling me that she had committed suicide. But what mattered most to me, as I sat with this man was that he was living his life in a crushing purgatory and did not feel that God was with him.

I asked him, “Where is God in all this?” Knowing that he was a religious man I was curious to see what he would say.

“God has turned his face away from me. He has abandoned me.” He blurted out as he began to cry, his breathing became laboured. His hand was shaking now, violently.

As the room darkened around us the care worker returned from his break. He looked at his client, then at me. Not knowing what

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had transpired, he returned to his seat. He did not comfort the man, but also did not interfere with our conversation. The space, I guess, seemed safe.

Slowly, after a few minutes, the old man's breathing returned to normal, and the sobbing subsided. We left the conversation about his wife, and he seemed lighter in a way to have unburdened himself. I'm not sure if he regularly purged these feelings of guilt and regret, but at least in this instance, he seemed relieved. I asked him who the people were on the wall. His sons, their families. The sons, he said, would visit on alternating weekends. In between it was apparent he would sit in a chair beside his bed, looking down, saying little. He was surrounded by a life once lived, waiting for the end. Was every day like this? No – I did see him several more times and he seemed less pained. But that first encounter will stay with me forever.

When you ask some people if they have any regrets, they say no. I don't believe them. To have no regrets is not to have felt your life. We are painfully imperfect. Regret is the child of effort gone wrong. My fear, and the fear of many I have spoken to, is that we will be alone, left to stew in life's sauce with no one to rouse them to a better place. And I'm not talking the Tuesday Bingo kind of better place, but one that sees our worth as elders and values us. One that allows us to still be part of the greater community.

What's That on My Hand

To appreciate the gift of aging we have to let go of the idea that we are in control of our lives. I'm not saying that we have to lay down and let the wheels of life run us over. We have to bring to bear a well centered intention, *kavanah*, as we say in the Hebrew tradition, or to put it another way, free will, to the task of living skillfully. But we must not confuse that intentionality with control. I have always asked people to look back three years into their lives. Where were they physically, emotionally, and career-wise? Could they have correctly predicted where they are right now? I have never had anyone say that they could. Why then do we insist on fixing our gaze on a future that we clearly will not have?

Permanence is the root of our bedevilment. As we age we become aware of how little we are willing to let go: how we looked, how we worked, how we made love. Go down into the basement of

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your soul and see what lies there, unused and untouched. Look at all you've dragged from place to place, unexamined but firmly held.

As we journey into eldering, we send out sentries to clear the path of danger, decrepitude and disease. Every physical change, no matter how small becomes a mortal threat. The mole that seems to appear from nowhere, the slight tremor of a finger, the yearning to rest. Sometimes the signs are much more ominous.

It was about a year since I had become the new me, the one with little tubes inserted in my arteries, the one who took four pills every day, when something happened that changed the geography of my life yet again.

I had been put on powerful blood thinners. The cardiologist quoted a mega-study that strongly suggested that this protocol should last a lifetime. But I was bleeding, profusely, from my nose. At the time I was still a morning jazz show host. I was alone in the studio, it was the morning shift and there was no engineer as we were a small outfit. When the warm sensation hit me I would cup my hand under my nose with a hand full of Kleenex I kept beside the control board. Quickly I would line up a few songs – completely contrary to station policy, and something I seemed unable to refrain from at the best of times. Getting up I would rush to the bathroom and pinch hard, hoping to form a clot that would let me finish the shift.

I went to see an Ear Nose and Throat specialist. He enjoyed me on the air, he said, as he tried to look through the clots and congestion that had formed. "Can't see a thing," he said. "Don't know what's going on, but let's keep an eye on things." I left with nothing. Hoping this was nothing. "Come back in four weeks," he instructed.

Two weeks later I woke up, looked in the mirror, and to my utter shock saw that the upper part of my nose had snapped upwards. The lower part, unsupported by its cartilage, was shrunken. What on earth was going on?

Immediately I felt a dull sense of terror, of sorrow. How could I reassure my wife? How could I even go out in public? I was disfigured. In one night, just one year after becoming a man with heart disease, this had happened. I can't remember how long it took to see the doctor again but when I walked in to his waiting room and sat down I was scared. He came out of his office, caught sight of me and before he could stop himself he blurted out a loud, "WHOA!" Unfortunately, the waiting room was not empty. People started to stare. Little did I realize that this was the beginning of people seeing me differently.

He composed himself and ushered me in to his office. "Your septum has collapsed. I don't do this kind of work. You have to see this man, he's one of the best." I did, and the new doctor, who I would grow to know well and respect, scheduled me for surgery to repair the damage . . . in five months. I figured if he thought I could wait five months then it was probably not that bad. I had switched jobs by then and was working in a crazed political environment, but this time I was not the one in the public spotlight. After years on radio and in television the persona and the public face that I had constructed was gone. No longer needed.

Now if I was subject to any public gawking it was to get a closer look at my disfigurement. One sunken nostril, the serious drop in the contour of my nose that I often masked by wearing my glasses lower than usual so as to cover the dip. By now my wife, who is sixteen years younger than me, only half joked that she had married a lemon. I felt the sting of that and know that I would have harboured some of the same feelings if the tables had been turned. Fortunately for me my wife is a woman of character and devotion.

The time for surgery came. Cartilage was taken from the tip of a rib and somehow placed in my nose to lift the bridge again. As I left the hospital, groggy from the general anesthetic, I saw the

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doctor sitting on a small ledge that held some tropical plants in the atrium off the main floor. I smiled weakly and sensed something in his return glance, something sad. But I had enough to think about with a heavily bandaged face and more than a hint of nausea from the anesthetic, so I continued on my way. My wife told me that they were sending off some tissue for biopsy. I tried to think nothing of it.

By then I, with the help of Dr. Google, had come up with my own diagnosis. Wenniger's Syndrome, I had decided, was my problem. It could be treated with a year-long course of Prednisone. Not great for the liver, but not the end of the earth either.

When I returned a week later to have the bandages removed it was obvious that the repair had only been partially successful. There, where my nose met my brow, was a sizeable dip. The graft had not adhered to my brow bone. The nostrils were no longer wide and the nose looked thin and weak. I was, in a word, disfigured. No longer able to see myself as handsome, no longer, I would soon find out, recognizable to people who had known me for a long time. Some would walk right by; others would give my altered visage a second glance thinking that they might know me from someplace, but then again, no.

A few days in to this new reality I received a phone call while walking in a garden outside of work. It was the doctor's office; my results were in and they were asking if I could come by to discuss them with the Doctor. Not a good sign.

My wife had a big night professionally just before the visit, something that would consume her life and her ability to be with me over the next few months. The next morning, we arrived together for the doctor's appointment. When I was called I asked if my wife could accompany me into the room. "Of course," came the much too quick reply.

The doctor came in visibly stressed and with a look of pity on his face. “I’m afraid I have some very bad news for you,” he said. “You have cancer.”

I had had many friends while I was still in my forties who had been diagnosed with one form or another of cancer, and none of them had survived. I had always wondered when, not if, that word would become a part of my life.

My wife burst in to tears. I did not

“What kind of cancer is it?” I asked quietly.

“It’s a squamous cell carcinoma,” he said.

I soldiered on “Is it malignant?”

“Yes.”

I processed this. “What’s the survival rate for this?”

I was reaching the limits of what he knew. He was not an oncologist, and it was apparent that as kind and skillful a surgeon as he was, this was not his area of expertise. “I don’t know for sure, but it appears to be quite high. I have booked you in to Princess Margaret Hospital next Tuesday to begin tests and diagnosis for a treatment plan.”

We got up to leave and I’m not sure why, but I had the presence of mind to say to him, “Thank you. I’m sorry you had to be the one to tell me.” I knew that this had been hard for him to do. Over the next few years we would continue to rebuild my nose to some facsimile of what it had been and we always shared a kind and respectful time together as I walked this sad and gifted path.

I went home. My wife stayed downstairs and I remember going up to our bedroom and just lying on the bed as slow ripples of despair moved through me. I had always thought of death as a rude intrusion. “*I wasn’t finished yet. What the hell are you doing this to me for?*” A year before I had cheated death, but now, so soon afterwards, I was not placing any bets.

My first thoughts were that I was going to let down all my children,

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all four of my boys. I wasn't going to fulfill my sacred obligation to be the imperfect chaperone. My older boys were in their twenties; I took some comfort in that. But my little ones were just five and two. I willed up later when I saw the littlest one. He would not even remember me, I thought. I will be someone that his mother tells the occasional story about. It was better that way. Perhaps in not cleaving to me, without us sharing the joy and disappointment that comes with being father and son, he would look kindly on me. Being gone could mean being thought of not as flesh and blood, but as a soft and comforting manifestation of love. After all, isn't love all that we have to pass on?

The most powerful emotion in those early days was a solid kind of sadness. It did not seem fair that I had helped to usher him in to this world only to abandon him now. The first noble truth of Buddhism states that life is inherently unsatisfactory. The second says that we suffer because we live in an almost constant state of desire. My desire was to live, to not be rudely interrupted like my colleague who one day went out for a run and simply never returned. Felled by a heart attack and dead within a day. Living was not my right, but my desire, and holding to this narrative was not just a wish but my just reward.

In the next few days the tests began. I lay on the MRI table being prepped – or was it the CT scan? It all seemed to the same to me now. I looked around at the technicians behind the exam room door. These people had seen thousands of patients like me, patients who had heard those same dreaded words. *You have cancer.*

They proved to be a kind and gentle group. I had not become patient #3574683. While I lay on the table, two technicians arrived with what appeared, from my limited vantage point, to be a large sheet of bone coloured plastic mesh. “We’re going to put this over your chest, neck, and head. It will feel a little warm. It’s to create a mask that we’ll place on you later to keep your head still for some

of the procedures.” They applied the mesh and smoothed it over my upper body and head. Gently they pressed down on the contours of my face. I lay there perfectly still, feeling the cooling water trickle down my face and neck as they fashioned this strange shroud. I was a man with cancer and this felt very much like a death mask.

I still have the mask in my garage. It’s rather ghoulish looking with two hollow eye sockets and a hole for my mouth – it looks like something out of a John Carpenter horror flick, but it’s mine. I earned it and it’s staying with me.

Once it hardened enough they removed it and the scans continued. If you’ve ever endured an MRI you know that it is a unique and, for some, terrifying experience.

I found it strangely musical. Being a fan of the ambient compositions of Brian Eno and his ilk I lay there listening to the alternating tones and pneumatic pounding of the machine not quite relaxing, but at the least, intrigued. I had to lie perfectly still. I was told when to breathe and when to hold my breath. If I moved too much, they said over the intercom, they would have to start all over again.

For the next two weeks I waited for the results. I had no idea whether I would hear that the progression of my cancer was profound and my chances slim to none, or if some better news, perhaps a tentative thumbs-up, was in the cards. My suffering soul was betting on and desiring, as the Buddha says, more time. We often bargain for more time.

Stephen Jenkinson, who believes that we are death-phobic as a society, frames the situation that many cancer sufferers find themselves in this way: “Either you die . . . or you are killed. These are your choices: die or be killed. Either the cancer kills you or you battle the cancer and win and carry the stain of your vulnerability the rest of your shadowed days, or the cancerous broken heart kills you and

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the obituary they make for the you begins this way: ‘After a long and courageous battle . . .’”

Though I identify with the stain of vulnerability he speaks of, I did not and do not identify myself as a survivor. I am not cancer. I had *a* cancer. Cancer is not a single disease. There are many kinds and many shapes. Often enough people are cured, or their remission is profound. I asked my oncologist why we never hear about the curing and healing side of the cancer culture. He didn’t pause before answering. “You can’t raise money that way. It has to be a kill or be killed call to arms.” As a communications specialist I would say there’s truth to that.

I waited. My oldest son’s birthday and Father’s Day passed during those two weeks. We held a party for both at my ex-wife’s house. At one point she turned to my wife and said that if anything happened that they could all come and stay with her. All of them. I wanted to cry. We were touched by what she said. My wife was holding us all in her arms through this, my two youngest boys and the new family we had made. Now my first marriage was also bearing such sweet fruit.

I began to see the gift inside the cancer. I know it seems odd to call what can kill you a gift, but it was. Powerful emotions ran through me. Regret, yes some. I wished I had found a way to live in other cultures. I had grown disillusioned with our high capitalist and materially obsessed western experiment long ago. “Never got out of this town,” I thought. Isn’t it interesting what actually comes to mind in life’s more heightened moments?

I was in a state of limbo. My identity, the personality I had worked so hard to craft over the years, had been taken by the shoulders and shaken. We construct an identity and present ourselves, or the version of our selves we think will get us what we want in the world. Sometimes we smoke cigarettes so that we can look just a

little reckless, dangerous, dark. Or we buy a watch or a car that says to anyone who will listen that mine is a life of quality. It doesn't really matter what props we pick to bolster our construction, it is and can only be, a reproduction, a façade.

We always wonder what we will be able to muster when our 'call' comes. Will we cower in the corner, limp with fear? Or will we become gracious and noble as we greet the angel of death? The days crawled slowly by as I waited for the results. Every time I sat to read to my little ones, I felt a surge of feeling course through me that almost burst the dam I had constructed. I didn't want to scare them. They couldn't possibly understand that I might be leaving them soon.

The Friday before my oncologist's appointment, I was on stage with three performers who were sharing their stories of struggles with mental illness. I had devised a theatrical format I called Seriously Funny where serious issues and the performers' serious stories could be interspersed with bursts of stand-up comedy. We would all talk seriously for a while about the topic at hand and then I would ask if anyone had a bit about that. One would get up and as they approached the microphone at centre stage the lighting would dim and a spotlight would hit them. The comedian would do a related bit, get some laughs and then return to their chair onstage to continue the conversation with me and the other story tellers. It was a powerful blending of serious and entertaining moments that showcased the strength of their craft and the heartache of their journeys. That day I had two of them on stage that I had known since I was a young performer myself.

I approached one of the comedians before we got on stage, a man not known at the time for his ability to relate to others. I told him that I had been diagnosed with cancer. He clearly had no idea what to do with that information. He shrugged and muttered some sort of acknowledgement that I had said something reasonably heavy. Later

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he talked on stage about being a heroin addict and then diagnosed as bipolar. A few years later he would discover that he had carried the Hepatitis C for years. He would need a new liver. He almost died then, but in that process you could see in his missives on Facebook that he had grown in his compassion and was humbled by the love and support that came his way. He returned to the stage then having had his mortality made clear and the gift of surviving worthy of deep gratitude. Unfortunately, he would succumb. He was a great comic and a deeply good and wounded man. His name was Mike MacDonald. But, that day as I told him what happened to me he was still in the company of those who watch others die.

When the show was over I left the stage and checked my cell phone. There was a message from my wife to call her right away. I did, though I didn't want to, fearful of the news. My oncologist had called while I was on stage, and he told my wife that though it was malignant, the cancer had not spread in to my lymph system. It was contained, but I would need a full course of radiation treatments.

He expected her to be relieved, but that is not her way. Eventually he said, "I'm trying to give you some good news." When she told me that part I chuckled a bit. My wife doesn't take good news very well.

A few days later we went to get a more thorough consultation. The oncologist said, "This isn't what's going to kill you. Something else will do that. This won't be fun, but it beats the alternative." I was, as you can imagine, relieved. He continued, "Every cancer has its own personality. Yours is a grumpy old man of a cancer. It moves nice and slow. You'll have thirty-two out of a possible thirty-five radiation sessions over a thirty-day period. You'll be here for a while every day except weekends. Your mouth will go dry, but I think we can save your salivary glands. Food will taste bad; you'll have to bulk up on protein drinks. Treatment starts in two days."

Part of me is quite practical. Though I am often the one that zooms out to thirty thousand feet when it comes to devising strategies, I can come down to earth quite quickly when the need arises. I was happy. I resolved right then that I would bring as much positive energy as I could to the radiation treatments, even though the doctor had made it clear that as the treatment progressed I would see a steep decline in energy and mobility.

The next day I was back to do some paperwork at what I now refer to as the Cancer Palace. Floor after floor of people who have one form or another of the diseases that make up the group of cell mutations that we call cancer. Blood cancers, bone, internal organ, and my assignment, head and neck. We came to respect that we all inhabit that space in such different ways. The medicines take their toll.

One friend who years earlier I had bumped in to in the X-ray department of another hospital described it well. I was there with one of my older sons because he separated his shoulder playing hockey, and my friend was there to take an X-ray of his foot. Turned out he had bone cancer. It was not a “grumpy old man of a cancer,” it was young and very aggressive. It would eventually take his life. Coincidentally, a few months later, I saw him on the same day that he was told that there was nothing more that could be done. I asked him how he felt having heard this final verdict. “Relieved, actually,” he calmly said. “It’s strange. First they cut you, then they burn you, then they poison you to try and kill the cancer. It’s quite medieval, if you think about it. All that can stop now.”

By then he had lost half his leg, yet there was something unexpectedly accepting in his voice that day. He was young enough that one might have expected more of a sense of outrage. Perhaps having looked in to the face of death he had found something different than you or I would expect to see. I never saw him again. I only heard

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of his passing. But when we met that day he was showing me what dying with dignity might look like. It is a process, not a moment.

Now, as my own treatment progressed there were many people I would sit beside who were facing their mortality. Some were bargaining for one more year, month, day. Others, like me, did not want to seem too relieved that our prognosis was good. That we were still making plans and suffering gladly through our treatment.

So there I sat, day after day, waiting for my dose of radiation. The mask that had been made just for me would be placed over my head and shoulders, each clip snapped in place around the perimeter of the slab as I lay on a cold table with a u-shaped headrest as my only comfort. My body secured, the technicians would leave the room so as not to be exposed to the radiation and a small series of buzzes and clicks were my only clues that the game was afoot.

I occasionally suffer from bouts of vertigo and lying with my head straight back is one of the triggers. Half way through my thirty-two sessions I had an attack. I began to wave my hands vigorously, something they could see on a camera mounted above me. They stopped the procedure and rushed in to the room. If you've never had vertigo, I can only describe it as falling and spinning at the same time while your body is in fact doing neither.

As soon as I felt the mask release, I began to try to get off the table. They shouted, stop! Stay still! Unbeknownst to me, the table was about seven feet in the air. That way, I realized in retrospect, the radiation gun could spin around me to shoot from many angles. I hadn't realized this in the numerous sessions I'd already gone through. They brought me down slowly and I was able to shake off the attack.

Up until that moment I had been a trooper. Now with vertigo, repeated bouts of nose bleeding brought on by the damage done to my septum, and a family busy with other important things to do, I

felt utterly alone. The words of my oncologist came back to me. “This isn’t going to kill you. Something else will, but not this.”

All around me, people were falling into two camps: those caught up in the to and fro of daily life, and those seated beside me in the palace of cancer coming to terms with the finite nature of our journey and the illusory sense of control that dissolves into farce when death comes calling. I would never look at life, my life and the ever-moving river of life, in the same way again.

I have often heard tell that what people reflect at these crucial moments is not achievement, but love. Who did I love, and who did I let in to my heart so that they could love me too? If that is the calculus, then at one point, with what urging, do we cross the bridge into the forest of the soul? The place where we can reflect and cultivate, collecting the harvest of wisdom that has been germinating throughout our lifetimes. These are thoughts and questions that we often feel we can think about on another day. I have been thinking about them and working with helping others to do the same ever since that time, on that table, in that hospital.

Eventually the radiation and the treatment regimen came to an end. I was given a bit of a peek under the hood every six months, then a once a year, and now I’m free to go about my business. I don’t think I’ve survived, struggled with or conquered cancer. I am not a cancer survivor in the modern parlance. What I am, however, is keenly aware of my mortality and the soul-work left undone. Eventually I changed jobs. Suffice to say that aging and working brings up a whole new set of issues.

We do so little to prepare for ourselves for aging, perhaps because the conversation can only lead us to something else we dread: the end, as they say. But what if you don’t believe that there is an end worth pondering? That we are just a series of biological functions.

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Electrical impulses firing off in a sequence that keeps us going, for a while. I have encountered many people who believe that we are quite simply born, live, and die with no rhyme nor reason. That there is nothing, “No mystery to this earthly puzzle, and that to think otherwise is merely to look for some shivering comfort in the face of a meaningless void” (Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*).

I literally came face to face with this as I looked in the mirror, post radiation. My nose was shrunken and malformed, my cheek bones an almost purple hue and my eyebrows bleached and mostly gone. Over the next few years I had more reconstruction of my nose and eventually my normal colour returned, but I will always look different. The person I was as I stood in front of television cameras as a host of variety and current affairs programs for Canada’s public broadcaster was gone.

The challenge was letting go of that ‘version’ of myself. As we age, we all go through physical transformations. We sometimes walk by those we have known for years and realize they no longer recognize us.

I remember discussing a procedure with my ear nose and throat doctor where he explained that he would take some cartilage from behind my ear to build up the bridge of my nose. I told him that the last two years had been a Buddhist meditation for me. Letting go of who I thought I was. Who I had been as a public person. It was my vanity, not my nose that was rising up to demand a better fate. I’m not sure that he, as someone who also ran a cosmetic surgery business, had heard too many patients speak this way, but I do think as a man he understood me very well.

I run workshops on ageing and saging now, an area I was drawn to during my studies in in Hashpa’ah, spiritual counseling, that build on the teachings of Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. I once had a woman say to the group that if she was ever confined to a wheelchair

that someone should put a bag over her head and shoot her. I was deeply affected by her words. I asked her why she felt that way. “Because,” she said sadly, “I won’t be me anymore.”

I thought about her response for a moment, then responded. “Yes you will. You’ll be you-in a wheelchair.” We all sat with that for a moment. The conversation stayed with me for a long time afterward.

That's Not the Way to Wash a Boy!

There are many ways to navigate the journey from child, to adult and finally to elder. Many ways to identify who we think we are and what we are doing as we strap on our metaphorical tap shoes, dancing as fast as we can through this life. Mostly I have relied on the fuel of ego. I don't just mean boastfulness or bluster, though they have had their fair share of stage time. No, I mean ego in the Eckhart Tolle, Advaita Vedanta, Hindu way. The construction of a narrative that I tell myself and others is Ralph Benmergui. Not Raphael but simply anglicized Ralph.

I bring up Tolle, *The Power of Now* bestseller because he has written well about our lack of is-ness. Being present in this very moment. Like most people I wake up every day and set about the work of adding on to the 'story' of Ralph. Who I have been and what will become of me. Past and future. Sometimes in an easy to digest diet of regret

and anxiety, sometimes in a much rosier scenario. But as Tolle and thousands of years of Hindu religion point out, the narrative of ‘I am Ralph’ is not real. It’s made up of foggy memories, revised scripts and fearful steps in to the darkness of a future that has not arrived.

All this to say that what follows is part of the story of Ralph but it is a collage not a verifiable account. It is of my making and may not resemble what others think ‘Ralph’ is. I am one of four children born to Rachel (nee Bengio) and Mair Benmergui. The ego has many ways of cementing our narrative in to convenient places. Immigrant, Jew, Sephardic Jew, Canadian, son, father, husband, comic, actor, writer, journalist, advisor, communicator. All in an effort to say I Am Ralph

We, our family of six, moved to Canada in 1957. As strange as it often sounds to me I was born in North Africa. At the most northwestern tip of the continent, Tangier. A place within sight of colonized Gibraltar and a ferry ride from Spain. I remember nothing of the city, my memories were constructed around photo albums filled with black and white images of another time and place then the one that waited for us here. Pictures of my mother with my two older brothers, born eight and nine years before me. My sister, three years older in a bathing suit at the beach. My mother, raven haired and buxom holding them within her lap.

My father was one of six children, five of them boys. There were shots of him and some of his brothers looking very European as they sat together, cheering on their favourite futbol team. There was one picture of him with a fighting cock. That’s right, a rooster armed with sharp blades attached to their long legs. The better to kill their opponent with. My father looked very proud, I was culturally confused. We had eight millimetre films of bullfights, some in Spain and some in the ring in Tangiers. In north Morocco before the Independence from France in the mid-fifties that was allowed though both Jewish and

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Muslim belief dictated that animals dying for sport was prohibited.

That independence by the way was the impetus of yet another moment of exile for us as Jews. I often say to people that for Jews every country is a rental. It may be a good one for a while, maybe even a long while, but it's a rental nonetheless.

I am the youngest of our family and was only two when we left. The flight, I'm told went from Tangiers to Shetland Ireland, then Newfoundland and finally Toronto. I was the only one who didn't vomit, so the story goes. A good start. We moved, a lot. Seven time in eight years. From right downtown to mid-town in the end. I remember some things. One that always stuck with me was walking with upside down chickens swinging beside me. They were being held, two in each hand by the man delivering them to the butcher shop up the street in Kensington market. He would park his truck across from our walk-up apartment above a store. The cages were made of wood and the bars were thin. I think the proper name is doweling. The chickens squawked, my mother pulled me along and her coat smelled of damp wool. The chickens, well they were doomed, that much I knew.

Immigrating is a high-wire act for most, for it was for me. Every day you leave your family, their language, food, religion, culture and identity and wander out in to the other space. The one that has its own code and format. Your parents often have an accent and you most often don't. Their English can be shaky, and you, a child, correct them.

Their credentials no longer apply. My father had, from what I understand, done much that had meaning and some share of status working at the Jewish hospital in Tangier, my mother was a nurse there. There, they met and married.

Here in Canada my father slipped on to a lower rung of the job ladder while my mother climbed to a better place. That was hard on this gentle, frustrated man. Or so the story in my head goes. We came

and then cousins, aunts, uncles and neighbours from back home followed. We rented a synagogue space downtown, we were making our way. The other Jews, the eastern European Ashkenazi Jews didn't give us a second thought. All except the JIAS, Jewish Immigrant Aids Service. They sponsored us, they helped us through, God love them. To give some perspective, Morocco had over a quarter of a million Jews, who for hundreds of years lived there with a relative peace, though a second class status. With the independence from France came waves of anti-Jewish feeling and today there are less than two thousand remaining Jews in that country. It's always a rental.

Meanwhile back in Canada we finally drifted into a three bedroom apartment on the last street on the west side of a very well off neighbourhood, Forest Hill. Lots of Ashkenazi Jews, lots of new money. Their lives were shaped by the intergenerational trauma of the Holocaust. We Moroccans had not experienced that murderous horror first hand, but to this day I am haunted by it. I cry, I shake inside and I wonder, not how God could have let this happen, but how we could have let this happen.

By now I was in grade three and I was getting very embarrassed. Every time we moved I would have to hear some new teacher mangle both my names. Rafee-il Benmengooey. Sheepishly I would raise my hand on day one, shirt done to the collar and pants hiked up, Urkel style. "Here . . ." I vowed to eradicate this shaming ritual as soon as I could. I noticed that there was a teacher in the school whose name was Miss Ralph. Scottish I believe. Now in my head I add a few layers to this part of the story, always have. I had noticed that in TV credits, TV being my portal to how to be like the white Christian nation we were surrounded by, there would occasional be some producer or writer named Ralph. Miss Ralph, TV Ralph's. Sold. I remember getting a quiz sheet and perhaps for the first time writing Ralph Benmergui at the

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top. Nobody had made me sell out. There was no Ellis Island customs clerk draining the ethnicity out of me, changing Schwartz to Smith. No I was the author of my own demise, and I regret it to this day. Once I became a public figure it seemed impossible to turn back, and it still does. I am in a cage of my own design.

Years passed and I taught myself to skate. Slithering around on my ankles till I was twelve. I played hockey in house leagues, even made the All Star Team that my friends were on. Me, a hockey player, made the school team too. My parents never came to see me. The space between their world and what was now mine grew bigger.

Something they did see me do was get on a stage and perform. From the beginning till now I have always been very comfortable on a stage and conversely uncomfortable as an audience member. Perhaps it is my tendency to be a know-it-all, or my competitive nature that gave me a little voice in my head that often says, "What are they doing up there, here give me that mic. You gotta be more like this." Forgive me for letting that little voice out but it is best I find to welcome all the parts of who you are in to the conversation.

I remember being in a play at the local Synagogue every year. This particular year someone already in the business, as it were, had written a parody of *Fiddler on the Roof* entitled *Gong on the Roof*. A show that clearly wouldn't be kosher in this age, and that's all the better. Nonetheless at the time it was 'acceptable'. Just before the night of our performance in front of four hundred people I had to go to the dentist. A trip I have made way too many times in my life. He froze my mouth, I kept asking for more freezing out of a well-founded terror of pain. By the time I got to the backstage I had lost the feeling in half my face. I remember peeking through the stage curtains to see if my dad was out there. He said he'd come. I scanned as best I could and just when I had surrendered to the reality that he was a

no show I gave one more cursory glance to the front row and there he was in his resplendent swarthy amidst all these ‘other’ Jews sitting, fidgeting with the thin paper program. Oh my God not only had he shown up he was going to be looking right up my nostrils. I don’t remember much else about that night except when the Writer/Director, a wonderful man named Alan Gordon, gave us notes at intermission. “Yes and Ralph, you’re doing great but could you please stop looking at the audience after every joke.” Good note.

One thing I should add that coloured everything about my childhood, well actually, two things.

First I was the kind of kid who had to look on the husky rack when my mother would take me to by the once every two years’ suit. Chunky, you could say. When they were splitting up boys in gym class for team sports they would make half of us shirts, and half skins. T shirts came off. I was mortified. If I was relegated to the skins team no good could come of it. I didn’t care who had a better team all I cared about was who had a better stomach. Kids are cruel. “Hey fatso, nice boobs.” Throughout school all the way till university I was the kind of boy that girls really liked-to talk to-about other boys. Boys that they really liked. Like a lot of heavier kids, I called the comedian in me out to keep everybody laughing. Keep everybody wanting me to be around, even if it was just to yuk it up. I was good at it to. I could make almost anybody, kid or adult laugh. I seemed to have this ability to read the room.

Every Sunday I would stay glued to the TV (black and white) watching *The Wonderful World of Disney*, *Bonanza* and the unbelievable, culture shifting, career launcher that was the *Ed Sullivan Show*. Years later I would tell network executive that I wanted to do what Ed did. Stand on stage in a suit (a tuxedo actually) and introduce an all Canadian Sullivanesque show once a week to celebrate Canadians.

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Jackie Mason flippin the bird at Ed and killing his career for a few decades, Alan King doing mother-in-law jokes, Stiller and Meara, and the Canadian comedy duo that made more appearance than any other act, Wayne and Shuster. I adored them. I wanted to be them. At school in grade four Mr. Parhboo let us put on a show every Friday in a class he called Topics if Interest. Me and a friend performed Wayne and Shuster sketches verbatim. It was great. Mr. Parhboo by the way also made me stand at the back of the class for the entire day once for forgetting, or not doing, an assignment. The result was that I became quite nauseous and deposited the contents of my lunch on the back of Susan, easily, the most beautiful girl in the class. Bad moment, but great fodder for future retelling in my efforts to get kids to pay attention to Ralphie.

The second part adds a dark piece to my self-portrait. I was a bed wetter. For a long time. Actually till the night before my Bar Mitzvah and never again. Sounds a bit like a Mordechai Richler character, but no, it was actually me. No sleepovers (unless we were related), no overnight camp and way too many interrupted sleeps for my poor mother. My brothers taunted me, but later I found out that they had suffered the same affliction. Something I would have appreciated knowing considering how many times they taunted me about it.

It's hard keeping secrets about yourself. It's hard feeling lesser than. In the end, once I was through the gauntlet of childhood the world opened up to me just a little as a better place.

Three things happened. I finally got a girlfriend, I got really good at funny and I became very sad. My last high school year book entry said, simply, "I'm sick of being the class clown. You run out of jokes after a while."

The next year would change many things for me, including how I saw my life. I enrolled at a local university, the one everybody with a less than 90 percent average could take refuge in.

On my first day of classes as I wandered around the large array of faceless, Stalin-esque buildings I stumbled upon a strange sight. A chalk outline of a body. Later I found out that a graduate student had jumped off the building above and ended his, or her, life. Just like that. On the first day of school. I hated being at that school. Lecture halls with hundreds of mostly bored students. A sage on the stage, also, it would appear, bored. I started skipping classes. No one noticed, this wasn't high school. If you wanted to drift off that was your choice. But what was I supposed to be doing here? I had always had great difficulty in school. At the time no one thought to call what I seemed to have ADHD. You were just a disruptor, unable to pay attention to the details, surviving while those around you thrived.

I was getting more and more depressed as I realized that I had not been living an authentic life. My girlfriend's mother was a kind and loving woman. Groomed to be a good suburban housewife, she was anything but. She seemed to see who I was even if I didn't. She encouraged me to read the emerging psychotherapeutic writings of pioneers like Fritz Perls, father of Gestalt, Arthur Janov of Primal Therapy fame, Eric Rogers with his landmark book, *On Becoming*. Books on schooling like *Summerhill* by A.S. Neill, John Holt's *What Do I Do Monday?* My mind was exploding. But at the same time my girlfriend had lost interest in me, I was adrift at school and I withdrew.

I stopped socializing, stayed in my room at my parent's new apartment and suffered the first bout of what would become a series of anxiety attacks that would possess me for a few painful months at a time through my early twenties. The pain in my chest was crushing, the doctor's advice was simply to take it easy. Thanks, Doc. I began to eat less and less. My mother would beg me to come out of my room and at least eat a boiled egg, anything. Over a period of several months I dropped about forty pounds. My body was trim, my facial

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features chiselled. When I looked in the mirror of the medicine chest where I had found a stash of valium that I would take once a day, I saw someone I didn't know I could be. All this pain and sadness had birthed a new me. For the first time in my life I was handsome.

I remember going to school occasionally and girls I had known my whole childhood and adolescence would start to say their usual hi to the chubby, loud and obnoxious Ralph they had grown up with. Then they would do a double take and instead give me a much more appreciative hello. I didn't like it. I was mad. "Oh I get it, now I'm worth saying hello to." I thought it, though I never said it. It was my first lesson in impermanence. I was now a fat kid in a romantic leads body. Anxiety attacks and all. Later in life I had facial surgery for cancer and that good looking fellow evaporated. Nothing stays the same.

Through that first change my loyal best friend, and now in my later life one of my true guardian angels, stuck by whatever version of Ralph I served up. He was Mike. He died when we were forty-three. Though we drifted apart after that first year of university we came back together before he passed. I miss him. I love him. The angel of my second change was the love of my life, my wife. If the price of love is grief then mine in light of her loving-kindness for me will be immeasurable.

It is no great tribute to my first post-secondary school experience that I indeed passed the year. I left. Everything. I auditioned for Theatre School at what was one of the best schools for drama studies in Canada, the University of Alberta. Sixteen students who were cherry picked from around the country, though I didn't make the cut first time around. I found that out on the day I got fired from a job my friend had found me at his dad's warehouse. I deserved to get fired. I was mouthy, always a verbal kind of bully, and one day, for the second time in my life, the object of my undeserved scorn turned around and punched me in the face. The blow landed on my chin

sending me stumbling back. All the great reading I had been doing on becoming a better me, all the pain I had suffered from anxiety, none of that mattered at that moment. Later that week I was fired.

I came home to a letter from the drama school saying that I had not been accepted but I had been shortlisted for possible entry. A few weeks later I was in. My parents didn't have a lot of money. I was their last of four and now I wanted them to send me away, not to law school, or to become a dentist, stuff that would actually pay – no, I was off to be an . . . actor.

I remember telling my father that I wanted to be an actor. I'm sure he had more than an inkling having sat in the front row and watching me ham it up in front of four hundred strangers, still this was not something I looked forward to sharing with him. "Dad, I want to go away to school to become an actor." Now here is a moment where I could tell you I distinctly remember how my father reacted to the news. Where I concretized the moment from forty-five years ago and have the facts bend to my narrative. But this is why memories are more of collage of self-sustaining myths that we use to bolster our stories. All I can say is that I have assigned my father the part of the disappointed immigrant dad who hoped I wouldn't have squandered all that he had given up to make for us a new life in the play called Ralph. Truth is, I have no idea what he thought that day.

Telling my mother, on the other hand is much clearer in my mind. We are standing in our narrow little kitchen when I told her I wanted to be an actor. "Well it's about time." she said. For me, that was a liberating moment.

Ralph Becomes Raphael

For the second time in my life, at the age of nineteen I was getting on an airplane. This time I wasn't with my family travelling away from centuries of North African and Andalusian life to Canada. This time I was travelling from the centre of my Canadian universe to the roughneck, petro state of Alberta.

I wasn't alone. One of my high school friends was coming to be in the Fine Art program at the University of Alberta as well. There was a Jewish family that his parents knew who put us up for a few days until we found a place to rent on the south side of Edmonton. The North Saskatchewan River cuts through the centre of Edmonton with several bridges spanning its shores. We found a house and soon a couple of roommates to help shoulder the rent. For the first time in my life I was truly away from home.

I was exhilarated. For nineteen years I had constructed

battlements around my sense of who I was. Mostly it was a rear guard action, one that tried to hide myself from others. I had been chubby, called Dumbo by some family members, carrying the shame of being a bed wetter like a heavy sack and, as I tried to say when leaving high school, the worn out class clown. So now, with only one person knowing who I ‘was’ perhaps I could start anew. Make a different Ralph, an actor who didn’t need to be funny to stay in the conversation. I began to explore the city.

Crossing over on to the north side I came face to face with a reality that back east was confined to one street corner deep in the downtown. The shameful truth of the decimation of our original peoples – the cultural genocide of the Indigenous population of Canada. As I milled about 97th Street I stared at passed out Indigenous men in tree pots outside an upscale hotel, at men and women sitting on the curb, brown paper bag in hand. So drunk that they didn’t even register that I was slowly walking by. Not even a glance. In later years when I lived in Winnipeg the tragedy of our abuse and neglect found an even deeper part in my soul. We, as Canadians often speak of human rights, in other countries, we would in the years to come boycott South Africa, tsk tsk at the racialized oppression in the United States, and damn the Soviets and Chinese for their draconian regimes. But here, in the ancestral lands of so many First Nations we have trampled their treaty rights, shuttled them off in to government subsidized ghetto’s, robbed them of their language, cultural rights and literally stolen their children. At that moment in Edmonton I came face to face with people dead on their feet. Lost in a maze of bricks, glass and steel. It made, and still makes me wonder just who in the hell we think we are.

Ironically that summer I had long hair and the sun had given me a bit of a golden hue. I soon realized that some people passing me by

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could assume that I was Indigenous myself – I remember someone asking me if I was.

The west was an entirely different ecosystem than the one I grew up in. The sky is so big that you swear you could reach out and touch it. Clouds stretch forever to the horizon and in Edmonton they say that the smoke from heavy industry adds burst of colour to each night's sunset. I was shown around by one of our hosts. Taken to the University campus. In the parking lot I saw posts with electrical plugs stuck in the asphalt every two spaces. "What's all that about?" I asked. My host looked at me puzzled. "Are you serious?" he said. Yeah what's it for?" He smiled. "It's to plug in your car." I was at a loss.

My host laughed, "You really aren't from here," then he explained "You see it gets so cold that you have block heater under the hood that makes sure that the gas line doesn't freeze among other things. At a party in the Prairie winter you have to occasionally get your parka back on and go outside to start your car if no plug is around. Otherwise you have to leave your frozen car behind." Wow! I thought. Tough town.

So, you wanna be in showbiz?

It was day one of acting school and I was terrified. This was supposed to be one of the top three schools in the country. Sixteen kids, that's it, with only fix or six making it through to fourth year. As everybody sat in a circle to introduce themselves to the group my fellow thespians spoke of being in this major production, or that film. Just about everybody had been in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. Everyone except me. The groups were also completely white and Christian. This was 1975. The oil boom was on and this time was what politicians forty years from now would lament the passing of. That day, in that room

the privilege and exclusivity were just a matter of fact.

They were probably wondering how I got in. Hell, everybody but me had been in *Our Town*, I didn't even know that it was a play. Then it was my turn to introduce myself. "Hi, my name is Ralph, actually it's Raphael." I began. Immediately the professor, a round man with a deep, butter smooth voice stopped me. "Oh," he cooed. "Raphael, that's much better, we will call you Raphael." Red flag number one. You see in proclaiming naming rights he had already managed to pronounce my name as Rafeeal. That's not how you say it. That's what I should have said, but he was the sage on the stage, literally. Who was I to point out that the very reason I had stopped using it was because it was apparently too ethnic to pronounce properly.

I was now Raphael again, with some minor mangling. Acting school was intense and a highly personal experience. We had ballet three times a week. I had to wear tights, though I passed on the rather snug dance belt. Chubby boy was still adjusting to this new found svelte body. If only my classmates knew that I had never taken a dance class in my life and that the klutz flitting by was actually a fake, an impostor, they would have understood that all these chenez turns were making me very dizzy. Actually I'm sure that watching me careen into the change area beside the floor-to-ceiling mirrors might have been clue enough.

While others flew around the dance studio, whipped along by the southern drawl of our task master I counted the minutes till class would end. That dance teacher was quite the character. He was also interested in me in a sexual way, but I wasn't game. I've always thought that rejection had a real effect on my fortunes as the year progressed.

There is a belief in many acting circles that you must break down the actor – strip the person down to an emotional skeleton and then rebuild them with a much deeper understanding that they have

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within them all the characters they will ever play. One of our better teachers taught me that. You are indeed capable of being anything in this life. A saint, a cheat, a lover and yes even a murderer. It's all a matter of circumstance and choices. Actors that are truly inspired make remarkable choices.

Later in in my short-lived acting career I saw all that in my friend Maury Chaykin. Maury played the deranged Calvary commander manning a godforsaken outpost where Kevin Costner goes to journey on in to the last frontier in the movie *Dances with Wolves*. Maury had an uncanny ability to look at a script, put it down and inhabit the character in a way that others could never hope to realize.

Most of the actors and artists I know are secular in their spirituality. They don't see religion as compatible with freedom. As for me I wish I could have joined my spiritual/religious side with my need-to-be-loved performer side while still in those funny dance tights. The personality tear down that I now realized was not in the brochure but which was essential to the mission of the teaching staff became, in the wrong teaching hands, at times, toxic.

This toxicity, as in other arts schools extended to after class activities as well where the house party was truly a thing. We would gather at someone's home near the University, I have no idea whose house it was back then, but the parties were intense. Actors didn't just dance to the music they moved as if their lives depended on it. Kitchen conversations weren't small talk. No. they were big, very big talk. The professors would be there too, making it so we weren't just hanging out, we were in a sense auditioning.

One of those professors was also the head of the department and our acting teacher. At one soiree he was seated across the room from me. He caught my eye and beckoned me towards him. I don't remember much else but I do remember that he pointed at me, and in the

tradition of a Roman Caesar he slowly turned his thumb downward and muttered, “You could be something, but you’re not, you’re . . .”

I don’t recall exactly what he said next. Memory, it’s a trickster. Was I a nobody, a fake, a failure? It hardly matters. After a lifelong quest for spiritual healing I have arrived at a place where being present makes memory and past just that, past. Not irrelevant but more of a watercolour painting, softened images and blurred landscapes of moments that we continually add colour and shading to.

Years later when I was co-hosting a national current affairs TV show that Caesar was a guest star on the popular Canadian TV show *Street Legal*. They were taping in the next studio. Some of the actors were my friends. I didn’t know he would be there and as I walked on to the set to say hi I saw him. By then a dozen years had passed. “Rapheal!” he said as he approached. “Good to see you.” We spoke for a moment and then he paused. “Did we make a mistake by letting you go back then?” he asked, in a gentle tone. I could have said, damn right you did, and look at me now. Hell, look at you! But I would be dishonest if I said that came to mind.

It’s funny, that moment we have later in the day after someone has hurt you or scared you, the moment where as a kid you stood in front of the bathroom mirror and with a bit of the gunslinger in your voice you said everything you couldn’t think to say at the moment. But in the instant what came out of me was something that in retrospect was a moment of grace. “No, you didn’t make a mistake. It all worked out for the best.” His smile seemed to be one of relief. We are not responsible for what others do or say, only what actions we take. Each night before bed observant Jews say, what’s called the bedtime Shema. It’s powerful. A time for humility. A challenging statement of

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compassion uttered before we drift in to the dream world, the land of souls. "I forgive those that have hurt me today, whether unintentionally or intentionally." Think about that. Someone knowingly hurt you and your reaction is to absolve them.

If I had turned instead to my old teacher and pointed, slowly turning my thumb down I would not have felt better at that moment. I would have been filled with hurt and anguish. I would be drinking the poison of revenge in hopes of killing the other man.

To live is to be wounded, it is how we tend to the wounds we suffer and inflict that mark the quality of our journey.

By now you know eventually I was kicked out of drama school, and left Edmonton behind. Lots happened there. I was seduced by a powerful woman and then terrified as a jealous and fearsome man, who I didn't know was in the picture, came looking for me. He seemed to be in every room I entered. I was convinced he was going to inflict something much more serious than a scornful thumb down on one very naïve, young, me. In the end he settled for shooting me deeply alarming glances. It was time to get back to Toronto.

The next few years were a gift I will never forget. I was in honest to God showbiz. Acting, writing, even directing. I was in the show voted the worst play of 1979. I wore a gold lamé jockstrap in a parody called *Reefer Gladness*. We use to peer out behind the curtain to count how many misguided patrons had ponied up a few dollars. The rule, which I'm pretty sure we made up, was if there were more of us backstage than out in the audience we didn't have to go on.

Out of nowhere I talked my way in to a job as an overnight social worker at a house residence for emotionally disturbed teenagers. Two things I learned there, one was that I could talk my way in and out of almost anything and much more importantly, mental illness and the destruction in wrecks on families is deeply and profoundly

heartbreaking for all involved. We break an arm and everyone frets over us, we suffer mental illness, and we are shunned and alone. Very much alone. To those that don't give up, that reach towards, not away, in a task that reaps little obvious reward, God love you for your work. I love you.

While working overnight at the home I was also doing something else. Writing my very first stand-up act. It all started because I happened to know the men behind the birth of what would turn out to be the home of stand-up comedy in Canada, Yuk Yuks Comedy Cabaret. Mark Breslin and Joel Axler had both been just ahead of me at Forest Hill Collegiate in midtown Toronto. Mark had been a bit of a Sith Lord at my high school. Small in physical stature he had been put upon by his classmates but he found a way to wreak revenge on the entire school. He launched a phantom candidate to run for school president and convinced the majority of the student body to vote for him. He was already on the road to being the disruptor that built a national chain of comedy clubs.

But right then, in 1976 Mark had established a space in the iconic 519 Church venue in the heart of the emerging gay village. He called the club Yuk Yuks and for a buck you could climb down the stairs to the bowling lane sized basement and take a seat. Comics would be introduced, they'd walk up the middle between two rows of customers and in five minutes those comics tried to do something very hard to pull off, make the audience laugh.

Stand-up is brutal. Consider the language of it, you kill, you die you bomb. People come demanding that you make them do something violent. Laugh out loud. Not snicker. Not smile, but from their belly explode into laughter. You just can't fake it.

When we watch a stage drama, half the time we feel inadequate if we dislike it. It must be me, after all this is art I'm seeing. Peter

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Brooks spoke well about the phenomenon of the Holy Theatre.

But in stand up you are either funny or you're dead. I had made another decision. I was going to put myself onstage and subject myself to the lion's den of comedy. I went down and hung out as soon as soon as the club opened. I watched a parade of would be comics get up and do their thing. Some were good and some weren't. In the parlance of the genre, they were dying up there. To this day watching a comic bomb is truly heartbreaking for me. You get up there. You're on your own. No one to lean on, no one to blame. You throw out the joke you've written, practiced and banked on. They just sit there staring. Fight, flight or freeze. Usually it's flight. You speed up, pumped with fearful adrenalin. As time goes on you become more confident. They don't laugh and you actually slow down as if to say. Fuck you, I'm funny. Works a charm. But that night I was just watching. Still safe in my own judgements.

I watched that night and came away thinking that I was at least as funny as these guys, and they were almost always guys at first. I asked Mark on the way out, can I get on? Mark said fine, two weeks from now, you get five minutes. Show up a few minutes early and I'll tell you what number you are in the line-up.

It was now time to be funny, on demand, just like on the playground at school. Please welcome fat boy Ralph back to the stage after a valiant post-secondary escape attempt. After all that version of me had helped me survive the *Lord of the Flies* smackdown of many a recess. It seems to me that we live and die many times in our short lives. One version of me is born and I furiously renovate that persona until it starts to show cracks and then crumble at various speeds in to dust and then that Ralph/Raphael dies. In this case I reached back to put on the clown outfit.

I showed up two weeks later for my next shot. The comics were

herded in to the back of the basement in a boiler room. A few were smoking a joint. Though I was a regular pot smoker I knew that performing and pot did not go together for me. I needed to be able to feel the audience, to be present and to connect with the unpredictable beast that on any given night would forge a mystical consensus. One crowd would be hyper and receptive, another grumpy and expectant. No one had taken a vote they just melded minds and my job, our job as performers, was to reach them, speak some semblance of common experience and truth and make them love us. Make them love me. What a strange thing to do.

My name was called. I sauntered up the aisle with a cigarette in hand and sat on the edge of the stool that was all that adorned the bare stage. Behind me a brick wall with a Yuk Yuks sign affixed. I could barely see through the adrenalin that coursed through my body. The amble up the aisle had been all show. Now I had to rein in my energy and remember what I had practiced in front of the mirror in the residence for emotionally disturbed teenagers leading up to this. My first bit, one that I had practiced for a week in that attic was not some piece of Lenny Bruce inspired wit and irony. No my first bit was about *The Flintstones*. “Didya ever notice that Wilma has no eyes. She has dots, black dots. If she had eyes maybe she’d notice that Fred’s been wearing the same fucking suit for seventeen years.” They laughed, not hard but they laughed a little as I babbled on for my five minutes. It was enough for Mark to let me come back. There were some really good, polished comics that night. One was a local FM Deejay. He had a twelve string guitar, played it left handed if I remember correctly and his presence on stage was electric. His name was Rick Moranis. He would star on SCTV and movies and then turn his back on the whole damn thing years later. Staying home to raise his kids. I love him for that.

Eventually we, and I say we because stand-up is a clan bordering

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on a cult. Once you're in it you will be part of it for life. Eventually, not too far down the line we moved in to a real honest to God nightclub. Yuk Yuks had arrived. We found ourselves on the eastern flank of the burgeoning Yorkville scene. The neighbourhood had transitioned from hippie enclave filled with headshops, eclectic bookstores and unisex hair salons to the disco, high end boutique epicenter of the late seventies, early eighties cocaine and powder blue jumpsuits crowd. We definitely didn't belong. We were a bunch of loudmouth, mostly socially crippled truth tellers, Flintstones notwithstanding.

With drama school in the rear view mirror I was living the Ed Sullivan dream. Comic, singer in a local cover band doing sixties tunes. I had to do it. I knew that I would never get the chance again. It wasn't a life path, more just a crazy, fun ride.

The club was a hit and some of the gang was already separating itself out from the herd soon to become some of the best anywhere. These were Mike MacDonald, Norm Macdonald, no relation but both from Ottawa, and the biggest acts, Howie Mandel and Jim Carrey. The second tier would go on to become great writers, show runners and journeymen comics – they would carve out a living for decades to come. Then there were the unappreciated. Savants like Steve Shuster, son of my boyhood idol Frank Shuster of Wayne and Shuster fame. People would introduce him as Wayne and Shuster's son as if they had conceived him. It was a heady time. Steve and I cooked up a musical parody medley as the cheesy Vegas lounge act, Sandler and Young. I was the smoldering Latino Sandler with an open shirt and big collar, Steve was the avuncular if not dimwitted Ralph Young. We had a blast. Comics were, and are, fiercely competitive, yet we fused together, charged with so much creativity, fear and elation

Every night we watched the crowd file out, locked the doors and took turns jumping on the stage praying that something totally

fucking brilliant came out of our mouths. Something that received the blessing of another comic who would turn to you and simply say, “That’s funny,” delivering the news in a deadpan, oncologist in a consultation room kind of way.

Every night we walked in to the fire, some got burned others like true firewalkers didn’t even get singed. The first to leave the Yuk Yuks stratosphere and go in to show biz orbit was Howie. Howie Mandel. He could walk off the stage and rightly declare, “I super-killed!!” Everyone was buzzing about Howie. No one wanted to follow him. There were two kinds of comics back then. Those who wanted to hear the roar of the crowd, whatever the cost. And those that wanted to become comedy warriors ready to share the gospel of truth to power. Howie fell in the first category. He was, and I mean this to be a compliment, a clown. A true clown with impeccable timing and the ability to say almost nothing and yet have the audience holding their sides in fits of laughter. I mean he got up on that stage in nothing but a diaper and spit out baby talk gibberish and they went wild. For those of us that had a bit more of the preacher in us this was depressing.

Then there was the punk infused raw and dangerous energy of the late great Mike MacDonald. Mike took no prisoners, got along with almost no one and unfortunately taught me that you can be great at what you do but if you piss off enough people you won’t be getting that call to showbiz fame. At least not in little old Canada. The pool just wasn’t big enough for you to poop in it. This is another one of Howie’s bits by the way.

Mike’s tennis racket ‘air guitar up in the attic’ piece was pure rock and roll genius and yes, it super killed!! Mike and I always got along. He had decided that he liked me, that I might be going places too. We just didn’t know at the time that we were headed in different directions.

Then there was Jim Carey. Most know his back story by now but

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what always intrigued me was his courage. Whenever something looked like his ticket to fame he would throw it over his shoulder and reinvent. Jim has always had a place in my heart. I have only seen him once or twice since he became an American star. His talent and elasticity put him in a league of his own but beyond that I always rooted for, and still do hope, for him to be a happy person.

Stand-up was a time in my life of limitless exhilaration, deep doubt and a sense of true belonging. I lived in many worlds at once. Actor, sort of. Singer, oh what the hell, sure. And the most exclusive club of all, stand-up comedian. Even the Second City types would ask: How on earth do you do it? I would never have the guts for that. We were tightrope walkers in the Yuk Yuks circus. No pay, tons of laughs and a healthy dollop of sexual energy flowing through our veins. We roamed the back hall throwing bits at each other waiting for that golden reply, that's funny, or shaking our heads and saying, 17 that's funnier than 11.

Mark Breslin, our ringleader and provocateur would dare the comfy crowd to laugh. Steal a purse, bring it on stage and tear apart its owner. Backstage we'd wait like restless hyenas. Through the narrow passageway to the tiny stage in the blackened nightclub we would be called. There truly is nothing like walking on to that stage. The rush of adrenalin blasting through your body on a Saturday night. The room packed, all eyes on you. Are you going to kill or die? Will you be the best that night?

Up there you are alone. I would stare in to the black middle space of the crowd and speak to the group psyche. They wanted truth, your truth, their truth, but wrapped in laughter and if you were really good, some tears, as the crowd roiled and surged through the night. Then there was the other side. The joke that had killed for five shows in a row just comes out of your mouth and lands in front of you

on the stage like a comedy hairball. Dead on arrival. They sit there, disappointed. You have two choices, look them in the eyes and stare right back like some gunslinger at high noon. What's at stake is who gets to decide what's funny. If you want to come back the next night you better lean in.

Jim, Howie, Simon Rakoff, Lawrence Morgenstern, Lou Dinos. The Nip n Tuck Tubbrag, Chas and Suzette. There were so many comrades in arms. We learned, we stole we even grabbed a sandwich from a waitress's plate in the kitchen in lieu of pay. If presence and contemplation are the gifts of age, then this was the absolute opposite. All guts and glory. Our ego's dragging us by the hair on to that stage every night that we could get a spot. Heckling each other or barking an editorial laugh of approval from the back of the club on a mostly empty Tuesday night.

Some of us became less themselves. Carrey was, and is a great impersonator and that what his first rung on the ladder to fame but he was just getting warmed up. Howie Mandel could magically stand on a stage and just keep repeating the word, "okay-okay . . . okay . . . okay, okay, okay. Worked every time.

Me, well I was doing characters on stage back then. Some were good, like my Jewish American Princess-Shelly, others were more actor-ish like the monologue where I played a gay bar hopper and a biker switching from one to the other in mid-sentence. In the end they go home together. When I would finish the bit there would be someone guy in the front staring uncomfortably. I took that as a red cape. I'd ask if they thought I was gay and then growl, "If I was what makes you think I'd want to sleep with you?"

I was getting attention and like any young and craven performer I sucked at handling it well. I am by nature introverted, my on stage bluster was all a cover. In fact, most Comics are at best, awkward. As

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someone who came from acting most of them saw me as a dilettante and way more normal than the rest of the herd. Most, if not all had great rhythm, many of us played some drums. You have to have a great sense of rhythm to refine the craft of joke telling. Its called . . . timing.

I slowly moved away from my characters, they were a dead end. I started hosting. It was the practical side of me that led me to it. If you did an act you could only play a gig outside the club twice, maybe three times in a year. The crowd knew your act. If you hosted, you could return every few weeks. What I loved about it was how every night was different. You had to be right there, with the audience and ride it like a bucking bronco. But, you had three, four, maybe even five chances to build that momentum through the evening as you introduced act after act.

I liked the tension of stand-up. The raw nerves of hitting the societal funny bone. But in the end I had a choice. Become a character that I could play every night. One that got a ton of laughs, or begin a journey to become myself that continues to this day

On a spiritual level I was lost. Yearning for approval, trying to get whatever I could but hoping that no one noticed while I scurried about in the shadows. The nagging feeling that had followed through my young life, the thought that I wasn't myself was back. I felt I was only a collection of reactions. The reaction to being an immigrant, to being fat, to being the wrong kind of Jew, to becoming handsome out of nowhere. The paradox was that I was no longer fat, I was acceptable. Hell I could be famous. I was a steaming mess of contradictions. I had an Inner life that had been forged in the sadness and shame of past experience, an emerging yearning for true self and no life map to get there.

I went to a place that no one from my upbringing went. To a therapist to take the chance of beginning a new journey. Primal Therapy

was big then. It had been invented by Arthur Janov in the States and was designed to unleash the raw pain that we carry so deeply.

These days there are well researched approaches that emphasize how the body keeps the score. Back then there was little support for doing this work. I cried, I wailed, I hugged the pillow of my sorrow. Though I didn't pursue that therapy for long it did make me realize that I was in a great deal of pain. That I had been gas lit when it came to expressing those feelings in my family environment but despite that the best approach for me was to bring that sad/angry boy in to the light.

By now, the eighties had arrived, I was occasionally taking hallucinogenic drugs. LSD, and magic mushrooms. For years the messaging was that we would all go insane if we took these substances. That we would microwave our cats. Luckily I didn't have either a microwave or a cat. We were also warned that we would go insane. That proved a little more possible. One of the best comedians of our generation did get triggered in to mental illness while on a Psilocybin trip we shared and he was never the same again.

For me the trips were inspiring. A sort of shortcut to the gates of spiritual awakening. No, the feeling didn't last but I caught a glimpse of the "Doors of Perception" as Huxley called them. I sat on the second floor flat roof at a party one night and looked up into the night sky. It all seemed so perfectly, laughably clear. The cosmic joke came into focus. We are molecular in the body of creation. Think about us, sitting on a dirt ball planet in a minor solar system, all in a swirl of hundreds of millions of galaxies. One winter night I sat on a porch, tripping on LSD, keeping company with neighbourhood cat. His profoundly simple presence was revelatory for me. There was no yesterday for that cat, no tomorrow to fear or crave. Just this moment, on this porch. In the garden in front to us there stood a tree surrounded by snow. But

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wait, there was no snow tucked up tight around the trunk. That space was thawed. The tree was generating heat. Living. There is the great meditative prayer in Jewish Renewal liturgy.

As we breathe out what the trees breathe in,
And the trees breathe out what we breathe in,
So we breathe each other in to life,
We and You.

For many who take the hallucinogenic journey there comes a profound understanding of the interconnectedness of all that is. We are the drop and we are the ocean. Imagine being twenty something and having the universe unlock a secret for you that can change you forever. Imagine.

But still the anxiety remained. The ego came charging to the rescue. The attention seeking pushed me on to stand-up stages, theatre openings and into rickety rock band vans as I wrapped myself in a shroud of dope smoking and wore my sunglasses as we drove down highways from one lousy gig to the next.

Until I started to yearn for actual love. I hadn't had many real relationships. One to be exact and that just dribbled away as she found herself longing for someone else, not me. I didn't even know it had happened. Now I was just a roaming young man. It's quite something, that juvenile chapter of love. Trying to mimic the often bad examples we grew up with, trying not to. Trying out the jealous guy, the sensitive guy, the count on me guy. I sucked at all of them.

Yuk Yuks was where I and many of my comedy colleagues actually found our mates. One, with the Restaurant manager, another with the box office girl and me with a waitress. The other two married them and stayed that way for keeps. Me I had twenty years and

two boys and to this day we are friends. Little did I know that the biggest job in life would be fathering. It still is. I ended up with four boys in two cohorts. Twenty years apart. I'll leave all of these people who I dearly love out of this telling as they are precious to me and so is their journey. I am mindful that they should always be able to choose in the telling of that.

Singing in a little rock band, telling jokes, occasionally being in some cheesy TV show. Even a few movies. These were Canadian movies of the early eighties mind you.

Sounds great right? Then why did I feel so lonely, so terribly anxious. Anxiety attacks, three in five years were the wakeup call of my early twenties. Friends tolerated my boorishness, family faded in to the background. I was a young man on the run, from me.

My body was telling me that I couldn't go on this way. Something had to give. But I had told everyone I knew that I was an actor, a comedian, a somebody. I had walked home for lunch in elementary school practicing my Oscar speech. When Timothy Hutton, who was roughly my age, won the award for best actor, or was it supporting actor, for his role in *Ordinary People* I watched and I cried tears of envy, but also of fear that I would never achieve my very big dreams. When Mort Sahl, the legendary truth telling comedian hit the stage at Yuk Yuks I watched in awe. He could be dead serious about the things that really mattered, politics, race riots, the death of the American dream, and then save the audience from annihilation by telling a good old fashioned joke. Again I watched and I cried. I would never be that true, that good, that authentic.

I was on the wrong path. The pain in my chest was telling me that. The tears were proof that I had to reimagine myself. I have to quit this acting thing I told my theatre friends. "What?!" But that's what you are, they said. I watched as some climbed the pole of show

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biz success and others just kept slipping back down again. Over the years I have found those that have had a fall from grace are more interesting. It's not a morbid, car crash interest. There is a choice we must make when we fall from a great height. We can wallow in resentment and jump back in to the fray seeking revenge, or, look inside and take the spiritual opportunity that the broken heart presents. The public life I was finding out gives many a heartbreaking opportunity to choose the path we walk on.

Tuesday Is Senior's Discount Day

One of the fears we confront as we age is that of decrepitude. In a world that commodifies existence, we struggle to conceal any reduction in our utility. The weak do not produce, they become a burden to society and family. This commodification, endemic to a western capitalist society, has precursors.

The use of the word 'taxpayer' is our introduction to this way of thinking. "It's taxpayers' money. Hell, it's my money!" We've all heard that before. As a matter of fact when I advise politicians on communications I demand that they take taxpayer out of their speeches. What I object to in the constant use of this language in the public discourse is the sheer selfishness of it. As we claw away at the public good, at our ability to care for, and about each other, we are left with the naked and material walling up of our lives. Private car, house, mall, community. If we are merely taxpayers, then we are positioned

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as customers who demand, but are often unwilling to pay for, the services that keep us safe and alive.

We become customers who have but one article of faith: their right to service. We demand better day care, but only if we have small children, better acute care hospitals, but only as we get older, or our closest family members need one. We have forgotten to see ourselves as citizens. If taxpayers have rights, citizens have more. They have duties, rights and obligations. Are we obligated to each other? Do we step beyond our specific material lives to bend a knee towards each other and, as my Sabbath visitor said earlier, willing to engage in the spiritual task of walking each other home. Something has been profoundly attacked in this shrunken view of our lives. In my journey, it appears to be no small coincidence that our spiral into self-interest hit full acceleration when we decided that God was dead.

There, I said the word: the one that triggers so many thoughts and feelings. The G word. So, for the sake of clarity I would like to tell you about the God that I *don't* believe in. That god is a man, with a beard, sitting in a very nice chair. In his hand, and weighing on your conscience, is a naughty and nice list. That pediatric version of the divine is also known by another name, Santa Claus, the one that Coca-Cola redid and *Miracle on 34th Street* reminds us of every December. In fact, this is the god that most of us now leave behind as we enter adolescence, never to engage with again.

It is said that we can choose to worship one God in many worlds, or many Gods in One. We have, as a culture, I believe, have chosen the latter. And what small Gods do we bow to? The latest movie star spewed out by the Hollywood hit-making machine, a man who makes very expensive shoes, or the women who wears them. If you can kick a ball very hard while wearing shorts with an ad splattered across your T-shirt you will, for a brief time, become immortal.

Now imagine the distance between that small slice of idolization and what we see when we gaze through the Hubble telescope at the literally millions of galaxies that are in a constant and awe-inspiring flux. Imagine what it is to see God, not as a thing, a noun, but instead as a process, a verb. The unfolding, never-ceasing pulse of creation that animates every cell in our bodies and indeed every granular flake of stardust are, in the end, what we are made of.

I often think of the life of stars. When they die and go supernova the resulting and enormous explosion forces nearby gases to come together and give birth to a new star. Life, death, birth. The cosmos is alive in ways we can't even imagine and we are a fantastic cellular spark in that majestic flow.

Matthew Fox was excommunicated from the Catholic Church for saying that the church had devolved into 'Jesus-ology': the worship not of Christ's consciousness, but of the man, Jesus. He argued that the faithful needed to reorient themselves back to a state of awe and wonder for the creation itself. He calls it Creation Spirituality and his teachings have allowed me to see spirituality through a deeply ecumenical lens.

There is, in most religious talk, a not-so-subtle undertone of exclusion, a tribal vibe. I'll elaborate. At a workshop I conducted recently at a local synagogue, we were talking about the value proposition of being Jewish. What was in it for these people in the circle to identify as Jewish? At one point the dreaded 'chosen people' label reared its misunderstood head. Some take the assignation as a sign of superiority, that as Jews, of which I should point out I am definitely one, we have been singled out in some sort of divine line up by the man behind the two-way mirror. "Him, he's the one." Weary, but resigned to our fate we now must serve a life sentence as beacons of light unto the world.

I addressed the woman who had brought the issue to the group.

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“Perhaps,” I offered, “we can look at this in a different way. You see, I identify with those who say that God’s not Jewish, we’re Jewish.” She went quiet for a moment looking confused by what I just said. “But he is,” she finally said. We moved on, but two weeks later she came back to the group and said that she hadn’t been able to stop thinking about what I said. I had challenged a fundamental belief, a definition of chosen people that she, as a convert to Judaism, had taken great comfort in.

What Fox and others have taught me is that there are many wells that lead to the one river. Spirituality is an exercise in profound intimacy, with others, yourself, and the mystery that swirls around us and literally through the ever-living universe. Being Jewish speaks to my particular need to make sense of all this.

I had always identified as a progressive and religious person before I was beset by heart disease and cancer. There was just one element missing. Death was, for me, no different than it is for most of us in this highly material and secular culture, a terrifying and downright rude assault on my march to forever. What I was beginning to realize is that I had assumed I was just going to skip right over the growing older part. Like death, decrepitude was for my hundred-year-old grandmother or my liver-spotted aunt. I was better than all that. I recovered from angina and my radiation. I was free to run back into the land of making money.

A year and a half earlier I had been in a very different place. I was unhappy about my professional life, but personally rising to the challenge of starting a new, second family. I had been through many struggles: divorce and the pain that that brought to my older children, as well as a gruelling work schedule, up at 4:30 a.m. to host a radio show, working on one of seventeen documentary programs, and advising the fledgling Green Party of Canada on top of it all.

Through this all a new and lovely ritual had emerged. With the first of my younger boys came a gift I have come to cherish: the Sabbath. I had been working on a documentary series we called *5 Seekers* and we were shooting out in Cortes Island, British Columbia, the home of the Hollyhock Retreat Centre. The point of the series was to witness and facilitate five seekers who had given up on religion but still found themselves spiritually wanting. One of the experiences we arranged for them was a visit on the island with a woman who every Friday night hosted an open Sabbath dinner.

Friday night is, of course, when Jews celebrate the arrival of Sabbath, *Shabbat* in Hebrew. In fact, it is the welcoming of the feminine divine, the *Shechina*. What was interesting about this particular Sabbath is that the woman hosting was not Jewish. In fact, her home was a celebration of all spiritual paths. Walking around her living room was like moving through the stations of the cross except that at each station you were greeted by a different religious icon. Here was Buddha, next Ganesh from the Hindu faith, then Jesus, and so on. She was specific in her choice of when to celebrate but deeply ecumenical in her choice of who would accompany her on this spiritual company.

The dinner was light and the company enjoyable but what I didn't realize at the time was that it would plant a seed in me that I would bring back to my home life. I mentioned the dinner to my wife when I returned home and though she was raised in a secular home she agreed that we would start having similar Sabbath dinners at our house. Anyone was welcome, some people who attended we knew well, others almost not at all, and once in a while people would bring friends we had never met.

The structure was simple. We spent time, and wine, with everyone flowing from the kitchen to the living room. Eventually we would move to the dinner table, and I would give a brief explanation

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of what the rituals of the Sabbath signify. I often referred to the writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel whose book *The Sabbath* is concise, poetic and deeply resonant. He speaks of the notion that Jews create an architecture of faith that is fundamentally based not on brick and mortar – we are after all a deeply diasporic people always moving from one land to another – but in time. There are six days when we are humans ‘doing’ and one where we are humans ‘being.’

Sabbath is the time of reflection and connection, if we choose. For the Orthodox, the strictures on works and labours of the home are severe. For most others the observance diminishes to the point where, for many, the Sabbath is indistinguishable from any other day.

But imagine for a moment a world where we massively reduce our use of energy for a day. We keep a few lights on, but give up running errands or surfing on our phones. Maybe we take walks instead, and just spend the day connecting to each other and ourselves. I remember clearly when governments began promoting Sunday shopping. I had been disappointed. I thought of all those people who would now have to work on weekends, all those people who, without restraint, would now be shopping every day, all the time. There was no more day of rest. Shabbat is the greatest gift that the Jewish people have offered to the world. What a waste to toss it aside.

At our table we light candles and then ask that everyone do a blessing. In this extemporaneous and often touching moment, I have seen husbands turn to wives and bless them for the love they bring even through the chaos of childrearing or job pressures. We have heard people bless their ailing parent or recently passed and much beloved pet. There is something in the public proclamation of gratitude and the making sacred what would otherwise simply pass us by that transforms the feast every time.

This is different from a casual dinner party, with its bursts of

small talk about this or that new TV show. Instead, dinner is a point of connection. For a moment we are stripped of the need to impress or entertain each other, and instead can speak of things that matter, both to us and to each other. You see, what Sabbath brings, what heart disease brings, what even cancer offers, is the deep knowledge that this is not a rehearsal. Life is not something that will be happening just as soon as we get these other bits out of the way. The day-to-day chore that doesn't quite satisfy, the daily routine of breakfast, lunch, and 'what's for dinner?' Life is truly only this moment, here, now.

When You Work You Always Have Tomorrow

I was sitting with a friend recently. Actually, he was more of a colleague. He'd had a distinguished career as a documentarian and we knew of each other in passing in my time at the public broadcaster. We met because I had passed him on a trail near my home in Hamilton one Sunday afternoon. I wasn't sure it was him as he passed, he looked so grey, and a little stopped. In fact, I thought he looked like an older version of the man I knew, not quite him, but similar. He could just as easily have had the same thoughts about me with one added piece, given how my face, specifically my nose, has been altered by cancer, surgery and the passing of time.

I didn't say hello as we passed but later I saw one of his posts on social media and messaged him to ask if he had been walking on the

Cherry Hill trail that weekend. He had commented on a few of my Facebook posts recently so a bond, virtual and tenuous as it may have been had been formed. He replied he had been there. We arranged to get together for a coffee. We both unspooled our stories of the ten to fifteen years since we had last passed each other's desks. He had ventured out of the CBC and spent years making documentaries in the private sector. A challenging task at the best of times, but he had done okay. Lately, all of that had changed. He, like many others, had seen the documentary well run dry. But something else had also happened. His services were not sought after by those he had worked with before. Assumptions had been made that he was probably out of the game by now. After all he was sixty-seven, surely he was retired, hopping on cruise ships, playing the proverbial round of golf.

If you look at the magazines targeting the seniors crowd you will see a glut of ads for travel, resort living and the good life fantasy that awaits those in line to reap their just rewards. Mertroland is the conglomerate that bought up all the community run newspapers in southern Ontario, where I live. The also bought a lot of others nationally as well. One of the publications the churn out in pursuit of advertising dollars carries the unfortunate title *Forever Young*. It's for the fifty-five-plus market. Framing people as young, and forever no less, is a form of gas lighting. "I'm getting older" we say. No you're not, we're told. You'll never get older, that would be awful. No, no my friend, you are forever young. Old people are dried up, on the way out.

As I sat with my colleague that afternoon in the coffee shop it became clear that he wasn't finished, that there was much he wanted to say as a storyteller but at sixty-seven he was finding it almost

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impossible to find his place in the public discourse. We paused for a moment letting what we had shared sink in. Then he looked up from his coffee and said, “You know, when you work, you always have a tomorrow.” His words struck me. We gain so much meaning from our labours, whatever they are. Self-worth, human connection and the sense that we are needed, not just today, but tomorrow. It is common to hear people complain about the busyness of their lives, the amount of things that have to get done at work and in the home. But there is more to this frenetic flow than we let on. There is validation. People are counting on me, they need this done, I matter.

It’s the same rush that we get with every notification on our cell phones. The proof is in the moment, the one where we see that no one has sent a message of any kind to us in the last six hours. The pull to validation is so strong that we are actually willing to stake our lives on it. More people are now killed by distracted drivers, by people on their phones while driving, then by driving drunk. Work life is filled with connections that give us a tomorrow but when that ends a vacuum is created, one that for many becomes a disheartening quiet. We get a taste of its sting when we fall into any stretch of unemployment. Life throws down a gauntlet challenging sense of who we are to rise or fall. The self-concept that we have built day by day through schooling, jobs and in some cases careers, perhaps the most freighted if not privileged version of our work self. Imagine having been a doctor, revered and seen as holding life and death in their hands. One day it’s over and you no longer have an office to inhabit, a patient to see, a conference to attend. Your identity no longer receiving its daily reinforcement, can go hungry as we retreat in to the shadows of what we once were.

Recently, during an Ageing to Sageing workshop I was conducting for men this became a central theme. Each man in the group

had been, or still were, practicing professionals. Lawyers, financial advisors, doctors, they had many things on their side, they were white, male and yes, even though they had worked hard for the honour, they were privileged. One was in his seventies. He was a gentle, thoughtful man but lately he had been annoyed at the frequency with which patients would say to him in the course of an examination, “So. When are you going to pack it in? Get out on the golf course?” I asked him what was upsetting him about this almost daily topic of conversation and he said that he had no intention of retiring and he was tired of saying so. We talked a bit more and it became apparent that he resented how obvious it was to his patients that he was old. Many of his clientele had been with him, literally for a lifetime. I asked if he intended on practicing till he was either debilitated or dead. Without hesitation he replied, yes. “What else would I do? I hate golf and I’m not much at sitting around the house.” I was with him on the golf part but it seemed unfortunate that he saw his choices simply as what he had always been, doing what he had always done, or he was no one. There is so much more that we can explore if we harvest our wisdom and find new purpose for our gifts.

But if we have not been spooning healthy dollops of soulful practice into our working lives, then we are orphaned as work life fades or becomes smaller. My colleague in the cafe. The one who had once been needed and wanted in the documentary world, carried some of that sadness as we sat together sipping our coffee’s. We had both fell silent as we reflected on how we had come to this point in life

Since the age of thirty I have been looked upon as someone who’s had a pretty good run of career luck. There have been some bumps but for a man who was spectacularly slothful throughout his youth I have grown quite a stiff backbone when it comes to work. Skills that emerged in my chaotic twenties became powerful tools for career

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advancement and survival as the years marched on.

The first leg of the career journey is the one that requires throwing a saddle on your ego, that part of you that creates your identity and your sense of self-worth, and taking it for a ride. A wild ride for me at times. The Christian mystic Richard Rohr speaks at length about the place of ego in our spiritual lives. Like others he offers that we must find the proper place for ego-driven choices as we walk the spiritual path. Ideally, if I understand him correctly, we must learn to let go of the construction of personality that is the busy work of ego and be available to the profound and simple power of what is.

Throughout my working life I have been struck by the subtle but persistent ambience of fear that swirls around us in the workplace. Imagine a tank filled not with piranha, or sharks, the common metaphorical props used to describe the denizens of the office deep, but instead, well dressed, late working schools of puffer fish showing all those around them that they have 'it' under control, oh and by the way, if you try to touch them as they climb the career ladder, you'll die. As I age I have grown more tender in my feelings about the workplace, sad, really for all the ideas that fell on deaf ears, the unused gifts.

Every place I have worked has erred on the side of operational competence. Being Canadian a hockey image comes to mind, to paraphrase Guru Mahavishnu-Mahesh-Gretzky; You have to skate to where the puck is going, not where it is. I'm not deriding the need to get things done I'm speaking about something else. The skill of workplace levitation. Floating above the situational imperatives just long enough to bring a new perspective, so we can imagine what will come next. But what is the fuel that will help us achieve that altitude?

I have been lucky enough in recent years to be schooled in creative problem solving methodologies through a curriculum devised by SUNY, at Buffalo State University. The emphasis, in a

nutshell, is deferring judgement and generating a quantity of ideas in a safe and often joyful workshop environment. Convergent tools are provided to help narrow down choices and refine outcomes but the key for me is the deferring of judgment. Being free to generate a quantity of ideas. In fact, their research shows that many of the best ideas happen in the time after we think we have exhausted the pool of ideas that we have been drawing on.

This dovetails nicely with the work I have done to become an ordained Spiritual Director. There we were asked to allow workshop partners, or your co-worker in a meeting for that matter, to take the risk of being brave, of being heard. How many times have we been asked in a meeting to ‘blue sky it’? A ridiculous request when all the hierarchies of organizational life are rigid and intact. All done with the boss in the room, looking for a near term solution with no iterative process involved. We talk of Innovation ad nauseam in the new millennia, but we do not allow for it to flourish. We are too timid. Innovation requires courage. My definition is simple. Innovation is subversion looking for respect. Innovation is the party crasher that says we need a truly novel solution to an existing problem. Creativity is the jet fuel that can bring these soulful ways of thinking out to the greater benefit of the organization and ourselves. How many dreams, ideas and even easy fixes are lying dormant in the people who work around and with us?

The belief for many is that creativity and the soulful opening that it brings is the domain of a few ‘creatives’ that are hired to live in that ‘blue sky’ that everyone seems to think is swirling above them somewhere, just out of reach. Creativity, like compassion and confidence are the materials that allow us to build our futures. They do not belong to a select few. They are obvious in the eyes of every child that is given a chance to be heard, loved and respected.

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Ken Robinson, the educator and king of creativity TED Talks describes a slow smothering of the creative sparks in our education culture. You can see it if you walk through a school that has kindergarten to grade eight. In the beginning, as it were, we have walls covered in insanely colourful images, crafts are everywhere. Singing and learning together in a close knit group takes place in a classroom filled with love and care. When they are young the magic in their eyes can soften even the most utilitarian heart. As they age we bring more pressure to bear on them. They must steel themselves to take on a world that has lost its magic, has tamed its spirit with promise of material reward. The children's pictures come down replaced by text driven narratives.

From there we move to deliverables showing competence and the ability to take in, remember and deliver a mostly predetermined outcome. They become good, I might suggest, at showing up, shutting up, and performing. I was conducting a creativity workshop where the group, educators mostly, spoke about the system killing the creativity of their children. But something felt wrong. I offered that it was not the system but all of us in the room that were the perpetrators. In our rush to inoculate our children from the vagaries of the world we demanded that they gain the hard skills that we could take comfort in. The B+ in math, the 90 percent in chemistry. If it's English, history or heaven forfend, art then the prize is less but it's better than nothing. We do not encourage the skills that allow us to think critically about the world we must live in. The soft skills of team building and interpersonal relationships are done off the side of the desk, so to speak.

Creativity is considered frivolous because it is often off point, disruptive, mischievous. You challenge conventionality. In my tradition, the Jewish one, this is an essential part of learning. Students were set in pairs, given a piece of sacred text and then had to dissect, defend and

listen to alternative ways of seeing the events and actions described therein. Which gives us the stereotype of the Jewish scholar who posits a point of view and then pauses for a second before saying, “On the other hand.” This can go on, and has, for millennia.

It’s a good thing when we are pondering the meaning of life. In our modern secular world, we have given up on the ambiguity that this line of inquiry brings. Save for occasional pockets of brave thinking we are enraptured with rationality. There is a Chinese proverb that states, and I’m paraphrasing here, “To be uncertain is uncomfortable. To be certain is ridiculous.” We have chosen to be certain. I never felt this more acutely then when I worked as a political consultant and communications director. Each of the political parties formed in to tight and aggressive clan clusters. Even within the party’s new entities were always forming and reforming mostly driven by the urge to power. If you took their political platforms and drew connective lines between policy proposals you would find many points of connection and convergence. Yet, if you asked the clan members, and it seemed the lower you went in their ability to wield influence and real power the more strongly they held to this way of being, they puffed out their chests and declared that they, and they alone were absolutely right and the other political amalgams were just dead wrong.

This binary nonsense, rooted in patriarchal systems of dominance and victory has done great damage to our civil society. Imagine if political parties were dissolved and re-localized representations emerged. Imagine a decentralized way forward on so many fronts. Scale breeds insensitivity, risk adversity and simplistic answers to complex human problems. As you can imagine my lack of fealty to the cause was considered suspect at best. It was a healthy hangover from my journalistic life.

How many times have you heard someone say the words soul

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sucking when describing their work life? It's not everyone but then again it's not no one either. I often use this story to illustrate the problem. You're driving to work and on the radio you have one of those songs. I'll say it's Heart doing their cover of Stairway to Heaven. By the time the choir kicks in behind her balls out vocals you're this close to official head banger status. You arrive at the staff parking lot. Turn off the car right at the top of the guitar solo and turn to your other self. "Right, you stay here in the car. I'm going in." For many work consumes most of our waking hours. But how much of ourselves do we take though those doors? How spiritually and psychologically safe do we feel?

When the meeting is over I walk by a field of desks, along the way back to my office I catch a glimpse of a family photo or the memento of an all too brief vacation. Artifacts of a life outside this place. Of why we came here. To provide. But in many cases there is a spiritual deficit at play and the cost benefit analysis shows that what we lose is the collective genius that sits out in the parking lot waiting for our return. In a time when utility trumps value we are often asked only for our operational best. Ideation is reserved for those spasmodic board room meetings where we are asked to digest and decide on the way forward.

In an environment where risk can be career limiting not much can come of the request that we 'think big'. As for our wisdom, well that's often met with a youthful eye-roll.

So what is the place of the older person in the work place? As I saw my work dissolve before my eyes I began to wrestle with this question for the first time. If we are to live longer and healthier intent not on retiring, but instead on inspiring how do we carve out a new space? A third space where organizations and businesses employ elders who can mentor, apply well refined experience and abilities, and use integrated thinking skills that neuroscience has proven improve

with age. How can we bring our wisdom to the table? This is not a case for being charitable and giving the former employee a little office nearby, or the academic an emeritus shingle to hang on an empty office door. This is about rethinking how we can truly leverage institutional memory, sage advice and intergenerational contact. I imagine that with less ego and more soulfulness that elders have a great deal to contribute if they so desire. Yes, at the senior level but also in the workaday world were most of us toil away.

These spiritual black holes have their parallels in the world of religion as well. As we cling to tradition we devolve in to a concrete like adherence to hollowed out rituals. We take refuge in beliefs and leave the risk of faith out in the parking lot. They don't call it a leap of faith for nothing after all. I know it's hard to bounce around but stay with me on this one, and by the way, try not to think of Charlton Heston while I share this bible story with you. So Moses is standing with the Hebrews, and those who decided to join them on their exodus to freedom. In front of them is the Red Sea but fast approaching to their rear is Pharaoh's mighty army lead by Yul Brenner, sorry I couldn't resist, Ramses the second. Moses is begging God for guidance. What do I do? The Egyptians are coming and they will surely slaughter us all. There is no escape. We have our backs to the sea. While Moses is begging/praying, one of the elders, a relative in fact, Nachshon, has either jumped, or been pushed in to the sea. I love the ambiguity of that. If he was pushed then this is all an accident, if he leapt then his actions are noble. I say that it doesn't matter either way because it's what he does next that matters. You see sometimes we need a push and sometimes we just say to hell with it and jump. See *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, the cliff above the rapids scene for further proof.

What Nachshon does next is walk. The water rises to his knees, he keeps going, his hips feel the splash of cold salt water, he keeps

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walking. Meanwhile Moses hears the voice within. “What are you doing groveling before me in your fear. Look at what Nachshon is doing.” By now Nachshon is almost completely submerged but he keeps on walking. Moses takes his staff and leads the people into the roiling waters, the seas part, and in overcoming their fears they catch a glimpse of freedom.

I’m not a literalist in any way. I have no need to prove that the event took place at a low tide and the escape was purely at the whim of nature. To me Pharaoh is our inner oppressor, Egypt the interior landscape that keeps us enslaved and the leap that Nachshon takes is the difference between cowering at our desks or taking the chance of bringing all of ourselves to what we do. The crisis is one of leadership and even though their cages are gilded the enslavement can be, and mostly is, just as real, for those that climb the ladder of career. This lack of spirit wears on us as we pass the years enmeshed in work cultures that treat us all as temporarily essential. As we age in our workplaces the spiritual aspects of our efforts yearns for expression. We have realized that there is not much from our labours that will live on once we leave our work behind and, more often than not we leave work with a whimper not a bang.

There is something sad about the notice that flashes on our shared screens. “Please join me (fill in middle management/supervisor’s name) as we get together and wish (employee with a long and loyal work history) a hearty congratulation as he/she moves on to new and exciting adventures. Well-meaning colleagues mill about munching on a pizza slice, give the retiree a pat on the back and say “Hey, keep in touch.” You know that in almost every case they won’t. It’s not their fault it’s just that once you’re gone you’re out of the daily flow. Proximity breeds friendship, distance, the opposite.

But what happens to all the wisdom and hard-earned experience

that person takes with them? It just disappears like sand passing through the hands of those that follow. Without an elder culture we have no way of turning to these men and women for advice. Imagine if we gathered in what organizations like Change World calls Career Legacy Circles. Imagine creating a meaningful purpose and eventual exit for those who age in work. One that brings dignity and consciousness to the process instead of leaving us each to mourn the passing of a career cycle alone, drowning in a sea of well-meaning platitudes. CLC brings together six to twelve people in the later stages of their active working lives and over two to four-week period they meet for three hours at a time. First they share a retrospective of their career journey with each other. Bringing voice to their experience. Then they create a prospective for a meaningful career exit and finish with an action plan for completing what needs to be done within the organization before they go.

I remember when I left Canada's national broadcaster after twenty-one years of radio and television broadcasting. The last day was so hollow and devoid of meaning. I fault no one. I quietly packed up a few boxes to take home brought the car around to an illegal parking spot then rushed up the elevators to grab my box of paper memories, my clumsy drafting table and chair and an old broken-down desktop computer that they charged me fifty dollars to take with me. There was no pizza, no pat on the back and certainly no legacy circle.

I had just reached a stage where I had something of a value to share as a mentor to the next generation of communicators and I had been deemed surplus. I know, I had a long run in a precarious business, but now, isn't all work precarious, all loyalty thinned out and disposable?

Extra Extra, Read All About It!

My sister was and is really smart. Lots of degree, lots of opinions. While I was slipping down the greasy pole of showbiz more out of choice than pressure she had enrolled for yet another credential, this time in the Journalism school at Ryerson Polytechnic University, now Ryerson University. I thought nothing of it until one day when I was sitting in my bathrobe on the couch of a second floor apartment that I shared with several acting friends in downtown Toronto. Back then actors could actually live downtown without starving.

So there I was in my bathrobe, smoking hash having slept till noon. I turned on the TV and watched one of Canada's first news magazine shows for a lunch time crowd. I was stoned, the anchor was stone faced. As he read I thought to myself any half-decent actor could do his job. It's all in the read. I started to wonder how much he made. Back then I thought, like most people do, that he must be

making a mint. I found out later, not so much. I remembered my sister and her studies. I called her up and asked what she thought of J-School as they called it. I also asked if I could tag along to one of her classes. She said she'd ask.

Luckily, her prof said yes. Her name was Joan Donaldson and a few years later she would help launch Canada's first all-news network, NewsWorld. One day while she was leaving the CBC building in Montreal she was hit by a bike courier as she stepped off the curb. She suffered severe brain damage and later died from her injuries. One minute, in one day, on a city street and regardless of where we are off to, it's over. It makes you wonder why. But over the years in my spiritual hunt I've found it is not the answer that satisfies me, it's refining the questions.

I sat in Ms. Donaldson's class that day and listened as the students discussed current events. By now I was twenty-seven and I found the conversation fascinating. I had been soaking up the politics of development, the history of the twentieth century and the realpolitik of the Cold War and the Holocaust since the day I left schooling. This conversation felt right.

I applied with help from my sister and I got in. I was living with the woman who would become my wife in a few years. I was feeling different, free from all that I had thought I was destined to be. My friends from the comedy and acting worlds just shook their heads. As far as they were considered I was turning my back on them and on my true myself. But I wasn't.

My first-year broadcast teacher would steer me to my first radio job and become a friend. He had already made a name for himself as the wunderkind of CBC radio. Executive Producer of the flagship documentary program *Sunday Morning* and now he was a regular contributor to the never to be surpassed *Morningside* with Peter

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Gzowski. His name was Stuart McLean. Stuart would go on to reinvent himself as the national storyteller, capturing a small town sensibility with stories carefully refined by his co-writer, Meg Masters. They were tales filled with laughter, love and the sweet nostalgia for main street Canada. A more innocent time they say, that is provided you were white and Christian.

Stuart and I even created a Christmas TV special together years later. We would drive the hour and half to Belleville from Toronto to shoot reminiscing along the way. When I heard that he had contracted a cancer and that it wasn't going well, it broke my heart. I remember going to see him perform in Brantford, Ontario, before we began production on the special. I wanted to be inside the magic he created up onstage. That night there was a driving snowstorm. The roads were treacherous, but the beautiful old theatre, a remnant of the old vaudeville touring days, was packed. Watching him up there I was witnessing a love affair. We could all forget our troubles; he was leading us in to a part of our better selves. We went willingly. Before turning to leave, our collars turned up to face that harsh and snowy night we smiled at each other. Stuart McLean was a good man.

I loved J School. I was older. I knew why I was there and I was discovering the beautiful world of storytelling through radio and television, no longer a last call actor, or so-so comedian, but as a critically thinking and creative journalist. There were some good teachers and some bad. I would occasionally hear the phrase, "Out in the real world." A term weaponized by many an instructor. "Now folks in the real world they won't stand for the kind of crap you churned out today you'll be out on your ass in a second."

One day I couldn't take any more, after all I was eight or nine years older than my classmates and I had actually lived "in the real world." Excuse me I said, not waiting to be acknowledged. I've been

in the real world and it's not nearly as awful as you keep telling us it will be. My point was not taken, nor appreciated. I continued, "There's lots of crappy work and low standards out there don't worry we'll find something."

I had one English prof who insisted that Canadian humorist and icon Stephen Leacock wasn't funny. He was telling us, by the way, not putting it out there for discussion. Once again I flexed my mature student muscle. Why? For one thing when you are a mature student you are more aware that in post-secondary education the class offered is a product for which hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars must be paid, by you. Secondly I had arrived relative free of the accumulated freight of eighteen continuous years of institutional pedagogy. Those around me were fresh-faced and ready to do whatever the sage on the stage asked of them. Some were quite adept at gaming the system for ultimate advantage and some were not equipped, or cared to employ, the self-protecting powers of critical thinking. They had simply not been rewarded for that skill.

I have worked on many news and current affairs programs as well as in government, politics and post-secondary environments. The ability for people in those environments to think, cynically, you know, the eye wink "I know what's going on but I'm above it" approach is common currency, critical thinking on the other hand is often absent.

In fact, as I said before, critical thinking and robust creativity are discouraged throughout society. Phrases like 'pie in the sky', out of the box, left field. All signal disruption of the organizations technocratic approach. If you want to make a lot of money as a consultant to these lumbering corporate middleweights best to come armed with PowerPoints, Venn diagrams and the certainty of numerical projections. No room for mystery or chance. But let's get back to English class.

So there I am with this sage on the stage telling me and my

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classmates that Leacock isn't funny. I disagreed. I asked if I could illustrate my point by reading a passage. I read, the class laughed at the precise moment Leacock had intended and the teacher's face reddened. He asked me as we were leaving if we could have a word. He offered me a deal. I could write the essays and exam but he would do me a favour and not require me to attend lectures anymore. I accepted. I shouldn't have. I should have stayed and modeled a different approach to the great power he held in such a small hand.

It's strange how we grasp for certainty as we stumble through this life. I was going to be an actor, I could only be funny, I was fat, I was good looking. The Buddhist notion of suffering the state we inhabit as humans is predicated on the urge to cling and grasp. We crave control. What that thinking does for me is make me unaware of what is right in front of me. As a case in point, let's look at radio. Besides wandering into a radio station at University of Alberta once, which had been a great moment really, I had never thought about radio. I asked, out of the blue, if I could go on the air. The guy said sure, come back Tuesday at lunch, we have an hour to fill. I did. I had no training, no clue really about how to cue up a record, station manager showed me once. I was terrified. I wanted to cling to his leg and be dragged out of the studio with him never to return again, but I didn't. Instead I picked a seventeen-minute song by Perth County Conspiracy, there were a lot of seventeen minute songs back then, so I could give myself the time to figure out what the hell to do. I survived, and vowed never to try that again.

But here I was at The Ryerson radio station CKLN. One of my closest friends from Yuk Yuks, Anton Leo who always had a much more level head than I, was now the station manager. I begged him for a job I made up on the spot. I wanted to be the News Director. There was no News Director. Hell there was no news on the station.

It was a hodgepodge of reggae, punk, far out morning jazz, emerging hip hop and old fart rock.

Out of nowhere I designed a five morning a week magazine show with headlines, interviews and editorials for anyone who wanted to be on air. I did one day as well. My mind was blown. I had no idea that speaking in to that microphone was the beginning of a lifelong love affair with radio. The intimacy, the way that the listener had to engage and imagine. The description Marshall McLuhan gave radio was perfect. It was a hot medium. TV was and still is a cold media. You are passive, receiving, the perfect selling tool. Radio, particularly public and not for profit radio is none of that. By now I was listening to Peter Gzowski every morning on *Morningside*. He was the epitome of a current affairs magazine host. In my opinion he has no peer when it came to bringing the nation in to a small intimate space and drawing the best out of each and every guest. Prime ministers, k.d. lang, orphan children, coal miners, pundits. He was the ultimate tour guide.

I made up my mind. I wanted to work at the CBC. I wanted to work in radio. I wanted to dive in to the real issues of the day. The class clown would have to take a supporting role. Life was changing. I didn't realize it but I would become the kind of person who thrived in reinvention.

I was two years into the three-year program at Ryerson, approaching thirty and wanting get married to my partner and have kids. Enter Stuart McLean stage left. "You know Ralph, I've been thinking that you really don't need to be here. There's a job available out at CBC Winnipeg for a current affairs researcher working on the morning drive home shows. "But I still have a year to go and they want me to be the editor of the *Ryersonian* in first term next year." I said. I had always sucked at school and now, for once, I was actually doing well. Stuart persisted. He gave me the contact info and I called to get an appointment.

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Winnipeg. What did I know about Winnipeg? Really cold, middle of nowhere and half my friends had come to Toronto to get out of there. When I told one of them I was applying for job in Winnipeg they said, “You’re going the wrong way.”

I began to prepare. First I cold called a producer there and asked how they format their interviews. They started with a focus statement, why you’re interviewing this person, then an intro paragraph for the host and then five questions. Those usually started with a why query. “Why did you take on this project?”

I threw myself at the task. Someone, I can’t remember who, got me access to the CBC research library. There was no internet, no google back then, just microfiche and hard copy of newspapers from around the country and the world. I scoured the back editions of the *Winnipeg Free Press*. This was real and I wanted to be totally prepared. I happen to have a neuro-diverse brain though I grew up with no label for that fact. I was just ‘bored’ in school, disruptive, unable at times to pay attention to details. Today with two if not three of my children living with the same obstacles I can tell them, I’m with you. I have ADHD too.

But this time I was ready to plow through, to be thorough. I collected eighteen stories. The term for these focus, intro, questions and guest scripts was a ‘Green’. I went to the interview, spent the entire time talking story ideas and got a call soon after offering me the Winnipeg job. It was full time, \$23,000.00 a year! I paid one of my ex-Winnipeg friends 450 bucks for his geriatric blue volvo and packed the wheezing old beater to the gunnels with everything from clothes to records and started off by myself on the two-day drive the Peg.

Two hours out of Toronto I heard a bang and then the flip flop of rubber as the car starting grinding to the right. I pulled over. I was already terrified of what I had just committed to. A straight job

in a city I didn't know and the real possibility that I was going to screw this up. Hell I didn't even have a degree to show for all my J school efforts. So there I was staring at a flat tire on the side of the road on the way to the TransCanada highway. I rummaged through the trunk not knowing if I even had a spare tire let alone the tools to make the change. I found the thingamabob that loosens the nuts. I thought, okay you can probably do this. I couldn't. No matter how hard I tried I couldn't move the nut.

All of a sudden I looked up and there was a bear of a man standing on the shoulder. I hadn't even noticed that someone had driven up behind and stopped. He had a thick French accent and an even thicker beard and belly. "Need some 'elp?" Years later while I was training to become a Spiritual Director I would be asked to write a paper on angels. I demurred telling the Rabbi teaching the course that I really couldn't relate to the idea of winged do-gooders or even do-badders. In response, the Rabbi led me through a guided mediation, and I realized that what she was talking about was more metaphorical. Angel energies appear at different times and through different channels in your life. I thought about my guardian angels. My father, my old best friend, both dead. I remembered this burly and kind man who knelt down and with a mighty turn of the ratchet loosened the bolts, put on the service tire and lowered the jack. All without an agenda. Just because I was on the side of the highway and he reached out to help.

The minute before he arrived I was already thinking that this whole Winnipeg thing had been a huge mistake. The night before my partner and I had thrown a big party for all our show biz friends, a bon voyage. I had wondered how in hell could I turn back tail between my ambitious legs and admit defeat. Now, instead a guardian angel had arrived and pushed me a little further away from my past life and in to the one that awaited me.

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I got a new tire in Gogama, where the mechanic also told me my brakes were close to shot, but I had no money to do anything about that. The radio was dead so I perched my Walkman on the dash with two seriously chintzy little speakers attached and on day two I drove for fifteen hours straight. At the border between Ontario and Manitoba everything changed. As I listened to the CBC the rugged lake region of Kenora gave way to the flattest land I had ever seen. The sky was like an upside down ocean of blue with crested clouds like whitecaps floating above me. I arrived at a friend's apartment. They were out of town, but the landlady saw me pull up and asked if I was staying with Charlie and Betty. She handed me the key to their place. I dragged my belongings in, minus two milk cartons of records I had left on the side of the road somewhere round Lake Superior. I figured less weight might mean I could still stop suddenly even with worn out brake pads.

I had a hot bath, sat down and watched a CFL football game. I don't remember who played, I just sat and watched. It was Saturday night. By Monday I would start at the CBC building on Portage Avenue.

I spent my thirties and forties working at the CBC, a good portion of my life. I always tell people that it was like being in a candy store. I could try a little of this and a little of that. Move between current affairs and variety, TV and radio. I worked on contract for the whole time. Year after year that made me have to think of what I could do next.

I have seen my country and fallen in love with it. We, unlike much of the 'old world' do not have seven-hundred-year-old churches. Our cathedrals are made fir and redwood. Our monuments of towering granite and ocean chiseled sandstone. We scatter along the southern border, most often, and live the impossible dream of nationhood. Thousands of kilometres separate our coasts. Language, geography and powerful regions crush together to make a place we can't define

but know is ours the minute we leave it for work or pleasure.

From that first day in Winnipeg, pitching stories for the morning Information Radio program to my last day as I packed up my office with no fanfare, no goodbye, I had the privilege of giving voice and my life's energy to the telling the Canadian story.

They say that youth is wasted on the young. I don't think so. What I do know is that my young journey was very much fuelled by a cocktail of ambition, ego, success and heartbreak. I spent two years in Winnipeg. Our first child was born there. My first eight months I was a current affairs researcher booking guests, cigarette in hand, for the local drive shows. Then I was a host of the late-night weekend FM show *Nightlines*. My producer was Ross Porter. We had a blast up till 3:00 a.m. each weekend night, playing true FM set lists. Ross had an encyclopedic music mind and exquisite taste in many genres' but particularly in jazz. We would remain friends for a long time.

But Winnipeg was not home. I would remember being in the parking lot at Polo Park Mall and looking up I would think I recognized someone. "What am I thinking, I don't know anyone here." I had to get home. Remember Anton, the Station Manager at CKLN? The one I had started at Yuk Yuks with? While I was burrowing away on the prairie he had landed a job at CBC trying to get all the afternoon shows to drag themselves musically in to the 1980s. It was not that much fun, with some shmuck from head office in Toronto telling you to play a little more Tears for Fears and a lot less Celtic folk.

As I yearned for home Anton found his way into a show called *Prime Time*. It was brand new and the host and producer weren't gelling. He tipped me off that change might be afoot. I started contributing, I focused on finding a way in and lo and behold I was offered the job. Stand-up had been a low rent jungle and I was not cut out for the itinerant life it offered. Nightclub performing could kill

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any marriage and poverty held no romantic interest for me. I wanted to be creative every day and see the fruits of that labour. I was on my way. Anton, with his own illustrious career and a heart of gold, and I lunched together most days over the next eighteen years at CBC. My friend, Anton, was the only thing that I truly missed as I walked out the door after two decades. We don't see each other enough.

Career climbing is hard and sometimes unfeeling work. I regret not having enough kindness and certainly not the wisdom to cherish my opportunities and the people who helped me along the way.

When Anton and I revamped *Prime Time* we got in touch with Paul K. Willis, one of our friends from stand-up days. He and his comedic partner were known as La Troupe Grotesque. Man could he write funny. He became our show announcer, and his openings were wonderful. He passed many years ago and I miss him. My first interview for the show was with legendary actor Gordon Pinsent. He was a great talker and his skill made me look good, it was a nice way to start.

Radio was good to me. We worked out of the old radio building on Jarvis Street where there were no elevators and occasionally we found mice in the desk drawers. But at least the windows opened and there were no security gauntlets to navigate. Unfortunately, it was there that security became a thing. One day Tom Shipton, who was the producer for *The Royal Canadian Air Farce*, was working the weekend getting his show together for airing when he noticed someone strange walking round in the building. He asked if he could help. The man became evasive. Tom followed him and eventually the man lashed out then ran out of the building. After that there was a guard in the parking lot making sure you had ID, it felt like a subtle but real loss of innocence. The Jarvis Street building was also where I first met the legendary Peter Mansbridge. At the time he drove a flashy Toyota sports car and was the anchor in waiting as Knowlton

Nash wound down his tenure.

Peter reached out after I had done something that was, shall we say, unusual. The Winnipeg police had notified me that I had hundreds of dollars in unpaid parking tickets. Let's just say accumulating those violations were a family affair. I offered a novel solution to the problem. I would headline for a week at the Winnipeg Yuk Yuks and all proceeds would go to the Winnipeg Police parking tags office. Somehow the Canadian Press wire service got hold of the story and it went old school viral. Appearing in papers around the country. When I came back from the show I was seated with Peter at a luncheon. He was tickled by the spirit of the tale and I was flattered that he was even talking to me.

My next step was a big switch. I moved from *Prime Time* and radio to Canada's number one daytime TV magazine show *Midday*. The show was well funded and had a global canvas – the first Gulf war, the Oka Crisis, Meech Lake and the Charlottetown accord failures. My days were filled with interviewing and research and my co-host, Valeri Pringle, was a wonderful person and a real mentor. She was authentic, intelligent and fun.

Valerie was the best mentor I could have asked for. Smart, witty and generous. Our chemistry was there from day one. She would joke to anyone coming in for an interview. "This is Ralph, he's about to tell you that he's a Spanish Moroccan Jew." She was, sadly, right. We travelled the country going to Smithers, B.C.; Prince Edward island; Iqaluit up in Nunavut. You name it. In studio we had the world come to us.

I love shows that are done in magazine formats. You get the whole range of topic – finance ministers after a budget, the Bare-naked Ladies before anyone really knew who they were. One guest I will always remember is the American blues and jazz icon Eartha

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Kitt. I had interviewed her in London, England for my previous show, *Prime Time*. We were there for a two-week recording spree, we spoke with Pierce Brosnan, 10cc partners Godley and Creme, Richard Branson on his boathouse parked in a murky canal. Ms. Kitt came to our CBC radio studio in downtown London. On the way in to the interview she had noticed a houseplant outside a Producers office. She immediately took out a pair of scissors and proceeded to give the shrub a less than gentle haircut. I was dumbfounded, I didn't know what to say or do. Having finished her trim she marched by me and into the studio. There she sat like a sphynx staring off into the distance until the moment I finished the introduction and said hello. At that point she lit up with a ten-thousand-volt smile and engaged in deep eye contact. Interview over, I ushered her out hoping she would wreak no more havoc. When I came back into the hallway the Producer had returned from lunch. She, well, she was freaking out. (The plant made *The Daily Mail*.)

Flash forward to the *Midday* set. Ms. Kitt was in town on a promotional tour. I walked in to the make-up room. This time I was going to have none of her gamesmanship. I approached. She had a stylish purple scarf wrapped round her head and was, once again sitting sphynx like. "Hi, Eartha, don't know if you remember me but we spoke in London once a little while back. You butchered a plant. It made the *Daily Mail*. No plants out on set today though, sorry. Anyway, I'll see you out there in about ten minutes."

Much of what we did on *Midday* was taped during the morning for a hard deadline of 11:00 a.m. to air in the Maritimes. This was a pre-tape as well. Eartha sat down. I introduced her and she leaned toward me on the couch and literally cooed. "I like you." She said something about men. Not sure what but I responded asking what she thought of men. There was a bowl of clear marbles on the coffee table in front of

us. She dug in to them and holding them above the glass topped table she said, “Men are like water, they just pass through your hands.” At this point she released the cascade of clear glass marbles on to the plate glass top. They crashed down almost breaking the surface. She smiled.

But I had learned something by the time I was doing that second interview with Ms. Kitt. Just like in stand-up you have to make the performance space your own. Journalists hate admitting that there is an element of theatre in the craft, but there is. I remember sitting on the set one day with one of our senior producer who was filling in for Valerie. I said that we were doing theatre in a way. She was mortified. She insisted that we weren't. Now don't get me wrong I'm not saying that she and I did not diligently do our research and employ to the best of our abilities the highest journalistic standards. I was saying that every story has to be sold. Every show implores you to stay tuned, to be loyal. To engage emotionally. Everyone says, “Don't go away, we'll be right back.” To prove my point with my producer I asked her what she thought our opening theme and credits were designed to do. I belted out the tune, ba da da dada dum da da dah! Cue the big-voiced announcer, *Midday* – With Valerie Pringle and Ralph Benmergui. Cut from overhead two shot to single of Valerie as she reads from prompter. Cut to Ralph as he pivots towards camera with the green screen behind him. Music out. Did I take the question of my responsibility to be well read and thorough seriously? Yes. Did I have a ton of hairspray in my hair and a ton of make-up on to make me look less than cadaverous? Also yes.

Back to Eartha. With the interview over I thanked her and she flashed that ten-thousand-volt smile. I had taken a bit of my stand-up life and repurposed it for my next life. The interviewer and host.

Midday was a great show to work on. I'll share two more quick stories. One involves the great Vegas illusionist act Penn and Teller.

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Penn Jillette did all the talking, and it seemed to me that Teller was the Harpo Marx of the duo. Silent and elf like. While we were on the couch, all entertainment in studio guests were seated on the couch, and I was talking to Penn, Teller got up and started poking at the fake city skyline in the flat behind us. It was kind of funny. He was pointing out the artificial ambience of the set. When he sat down again I figured I'd ask him a question to see how he would respond. "You're kind of the Harpo in this act, right?" I asked. Teller looked insulted and proceeded to pick up a full glass from that same coffee table and threw it in my face. He missed my face but did nail the shirt and tie. My only thought was whether or not my lapel microphone still worked. I could hear it in my earpiece so I carried on. Having been a stand up I got what he was trying to do. I also knew, like he did, that it hadn't turned out to be that funny. I finished the interview and as soon as the floor director said, "And we're off," Teller jumped up and said, "I am so sorry, really, I'll buy you a new shirt, can I get you a tie?" I said, "No problem. I get what you were after there." My executive producer happened to be up in the control room at the time. She was angry. I headed her off before she could say anything. "Suzanne," I said, "they didn't mean anything by it. He was just trying it out. Believe me there will be people who will see that and remember for the rest of their lives." She cooled down, they left, a little bit sheepish. Television is a media of moments, an emotional medium.

One last story. This one involves the Chairman of the CBC at the time, the famed and tough-minded broadcaster Patrick Watson. The government of the day under Conservative prime minister Brian Mulroney had just announced devastating cuts of 108 million dollars to the annual budget of the CBC. I was called at home to say that we had an early afternoon "double ender" with Watson for reaction. A double ender was when the guest has a camera crew and a telex

available to them. The crew would shoot the guests answers with professional visual and sound. The guest would hear you through an earphone. In this case I was on the phone from home, having finished the show taping and story meeting by then. I had a four-year-old downstairs so I kept him busy and went up and closed the bedroom door so as not to be interrupted. Watson was truly a gifted broadcaster having hosted and revolutionized current affairs television with the seminal program *This Hour has Seven Days*. He asked tough questions. We began and at some point I asked if he felt comfortable going along with these drastic cuts that would see regional TV and Radio taking the brunt of the fiscal blow. He shot back, saying, well would you rather they have some political hack in this job? At this point my son was banging on the door. I persevered. Well aren't you in danger of becoming a political hack by going along? With an angry child in the backroom and an angrier Chairman of the broadcaster that employed me on the phone Watson exploded. Benmergui, you are subject to the laws of libel, calling me a political hack. I don't remember much else of the interview after that. I hung up and felt a combination of excited and fearful. I had stood up to an uber boss and it would be on national television the next day.

Remember I spoke about the theatre of journalism. Well, here's the perfect example. The next day I had to go on set and re-enact the interview so that they could record me in studio as if it was live. I had a choice to make. I knew what Mr. Watson was going to say. I could have added a good dollop of calm and arrogance that would make me look good and him look even worse. I decided to do something else. I employed what little genuine acting skills I could still muster and became totally present to what was in front of me. I was actually as scared and exhilarated as I had been the day before. Propelled by the knowledge that what was said was going out to the entire country

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I didn't need to fake anything. In a double ender when you start talking the floor director would count you down with hand signals because you had to fit your comments and questions in to a hard hole in the tape as they say.

One thing did bother me. The producer had decided to bury the interview at the bottom of the hour. I knew they had dynamite given the dynamics of the situation but they were too scared to lead with it. Once it was done I started getting calls from people. The one that meant the most was from the head of our program and of *The Journal* with Barbara Frum, Mark Starowicz, he congratulated me and said he was proud. Even the head of current affairs liked it. He was the one who told my executive producer Suzanne Boyce, the one who had taken a big chance on me, that she could hire me but if I bombed it would be on her head too. That interview was quoted by the Prime Minister and netted me a Gemini TV nomination in the same year that I hosted, along with the fabulous Cynthia Dale, the Gemini awards themselves. I was flying high professionally, but I didn't appreciate the moment in ways that made me in any way wiser.

With *Midday* I learned the art of tv broadcasting. Just like great acting and stand-up it was about being present, being able to chance being truly curious and most of all being authentic.

Years later when Paul McLaughlin, who had been one of my Ryerson professors, ran advanced training courses for CBC on-air hosts, he would invite me to speak to them for half a day. Here is what I shared:

The bad news is that it's not healthy to want thousands, if not millions of strangers to love you. The good news is that you actually have the skill and tools to make that happen.

So, now that you have their attention what is it you want to say?

You see that's really it, at least for me. I knew lots of people in broadcasting, stand-up and acting that were quite content to stop

at getting the love. I felt that the love should come from family and the much more difficult journey to loving myself. That phrase, love of self, has always been problematic for me. It's like the word ego. Both have come to mean an exaggerated sense of worth, but there are other meanings. Ego, for me, is really about choices. What makes me do or avoid doing something out in the world? What if I find if I come from a place of insecurity? I must be become bigger and command attention like some frightened puffer fish.

One way to achieve some level of security, if not fame, was marquee status. In a country as demographically small as Canada name recognition for public figures is almost non-existent. Actors with long and illustrious careers go unnoticed and unknown. Does it matter? Hell yes. Without marquee value you have no leverage to command a decent wage for your talents. Besides you are wanting to be noticed. I used to ensure that my name was included in the title of every show I hosted. After all this is Canadian showbiz, the witness protection program of public life. In later years I found myself wanting to step away from the spotlight. My ego-chasing days had caused more pain than joy. Was this retreat about reaching an epiphany, finding wisdom, or the satisfaction of arrival? No. It was for me, a fall from grace.

Friday Night with Ralph Benmergui

I remember walking through the canyon of mid-sized skyscrapers of uptown Toronto on a blustery winter night. Looking up I literally thought, “One day I’ll own this town.” This was another in a series of over compensating moments that had started with that chubby boy pushing leaves down the street practicing his Academy Award acceptance speech. Yeah I was on the way up. Mind you I had also had that thought after an unpaid set at Yuk Yuks and a stolen chicken salad sandwich from the Club’s kitchen. Nonetheless fame would be mine.

Midday was going well. I was hosting the Gemini’s, what could go wrong? The Gemini telecast was watched that year by what was a big audience for English speaking Canada. The biggest for that or any other Gemini telecast, if memory serves. About million people tuned in and with some great producing by the likes of head writer Joe Bodolai, and a great production team, the night went off without a

hitch. I do remember standing backstage in my tux and thinking, what the hell am I doing? If I bomb out there, I'll do it in front of the entire television industry in this country. This was like hitting the stage on a Saturday night at Yuk Yuks times one hundred. I had just been working on a late night one-on-one pilot for a talk show with one of the country's best independent producers, but the pilot had not gone well. That night, at the Geminis, nothing could go wrong. I was seated with my wife and newly minted movie star and SNL favorite Mike Myers. His *Wayne's World* flick had just crossed the 100-million-dollar mark. He was classically Canadian. Authentic and kind to those around him with a large dollop of shyness and underneath a steel eyed sense of what funny is all about. My fortunes were changing.

By the next day my phone was ringing, Lawyer/agent Michael Levine was on the line to anoint me into the exclusive club of movers and shakers in the smallish solar system that was and is Canadian stardom. I could write my own ticket. Kind of. Well, not really, but hey who knew? I met with the heads of programming for both major networks. CTV said, "Ralph, we love you but we can't support a late night TV talk show. Numbers just aren't there." CBC, well they were more intrigued.

I told Ivan Fecan the then head of programming at CBC, that I wanted to basically do *The Ed Sullivan Show* with all Canadian talent. I thought that the public broadcaster should be unabashedly enthusiastic about the enormous amount of talent we had and that a showcase with me on the side in a nice tux would fit the bill. "Lose the tux and we're in business." Ivan said. But here's where things got Faustian. I was told that we could get the green light but that the 'we' had to change. Instead of the Producer I had been working with, who I had piloted the original idea with, I would have to have a new production team. Perhaps the team that had just hit a home run with

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the Gemini's would fit the bill. Oh, and by the way, I had to be the one to cut ties with the original Producer. I always regret that I didn't have the confidence to say, look I liked working with him, if you want to fire him you go right ahead. I didn't have the backbone to do it. I did it and we never worked together again. When someone says they have no regrets, don't believe them. I have plenty and that has always been one of them.

I carried on. By now the full weight of the CBC was behind me. We had just moved in to the brand new Broadcast Centre at the foot of Front St. across from the Skydome where the Blue Jays were busy winning back-to-back world series championships. Great right? But I was getting this awful feeling that I could have whatever I wanted and that everyone wanted to be my friend. Neither struck me as a good place to be in life, work or family, but it was too late to turn back now.

This was going to be a big show, talk, music, comedy, variety. All of it, and all kinds of agendas were at play. Some were obvious, some more insidious.

I remember the late great showbiz interviewer Brian Linehan coming to see one of the rehearsals and turning to Variety Head George Anthony, who he had been close to for so many years and saying. "My God, you've put the entire CBC building on Ralph's back!" Or words very much to that effect. The Head of Variety wanted one kind of, frankly more old fashion guest list, the head of television was shifting the whole evening schedule around and was looking to us to deliver a million eyeballs every Friday. Me, I was trying to walk around like the quarterback everyone was hoping I would be.

We had all the resources you could ask for. The show was going to look like a million bucks, even though it cost a tenth of that per episode. I was now surrounded by people who had the scent of power in their nostrils. I was becoming very much a commodity.

Meanwhile, I was getting less and less myself. I used that experience years later when interviewing John Travolta. I had three minutes to speak with him on a film junket while he was promoting a dreadful movie called *The General's Daughter*.

Here's what I asked:

What's it like to fly in to Vancouver?

(He's a pilot and had done two films in Vancouver recently)

Why do you barnstorm Kristie Alley's house?

(They were neighbour's and he loved doing that)

What is an "Assist"?

(He and Alley are Scientologists, and an Assist is a sort of laying-on-of-hands healing they do)

With the film company publicist signalling me to wrap it up I asked one more question:

What effect has having millions of dollars had on your ability to form friendships?

The last question had him bolting upright in his chair. "That is the best question I have had to date," he said. Travolta went on for a few minutes about finding out who your real friends are and the sad truth that power attracts many and falling off that pedestal has the salutatory effect of shedding the hanger's on. Without my own fall from grace I would not have asked that question. Travolta had been a superstar, fallen out of favour and was only brought back by Quentin Tarantino through the box office hit *Pulp Fiction*.

Friday Night would teach me a lot. We had a hugely hyped premiere. Don Cherry, the hockey macho man, and Scott Thompson, the flamingly gay Kid in the Hall, ended up on a couch beside each other with Scott snuggling up to Don. It was supposed to be Canadiana for the new generation. A million people watched and the executives were ecstatic. One minor note though. The show debuted,

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at my urging, an hour earlier than what was to become its regular time slot. You see the latest edition of the flagship news show, *The National* was making an unfortunate major move, broadcasting an hour earlier at 9:00 p.m. Anchor Peter Mansbridge was going to be joined by Pamela Wallin who had been poached from rival CTV. It was a big night for appointment television.

The next week we debuted at 10:00, and the audience was cut in half. Part of it was me, part of it was something much deeper that I didn't understand at the time and later would become clear. The show was high status, glitzy, slick and screamed Toronto – the one city in Canada that unified all other Canadians in contempt. What we like, as Canadians, and I say this with a good measure of admiration, is low status public displays. We are averse to hype and bluster. Think about it. The show that I replaced was the darling of white christian Canada, *The Tommy Hunter Show*. “Goodnight and may God Bless.” The show that they replaced me with when I was eventually and mercifully cancelled starred the Celtic darling of small town Canada, Rita MacNeil. I was some guy with a weird name, visibly uncomfortable and claiming to speak for mainstream Canadian culture. Probably not such a good idea. But forget all that. I wanted to showcase our talent. Largely ignored at home and deserving of a national audience and the full weight of great production values.

We had everybody. The record companies spared no expense in getting us the likes of Céline Dion, Leonard Cohen with his L.A. back up singers and even the reunion, sans Robbie Robertson, of The Band. It was thrill to just stand there and say to camera. Ladies and Gentlemen Buffy Saint Marie. We had Bachman–Turner Overdrive open the show with our house band bringing the house down with their hit “Takin’ Care of Business.” The Rheostatics, Martin Tielli with Hugh Marsh on his electric violin just killed me with their version of

Joni Mitchell's "River." When it comes to the showbiz side of me, I am actually pretty corny. I even had the original plate spinner from the *Ed Sullivan Show* on when I found out he was Canadian. I wore original Canadian jackets designed by Indigenous artists. On the night everyone thought the show was electric. At home on TV for some reason that none of us could really figure out, it wasn't working.

We had Sarah MacLachlan debuting her first smash hit, the Barenaked Ladies doing two songs on our first show from their breakout album, *Gordon*. Bruce Cockburn, Junkhouse, The Pursuit of Happiness. We had all the comics I had started out with doing stand-up on a national stage. When Brian Mulroney resigned I opened the show with a picture of him framed by a funeral wreath dressed as a preacher. I delivered a eulogy and then burst into song. It was one the writers came up with called "He's Gone!" The curtain rose behind me and a full gospel choir belted it out as I walked into an audience that was madly clapping along.

I had gone from interviewing very serious people about the state of national and global affairs to funny man host of a variety show. But my opening monologues were too stiff. I had lost the spontaneity in my interviewing with all the prep and tech run through. Peter Mansbridge kindly took me out to lunch to remind me that interviewing was what I did best and to throw away the cue cards and just relax. But I felt out of my skin. Detached from my actual life. The one where I walked the dog in the park and wanted to be home.

We soldiered on as the ratings slowly descended into dangerous territory. The critics hated it. To be precise they hated me. There was blood in the water. I would wring my hands during the monologue. Wince, when the bandleader would have the crowd chant my name. Frankly, I wasn't able to throw myself wholeheartedly into the showbiz or bust tank. I had just come from the current affairs world and deep

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down I knew it was much more me. I even had the thought that it wasn't right to do the show on the Jewish Sabbath.

On my previous show, *Midday*, I had been wondering what to do with my desire to deepen my relationship to Judaism. I began to ask myself questions like, what if I just showed up on the set one day wearing a keepah, my traditional head covering? I had returned to my Judaism in my late twenties in a way that many do. I had wandered off earlier and had spent time exploring all the facets that made up the diamond of my spiritual life. But I came back for the tradition and the family glue that oozes out once children arrive. I attended synagogue and was immersed in Jewish thought and innovation.

So, what, I would muse as I drove to work each day, if I just arrived with the obvious sign of my religion, my keepah atop my head? What would the current affairs honchos do? Would I be asked to remove it before going on air? If so why? Would it be assumed that if I was interviewing someone about the Gulf War for instance that I would be proclaiming a bias towards the interests of Israel? For years now people had assumed that to be Jewish is to be pro-Israeli policy, to not be able to think critically about the region and to be an automatic Zionist. Then should they not also have also assumed that I would be anti-communist after a lifetime of being fed stories of atrocity and deprivation? That I would cleave un-questioningly to the dusty tropes of the 'Free World' and the miracle of the free markets? For that matter how could I interview someone with a neo-conservative ideology if, in my own way thinking, that ideology lead to growing poverty and obscene concentrations of wealth?

The answer to me was obvious. The secret sauce of journalism was and is genuine curiosity. Critical and well researched thinking must inform every interview and societal assumptions must be seen as just that, assumptions. Disruptive, yes but I have always been that

way. Indeed, once I had arrived at the network level of current affairs the invitations to the circle of what was later termed white privilege arrived at my desk. To be in the mid-to-upper levels of media was to be part of the power. What I found disturbing was the ease with which so many of us elbowed our way to the dessert table and the nod and wink of those that we had been tasked to hold accountable.

So, what if I wore a keepah? Would I be asked to stay off the air, re-assigned in some balletic HR move that would avoid the charge of discrimination? Do we assume that organized religion carries deep bias, but that secularism is more non-committal? Is the atheist any less orthodox than the religious person who believes in Christ the Saviour?

I never tested the limits. I was doing well and I had a family to feed. I guess the feeling stayed with me as I hit the spotlight on what was later referred to as “The ill-fated *Friday Night* with Ralph Benmergui.” I soldiered on wondering, “What am I doing here with all these people staring at me.” In the pit of my stomach the feeling grew that this was not my calling. I had climbed the skyscrapers of Canadian notoriety just as planned and found the view from atop sorely lacking.

I had more than my share of scorn tossed my way during *Friday Night*. Some I deserved, some was viscerally dark and uncalled for. Like I said it’s a blood in the water sport, and I was the one bleeding. I remember riding my bike home from the towering new CBC building and seeing the cover of *Frank*, a satirical magazine that revelled in taking the piss out of those that would claim centre stage, be it in politics, media or occasionally the arts. I don’t remember what they were saying but it was a basket of insults and humiliations directed squarely at me. I cycled on and once home I sat with my two young boys. They had no idea what a maelstrom had formed around me. I found great comfort in that. I knew that who I was attempting to

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become as a person was not to be confused with what I did for a living.

I did grow lonely though, I lost my way, I was fearful and craving affirmation wherever I could get it. My life was filled with hangers on. On the day I was called in to the network executives office to be told that the show was cancelled I didn't realize it, but I had been given a blessing. I began my fall from grace.

Jump!

You'll Grow Wings on the Way Down

I travelled with my family to Costa Rica for a month. I was exhausted. The waves came crashing in close to our yurt like cabin at the vegetarian resort we had booked. I worried about what I, the sole provider at the time, would do. Who would hire me? In the States it seemed that if something didn't work at the higher levels of the entertainment business they just cooked up some other way to capitalize on the fact that you had marquee value. Back home it always seems that we figure that so and so had their chance now let someone else give it a go, after all there are only so many seats on the good ship Canada.

I slept, I schemed. I watched laserdiscs of Disney bootlegs at the restaurant with local kids gathered round. I practiced my Spanish. Not much call for that in Canada.

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I returned in time for the Gemini awards and was presenting with my old co-host Valerie Pringle. She introduced me as “What’s left of my friend Ralph.” I walked on stage bearded and tanned, but not relaxed. I received some mild, if not pitying applause. Then Seaton McLean, co-founder of Atlantis Films, one of the country’s most successful production companies, stood up. He stood as if to say, “Good on ya, Ralph, you gave it a real go.” I will always remember that simple act of kindness.

I spent the next eight months writing a never to be published book and meditating every day. I immersed myself in Buddha Dharma, read the *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, and *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom*, by American writers Jack Kornfield and Joseph Goldstein. They are part of what is affectionately known as the JuBu Movement. Many of the leaders of the North American Buddhist movement are Jews. I am still a borderline JuBu in many ways. The stillness and presence that are core to the meditative practice were, and still are, good medicine for my aching sprit.

Taking what I learned about my country through *Friday Night* – that we are humble people who enjoy modest entertainment – I began to turn away from the showbiz beast. If you want to be big go to L.A. or New York. We’ll love you and claim you as our own if you make in that arena but if you’re staying, keep it simple. I don’t think that’s a bad thing. It’s just a thing I learned. The rest of my career has been more in line with that truth.

I had a lot of repair work to do. My marriage had taken a beating and I had used up much of my professional capital. One day I noticed that the head of the CRTC, Canadian Radio and Television Commission, Keith Spicer had been swirling around the country, cape and hat in hand, proclaiming on the inadequacies of the CBC. He did so without mentioning that each year the budget had been slashed,

that the political masters of both Liberal and Conservative stripe had starved the public broadcaster and forced it to seek profit and pop appeal, implementing a year-by-year budgetary stranglehold around the throat of the Corporation.

I wrote an op-ed in rebuttal, and Jim Byrd, a lovely man from Newfoundland who was now running the TV side of the CBC got in touch. He asked if I would go for lunch. I arrived on my bike, we sat and talked and he asked if I would like to work at NewsWorld. I said sure. I was so grateful that what I really wanted to do was hug him right there in the restaurant.

It was good to know that someone believed in me. It was better to know that I could still make a living despite the media stoning I had just been through. I spent the next six years hosting a small town-hall show in the atrium of the CBC building in Toronto. *Benmergui Live*. We scraped by barely noticed but we also had a lot of fun. The pressure was off.

I used to have a bet with the show Director, Michelle Berlyne. We would bet to see how long it would take for someone to get on the line and open with, ‘Hi, Ben.’ It happened almost every day. Soon as I heard it I would look straight in to the camera and slowly widen my eyes. I would hear Michelle laughing in my earpiece. She had been my Director on *Midday* and I loved working with her. Also on the staff was someone I first met when I did a few months of call-in on the Ontario-region *Radio Noon* show. Jennifer Dettman had been a part-time chase producer booking guests and generating show ideas. They wanted to cut her for budgetary purposes, but I said they were nuts. She stayed and came with me to *Benmergui Live*. She left later to produce Strombo’s national talk show and went on to become a senior part of the CBC TV 7th Floor group. Jennifer Dettman was truly the best chase producer and idea generator I ever had the pleasure of working with.

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We were live the day the O.J. Simpson trial released its verdict. You could hear a pin drop across North America. I was convinced that he would be found guilty. The verdict was read live. O.J. had already revolutionized all news television with his slow-motion Ford Bronco Drive in L.A. That event alone had literally birthed the now completely meaningless phrase 24/7 cutline, Breaking News.

The verdict was read. Not Guilty. I couldn't believe it. We were flooded with calls. I have always loved live broadcasting. Keeps you in the present. If I had my way, we would have played Don McLean's "American Pie" at that moment.

We also did a live show from Warkworth Prison in Ontario where we assembled a gymnasium filled with men had been sentenced to life in prison. Now it's important to know a few things here. First off they were all there voluntarily. Jennifer and I had driven up to see them in a classroom at the prison to talk to them and to gain their trust that we were there to hear their truth as people, not just as convicts. Believe me some of them had done horrible things, murder, sexual predation. There was even a professional hit man who wiled away his time on the range popping pills and playing pool. But the thing is a life sentence is a misnomer. These men were really going to be there for anywhere from eight to possibly seventeen years depending on how they behaved and what programs they completed while penned up.

The question we asked the national audience that night was: What should we do with these men? Some said throw away the key. Some said rehabilitate. Most didn't realize that one day they would be sitting beside one of these men at their local Coffee shop. It was tough to go into that prison every day as we prepared knowing strange things, like the fact that murderers are the least likely to re-offend. That in many cases, hit man excluded, these were acts of passion or psychotic breaks. Every day we would leave. One gate would open and then close

behind us, then another gate would open and close behind us. As I looked back I thought it so strange that these men would spend years never going out to get groceries, catch a local hockey game, be free. They had forfeited that right. One thing I did know, though, was that prison could easily harden your heart, break your spirit and spit you out on to the street doomed and ripe for failure. Any eye for an eye was not meant to justify savage jailings, it was meant to ensure that compensation for foul deeds obligated the perpetrator to make things right. We did some great shows on that small program.

I liked hearing from people every day and I was grateful to still be on the air.

But *Friday Night* had bruised me more than I realized. Occasionally I would try to land a bigger fish as I toiled away in the atrium. In fact, there came a time where I was up for a major network radio show that would run from nine till noon weekdays. The *Morningside* of its time. I wanted that show very much. I never felt as comfortable on TV as I did on radio. It was a more intimate medium and frankly more soulful.

The day they informed me that I didn't get it I was walking home. I stopped to take the call and when they said good bye I turned in to a small alley way and for one of the few times in my broadcast life, I cried. I felt I had been born to do that job. From then on I knew my days at the CBC were numbered. My life was changing, my marriage was ending and that chapter of my life was coming to an end. I didn't plan any of this, it just came together, and apart, as it were. Without realizing it I was entering the autumn of my life. I wasn't there yet but the crimson trees were there just over the horizon.

It was time to leave the CBC and luckily I was asked to join my old producer from the Winnipeg days, Ross Porter, at Jazz FM. He was the new CEO and I managed to end up as the Morning Show

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host. Ross was creating a small miracle, a twenty-four seven all jazz, real jazz station in Canada's biggest media market. The place was abuzz and the ride was up and down over the next six years. I got remarried and had another two children. I was also finally free to get involved in politics – oh, and I had a lot more grey in my beard.

Who's Ralph Benmergui?
Get Me Ralph Benmergui.
Get Me a Young Ralph Benmergui.
Who's Ralph Benmergui?

Part of the work of becoming an elder is crossing the bridge from ego to eco. How can I become part of the greater landscape of community? How can I become useful as a mentor? Noble thoughts to be sure. But if we add in the prevailing attitudes towards us as we age into our elder-hood the task becomes freighted with systemic bias against the very idea of age. We wonder if we will even be asked to contribute. The notion of retirement itself implies a torpor where we linger over

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morning coffees till near noon. We're expected to watch all news TV channels, populated as they are with commercials for stair-lifts, adult diapers and pharmaceuticals with a list of side effects that usually concludes by informing you that in some cases this medication may cause death. Instead of connecting we are supposed to sit quietly hoping that perhaps we'll be hearing from someone we have known or if we're lucky loved. Retirement seems so much like surrender at first glance. Even an active retirement is for many a segregated experience. More and more of us we would rather cling to the last work a day version of ourselves than venture in to the isolating future of no work. But what could we do to make our leave taking from full time work meaningful?

One thing that we have pruned from the tree of life experience in our rush to secularism is the ability to celebrate the passages of life with meaningful and sacred rituals. To even hint at how holy our brief time together is difficult for many of us. Too intimate. I was once leading a workshop, a men's group on Ageing to Sageing. Halfway through the first session one of the men, a bear of a man said, "Is this going to be one of those airy fairy things?" I found myself wanting to reassure him but decided against it. "Yes," I said as I looked him in the eye. "Yes, it is." He turned out to be a valuable member of the group and we shared many tender moments together as he spoke of his love of family and his desire to find a new way of seeing himself and the place of work in his life as he approached seventy.

So, let's get airy fairy. Imagine, instead of simply being shown the door what a leaving ritual might look like? Picture those that you have worked closely with gathered in a circle where power structures disappear and we all face towards each other in a shared space. We all bring an artifact, something that reminds us of what the person leaving has meant to us. A picture, a project file, a shared road trip symbolized by a rent-a-car key fob. As we place these artifacts on a

table in the centre of the circle we tell the story behind it. A facilitator speaks of the power that work and time together can mean. About the fact that this has not just been passing time but a witnessing of each other as we move through this life. The person leaving can speak of what it has meant to be a part of this circle, what they wish for those around them and then each co-worker bestows a wish or blessing on the person exiting the work environment.

Martin Buber talks of the difference between an “I and It” relationship where we see the other in an objectified way, only considering what use a person can be to us and engage with them in a transactional space filled with notions of deficit and surplus and “I and Thou” relationship. An ‘I and Thou’ relationship is where we connect with mutuality, directness, presentness, intensity and ineffability. I think of this as connecting on the plane of soul, heart to heart. Spirituality is about relationship, to ourselves, to each other and to the deep mystery of the unknown. It is an acknowledgement that there is a divinely unknowable spark within everything and our soulful work is not to find it in others as much as allow the hardened shell, the Klipah as we say in Judaism, to soften and fall away, allowing our deeper meaning and true self to emerge so others can see it in us.

It is said that God can only enter through the broken heart. If I believe God to be a process and not a thing, then that idea takes a different shape. It looks more like humility and an opening to what is, right now, and never will be again. Humility is not about the humbling we associate with shame and penitence; humility, I have learned, is knowing what your proper positioning is in any given situation. Would I serve this situation best by following, leading, by listening or speaking? Humility is presence tinged with grace.

So as we sit with the person leaving our work place why not make it personal? Working with others is personal. It requires courage to

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make that a conscious piece of our lives and do more than playfully punch their arm as we shuffle back to our desk knowing that we won't connect again. Imagine as well that we bring our elders back to share their wisdom as we soldier on in our own endeavours. Even the concept of generations has changed as we carve out market segments to sell to. It used to be that a generation was a forty-year span, now it's less than twenty years before the next wave must crash on to the beachheads, the better to flood the halls of our shopping malls.

Leaving for another position with a feeling that there are still years of work ahead of you is one exit. But I have realized the story changes when you are leaving a career or organization in your sixties. We live longer than anyone has in human history. It's not uncommon for a 'retiree' to have another twenty years of living left. Mary Jordan and Kevin Sullivan wrote in a 2017 article for the *Washington Post* that people are living longer, more expensive lives, often without much of a safety net. As a result, record numbers of Americans older than sixty-five are working – now nearly one in five. That proportion has risen steadily over the past decade, and at a far faster rate than any other age group. Today, nine million senior citizens work, compared with four million in 2000.

In speaking to people over fifty who have, for one reason or another had to find new employment, opportunities can become harder to find than they imagined. At first they simply assume that with a powerful resume and lots of gas still in the tank they will be scooped up by another employer. I certainly assumed that when I was relieved of my duties at one of my later positions.

In a late afternoon meeting with the president of Sheridan College he informed me I was enjoying my last day there and handed me a manila envelope that contained a severance offer. "You don't need to look it over now," he said. I was stunned. As I left, my mind

swirling, wondering what I was going to say to my beloved wife I muttered, “Thank you for the opportunity.” I went to my office to take a few essentials having been told that I could pick up the rest on the weekend. I heard work colleagues going about their day, one, wondering if anyone had seen “the Rabbi” as she lovingly called me. I did not respond from inside my office. What I didn’t realize that day was that I was now a man reaching sixty. That people looking for someone to invest in saw little runway in someone like me even if the resume was, as many said very good.

My heart sank as it does for most people when they, like Nachshon in the bible story, are pushed in to the raging sea of uncertainty. I may be older but at that time I still had two of my four children at home, who were school aged. Retirement and a condo downsize were not in the cards. Of course, there would be no closing ritual with heartfelt stories to share with colleagues. I had poured my heart in to the work, as so many do. No, I was simply asked to take a few things, come back after hours to get the rest and just leave. Like a thief in the night. It would be a year until I returned to that President’s office to meet with his successor, a valued friend. I told her that it was hard for me to be there. That I had, basically, vanished as far as any one there was concerned. I probably made her uncomfortable in mentioning it, but I have come to believe that what is left under the surface festers and can leave the tart taste of regret or even bitterness on my tongue. When that later meeting ended I walked the familiar rabbit warren of offices and support staff carols. People came out, gave me a hug, asked how I had been, said that they had missed me. That closure meant a lot, but I didn’t share with them what happened after I left.

I soldiered on. Each resume had to be tailored to the job. Communications, external relations, innovation, post-secondary, media. At the age of sixty I thought I had a well-rounded CV. But something

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strange happened. I wasn't getting the response I was used to. People were being kind, but they were passing. One head-hunter called to tell me that she had pushed hard to have me seen for the final round of interviews but that she was sorry to say they were going in a different direction. The successful candidate was very well qualified, and twenty-five years younger. For some jobs I didn't even receive a courtesy interview, and these were jobs that I was confident I could do at the highest level of competence. I looked at the 'pitch' document for the public broadcaster, my one-time employer of some twenty-one years. Programming must be young and diverse.

In Hindu culture there are four stages of life. For those in their thirties and forties they are in Grihastha, the second stage, as householders, acquiring goods, providing hearth and home for their growing families. The ego is in harness and producing tangible benefits. I have always referred to it as keeping the fridge full. But by the time we arrive at the fork in the road, the place where we journey in to elder-hood we yearn to walk in to the forest and sit quietly as we reflect on a life's effort. This retreat and deepening of spiritual practice, Vanaprashtha is the third stage. The change in life expectancy obviously bring new challenges to the ageing table. How do we finance twenty more years of life in a culture that values youth in everything, especially the workplace? Younger employees, still in the acquisitive stage of their lives might work more hours, have less family to pull them away from the desk and often demand less money than older employees, who rightfully expect to be compensated for their accumulated experience and yes, even their wisdom.

The fastest growing cohort of entrepreneurs in North America are people like me, those fifty-five or older who have had to go out and become their own boss. In many cases not because they want to but because they find that employers and decision makers are

looking over their shoulders like some distracted career climber at a cocktail party searching for the next young star.

The challenge should not be how might we become better entrepreneurs. I believe that the shift to entrepreneurship that I witnessed in colleges and universities, as well in the tech mecca's of Silicon Valley and urban superclusters, is a false narrative. Very few people are suited to entrepreneurship with its spectacular failure rates, high risk and long term investment structures and the drive and deep resilience required to succeed. What the romantic storyline of the genius/rebel covers up is that work itself has died in its twentieth century form. The gold watch and mutual loyalties of employer and employee have vanished and we are left instead with a work culture filled with precarity. Occasional contract opportunities have become the norm. No group health plans, no pension contributions from employers and no sense of community and continuity that comes with long term investment in each other and our gifts.

How do we age in to that environment? Where do we place our hearts in that 'sometime' workplace? This is not simply a question for those approaching the autumn of their work lives but there is one piece that applies mostly to that group. If there is no there, there, where do we deposit our hard earned wisdom and who can benefit from it?

When I first began work at the CBC there were departments for arts programming and for current affairs, as opposed to news gathering. We had producers who were employed on a full-time basis to come up with truly Canadian programming that reflected the best principles of public over private broadcasting. But as successive governments of different political stripes continued to tether the public broadcaster year by year underfunding the corporation decided, as one senior executive at a dinner I attended admitted, "That we are going to use private broadcasting methods to save the public broadcaster."

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My fellow dinner guests didn't bat an eye but in my opinion this was a disastrous decision. The CBC, in particular the television side, has never recovered. Those full time, productive culture workers were shown the door, departments died, contracts became shorter and shorter. We lost what continuity gives to storytelling. We lost our wisdom. Over the years CBC radio has done much with little, TV on the other hand is in desperate need of a total makeover. Though the regional information shows have not changed formats in forty years there is still more ability to pivot and change with the times left in the senior service. On the other hand, blowing up CBC TV and making it a content generator for dissemination to all Canadians without market driven imperatives means a smaller presence unfiltered and in touch with the evolving Canadian story.

Old and Improved

In our rush to join the marketing stampede that slices and dices us according to age and income we have lost something of the public good. That's been a big piece for me. That loosening of community bonds. I grew up in an extended family, with multiple cousins, aunts and uncles that had a firm grip on my little kid cheeks as they pinched the flesh and called me Raffi. They hugged and scolded me like I was one of their own. Now we live alone asking too much of our nuclear family and chasing so much that matters so little. Those days are gone and now my fear is that, not only do we live alone but far worse we are scared that in the end we will die alone.

There are now a billion people on planet earth over the age of sixty, and that population is growing fast. Yet no marketing person in their right mind would sell you a product that is "old and improved." But what if it's true? Lewis Richmond wrote in a recent article titled

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“The Dharma of Aging”: “Research on aging has discovered many aspects of our life that actually improve with age. One of them is “integrative problem solving.” Yes, we may be slower at math problems or word retrieval, but we are better at putting together a creative solution to a complex problem that requires a lot of life experience, as well as a lot of practice in solving such problems. Older people do measurably better at such tasks than younger people do.” Integrative problem solving, precisely the skill set that makes wisdom such a valuable and relevant tool in the Innovation culture. One that we are told is the domain of the young, hip and mobile.

Presently we are mired in an old paradigm of evaluation. Just read the job descriptions that have become grotesque parodies of what any reasonable employer should expect from one employee. “We are looking for a highly motivated energetic individual who is willing to give everything they’ve got. Must be proficient in Word, Adobe, Excel. Able to navigate and populate all social media platforms, proficient in [insert insane list of skills here.]”

It has become normal for the least amount of people to do the most amount of work. In my hiring experience in large organizations the Human Resources lead in the interview most often ends by asking, “Are you willing to work occasional evenings and weekends?” As you can imagine the reply is usually a reluctant yes delivered through a tight smiling mask of enthusiasm. With an older job applicant, I would offer that there is often an unconscious bias that is layered on top of all these chocolate coated, take one for the gipper, demands. That is the assumption that older people are not interested in staying till ten at night. Or going out for drinks after work for that matter. We are in a different geography of our lives. Remember the Hindu view of life stages. In our elder-hood we become more contemplative. Stillness accompanies us as our bodies yearn for respite. Our

minds turn toward the bigger questions. I am left wondering if I can harvest and cultivate all that I have seen, felt, heard.

Could it be that we can ask for something different than simply throwing ourselves in to the fire of some other person's dreams? Make no mistake the young may have the energy and lack of commitments to family and community that elders carry but they too feel the "soul sucking" emptiness that throws life out of balance.

Imagine a different job description. Imagine instead a call, not for a kamikaze foot soldiers but for someone who can serve as a motivated team member, committed and connected, at any age.

If you're interested in living a balanced life and making a healthy and well-respected contribution to an exciting company, then we should talk. We accept the fact that you have friends and family and that your work life and your community should complement, not cancel each other out. Certain skills sets are required, if there are any gaps in your knowledge base of operating systems or if you want to upgrade skills to help make us a better organization we will help identify opportunities that you can take advantage of with the understanding that we have requirements, deadlines and responsibilities to our customers that are baseline requirements for employment.

Apply here.

My journey into precarious work dovetails with a sea change in work culture that is affecting all generations. The difference for me is that I am not looked upon as brimming with potential. Wisdom is not asked for in today's work environment or apparently needed. In fact it could well be seen as old thinking. Ageism is real, I don't think it's conscious, but I take no chances. I shave off my beard if I have a job interview. A grey beard is only hip if you own the company. I don't.

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The effect of all this precarity has been deeply upsetting for me. It has challenged the version of myself that I've been busily constructing for all these years. I hadn't realized how easily I had moved into a place of entitlement. It wasn't about if, it was about when. Yes, I had worked hard, remained nimble and taken chances that others wouldn't have but looking back I don't remember when I crossed the line. You know the one. It's one we use in show business quite a bit.

Who's Ralph Benmergui?

Get me Ralph Benmergui.

Get me a young Ralph Benmergui.

Who's Ralph Benmergui?

Yet, there is something else going on. Something liberating. As some say I have come to the proverbial fork in the road and I have decided that the way forward is about moving from success to significance. This is not an easy turn to make and despite myself I have been wrestling with the choice for these last few years. Only recently have I carved out a space for this idea to inform my intention, my kavanah as we say in Hebrew. The first glimmers actually appeared when I was young, those moments in my early twenties when I dared to dream, where I yearned to change the world. Then as providing and consuming took hold of me I pivoted and surrendered the fight. I opted instead for success and a mild case of materialism. The material can become the measure of a person. It's not just a car, it's THE car, THE house. In fairness I have not been that guy. I have always frankly seen that pursuit as comical at best. Ownership for me is delusional. Everything, and I do mean everything, is a rental.

So, how do we take that turn into Autumn? Now is the time to harvest my wisdom and share it as best I can. This has become what is important, the legacy I wish to leave that will guide my choices and become the measure of my new vision of success. What drives us all

is purpose according to Viktor Frankl, author of the classic book, *Man's Search for Meaning* and holocaust survivor. Work can give us exterior objectives and if we're lucky enough a healthy dollop of purpose, but I do believe that if we are to decouple from the exterior affirmation that work and career can give us we must look inward. When many are on their death bed they speak not of the things they did or had, instead they treasure love. When people die and are resuscitated regardless of cultural predisposition they often speak of a pure love that enveloped them, devoid of judgement. If we cultivate the still small voice within us it will reveal the deeper yearnings of our lives. We can find a drive that is fuelled not by accomplishment but by the more essential element, love.

I have come to believe that if this informs our sense of purpose then we can reinvigorate work and home life in a way that we yearn for. We can bring all of ourselves to our labours and bring our labours in to harmony with the living world we have been gifted with.

Working precariously has given me, for one of the few times in my working life, a glimpse in to what it means to watch the parade pass instead of running to be at the front of it. My initial reaction was one of panic and no small measure of guilt. The feeling that I was letting loved ones down. But a more fertile ground has also been created. If I can slow my breath and make myself available to the opportunity – I catch glimpses of something new. A sense of grace, and with it the calm that lets me think and act from a slightly different place. A site of soulfulness that takes its cues from the heart as much as the head. I am not giving up, but perhaps as the southern Rabbi I quoted earlier says I am shifting from success to significance, trusting that I will not disappear but instead emerge with a clear eye and a gentler hand on the tiller of work.

As one fellow traveller put it, “I am sixty-one and coming to

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terms with aging, that is to say gracefully and not with disappointment. I have reached many goals which no longer inspire. Yet I am aware that life is precious. This feels like a different stage, as tough as adolescence was.”

What a wonderful insight. Moving into her sixties this accomplished woman now longs to be graceful, not resentful. I have never thought to put adolescence and elder-hood in the same sentence, but maybe we should. They are both passages into unknown territory that are accompanied by often dramatic physical changes. Both challenge us to see ourselves in unfamiliar ways. To find new ways to self-identify.

From householder to forest dweller we can work and we do for a very long time. What we bring to the enterprise can be guided by a different compass that accepts mortality and is informed by wisdom and generosity.

Politics, Jazz and *Friday Night 2.0*

After twenty years at CBC it was time to spread my political wings. It had been liberating and constricting at the same time to remain agnostic in the political arena. I remember once, on the trip I took to London, England, I went out on to the street in a rare morning off and saw a huge crowd marching toward Hyde Park for a Free Nelson Mandela concert. The crowd was filled with energy and righteous indignation. I followed, but out of pure conditioning I stayed on the sidewalk. I would not join them. As a public broadcaster it wasn't my place. Well now all of that was behind me and I could engage in politics. I still hosted a radio show after the CBC but it was a jazz program and I didn't discuss politics on the air.

My first foray was with the political party I had grown up with, the NDP. As a kid we lived in the federal riding held by the Jewish leader of the NDP at the time, David Lewis. My father was a union man, the

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Shop Steward for C.U.P.E. Local 79 Toronto, inside city workers. I have always believed strongly in unions and the security and protections they fight for every day. I spoke with the late Jack Layton and his political and spiritual soulmate, Olivia Chow one cold day in a downtown coffee shop about working together. Perhaps I could be part of his communications team, perhaps I could even run. I remembered a day years earlier, when I was away on business, pacing around my hotel room and thinking that I would spend, ten years in show biz, ten years in journalism and then ten in politics. Was this going to be that pivot point? Granted I had already spent thirty years in total on the first two goals but I still had lots of fuel in the tank. We had a good talk.

Jack had always been to me a man on a mission. A classic NDP warrior. The ‘dippers’ as they are known in political parlance, fight. For, and with, just about everyone. I think this comes from years in opposition in many parts of the country and at the federal level. The approach has pluses and minuses, but I believed that they were often on the right side of the public conversation. We agreed that what he could offer me as a position would not meet my family’s financial needs so we mused about me running for office. An election would be in the offing in the next year or so. His offer for a riding was the one I had grown up in but the truth was that the NDP didn’t have a chance in hell of winning it. I took it as an indication that they weren’t seeing a future for me in the party. I began to search for a different way to get political.

I don’t know how I feel about coincidence but my next political moment only happened because I was sitting naked in a steam bath at the gym with another man on the other side of the ‘shvitz’ as it’s known in Yiddish. After all this was the Jewish Community Centre we were sweating in. I broke the customary silence that is part of shvitz etiquette and asked him. “Excuse me I hate to bother

you but you're young why do you vote for the NDP?" He said no, he didn't vote NDP. I pressed on, "Why? I would think they would have policies that were progressive and could attract people in your age group?" He didn't agree. "Actually," he said through the mist and heat. "I don't vote NDP because I work for the Green Party."

Back in the change room we talked more. He was an organizer who helped find candidates and work on campaigns while looking for the first Green seat in Canada. Our conversation ended with him asking if I would like to meet the Green Leader, Elizabeth May. She was coming to Toronto in a few weeks and we could meet near the train station before she departed for headquarters in Ottawa. I was intrigued and said yes. I had interviewed Elizabeth a few times and she would have known me as well in that media way.

I read their platform. I agreed with just about all of it, but most importantly they didn't have the stench of power drawing them in to moral and political ambiguity for the sake of winning enough seats to run the show. It meant, I thought, that they could think about what could truly help people and the planet to survive the threat of global and local climate destruction.

The idea that I could make a difference has been a main driver for me for most of my adult life. Even as a child I imagined myself standing on a stage behind great leaders like Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy, bringing my little Jewish voice to their struggle for those who were yearning for expression. When both these men were gunned down I, at twelve years of age, was heartbroken. Once again the American dream died. There have been many small deaths in that country around race and wealth. In fact, I believe that America has never accepted the outcome of the Civil War and that it goes on to this day in a kind of torturous slow motion.

Twined with this yearning for social justice was, and is to this

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day, a spiritual journey that has me focusing on Torah teachings like, love the stranger as yourself and do not do to another what you would not have them do to you. I have little space in me for the idea that we are just a collection of chemical and synaptic triggers, firing off and then disappearing in to the chasm of futility. It might be true but I'll be damned if that is the compass for my journey in this world. It's just too small a window for me to look out of. I believe in mystery as much as science. In fact, I believe science is our human attempt at articulating the mechanisms that are part of the wonder and awe of creation. A flow that I prefer, for lack of a sufficient word, to call God.

One of the great failings of the progressive movement, of which I count myself a part of, is the separation of spirituality and secular politics. Dr. King and here in Canada leaders like Tommy Douglas, a Christian cleric, have breathed life into the call for dignity and equity for the dispossessed above all else. They are right when they say that a society is judged by the way they treat those that have the least power. It is the quality of our mercy that will define us.

I spent the next week or so coming up with what I thought was a way for Greens to communicate their message of a green and caring society. I organized the policies into three buckets and even put together a PowerPoint. Anyone who knows me knows that slide decks are not my thing. I was pumped.

Elizabeth was charming. She always is. She was also, on first meeting, like many public figures, an odd mix of glass and steel. She had the guts and nerve of a real warrior but also the glass thin shell that might crack in the face of resistance from those around her. I came to realize that loyalty was of the highest value and opposition was a violation of that.

She loved my proposal and asked me to become her Senior Advisor. I was still on the radio at a non-profit station so I had to keep

my contribution low key. I liked that and most of my political contributions, especially to Greens have been of that nature ever since.

Life was on the exhale for me. I had four children now instead of two. I had had a first wife and now a second. I was deeply in love and saw new horizons after many years at the CBC.

I would do a morning show every weekday morning and fly to Ottawa once a week for the latter part of the day to work on communications and policy advice.

Mixed in to this ferment of creative juices were a series of documentary programs about something I had always wanted to pursue but never got the chance to. Spirituality. The first series produced with my good friend Allan Novak was called *5 Seekers*. We put out a call for five people who had given up on their religion of birth but were still seeking a spiritual direction in life. We received hundreds of applicants. I would say a full third, if not more, came from lapsed Catholics. The rest were Protestant, a very few Jews and no Muslim or Hindu adherents.

On reflection, I would suggest that those in the dominant culture, Christians, felt more comfortable in disclosing their religious ancestry and that the rest of us had learned to hide our light under a bushel in that regard. I could be wrong. I loved doing that show. We broke the filming in to two locations. Sedona, Arizona, and Cortes Island, B.C.

We arrived at Sedona as snow was falling. It's situated at an altitude of 1,326 metres. The air is thinner but the scenery is almost literally out of this world. Red rock canyons, wind sculpted plateaus and stand alone hoodoos. The ambience is Martian-like and every ten minutes of trail walking gives you an entirely different vista.

Our seekers were an eccentric lot. One man was blind and with a guide dog, crusty and intense; then a man in his late thirties who had survived HIV; and a rural Albertan with a heart of gold. The other

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two were harder for me to figure out. An attractive and soft-spoken woman who had given up on religion but still seemed to have faith, and finally, a monk-like figure who seemed in many ways unavailable to the experience except as a detached and perhaps superior observer.

Sedona is the new age capital of America. Didgeridoos, hand drums, bells, crystals, shamanic robes. The town is packed with them. There is even a synagogue thrown in for good measure. The seekers did sound therapy, past life regression and shamanic rituals with a Hopi elder.

I was their guide/television host. I would debrief them after each experience – sometimes they cried, sometimes they winced. It occurred to me that most of them were hoping for a divine bolt of lightning to shock them out of their spiritual bunker and bring them in to the loving light of God, or whatever. I felt sad as I witnessed their yearning. Not that I lean toward certainty when it comes to my spirituality. I don't. It's just that I could feel how much they ached for a deeper meaning. For something strong to cleave to.

We moved on from Sedona to a small Island off the coast of British Columbia that was only accessible by boat. Cortes is home to the Hollyhock retreat centre, which runs alternative programming and leadership programs throughout the year. We had the place to ourselves for the week. It was a very intense week. The seekers were fraying at the edges. They weren't just filling their spirit-seeking plates at the celestial buffet, they were being recorded all day and well in to the night. The more I saw of their god-wrestling the more I was grateful that as flawed as my, and all religions are, they at least gave structure to the spiritual journey, Ritual, text study, and community. These things were missing for most of these seekers.

I did two more six-part documentary series. One called *God Bless America*, about religion and politics in the run up to the first

Obama Presidency. The part that I still roll around in my head from that experience was a dinner that was set-up for me in the suburbs of Virginia with Washington evangelical lobbyist, George Roller. They called him the holy roller. We had been visiting with a black civil rights hero earlier in the day and the next day we were going to talk to the head of the Humanist Association of America. That's a tough gig. The Humanist Association is one of those organizations filled with members who usually resist joining any group at all.

But this night we were in the Virginia suburbs a stones throw from D.C. George and his wife laid out a spread for us. To be precise Mrs. Roller did all the cooking. During dinner we talked about their deep love of everyone through the love and devotion they felt for their Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. I pressed them on the idea that their mission in Washington, and on this particular evening at the table with me, was to share the gospel and save my soul. I tried to impress upon George that I found myself offended by his crusade. If I could only find salvation through Jesus, then what did that say about my Jewish belief system? What kind of respect did it show for me and the millions of Jews that came before me? It was a gentle and passion filled conversation. When asked if they kept pursuing folks, especially those that appeared in some ways lost Mrs. Roller said, with eyes almost bursting out of their sockets, but in a hushed tone, "If there's low hanging fruit, we're going to pick it." Then she passed the casserole.

I had always wanted to do a series of documentaries about religion. I wanted us to go below the surface the religious conversation and explore with genuine curiosity the what and why of what people believed, or didn't.

Say what you want about the American culture, it is passionate and dynamic in its breath of practice and opinion. Much more so than we Canadians. It helps to remember their colonizers were in

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part religious zealots and social disruptors that came across to Providence and New Amsterdam to throw off the shackles of mainstream religion in the United Kingdom.

In Brooklyn I met up with Jay Bakker, the Punk evangelical son of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker of televangelist fame. Every Sunday in the late afternoon he would hold service in a funky, dank bar. That's when his congregants would be getting up after a tough night of music, booze and whatever. He was meeting them where they were. He believed the evangelical message but he also believed that we are all made in God's image and deserve to be loved. That meant LGBTQ+ as well, though megachurch pastors like Joe Osteen begged to differ.

Bakker was interesting. His parents had resigned from their evangelical TV and entertainment empire. They had become the poster couple for divine dysfunction, there was jail time involved. It was a pathetic stew. Jay rose from those ashes to fight for inclusion, and he was shunned for his efforts.

We travelled from one end of the country to the other in fourteen days before ending our journey in Denver. It was the Democratic National Convention and America was about to nominate the first black man to lead a major party for President. The city was buzzing and we decided to go out in the street and interview whoever caught our eye. There was one fifty-ish couple that definitely caught my eye. They were wearing "We're Jewish Republicans" T-shirts.

I asked them to have a seat in a downtown park bench with Democrat partisans lining the street. It was a parade-like atmosphere. I asked why they supported the Republicans. The party was leaning very heavily on evangelical support at the time, as it still does. "They're good to Israel!" they said. I asked if they were aware of the evangelical reason for the support of Israel. Their hope was that the Jews would return to the promised land and trigger the start of

the tribulations. This would then lead to the apocalypse where those who did not take Jesus as their Lord, being in this case the Jews and Muslims to say nothing of the poor atheists, would be knee deep in their own blood and their souls would be thrown in to the fiery pit of damnation. The believers fared much better, they would be pulled from their graves to celebrate the return of the Messiah.

The man looked at me with an impish grin on his face, and his wife piped up. “Look what do I care why they’re doing it. Tell you what, if Jesus comes down from the sky and he’s the messiah then hey, he’s the messiah.”

I didn’t show it, but I was mad. She was proud of her opportunistic machinations. She was an Israel at any cost Jew. I have always worried that if the ends justify any means then we will have a deeply hollowed out prize to show for thousands of years of exile.

The year before I had travelled to Israel to do a series called My Israel. At first I didn’t want to be in the series on camera. I wanted to have people tell us their story. Their Israel. The Network, Vision TV, wanted me to be in it. I differed. Perhaps the wounds of twenty years of public life had left me shy of the spotlight, but in the end they were right. The show was much better as a personal journey. I started the series with my mother. I asked her to bake one of my favourites, *bischochos con miel*. Honey cookies. I asked her why we didn’t, like so many other Moroccan Jews, emigrate to Israel instead of choosing Canada? She didn’t miss a beat, and shot back “Why should we go from being treated like dirt in Morocco to being treated like dirt in Israel?”

I was proud of my mother at that moment. She had taught me one thing that I have always cherished. Speak some form of truth to power. Or in her words when I was older, “Don’t take shit from anybody.” I have tempered that sentiment as I struggle to be more compassionate.

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I tried to know what hills to die on and when to see it someone else's way. That is more in line with what my father instilled in me.

But, in this case my mother was airing a grievance that many Sephardic Jews had and have to this day. We are mostly the Jews of southern Europe, the Balkans and the Arab world. Sepharad. Spanish descendants of the expulsion from Spain in 1492. Basically 1492 was only a good year for white Catholics. For the Indigenous populations of the western hemisphere and for the Jews and Moors of Andalusia it was a disaster.

If you go to southern Spain where many of my ancestors are from you will see churches that once were mosques and sometimes, synagogues. For a time three of the world's great religions came together in peace. It was a golden age for all three faiths. I wish that Jerusalem today could reignite that flame of unity and truly be a beacon of tolerance, spirituality and peace on to the world. But this day in my mother's apartment, the conversation was not nearly as sweet as the delicious cookies I was eating.

She was right about the history of the Sephardim in Israel. Israel is a western European construct, it was the result of the Zionist movement that convened in Switzerland and created the plan for the creation of a Jewish Homeland in Palestine. Jews from Arabic countries were not given prominence in that grand project. When the colonial powers loosened their strangle hold on the Arabian Peninsula and the North African Maghreb there was a great surge in pan-Arab nationalism. The resurgence was led by Egypt's Gamel Abdel Nasser. In Morocco the transition to independence was for the most part peaceful, but what came with this throwing off of the French and British yoke was a rise in anti-Semitism. Jews in my birthplace of Tangiers were receiving death threats. Many were encouraged by European Zionists to emigrate, to make Aliyah, to the new state of

Israel. There would be housing, opportunity and most of all, for the first time in millennia, safety in the biblical homeland.

Nonsense. In truth we were brought there to increase the population, left on border areas in tents close by malarial swamps. Second-class citizens yet again. Year later when I did the My Israel series we happened upon a spontaneous street demonstration by a group of Sephardic Jews in south Tel-Aviv who were protesting their eviction from government housing to make way for new, privately driven condo tower developments. Whenever I would show this series to Jewish groups back in Toronto, all Ashkenazi except for one, someone in the crowd would inevitably stand to say that that's the way things used to be and that the conditions have changed now. I would respond with what one protestor told me. Nine out of ten Judges in Israel are Ashkenazi, show me where there are Sephardic Jews depicted on the currency. How many Prime Ministers have been Sephardic? The reply would come, names of Sephardim that had 'made it' were recited. I replied, if you can name the ones that made it, there can't be that many. How many European descended Jews have 'made it'?

My mother carried that wound as do I. We are prone to this disease of particularism. The need to contract in to hives of identity and ethnic cause. Duality over unity. As my spiritual path grew I realized some fundamentals truths. One that I still live by is that God is not Jewish, I choose to be Jewish. When I offer that thought to others I am often met with real surprise. It is a thought that many haven't considered. God, Allah, Christ, Vishnu, these are particular ways of understanding the constant flow of cosmic creation. I was moving away from the particular to the universal.

Later in the filming of that same documentary I was at the Kotel, or as it's commonly known the Western, or Wailing Wall. We were filming me mediating at the wall. It is common practice to insert a

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prayer or petition into a crevice between the mighty bricks that stand as testament to the longevity and the sorrow of the Jewish people. It is a remnant of the Second temple. It has been fought over, pissed upon and conquered many times over by all three Abrahamic faiths. To me, it is as much a testament to dysfunction as anything. I also believe in the wisdom of those in Judaism who say that the worship of idols cheapens the wonder of awe of the creation. Today we have many golden calves that we kneel before, whether money, fame or power over others. The Wall to me is also a physical structure that people are willing to pray for, and even kill for.

With all that freight, and knowing that my departed father had inserted a prayer in this ancient wall on the one trip he made to Israel before he died, there I stood. I stood and thought about him, when suddenly I heard someone over my shoulder say. “Hey. You Jewish?” I opened my eyes to see a man in classic orthodox garb, black long coat, white open collar shirt, black keepah and forelock. I was not happy. “Yeah,” I shot back. “That alright with you?” It soon became apparent that he was hitting me up for a donation to the cause of keeping him at the Wall to interrupt people like me who had come from halfway around the wall to have a quiet moment. It was kind of like a prayer tax and I was ripe for the picking as my friends the Rollers back in D.C. would say.

He asked me where I was from, realizing he hadn’t quite buttered the bread as well as he should to garner a few shekels. I soon discovered that he was in fact, like me Moroccan. I was shocked. Usually I could spot a Sephardic Jew at the wall or anywhere else in Israel by the fact that they did not dress, as the orthodox did, in the shtetl garb of nineteenth century Poland or Lithuania.

I felt I was looking at someone who had gone over to the dark side. We, as Moroccans, were a traditional people but we didn’t have

gradations of observance. You're either in or you're out. I have come to appreciate the Ashkenazi forms of choice but that day I was looking at someone who had made themselves over in a way I did not recognize. With cameras rolling I said goodbye. No money changed hands, though I felt a little poorer for the exchange. The series was a cable hit garnering Allan and I a Gemini nomination. It is still played on streaming services today and sadly much of what we encountered, the bitterness, the cry for dignity on all sides and the passions that this tiny arid land enflames have not changed very much at all.

The years brought new experiences for me in politics, some good and some quite disappointing, whether with the Green Party, or with my good friend the Honourable Glen R. Murray, who served as a cabinet minister in the Ontario Liberal governments of Dalton McGuinty and Kathleen Wynne, Canada's first openly gay woman premier. Glen, by the way, as well as being the greenest politician in government, had been the first openly gay mayor of a major city in perhaps all of the world when he served in Winnipeg.

My time in Jazz radio hosting the morning show was coming to an end when I left for a communications job with Glen. My relationship with my boss and friend, Ross Porter who had done so much to create a viable, vibrant jazz station in the highly competitive Toronto radio market, had become badly frayed and we were no longer enjoying each other's company. Doing the three seasons of documentaries focused on spirituality had also deepened my yearning for more exploration of not just my Jewishness, but of my soul.

Politics and soul were not the best fit as I was soon to find out. I had spent many years covering politicians through a current affairs lens so I thought I knew what retail politics was about. I had counselled Elizabeth May before she gained office, so I thought that I had a real leg up. I was wrong. This game being played in the halls of what

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is known as the Pink Palace, Queen's Park, the seat of government in Canada's most populous province, Ontario, was all about power. Who has it, who wants it, and what will either do to get, or keep it.

This was a kingdom of workaholics. Thirty-somethings scurried through the halls typing furiously on the hottest cell on the market at the time, the made-in-Ontario BlackBerry. Hell even Barack Obama had one. Newly minted politicians arrived believing they could make a difference. Many were soon crushed under the wheels of the leader's office and the edicts that flowed like manna from there to the minions/member of provincial parliament, who were there to stand and cheer for their team on command, and screw the rest.

Consensus had almost no place in the legislature that we all lubricated with worm on hook press releases and witty and withering tweets that were meant to chip away at the brand loyalty to other parties. They say that politics is show business for the ugly. In a way it is. These often well-meaning types who mingled with the take-no-prisoner's operatives in their own parties while always wary of the hunting press, were also always wondering if and when a knife might come their way, either in the front or in the back. Like showbiz some rose to the occasion and others to their level of incompetence. The press and public held little sympathy for their fate.

We have demeaned public service and demonized the press that covers them. The theatre of politics plays out while in Cabinet member's boardrooms lobbyists, representing those that have the money to influence real laws and regulations, press the flesh and ply their trade of influence peddling. Many of them have parlayed their time in politics into that very seat at the table.

At times the transactional nature of the game overwhelmed me. One day I was asked by a higher up if I had returned the call of certain businessman. I said that I hadn't. "Get on it." Came the rebuke,

“He’s a very good friend of this office and we don’t want him to think we’ve forgotten about him.” I was working for the Liberal Party but I was not and never have been a Liberal supporter. That didn’t endear me to some. I kept saying you and they wanted me to say we. But it was not going to happen. I was there for Glen. I did find it ridiculous that the Liberals and the NDP behaved as if their policies and desires were a million miles apart while their common foe, the Conservatives benefited from their wasted energy. Consensus, compromise and collegiality were the tools of the weak, the strong chose the bludgeon.

I still advise politicians I respect when asked, but when I left Queens Park I looked back over my shoulder and what I saw was a broken system of male patriarchy, adversarial gridlock and a profound tone deafness to the society that was struggling around them. Pink Palace indeed.

My escape hatch came in the oddest form. Because of my Ryerson days decades in the past I found myself invited to a lunch with an old classmate who I barely remembered. After all I was a good eight-to-ten years older than him when I attended. Now he was the president of a major Ontario College and I was working with the Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities. He asked if I would like to work with him as his executive advisor. Yet again I was going to have to fake it till I made it. Yet again I jumped at the chance, thankful for the opportunity.

The college was Sheridan, known around the world for its school of animation and with over twenty thousand students in campuses in the west GTHA, Oakville, Mississauga and Brampton, it is one of the big five colleges in Ontario. The goal was for Sheridan to become a university. The obstacles were many. Classism, parochialism and flat out competition for dollars and students. This was going to be, like politics, as much about power as anything else.

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I loved the job and was always aware that I, someone with five years of post-secondary but no degrees to show for it was now often in a room filled more and more with PhDs. It made me aware of two things. One, that we live in an age of credential inflation where a Bachelors of Arts is the new high school diploma and secondly of the class divide between applied education and research.

The fact that Sheridan already had numerous Honours B.A programs, that it was the first school in Canada to create a curriculum around creativity that favoured critical thinking, quality ideation and novel solutions to existing problems seemed to carry no weight with politicians, and certainly not with other competing educational fiefdoms. Something else occurred to me as I walked the halls of second tier academia. We were sending these students out in to a world that I believed was heading in the wrong direction. One that more and more knew the price of everything and the value of nothing. Inaction on climate destruction alone was going to gift them a dystopia that they seemed, for the most part, oblivious too. Partly because of the immortal rush of being young and partly because they had been conditioned to believe in a neo-liberal, me first world view that only asked of them that they pick a lane, the right lane for who they really are and what they should ask of this society.

One day I was visiting the Trades building to discuss a potential partnership opportunity with the Dean of Trades. Sheridan was not a big trades school, we were more arts and high-tech oriented. I asked him why more students weren't interested in the high-demand, high-wage jobs that trades offered. He told me about the parents that came to the faculty with their children and would pull him aside and say, "He's not that good at school but he's good with his hands." He would smile at them but really he wanted to dress them down. He wanted to look them in the eye and say, "You're telling me that your kid is not

that bright? What makes you think he won't build a house that will collapse, electrocute himself on a job site? Fit the wrong pipe and poison a living space?" Trades, he said, were about being a precise and careful creator who, when confronted with unforeseen problems could have the wherewithal to come up with a great solution. If class wasn't enough to drive the process, gender made the welcome for women daunting to say the least.

How's your kid? "Oh she's at McGill." You? "Ah she's taking carpentry at Algoma." Case closed. The facts are clear, it's parents that drive the post-secondary bus in terms of stream. If you went to university its very likely that your kids will too. No degree families often produce no to low degree kids. All this and that nagging feeling that while education is sometimes profoundly impactful, sometimes it deadens the dreams of many a student.

Still, there were so many great people and stimulating conversations that I enjoyed trying to help this group with their university objective. Of course, the other Colleges had no interest in seeing us succeed and leaving them behind, the Universities couldn't have been more elitist, and the Provincial Government saw no political advantage to granting us the new assignation. I trundled from office to office, Mayors, Ministers, horribly boring Canadian Club luncheons, an orgy of business card flashers and bar mitzvah grade lunches followed by the crème of the establishment puffing like peacocks at the lectern before we all, bloated and bored, returned to our offices, trying to remember who handed us which card.

Looking at the cluster of carols filled with good people asked to do so little but what the office assembly line required of them sparked a sadness in me and the spiritual longing that I had been struggling to contain started to demand more.

I made the decision to move my family out of what had become

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the megalopolis, by Canadian standards, of Toronto. I felt that life there had become soulless. Too many people scurrying about in a fierce competition for money, resources and time. Dead eyed subway travellers, drivers who could never let you in because they had been on the road for forty-five minutes already!

I took to explaining to my Friday night Sabbath diner guests that I felt there was a God Hole in the city. That scale had rendered us more heartless. My wife was much more reluctant but I would be closer to work and she was in a career transition. When we informed one of our boys that grade five would happen in a place called Hamilton, he wailed and wailed. In the end he says he's much happier here.

But it was more than relocating that was being asked of me. As Jon Kabat-Zinn said, wherever you go, there you are. Over the years I had often web surfed pathways to becoming a rabbi. I wasn't ever able to convince myself that with my poor command, as in almost none, of the Hebrew language that I would be accepted by any institutions. I realized that I had been looking at these sites for more than twenty years. Every time I reasoned that I couldn't take the five years off it required and that I wouldn't be able to bear the weight of rabbinical obligations. But here I was again, taking one more look.

There is an ebb and flow to my spirituality. When the tide is in I am awash with feelings of unity and find the doorway to my compassion opens just enough to let the beauty and sorrow of this existence in. The triggers vary for this open heartedness. Sometime it's the approach of our highest holidays and the call to reflection, repentance and service. Other times it's my own sadness or despair for the plight of so many for so few reasons. I, for instance, find myself occasionally crying for the earth that sustains us. The hardened heart of our every man, and I do mean man, for himself culture. Ironically we prop up the billionaires not because they understand us but

because we hope through them we can ourselves become the rich, the powerful, the immune. Upton Sinclair, the American writer said it well. “It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on him not understanding it.” John Steinbeck, another American dissident writer said so eloquently, “Socialism never took root in America because the poor see themselves not as exploited proletariat but as temporarily embarrassed millionaires.”

My soul wanderings are not the kind that will make me a religious scholar. I don't know how many angels dance on the head of a pin. So what was I doing staring at a screen wondering if I should take one last poke at the Rabbinical piñata? I returned to the form of Judaism that has always been aligned with my disposition, Jewish Renewal. A movement that was born of the hippie days of west coast America. Its founders were well grounded in orthodoxy and yet had found a way to infuse the cosmic gut punch of Psychedelia and the mystic traditions of the Hasidic movement in to a new age Judaism that spoke to those that yearned for more mystery and less certitude.

From that form of Judaism Rabbis like Shlomo Carlebach, the singing Rebbe; Arthur Waskow, the leading proponent of an earth-based Judaism that reconnected Jewish teachings with stewardship of the planet; and the most impactful sage of them all, Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. With books Like *Paradigm Shift* and *From Age-ing to Sage-ing* Reb Zalman brought a magical synthesis of classical and profound Jewish practice and tradition in to the twentieth century and now beyond. He asked questions like, “How do you get it on with God?” He launched a dialogue with the Dalai Lama that was captured in Rodger Kamenetz's wonderful book, *The Jew in the Lotus*.

I was hooked. As a teenager I was a tail-end baby boomer. That meant I could only see the earth based and communal experiment of the hippie generation from the distance. I was too young to

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participate actively but old enough to attach myself to the utopian ideals that were launched in the face of a dour and war-addicted western world that was rife with cruel ‘isms’.

God as mystery, people as beings, all beings, infused with a spark of the divine that could be activated by the connection of one heart to another. The teachings seen through the lens of unity of all took on a rich meaning for me that never truly left me. So here I was scrolling down the course curriculum to a place called The Aleph Ordination Program. There were choices. Rabbi, Rabbinic Pastor, never heard of that before, and finally Hashpa’ah – Jewish Spiritual Direction. I gravitated toward the one that I could do while still providing for my family. Spiritual Direction. I applied only to realize later that I had missed the last line where they said that you had to be enrolled in the Rabbinic stream to apply. I wrote a second note saying that I had missed the fine print and thanking them anyway.

The next day I got a reply saying that I was to hold that thought. A decision had been made that this year they would accept people who were not Rabbinic candidates. I would be interviewed. I was excited, but also feeling like I would get laughed out of the virtual room. We spoke, actually I spoke, a lot to two different Rabbis. I waited. I was accepted.

How was this going to mesh with my home life in a new city? I was going to be the only Canadian in the program and would have to travel to Colorado every six months. What would my President over at Sheridan say? He was, by his own admission not the kind that pursued these spiritual paths.

So what is spiritual director? That has always been a tough question to answer, especially in the Jewish world. SD, as it’s called, has a much more robust community in the Christian world. Accessing the wholeness of the human narrative through story and tradition

with a spiritual guide, or companion, can ground a person in a way that allows them to open up to the universal questions with a focus on reflection, contemplation and increased skillfulness. Note that I don't include the word answers in the process. It's refining the questions that draw my attention. Why am I here, what purpose could and even should my life have? How do I wrestle with transition, grief and inner peace?

At its core the process of Hashpa'ah is about holy listening. Hearing with your heart and responding to their heart. We yearn for spiritual connection through the often broken heart. We yearn to be heard. As I moved through the three-year course I found a rich cohort of fellow travellers and a growing appreciation through Reb Zalman's emphasis on deep ecumenism of all spiritual paths – religious or otherwise.

I do remember how I started on that journey. It was to be a week of face-to-face workshops in Colorado just outside Boulder. I arrived at the airport in Toronto ready for the flight out. Trouble is the plane I was expecting to take very early that morning didn't exist. No flight number on the departures board, nada. I approached the desk. It should be noted that I had made a conscious decision to wear my keepah for that whole week. I wanted the world to see that we can all carry faith and a reminder for myself that whoever saw me and how I behaved would think that that must be what a Jew is. I approached one of the service people and asked where my flight had disappeared to. She informed me that the flight had been cancelled a month ago. Part of me was confused, part of me was relieved. Hey this could be a sign, even though I don't believe in that, not to go. You were just going to embarrass yourself in front of all these people who know way more than you will ever knew about being a Jew. Turns out the travel agent had either sent a note I did not see or just didn't notify me. I asked what I was supposed to do now. Turns out that I could be booked on

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another flight with connections that would leave in eight hours. I was in a good space by now, spiritually. I made the choice to be present to what Eckhart Tolle calls 'the isness' of my situation. I sat cross legged in a hallway and brought out a book to read. Time melted away, but then my reverie was shaken by an announcement over the PA system. Ladies and gentlemen we are experiencing extremely cold temperatures out on the tarmac right now and because of that we are declaring a ground stop. No planes will be departing until further notice as the extreme cold weather could compromise the operation of our aircraft.

Okay, so maybe there is such a thing as a sign. I had every reason now to back out. I was supposed to arrive for an opening circle ceremony by 6:00 p.m. mountain time. This was just not going to happen. Yet somehow I was settling in to my keepah-clad serene disposition. Whatever would happen was not necessarily meant to be but I still had a choice as to how I would receive it. By the time I got to the airport in Denver fifteen hours had passed. As I was standing, waiting for the shuttle that would load up with seven of us to be dropped at different points a woman walked up to me and said, "Rabbi, you look tired, is there anything I can do for you?" I smiled. "Oh, thank you I'm okay." I loved that moment but I also knew that I had been misidentified. As I began to say, "I'm not a Rabbi." She interrupted and said, "I'm Christian but I just wanted to say that it's good to see someone like you today. It's been hard day for me. God bless you." "God bless you too." For that moment I had been what that kind woman needed. For that moment I had been what I needed too. I was finally at the hotel having missed all the of the ceremony. I headed to my room exhausted but somehow peaceful. The trip took seventeen hours. It was worth it. A new chapter had begun.

During that week I did a deep dive into a way of relating to others that I had only danced around all these years. I had begun to give

sermons, Dvar Torah, at my lovely downtown synagogue when the rabbi was kind enough to ask me. I could feel the powerful energy of the Torah portions that we were exploring together. For me Torah is not in any way a literal and cohesive narrative. It is a poetic and metaphorical journey onto right and wrong, holy and profane. A chance for us to see humanity, with all its flaws, as part of a greater consciousness. When God is asked, who are you, the answer is the same in all faith traditions. I am that I am. Total presence.

As our workshop progressed we realized that we weren't called together to become spiritual lifeguards. We were here to become present to what is, and deeply hear what yearnings the process of spiritual companionship could bring to light in the person we were sitting with. I was glad that I hadn't turned to run that day in the airport. This new chapter felt right.

My time at Sheridan had me feeling well paid and appreciated, but the job was a creative gamble by the President and I always had the gut feeling that I was in a precarious spot. Advisors come and go but I had always managed to find a way to flow from job to job. The spiritual work did something else for me in my work life. It allowed me to listen in ways that I hadn't before. I was able to bring my wall of ego, good and bad, down and listen with my heart. That didn't mean that I sat like a mush ball nodding away with an insipid grin on my face. It meant that I could accept the energy and concerns of those around me and with compassion, as opposed to ambition, and offer a more measured and useful response.

Take Your Time and Let Us Know

I finished my ordination and began to guide workshops and individual counselling sessions. I had gravitated to one of Reb Zalman's cornerstone projects. Aging to Sageing. I had crossed the threshold in to my sixties and the area was a rich one for me. I remember the day that so much changed. I had joined the gym at the College to get myself moving. I had never really liked the gym culture. Still don't. Too much huffing and puffing. That day I had a late meeting with the President. He had announced his departure suddenly and in a way that left many of us feeling that he had always had another horizon in his sights. I was brought into his large office, the afternoon light was soft and the cloud cover was a gun-metal grey. He started the conversation with a joke about seeing me featured in a newspaper article about my families move to a new city. "Hey I know that guy!" Then he got down to the task at hand.

Just about all of us have been let go. There is that feeling, not just of disappointment, but of shame. What will I tell people? How can I make this look like it was my decision? I should have seen it coming. It made perfect sense if I thought about it. But, I had just moved my family to another city. I drove home feeling gutted. What was I going to tell my wife? I love her and my children so much and I had always seen myself as a provider. The guy who goes out and hunts down that moose. In the face of big moments like this I usually spend a day or two feeling very sad and then I jump back up. I have worn many hats and I have been nothing if not resilient.

But I was about to embark on a journey that I was ill prepared for. Ironically, it was one that I had started running workshops about. I had entered, or should I say I was backing into the autumn of my life.

I was torn. Should I step back or leap forward into the next big pants job? It would become the most confusing time in my life since my adolescence. Before I could move forward in any direction I needed to take stock and acquaint myself with all the colours that autumn can reveal. To find a way to understand what society thought of us as we age and what we must do to reap the harvest of our lives and share that wisdom in a world that devalues aging. A time where life is often reduced to fearful stories of physical decay and personal diminishment.

Old and Improved

The *Guardian* newspaper once compiled a list of the recurring attributes of older characters in films and television. Now first let's keep in mind that only 5 percent of characters in cinema and on TV are over sixty. Of those the paper maintains that they are overwhelming portrayed as: "ineffectual, grumpy, behind the times, depressed, lonely, slow-witted, sickly, whining, rude, miserly, hard-of-hearing, ugly, interfering, heartless, intransigent, doddering, frisky or profane."

Let's stay with this list for a moment and understand that in the face of this overwhelmingly negative menu of aging attributes we have some decisions to make as elders and for those who will eventually follow us. Looking at this list I realize, in the vernacular of the age that this shit is starting to get real. Intransigent, slow witted, miserly and profane, what an indictment. For those of us that watched more than then our fair share of Hollywood sit-coms

growing up we can call up images of characters like Granny on *The Beverly Hillbillies*, a stereotype wrapped in an even more denigrating stereotype. She was frisky as the list above points out, inappropriate and often prone to random cruelty, occasionally she would dispense some Texas wisdom to her son or granddaughter but mostly she was looking for her false teeth, and/or, her trusty shotgun.

At best we got *The Golden Girls*, a quartet of high-powered TV actresses brought together after the success of *Maude* starring Bea Arthur. Even there Arthur's character had to endure her own mother who was rude, heartless, see the list above, and interfering. We, it seems can look up to the old when they come from other cultures but in the Judeo-Christian frames in which we in the west live the old are a deeply flawed burden. With the weight of that relationship comes objectification and different forms of dehumanization and abuse.

Perhaps that is what was already embedded in my heart when I met my first octogenarian. My own grandmother. She followed us to Canada from Morocco in the late 1960s. I had grown up with no grandparents till then. The other three had died in Tangiers before I was even born. My grandmother, Mama Camilla, as we called her, was eighty-three when she arrived. She spoke Spanish and Arabic and God love her, she did not have a single clue as to what in hell was going on in her new 'home.' I was unaccustomed to old people and everything I had seen on TV conformed quite nicely to the *Guardian's* list. I frankly didn't know what to do in her presence. Her skin seemed more like cellophane, paper thin and covered in spots and discolourations. Her hair was dry and grey, and her teeth were often in a glass beside her bed. The barriers weren't just physical, they were cultural, as by then I was quite Canadianized. I had no appreciation of the life she had led. I didn't know that she had traveled from Tétouan to Tangiers by donkey and, if I heard correctly much later

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on, she had miscarried along the way. She was the second wife of a grandfather I never met.

His first wife had taken ill and was dying. He married my grandmother to take care of her as her illness progressed, her, and the five children his first wife had borne him. After the first wife passed, my grandmother had five more children with him, my mother being the youngest of them. We were of very different worlds. As baby boomers in Toronto we were filling the streets with protest, or at least my sister was, listening to Hendrix and wondering what American Yippie founder Jerry Rubin meant by his *cri de coeur*, 'Do It!' I remember laying there in my room thinking, I would do 'it' if I knew what 'it' was, or where I could get it. Meanwhile down the hall my Grandmother sat staring out the window of our first floor apartment, marveling at the sight of snow. I ran out back of the apartment and got her some. She liked that.

We weren't together in that apartment for that long. Eventually she was housed in what we have come to call an old's folk home. This one was big, and at that time, like most, set-up more as a long term care hospital than the retirement village offerings being marketed today. She spent the next fifteen years there, passing away at one hundred. I hated going to see her there. Not because of what she was going through but because I was scared of the place. The smell of death, the helpless people wheelchair bound and slack jawed moaning into the empty spaces, their eyes searching, scared, forgotten. It was, and mostly is, a warehouse we send our loved ones to. We are enmeshed in the private good, private house, car, cottage, backyard. The nuclear family has become the core of our lives. The common good, indeed the Commons itself, is mostly gone. What place do the elders have in this atomized landscape? What value do we place on that interaction?

We see age and physical decay as the singular focus of care.

Trapped in our need to remain vital we, as the elders, want to give away nothing. Why would we in an anti-aging society? We marvel at the ninety-year-old sprinter and the eighty-two-year-old distance swimmer but as I hit the official age of ‘retirement’ I hesitate to tell others about this personal milestone. The old have whiskers, the old become invisible, the old become our burden.

Canadian poet Al Purdy wrote a stunning poem, “On Being Human,” about his own mother and how he witnessed her final act of ageing.

“When my mother went to hospital after a fall in her bedroom I was eighteen miles away trying to build a house.

I visited her later and something in my face made her say, “I thought you’d feel terrible.”

The question that arises is one of process. How might we change the channel as it were? Why do we need to see our elders as ineffectual, burdensome and filled with reminders of death? Again I come to death and our desire to avoid it, especially in those that carry its nearness more obviously. Perhaps the answer lies in which clock we live by. There is the chronological clock that gets its due once a year. If you search your feelings about birthdays I am sure that much will be revealed. There are those that say, oh birthdays, I hate them, such a fuss over nothing. Others go through ebbs and tides around the day – sometimes feeling that they are where they want to be in life and other times not wanting to mark the passing of a hard year. But the shadow must be given its due. Making it for one more year means moving one step closer to the end, or so it would seem. Here it gets tricky because the end, if one is purely rational, is nothing but a physical event. Approaching the end is an exercise in maintaining the biological unit for as long as possible. But if we embrace a different conception of time others doors may open. Ram Dass writes: “In

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the end of course, our approach to the future comes down to how we feel about mystery. As much as we know about ourselves and our existence, there will always be a great deal more that we will never know. The soul has no problem with mystery at all. Mystery is the Soul's element. As wise elders, we come to know that the ego has no control over anything, and so we begin to rest in the mysterious present and let the future unfold as it will."

Hollow ad phrases like, you're not getting older, you're getting better reassure us that we can cheat ageing, and by extension, cheat death itself. I resented shaving my beard. My youngest son confirmed my defeat upon arriving home from school. He looked at my hairless face and simply said, "You shaved your beard, Daddy, it makes you look young." Old and Improved. Just doesn't have a ring to it. Pity, it should.

Which brings me to anti-aging creams and unguents. A group called Transparency Market Research published a report stating that from 2013 to 2019 the anti-aging market grew by 7.8 percent and was worth 191 billion USD. Almost 200 billion dollars! This, by the way doesn't take in to account the figures for getting 'work done' as they say in the cosmetic surgery business. In an April 12, 2017, article in *USA Today* it was reported that seven million Americans receive Botox injections every year at an average cost of 385 USD per shot. Most of those injections were for treatment of wrinkles. Hair replacement, liposuction, the list goes on and the profits are huge. But apparently boomers have the means, at least in parts of the industrialized world and more and more in the rapidly growing middle and upper classes in Asia. Seventy percent of U.S. disposable income according to this article is owned by the baby boomers and when it comes to spending it on anti-aging products and services they seem to feel quite free to open their wallets and purses.

Of course, the reasons for getting the work done vary. Some do

it because they can. It's like freshening up. For others it's a business move. I know one successful business owner who has had tucks to remove the bags from under his eyes, hair replacements that repopulated his scalp and permanently banish any hint of grey and a nose job because he didn't like the size of his old one. The first two procedures, when I asked him why, were about his relationship to his clients. He didn't want to look old. They would start looking elsewhere assuming he was probably on the way out, or worse that he was out of touch with the latest trends, married to old ways. He literally couldn't afford to look old. He also had a surgical eye procedure so that he could go without glasses. And you know what, it worked, all of it. His clients stayed loyal, he's now seventy-six and everyone says he looks great.

Putting cosmetic surgery aside for a moment, there are some who believe that an immaculate outward appearance reflects a level of self-respect and a way to honour God. I remember one of my more religious cousins asking me why I didn't wear a suit and tie to synagogue. I replied that I, like many I had spoken to over the years, felt that the synagogue experience had become more like a parade of peacocks, congregants advertising their new found wealth and sitting pretty, literally. I am making an assumption but I detected no connection to a sacred experience as they sat in place, they were there for a presentation that might at the least make them feel some contentment.

My cousin wasn't buying my casual dress argument. "If you were invited to see the Queen of England would you wear jeans and a T shirt? Honestly, would you?" "No," I replied, honestly. "So why," he continued, "would you not want to dress appropriately to spend time in the presence of God?" God, by the way, to him, is best imagined as the King of Kings. I never really bought into that version, my path forward required a different spiritual fuel.

But if most of our cultural signposts are pointing as far away from

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aging as possible, what's in it for us to age gracefully, as they say? Just walk by any bus shelter advertising and look at the face of the models selling, whatever, jeans, perfume, travel. They are literally children, heavily made up, often sexualized, but children nonetheless. They are the sirens on the rocks, calling to us. Come back, you were me once, it's yours for the taking. Desire feeds our impatience but looking at some biblical outtakes we can get a different perspective,

“But the Lord said to Samuel, ‘Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the Lord sees not as man sees. For man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks in the heart.’”

I have never been much on the ‘Lord said.’ There is something too transactional, too small about reducing the awe and power of the universal flow in to a series of edicts transmitted from the unknowable to my tiny ears. But what I do take from that passage is the idea that when it comes to what connects us to the unity of creation, that it is best to look past the outer shell and into the metaphorical heart that we all share. Are we capable of doing that? If not, perhaps I should not overestimate my fellow humans and should “get thee to a good cosmetic surgeon,” or at the very least pick up some hair dye.

For me the challenges of outward appearance have taken on a different hue. The form of cancer that I hosted had taken up residence in my nose. Funny how we never think much about body parts until they find a way to grab centre stage. In my case my septum was hollowed out and the part of my nose that continues after the cartilage that had done the work of keeping my nose up, well it just collapsed. At least the left side did. After treatment I had cosmetic surgery, which was only partially successful. It left me looking nasally challenged, if not deformed. I was no longer me, no longer the man my wife called handsome. I took what had happened as a

challenge to my vanity, to my sense of the permanence of things. I tried to live with this new face. The one with the sharp dip where my nose should meet my brow. The one with a nose that was now quite thin. The one that made it so I could walk by people who I had known for years and they didn't recognize me, though occasionally they would give me a double take as they passed. I learned to say my name, and still do as I approach people.

Eventually with the help of my more than kind ENT Doctor, who like so many in that field was also running a cosmetic surgery practice, I decided that I had to have another procedure to at least make my nose symmetrical. I didn't take that decision lightly. I waited two years to do it. I was trying to live, in Buddhist terms, with the truth that nothing is permanent. That our looks are not just subject to age, but to transformational disease. There is a great spiritual challenge in how our bodies change regardless of when or for whatever reason that change occurs. If this life is transitory then why shouldn't we embrace the changes that come with age? What is it, that looking back over the shoulder of time, could leave me with a feeling of regret? I had a choice. I could regret that I was not what I once was or see that with every breath, every passing moment there is a small goodbye, with every passing person another chance to start again, not from where we were but from where we are. It is not an act of surrender to inhabit our present tense. It is an opportunity to savour, to be awake, to see who and what is all around and in us at this very moment. I learned something from that experience. Presence is all I have. This very moment. The past is just a collage of images and reimagined moments. The future has not arrived.

But letting go is difficult. We see our popular culture icons as the years go by and we unconsciously wish them to be frozen in time. They accommodate us popping in to our screens with tightly

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wrapped faces that give our forever stars an almost ghoulish visage. Kind of like a dog's face as it hangs its head outside the window of a fast moving car.

I remember hosting a live television event in Toronto in 2003. It was a concert meant to show the world that the recent SARS outbreak that had taken some lives and scared tourists away was over, something not to be afraid of. The Rolling Stones, AC/DC, Rush and others were trotted out on to a stage to entertain a huge crowd. As the evening wound towards its climax, the crowd waited for the appearance of the headliners, the Rolling Stones, I was positioned in front of the stage between the crowd and the band. After an appropriate amount of delay, the kind expected in the church of rock and roll, the Stones hit the stage. Keith Richards blasted out the opening chords to "Start Me Up." The years haven't been kind to Keith's appearance but he has done little to hide its effects. The lights changed the sound cranked higher and Mick Jagger strutted out to his microphone. His hair, chestnut brown and long, his body lithe and athletic. The crowd went wild.

I felt like I was watching a Rolling Stones cover band. That I was at some casino where rock bands go to pasture and we relive our youth as we gladly accept the disconnect between who is front of us and whether or not they are singing with their real teeth in place. The Stones have been in my life from the beginning. As a small child I sat with my family parked in front of the TV on Sunday nights to see them on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. As I looked up to the band from the lip of the stage I wondered how Ronnie Wood could still have not a strand of grey in his mop of rock star hair. Now I wonder, why did we need him to look that way?

There was one member of the legendary Rolling Stones who did not play the forever young game. I had the chance to interview drummer Charlie Watts some time after the SARS concert while

working for JAZZ FM. Mr. Watts, along with being a Rolling Stone, is also a big band leader and jazz aficionado. His collection is cross referenced, mammoth and highly nuanced. He came down to our modest radio digs one day when the Stones were rehearsing in Toronto. They often came to the city to get their show together in an empty airplane hangar at Pearson International Airport.

Charlie was a gentle and unassuming man. His hair was grey, his eyes still twinkled but it was clear that no ‘work’ had been done. In fact, he had done nothing all to upgrade his aging body. He was tasteful, and frankly, gracious. There was something peaceful about the evenness of his voice. He had settled into a relaxed rhythm that it seems he had warmly embraced many years ago. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that Mr. Watts was both comfortable with his place in the journey of life and the fact that he loves and plays Jazz.

I’m not saying that Jazz has some magical power, though it does, but in the years I hosted a jazz program I came to realize a few things about the people who play it. They don’t do it because they are going to get famous, or rich. For most the crowds are small and the pay is smaller. They do it because they have to. It is in them and it must come out. They have to have a level of musicianship that only finds its parallels in the classical music’s of the world. The other part worth noting is that one can grow old in jazz with no need to recreate the adolescent hormone rush that fuels so much pop culture. A seventy-two-year old pianist can sit in the pocket of this rich and spiritual music and just play. Suit and tie, or jeans and sweater. No matter. Jazz ages well. The ravages of time make it whole. Charlie Watts knew that.

We all approach age differently I suppose but spiritually one has to wonder if anti-aging creams, chin tucks and Rogaine make the path easier or are simply a form of fairy dust we sprinkle around in hopes that others, if not ourselves, can be assured that we are not

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changing, that we are still here. But perhaps we are looking in the wrong place to validate our journey. Perhaps life is not measured best by cheating death, at least outwardly. In Jake Reimer and Nathaniel Stampfer's book *So That Your Values Live On* there is a passage from a young man named Eldad Pan. He was a twenty-year-old Israeli soldier killed in the Battle of Independence:

“Lately I have been thinking about what the goal of life should be. At best man's life is short. His life may be kind, harsh, easy or difficult, but the time passes before he realizes it. An old person wants to live no less than a young person. The years of life do not satisfy the hunger for life . . . precisely because life is short and no one can completely enjoy it (for we die with half our desire unsatisfied) {Eccles. Rabba 1,2} we should dedicate life to a scared and worthy goal.”

Eldad was young when he wrote this and died soon after, but what I admire about him is that he realized that age had little to do with purpose and I'm sure even less in common with our desire to keep our icons and ourselves forever young. Ask any actress in Hollywood about the availability of work once they reach the tender age of thirty. We yearn for the maiden, tolerate the mother and, it would seem, mostly hold the crone in contempt.

The Buddha also asked us to consider that longevity is perhaps not as important as what we do with ourselves in the time we have. He said: ‘It would be better to live for one day wise and meditative, than for a hundred years stupid and lacking awareness. It would be better to live for one day full of vigor, than for a hundred years lazy and idle’ (Dhp.111–12).

But popular culture has, at times, another face. Older, aging and ready. There are some who as they come to the end of, not just their careers, but their lives bring a powerful spiritual element to their last hurrah. Johnny Cash, the legendary Man in Black, recorded one more

time before his death. In full knowledge of his end he collaborated with Producer Rick Rubin. Rubin told him of a televangelist who claimed to have cured his own cancer by taking daily communion. Cash had Rubin find his old communion kit and he said it every day, often with Rick witnessing him, usually by phone. Johnny ended each call by saying, “I love you, Rick.” And Rick would love him right back. The first song they released on that last album was a beautiful lament. The song is called “Help Me.” It opens the collection, the last he’d ever sing. In it, Cash speaks from a humble heart, he begs for help and bends his knee towards his God. We have an opportunity in aging to move from ideas of winning and losing in the battle of life, to moving towards the communion that Cash was drawn to. To unity and humility in the knowledge that we are not alone, we are part of something bigger. Indeed, we have never been alone.

If you listen to Cash singing this song your heart breaks. Unlike Jagger who defies his age with every concert Cash sits quietly in the recording studio with a tired voice, the Man in Black gone grey, his frail voice reaching out from soul to soul to say, take me home lord. It reminds me of a ritual pet peeve of mine. In Jewish prayer there is a point in the service where we are to go in to silent prayer. It’s called the Amidah. Part of the ritual is to be standing with feet together and body upright. For as long as I can remember I have resisted putting my feet together and often lean on the bench in front of me instead of remaining upright. I know what I’m doing. I’m refusing to sit in my humility. I will stand any way I want, and slouch too damn it. It’s become a thing for me, and about me.

Now I find a small smile breaking across my face as I position myself for this prayer cycle. It lasts about five minutes. I have stopped reading the words as quickly as I can in Hebrew. Most of them don’t mean anything to me. Instead I push my feet together, put down my

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prayer book (the Siddur) and close my eyes in silent meditation. I often find myself contemplating my family and sending them love and compassion. Perhaps now, finally, I'm slowly arriving in the moment as my ego gives way to my true self, my soul.

Like Cash, Canadian icon Leonard Cohen went in to the studio to leave us with his last will and musical testament. I had the pleasure of interviewing Cohen several times, for radio and for television. On one occasion I had a good half hour to spend with him. I asked, "So you're a Buddhist now, right?" Cohen looked up, "No I'm not." "But you just spent six years in a Buddhist Monastery." Cohen paused, "I'm a Jew. We have within every religion all that we could want or look for." The key he said was to build a fence around the sacred in our lives. To cultivate the garden of our spirituality and to tend it well. With his masterpiece, "Hallelujah," Cohen cemented his place in the spiritual life of so many people around the world.

As the septuagenarian troubadour he proved that a performer can show their age and still electrify an audience. As he came closer to his death Cohen did not retreat in to issuing a collection of his greatest hits. Instead, he met his end with the grace and audacity that were his hallmarks with his incredible "You Want It Darker."

Hineni is the Hebrew for I am here. When Moses encounters the burning bush he bows his head, removes his sandals at God's command to feel the sacred earth beneath his feet and says, Hineni. I am here. For me the central question of faith is not where is God? It is, where am I? What have I done to make myself available to what is all around me?

If God is process, then ageing must be part of the flow, the Shefa, as we say in Judaism. Yet we live in a cultural milieu that gives little value to process, let alone age. If we are to take our cues from the grossly underrepresented elders in our cultural media, then there isn't much

to look forward to. I spent most of my adult life in media but there came a time when I had had enough. Instead, I worked to help others communicate messages that I thought people needed to hear. When I did appear at some event it was like I had risen from the ashes. Seeing the surprise on people's faces I would pre-emptively say, "I know what you're thinking; 'I thought he was dead.'" My provocative quip was often met with a quick denial, but I don't think we can help it.

I think that perhaps we need not be so absolute about our choices. We can find a way to steer clear of the cartoon decrepitude that populates our less than inspired storytelling and imagine the autumn of our lives differently.

The Japanese have no word for retirement, instead they focus on *Ikigai*, which I would call Kavanah. Your profound connection to your intention. For the Japanese getting in touch with their *Ikigai* can mean that they remain engaged and eager to continue doing the things they love, truly love, for the rest of their lives. According to *National Geographic* reporter Dan Buettner, a long-time student of Japanese culture, we all have *Ikigai* deep inside of us. It is the ability to locate our true inner voice, that which calls to us but is so often obscured by our mostly fear driven operating systems. Once we're caught in our fears we become reactive, compulsive and unable to hear that voice, the one Judeo-Christian's call the still small voice, above the din that we ourselves cultivate. Growing in to our sageing years is our last best chance to hear what for many is a voice that they have never learned to listen for.

Perhaps the old fool sitting quietly on the front porch is not so ridiculous after all. To hear what is all around and available to us requires stillness. But in a culture where stillness is often looked down upon that can be hard to do.

The Japanese also believe in cultivating *Moai*. This is the coming

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together of those with shared interests that do something important. They look after each other. According to Buettner, Moai came to be because farmers would get together to share best practices especially in hard times. Today we have virtual communities where elders can congregate online. This can be helpful in breaking down the walls that we seem determined to build around those that are getting older, but I wonder if high tech can be of profound use without high touch.

I first heard that idea, high tech versus high touch, at a lecture given by educator Walter Pittman when I was a journalism school in Toronto. He maintained at the time, in the mid 1980s to be precise, that the advent of more technologies that allow us to connect to each other should not fool us into believing that the more intimate forms of collaborating could be duplicated. He wanted us to find ways to enhance our people skills not just enhance our tech touch. To me, he was talking about the heart to heart that is the cornerstone of not just social but spiritual life.

Spirituality is about relationship, life is about relationship. If the dying repeatedly tells us as they are leaving that it is all about love then what good is a chat room unless it is underpinned by the body heat that is at the core of what we starve for?

In an article on the effects of social media on loneliness author Sherry Amatenstein writes:

We've all been in a public place, waiting for a friend to arrive or simply dining, traveling, or sitting alone, and opened an app to avoid "awkward" eye contact with those around us. And it is common for social anxiety sufferers to open social media apps to temporarily feel some connection to others. But when they unplug, the feeling of connection dissipates. Furthermore, frequently viewing curated snapshots of other people's lives might leave social media

users feeling as if *everyone else has a better life, is smarter, funnier, more interesting, has more friends, etc.*

Connecting virtually can benefit us but it can also make avoidance easier. How many times do we decide to text or email rather than call or visit someone? We have gained ‘connectivity’ but in some ways lost community.

What I’m talking about is what the Buddhists call the “third treasure.” The first treasure is the Buddha, which signifies the unity of all, the web that we are all are part of as explained by Vietnamese master Thich Nhat Hanh. The second treasure is the dharma which through the teachings brings us a skillful refinement that shows us the beauty and wisdom of the diversity of all things and then finally, the piece that we as elders must strengthen if we are to survive the pressures of marginalization, the sangha, the community where unity and diversity come together.

I remember sitting at our Sabbath table one evening, with ten or twelve people gathered together for our feast. One new attendee, a good friend, was seated beside me and as the conversation and wine flowed freely as we rested in the twilight of the day. It was time to claim some space. To leave the doing behind and simply be, together. My friend was a distinguished academic and former University president. Jewish by birth and temperament but an avowed atheist, a scientist, as he put it. He was playfully jousting with me about my belief in God and telling me that his religion was the pursuit of truth. There was nothing to refute there, but as I looked around the table, I turned to him said. “Science is to me the articulation of the mystery and a crucially important pursuit. One that can banish ignorance and calm the superstitious mind, but there is one thing that science cannot give you.”

“What’s that?” he asked. I turned to the feast table and all the

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animated discussion and sharing going on and said, “This.” We smiled at each other and he said, “Well I can’t argue with that.” The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh understands Sabbath as well: “We will be more successful in all our endeavours if we can let go of the habit of running all the time, and take little pauses to relax and re-center ourselves. And we’ll also have a lot more joy in living.”

We can and do find ways to connect to each other through technology and much good can come from that, but what religion has given us cannot be easily replaced. The opportunity to congregate, to watch each other grow up and through this life. The ability to witness each other as we mourn, celebrate and come together to share life’s journey is one of the greatest gifts that we can partake in.

Growing older can be lonely. It’s often experienced in a segregated space, such as senior’s residences, retirement communities, and in my neighbourhood, an adult daycare centre, for those ‘enjoying’ their golden years. Two thirds of Canadians live in suburban communities – places where the car is king. The streets are often four lanes wide each way and the average speed, well let’s just say it’s the perfect speed for crossing the street if you’re on the track team at your local high school, otherwise, deadly. Some streets don’t even have sidewalks and the main thoroughfares are often divided into road, sidewalk, thirty feet of grass, a sound barrier and finally subdivision housing where the large, cookie-cutter houses with no backyard face away from the traffic. The setting is not conducive to having people mingle, congregate or even say hello. Now imagine being old enough to find driving too much. Or having some physical ailments that make it too difficult to do.

Without the car you are lost. With it you could at least get to the private mall where you can watch people shop, maybe even do a few laps in retail purgatory. There is no sangha in that scenario.

We have professionalized care of our elders. In Denmark they managed to create an opportunity for older women to come together, stay in their community and in many cases, thrive. They renovated houses in existing neighbourhoods with high streets in walking distance of the houses. In each home they created semi-autonomous apartments and some common living areas. The women, and it still is women who live longest, had company when needed, felt part of the community and were given the most precious spiritual gift of all, their dignity.

I keep forgetting how old I am when I venture out in to the professional fields that used to be my playground. For example, I recently approached a public broadcaster about an idea I had for a current affairs radio show that simply asked, Why? They liked things about it and asked if I would go away and refine the pitch. A few days later I received a call from the very able and creative lead on new program development, a woman close to my own age, and she asked, “Do you have to host this?” She quickly added, “Not that you might not be the best host for it, but are you married to that?” I was taken aback. I had hosted many shows over my public broadcasting career and was often well received in that position. I had even been doing some hosting for them recently. I quickly reassured her that I was open to what was best for the show and we said goodbye.

That call stayed with me. Whether she meant it or not I was being told, look you’re kinda old and we’re looking to change the guard around here. I had often heard people say, well the audience is dying. In fact, though the hosts had become younger and younger the audience was still overwhelmingly older. Radio listeners are often a fiercely loyal breed. Having me, a blast from the past as some were saying, on the air was not going to help matters much. I asked a friend of mine who hosts a satellite radio show and was once the king of morning rock

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radio in Toronto, do you think you could still do that high pressure morning zoo show. “Without a doubt.” He replied. There is this belief that elders are stuck in their ways and have had their turn.

Then we get people like the American presidential hopeful Bernie Sanders, white-haired, in his seventies and the darling of the young. Why? Because there is something universal in what he articulates. Social justice doesn't have an age limit. Universal healthcare isn't just for the elderly. We have so much to share. I began to think more and more about the spiritual questions that aging brings up. Where do we put those ideas in a society that doesn't seem to care about the big questions? One that, in baseball terms, is playing small ball.

I'm Spiritual – Not Religious

In North America today roughly one in five say that they are spiritual but not religious. But a recent *Vox* article points out that “almost 20 percent of Americans, according to a survey by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) belongs to a category that transcends stereotypical religious identity.” It goes further in reporting that, “By contrast, 31 percent of Americans identify as neither spiritual nor religious.” These respondents skewed younger and more educated than the religious Americans, with 40 percent holding at least a four-year college degree and 17 percent having some form of postgraduate education.

It may be important to ask, if we lose our religion what else we might lose. Now let me be clear, many people leave religion behind for what they, and I, believe are the right reasons: intolerance, bigotry, toxic exceptionalism. Add to that dried out theologies and

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patriarchal structures. Religion can be all those things. But, frankly, any social organization can be that. The army, the steel plant, a rock concert, you name it. The flaw is in the human part. What concerns me is the loss of connective tissue and the creation of a safe space to ponder the mysteries of existence and the struggle to become ethical beings. When people tell me that religion is the root of all evil I ask if soccer is a close second, given the fanatic and sometimes violent culture it engenders in parts of the world. As Leonard Cohen said, we must tend the garden. Leaving our sense of connection to what can appear on a laptop, FaceTiming with the grandkids, Skyping or Zooming with old friends might be something but it also might not be anywhere near enough.

If we are to have a cogent response to the marginalizing forces that demand that we and those we admire never age, then we must turn towards each other. Otherwise we leave that space not just to technologies but to those that offer care, at a price.

We have chosen to live in atomized family units, and even connecting with our neighbours in the adjoining house or apartment has become too much. As for family, we are mobile, we leave our parents. On average, in bigger cities people move every three or four years. The social investment is, well, I'm not sure where it is anymore. Perhaps it extends no further than our fenced in yard or a twelve-foot-long concrete balcony.

As we age, we will have to elbow our way in to the mainstream dialogue and look to each other for support and to find deeply meaningful ways to connect, to mentor and to stay engaged in all that still calls to us. Thirty years ago the image that terrified us was that of the frightened senior furtively perusing the supermarket aisles, stocking up on tinned cat food, not for any pets mind you, but being hoarded for their own consumption. We were all going to end up destitute.

Now, apparently we're all going to end up on a cruise ship, flashing credit cards at the next exotic port of call. Truth is, for many poverty is still very real.

All of these scenarios are grounded in our desire to cling to what we have constructed, the personality, material inventory and the never say die picture we create of us. But what of the soul, that other element that I so clearly saw had left the body of my father almost thirty years ago.

I defer to Thich Nhat Hanh again: "The cloud will never die. It may become rain, or snow, or even ice. It may change shape, sculpted by the westerly winds but in essence like the soul itself is an eternal piece of the web of creation." Even the atheist can find common cause here. Energy, as the physicist say, never dies, it may transform but it is eternal. Perhaps the Richard Dawkins' of the world view my belief in the soul as mere vanity. Or worse, a weakness that propels me in to cult like positioning that will not accept the finality of this biological unit. I can see their point, yet I prefer, instead, to dance a little pirouette, luxuriating in the mystery that I can't deny is all around me, around us. There is little room for this garden of the soul in a culture obsessed with the individual and their buying power.

In fact the majority of magazine and media literature aimed at seniors keeps driving the demographic lower in hopes of adding just the right amount of honey to aging. The better to attract advertisers to the good life fantasy they can offer in return. In Canada there is a magazine called *Zoomer*, it is part of an overarching media and financial services strategy that includes an oldies radio station, a classical music offering, a high gloss magazine and a television station populated with classic brit-coms and *Murder, She Wrote* re-runs. The group also owns the Canadian Association for Retired People brand, or CARP. Its counterpart in America, AARP, represents, lobbies for,

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and offers insurance and other products to over 40 million members. I recently picked up a copy of *Zoomer*. On the cover, ridiculously enough, was Canadian and occasional celebrity Jason Priestley, best known for the retro TV hit *Beverly Hills 90210*. I have nothing against Mr. Priestley and by all accounts he is very talented director as well as actor, but the idea that he was staring out from the cover of this magazine as a representative of someone in their later years, an elder, seemed, at least to me, quite cynical.

Zoomer has over the last ten to fifteen years steadily lowered the seniors threshold for its marketing purposes in hopes of grabbing a piece of the 34–49 buying demographic. Get fit! Look great! At the very least dye your beard will ya! Fun factoid, getting rid of the wrinkles in your neck costs about thirty thousand dollars, zoom that.

The story of is told of a billionaires' bacchanal on Shelter Island. Reportedly two of America's greatest modern authors, Joseph Heller of *Catch-22* fame and Kurt Vonnegut, who penned *Slaughterhouse-Five* among other great titles, were standing around as the lights danced across the room, the liquor flowed freely and the glitterati, well, they glittered. Vonnegut turns to Heller and says, "Joe, how does it make you feel to know that our host only yesterday may have made more money than your novel earned in its entire history?" Heller replied. "I have something he doesn't have." "What could you possibly have that he doesn't?" asked Vonnegut. And Heller replied, "I have enough."

Now this story has been with me long enough that I'm not sure of its veracity or if it is indeed apocryphal. Regardless, it speaks to a notion that is essential to spiritual growth. The decision to deal with our attachment to the belief that material pursuits will make us happy. Anthropologists call it the Good Life Fantasy. Just one more thing, that's all I'm asking. One more car, house, shirt, shoes, wife, Facebook friend. Now as we enter the autumn of life we are asked to continue

the fantasy, continue feeding the shadow of want and the vulnerability that comes with it. We whiten, we brighten, we flaunt our buying power. We become seniors, active, productive, still in the game that best suits the householder mold building the modern-day cave to protect their young and vulnerable family. But, if we are to enter the forest of contemplation, we must come to terms with changing the value proposition that no longer fulfills our needs on the journey.

As our levels of desire change, so to must our worldview. Again, I factor in our repulsion with the inevitable. The fact that we are going to die and that none of those things we've acquired will be useful for the journey. We will not be burying our servants alive with us, and no, clay soldiers are not needed to protect us. At times like this it helps to see how others see what we insist is the end. In the *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, Sogyal Rinpoche speaks to another possibility. "For what happens at the moment of death is that the ordinary mind and its delusions die, and in that gap the boundless sky-like nature of our mind is uncovered. This essential nature of the mind (what some religions locate as the heart centre) is the background to the whole of life and death, like the sky, which folds the whole universe in its embrace." The audacity of that claim in the face of clear eyed rationalism is worth, in my opinion, exploring.

I was speaking to a close relative recently who was eloquent in her belief of the place of mystery in her life, she kept apologizing for her 'flaky' views. I tried to assure her that she was in good company. I encouraged her to flake away. I am quite comfortable with mystery and enjoy a deep dive in to it, but she kept apologizing anyway, and I understood why. After all we are rewarded for proof, even in a life where we lie in rich and often non-rational dream states each and every night. We spend our waking hours in a state where memory is nothing more than a construct, where love is pursued with no proof

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of its existence, where we must apologize for seeming ‘flaky’ when we could be turning to each other and saying, “what a wild ride this is. Spinning at six thousand miles an hour on a miniscule ball in a field of stars that stretches in to millions of galaxies. Seriously this is WILD.”

Remembering that many depictions of our Elders revolve around the notion of the senile, doddering fool perhaps there is little in it for us, with silver in our hair to turn to the person beside us and say, “we’re all literally made of stardust you know. The energy in each of those particles will never die. We go on in some way forever.” Now, if this is proclaimed in a movie where the old person saying it is being played by Morgan Freeman and he has just come back from a cloud walk, or by an Indigenous actress in a period piece we probably find it enchanting. But if it’s the guy beside you at the local chain store, well that, at the best of times, is suspect.

After all, if, as we stated earlier, no more than 5 percent of characters in our cinematic storytelling are over sixty-five years of age and the vast majority of those depictions are of inappropriate, demented or mean spirited seniors, then there isn’t much that would convince most elders to stand and deliver. As Zalman Schachter Shalomi writes in his seminal book on the subject, *Ageing to Sageing*, most people can’t honestly say, “Yes I want to be an elder when I grow up.” Homer, he points out, shows Odysseus as the world conquering hero on his return from his mid-life adventures, but we never see him harvesting his wisdom in his later years. Lear, well he just descends in to madness, destroys his greedy children and dies once his royal power is taken from him. Lovely life lesson don’t you think?

We celebrate victory but rarely honour the wisdom and the peace that comes with reconciling our relationships and opening ourselves up to agape, the soulful, loving and generous heart of one who knows that we are one with creation. Is that flaky?

As elders we have a chance before we leave this mortal coil to renew our purpose. If we now live longer than ever before in human history then maybe we can burn our bingo cards and stay engaged with others and with our selves. Ageing is an opportunity to cultivate love and appreciation for the mystery and gift of this life.

Love – To Hold Dear

It's hard to know when we cross certain bridges in life. I haven't encountered any "aha" moments that changed everything. It's more a bits and bytes accumulation of seemingly disparate shards of knowing and unknowing. As the years unfold I have found it easier to invite more mystery in to my life. As I entered autumn with more clarity I realized that I had to out myself. I had to start using the G word more liberally.

Sometimes when I talk about that four-letter word, God, people pull their trump card out. "Prove God!" I, and others I've heard, always answer the same way. Prove love. Can you hold it, buy it, put it in a bottle? No, yet we spend our lives searching for it, holding on to it, watching it change and sometimes letting it go. Love, like faith, is something we do, not something we can clutch in our small hands. One phrase that does confuse me though is, "God is love." In my eyes God is not encapsulated in human emotions. Besides if God is love

then is it also not hate, fear, hope and death? I'm not looking for a one-dimensional presence. So let's uncouple God from love. Let's not prove or disprove but instead take a dive into human love.

There are so many destinations for our love. We don't just love people, we can love nature, service, justice, food and as the old testament implores us we can, we must, love the stranger. Let's stay with the love word for a moment.

When it comes to getting older it seems that the love that gets the most attention is sexual love. The literature is everywhere about senior's sex. The premise is that as much as younger people find the idea of old folks rubbing bodies together, even achieving orgasm, repulsive, older people still want sex and young uns be damned. It's almost an act of defiance to hear some tell it. I don't deny that sex for older people is important but I want to broaden the idea a bit. In the context of a sexually repressed culture where sexuality, like so much else, is a commodity, a currency if you will, we are in danger of framing the sensual lives of our elders in the same superficial way that we categorize all sexual activity. Performance, power, or the lack of it, and the potent rush of a chemically enhanced flow of blood to our primary sexual organs.

"Sex is better than ever," we hear the octogenarian say. That may well be true, but is it the same sex that we had in younger years. Should it be? Does it need to be? What about those who find that sex doesn't have the same hold on them anymore. Call it a lust deficit. As a young man I was overwhelmed by the hormonal rush to procreate, to feel lost in the power of intercourse. Should I feel that way now? Perhaps occasionally but occasionally perhaps not. I imagine for some it's a relief to move from copulation to companionship. To feel the warm and soothing touch of a loved one that says you are touchable, loveable, still here. Love as we age has something we

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can't acquire before its time. It has a narrative. Our stories are of love found, lost, nurtured and forgotten.

I do not exclude myself from the expectation that we must be forever sexy. I have trouble letting go of the high performing ideal. It feels like surrender somehow to bob around in the low tide of a slower sexuality. I sometimes fear that low tide is my new normal. That by accepting it when it comes I've lost something that I've relied on to feel good about myself for all these years.

I would say that contrary to the crass stereotype of the dirty old man I feel that as an older man I am more respectful of women than I was as a young bull. I appreciate the same things, in my case in the heterosexual frame that I work from. But these days I am able to be in the presence of women without the same longings I had in my younger days. Its liberating really. I can see the person in front of me more clearly. But perhaps this calming of the storm happens regardless of who is or isn't in our lives. The challenge I face, and sing along if you know the words, is to blend the passion with a new piece, wisdom. Sexual wisdom. Marvin Gaye spoke of sexual healing maybe entering in to this phase of life is a chance for us to do just that. Heal ourselves. What would it be like to enter a new realm of sexual grace? One where we are not fixated on performance over connection.

We celebrate, often with good reason, the people who marry and stay together for forty, fifty, even sixty years. But for most of us the reality is that one spouse outlives the other or divorce ends relationships. I, like many others, have had two marriages, and from that I have learned a great deal about myself. For instance, we live longer, and we can start again even if we marry for long periods of time. How do we cohabitate over all that time and comingle is the new question to be answered?

Even so, there is a great imbalance as far as gender goes that can

make finding a mate in the later years hard. For instance, women live eight years longer than men which eventually leaves seven women for every man in places like assisted living retirement communities. Even then while 55 percent of women are unmarried, only 28 percent of men are single. Basically, single women outnumber single men by roughly a two to one margin. What is it about us men? We can't seem to fathom the idea that we might have to go it alone. Lord knows we talk a big game about toughness and self-sufficiency but leave us out there on our own for more than eighteen months and we curl up in a ball on the La-Z-Boy watching *Family Feud* re-runs. A *Globe and Mail* article from a few years back pointed to a new wrinkle, women, or at least two thirds of them, preferred to become LATs – living apart together – to getting married and cohabitating in their later years.

An American survey came up with the top dating sites for finding the next Mr. or Ms. Older, but still right for me, match. Sites like MillionaireMatch, Friend Finder and Senior Black Meet. I found the specificity pretty hilarious but what really caught my eye was the use of the word friend. It's not that older people don't want sex, it's that they want it with a person who can offer them that and more. Companionship. They may even just want the friend part when it comes right down to it. Getting older means you often accept who you are more easily. This is not the time for stumbling through relationships driven by a mix of hormones, dreams and a healthy dollop of immaturity. This is the time to fold in to the soft creases of life with someone who, like you, has lived, loved and known that with love we must accept that there will be grief and sorrow as those that we love pass. For after all the price of love is grief.

I know a woman who in her late eighties, after years of living without a husband, found and fell in love with a man who had already turned ninety. He had outlived two previous wives and like many men

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he quite quickly went about the business of finding a new wife. They lived quite happily together for about five years until he died. I always enjoyed seeing him with his arm around her shoulder as they smiled and laughed with family. After some happy banter he would excuse himself and go for his afternoon nap. It was lovely really.

Another woman, my mother, lost her husband, my father, in her early sixties and never again seemed to be interested in remarrying. We all did the things good children do, we told her that we had no problem with her finding someone to share the rest of her life with. Thing is, she had several suitors over the years but she would have none of it. "I've been taking care of people my whole life. The last thing I need is some man expecting me to make him dinner and keep him company." She was content to see some friends at the Synagogue, watch lots of all news on television and indulge her long neglected passion for painting. Her apartments since have always been filled with her creations. Was she always happy and never sad or lonely? Of course not, but she was living life on her terms and that was as it should be.

As I write this, she is alone and frail in a long term care facility far away from me, but close to my siblings. She is ninety-six and one thing I can say with certainty is that she is not online dating. She seems content with the attention of her children, or as content as she can be.

With this long life span comes a fair amount of baggage but if we allow ourselves to unpack some of our emotional carry on we can see that some of what we ascribed to others as 'their faults' when relationships failed was really us. Here's one advantage to having more than one long term relationship. When you have a second or even third life partner you start noticing that you have a habit of putting off important conversations or that you are much too quick to anger. You can't help but feel that life is much less about what's wrong with those we share it with, and more about what we have not taken the

time to refine in our own character. It can be sobering to realize that partner number two is echoing the complaints about your character that were so well-articulated by your first partner.

In the Jewish tradition there has been a revival in the concept of Mussar, a values based approach to shaping our character through mindful practice. The idea is that talking about being better and more ethical is not enough, we must reinforce our better traits by consciously picking one trait at a time and working to take action that enhances our ability to embody it. Mussar can focus on a trait like humility, order or truth and employ an active and mindful strategy to strengthen it. There are three parts to a daily practice: a morning mantra that is read out loud or chanted to frame the day, a mindful action as one goes through the day, and then, nightly journaling. The effect can be profound. Alan Morinis' book, *Everyday Holiness*, gives you a coherent and well written roadmap to developing a strong Mussar practice.

Imagine, as we re-enter the world of dating and search for new love after fifty that we pause and first take the time to make sure that we have done the work of being a better partner. That we are not impulsively shopping for a mate out of fear of being alone, as real as that can be. But instead we offer a better version of ourselves that brings depth to the relationship by being reflective. A morning mantra, a mindful action and an evening journal, brilliant.

We can choose to enter areas of contemplation on this journey from senior to elder. We can embrace conscious action, even revel in our ageing process, or, as so often happens as we move through the stations of life, we can back in to it, eyes closed, taken by surprise, and unprepared to accept the gift that's offered.

I have heard people complain about the lack of good potential partners out there but rarely have I heard them say, I think I'm going to spend a little time getting to a better place myself before I size

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someone up, or settle for someone, anyone, who'll put up with me and keep me company. Given the rate at which men quickly remarry I think we would benefit greatly from embracing that pause.

Of course this is easy for me to say right now given that I'm blessed with a loving wife but I have to say that I find it fascinating that so many more women, rather than men, can become self-contained as they age. I believe that women have reserves of strength, physically and spiritually, that men either expend early on, or in the case of spirituality, neglect to cultivate. But fear not gentlemen, and women too, there is a remedy. You just have to take a little leap. But as they say if you do choose to jump you will grow wings on the way down.

Into the Woods

Growing up in a three-bedroom apartment with six people milling about I always cherished the times that I could actually have the bedroom I shared with my brothers to myself. Sometimes I would place the egg-shaped microphone attached to our honking big Philips reel-to-reel tape recorder in front of the radio by my bed. I would wait for the first few bars of a song and if I liked it I would press down hard on play and record and basically put together a 1960s version of a mix tape. Only bigger. I would lie on my bed and listen to the tunes and my mind would wander. Being the macabre sort at the time I would find myself thinking of dying. Being the youngest in the family I figured everyone else would go first so I could afford to think these thoughts. I remember thinking that if there was a God then he was cruel. Cruel to put us here, make us aware of our mortality and then for no apparent reason, let us die. Die, for God's sake, not

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have a bad day or even a lousy year but up and die. The randomness, that's what hurt the most. Sure old people die, I thought, but so do innocent bystanders, people doing wonderful things for mankind, children, even children. It's a bloody outrage. Why put us here in the first place? And, if you must have us drop in for a short visit, why make us conscious of life's limits?

My cats, my dog, they have every Buddhist practitioner licked. No pun intended. I hate puns. Those creatures are completely present. No awareness of their eventual death. They are content to literally putter about, sleep, eat and occasionally run around. Ironically their relatively short life spans often teach our children some of their first lessons about love, attachment and that inevitable price we pay in grief when they die.

When I was first touched by the hand of death, like so many, I had done little to prepare. I had not rehearsed my dying so that once faced with the prospect I could enter in to that journey with some grace. Within my own faith tradition there is an acknowledgement that there are many small deaths in a lifetime. Every year, on the day of atonement, Yom Kippur, we are to dress in the white cloth that closely resembles the funeral shroud that they will wrap our bodies in when we are emptied of our soul. The shroud will cover us from head to toe and we will be buried within twenty-four hours in the simplest of pine boxes. The body, as Ram Dass says, becomes the empty space suit that we once inhabited on our eternal journey of impermanence.

Every night there is a prayer we say as Jews that speaks to tying up loose ends: the bedtime Shema. We forgive those who have wronged us, whether intentionally or accidentally, and we ask forgiveness from those that we have wronged. We do it with the belief, at least for those like me that revel in the mystery, that life is composed of a multitude of deaths. You see at night, so goes the teaching, we don't

just sleep. In fact, our souls ascend and become part of the eternal flow of God, or as I and others like to call it, the Shefa.

When we awake, our first blessings are those of gratitude. We are grateful that our souls have been returned to us so that we might live another day in our quest to become a mensch, literally a human being. I know in the age of reason; this seems like fairy tale. But I for one deeply value and bend my knee to mystery. I'm not speaking of the paranormal. I am thinking more of awe and wonder.

The ex-communicated Catholic theologian Matthew Fox maintained that the Church had become too Jesus-centric, that religion had left behind the awe and wonder that gave the spiritual journey its humility, given us the ability to be available to the magnificent, unimaginable power and majesty of the cosmos. Perhaps that is why so many scriptures speak in terms of Kings and Lords. Yes, these are unequivocally and unjustly patriarchal, but in their time they were attempts to capture, at least in the Jewish tradition, some powerfully infused shards of what is truly, for the human mind, unknowable. Matthew Fox did not shrink in the face of his chastisement by his Church. Instead he incorporated many spiritual elements from Indigenous beliefs and other deeply ecumenical sources in a path he calls Creation Spirituality. An exploration of wonder and awe. One river, many wells as he would say. Since discovering his work deep ecumenism has become a passion point in my learning. I love seeing how, as Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, one of my foundational teachers says, "How do you get it on with God?"

Occasionally, I have been asked to give the sermon, the Dvar Torah by my Rabbi. I have taken the honour seriously each time I was offered it, and tried my best to bring the story, or Parsha of the week in to a new and interesting light. One week I decided to play a little bit. I had learned an icebreaker in my years of public speaking that I

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employed. “I want you all to turn to the person nearest you who is not a spouse or family member.” I said. “Please ask them in the next two minutes to tell you the story of their name. You are not to answer or ask questions when they speak. Just hold what they are saying and listen from your heart. When they are finished please reverse the roles.” The sanctuary was abuzz. People were animated and I knew then that they would never look at the person they were sharing with in the same way again. That they would have an intimate piece of another’s life inside them. That too is love. Then we went downstairs to share food in the Sabbath communal meal, Kiddush. This time I was feeling like we could go a little deeper. Not much, but a little. So many of us in that synagogue basement had been coming together for years knowing so little of each other. Not even each other’s names, let alone the life that they, and I were living. Watching this unfold made me realize that I needed to be part of was more spiritual than religious. That without the spark of intimacy and relationship both within ourselves and between each other that was happening here, I could practice religion without investing my deeper heartfelt self in its ritual. Rituals that for me and so many have become dried out. I smiled and moved a step closer to creating that intimacy.

Since then, every autumn I gather with a group of eighty to one hundred men at a Jewish retreat centre in Connecticut. The weekend is called JMR, simply, the Jewish Men’s Retreat. What happens is rare for us as men. Unlike the bond of war or crisis, or of sport or commerce, we come together to sing, dance, sweat, share and pray. The traditional Sabbath service is turned on its head. For some, it is their first chance to see the service as truly joyous and take the chance of making heartfelt connections. It can be quite scary really to see some men get up and start to dance in the centre of the sanctuary. Hands reaching up, arms intertwined as they form a circle together. I have

taken both my oldest sons to the retreat. As the younger of the two and I walked toward the service, I said to him. “Men are going to get up, jump up, and lose themselves in joy, but you don’t have to do it just because they do.” I don’t get up to join in the dancing. I play a djembe, an African drum, it’s the gift I feel most comfortable in offering. What we revel in at JMR is often called Jewish Renewal. A movement that mixes east and west, mysticism and traditional practice in a stew of intimacy that brings good things out in people. In this case, in men.

This strain of Judaism has its roots in the Hasidic movement that blew the sensible barn doors off of Judaism about 130 years ago. Every religion has its ecstatic branch. This one includes the cult of personality, teleporting Rabbis and the usual patriarchal trappings of every orthodox religious grouping. But sometimes by releasing the grip of rationalism we can transcend the need to have everything fit into a neat little box. We can take the leap of courage needed to conquer our separateness, to break through the firewall we spend so much time constructing. Embracing this idea has been my leap in to a radical acceptance of the role of mystery in my life. It probably explains my aversion to spreadsheets as well.

In this men’s gathering we are mostly older, mostly feminists, but with a good sprinkling of younger men to offset all the greying beards. As an older man it has truly been a gift to have either of my older boys at these retreats over the years. It hasn’t happened very much and I have always been careful about pressuring my sons, all four of them, to follow my path. Their lives are mine to nurture but not direct. For those times when they have occasionally accompanied me what I hope they saw was men being intimate, with each other, reflecting on their roles as men and building their emotional vocabulary by sharing their lives’ journeys. It’s courageous, when I think about it, actually bringing a loving intention to our gathering

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and daring to feel love and loved. Growing up takes guts, growing older makes the task more urgent.

As we prepare to leave the retreat some words of wisdom are imparted to us about the bumpy ride of re-entry that awaits. If we have a partner, we have to remember that they weren't on this journey. They didn't enter the sweat lodge with us, share their trials and fears in small sharing circles that form three times during the weekend. We might have a glow that frankly others find annoying as we enter our homes. You know the, "Glad you had a great time, the dog ate my shoes while you were gone welcome." Kind of a buzz kill. Still each year I am able to bring a little bit more in the door to make my love of my family a little sweeter. It's never too late.

The love I leave behind informs the love that I pay forward. I have been in two twenty-year relationships now. I have loved badly and well. I have learned that if there is unhappiness it is most often because I am not cultivating the source of my own love and gifting it to others. I have loved friends and lost some. I will always remember my childhood best friend leaving the hospital with a surgically altered throat and tongue eking out the words, "I love you." He caught me by surprise. We had been engaged in the sterile world of Doctors and timelines up till that moment. But he didn't want to waste any more time with them. He knew it was better to speak his truth about all our years growing up together. I got in to my car, with a clutch in my throat and tears in my eyes. We were forty-three, he and I, at the time. He died within a few weeks. I will always love him.

Take Two Teaspoons of Agape and Call ME in the Morning

If you want the moon, do not hide at night. If you want a rose, do not run from the thorns. If you want love, do not hide from yourself.

– Rumi

So, how can ageing make for loving better? If you believe, as I do, that the spiritual journey is grounded in our relationship, to ourselves, to each other and to the awe inspiring universe then follow me down this path for a while.

As we grow older we have a profound opportunity to cultivate the most precious element of a good life, love. Who have we loved, and who loves us? What are we going to do with that knowledge and how can we repair or at the very least enhance our loving relationships?

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It requires courage as do all things that deepen our experience of this life. Honesty as well. If I think back on my failings in loving my partners, my children and my friends it is much easier to look away. Easier still to lay the blame for failures at the feet of others but as we age we can take a different path. One that gives us clarity and new opportunities for renewal.

The courage to love comes in many forms. For this couple after many years together it was about choosing life. This from Terry Doyle.

Mary and I had a couple of special moments in our later years. When I was first diagnosed with cancer and told I only had a few months to live. The radiologist in Sudbury said that they couldn't promise anything but he wanted me to do 6 weeks of treatment. I had gone through that with other friends and they were sick and vomiting every day. I said if I have to go through that to extend my life for a few more months, I'd rather not. His next argument was that he might be able to save my life but I probably would lose my voice box and my tongue. At that stage, with Mary in the room, I said I think I would rather go home and die.

This is the love part. Mary agreed with me. I was sure that she would have tried to talk me into putting up the great fight but she said "it's your decision, if you want to go home, we'll go home." I loved her more at that moment probably more than I ever had and I remembered that when she wanted to die last year . . .

The night of the 25th, about 3:30 a.m. after I had fetched a hot compress for her neck pain, she said in a clear young voice, "I'm so lucky to have you." (I have to tell you, I am softly crying while I type this.) That was the most tender moment of our fifty-six years and at that time I had expected her to live for years longer.

For some getting older is chance to bring more love to their relationship with one of their children. I had a client in one of my Aging to Sageing men's groups. He was a successful lawyer. He had a son who lived in Brooklyn playing jazz music and barely getting by. The relationship had always been strained. I had asked him to write a letter to someone he loved. A letter that they could read after he was gone. In this group this man, this lawyer, chose to write one to his son, a jazz musician in Brooklyn. He did a lot of things in that letter. Said things that required introspection, humility and courage.

He realized, he said, that he had never really accepted his son's decision to be a musician. He could have been, should have been a lawyer like his dad. Done well at it too. He could have lived the good life. What he realized in writing the letter was that he had devalued his son. Undermined him really. He was sorry and he said so. He read that letter to the group of men that were in the workshop. It was a powerful moment for us all.

When we reconvened the next week he told us that he had phoned his son. He told him that he was sorry that they weren't closer and he asked, with real interest about how things were going in Brooklyn. No offer of money to help out just a genuine interest. It took a while for his son to let his guard down but in the end they cried a little together and ended their call with a simple, "I love you."

The writing of that loving letter was something I learned along the way from one of my Rabbis. She called it the Oh my God Letter. She writes one for each of her four children every year. If and when they hear that she has died, she says, they can blurt out, "Oh my God!" then they can go to her filing cabinet at her home office and find a letter waiting for them. A letter filled not with advice and regret but instead with love and blessings. It's a powerful tool for unlocking all that's left unsaid. As Hillel says, "If not now, when?" To do this work

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is to go about the business of cleaning the container of our lives. A container that is often filled with regrets, lost connections and even frustrated dreams. It's not an easy well to look down in to but if we are to move with confidence in to our eldering then we must open our hearts to all that is so much easier to push down in to the dark recesses of our souls.

Love Me, Love Me Not

As I grow older I have noticed that for many, love is often a form of currency. Something to be doled out if conditions are met. Something too precious to offer to just anybody. In fact, even in relationships with those who we profess to love the most we can twist our loving into something more akin to a carrot or a stick. To protect ourselves from hurt we sometimes weaponize love. Yet once we leave the interpersonal realm of loving it seems that love changes. You'll often find clergy saying that God is love, the dying person often says that all that matters in their disappearing life is love. Love becomes more universal in its meaning, more generous in its application.

During the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur, the day of atonement we have a ritual that requires much of us. It is called the Viddui. As we list the darker things that we have done, the lies, the pettiness, the hurtful acts, we knock on our chests. We

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are breaking the hard shell, the klippah, that we spend so much time building around our hearts. We do this because only through the broken heart can we access our spiritual selves

I do believe that there is a difference between naiveté and open heartedness. Is it wise to offer love to everyone? Most of us don't believe it is. Doing so means that we lack boundaries, or worse, that we will be crushed by it. But what if we see it differently? What if instead we offer love, not under condition of an equal and opposite love offering, but just as an act of grace and generosity. If I don't need you to love me back, then everything changes. To be clear, this takes guts to do. It's safer, if not sadder, to keep our armour on.

Don't misunderstand, I'm not offering this because I have in any way mastered it. I can mutter ungratefully about someone who has wronged me with the best of them. I'd love to be Saint Ralph instead of the terribly uneven ball of contradictions that adds up to the unfortunate total Ralph that I am.

Is it our attachment to a result that stops me from loving and from being available to the love that clergy are referring to when they say that God is love? Well, if I take my own advice, I remember that to evolve spiritually it's best to jump in to the spiritual work out room.

One way to do that is a daily regimen of loving intentions. One that involves gratitude, forgiveness and courage. By articulating what we are grateful for we can soften our hearts. By forgiving those that have in some way harmed us we can go deeper in to this human moment.

One practice might help with that piece is the evening shema. The shema states explicitly that we forgive those that have hurt us, either unintentionally or even intentionally. Imagine forgiving someone

who you believe meant to harm you. Why should you do that? Well I like the saying, “revenge is the poison we drink in hopes of killing the other person.” In other words, life becomes toxic when we hold on to hurt and dig deep in to ourselves for those weapons that can get the job done, hate, anger, cruelty. I believe that each of us creates the tone of our own narrative. Again, are we a healthy cell in the celestial body of creation or are we cancerous.

As we age we can choose to do some prudent life review and soften the edges of our personal story. We can find a way to speak from love, taking the chance that we will be heard and become part of a better story, one we can share with others.

Another gift of living longer is that you can sometimes see how those we have known have evolved. Often in my experience for the better. That hurtful verbal bully you knew in elementary school could become a good man. I speak of personal experience here. Not as the bullied, but as the bully. Gather round kids it's time for a Ralphie tale.

At one point in my first marriage I moved back in to the neighbourhood I had grown up in. As a matter of fact, I moved into the house that my old best friend had lived in. His parents, who I had grown up with and loved dearly had died one after the other in the span of a little more than a year. I offered to buy the house from him and his sister. They had all been like family to me. He died of cancer within a year of me moving in to that house.

The reason I bring this up this time is that while dropping my kids off at my old school after we had moved in I bumped in to someone who I had gone to that very same school with years before. I'll call him Rob. I was glad to see him. He shook my hand, hard, very hard, it hurt a bit. Rob looked me in the eye and said, “You were really mean to me when we were kids. I never forgot that. Whenever I would see you on TV I would think about that.” I was gutted. Speechless really.

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He let go of my hand and we parted ways. I soon discovered that he had a store in the neighbourhood. I knew what I needed to do. I went to see him in the store and waited till there were no customers around. “Rob,” I said, “I heard what you said and I just wanted to say that I am truly sorry for the way I behaved. Really, I can’t tell you how sorry I am.” He accepted my apology. Over the next few months I saw him several times and each time I couldn’t help myself, I apologized all over again. Finally, Rob said, “Ralph, it’s okay I just wanted you to know so that I didn’t have to see you in the neighbourhood and carry those old feelings around, please stop apologizing, we’re good.”

Forgiveness, his forgiveness, mattered. I offered no rationalization for my schoolyard taunts, I lived with it. I had created it. This encounter was an important and natural consequence. As time passed I had tried to be a better person. He had helped me do a little of that work. He had offered me an opportunity.

Without forgiveness it is hard to take the steps that can allow us to move forward in to love. Forgiving ourselves can allow us to allow for the actions of others. One of the most valuable things I learned in my brief sojourn into acting happened while I was at the University of Alberta acting program. I only lasted a year, but before I hung up my dance belt and scuffled back to Toronto with my thespian tale between my legs, I was lucky enough to hear this from my acting teacher. I don’t remember how we got there but we were in scene study class and two people had just finished a scene. They were good, but there was something missing. A certain authenticity.

Our teacher got up and spoke about inhabiting the characters completely. To do that we had to accept something hard, we had to accept that each of us is capable of doing absolutely anything. We are strong, terribly weak, honour bound, liars. We are capable of killing someone with our bare hands. Literally. As the Yom Kippur (day of atonement) prayer says:

We lie

We cheat

We steal . . .

Now this may seem the opposite of those happy affirmations we are encouraged to recite as we start our day. The all accepting pep talk that is intended to have us looking on the bright side of life, but I'm of the mind that we have to embrace our awfulness. I'm not talking self-flagellation here, though for some that seems to be an oddly satisfying way. I'm asking you to explore humility. Here's an example. You know that moment? The one where someone cuts you off in traffic or won't yield the right of way? There you are in your car growling about their stupid selfishness, what the hell is wrong with people any way. Cut to three months later. You have been stuck in traffic for 40 minutes just trying to get to the expressway on-ramp. Someone catches the corner of your eye. They're trying to merge in to your lane. You stare straight ahead. You can't let them in. You've had it with this bloody traffic jam, and besides you're already late. You are the bad guy

Imagine something much worse, someone attacking someone you love. What would you do? I would do anything to stop them including killing them if I could. Imagine, finding a great pair of winter gloves left behind on a park bench, bonus, right? Could I become a killer if the stakes were high enough, a thief if no one was looking? How do we move from being situationally moral to being the kind of human being we want others to see us as? It's a balancing act really. We can strive to be a truly decent human being and also forgive ourselves for failing in the attempt. But the thing is that we have to try, try really hard, and with intention, or Kavanah as we say in Hebrew.

There is a practice I ask workshop participants to engage in, a guided meditation focused on forgiveness. I ask them to think of someone they are having trouble with in their lives. Not too much

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trouble but someone they can't see forgiving right now. Then as we settle into the meditative state I ask them to imagine a golden light flowing from their hearts. A golden light of love. As they visualize this I ask them to think of that person and send that unconditional light to them. Bathe them in that loving light expecting nothing and knowing that you need not engage the person or the actions they have taken that hurt you in any physically tangible way. Just send them love. This is powerful. It changes the toxicity of your soul. Forgiveness is not letting someone else off the hook. It's letting you off the hook. Giving you permission to get on with your journey without the rocks of hate in your knapsack.

These guided meditations can allow you to do important work. During my Spiritual Direction training I had an exercise that I found challenging. We were asked to study the Jewish way of engaging with angels. I was asked to present on the topic. I didn't want to. I really didn't want to. I didn't think angels were something I could take seriously. They were right up there with unicorns on my 'give me a break' list. Angels had wings, and chariots for God's sake. But, I had to do it. Our rabbi took us through a guided meditation that had us journey through the worlds of the four archangels. When it was over I was stunned by the emotional impact of what those angels represented.

Today the Archangels work for me as touchstones. I have even adopted my own guardian angels, they are my father and my old best friend Mike. They just seem to slip in to my thoughts sometimes when I let my mind wander. As I write this I can see rationalists like Richard Dawkins, the renowned atheist, sneering as he pats my head. There, there, little man, this need for fairy tales shall pass.

But it hasn't. Instead they have become part of my spiritual fitness plan. It might be important to note that in the Christian literature the four becomes seven. Added to the list are Saraquel, Raguel

and Remiel. In Kabbalah there are ten. I'll stick with the four.

To begin, I sit quietly. After a few centering breaths I let go of my breathing and just observe it. No judgement about the level of stillness I can achieve, I just sit. Then I begin to journey. On my right is Michal, the angel of love and protection, on my left, Gabriel the angel of strength, ahead is Uriel the angel of vision and at my back Raphael, my namesake, the angel of healing. I slowly traverse the circle of these realms. Love, strength, vision and healing. As the time passes I sit with each of these qualities and observe what comes up without judgement. There are no wings or white robes just a chance to contemplate. To see my imperfect journey through the lens of love, strength, vision and healing. Occasionally I have to admit that John Travolta as the chain smoking angel Michael does pop in to my head but that too shall pass.

A while back late night talk show host Stephen Colbert had Keanu Reeves on the show. Reeves has spent most of his career as either a romantic lead or a goth action figure. This night he was goth, dressed in black promoting another movie. Colbert set him up, "Let me ask you, what happens to us when we die Keanu Reeves?" The audience, hip to the persona Reeves has cultivated over the years, roared with laughter waiting for a *Matrix*-like answer. Reeves took a deep breath and answered, "I know that the ones who love us will miss us." The answer stunned Colbert who was reduced to simply shaking Reeves hand as they went to commercial. The clip went viral and people started claiming that Keanu was their new religion. A simple and genuine answer, for at least a moment, punched through the pop culture bubble and left us feeling human.

Eldering: The Way Forward

I have often felt that we are here to refine our souls. That, animated by spirit and tempered by intellect we have a chance to be better this time around. I remember once watching a South American film at a long ago film festival. It was part of the world cinema retrospective that year. In it, people are portrayed as souls that can stay in the spirit realm or choose the harder route. From time to time they dive off the clouds in to a new earthly life. Not an easy decision because as souls they are not burdened with the suffering that accompanies mortal life, gifted as we are with consciousness and how finite it is. Life in our form is filled with suffering in this film.

In this film two lovers leap into love as they have before and will forever, and their love is always different, the same. Sometimes they are brother and sister, or mother and child, husband and wife. Each leap is another journey in to heartbreak and profound grace. Each

time another opportunity to refine their souls. To be, to become, to love. That willingness to forge ahead with at least this mortal end in sight will take courage.

In the Mussar tradition of Judaism, the work of articulating the shape and contour of your soul revolves around the development and refinement of our character traits. The soul is not looked upon as simply a part of us. It is us. In totality. There are three tiers to this idea. The neshama, which is the source, the light if you will, that suffuses everything; the ruach, which defines the spirit and energy that animates the soul; and finally the tricky part, the nefesh. One learned Rabbi described nefesh as like clouds that can either block or give way to the eternal light of the soul. The difference lies between the clarity of kindness, loving-kindness and the clouding that reduces that noble trait to sheer sentimentality. Think of it as the kindness we extend to our children devolving in to a permissiveness that leaves them without boundaries and structure that will truly benefit them.

Elder is a role that is consciously chosen and requires preparation at all levels – physical, psychological and most importantly, spiritual. These are words that I have taken a while to process. Like so many I drifted into elder-hood. Perhaps it's the fact that I, like some, have a second family. Remember those sons that range in age from thirty-four to eleven? You can see how I have not had the usual trajectory. Marriage, children, empty nest, retirement. I often think of that seductive insurance company's ad campaign from years gone by where they promised that if you sign up with them you can drive off in that convertible as the sun sets looking forward to Freedom 55! In my case it looks more like Freedom 85.

Friends often say, "Well I guess having kids later, keeps you young." Well actually that's not true, it just makes you not want to die. You don't want to let them down, and they still need you . . . a lot!

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Richard Rohr says the second stage of life is one that moves us across the bridge from a world where ego propels us in job, career and even marriage, to one that honours the journey and helps us grow into a time of giving, reflection and kindness, mostly towards ourselves. This is not to say that we will live pain free and with an always open heart. We will lose loved ones, what was once taken for granted physically will often times become much harder if not out of reach. And above and beyond our personal challenges there still hovers a culture that will do little beyond pathologizing and caricaturing us. We will have to claim the mantle of wisdom keepers, wrestle it away from the anti-wrinkle hucksters and cruise ship operators.

I recently heard an online radio host for an 'after 50' broadcast say that he had always felt that he had lost something by not having a rite of passage in to adulthood as an adolescent. There had been no community acknowledgements, no ritual to confirm that he was about to embark on a new journey, one that left behind some of the magical pieces of childhood and instead asked of him that he obligate himself to the responsibilities that come with becoming a man. Being Jewish I was reminded that many Bar Mitzvah boys of my generation began their Dvar Torah, a sermon based on gleanings from that week's portion of the Torah narratives, with the proclamation, "Today I am a man." Though that wasn't actually the truth it was for some a self-shocking proclamation made in front of family, friends and the community that had seen you born, in the case of boys, circumcised and running through the synagogue hallways as your parents sat upstairs for Sabbath services. But on this Sabbath, after a year of preparation where you learned to read directly from the Torah scrolls, you donned a prayer shawl for the first time, stood before your fellow congregants and delivered your thoughts for all to consider, on the flood, the exodus, even the story of creation. This was and is a conscious ritual that

affirms that you have arrived at a different place. But even my faith does not have as rich and daunting a path into becoming elder.

However, many older Jews who were denied a Bar Mitzvah for a myriad of reasons, not the least of which was the murderous and hateful slaughter of the Holocaust, have decided to have what was taken from them. An elders Bar Mitzvah. Working with a Rabbi or lay teacher they may have to do anything from learning how to read Hebrew to the trope, or singing, of what is written on the Torah scroll. Each word has tiny symbols that require the person reciting the portion to have their voice go up or down, the vowels sometimes stretched and others times cut short. Depending on where your people originate there are a myriad of ways to sing this Torah song. The sermon or Dvar, well at a ripe age the words carry much weight and wisdom. The effect on the Bar or Bat Mitzvah and the community is profound. But even with this response, we lack something that says we have arrived in a new place. One where we can measure this life in decades, not eternities.

Someone asked me recently about a song that marked a moment of my life. It would have been nice if I had some highbrow response. Miles Davis' "Boplicity," Mahler's Third Symphony. But no, I responded with The Doobie Brothers and "Black Water." You see I remember being in the back of a pick-up truck, something I had never done before with that song blaring out the cab window. I thought I was in love with everything that day, the sky, the fields whipping by, the girl sitting on the other side of the truck. It was early spring and the air crackled all around me. I remember the feeling like it was yesterday. I was immortal and as we drove down the road my heart was filled with possibilities. That day I realized I could do anything, be anything. As the Doobie Brothers played, with the wind rushing all around me I was filled with optimism. That feeling informed much of what has fuelled me since. The Doobie Brothers, who knew?

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Ron Pevny in his book, *Conscious Living, Conscious Aging* writes about a ritual that he has learned of. One that comes from Indigenous traditions and has much to recommend itself to us as we search for a meaningful way to honour the leaves of our lives as they begin to fall. He calls it the Death Lodge, others call it the Life Lodge.

Pevny describes it this way. A Death Lodge is a ceremony in which a person consciously goes out alone into the wilderness in order to lay-down some established aspect of their life that no longer serves them. This aspect is released; it receives a ritual death. In sacred terms, this is a 'dying before you die' and is one of many deaths that we must necessarily experience in life before our eventual physical, bodily death. The Death Lodge is a way of spending an intense period of time reviewing and fully experiencing all that this element has meant before it is laid-down in a symbolic ritual of dying, release and opening into whatever is to arise next in the void that follows the death.

One participant in the Death Lodge entered it a few years back to make real the retirement that loomed before him. He had worked for thirty-eight years and wanted to release himself not only from the day to day routines of his labours but "the patterns and behaviours that had arisen and taken hold throughout this career."

Before we explore the ritual itself I think it's worth pausing and really taking in what the patterns and behaviours that arise through our working life. As they say, the hammer shapes the hand. How we see ourselves in the workplace, be it positive or negative, it is a persona that, as we exit that culture or routine, may have little or no place in the next iteration. That may be liberating, or conversely it may be something to acknowledge and grieve the loss of. Were your employer or employee? Happy in your work or yearning for release?

Let's also look at the importance of reflection and resolution in this stage of not just career but of our lives. If we are fortunate

enough to have lived long enough to reach this stage of life then it is, I believe, incumbent on us to make some decisions.

The notion of retirement itself is a relatively new phenomenon that came from the space that opened up as industrialization matured as a way of working. It was Otto Von Bismarck in 1880s Prussia who first introduced the idea of retirement, under pressure from the socialists that were growing in influence in Europe and throughout the industrialized world. Up till then, quite simply if you were alive you worked, provided you could find employment and were physically able to carry out the task at hand. It took the rest of the decade to create the system that we still have today. A few of the more cynical pieces of the retirement offering insured that most people would not reap the benefits. Payouts didn't begin until you reached the age of seventy. Back in 1889 that was by no means a given. So most workers still died in the harness, as it were. Today, with most countries keeping the retirement age at sixty-five many more people are collecting benefits. Often for ten to twenty years or more.

Sarah Laskow writes eloquently about the rise of retirement in a 2014 article she wrote for the *Atlantic* magazine. She writes, “So, roughly a hundred and thirty years ago we decided to help people exit from a life of work, a life that for many was hard, with long hours and the notion of time off or vacations out of the question. As humane as it is to bring us to this place where we can step off the treadmill of work it does present us with real challenges. Spiritual challenges. What have I been doing? Who have I become? Was it worth it? All the compromises, missed opportunities, machinations and the less than tangible results, are these the fruits of my labour?” Even if we intend to continue working after retirement age it is important to acknowledge the passing of a time, of the summer of our lives where we watched our ambitions, our families, our reputations

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grow. We identify with what we have created as a work narrative, be it inside or outside the home. But do we have a way of concretizing these abstract constructions.

Let's see how the Death Lodge experience helped one man deal with these questions – questions that require conscious contemplation if they are not to fester and burn in to our souls as regret, or melancholy memories. The good old days, or the dream that got away.

During the first day we prepared ourselves for the solo wilderness experience. In an opening ritual, we picked up a stone that for me represented the burden that I had come to lay down;. On the second day, we each set out in the wilderness of this remote glen to find our spot for 40 hours of solo wilderness camping and contemplation, without food.

For the first day, I gave my attention to a thorough review of my professional career: the different jobs I had undertaken. I wanted to sit with the regrets about work – both the things done and the things undone.

I found some uncomfortable truths here around money, security, status and earning.

The questions and insights that arose for this man as he fasted in isolation and a focused intentionality were not idle musings. This ascetic approach is familiar. We've seen it before, the image of the Indigenous youth on a wisdom walk, the Buddhist monk renouncing the worldly path and entering in to deep humility as they peel away layers of distraction and material gloss. At first, this approach sounds to be at best a luxury and at worst self-indulgent and uncomfortable in the extreme. I know my first response was, hey you lost me at camping. Fasting I get, been doing it once a year for forty years. Yet, there is a lot to be said for depriving yourself of material life for a period of time. Every spiritual path advises it. This Death lodge visitor

ended up collecting work and career memories in a little piggy bank on scraps of paper. He then released the scraps of paper with those memories in to the river and took a hammer and smashed piggy to pieces to rid himself of the baggage of ambition, loss, gain and regret. Then he burned the remains of that little piggy bank in the fire. This was the laying down and the death of his professional career.

The rest of his forty hours in the wilderness was easier without the burden, he had a sense of freedom, spontaneity, generosity, recklessness and presence. It had been a “good death.”

There’s that word again, death. Imagine if we honoured all the small deaths instead of just the finite physical one that take up so much of our thoughts?

But let’s bring this down out of the celestial clouds for a moment. Have you ever tried to comfort a child who has lost a beloved pet? As you look in to the teary eyes of a four-year-old they ask in the most genuine of ways, “If Noodles isn’t here, where did she go?” So many times our answer is Heaven, she went to Heaven. For many this is the white lie that helps their child deal with loss. But what happens when someone dear to us dies? What is our answer then? Is it simply a shrug of the shoulder and, say who knows? Do we search inside ourselves for a more satisfying answer? Do we wish we could believe, as our ancestors did, that there is a life after death? That it is indeed a better one?

Whatever the answer we come up with, we tend to look upwards for it. Our bias, when it comes to spiritual answers, is to fall back to the childhood answer we just passed on. We ascend to a better place. But perhaps we are short-changing ourselves. If you walk the forest in late fall you are surrounded by a carpet of dead leaves, rotting tree trunks and moss covered stone. Out of this fecund array new life grows, relentlessly. This time and process, these deaths, the rich soil that a lifetime can create, are essential if we ourselves are to regenerate and move into our wisdom.

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These questions have made me a bit of a bummer at dinner parties but that's just the way I roll. I want to explore the path.

If I don't take inventory of where I've been and what I've done then it's really hard for me to move forward. I want the examined life to be part of my journey. That life is often filled with regrets for what could have been and what I have failed to do, or not do. The people I have vowed never to forgive, especially myself. These are not pieces that I have learned to spend time with. This reminds of me of the older man in the retirement home I visited as a Lay Chaplain. The one that was so deeply lost in regret.

I saw him a few months later when the children from the local Hebrew School came to sing holiday songs for the people at the Home. Two of my children were among them. We looked at each other and he smiled, "I remember you." He said. I asked how he was and he took my hand and said, "I'm fine, just fine." I wanted to believe him.

I think about the effect that regret has on us if it remains unresolved. Sometimes we just want to stay in that place of damnation. We feel we deserve it. How can we laugh and find joy in a life that is not rightfully ours to live? What this man did not want to consider was that whatever path had lead his wife to her death was her path and that he must free himself of the guilt, blame and shame that haunted his final days. But how do we find a way to do this work?

As Kahlil Gibran says, "Faith is an oasis in the heart which will never be reached by the caravan of thinking."

This quote speaks directly to the disconnect that we feel living in a time when answers are valued more than questions. Indeed with the ascendancy of science and rationalism, both of which have saved and condemned us in equal measure, we have come to greatly devalue the awe and wonder that people like Matthew Fox, the ex-communicated Catholic stand for. Fox implored us instead to stay confused, to see

with our hearts. The great Zen ambassador to the west D.T. Suzuki also asked us to leave the logical mind at the temple doors and deal with the ‘fact and reality’ of what is literally present at this moment, not the ruminations that keep our monkey minds so enthralled. Please know that I am not advocating for a life that has us unquestioning and sheep like. I am instead asking that we re-animate our ability to live with questions that cannot be answered by logic. Why do I dream every night, entering worlds and relationships that I could never concoct in my waking hours? Why does my heart fill with love and sadness when I see the innocence of one of my children?

I have come to believe that if I cultivate the questions of the heart and learn to hear what arises I might perhaps re-imagine my journey so that my life can grow richer before I take my final exhalation. I must take the leap in to true vulnerability.

Brene Brown is a fascinating seeker and author. Her life’s work revolves around the place of vulnerability in our lives. She uses that lens to understand spirituality in a deep and truthful way. Faith minus vulnerability according to Brown equals extremism. To her faith, a balanced open faithfulness, is the vulnerability “that flows before the shores of certainty.” In my conversations with clerics of different faiths, despite what we imagine, I have not found many who have professed an unwavering belief in God. Mostly they are passionate doubters. I think that belief hardens like clay in the hearts of those who call themselves believers.

George Roller was a man who in his, and his wife’s belief, exemplified what I’m talking about. In his work as a lobbyist in Washington D.C. on behalf of some evangelical Christian groups he convened prayer breakfasts and organized free lunch and learns for the young interns on the Hill – something that these underpaid young men and women gladly took him up on. He was busy and he was good at what

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he did. George's approach was simple really, he would love you into Jesus, if he was proselytizing it was just because he truly believed that in bringing you in to the loving embrace of Jesus he would be frankly saving your life and the one hereafter to boot.

When I dined at his suburban Virginia home with a camera crew in tow, with the eerily blissful Mrs. Roller serving a virtual feast, I realized that George Roller, or The Holy Roller as he was known on the Hill, had no interest in exploring the mystery of faith with me. He had something he thought was better, belief, rock hard certainty that the way the truth and the light would be the gift and he a simple servant of that truth. I tried to point out to him that as a Jew I might perhaps find it a bit patronizing if not actually offensive that he was telling me that he was absolutely right and therefore I must be wrong. There was no searching for commonality. The mission was to drive me towards Jesus.

In all our talk of religion I can say that not one spiritual moment passed between us. Perhaps if I had bent my knee and formed a loving circle with the Rollers as they prayed for my salvation some epiphany might have occurred. That bolt of sudden enlightenment and, as far as the Roller are concerned, a victory for the faithful and pledge of allegiance. That is the spadework of an evangelical religion. For me the work of spirituality is much harder than that. It is about intimacy, not exceptionalism, and as Brown points out we cannot achieve that special relationship with ourselves, each other and the cosmology without making ourselves vulnerable.

Many other things can, and do come from this type of conviction but not without a deep and often dangerous price attached. Fuelled by certainty, it is often the nesting ground of tyranny. The 'other', and the resultant objectification of 'them versus us' feeds on fear, not hope, and brings so much sorrow to this world. This is the poisoned

gift of belief. Faith on the other hand requires my strength to stay with hard emotions and dark personal truths that, if cultivated, can bring self-discovery and the humility required to see how I am complicit in my own suffering. But here's the thing. What am I supposed to have faith in? Without certainty what holds me on the path in that forest of contemplation the Hindus talk about.

It is said that ninety percent of what we observe in the infinite night sky is not light but instead darkness. Not the darkness that terrifies us but the gateway to mystery. Not the shadows but the pregnant emptiness that is the primordial stew of creation. I'm confounded by that which I cannot see, but still there is this intuition, this gut feeling that in this darkness there is something magical and eternal.

I know that living as we do in the age of reason, with the benefits of science in health and in greatly reducing the power of religion in parts of the world to create war has been one of the great triumphs of the last few hundred years, but this rationality has also seen some of the darkest acts in human history unfold with no religion in sight. There are more than a hundred million dead in the name of Communism, Nazism and Fascism where the cult of personality has offered us instead human gods with the power to decree who lives and who dies in their name.

Yes, there is much darkness in the world, and still, much light. The chaos machine that is the daily news spins tales of death, mayhem and evil doing. A murder here, a bus over a cliff there, a car crash, a mad dash across the water that ends not in freedom but drowning and death. Still, many millions of us walk our children to school each morning. We hug them, whether they want it or not and say out loud, I love you, as they run in to the jubilant energy of the playground. We are more than that which has gone wrong.

So this is what I hold on to as I prepare to take a dive in to the

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darkness of my own life. The regrets, the guilt and shame for what I have done and not done. Those that I cannot forgive and those that cannot forgive me. Tough work but I tell you what, I'll go first.

There was a good man who I worked with professionally. He was always good to me and stayed in my corner when many others had abandoned me. I had reached the top of my profession, hosting and producing a big TV variety show and he was there from the get go as part of the crew. Later after the show had failed terribly in its mission of bringing more Canadian talent on to a big stage and my big chance had fizzled most folks around me moved on. Turns out not many that arrive with your success want to marinate in your failures. But this man was right there and as he rose through the ranks he always found ways to invite me back in to the glare of the TV lights. A big idea came to me to produce a film for the public broadcaster. We worked it up the chain together.

The network, it turns out, wasn't as thrilled with it as we were. They told me that it wasn't going to fly. In frustration I asked if a new approach with a different partner would improve my chances. It was and still is something I am ashamed of myself for doing. Shame by the way is not something that we should never feel. It's important to feel shame when we are wrong. It is deeply wounding to be shamed when we are not. This time I was wrong. I was afraid that if this project failed than I myself might fade even deeper in to the shadows. A place, I had been reading, that lots of folks would have been happy to see me go. In the end the project went nowhere and shortly after I left the broadcaster. But something had happened. I betrayed the support and loyalty of a good man. I apologized. Actually I apologized every year for five years, but it was too late. We have never been friends since and frankly I understand why. I am usually a loyal friend and can say that most of my friendships have lasted literally for decades. This one did not.

I have often wondered how many of these stories from my life will come to me as I lay dying. If I, like so many, will have buried them in the darkness of my soul. If I have guarded them from scrutiny, then perhaps dying will be the only place where the damn can burst and my deep regret can spill out. I realized that it is better that I do this work before the final snows fall. Why wait till the cold chill of death is all that swirls around us?

So here's the next question. How do we take this freighted inventory of failure on without succumbing to recrimination? A ritual seems to be in order. The prayer that is recited in the Jewish faith every Yom Kippur (the day of atonement) it is an unrelenting litany of weaknesses. If we choose we can move through the list with just a passing glance, not willing to dive deeper into the words we are saying.

We abuse, we betray, we are cruel.

We destroy, we embitter, we falsify.

As we recite each of these powerful indictments we take our fist and tap on our hearts. Imagine if you will that your heart is surrounded by a tough outer coating, one that protects you from feeling too much. I mentioned it before, it's called the kilppot. As we are striking, pounding on our chests we do so in hopes that we can break through that shell. As Rabbi Leonard Cohen says, we need that crack in everything, that's where the light gets in. It is said that only through a broken heart can one find faith. Who can arrive there from strength, arrogance or anger. No one.

We gossip, we hate, we insult.

We jeer, we kill, we lie.

This all seems so harsh. Could I be that bad a person? Surely of any if this is true I didn't really mean any harm.

We mock, we neglect, we oppress.

We pervert, we quarrel, we rebel.

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What could be the point of such self-flagellation? Perhaps as the late Rabbi Alan Lew said in his wonderful book on the Jewish High Holidays, *This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared*, as we say these words we might come “to realize that we have greatly overestimated our cleverness and our potency; we have overestimated the efficacy of our conscious behaviour and we have underestimated the persistence and depth of our destructive tendencies.”

I know that what I'm throwing down here as an emotional and soul searching gauntlet goes against our wise guy kill'em all and throw in a quip culture, where the good/bad guy vigilante rides in to town on something or other and blows the even badder guys away while muttering yippie kayo kayak through cigarette stained teeth, but the thing is, this work is much harder than that.

We steal, we transgress, we are unkind.

We are violent, we are wicked, we are xenophobic.

We yield to evil. We are zealots for bad causes.

My god what a bummer. Who wants to think that badly of themselves? But is it really thinking badly of yourself or humbling yourself to the thousand tiny cuts that make up the darker side of our hearts. This prayer is followed by the congregation asking forgiveness for the transgressions that have passed through their hearts and from their lips, either willingly or unwillingly over the past year. It's a life review that reads like a highlight reel of failings. It's obvious, at least to me, why when I look around the synagogue during the Viddui, as it's called, I see so many different levels of commitment to this ritual. Feelings of shame and a default to a position of reproach are always close at hand when we dare to take stock of our less glorious moments.

But what is the alternative? Simply to live with these feelings and thoughts roiling beneath the surface of the social veneer we create in the hopes that others will think better of us than we think

of ourselves? Perhaps we can relegate this work to the dream state. Leave the heavy lifting to our custom version of the passion play, the one that speaks in whispers around the fringes of our consciousness of forbidden thoughts and startling encounters. But as we age perhaps we should muck about a bit in the cellar of regret.

One of my Rabbis, Nadya Gross, a wonderful soul that has spent much time with the dying in her work as a Spiritual Director as well as cleric, has taken the Viddui and distilled it in to three simple questions that we would be wise to answer. But unlike the traditional Viddui of the high holidays she begins with a positive accounting.

Who I am; the accomplishments of which I am proudest; the relationships that are meaningful in my life.

By starting with a positive inventory she has invited us though the front door of our lives. We get to talk about what we and others have recognized as the legacy that will unfold when memories are all that feed our loved ones.

Next; What have I left undone? What do I regret? This is where we do a little mud wrestling with our egos. We must consider the personal failing and deeds that we committed of which we are deeply ashamed, as well we might be saying goodbye to dreams and aspirations that in our youth seemed within our grasp.

But I would caution that this is more than that. I believe that for many autumn is the time in their lives when they can actually take up many forgotten aspirations. Those talents and yearnings that we shelved as we catered to family. Now, as we age up perhaps there is a generosity that can flow from the idea that the time to work on oneself and for the common good is ripe. Regret can take the shape of guilt or yearning. Sometimes the recipe contains dollops of both.

Many speak of aging as ripening despite the fact that part of us dreads that getting older will be filled with the rot and decay that may

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lie in wait. You know the thinking. You look down at your hand and you noticed a raised blemish of some kind. What the hell is that? That wasn't there yesterday. Great, I better look that up, raised blemish, translucent. This can't be good. And we descend down the rabbit hole.

Now imagine if your worries were true, that the thing on your hand turns out to be a harbinger of something very serious. How well prepared are you to walk through that door? There is plenty out there that deals with cures, therapies, courses of treatment, and for the sake of the body that's good. But like so much else we live through, like birth and hormonal rites of passage there is little that deals with the soul. As Stephen Jenkinson, the grief-walker and author of *Die Wise* says, we are concerned with curing but not so much with healing ourselves. So it goes with unresolved actions, relationships and lost opportunities. Yes, it is painful to stay with these feelings but regret is not solely a room of shadows. If we work consciously, and that is the key, we can create a better story. Maybe even a better ending if it comes to that.

Jacob Marley in the Dicken's classic shows us what happens when we forge a chain of regrets. I always loved the film version that starred Alastair Sim. The black and white classic version of that wonderful book. Marley shows Scrooge the length of chain he is doomed to carry for eternity to which Scrooge, determined to outrun his fate, reacts:

"But you were always a good man of business, *Jacob*." Upon which Marley's Ghost cried out in anguish: "Business! *Mankind was my business*. [You have say bus-a-ness to get the full effect.] The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were all my business."

We too carry our length of chain. The unkind word that leaves so many wounds in those we love. The casual infidelity that our yearning to be validated makes real. We are violent, we are unkind, we gossip.

This is not all of who we are but wouldn't it be divine if we could sift through these transgressions and make restitution with those we have willingly or unwillingly offended. Often we harden our hearts in the face of such a choice. "Well I wouldn't have said those things if he/she hadn't started it. I've put up with a lot from them over the years." Hell, it feels good just writing that last bit. It's not me it's the situation, or better yet, it's them. After all a man can only take so much. I'm starting to feel like James Cagney, the classic American gangster, from the Hollywood of the forties and fifties. Spunky Irish and ready to bellow, "I've been framed see, it was Flanagan. He's the bum who set me up!" I made up the last line, but you get the idea. What follows that scene is, of course, the flatfoot cop dragging Cagney in to a waiting police car. Nobody's buying his story.

Henry David Thoreau once said, "Make the most of your regrets; never smother your sorrow, but tend and cherish it till it comes to have a separate and integral interest. To regret deeply is to live afresh."

The third question is: What do we want to be remembered for? What is our legacy. Here we can take a while to think about what we want people to say. You know in that fantasy where we get to listen in at our memorial service, and better yet to the conversations people have at the reception afterwards. We hope they will say good things; we hope we will have deserved them. But legacy is not set in stone, we can still write new chapters in that story. We can start on any given day to do something that will make us proud and have other people in mind. Something for their good, for the betterment of friends and family. For whatever full hearted endeavour we can think of.

So let's imagine that instead of fearing what a life review can bring us, the dredging up of our mistakes, the past hurts and friendships that to this day lie in ruins. That instead, we tend to and cherish our failings and build a living legacy. After all, even the act of doing so brings deep

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and meaningful value to what we have done, be it noble or beneath us.

In the Jewish tradition we have a process that engages us in a personal cleansing every new year. The Lunar calendar we look to places Rosh Hashanah, the head of the year, the new year, in the fall. Usually in the Christian calendar month of September. The harvest is in play and as the fields bend towards rest we take stock of ourselves. During the process and between the celebration of the new year and the day of atonement, Yom Kippur, we gather up our transgressions and the regret that they have brought us, we're asked to write them on pieces of paper and then go to a water source to toss them away as we ask forgiveness. It is called Tachlit. Like so much in Jewish practice it's a process. We start with penance during the ten days of Rosh Hashanah the true reckoning that finds us willing to take responsibility and make that which we would rather bury real. We have to decide for ourselves to be free of the burden of guilt.

Another piece of the Rosh Hashanah puzzle that prepares us for our personal reckoning on Yom Kippur is that mitzvah, or good deed, is undertaken to seek out those that we may have offended and ask their forgiveness. I remember doing this once with someone in my neighbourhood who would often join me for dog walks in the park across the street. I had been flip with him one day. He was going through a divorce and with it a radical change in lifestyle. He was sharing with me and all I could do is answer him glibly and then cut the conversation short because I had something 'important' to do. Or so I remember it. I felt bad the minute I left him. The feeling stayed with me, and returned at the oddest moments as the year passed. So here we were walking our dogs before Yom Kippur and I stopped and said; "Look, a while back you were sharing something with me about adjusting to your new life after divorce. I didn't really honour what you were telling me. I just wanted to say that I'm sorry. That I

should have been there for you and that I hope that this year brings you some happiness and connection to your daughters in your living arrangements. Anyway, I'm sorry."

He looked at me, a bit surprised. I'm sure he was trying to remember what on earth I was talking about. The conversation had clearly left more of a mark on me than on him. Then a smile broke across his face. "Don't worry about it." He said. "It's no big deal." We were saying goodbye a little while later and as he walked away he added, "Hey, Ralph. I really appreciate that you did that, but don't sweat it, it's all good."

So why bother?

Do I want to be trying to process and act on these pieces as I lay dying or would my life be better for acting on them now? By engaging in this process now we can move from a space filled with scores unsettled and wrongs un-righted to a much larger landscape of connection with something much larger. A life that has more deeds and thoughts that have not been stopped mid-sentence, left hanging.

The story is told of a Rabbi who says to his students that anyone who repents even one day before they die will be redeemed. But Rabbi, they ask, how will we know what day that is? Exactly, says the Rabbi. So its best we do it now.

Frankly I think that if I'm lucky enough to be even remotely lucid as I pass I would regret it more if I had never taken stock, made amends and finished those conversations that would have brought closure for myself and those I have travelled through this life with. Whether or not they can, or choose not to, engage me in that process is not a deal breaker. I can speak directly to someone I have harmed in some way or I can write them a letter that I will never send. Thoreau also says, "to regret deeply is to live afresh."

Central to the process is to avoid the trap of self-pity and instead

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to take a deep personal responsibility for what has come to pass. In doing so we take our true and honest place in the narrative. Regret requires some form of relationship. This is not to say that we must seek out and mollify those that have done much to harm us in one way or another. It doesn't mean that we must resume relationships that have died for good reason, but it does mean that we take honest account of our part in the failure of them. Make no mistake this is tricky work. What starts as an exercise in humility can end with self-congratulation and pity for the other guy.

I don't believe anyone who says they have no regrets. There is an arrogance in banishing regret from our narratives. It's as though the acknowledgement of egregious actions might leave us too vulnerable. It might encourage others to look for more of our failings in an effort to themselves prop up a false sense of superiority.

There is only one cure for the toxic effect that regret can and does have in my mind and that is forgiveness. The American Buddhist psychology movement is led by people like Jack Kornfield. Kornfield tells the story of the two former prisoners of war that meet after World War II. "When the first one asks, "Have you forgiven your captors yet?" the second man answers, "No, never." "Well then," the first man replies, "they still have you in prison." For most people, the work of forgiveness is a process.

"Practicing forgiveness, we may go through stages of grief, rage, sorrow, fear and confusion. As we let our self feel the pain we still hold, forgiveness comes as a relief, a release for our heart in the end. Forgiveness acknowledges that no matter how much we may have suffered; we will not put another human being out of our heart." This Kornfield admits is easier said than done. In his own case he could forgive many, and at times even himself, but the greatest test of his Buddhist sense of compassion was in the life and death of his father.

This was the man who had beaten Kornfield's mother. A father who had left deep traumatic scars on all those around him. Kornfield was able to witness his father in the latter's dying days and in that time, because he had as a meditator and practitioner of a loving path been preparing for this witnessing for his whole life, was able to find it in his heart to forgive. "I sat with him over long days and late nights. He kept asking me to stay. Because I had sat with my own pain and fear in meditation, I was not afraid. Because I had sat in the charnel grounds and with others as they died, I was able to offer the steady presence he needed. By now I also knew enough not to blurt out that I loved him, but I also knew that he could feel that I did."

This is heavy lifting and without the spiritual discipline that years of practice gave him perhaps Kornfield would have left the room, made excuses for why he couldn't make it that day or simply found himself acting out in passive aggressive ways while appearing to be there all the way through.

Earlier I quoted for a poem by the late great Canadian poet Al Purdy. How he had realized that on distractedly visiting his gravely ill mother she had seen through his façade of care and in that moment realized that in fact he didn't, care that is. "I thought you'd feel terrible," she said. She had fallen and the decline and pain of what she must have known was coming soon had not moved her son. She was soon to die. Purdy would carry the shame and regret of that failed response in to his art, in to his life and in to his soul.

"But I remember those last words, list them first among the things I'm ashamed of / As intolerable as realizing your whole life has been wasted." – Al Purdy

Purdy does us a great favour in his mea-culpa. He lets us know not that he is worse than us but that we are all stumbling, failing and human. That our best does not always surface when it is being called

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upon. If we are not preparing the ground for a better response then indeed it may not blossom when we need the flower of its wisdom the most.

I have always wondered what a life that included Confession would have been like. Knowing, even while transgressing that one can unburden themselves, that another human being can be the repository and the conduit to forgiveness. Clergy in the Catholic faith would no doubt say that they are not absolving people but instead that they are a conduit to the divine, a vessel that, when filled spills over in to the unconditional love that is for many the bosom of the lord. Forgive me Father, in our patriarchal constructions of God, if one can get past the notion that God is a thing then I suppose that that thing must be relatable in some human form, be it the Priest, the Nun or Jesus himself.

Richard Rohr, the Christian mystic writes, “In Jesus, God was given a face and a heart. God became someone we could love.” While God can be described as a moral force, as consciousness, and as high vibrational energy, the truth is, we don’t (or can’t?) fall in love with abstractions. So God became a person “that we could hear, see with our eyes, look at, and touch with our hands” (1 John 1:1). The brilliant Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) said the only thing that really converts people is “an encounter with the face of the other,” [1] and I think he learned that from his own Hebrew Scriptures.

I know that many absolutions are directed through the feminine divine in the personage of Mary as well so perhaps there are alternate pathways to the loving destination. Either way, I, as a Jew have to go on a different journey.

The Harvest

What would be tragic is to die having felt that “I never showed up in this life.” – Parker Palmer

If you don't know of Parker Palmer I would suggest that he is worth listening to and reading. Palmer is an American Quaker and social and spiritual activist. One of the insights that he shares is about ageing, and our sense of purpose. There has to be something that trumps effectiveness as he sees it. Not that I'm arguing that utility isn't important. I'm looking instead at the intangibles that can transform work and bring purpose. Decency, an ethical base and institutional wisdom that can temper the rush to achieve.

Palmer asks us to do something very important in our journey into the time of harvest. He wants us to take our gifts and marry them to the needs we see in the world around us. In the intersection

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of these things we can do service to those around us, leave a legacy and gain a new sense of purpose. Without purpose, without a 'why' as we discussed when talking earlier about Viktor Frankl, we cannot survive the 'how' of life. Imagine that you are a lifelong bookkeeper. Your services are no longer required by the large company you worked for, they can outsource that now. That turn of events can drive you into isolation, even bitterness. But the gift you have for numbers and planning has not disappeared. In your community there is a worthy not-for-profit that can't afford a bookkeeping service. You believe in what they do. You don't want to work five days a week anymore. You get together and work out something that is not too onerous to either side. You have a reason to get up, and they have someone who can keep their books. Bingo, purpose.

As we open our eyes to the opportunities of ageing we can refine our aim and with a clear eye bring a new meaning to the autumn of our lives.

From Success to Significance

So how do we cross the bridge? What can we do to make sure that as we age we can refine our sense of purpose? Our aim as it were. After all we are dealing with an entirely different set of circumstances than the ones that we were given as young people. Some of the answers to this may be found in a definition I was given around the idea of sin.

Instead of seeing it as self-flagellation Jewish scholars say that sin is simply a lack of aim. Yes, aim. As we navigate this life we must take the opportunity to look down the shaft of the arrows we fling, and the targets we strive to hit. Is the target the right one? Is our aim true? Have we spent the time refining our technique, being mindful of what we are really hoping to achieve?

The Buddhists speak of living an unskilled or a skill life. We know when we are being unskilful – at least I do most of the time. Sometimes it hits me while in the middle of giving one of my boys

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a hard time when I should be holding him in my arms, or I'm being harsh in response to something my wife has said. Life can be seen through this lens as a craft. We can refine our technique and become better prepared for the cascade of events that inevitably face us on a daily basis. That moment that we lean on the car horn as someone cuts in front of us. Someone, for all we know, that is desperate to get to their loved one's bedside, or simply trying to get home before their child goes to sleep for yet another day without being able to say goodnight to their commuting mother. Or, maybe they too have lost sight of the target, have neglected to refine their aim, just like us.

The conventional idea of sin is of little use to me if instead of feeling humility, I find myself feeling shame. Shame too often is a dead end. To escape it is to act compulsively, wanting to avoid the burning sting that it provokes. But the idea of having a target that is true and developing the skill to hit it, not nail it, just hit it, that gives me something proactive to work for. Something within my grasp.

The target. That's the tough one. What are we aiming for? If not success, then what? I was speaking to a friend, who has also been a financial guide for me over thirty years. He asked me about the book I was writing. We spoke about success and significance as I was on my way out the door. He asked me to stay a minute longer, and close the door if I wouldn't mind. I sat with him and he told me that he was in some ways stuck. In his success, with no idea how to bridge to a life that offered anything different. Anything that he would call significant. First we acknowledged together that he has made a real difference in the life of his clients over the years. That he has been a loving father and husband, and that all of that is worth embracing.

But when it came to finding a new target that could be his legacy he was at a loss. I knew he wanted to me tell him something that might help. But I had no lightning bolt that could shine a light on his path.

The work is personal. It starts with an inventory of who we have been, who we are and what we want to be remembered for, in the Viddui.

Who do we love? What are we most proud of? What do we regret? And, what do we want to be remembered for?

As we collect those thoughts we can look at our target with a clearer eye, unclouded by buried feelings and deep regrets. But it's the last piece, the legacy bit that can become the new target. The piece that is not about who we have been, but who we may yet become.

In one of my men's Aging to Sageing workshops I had mentioned that we spend much of our lives believing that we have to be heroes, leading the parade but now, in our autumn season we have a chance to move to the sidewalk, if just a little bit, and from there cheer the next generation on. For some around the table this was a hard one to internalize. It was difficult because it spoke to male identity and work. If I am not a Doctor, what am I? There was talk of the dreaded word, retirement and the notion that men, within of few years of retiring just up and die. One man took up the challenge. He asked, if I'm not what's on the business card, what can I say that I do? How do I stay in the parade in some way? That's the work of building a legacy. Of paying it forward.

We can refine our aim to align with the changing winds of age. Not decrepitude, but age. We have the power to take back words like old, ageing and senior and make them in to mentor, seeker, elder and wisdom keeper. This is ours. We have earned every year of it and we know, more than most that our time is limited.

The last piece of my Ageing to Sageing workshops comes from the work of Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. It is an address to the United Nations. I love what participants bring to this exercise. We often read them out loud and the care and passion that goes in these speeches touches me every time. Whether it is about child poverty,

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the destruction of the coral reefs or the crisis of clean water in the world the exercise can bring out passions in our elders that speak to the urgency with which these issues must be addressed. When you're in the autumn of life you become cognizant of the finite nature of this mortal moment. Life, human life is now measured in decades at best if not years as we progress up the ladder of aging. Thoughts about what we leave behind come in to focus.

I remember sitting in a meeting a few years back where the proposed completion of a strategic plan and its objectives was twenty-five years from the day of the meeting. Without thinking I blurted out, "No, that's way too long." What I was thinking was, hey man I'll be dead by then, we need to doing something now. I'm not interested in going carbon neutral by 2050. A) the planet will be beyond human repair by then, and B) I want see that happen now because I know if we marshalled the resources and political will we could get it done, actually, really done by 2030.

Is it vain of me to think I could be around for that so that's why it matters? Perhaps, but it is also something that age has gifted me. The realization that we can continue to kick the world's tragedies down the road and continue to live unconsciously or we can come together and make tomorrow into today. My awareness of the fact that my human life is a but a blink in the eye of creation is real and may be a catalyst for renewing my purpose in the time allotted. The delusion of eternal life gave inspiration and passion to my younger self. But living for tomorrow may be our ruin. I want to fuel my elder years with the experience and cultivated wisdom that elders can offer at the other end of life.

This time is not simply for taking inventory. It's a time for action.

What's the Plan?

Good question. In the second half of my professional career I stumbled in to the work of being an Advisor. Working with political leaders, academic Presidents and environmental groups. Like so much in my life, I didn't mean it, it just happened. This kind of work is best explained as flying at thirty thousand feet. It's not the operational excellence that is much more in demand but more of lateral thinking mash up of data, inspiration and the ability to identify the problem that needs solving. I tried to discern what the desired destination truly is, then reverse engineer back to the present moment to chart a path forward with timelines and deliverables.

Surprisingly most organizations don't do this well. They are so consumed by the operational demands of the day that they don't think they have the time to 'dream'. If this sounds a lot like our daily lives, it's because it is.

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We interrupt this book for this important message. Or as they say in that nineties sitcom classic *Third Rock From the Sun*: “incoming message from the big giant head!” It would appear that I’m about to wacked in the head again by some form of cancerous material. Not sure which one or how bad as I write this but I’m hoping for another cranky old squamous cell carcinoma. I know its sounds exceedingly strange to hope for a cancer but I know this one and the outcomes of having it are usually good. Might be worse, doubtful that it will just be benign. I know this because I just visited the Doctor(s) about a cyst on my upper neck and after an ultrasound and then CT scan I was on the receiving end of not one, but two needles right in to the cyst. Yes, a needle biopsy. I did ask if it was going to hurt and the Doctor was kind enough to say, “Yes it will,” before digging in.

I know I’m being glib but that’s because I am honestly feeling the opposite. Filled with dread and under attack. I had thought that cancer was something that I could refer to as a big fat teaching moment. A gift, as I have called it in these writings. I thought I had it all figured out, that I was one of the lucky ones. Now I’ve been thrown back in to the pit. Uncertain, vulnerable and feeling angry. What is this about? Is what I actually just said about vibrant ageing and growing older just wishful thinking? Is it mostly about decrepitude? My rotator cuff has been bad for a year (getting slightly better, thanks for asking) I’m having an MRI to see if I need a catheterization to fix a pulsating Dural Fistula in my right ear, I have vertigo in my left ear at times. The capsulitis in my right foot that plagued me all winter has subsided.

Maybe all that I have been thinking and sharing with you about the autumn of life is just bullshit.

Like they say: “Everybody has a strategy until they get punched

in the mouth.” When I was a kid sitting on the rug in our apartment as my parents played Canasta with their friends I would over hear their conversations in Spanish. A conversation that is heard in about every house around the world. “Did you hear about Samuel?” “No, que paso?” “Un heart attack.” “No. El pobre.” Now it’s my friends who bring stories of sickness and passing, but this time its posted on Facebook and the comments in return are often lacking substance but well meaning. “So sad, thinking of you.”

So I busy myself until the biopsy results are in. Once again feeling helpless and worried that I will let my wife and children down. That I won’t be able to calm the eleven-year-old as it seems only I can do. That the fourteen-year-old won’t be able to spin hilarious stories that we build together like some sort of comedy Lego.

My older boys, finally settled and like my father before me I am unable to see the raise their children. Here’s something, I don’t find myself afraid that I am going to die. I’m just so bloody disappointed that I won’t be there for those I love. I sometimes want to walk up to my wife, the love of my life, and say, “Look you’re still young, beautiful and so brilliant. You should leave me for this part of the journey and find someone younger. Remember, you’re sixteen years younger than me. Go get a fifty-year-old. A good man. Let me do this journey into MRI’s and needle biopsies by myself. I’ll manage.”

Full disclosure. What I usually tell her is, “Listen after I die I seriously don’t want you to find someone else. As a matter of fact, even though I will be buried, as is custom in the Jewish faith, I want you to get an urn, a decoy urn as it were. Put a big plaque on the front that just says Ralph and put it on the mantel piece so that any potential suitors can look up and experience an immediate buzz kill.”

Unfortunately, I have found no great wisdom teachings to back up my petty and mildly psychotic demand. Of course what I’m really

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trying to say is that I want to be part of their lives. That I want to keep learning and sharing, that it's not fair that this life has limits. Why is it that purpose and legacy are best enjoyed by others and that dying is the best way to pass that gift along?

It's so easy for me to say that we must die so that the cycle of creation can continue, it's just harder to fall asleep tonight thinking that some Doctor might enter a sterile examination room in a few days and tell me that they have a pretty good idea when that dying will be upon me.

Wait, this just in. It was a squamous cell carcinoma but it was successfully removed and no follow up treatments were necessary. Alright let's get back to renewing our purpose

There are two ways to go about this in my experience. One needs follow the other. First job is to do the work that we have been talking about, the work of cleaning the container. I emphasize this because without the clarity that comes with that work we are prone to making the wrong decisions. We realize we are aging; we can be scared which makes us hurry so as not to leave a void where fear prevails and panic sets in. Like we noticed earlier men who lose a spouse in later life almost always find a new partner within months. Similarly, what we want to avoid is having a rebound purpose.

I made that mistake when I no longer had a full time suit and tie job to go to every day. I thought I was going to be fine at first. I convinced myself that I was on a new path but really I just looking for more of the same. The pursuit left me fearful and unsatisfied. I went through a prolonged time of anxious dreams and deep worries that I was in many ways disappearing. I eventually got sick and tired of being

sick and tired. I turned towards my spiritual life. Not in a desperate lifeline way but naturally, easily, I started taking my own advice.

This was my time to reap the harvest. The time to reap the rewards of taking the inventory that forgiveness and reflection can bring.

Not That Kind of Rabbi

What did I do? All around me I could see that very few organizations were interested in hiring a sixty-four-year-old. So, like when I took up stand-up comedy I realized that I had to take control of what I wanted to say and find a way to make it pay off – not in money but in claiming my voice, in not waiting for someone else to tell me what I could say and how I could say it. I launched a podcast called *Not That Kind of Rabbi*. The name came when I was on one of my Jewish retreats in the States. I was with a group of men where we were consciously sharing. Something men don't do very much of.

Frankly most men have very small emotional vocabularies. Doing this work with them has become very important to me. We were talking and I mentioned that I have never stopped thinking of whether or not I should become an ordained clergy. "I keep thinking of whether or not I should become a Rabbi," I told them. "Not that kind Rabbi,

mind you, tending to a congregation, dealing with the politics of the role and seemingly never keeping everyone happy. No, a different kind of Rabbi. More a spiritual companion with a great toolkit to help people.” One of the men, a fellow drummer and marketing man from Boston said, “Hey that’s it, you said earlier that you wanted to start a podcast. That’s what you should call it. Not that kind of Rabbi.”

The drive home after the retreat takes about seven hours. By the time I walked through the door of my house two things were clear – the name of the podcast and the fact that I had to stop chasing who I had been.

I always remember the former Senator and comedian Al Franken when he played the insipid new age guru Stuart Smalley on *Saturday Night Live*. He was soothing us with his weekly spiritual Pablum in one episode when he started saying something like, “I know I should be kinder to others, I should . . . Oh wait a minute” he almost whispered, “There I go should-ing all over myself again.” That little bit of comedy has oddly helped me even though it’s clearly parody. It’s not about what I should do but what being here, right now, is calling me to be.

One of my guests, many of whom have taught me much in our conversations, was the east meets west musician Harry Manx. Somewhere in that interview I asked him how he was doing at this stage in his life. We’re roughly the same age. He said something not many people can say with a straight face. He said that he was content and at peace. I asked him how he got to that treasured destination. He mentioned Avida Vendanta, basically saying that it was simply about accepting what is, of being here, now.

I went downstairs after taping the interview and there on my bookshelf was *The New Earth* by Tolle. I picked it up and started reading. Tolle talks about a true self. His philosophy draws on Buddhism

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and the same Hindu path of Avaidā Vendānta that Harry had just spoken of. From there I branched out to include the marvelous teachings of the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart. It is a curriculum that builds on the difficult notion of total presence. The difference between I am Ralph Benmergui, and simply, beautifully, I am.

The elder years give us a chance to contemplate, to take a measured step back and in that process we can let go of the story we have written so far. I never got that promotion, I could have made more money if I just wasn't so stuck on living near my family. Why do I have such bad luck when it comes to my health?

Tolle and the pantheists of our time like Richard Rohr and Matthew Fox, though Rohr would probably reject this assignation, are preaching about the unity of everything. Tolle puts it this way. There are two ways to see the word I. There is the deep I and the surface I. The surface I sees itself, you, as a separate entity often living in resistant to forces around it. The I that needs a name, status and all the things that we find so hard to let go of as we search for renewed purpose. The Ralph I tell everyone that I am.

Then there is the deep I. the I of being. Like the concept of Sabbath there is a time for doing and a time for being. The deep I is an exploration of the self that is part of everything. The being that is made of stardust and will return to all that the universe ceaselessly creates. The deep I is the connection to the source. The search for the divine and the unknowable.

Now I know that this is not what your career coach is explicitly talking to you about as you cast about for calling or purpose but it is the work that allows us to refine our aim. Do we really want a life as elders that is one long shout? I still got it! Or can we gain humility and put a different lens on being closer to the end of this life than the beginning?

I am finding that it is better to realize that the only moment that matters is actually this one. Right now as you read this. That for most of my life I have either been reacting to, or scheming about what has passed and what I want to have happen in the future.

Today we talk about mindfulness. That conversation has been going on in religion for thousands of years. Meditation, contemplation, call it what you will.

As we age making room for that practice will allow us to fear life less. The ego feeds off fear. We can, and must fear death less as well if we are to make clear eyed decisions about what we can do here and now.

I had a spiritual counseling client recently who was anticipating an upcoming knee replacement surgery. She had been in an accident and torn up her knee six years earlier. When we first spoke it was clear that she felt victimized. It also became clear over time that she had been fed a narrative by her holocaust surviving parents that life was not a positive experience. That they were basically, in the Jewish vernacular, Shlmaozzles who didn't deserve better. The knee injury was the fault of the dumb bus driver, the place that it happened was Israel, why in hell had she tried to live there anyways. She is a lovely heartfelt woman but her definition of life and the story she told herself every day to reinforce it were making her existence more unhappy than she deserved.

Now in her late sixties she was anticipating a surgery that struck fear in her heart and sorrow for the surface I that shouldn't have suffered this long. Here you can see how the hammer of life shapes the hand. We began our work together by building a new narrative of loving kindness towards herself and gratitude for what she has. I asked her to write a list, a long list of things she loved about herself. I made it long on purpose. I wanted her to dig deep. She came up with

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fifteen lovely attributes. Everything from loyalty to mentorship and beyond. I asked her to read them out loud to herself before she went to bed each night. She did and when we met two weeks later she told me that in the repetition she felt that she was making friends with a different part of her being.

Then we started a list of gratitudes for recitation in the morning as she awoke. Slowly we were altering her story so that she could begin the journey to the deeper I. Guided meditations followed and then we did the spadework of presence. I say spadework because the non-thinking, just being, nature of the work is so foreign to our culture that we first have to check in with our internal mind police to get past the gate-keeping troll of our ego.

The work helped her do that and when she arrived at the pre-op she was able to return to the actual moment and not the one she feared was waiting down the hall in surgery. Post-operatively there was another challenge. As the analgesics wore off there was pain in her knee. A lot of it. I offered her a different way of seeing it. Re-labelling the pain and instead calling it sensation. Pain carries an enormous amount of emotional freight as a word. Mostly we don't think we deserve it. Why me? I want this to stop goddamit!

She began to visualize the word sensation. Sensation arising and subsiding like a wave in the ocean. The purpose was to drain the anxiety and fear out of the moment and instead of resisting it, to breath through it. Even looking at the sensation as a guide in her healing process. We have all kinds of drugs to kill pain but we offer few salves for the spiritual challenge that something like knee replacement surgery offers up. Mortality, vulnerability, loneliness, fear. Asking ourselves to increase consciousness in light of that seems counterintuitive. Rough translation, I'd rather not be here for this. Like Stephen Jenkinson says in *Die Wise*, we want to skip the dying part and just be dead. With an

operation and the ensuing challenges, we would rather numb our way through it. I know that has been my struggle.

My client found herself accepting her healing process with more kindness towards her aching knee. She got out of her way and let herself slow down and heal. Before she would have skipped that healing part and just want to get on with it. Now if she needed to sleep for a few hours during the day and Ice her knee while talking to a friend on the phone, then that's what she did. This wasn't a battle of knee replacement, it was a loving process.

There are many situations in life when we prefer to be absent, emotionally, physically and spiritually. Confrontation, hard truths about relationships, feelings of regret and failures. Being present is warrior work but I ask you wouldn't it be worth it to take that hill. To live life right now with all its beauty and yes, it's suffering.

By being here and choosing to be conscious many of the fears of the future have begun to melt away for me

I introduced one more healing piece into my friend's spiritual recovery plan. When talking about the character trait of patience Canadian Mussar practitioner Alan Morinis asks us to use meditation to create more space between what triggers us into impatience and lights the fuse of anger. Through being present, being conscious we can take right action. "Truth and consciousness are preconditions to exercising free will. Only when the light of awareness is glowing brightly can we see the truth and choose to follow a course that is guided by our values and goals, not by our animal soul, instincts, emotional reactions and habits." That's what I'm trying to get at when I talk about cleaning the container before re-focusing our efforts as the years roll on. I speak from a place of experience, as my reflexes and habits sent me flailing about, I found the choices I had made in the past were no longer the ones suited to my new station in life. Basically I had brought the wrong clothes on the trip ion to elder-hood.

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Morinis also writes about humility. He gives us a continuum on which to chart that trait. From the extreme of self-debasement on one end to arrogance on the other. Humility is in the middle of that continuum. Like all other character traits, we can veer from one end to the other of that spectrum. The deciding factor on where we land is not force of will but the cultivation of mindful presence.

Time for a caveat emptor. As the sacred tries to elbow its way back in to our society – which prizes the material, the rational above all else – I see that there is little to no counterweight of mystery. Contemplation and stillness have fast become commodified as faux ingredients of everything from bath soaps and yoga mats to condo-living. The Buddha has become a garden gnome. We need to re-sanctify these practices and enlist their profound power so that we can connect to where we stand and what calls to us

I don't know if this helps you but it is working for me when I confront that odd piece of my journey, finding true mindfulness. I have learned to let go of judgement and disappointment from time to time. In doing that I have opened up to the meditative practices that suit me. No, I don't enjoy sitting in a lotus position for twenty minutes twice a day. Instead I play the Djembe or the Tabruk African and Arabian drums. Am I a great drummer? Who cares, I'm not practicing for a performance. I'm letting go and listening to what the drum is telling me today. As soon as I try to control the flow that resonates as my hands hit the drum head it all falls apart. I must surrender to what is. I listen to sacred music and chant the eastern European Jewish scat of the Niggunim. I listen to the ambient genius of Brian Eno and as I walk I take note of the monkey mind that has dragged me through forests and I let it go as I take in what is all around me. The miracle that I am a part of. I have come to accept that there is no right way to be to do, to walk through this life if I am not coming

from a place of authenticity. If I don't take the chance of being seen for who I am. That doesn't mean I give up the work of refinement. To be conscious is to challenge the myth of who I am and love the truth that lies beneath it in me and in all those around me.

Creating the *Not That Kind of Rabbi* podcast made me realize how little we talk with people about our spiritual lives. I have interviewed politicians, musicians, poets and in one instance a Happy Capitalist whose world view left my chin on the floor. He believed that quite simply, we're born, we live, and then we die. That's it. He challenged me asking if that was a problem for me. I replied that I preferred to not be so certain. That I enjoyed giving some space to the idea of mystery. He scoffed. Then he added that climate change was nonsense, or should I say inevitable. The sun, according to him had a broken thermostat and we were suffering the effects. Nothing we could do. I didn't take the bait. I just wanted to hear him out. It did make me wonder if high capitalism is compatible with a reinvigorated spiritual society. I spoke to Kathleen Wynne. She had been the first openly gay Premier of Ontario and the first woman leader in this province of 14 million. She spoke of life passages and the transition from being a maiden, a mother and to now wanting to reclaim the title, crone. Poet Robert Priest talked of his yearlong stay in a psychiatric ward for severe depression. His reluctant but grateful embrace of ECT Elector-convulsive therapy. The love of his wife, who came to see him almost every day and went home wondering if she would ever get her beloved back. All of these were profound conversations about life and the struggles of the soul.

I realized that we all have a spiritual story that manifests in different ways. Hockey broadcaster Tara Slone was brought up Buddhist in the highest per capita population of Buddhists in North America. The Shambhala group in Halifax, Nova Scotia. We didn't

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talk *Hometown Hockey*, a show she co-hosts, just Buddha. When it was over, she told me how happy it made her to leave the puck behind and speak from her heart.

The podcast is good medicine for me on my journey.

Do Not Cast Me Off in Old Age; When
My Strength Fails, Do Not Forsake
Me!
Psalm 71:9

As I write this we are passing through a global pandemic that has claimed many lives and is changing us in many ways. But one sad truth that has been laid bare is how little we value our elders. In places like Texas and Alberta politicians informed us that the vast majority of deaths occurred in the aged. Those at or close to eighty. A choice was given to us. Get the economy going and let some old folks, who were past their due date anyway, die or shut it down and risk the livelihood of others.

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The most acceptable 'ism' of our time is ageism. As I have said and many others have pointed out we know the price of everything and the value of nothing. We live in a death-phobic culture and our elders remind us too much that death awaits. Yes, the process of getting older is a physical challenge but it is also a spiritual one. In fact, it is a chance to reclaim our soulful existence. But our elders will remain invisible if we simply wait as a society for acknowledgment and respect for them to appear. If we respected our elders, a commandment that is meant for the adult children of parents, then we would demand an end to the warehousing of people as they age. No one would find themselves in a waiting room filled with loneliness and strangers on their way to a dusty, airless death. When I ask people to write out their obituaries they never paint that picture. They die at home surrounded by love, peacefully.

If we want to create Wisdom Councils that will help in making decisions that are infused with experience, context and the passion for leaving behind a legacy for generations to follow, we will have to carve out a place at the tables of power.

Right now one of the most powerful voices in the campaign to stop the war on mother earth in the Western world comes from a teenage girl. God love her but where are our elders? If we have received the gift of longer lives then is it not incumbent on us to reject the label of doddering old fools and engage with our communities in an effort bring our spiritual gifts to bear?

When I was young I saw religion as a weak kneed insurance policy that those that feared dying, paid in to in hopes of a heavenly reward. I didn't need that reassurance.

Well I'm older now and yes, improved. I fear and I accept that my life, this human life is finite. Thing is, I don't fear my so called end, I fear hurting those I love with my passing and I know that that sorrow is real and hopefully well earned.

I see religion, religions, as sources of profound wisdom, providing ritual tool kits to help me through the cycles of life. More importantly I have come to believe that without a spiritual life we have devolved into a place of arrogance. With our humility gone we have become rapacious and entitled. We have thrown God out. We look for a different type of certainty when facing the unknown. The kind that toxic men can offer, with law, order, and the power of the mob.

God is a verb to me. A process of unceasing creative power. I have never pretended to fathom its depth. I never stop marvelling at its manifestations, the genius that is evident all around us on this silly little dirt ball of a planet in a minor galaxy surrounded by literally hundreds of millions of galaxies.

I have tried to be honest about my lack of grace and sometimes dignity in my life. I have shared this with you because as I said at the beginning this is not a rehearsal. The death of my father, his massive stroke three days before official retirement with his bags packed for a well-deserved holiday, a holiday that he never had, forever changed the geography of my life. We don't have to wait to go through the steps I have laid out in the process of reclaiming and making conscious our journey. We can do it all right now.

Contemplating our own death and bringing that truth out of the shadows, taking stock and asking forgiveness, writing our Vidduis: Who do I love and what have I accomplished, what do I regret and what do I want to be remembered for. Writing a letter to those that we love, and standing before the world to say, this is what I care about. This is a wrong I want to help right. Finding renewed purpose and standing proudly to say, I am. I am old and improved.

Epilogue

My eleven-year-old won't go to sleep. He can't. He has to keep reading *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*. At my age I shouldn't even know that this book exists. But I do. I'm tired, he's eleven, this probably won't go well.

"All right, enough with the book. Would you please stop getting up to turn on the hall light so you can keep reading? It was time for bed an hour ago."

"Okay," he says, in his little boy voice.

"All right, I love you. Good night."

How did I get here? Me, turning sixty-five, and him, telling me the next day, "You're not a grumpy old man yet, you're not seventy yet. You're a grumpy middle man." Sad as it is I'm willing to take the reprieve at face value.

I'm one of a growing cohort of men. Two marriages, two sets of kids. Mine are thirty-four, thirty-one, fifteen, and as just mentioned,

eleven, all boys. I have navigated the swampy and chaotic journey in to adolescence with the first two, and now, two more on deck, growing hair in strange places. I find myself wondering. Will I have the juice to stare out the window on a Saturday night wondering why they still haven't come home, still haven't called?

Aren't I supposed to be spending my weekend mornings slowly reading the paper? Yes, I still read printed newspapers, and yes, I also surf digital platforms. Hell, I create content for them. In many ways I'm blessed. From my first son I have two granddaughters, and my second has a wonderful seven-year-old in his life through his partner. I see the first brood when I can, and I see my youngest sons, well, that's a full-time job.

This is where I'm supposed to say I'm not complaining. But I like complaining, it takes the edge off. Frankly I think there's way too much of this stiff upper lip, keep your voice down, pull your socks up mentality floating around like a dark grey cloud above our heads

At my age I'm told I'm supposed to be out playing golf, counting the days till my pension kicks in. Thing is, I hate golf, truly hate it, and the pension is more of a supplement than my ticket to heaven.

For me, the primary reason to stay alive is that I don't want my younger ones to have to deal with their dad leaving this mortal coil before they have grown into young men. It's quite the motivator. I'm always doing the math. "Well, If I last another 13 years then he'll be 28 and the little one will be 24. Great, I got them through college, that's if the planet hasn't gotten rid of all of us by then.

So as you can see the conflict is real. I am entering the autumn of my life at the same time that I have to continue the summer's work of planting seeds and tending the growing garden.

That means still finding work and making decent money. Meanwhile I'll take the kids to the laser tag arcade where they run around

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like chickens and sit amidst a battery of incredibly loud video games holding on to their winnings, each machine with its own screeching siren call, yelling, hey, kid, come over here and spend some of your parents' retirement nest egg.

This book is about the passage through our seasons. For me, and for so many others, the leaves have begun to fall. But isn't that where so much beauty lies? It's in that riot of colours, the fiery reds, brilliant yellows, and copper-tinged leaves giving us one of the most beautiful gifts we have: the gift of cherishing and sharing our mortality. The gift of grace. This is not the age of surrender. This is the time to collect our gifts, and offer them to a world in need of elders and their mentorship.

In the end, my eleven-year-old fell sleep. Just a few years ago he used to crawl into our bed. He was all elbows and gnashing teeth. I hated it then, I miss it now. He loved to lie between us and feel the warmth of his mother's body as he slept. All that commotion made me grumpy. But still, looking at him content and asleep made this work of eldering all the more urgent. It's not just that I want to see him through to manhood. It's also for my sake. If I can find my wisdom while I cross this bridge in to the autumn of my life, then the time we have together will be that much richer.

In writing this book I invite you to share this journey with me. Because after all, we are all, as they say, just walking each other home.



Ralph Benmergui is best known as a TV and radio personality. First at the CBC for over twenty years and then at Jazz FM with his morning show *Benmergui in the Morning*. Born in Tangiers, Morocco, Ralph and his family arrived in Canada in the late 1950s settling in Toronto. Ralph has had an eclectic career. Stand-up comic, singer in a band, national media, then government communications. Executive Advisor to the President at Sheridan College and along the way seeking out and becoming becoming an ordained Spiritual Director.

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“A compelling mixture of memoir, reflection and philosophy, this is a startlingly honest and important book.” – Rev Michael Coren, columnist and best-selling author of *Reclaiming Faith: Inclusion, Grace, and Tolerance*

When Ralph Benmergui discovered he was literally hours away from a deadly heart attack he realized his life had changed. He was entering the autumn of his life, as he saw it, and he was being dragged into it by his heels. What follows this awakening is a funny, profound and generous look at where he came from – from his childhood as the youngest son of Moroccan immigrants, to his experiences during the early years of Yuk Yuks, to his long and storied career at CBC and much more – to where he is now, with stents in his arteries, having survived two bouts of cancer, hosting a much-loved podcast and with a practice in Hashpa’ah: Jewish Spiritual Direction. Along the way Benmergui looks critically at what it means to grow old in our society and challenges the reader to push against the stereotypes, to find a new purpose, and to claim the title and role of elder in a society that demands we strive to stay “forever young.”

I Thought He Was Dead: A Spiritual Memoir

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