

One Thing You're Never Too Old to Do

No matter how old you are, you must have a vision for your future. Are you afraid to dream? You should be more afraid not to.

Nobody had ever asked me much about my dreams until Walt Wright, an unexpected mentor, forced me to take my future seriously.

"Leslie," he said one morning as he walked into the office, "I'd like to see your 10-year plan."

What's that? I wondered. Would I find it in one of the file drawers at my new receptionist's desk? At 21 years of age, I hadn't planned my next 10 days, let alone my next decade.

"I'm serious," Walt continued. "I want you to think about what you'd like to accomplish." He handed me a legal pad and said he'd check in with me a couple of days later; and he did.

"OK," he said leaning back in his chair with his feet on his desk, "let's hear it. What are you going to do with the next 10 years you have on this planet?"

I read aloud three things I'd put on my list. First, I wanted to help get Les, my husband, through graduate school. Second, I wanted to eventually move out of our tiny apartment and into a house. And three, I wanted to have children.

"Hmm," Walt nodded. "OK. That's a start. Would you say this captures your dream? Is this what you want to do with your life?"

That's a bit of a different question. Truth be told, I wanted to do more than whittle away at my husband's student loans, get a mortgage and have a baby. I wanted to make a difference,

and Walt knew it.

“Let’s try this again,” he said. “Let’s talk about your dreams. If you could do what your heart wants to do, what would it be?”

That got me thinking. The next day, I came into Walt’s office with a new list—and new energy. Dreaming, by the way, is sure to energize your heart.

“Here’s what I dream of doing over the next 10 years,” I told him. And I slid my yellow pad of paper across his desk. At age 21, these were the things I dreamed of doing with my life:

- I want to earn my doctorate.
- I want to run the L.A. Marathon.
- I want to have three children.
- I want to write children’s books.
- I want to teach and mentor college students.

That was it. At the time, these were my dreams. Big dreams. And chances are, I would have never articulated them if Walt had not forced me to take my future seriously.

By the way, in case you’re curious, in the past two decades, I’ve accomplished each of these dreams, except one. I had just two children, not three. That’s a story for another time. For now, I want to stay on the topic of dreams and how they expand our ability to make a difference.

So many of us, as women, don’t think much about dreaming big dreams. In fact, I debated long and hard about whether or not to share with you my five dreams from so long ago.

I fear you may feel badly that you haven’t dreamed your dreams yet. Or that you might think you’ve missed your chance to dream big dreams if you didn’t articulate them early on.

If that’s a thought you’re carrying, I want to challenge it. I’ve interviewed enough women in their second half of life to

know that, truly, it's never too late to get excited about dreaming a big dream.

Too Old Not to Dream

A friend recently asked me if a woman in her 20s finds it easier to dream big because she has so many more options and choices to pursue.

"On the contrary," I replied. Only half-jokingly, I continued: "You should attend one of the college courses I teach and interview even the most thoughtful and articulate young women with their lives before them, and you'll soon see how much most of them struggle to dream a big dream. Most are consumed with getting through the semester, their social life and finding time to sleep."

"Yes," my friend countered, "but don't you think a woman in her 40s and later finds the idea of dreaming at all somewhat painful? I mean, she has had to surrender some of her dreams and grieve their loss. Aren't her days of dreaming big dreams over?"

My heart ached to hear this question. It literally gave me a thud in my stomach. A woman's days of dreaming big dreams over? Absolutely not!

Of course I didn't shout this out. Instead, I answered by saying: "In some of these same courses that I teach, sprinkled among the shining 20-year-old faces, you'll also find a few women in their 30s, 40s and sometimes 50s who are returning to college to realize a new dream they have for their life."

I told her about Betty, a woman in her early 50s, who always wanted to be a nurse. With her two children recently married, she lives in an empty nest with her husband and is returning to the classroom to make her dream come true. And she's loving every minute of it.

"I turned our dining room into my study," Betty told me. "I just love learning all of this stuff."

I can remember another woman, a bit older than Betty, who had always been interested in the history of Europe. She came back to college for a second degree, 45 years after earning her first one.

On the first day of class, as we went around the circle to introduce ourselves, she said she couldn't remember what she majored in the first time. The students howled, but she laughed the loudest. And why not? She was pursuing a dream.

Nearing her graduation, she rewarded herself with a wonderful European trip accompanied by a dozen of her young classmates on a semester abroad. It was the first of several trips she's now chaperoned with the teaching late for a woman to dream? Never!

Hold Fast

Now, I understand that almost all of us in the second half of life have regrets. We have opportunities we may have passed up. Doors we closed too soon. Poor choices that curtailed our options. Or life's circumstances were out of our control.

That's life. But does this mean we are forever walled off from dreaming big dreams? I'm here to tell you that the eventual pain that results from not dreaming—for fear of being disappointed by an unrealized dream—will always eclipse the pain of a dream that never comes true.

Why? Because a big dream almost always leads us to something good that we never would have experienced without our dream.

Consider some of the dreams women have recently told me:

- "My dream is to see my agoraphobic daughter leave her room."
- "My dream is to open my own bakery and use the profit to

feed the needy.”

- “I have a dream of making the Bible come alive to junior high students.
- “I have a dream of getting out of financial debt and honoring God with my money.”
- “I have a dream of building houses for Habitat for Humanity.”

These are big dreams. I think most of them will be successful. But if not, they will have enjoyed the satisfaction of trying and nobody can criticize them for that.

What yearning and passion has God placed in your heart? What do you dream about? I hope you’ll give this question serious consideration if you haven’t already.

Carl Sandburg, one of my favorite poets, said, “There is an eagle in me that wants to soar, and there is a hippopotamus in me that wants to wallow in the mud.” I know just what he meant.

Sometimes I feel steady and strong, sometimes worried and weak. The difference? It has to do with dreams.

The older I get, the more I notice that my strength, my energy is directly correlated to my dreams. The more confidently I pursue them, the stronger I feel. But the moment I let a dream die, I feel that eagle within me giving way to the hippopotamus.

I had a recent dream that energized me for a while. I was invited, along with several others, to help cast a new and updated vision for the overall ministry in our local church. I felt affirmed. I was excited. I prayed about it, wrote down some of my thoughts and talked to others.

I had something to contribute. And I did contribute. But not long into the process of crafting a new vision for our established church, it became apparent that the old,

entrenched “we’ve-always-done-it-this-way” attitude of the gatekeepers was going to prevent any new and creative ideas from having a fighting chance.

Soon my big dream of making a difference in this area was gone. It died. And with it, part of my joy became less bright. My spirit, temporarily, withered.

This must be what Langston Hughes meant when he wrote these lines in “Dreams”: “Hold fast to dreams, for if dreams die, life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly.”

Do you believe that? I do. That’s why I continue to dream even when some dreams die out.

Your Dreams Count

These days, much of my passion for dreaming is focused on my two little boys. When I dream big, I dream about the kind of men I’d like them to be.

I dream about the qualities I’d like my sons to cultivate. I made a list of these qualities with my husband, and I’m energized most days—even after little sleep with a sick 2-year-old—about this big dream.

My personal dreams these days, as opposed to my dreams from 20 years ago, have more to do with significance than success. In addition to the character qualities of my sons, I care deeply about the state of marriage in our country.

I think that if the divorce rate could be lowered significantly, it would be one of the single greatest social revolutions of our lifetime, so I put a lot of my energy into that dream. I dream about seeing seasoned couples mentoring younger couples. With my husband, I write about it, speak about it and work with others to do what we can to make this dream come true.

I have a dream of helping a local ministry for the needy in

Seattle become the best it can be. I volunteer my time there when I can, and I support it financially.

Dreams change over time and as we age. What may seem like a big dream to some women will seem rather puny to others. That's OK. We are all contributing to the great collage that makes a difference. And whatever a particular woman's dreams are, you can be assured that they are a vital means to helping her discover how she is designed to make a difference.

I live in Seattle and so, perhaps, it follows that I love coffee. The largest cup, venti, is not an uncommon order for me. Most of my thoughts about life—and my prayers—have been scribbled on a napkin in the white space that forms the margins around the green-ringed Starbucks logo.

And that's where recently I wrote: "I dare to dream venti."

And I do. If there's one thing I've learned about making a difference with my life, it's that my difference-making is only limited by the size of my dreams. And so is yours.

That's why I hope you dream big. I hope you talk to a trusted friend or two about your dreams. I hope you pray about them often.

"Dreams are the touchstones of our character," Henry David Thoreau said. "Our truest life is when we are in dreams awake."

So dream venti! {eoa}

Leslie Parrott, Ed.D., *is co-founder with her husband, Les, of the Seattle-based Center for Relationship Development.*