

Who Said Over 50 Is Over The Hill?

DON'T ASSUME THAT YOUR MOST FRUITFUL YEARS ARE BEHIND YOU. OLDER WOMAN MUST BREAK FREE FROM ALL COMFORT ZONES AND EMBRACE THE JOYS OF LIFE IN THE GOLDEN YEARS.

As I surveyed my overgrown yard I realized, based on my 40-plus years of gardening experience, that something needed to be done. What had been intended to serve as border grass in my well-defined flower beds had spread and taken over.

Many of my shrubs were misshapen and grotesque, pruned by various episodes of ice, blight and drought. Armadillos—those destroyers of southern gardens—had devastated my bulb bed and left unplanned holes and gaps in the lawn. Yes, it was definitely time to relandscape.

Eighteen years before, I had done the landscaping myself—planning it, supervising it and doing the bulk of the work. I had used some innovative ideas, making my yard and garden different and uniquely beautiful. I was quite proud of it.

But this time I had neither the time nor the energy to do all the work alone—so I called a designer and a landscape contractor. I approached them with confidence, secure in my gardening experience and know-how. To my surprise, after listening politely to my thoughts about lawn design, they discreetly directed me toward some new ideas. I discovered that while I had been busy ministering, many things had changed, and the art of landscaping was one of them!

I also discovered that embracing new ways of thinking, planning and doing landscape work was invigorating. My yard is now totally different, but it is once again uniquely

beautiful. I have found renewed energy and excitement for keeping it up. My experience and knowledge of the basics—good soil, good plants and so on—still serve me well, but my old forms and patterns needed to change with the passing of time.

As I move into the years on the far side of 50, I have found this principle to be true in my life as well as in my garden. To rephrase a popular saying: If you always do what you have always done, you will always be what you have always been. Life is so full of opportunities to grow—even at an older age. I refuse to remain immune to change!

THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE Where is it along life's way that the challenge of change is exchanged for the comfort of sameness? Sameness can be learned so well that all things become rote. What was once the cutting edge becomes dull. The same words and activities that once vibrated with passion may look and sound the same, but feel lifeless. The mind becomes lazy. Ideas become stale. The horizon of life narrows.

It happens when we settle into the familiar and comfortable and skirt the challenge of change.

The real loss in settling for sameness as we grow older is that the knowledge gained from past experience becomes only lessons to talk about instead of a foundation for further growth. My basic gardening skills were good, but using them in new forms and functions expanded my ability and know-how. It also gave me a fresh sense of accomplishment and now brings a new sense of joy and excitement every time I open the front door.

Perhaps you aren't into gardening; but if you are on the far side of 50, you may need to take inventory and ask yourself: Is there freshness and excitement in my life and work?

Years ago, I read something that has been a regular prick in my comfort zone. The writer said that women have a tendency to maintain themselves as they were when they were at a peak of

self-confidence—at a point in their maturing when they first felt really good about themselves. Dress styles, eyeglass styles, hairstyles, what they do and how they do it can all become set in that comfortable time period.

It can happen to the best of us—and it can apply to accomplishments and achievements, too.

In the decade of the '80s, I was intensely involved in women's ministries in the church. Along with a dedicated group of other women, I helped plan and sponsor a series of women's conferences, which peaked in the late '80s with a conference of approximately 8,000 women. During this time we purposefully drew younger women into leadership, mentoring them for succession.

The '90s brought change. The women on our original committee began to move on to other roles, responsibilities and places. I accepted a new challenge, too—a unique direction that, while still involving ministry to women, surpassed the scope of my previous calling. A younger woman was given the leadership of the women's ministry.

In 1997, when the younger woman came to me with plans for another large women's conference, I knew it was time to let go and move on. I determined not to have any leading role in planning the event, agreeing to be only a consultant. She honored me by requesting that I give the keynote message.

About three months before the scheduled conference date, my daughter, Teri, who lives in a different state, became critically ill. I spent several weeks with her but flew home for the opening night of the conference to give my keynote address. Three hours later I boarded a plane and returned to my daughter.

Although Teri felt bad that I had missed the majority of the conference to be with her, I was at peace. And later, when I watched the video of the full event, I experienced one of the

most rewarding moments in all my years of ministry: I saw that the thing I had birthed, nurtured and eventually turned loose had blossomed into something fresh and beautiful! That had happened only as I had moved on from the comfort zone of past accomplishments to the challenge of new pursuits.

THE EXPANDING CALL I am often encouraged by a phrase from Ephesians 4:15 in which Paul refers to our potential to “grow up in all things into Him who is the head” (NKJV). Think of what God is holding out to us—the possibility of growing up to be like Christ in every area of our lives!

Here we are, God’s created likeness, alive by the very breath of God, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, who supplies guidance, strength, council, wisdom, power, gifts, fruitfulness and much more. Surely the apex of the potential of a Spirit-empowered life has never been fathomed! So why would we ever settle into just being what we have always been, doing what we have always done?

I admit I sometimes get tired, frustrated, whiny, stressed-out or fearful. Sometimes I tell myself I deserve a rocking chair, not another assignment, project or trip. But whenever I accept a new challenge I discover I am rejuvenated and energized, and I continue to expand my potential.

I love Eugene Peterson’s contemporary rendering of Ephesians 4 in The Message. It reads in part: “I want you to get out there and walk—better yet, run!—on the road God called you to travel. I don’t want any of you sitting around on your hands. I don’t want anyone strolling off, down some path that goes nowhere. And mark that you do this with humility and discipline—not in fits and starts...[as] fully mature adults, fully developed within and without, fully alive like Christ.”

Remember, Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians 30 years after his conversion, when he was surely on the far side of 50—perhaps quite far. But his vision continued to invigorate

him. His calling continued to challenge him. He understood well the ever-expanding call and plan of God for his life, referring to it in Romans 1:1:

**"Paul, a bondservant"—the general call

**"called to be an apostle"—the special call

**"separated to the gospel of God"—the specific call.

Only through continuity of service over time did Paul come to the specific, expanded work of his life. His experience and discipline over the course of his life produced the mature fruit of his later years. What a loss it would have been if Paul had not pushed himself beyond his earlier ministry to capture in letters the unfolding revelation of the gospel of Christ!

There is no waste in God's economy. There are no accidents, only incidents, in His plans. All things serve His purpose (see Is. 46:9-11; Rom. 8:28). In our lives, as in Paul's, good times and bad times, desert years and fruitful years, active ministry and painful events all bring us to the fulfillment of God's purpose in us. We must not let the passing of years steal the crowning culmination of a faithful life!

Abraham's wife, Sarah, was challenged with motherhood when she was past 90. Bitter years of loss challenged Naomi, but they were eclipsed by the birth of Obed to her beloved daughter-in-law, Ruth, which brought joy and fulfillment in her old age. Deborah, after many years as a prophet and judge, was called on to help lead Israel into battle. Elizabeth, in her old age, gave birth to John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ.

It seems God takes special delight in bringing forth something new and fresh out of older experiences. He often allows the most important part of our lives to come forth in the later years. Our part is to have the faith to believe, the patience to continue, the diligence to labor and the determination to

go beyond the norm.

I have several friends in their after-50 years who accepted new challenges, greatly enriching their lives and blessing others. My friend Fredi Trammell was encouraged to write her first book at the age of 56. Since then she has written and published nine books over nine years.

Nona Freeman, a prolific writer, produced her first book when she was in her 60s and learned to use a computer after she was 70. Faith Spears, now 70, is a substitute teacher in her local school. Her position not only has been fulfilling but also has opened up new friendships and other new interests.

The now-famous Bible teacher, Henrietta Mears, was in her 50s when she pioneered new methods for teaching children in Sunday school that still impact Christian education in churches everywhere.

PRODUCING MUCH FRUIT Jesus spoke to his disciples about bearing “fruit,” “more fruit” and “much fruit” (see John 15:1-8). In our mature age we can draw from the rich soil of years of experiences to produce much fruit to the glory of God. Don’t shortchange the Lord of the vineyard by excusing yourself based on years of past service! Remember, He has a problem with a lack of fruit-bearing (see Mark 11:13-14,20-21).

Besides, there are advantages to serving after you’ve topped the hill of 50 or 60 years old. Your empty nest gives you more control of time. Energy may wane, but stamina can be developed. Enthusiasm now rests on the firm foundation of experience. And as a “veteran” of life, you know that every storm that comes is not going to sink your ship!

With the ever-changing roles of life, however, there come new choices. What should we do? How can we best spend our time? Into what should we invest our resources?

Two words have helped me keep my balance in making these choices: eternal and temporal. It is true that we are temporal beings living in a temporal world, which necessitates our dealing with temporal things. But we must remember that all things temporal will pass away.

Shopping, gardening, decorating, rocking chairs and bank accounts have significance only on this side of eternity. Eternal investments—time and resources spent on expanding the kingdom and giving glory to God—are what bring an eternal reward. So don't settle for trinkets in time; reach for the stars!

After all, life is not over until it's over. So go ahead: Embrace challenges; be willing to change; make choices with eternal significance. Press on into maturity, and become all God wants you to be. Do everything God has called you to do. You are alive in Christ—and you are on your way to the best part of the rest of your life.

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