



Leon Zernitsky

To Every Season

BY ANITRA KITTS

One recent summer afternoon, I sat on a northern California beach watching my daughter leap the waves with her beloved.

It made me feel old.

It was one of those moments when I had to confront just how much of my life has already been lived.

I recalled how I used to jump the waves with my little five-year-old Dana. I used to hold her hand and not let her get any deeper than her knees, and she'd laugh with each wave and I'd laugh, too, just because she was so enraptured with the ocean and the surprise of continuous waves.

In that moment on the beach, my 25-year-old Dana was still laughing—in the water way above her knees—and I was scooping up sand and letting the grains pour out between my fingers. I thought of a photograph of my mother: she was a toddler at the beach, standing in the arms of her mother. With this memory, I found myself wondering about the generational pattern of mothers, daughters and ocean waves. In my mind, it was a scene so poignant that if it had been a movie, I would have whipped out my guitar and sung the old Birds song, “To everything (turn, turn, turn), there is a season (turn, turn, turn),” while the sun sank peacefully behind the edge of the ocean.

Only it was foggy. And the middle of the afternoon. And I had left my guitar at home. And I would have needed my reading glasses to see the music anyway.

Now What?

The point is that much has changed. My daughters are grown now. They no longer need me to guard them from undertows or drive them to school. The huge, overwhelming, life-eating task of raising children is now, more or less, done—has been done for a while, really. While sitting on that beach, I realized that I could continue to sit there, watching my daughter have all the fun, or I could summon the courage and energy to stand and find my own set of waves, my own adventures.

But accepting that high-involvement parenting is over is not easy. It leads directly to the always unsettling question: now what? If I could go anywhere and do anything, what would I want to do? What *can* I do? What *should* I do? These are not idle questions to be answered someday,

like they appeared to be when I was in my twenties and my life seemed to stretch out before me without limit. *Someday* is now much closer than it used to be. There’s something about getting the first AARP membership solicitation letter that sounds a lot like the call for last round.

“The fact that life has a boundary,” Greg Love, professor of systematic theology at San Francisco Theological Seminary, said at a recent conference, “gets us off the couch, because there is clearly a time limit. Without death, we’d never get anything done because there’s always another tomorrow. It reminds us that there’s only so much time, so we need to use it.”

All these thoughts during my afternoon on the beach brought to mind recent conversations with other women at similar points in life. I found it helpful to recall what other women are doing with this period of “only so much time.”

Answering the Now What Question?

Sonnie Swentson-Forbes, who is 59 years old and lives in the Los Angeles area with her wife, is very aware that life stretches out for only so long.* Now a ten-year colon cancer survivor, she was told that the discovery of the cancer was days away from being too late. “There were no symptoms,” she says, until one night when it became clear she needed to go to the emergency room. That visit led to diagnosis and surgery within hours of admission. “Things that used to be important to me now seem more trivial. I spend my time doing things that are meaningful and add value. I want to say that I did something that was worthy.”

For Sonnie, this new life focus involves volunteer service on the

boards of several organizations that advocate for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people. She also enjoys laying down some serious smoked barbecue for church dinners and family picnics. While Sonnie volunteers as an advocate, her wife, Melinda, is still employed. “We’re talking about life after retirement,” Sonnie says. “Melinda and I are in the financial planning stage right now. We’re looking forward to her joining me in retirement. We want to travel, to play golf, to live in a less stressful kind of way.”

Cynthia Jo, who is single and lives in San Francisco, retired in January 1997. Now 71 years old, she was slowed only a bit by a broken foot on a recent mission trip to China. She has traveled on six other mission trips since retirement, including one with PW to help rebuild homes in New Orleans. When she’s in town, she volunteers at the Cameron House, offering food to elderly Asian immigrants who do not qualify for food stamps or Supplemental Security Income. “I like the flexibility of time now,” the former supervisory chemist says of her life after retirement. “Now I can go unlock the door to the church basement if that’s what needs to happen . . . I have been such a fireball,” Cynthia says. “I’ve been high up on the social-justice bandwagon, I’ve done the work. If I’ve done a decent job, then other folks should carry on. If we don’t serve others, life has little meaning.”

Arlene Gordon retired two years ago from her work as presbytery executive of Tropical Florida Presbytery. Now deeply immersed in various projects for the PC(USA)—from renewing the African American Presbyterian Church directory to serving as co-leader of an

upcoming Women of Color Consultation—and managing an upcoming family reunion, Arlene admits she might be a little over-committed at the moment. “I’m a single mother,” she says. “My son and his family live in northern California and my sister just moved to Arizona. I miss them but this work keeps me busy.”

Even so, Arlene appreciates the freedom to structure her time as she wishes, rather than responding to the over-packed calendar of the presbytery executive life. “I can go shopping now,” Arlene celebrates. “Before, I could only run in and grab something and run back out. Now I can just walk and walk the mall, then walk some more. I can get up each morning and spend as much time as I want singing and praying. I have time to read my Bible each night before going to bed.”

Just Finding Enough for Today

Elizabeth Nordquist, 68 years old, also values the gift of unscheduled time in her life, two years after retiring from the southern campus of San Francisco Theological Seminary. In addition to reading through the books she intended to read while an English major, the former professor of spirituality also took much of her

first post-retirement year to think and pray with deep and consistent intentionality. Since retirement, Elizabeth has encountered and formed a solid friendship with another recently retired woman in her neighborhood. “I wanted to be a person in my neighborhood,” she says. “A commute that was 50 and then 100 miles round trip cut me off from being where I lived.”

“Perhaps the most humbling [aspect of aging] is the discovery that it is no longer possible to be as unconscious of my body as I was earlier in my life,” Elizabeth observes. “Now, there’s no avoiding that part of myself. I have to be present to it, allow it to speak to me and to do the stewardship of caring for my body. I don’t like to walk or to exercise, but now it’s more of a thing that needs to be done.” Elizabeth continues her work as a spiritual director and writer while she and her husband prepare for his upcoming retirement. “I’m glad we’re anticipating this change,” Elizabeth says. “I’ve developed a pattern of being home on my own these last few years. Now that is going to change. The question for me is ‘What do I do to make this work and still be true to myself?’”

Back on the beach, I thought about Elizabeth’s question as I stood

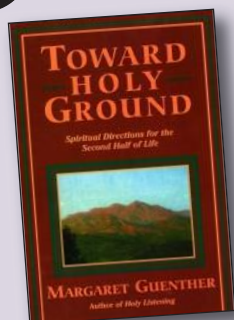
up. I might have been a bit slow and awkward, but I still made it to my feet all on my own. My daughter and her beloved had come out of the ocean and were drying themselves. It was time to head back to town and, eventually, to the airport so they could return to the other side of the country. I found myself thinking that “Now what?” is a good question, with many answers. I felt grateful for the chance to start finding out which answers might work for me. In the meantime, there was a car to reload, some food to cook for dinner and childhood photos to unbury so all the good stories could be told. And that was enough for that day. As we drove back toward home, I noticed I was humming the last line from Pete Seeger’s chorus: “. . . a time for peace, I swear it’s not too late.”

Anitra Kitts is a mother and occasional preacher. She holds a master of divinity degree from San Francisco Theological Seminary and lives in Santa Rosa, California.

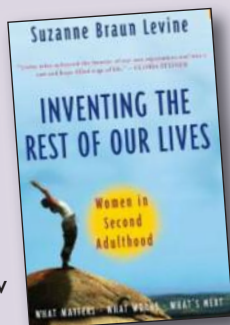
*Marriage between same-gender couples is legal in six states, and was legal in California from May 15–November 4, 2008. All marriages recognized in that window retain full legal standing.



Resources



Toward Holy Ground: Spiritual Direction and the Second Half of Life
By Margaret Guenther
Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1995
A thoughtful and encouraging examination of how our lives and our experiences of God through the Holy Spirit deepen as we grow wiser.



Inventing the Rest of our Lives: Women in Second Adulthood
By Suzanne Braun Levine
New York: Viking Penguin, 2005
A secular and readable look at how being a woman over the age of 50 has changed in our culture, and how we can claim fresh energy and direction within those changes.