

## Sermon: Getting Through February 11, 2018

There are some people who love winter. Most of them love winter because they engage in winter sport. I, too, have a winter sport. My equipment is a chair, an afghan, a lamp, a cup of tea and a book. When the weather is like it has been for what seems like the last century, my response is to hunker down and wait it out. I can't say I'm a happy bunny, but I'm relatively OK. Or at least I think I'm content in my self-imposed cave until I notice that my spirits are flagging and I have vague feelings of discontent and depression. The colors of the world are reduced to white and grey and those are the colors of my soul as well.

I may not have chosen to be born in this climate, but for some reason I continue to live in this climate. Sometimes I think that's more inertia than choice, but, be that as it may, I'm still here. So sometimes I think I must need winter, the way I need green, leafy vegetables. For one thing, every year, I get a free reminder of the changes that life throws at us. Then I have to wonder how well I was dealing with those changes.

So when I read an article, *18 Years into the New Millennium, Finding My Younger Self*, by Robert Goldfarb, I really paid attention. The author, who is 88, noted that it has been 18 years since 2000 and he compares that with the 18 years

that took him from birth to graduation from high school. I have to quote a few of his observations.

First, When he renewed his driver's license, the clerk told him he hadn't changed enough in the last seven years to warrant a new photo. He observes that *"Only my mother would have recognized me in photographs taken seven year apart during my first 18 years of life."*

However, while some changes slow down, others speed up. On the issue of time, he says, *"Aging has put me on a conveyor propelling me through days as though there were only two in a month, the first and the last."*

Comparing life to a pie divided into 88 pieces, he realizes that *"the slice of life remaining...is very small."*

For everybody here, we are looking at different sizes of that same pie. Some, like me, are closer to the author's perspective. Some have many, many years to go before this will even start to be a concern. In all cases, however, winter often reminds us that life is not always spring dawns or summer afternoons. It can become coldest, dullest winter at any age. What do we do when we hit those doldrums, not, perhaps, the great tragedies, but the lulls and discontents that happen in any life, at any time. In short, what do we do in the February of our souls?

What we do, how much we feel drawn to change things in our lives, varies from one of us to the other. Sometimes it feels as if we don't have to do anything. If there is change, it doesn't make itself very noticeable. We can go on for quite a while in a sort of bubble, like a snow globe, in which not a lot seems to be different from one year to the next. We keep to the same routine; we do the same things we always do at the same time; we observe the same traditions. But this feeling of timelessness is an illusion. We are always changing, whether we choose those changes or not. Change is either something we choose or it is chosen for us. Always, always time is moving us into new places, new events, new challenges. If we don't consciously choose to change, we often find ourselves being changed by those events and challenges.

When there is an accumulation of small, unnoticed changes we are often surprised. Suddenly, our children grow up. Our parents age and die. We age and are no longer able to do what we once did. We alter our traditions, change what we do and how we do it. But, if we are human, we often try to change as little as possible. We want to feel that all is fundamentally the same. Traditions and habits are the macaroni and cheese of life, the comfort food of our soul's winters.

We are all different in how we respond to change. I confess that I like the comfort, the feeling of being able to relax into the warm blanket of habit and

tradition. And yet, for all I cling to that, it is sometimes a pretty threadbare blanket. And it certainly doesn't prepare me for those abrupt discontinuities, those forced changes.

So I read with interest how that 88 year old man dealt with his desire "*to recapture the adventure and passion*" of his first 18 years. And what he concluded was that he would need to "*break habits that are comfortable but confining*".

He didn't decide to go on a round the world tour or to take up skydiving. He did this, first, by a few sessions in a neurofeedback center where he found he could enter a calmer place than he had ever found through meditation. For those of us not near or able to access a neurofeedback center, I think we might thing strongly about the benefits of meditation or centering prayer, or maybe quiet woodland walks. It seems as if we need, somehow, to stop the chatter in our heads and get off the treadmill that our own minds too often put us on. We need a bit of space in the cranium. In that space, we can become more conscious, more mindful, more aware, less creatures of unthinking habit.

In order to get off the treadmill of his life, the author decided to get on another treadmill. He decided to change the workout routine that he had performed for years. I was, at this point, so intimidated by his habitual workout, after all, he is 88, that I almost stopped reading. However, it wasn't that he was working out more

but that he had made a change. He wasn't on automatic pilot. He was thinking about what he did and having to use concentration and intention in place of habit. I still may need more incentive to do this, but I take his point. Where, after all, would we divide the mind from the body? At the neck? Painful. They are connected and a change in one creates a change in the other. And so, sad to say, I can't just read about change. I have to make it happen in my body as well. I have to embody it because everything we do is, sooner or later, embodied.

The third action he took was in relation to his primary relationship. He and his wife decided to follow the lead of some of their friends and stop each day for a cup of coffee or a glass of wine together. He was surprised at how much this small ritual enlivened an over 60 year marriage. For anyone in a long term relationship, even if not one of 60 years, we can all identify with that becoming stale, habitual, the point at which we don't have a lot that's new to say to each other. It doesn't have to be a marriage we're talking about. It can be our relationship with our parents, our siblings, our children, our close friends. Whatever the closest, longest and most important relationships in our lives, we can find that they, like us, lose their zest. It is hard to get that back when aren't feeling so peppy, aren't feeling so interesting, or so interested. That's when we find that relationships, too, do not do well on automatic pilot and need some mindfulness, some intention, in order to keep functioning.

Not big changes, any of these, not life changing events, just small tweaks to an established life. But in each case, the amount of change was less important than the conscious choice behind making the change.

But there is still one more ingredient missing from the list. Once we have more clarity and calm, once we have our physical well-being in hand, once we have reinvigorated our relationships, we need to think about how we will interact with the world around us. A study out of USLA adds that people who are stressed or anxious can help themselves by helping others. In big ways or small, when we hear so much bad news, it is helpful to regain our feelings of control and our feelings of being active agents in the world by some act of kindness or charity. When we feel we are doing something positive, when we act rather than simply wringing our hands, we feel better. This holds true, I think, for those who are recipients of the help as well. Therefore, ways to encourage those who may feel they have nothing to give to find a way to actively engage in helping others may be as beneficial or more as those programs that help them. There is always something someone can do for somebody, even if it's just a smile. We all need to feel we are part of the solution, whatever the problem.

And the other thing this study recommended was to limit news consumption. We ask people to be informed, but at a certain point, that simply becomes anger

and depression. That point varies from person to person, but it is something about which we need to be aware.

Awareness. That is the word that seems to drive all these recommendations. It is harder to be aware, to be aware of our own needs, to be aware of when we need conscious changes, to be aware of what our minds and bodies are saying to us. Some may find change easy, some may have more means than another to make large and dramatic changes, while others may be more restricted. In any case, for each of us, knowing what we cannot change need not blind us to the small changes that are within our grasp.

For each of us, awareness may come differently, different in duration, different in resolution. I sincerely hope that no one here will think that I am advocating constant change, or, worse yet, insisting that there be no time for quiet, no time to rest. We need time to mourn life's losses as well as to celebrate change and mourning is not just for the people we have lost. Mourning can also be for our lost opportunities, our lost youth, our lost abilities. Perhaps trees mourn the leaves that fell in the autumn. We need time to go into our caves, to curl up, to hibernate as much as any bear or woodchuck needs this time, as much as the trees need time to rest before they can begin to gather energy to put forth those new green leaves. We do not always need constant action.

But we do need to realize when we've been in that cave a little too long, when we have slid from the need for recuperation to the fear of the outside world. We need to know when the quiet has lasted longer than it should.

That is when we should think about poking our noses out into the world. I can usually tell it's time for me to do something when I find myself lingering in the floral section of Wegman's, or even near the salads, in an effort to get some feeling of spring.

We need, then, to find our balance between rest and activity, to seek clarity of mind as to the next steps we need to take. We need some grace. We need to recognize when we are given that grace.

Grace is always around us. It may be well hidden so we don't recognize it when we see it. Or it may be that our eyes become winter-blind and we can't see it when it's right in front of us. But it is always there, waiting to give us what we need. Maybe not what we think we want, but what we need.

We are living things, just like plants. The need to grow is inborn in us as it is the largest tree or the smallest violet. We need growth as we need food and water and air. As well, we cannot grow alone. We need others in our journey, others who help us, others whom we help, sometimes in ways we, or they, do not expect. Our needs are mortal needs, needs that are as much a part of us as our heart beat. In



order to grow, we must re-pot ourselves into larger pots, add fresh earth and water. Above all, we need to have sun and air. It is hard for anything but mushrooms to grow in the cave of habit and false security.

Sometimes we need help to get out of that cave, to know when and how to go out into the wider world. We need help in finding what is best for us, what we can do within our powers to get through those Februaries of our lives. And so, I'd like us to ask for that help. For those of us who have difficulty with the first word in this reading, I offer the alternate notion, given to me by a counselor where I worked, that GOD can also be Good Orderly Direction. Let us say this together.

### The Serenity Prayer

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
Courage to change the things I can,  
and the Wisdom to know the difference.

May we all be given this grace.