

THE SECOND HALF OF LIFE

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After our glorious homecoming 150th anniversary kick off celebration earlier this month, I was waiting to thank Alan for his inspired piano playing, and an older gentleman came up to me. He said he read about us on the front page of the IJ he decided to come visit. He told me he'd been a Presbyterian all his life but goes to another Presbyterian church.

“But”, he said, clearly disgruntled , “ Tell me, Where are the hymnals? And the Bibles. Where are the Bibles? Where are the pews? Churches have pews. Why don't you play the pipe organ? And I've never in my life heard any of the hymns we sang.”

What if I told him we don't say the Nicene creed or sing the Doxology either. And we experience God through creative music, art and silence as well as words. Maybe the last straw for him would be that the pastor doesn't have the last word in the sermon—we do—as we are encouraged to respond from our own experience.

He got me to thinking, though, that our transformation has been so incremental I hadn't realized how disorienting it might be for an old time traditional Presbyterian to be here. I thought, wow, we have come a long way. And I started looking at First Pres San Rafael with my Spiritual Director hat on.

A question we Spiritual Directors love to pose, is where do you see God? Where are the Divine footprints in your story? And how does the Spirit touch your daily life now? Pondering those questions, I think it's fair to say that FPCSR has embarked on the Second Half of Life. First Half and Second Half of life is a template of personal spiritual growth outlined by Richard Rohr and widely accepted in the Contemplative Christian world. The two halves of life normally have a rocky, disorienting transition in between. What I'd like to do this morning is describe these two stages of spirituality in an individual life, and then see if that lens is useful for us to understand ourselves communally.

In the First Half of life, we are building a personal identity, finding some way to belong, learning the spoken and unspoken rules of the culture we're born into, developing good habits, creating security, seeking prestige in society. Fitting in and looking good. Establishing our identity according to custom and tradition.

Then comes a transition time which can be gentle and gradual or sudden and dramatic. Some disappointment, failure, wake-up causes us to step back and question the patterns and assumptions we've been operating from. In the seminar Ruah Bull gave last fall on The Second Half of Life she described a client in the middle of this disruption. In his work life he realized he put huge effort into climbing the ladder to success, but his ladder was against the wrong wall. Waking up—hey, this isn't working. There can be a sense of stuckness, unfulfillment, longing for something more.

Which opens the door to The Second Half of Life. I can only barely touch the breadth and depth of what this involves right now. But Ruah will be back on October 20 for a Saturday morning retreat to lead us further into our own Second Half experience.

First some caveats: 1) Second Half has nothing to do with how old you are—it can begin at 20 or 80 or on the deathbed. 2) Second Half of Life is not a destination but a never ending on-going experience..

In the Second Half you realize begin to let go of control—either by choice or happenstance. The Spirit, the Hound of Heaven, shows you in many ways that you aren't in the driver's seat any more. Tentatively you turn over the steering wheel. No more 90 miles an hour. Slowing down, you begin to listen to the surprising wisdom of your body and your heart.

You face innumerable "Letting Gos"—from the trivial—letting go of a habit of checking your Iphone every ten minutes, to the foundational--letting go of a cherished self-image, or an illusion of your own autonomy.

External values of success, prestige and power give way to internal values of compassion, humility, mercy, plus curiosity, creativity and freedom.

Believing concepts gives way to whole body knowing. The head's thinking no longer snuffs the heart's intuiting. Instead they work together.

NICODEMUS: Let's have a look at how Jesus ushered Nicodemus into his Second Half of Life.

He was a prominent, learned and well-respected Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin. But he sneaked out at midnight to meet with Jesus. Didn't want anyone to know because Jesus was definitely not "One of Us." Sounds like a man who realized his ladder was resting on the wrong wall—we can just imagine how caged he might have felt by the Pharisees' insistence on strict application of the 600-plus laws in the Torah. Add to that the tension and hostility within the Sanhedrin between the traditional Pharisees and the liberal elitist Saducees, who advocated a looser interpretation of the law. (Does that sound familiar??) Nicodemus felt stuck and stifled. A gut feeling he couldn't ignore compelled him to seek Jesus out at great personal risk. He was following an irresistible longing.

Theirs is a bizarre conversation—Nicodemus says We know you are a teacher from God otherwise you couldn't do these signs that you do. Jesus then launches into a dramatic and surely shocking teaching—telling him in no uncertain terms that he must be born again from above. Nicodemus protests "You can't climb back into your mother's womb." Logic doesn't do it here.

Up until now Nicodemus had relied on his fine mind to navigate life, and Jesus throws him a bucket of nonsensical cold water, knowing exactly what a shock it will be. (Let me say parenthetically what a shame it is that "you must be born again" was turned into a "holiness pill" the 60s. Presto chango. When in fact the birth Jesus speaks of is a very long labor--a lifelong process that does in fact produce a new creation.)

We are not told what Nicodemus did with this wild and hyperbolic message, but his appearances later in the John's gospel tells the tale. After Jesus' arrest, he was the only Pharisee who insisted Jesus be given a fair hearing. And we meet him again when he assists in taking Jesus body down from the cross, bringing spices and herbs for embalming. Nicodemus had left his position of political power to

follow an intuition. He had opened his heart to the Sacred. Here is this sculpture by Michelangelo we see his compassion and devotion; it is the face of humility and love.

III.

What has been your own splash of cold water? A job loss. A divorce. A failure of some kind? Take a minute to think about it. What happened as a result? [] By God's mysterious alchemy we can begin to discover our True or Essential Self through these crises. Like Nicodemus, we may turn away from conventional expectations to follow Love's leading. At this point it really helps to understand the invitation of the Second Half of Life..... to recognize the Spirit of God is alive within you. It's been there all along, but it usually takes a crisis for us to grasp it and live from it. Each of us can find ourselves along a spectrum of this recognition.

I suspect that we all have lived through some aspect of these stages of anguish, letting go, feeling lost and then found—and maybe without any sense that God was a player at all. That seems to be the case with many of the people I have seen in spiritual direction. When you're in the middle of one of these "deconstructions", one of these times when you are stripped of another illusion about yourself or your family or life itself, it really helps to know that you are not lost but rather are in God's hands, letting go of assumptions and expectations that blocked your way to a new simplicity, creativity and freedom.

CHURCH

Here's the church and here's the steeple. Open the doors and here's all the people! Remember doing this as a child? It was true in the 40s and 50s—everybody came to church because it was just an unquestioned part of the culture. My husband John who grew up in Idaho and I in Tennessee compared notes. Same pattern! Sunday morning church, big roast beef or chicken dinner midday, and a drive in the countryside in the afternoon. The stores weren't open and there were no ballgames on TV because there was no TV.

Times have changed. The church has changed. Most people do something else besides go to church on Sunday mornings. The First Half of Life is over for the church world wide and for us here at First Pres. We have been through a disruptive, transition stage as well, which meant letting go of our self-image as the tall steeple Presbyterian stronghold in Marin. It meant letting go of some expectations that were no longer possible, like “we should have lots of young people and a big Sunday School.” And it meant no longer clinging to some outworn traditional doctrines. I remember how Barbara Royall’s face lit up when she said “You mean I don’t have to believe in the Atonement! I never did anyway!”

Last May I sat in a huge circle of more than 30 people—Session, Deacons, Parish Associates here at church. Jan asked What gives you life at First Pres. As the heartfelt expressions of fulfillment, belonging, encouragement and gratitude filled that circle, we recognized the all-pervading Grace in our midst. With the knowledge of Jan’s retirement in the back of our minds, we knew we were going to be OK. Jan’s combination of organization skills and open-hearted presence had invited a new solidarity and loving spirit among us. Each one of us had found his and her place and was given the freedom to take it and run with it.

The result has been a flourishing in our common life and our outreach to the community—programs for Short School, Youth of the Move, Marin Moms and more. Our building is a meeting place for all kinds of groups—educational, recreational, church groups, the homeless. (Here’s the church)

To understand and experience ourselves as a Second Half of Life church changes our perspective—from wishing for the old days to TRUST that we are being guided and held by a Benevolent Presence, the Mystery we call God. As so we are called upon now to depend upon something more than our own ingenuity, to notice on purpose the emergence of open-heartedness in our community, to love what we have and what we are---right now. And to trust that the Divine speaks and guides as listen deeply to our communal wisdom.

