

— 30 WAYS OF —
AGING
gracefully

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AGING GRACEFULLY

An Introduction

2015 was a year of facing into reality for me. I turned 70 in January, I landed in the hospital in February and again, at the end of April. I traveled to Kauai in July with our entire clan to celebrate FIFTY years of marriage, and in August, my husband and I moved, downsizing after 18 years in a much-loved larger home with a huge yard. The realities of aging hit me smack in the face.

It was time. It IS time to think about how I want to do this thing, this inevitable thing, this getting old. It's what I chose to reflect on in daily blog posts for the entire month of October during that challenging, yet life-affirming year. I looked this one true thing right in the eye: I am old, and getting older by the minute. I figured out that if I want to have a shot at aging well, I must be intentional about it. The small book you see on your screen is what emerged from that intentional, month-long commitment to look squarely at the truth of who I am and where I'm headed.

I'm nervous about this, to tell you the truth. I happen to find myself at a somewhat painful juncture, realizing I am beginning to be invisible in some ways. Do you know that about getting old in this culture? Elders are not always seen, even in their own family setting. I'm not sure this is intentional, but it surely is reality. Maybe it's because we've been around so long that we've become part of the furniture, always available. Maybe it's because we serve as somewhat painful pointers to the future for those who are younger. Maybe it's because as we age, we tend to slow down a bit, to measure our words more, to give up the drivenness and hungry ambition that are so much a part

of mid-life in 21st century western culture. Whatever the reasons, I am choosing to step out of the invisibility cloak and put some words out into cyberspace about how I'd like to live these last years of my life.

I am hoping that these reflections will be both highly individual — reflections on my own aging process and what I'm learning — and at that same time, inclusive, maybe even universal. After all, none of us gets a 'pass' from this part. If we're fortunate to avoid a fatal accident or early terminal illness, we all must face into the reality of bodies that grow old and weary, of choices becoming more limited. And hopefully, of enjoying the benefits of wisdom gained, gratitude grown, joy multiplied, insights deepened.

So, here's to reflecting together on how to do this with a tiny bit of grace. Each topic will have a question or two for your own personal reflection. There will be photos here and there as well; I hope you will find something you can tuck away for your own pondering and prayer -- after all, not one of us is getting any younger.

NUMBER ONE

Living in Gratitude

“Even to your old age I will be the same, And even to your graying years I will bear you! I have done it, and I will carry you; And I will bear you and I will deliver you.” — Job 12:12

I have got the gray hair DOWN.

Just like my father before me, the hair around my face started to turn white in my late 50s. Gradually, it spread and now this head of mine is pretty much white all over. Fortunately, I like it. It took a little adjusting, but I figured — hey, I used to spend a fair amount of money paying my lovely hairstylist (also a friend) to weave blonder hair through my dark ash. At about the age of 60, I no longer needed to do that.

Score!

There are a few other signs of advancing years that are not quite so easy to accept, however: joints that wear out, skin that sags and grows



strange, dark spots as well as completely unacceptable hairs in some places and absolutely none in others. Ahem. There are definitely losses that come with the gift of years and I think they must be grieved and released.

But.

If I learned anything at all in the difficult year of 2015, it is this: every single minute of life is a gift. Period. Not one of us is guaranteed any of it. Serious illness or injury can happen in a heartbeat and we can never know which breath might be our last. I do not mean that in a morbid or maudlin way, not at all. I just want to underscore the important truth that length of life is beyond our control. Yes, there are healthy habits we can endorse to help however many years we live to be more comfortable, but how long we live is not up to us.

Adopting the attitude that every minute we breathe is a gift from above can do wonders for any negative thoughts we might carry with us about the process of aging. Yes, we can still moan about the difficulties. But around and underneath and encircling all of that moaning, there needs to be something else, something even more basic and life-giving.

There needs to be gratitude.

Deep, overflowing wells of it.

Being grateful is the single most potent life-extending medicine I know anything about. And practicing gratitude, repeatedly and often, is good for the soul as well as the heart, lungs, and brain. This is the number one lesson to be learned if we want to enter into the last years of our lives with grace and confidence:

SAY THANK YOU.

Over and over again.

Thank you to God, for the gift of this life and this world. Thank you to family and friends for loving us and putting up with us. Thank you to the clerk at the grocery store, to the man who picks up our garbage, to the people who help you care for your garden or your home, to the children you see playing in the neighborhood, to the birds who flit by and make your life more joyful, to the roof that covers you safely at night, to the floor which holds you up and keeps you out of the dirt. *Everything is a gift.*

Do you see it?

For you to ponder:

- 1. Are you at peace with the uncertainty of life and its length? How about the aging process itself?*
- 2. How can you start (or continue) to develop the habit of gratitude in your day-to-day life?*

NUMBER TWO

Slowing Down

Can you see those pretty things out there? They're small from this view, taking up very little space on the horizon. Every Wednesday evening during the summer months, these little beauties sail out of the harbor and enjoy the long light and gentle breezes we greedily absorb here in Santa Barbara.

They hold between one and four sailors each, and look so jaunty and graceful as they catch the wind and sail off.

The truth, of course, is that these small craft generally move fairly slowly, compared to larger, motorized boats. It's also true, that on a good wind, they can dart around very quickly indeed. But overall, sailing is not done for speed, do you think? It's done for the exhilaration of being out on the water and moving across it with agility. There is something to be said for turning the motor off.



Big engines are important and have certainly changed our world, mostly for the better. We can cross oceans and continents in very little time these days. But sometimes, it's good to sail rather than motor. Good to take a little time to look around, to pay attention, to feel the wind in your face or at your back. Sometimes, it's good to slow down for while.

With age, comes slowing. It's necessary and it's good, though we tend to fight it pretty hard. Even if you work to keep in shape, if you eat well and exercise regularly, your body cannot move as quickly as it once did. And sometimes you even need a nap in the middle of the day! Imagine that.

But there is a bonus to lessening energy and speed. Would you like to know what it is?

You really get to enjoy the view.

Like these small watercraft, you can look around at all the hustling, engine-driven boats and cars on the shore or in the harbor and you can breathe in and breathe out with joy and thanks. Why? Because you're going at just the right speed. It feels pretty fast to you, in point of fact. It feels just right.

For you to ponder:

1. *What would a little bit of slow-down look like for you?*
2. *How can you practice 'enjoying the view' in the midst of your life/world/situation?*

NUMBER THREE

Sizing Down

Those of you who are subscribed to my monthly newsletter have been following along on our latest adventure over here on the central coast of California. On August 10th of 2015, we moved from a God-given home set up against the foothills, a place of refuge and retreat for us for the 18 years just previous to that summer. It is located on an acre, with a long driveway and large parking area, a pool in the backyard and loads of fruit trees and roses all over the place. Plus about 3,000 square feet inside, perfect for entertaining — both church groups and family. We found it after nearly five months of searching, me living in a parishioner's guesthouse and my husband making the 120-mile commute during the middle three days of each week.



And it was a gift when it landed in our lives. A gift.

But the times, they are SO changing! We'd been retired for five years at that point, both of us finding other meaningful work to do and many more hours in the week to spend putzing around our home. And we began to realize that we didn't need quite so much home to putz in anymore. So I spent about 18 months looking and praying and in the spring of 2015, a lovely little gem of a house showed up. Tiny yard, about 1000 less square feet of house space, and a view from the entire back of the house. It's a 1950's tract house, yet still has character and during the last half of 2015, we began to settle into it fully, after many weeks of renovation here and there. (Mostly adding built-ins full of shelves for our too-many books. Even after deep purging, there were still a LOT of those!)

My newsletters during those months were full of before-and-after pictures, plus some reflecting on what it means to us to choose to do this now, while we're still sturdy enough to endure the slings and arrows of a physical move. Neither of our parental sets made this move soon enough — they were in their 80s and our dads were terribly frail and ill. Neither of our moms was able to make choices about what to keep and what to toss, so their kids ended up doing the biggest part of that particular task. After touring our local retirement community (and putting our names on the wait list — which tends to be many years long), we opted not to go there yet, choosing instead to downsize by moving ten minutes away, and continuing in home ownership.

One of the big plusses of this house is a good-sized family room (every other room is quite a bit smaller than our previous home). That largish room has its own bathroom and an outside entrance. We figured that if we should ever need a live-in caregiver, that space would be perfect. Hopefully, that won't happen. But we never know, do we?

No, we don't. We just do not.

We're glad we made this choice, even though we both felt the aches and pains of harder physical labor than we'd done in a while! It's a good space for us, we even love our tiny little bedroom-with-a-city-view. PLUS — each of us has a small study. And that, I might add, is ESSENTIAL, if at all possible. A long-married couple needs a little space from one another when they're together pretty much 24/7, know what I mean?

Downsizing has been a good idea. And I'm thinking all the time about ways in which the principles learned in our cross-town move might apply to other areas of living as well. Culling our various 'collections' is a good place to start, I think. And don't tell me you don't have any, because we all do. Whether it's a certain style of shirt, salt-and-pepper shakers, kitchen utensils, books or houseplants, we all tend to gather 'like things' together. Even if you're not as far along on the road to old age as we are, you could do an annual purge of all those things you keep multiples of. It's never too early!

For you to ponder:

1. *Have you tried to downsize anything recently? How did it go? Did you meet some inner resistance along the way, or was it easy to disentangle?*
2. *What do you need less of in your life?*

NUMBER FOUR

Finding Beauty



Beauty shines. It's all around us, all the time. But, oh! We need eyes to see it. We need intention and we need attention and we need an open heart. Lord, open the eyes of my heart, the eyes in my head.

No matter our age, the truth is always the truth. And here is the truth: our God is a God of beauty, a God who loves beauty, a God who makes beauty. *And it shines!*

Through the back of a pink hibiscus; through the tassels in long grass, even from a string of new patio lights from Cost Plus/World Market.

In our hometown, you can find it in the clouds that roil and roll, and the water that glistens below them. You can see it in the whiteness of the bluffs as they meet the water and in the reflection they create in a pond of

scummy slough water. And then there is the wonderful, redemptive truth that the sea-scum supports a long list of beautiful shore birds. Beauty downright startles in the silhouette of the greater egret, with his elegant white coat and his bright yellow feet.

And then there is the beauty closer to home -- delight as we eat our dinner outside in the warmer weather and enjoy the momentary fluttering of the small winged creatures that visit our feeders. And, I have to tell you that it is beauty that smiles back at me in the handiwork of our much-loved son-in-law, who made it possible for books to sit on their own shelves and files to nestle in their own drawers in my study in this new-to-us house. He even added a spotlight to make it all look downright heavenly.



For you to ponder:

- 1. Where are you finding beauty these days?*
- 2. How can you remember to look for it in your day-to-day scrambling?*

NUMBER FIVE

Facing Fear

If I am being honest — and I want to be honest, to use this space to speak my own truth, as I am experiencing it — I have to admit that 2015 was a year laced with fear. Falling flat on my face, spending time in the hospital as a result, suffering through a torn abdominal muscle and the resulting nerf-football-sized hematoma plus low blood counts and a Medicare form that read, ‘life-threatening treatment’ — all of the above has brought bouts of anxiety the likes of which I’ve never experienced before.

It’s a very scary thing to face into your own frailty, to face into the possibility of life forever changed. I’ve had some small panic attacks and flashbacks that have stopped me in my tracks in the months since those incidents, and I’ve uttered the Jesus Prayer more times than I can possibly count.



If I let it, fear could pretty much rule my life these days. That picture at the top of the page is of a sunset we enjoyed the third week in our new home. Stunning, isn't it? Yet . . . a sunset, right? The end of the light. The end. That's what I could choose to focus on as a result of the anxiety level rising to code red proportions. I could so easily be a real Chicken Little type, friends. SO easily.

But I don't want to do that. Truly, I do not. Yes, I want to be increasingly realistic about the truth that my days on this planet are stretching less far out into the future than ever before. This is true for all of us, every day, right?

But do we focus on that truth?

Or do we choose to enjoy the diminishing light for as long as we possibly can? Have you ever noticed that sunsets tend to be longer than sunrises? It takes a while for that light to leave the sky. And as it fades, it can be exquisitely beautiful, sending beams of color across the sky and the landscape below.

I want to be a lovely sunset, don't you?

And I want to remember that the sun also rises. Every single day. Rain or shine. There it is, sending its beams out to nourish and sustain us, shining down on us, even through the foggiest, grayest day. For every sunset, there is also -- and always -- a sunrise.

And there will be one for me, too.

This picture, taken on one of my morning walks, deep into our new neighborhood, reminds me of that truth in a powerful way. As the sun was rising this day, I could see a cruise ship come into view. A big ole boat, filled with tourists, happy to be taking in the sights and enjoying the water. Reflecting on this photo helps me to breathe out the fear, to breathe in the hope, to lean into the promised future that is mine as a child of God. I don't know if there will be a cruise ship to ferry me there, but I'm bound and determined I'm going to enjoy the ride.



For you to ponder:

- 1. What are the fears that hound you, wake you up in the night, infect your thinking processes from time to time?*
- 2. Are there some practical things you need to do to help you deal with those fears? For me, it's deep breathing, the Jesus Prayer, and physical movement -- walking. What helps you?*

NUMBER SIX

Staying Open



Our new home provides visual reminders on a moment-to-moment basis that it is a very good thing to stay open to the widest view possible. We are continually stunned by what we see from the entire backside of this house — the foothills, the city and almost all of its beautiful landmarks. No matter which direction you face, there is something lovely and interesting to look at. And at just the right spot, you can even see a glimpse of the harbor, especially if you use the zoom feature on your camera.

Although I am not interested in being ‘hip’ as an aging woman, I do want to stay at least somewhat current. I want to know what’s happening in our world, in our churches, in our families, in our communities. I want to be open to learning, changing, growing. The stereotypical picture of an old fogie is NOT what I want to become.

And it's so easy to get there. Especially if I let yesterday's lesson go to waste — if I choose fear over hope and joy. Many older folks are frightened, I think. And too often, they let that fear be the rudder of life. There is, under all else, the fear of death. But there are so many other things to fear — falling, failing, losing touch, life/culture/society changing beyond recognition. Yes, there are lots of things to be fearful about. But . . . there is also much to celebrate, to learn, to try.

So . . . what if we begin to ask for hope early on in our lives?
What if we make it a goal to learn more each year?
What if we listen to people who disagree with us, civilly and earnestly?

What if?

Maybe, just maybe, we might discover that life becomes more interesting, intriguing, palatable, maybe even more recognizable? Because let's face it, friends:

CHANGE HAPPENS.

Things shift, ideas morph, interpretations vary. Truth is truth — but our understanding of it does not stay the same. The world has never been flat, but for a whole lotta centuries, we were sure convinced of its flatness.

For me, a huge part of aging gracefully is cultivating a desire to preferentially lean toward openness. For that to happen, there must also be a regular, practiced release of all that fear.

Which is why that was topic number five. And this one is number six.

For you to ponder:

1. *What can you do to encourage openness in mind and spirit?*
2. *Who can you get to know who might help you to do that?*

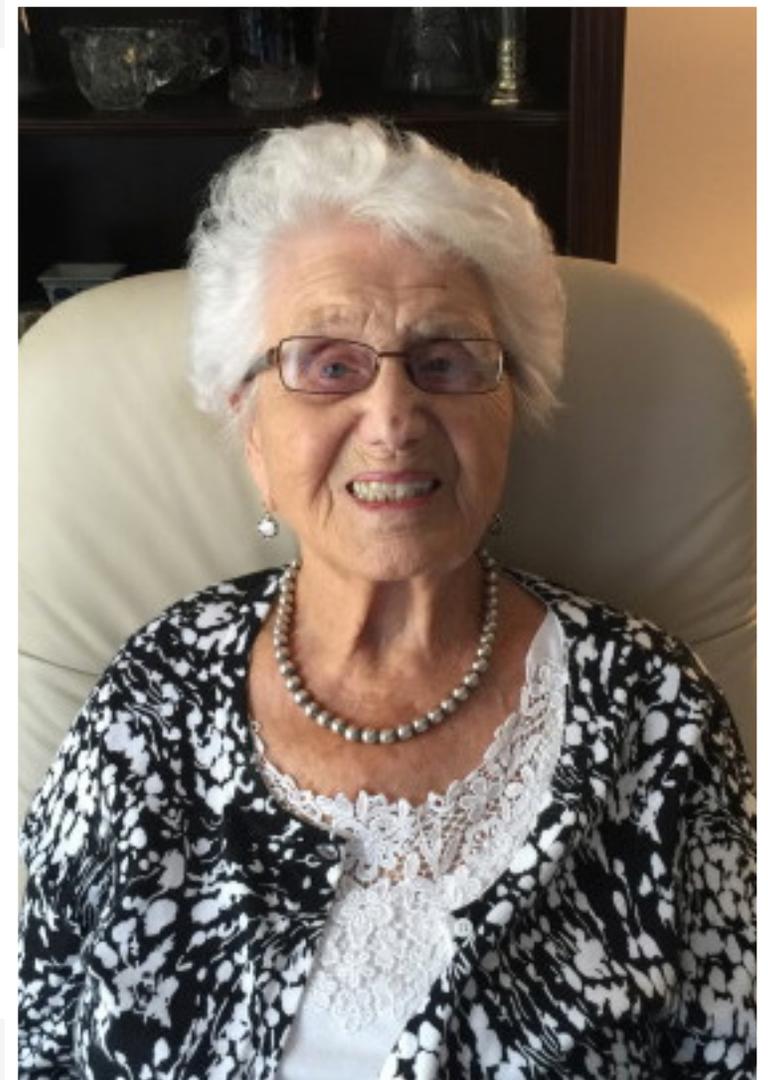
NUMBER SEVEN

Looking for the Good

Let me tell you about my friend, Lucille. Please. Let me tell you.

We met in 1975 when my family began attending Pasadena Covenant Church, where Lucille and her then husband Harold had been lay leaders for decades. She was the head honcho of the woman's organization in the church and she was GOOD at it! Gifted organizationally and an exceptional cook, she had vision and energy to spare. At this point, she was 58 and I was 30.

If you're any good at math, then you've figured out that she has now passed her 100th birthday. She has some trouble walking these days, but overall, she is still amazing. In fact, I would say, Lucille is a real pistol!



God put this good woman in my life at precisely the time I needed to be inspired and encouraged. She saw gifts in me and she patiently drew them out over the 21 years we worshipped and worked together in that community. She always saw the good in me. Always. And she told me about it, in ways both direct and indirect. She was, in many ways, a third mother to me — my own mom and mother-in-law being the first two. And I even looked a little bit like her daughter.

Can I just tell you what a gift it is to hear from another adult whom you admire that you are a good and gifted person? It is life-changing, as a matter of fact, and I will be grateful to her and for her until the day I die.

She now lives in assisted living at the same retirement community where my mom is located. Because my mother's dementia condition has been so demanding, I've had little time to visit with her of late, but I'm making an effort to change that. Why? Because I love her. And because I'm grateful for her. And because I don't know how much longer she'll be here for me to sit with and smile at.

When I went to see her new little apartment (her third in this place – she started in a HUGE one with her second husband . . . which is another beautiful story I will tell some day, and then downsized to a still lovely smaller one when he died.) Near the end of 2013, she moved into assisted living. Her same beautiful things are there and that smaller space radiates her beauty and grace in every corner.

When I went to see her, she asked me to go get a box out of one of her closets and bring it to her. Inside were some lovely needlepoint zipper bags she had made and she insisted that I take one. “My daughter is coming soon and she’s bringing me new ones to do. I love to do it while I sit and look out the window or watch television.”

Her beautiful handiwork sits on my bedside table, a glorious reminder of someone I love who took the time and made the effort to see and speak the good in me. Thank you, Lucille. And thank you, Jesus.

For you to ponder:

1. *So, where are you looking for the good in others these days?*
2. *Who has seen and named the good in you?*

NUMBER EIGHT

Learning to Listen

This recently finished new space is where I do my professional listening these days. I am graced with the title 'spiritual director,' something I began to train for during the last year of my pastoral life, continuing for two years afterwards in order to earn my certification. I've been listening to directees (and listening to God, I sincerely hope) for six years now, some of them for that entire time. It is one of the best gifts in my life.



When I'm sitting in my chair (the one on the right), I listen well. I've learned how, I've practiced and I'm getting better at it each time I do it.

In my regular life, however, it is too often NOT so. I had a dear and trusted friend tell me once that she felt I was always scanning the room, looking for someone more interesting to talk to whenever we engaged in one-on-one conversation.

Ouch.

That one hurt. But you know what? She was right. I began to observe myself after that comment, and her remark was spot on. Embarrassingly spot on. I was not scanning the room, looking for someone more interesting — that part, I categorically deny. I was, however, easily distracted, uncomfortable making prolonged eye contact and very busy inside my head, planning what I was going to say next. Or making a list of questions to interrupt with. Or thinking about something entirely different.

Oy vey.

So I have worked on that over these years, these later years. Without the ‘cover’ of the direction session, I am still more easily distracted than I wish I were. Part of the problem — at least in my own home, with my husband, in particular — is that I learned to read with ferocious focus when I was quite young, effectively tuning out any noise or music in my home. I have carried that with me to this day. So if I’m looking at email or texts and he says something to me, I literally do not hear him. We’re both trying to be more cognizant of the truth that we must keep on learning how to communicate well with one other. We need to learn when to talk. And most importantly, we need to learn when to listen.

Really listen.

For you to ponder:

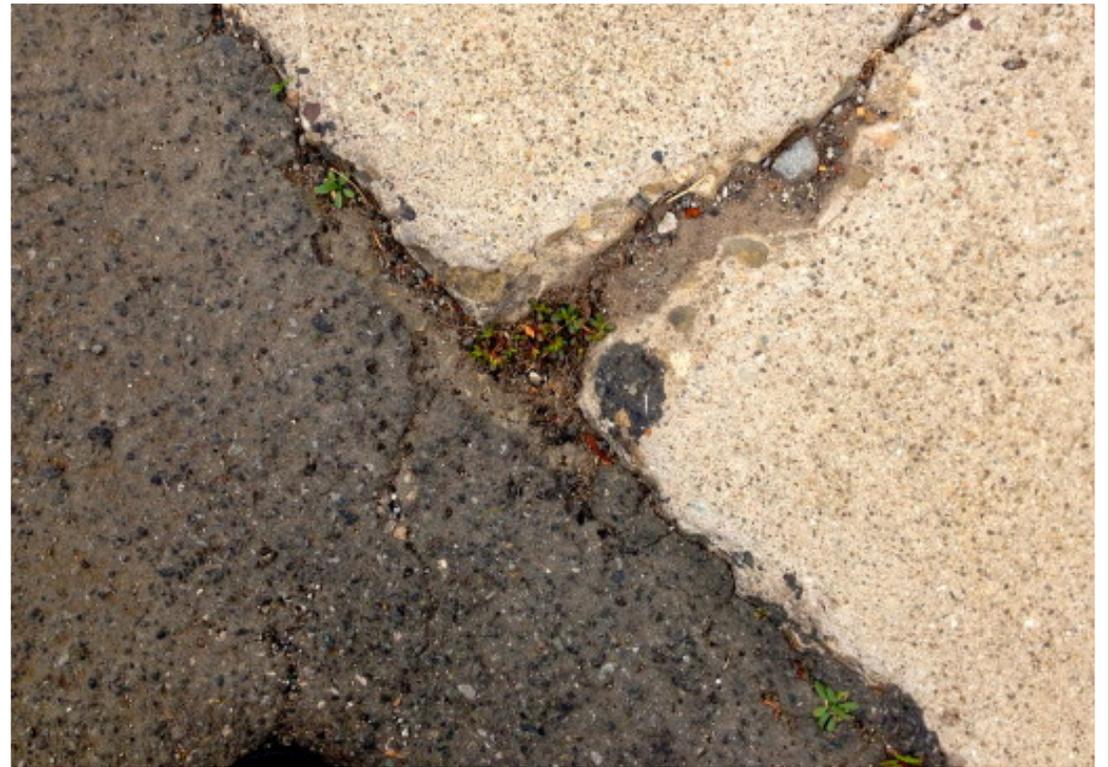
1. *What about you? Are you a good listener?*
2. *Who listens well to you?*

NUMBER NINE

Watching My Step

Do you see that rough looking spot in the pavement in this picture? There is about an inch-and-a-half difference between the asphalt and the concrete in this particular roadway. It's the one that circles our local cemetery here in Santa Barbara, a place I used to love to walk.

But in February of 2015, my left foot — which was surgically altered ten months prior to this event — got caught on that inch-and-a-half difference and I went down, face first, into the asphalt. After I hit the ground, that poor roadway was splattered with quite a lot of blood -- my blood.

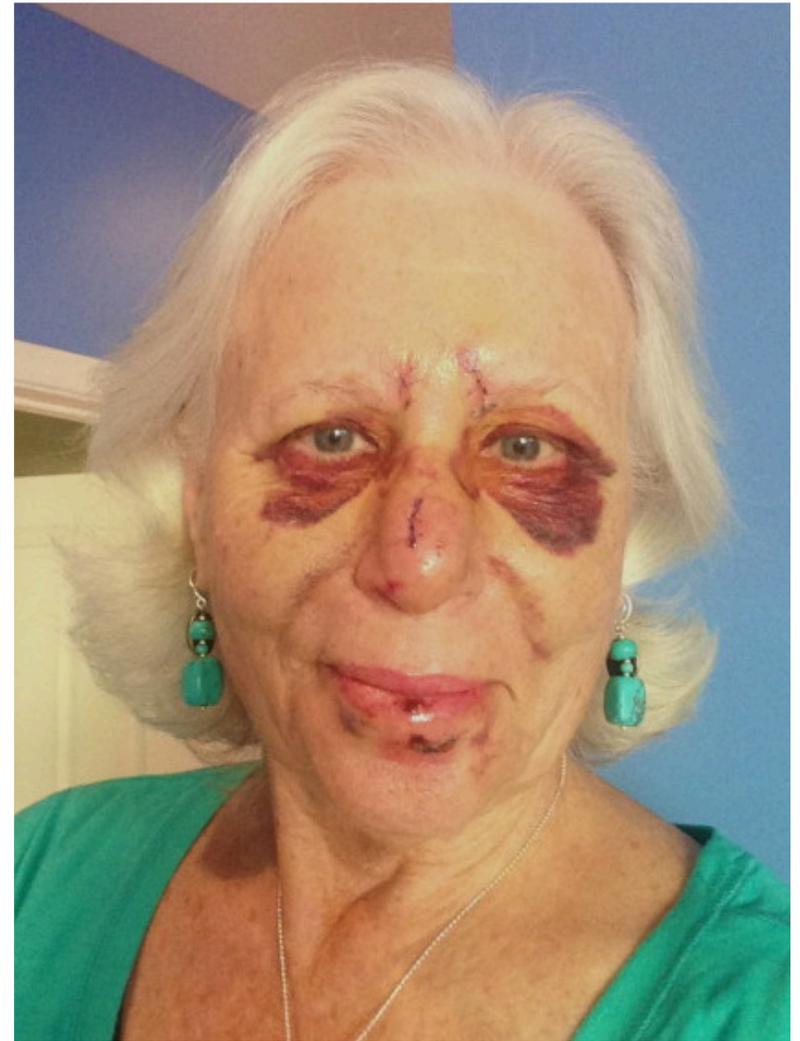


Because I was on medication designed to keep that blood of mine thin, I had to spend the next 24 hours in a hospital room, being monitored for a possible brain bleed. The hospital room came after driving myself to the ER and having stitches put into FIVE locations around my face, including inside my mouth. Thankfully, the brain bleed never materialized.

Within about five days, this is what I looked like:

I know, I KNOW!! Downright scary!

Less than three months later, I miss-stepped coming out of the back seat of my car after I'd gone to retrieve something while visiting my daughter. I landed on my bum, hard, and then on the back of my head. I refused to go to the ER that time, but four days later as I turned over to get of bed in the morning, I felt a sharp, tearing pain on my left side, the worst pain I've ever felt in my life. Something tore – I could feel it. I found out later it is called the abdominal rectus sheath muscle, and that sudden, searing tear is a rare side effect of the particular blood thinner I was taking, most probably complicated by the fall at my daughter's home.



That little event led to TWO nights in the hospital, with lengthy intravenous treatment to reverse the effects of the blood thinners and stop the internal bleeding. I had a humungous lump in my gut, just below my lower left rib, that slowly dissipated over the next couple of months, causing some very funky bruising all along my left side.

To say these two events were distressing is a massive understatement. The very best thing that came out of them is that I am no longer taking a blood thinner. And the second best thing is that I am now very, very careful where I put my feet.

From my bed in the ER during that second event, I called my foot doctor and asked him to please order some specifically targeted physical therapy to help me with my balance. The surgery with its L O N G recovery (no weight-bearing for eight weeks) had left me feeling off-balance much of the time. My post-surgery therapy had worked on strengthening my newly re-created foot, but this second, targeted round of PT has made a wonderful difference in my sense of balance and I am grateful. (I still do two of the exercises every single day.)

These scary episodes have underscored for me the truth that this body, she is gettin' up there. She simply is not what she used to be. So I find myself looking down a lot these days, being extra-careful where I walk. In fact, I am much more cautious in general. I have never been a daredevil physically, but these days, I'm an out-and-out scaredy-cat.

And that care, that caution has become something of a metaphor for me in other areas of my life as well, most particularly with words — both spoken and written. Watching my step can be applied in lots of way, it seems to me. And, if I'm not at least slightly vigilant, I

can find myself using my eyes and my mind carelessly, too. The internet is a good place, a gift in many ways. But too much of it -- or of Lumosity games, or Solitaire, or email, twitter, Facebook, Instagram. . . too much of it can severely limit my life and my imagination.

Care needs to be taken -- watching my step, watching my words, watching my eyes.

For you to ponder:

1. *Where are you becoming more cautious and watching your step as you get older?*
2. *What about those words you use? Do they build up or tear down?*
3. *And those eyes? What do you look at the most?*

NUMBER TEN

Singing For All I'm Worth

I am writing this on a Tuesday morning. And Tuesdays are now very special days. Here's why: in January of 2015, soon after that BIG birthday event mentioned earlier, I joined a community choir at our local junior college. We rehearse on Tuesday nights, and except for those unfortunate hospital stays later that year, I've been in that rehearsal room every Tuesday of the school year.



I've loved to sing for as long as I can remember. Joined the kids' choir at our downtown LA church at the tender age of five and kept right on singing in choirs until I moved to Santa Barbara at the age of 52. Nearly 40 years of being in choirs!

And then I stopped.

Why? Because our church did not have a weekly choir to join, that's why. We did sing seasonally the first few years I was here, but even that dropped away about seven or eight years ago.

Then a talented and kind woman in our congregation formed a small ensemble that sang in worship one Sunday and I was simply overwhelmed with how much I missed that kind of music. Initially, I was not a part of that group — and that, I will admit, was more painful than I ever would have guessed. In truth, it was stunning how much it hurt not to be included in their number. And in earnest conversation with my pastors and my husband, I began to realize that choral singing was a piece of my own story, my own identity, one that I had buried for too long.

I was strongly encouraged to find somewhere to sing. I did a little online research and found this college/community choir. And I HAVE LOVED IT. One of the hardest things about that second hospitalization was that it forced me to miss our spring concert that year. I was bound and determined that I would be there for the Christmas one -- and I was. We sang Durufle's beautiful Requiem Mass and Ralph Vaughn Williams' Five Mystical Songs — settings for poems by George Herbert, who is a favorite of mine. Not exactly typical Christmas music, but it was fun to work through. Challenging stuff — and I was actually quite delighted that it was. My voice is not quite as steady as it once was, but I'm still a dang good reader, so bring on the tricky stuff!

It's interesting how the pain of exclusion served as a huge wake-up call for me, forcing me off of my duff and helping me to do a little exploration of the possibilities. This choir is roughly 50% college students — and 50% old folks from the community -- exactly what I needed right now.

And then there was this lovely bonus: I was invited to sing with that church ensemble right after their first attempt — and I'm loving every minute of that, too.

For you to ponder:

1. *What do you love to do?*
2. *Has it gotten lost, maybe buried under too many other things you love (or don't love)?*
3. *How can you help all the pieces of yourself to re-emerge?*

NUMBER ELEVEN

Walking For All I'm Worth

A few months before I retired at the end of 2010, I began to intentionally take walks almost every day. I'd done it for a lot of years before I moved to Santa Barbara and began my pastoral work, but somehow, the habit died away. We lived on a street without sidewalks, it was quite hilly . . . yada, yada, yada.



I quit. I was distracted. I was lazy.

Then in May of that year, I landed in the hospital with blood clots in both lobes of both lungs and I began to think about trying to get more exercise. So I walked.

Very slowly at first, walking laps around the large parking area of our driveway or around the campus at church, sometimes even around the pews in the sanctuary.

Then I went to Laity Lodge in the fall of 2012 — my second time to that marvelous place — and one of our speakers was an expert on neurobiology. We happened to be in the same van heading to the airport for our flights home and I asked him what the latest developments were for the treatment of Alzheimer's disease. He said this: "Sadly, there isn't much that we know right now. It's a much more complex process than we initially thought and the meds we've developed only target tiny pieces of that process. But there is one thing we do know that can help prevent or delay onset of this disease and that is this: thirty minutes of aerobic exercise at least five days each week."

Bingo.

So I began to step it up even more, getting to about a mile and a half or two miles each evening. Slowly, I began to get stronger and I also began to drop a few pounds here and there.

Bonus!

But . . . then . . . I injured my foot while on vacation. And during PT for that injury, I sustained a far worse one — which eventually required surgery, the insertion of two long screws, and a failed attempt at tendon repair. For the eight months between injury and surgery, I could no longer walk more than a few steps, and the pounds began to slowly return.

Before going into the surgery, I put myself on a fairly stringent diet and lost a number of pounds just before and for several months after surgery and recuperation. After almost two months of no weight-bearing on my left foot, I began to take very, very careful walks once again — laps around my driveway and occasional circles at the beach nearest to that home. Since our move, I have mapped out a route in our new neighborhood and found another beach that allows me to walk on the sand at low tide.

You know what? I LOVE WALKING. I often have my longest prayer times when I'm walking. I don't talk much, but I listen and I lift names and faces to our loving God, trusting that God knows their needs far better than I. Since our 50th anniversary trip to Kauai in July of 2015, I began waking up much earlier than ever before in my life (which means about 6:15 or so — I am SO a night owl and not a morning person!) and during the warm months, I'm usually out of the house between 7 and 7:30. Those morning walks are a highlight of the day for me.

And they are also good for me — in every way I can think of. Since that initial hospitalization for pulmonary emboli in May of 2010, I have lost about 80 pounds — very, very slowly. And, hopefully, permanently. I've dealt with weight/food issues my entire adult life, so I make no guarantees. Somehow, this feels very different from earlier weight loss episodes and I am praying that I am very different.

So far, so good.

Walking is central to so much of who I am at this late stage of life -- I feel better, I can

maintain my weight better, I can drink in the beauty of this place, I can enjoy solitude or the company of my husband. It's a big deal. And it is also a great gift.

For you to ponder:

1. *What do you do to feel better about yourself?*
2. *How can you carve out time to do this thing regularly?*

NUMBER TWELVE

Trying Something New!

I am sure you have all read the jokes about a trend that began to develop in the waning months of 2015 and continued well into the new year: adult coloring books. Now, coloring is not exactly new, is it? We all did it when we were kids, and some of us actually enjoyed it, too.

But coloring became one of those things that adults generally leave behind as they age.

I wonder why. Because here's what I am discovering -- coloring is really good for a whole lotta things that ail me, like fatigue, worry, anxiety and boredom. Who knew?

I have three books full of designs and/or pictures. I have a large box of crayolas and I have a pretty good collection of colored pencils. Some-



times, I use one, sometimes the other. I tend to do this when I am watching recorded television programs. (I very seldom watch 'live' TV, preferring to fast forward through every.single.commercial and station break!) And I don't like watching television without having something to do with my hands.

I've done video games (mostly solitaire of various kinds) and I've done crocheting (something I taught myself to do when my children were quite small and I was laid low by the flu one year). But something about coloring really helps to center me and helps me to un-kink at the end of the day. I even found one book that had the word, 'worship,' in the title. And you know what? I'm discovering that there can be a connection between 'mindless' activity with my hands and my ability to connect with that Divine Spark within. I think this kind of activity helps me to make a switch from the left side of my brain (the thinking/analyzing/problem-solving part) to the right one (the intuitive/artistic/creative part). I often recall names/faces of people for whom I am praying while coloring and I find myself saying 'thank you' quite often. And thank you is at the very heart of true worship, it seems to me!

For you to ponder:

1. *What do you enjoy that is new to you (relatively!)?*
2. *What things do you dream about trying? What's stopping you from trying?*

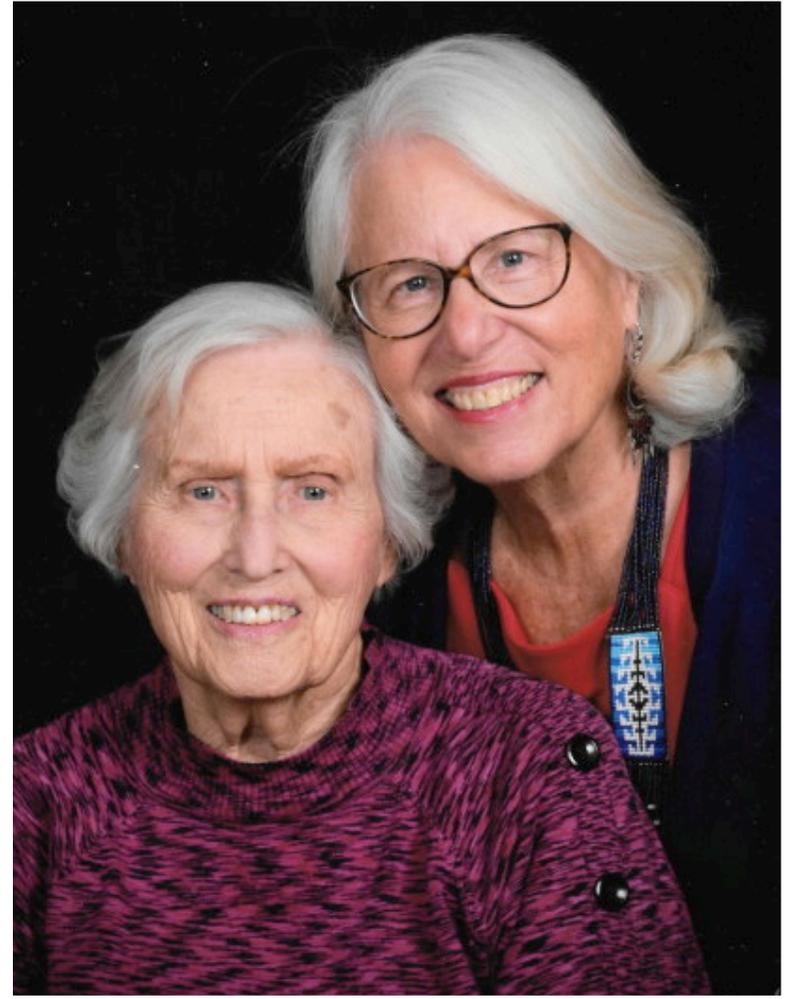
NUMBER THIRTEEN

Valuing The Old

Of course today's topic is one close to my heart. I am graced to have my 95-year-old mother still living. And at this same time in history, I am a recently-turned-71. So I am personally familiar with old things. And old people.

But you know what? We are not a society that particularly values old anything, maybe most especially people. That is painting with far too broad a brush, I own that. But there are times when it surely feels that way. I'm not sure it's entirely intentional. We get busy, our lives are full, there is more energy to be found in the company of younger folk. I get it, I'm guilty of it, I know it.

But.



The sixteen people who live in my mother's Alzheimer's unit were once thriving, contributing members of society, living lives rich in friendship and family. Now, many of them seldom see any young face other than that of their closest caregiver — the one who is paid to be there.

I myself am deeply, DEEPLY grateful for those paid friends. My mother's life is incredibly richer and safer because of the place where she lives. And for a long list of reasons — most of them to do with my own emotional and physical limits — I see my mom only about every two or three days. For years, I called her nightly on the telephone. Now, that is too confusing for her, so I stopped doing that during the summer of 2015. It was both a relief and an opening for yet another kind of grief, deep within me.

I love my mother very much. I miss my mother very much.

Yet she is still here.

And the pieces of her that remain have been lovely to see for the last few years. Early in 2016, however, I began to see a deepening level of confusion and 'lostness,' which came yoked with an exponentially deeper sense of panic. That panic began to permeate almost all of our 'conversation' after that. Early in that year, she began to be frightened to use the bathroom before we left for our lunch, sure that someone was going to get her wet (she now hates the shower.) And she insisted that she had never been to our favorite Cafe before, though we have been there at least once each week for the last six months. A verbatim conversation from one of those visits:

“Are you sure it was me you took here?”

“Yes, Mom. I know you. It was you. You are Ruth Gold, right?”

“Yes, I am. But there must be another Ruth Gold because I’ve never been here before,” she said in a frightened, trembling voice.

I patted her arm, told her I was going inside to order our lunch and left her, sitting at the counter, peering at the view with a troubled look on her face.

Seven or eight minutes later, I returned with her diet coke in hand and told her the cheeseburger would be coming soon. She turned and looked at me, much calmer, and said with conviction, “I think that other woman must have left.”

Clearly, she had been thinking about our earlier conversation, something she is generally unable to do. Something about it hit her deep inside, requiring her to ponder and try and figure out how she could be so lost. Her conclusion was unbearably sad to hear.

Yet something deep within me resonated strongly with that so-sad sentence, that oh-so-carefully prepared sentence. Because she was right, you see. That other woman has indeed left, never to return this side of heaven.

And oh, I miss her so.

For you to ponder:

1. *How do you feel about old things? Old people?*
2. *Do you know anyone who does (or has) suffer(ed) from Alzheimer's disease or other form of dementia? What did you learn from walking through that disease with them?*

NUMBER FOURTEEN

Dancing Through the Days

(AT LEAST ON THE INSIDE)



I mean, really. Have you ever seen such gorgeous color in your life???

Our days are marked by moments. Moments that often bring us glimpses of glory . . . *if* we have eyes to see — and feet to dance! (at least in our spirits, right? I've written before about how dancing is a thing of the past for me, but the *spirit* of dancing is available, always. Always.)



So today's reflection is a compilation of some of my dancing moments over the first eight weeks following our late summer move to a smaller house. Yes, there have most certainly been moments of a different kind. Tired, cranky, worried moments. But these dancing ones? They're the ones I want to remember, to hang onto, to breathe in like oxygen. Because that is exactly what they are. Sailboats just before sunset will certainly make me breathe more deeply.



Worship is a dancing moment for me, especially on Communion Sunday. I might even move my feet or my hips (very carefully) if the beat is uptempo.



A largish angel from my collection didn't fit indoors, so my eldest daughter calmly walked her outside and put her in the birdbath. And I LOVE IT. Every time I look at it, I smile.



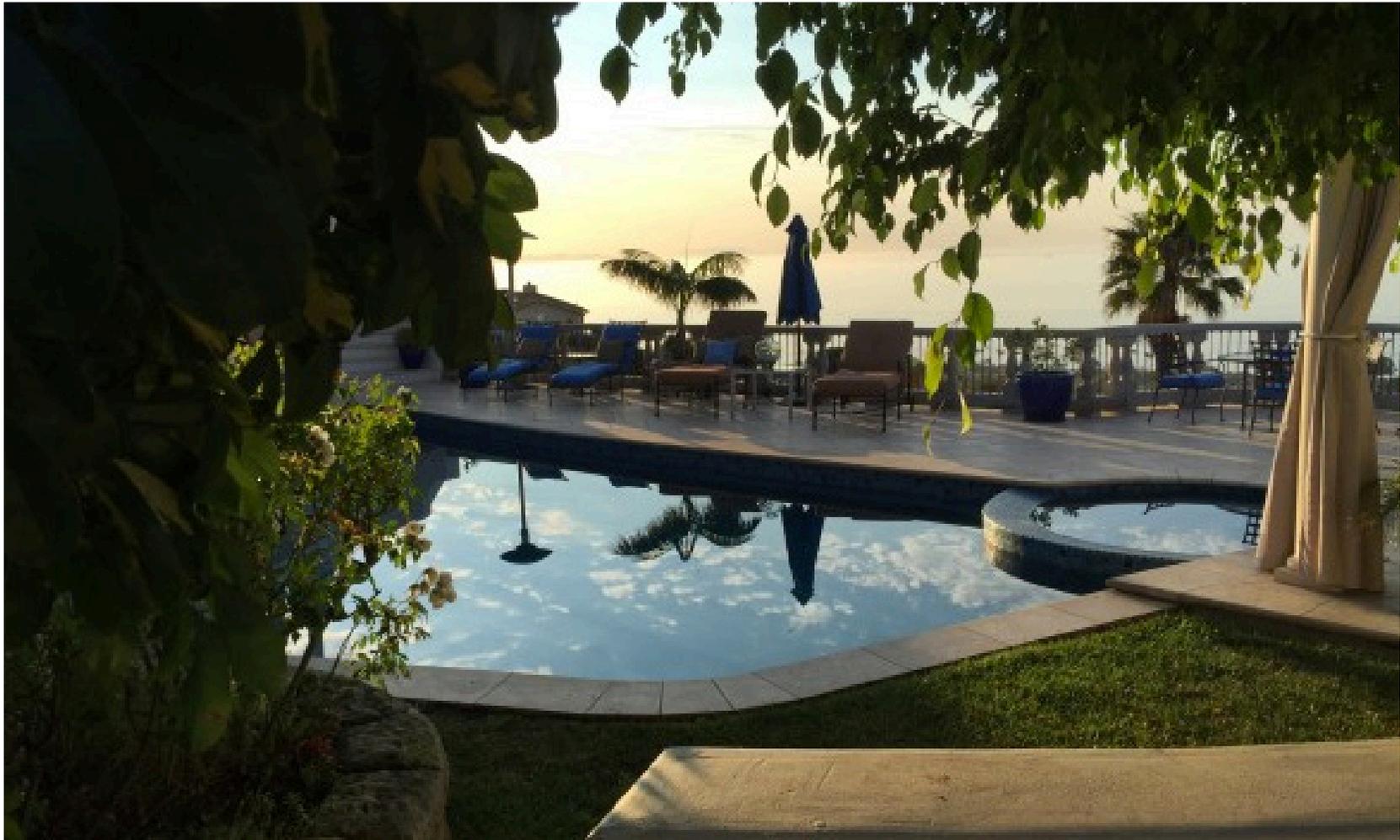
A beautiful succulent flower, new to me, seen on a morning walk.



One of the bunny family that share our backyard – sitting calmly while we were eating dinner.

And stretching up to nibble on the low hedge of ceanothus that borders our fence.





A gasp-worthy reflection in a neighborhood pool on a walk one morning.



Early morning cruise ship viewing.



Five-year-olds playing soccer.



An evening view from the dinner table.



A California icon, rising upward against the morning fog.



Egrets in flight.



A great blue heron stalking lunch.



A hummer circling round the feeder.



The super moon, the night before.



These guys, playing cards on our back patio after dinner.



And these blurry feet – so precious to me and so small next to my honkers.

For you to ponder:

1. *Yes, these are things that make me dance inside. What about you?*
2. *What lifts your spirits and makes your muscle memory think of dancing?*

NUMBER FIFTEEN

Cherishing Friends

As I've gotten older, I've come to value long-time connection more and more. People who've walked the road with me for a long time, those are the ones I yearn to be with. I'm so grateful for newer friends, for later-in-life community — I am and I will continue to be.

But those people who've known me for a lifetime (or at least, a good chunk of a lifetime!) are the ones whose presence I seek out. My calendar has reservations for those folks. Maybe not a whole lotta reservations — but regular ones, that's for sure.



Those three women up there are my maternal first cousins. We live within 90 minutes of each other and try to get together for lunch and catch-up about twice a year. They're remarkable people, each and every one. And we share so much story. It's not very many people who can see me after six months and say, "You're looking more like your dad every day, Diana." Who else would know that about me? (And they're right. I've always looked like my mom — but I see dad in there more and more as I age, especially in the hair color, body size/shape and, regrettably, that nose.)

And, of course, there is my longest-term-best-friend, my mom. The parts of her that made for true friendship are not as evident as they once were, but that twinkle in her eye is a reminder, that smile is a heartstring to the past. She does not remember me, but oh! I remember her.

And then there is this glorious posse, this group of long-term friends from our days at Pasadena Covenant church (1975-1996).

These friends knew me before I wore any of the hats I've worn in the past two decades. Before seminary study, before pastoral ministry, before spiritual direction. Before.



And most of them knew my kids. At least they knew me as a mom to those kids, which NO ONE in Santa Barbara does. I was so surprised at what a loss that was to me when we moved here. My role as their mom has been my primary identity since 1968 — and nobody in this congregation had a clue about any of that. It makes a difference, friends. It truly does. People who've walked with you through the joys and pitfalls of parenting and marriage (even if they themselves are not married or a parent) — those are the people who know you best. And who love you anyhow.

You gotta keep those friendships going. They're lifeblood, even though IRL connections may be few and far between, they're always rich and memorable. I was also part of another friendship group for a few years, one that I miss to this day. Six of us who were ordained as pastors in the same denomination gathered together for retreat every year for about 6-8 years. And then it just sort of died away. I have limited contact with three of that group and seldom hear from the other two. I miss them all and wonder every year about how to try and reestablish our connection.

For you to ponder:

- 1. Do you have friends you've known forever? Special interest friends? Shared life experience friends?*
- 2. What do you do to stay in touch? If you don't, how can you change that?*

NUMBER SIXTEEN

Celebrating the Small

You know what? It really is the little things. Those small spots of beauty and grace that make up our days. Moments, miracles, details. These are the things that speak to our hearts, fill us with gratitude, remind us we are loved, reveal the beauty that is beneath everything.

Look for them. Speak them aloud. Say, 'thank you,' to God, to the universe, to whoever made that moment happen for you. It's the best way I know to fully inhabit your life, to see it for the gift of grace that it is, no matter how bad your day may be going, how lousy you feel, how mad you are at someone (or at life in general!). If we can see the small beauties around us, then we can remember who we are.

Walking through Cost Plus, just lookin' around, and nearly tripping over a strange little pocketed stand that had drawer hardware scattered throughout. Who knew Cost Plus carried drawer knobs? What I needed exactly, right there in front of me. Cracked turquoise glass ones and lovely soft green ceramic ones. One set for our new bedroom drawers, one set for the ones in my study. Gift, pure gift. And I wasn't even looking for hardware that day.





Ditto this small side chair. We had a stuffed chair and ottoman that we moved into our new living room. But it was too big and bulky for this new, smaller space. And my daughter could use it. So . . . what about something smaller? And there it was, well-priced, well-made, perfect color. And we love it. Score!

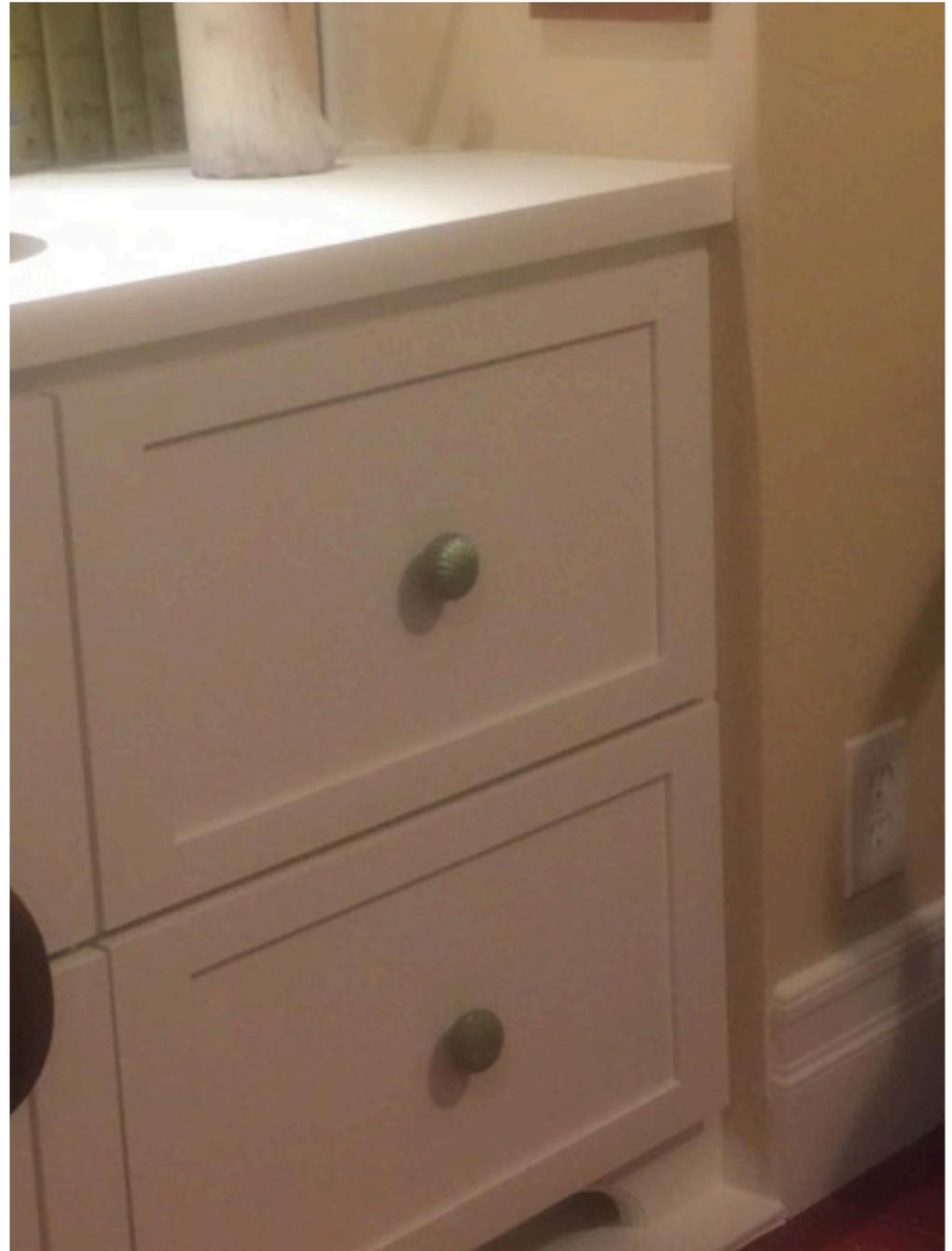


These lovely trumpet flowers pop up at the fence line in our new backyard. They begin life a vibrant purple hue and over the course of many weeks, slowly fade to white. All the while, they lift their heads to the skies and sing to me of beauty and grace.

One set of those drawer knobs, in place on my wonderful new files. They work perfectly: small gifts, small gifts.

For you to ponder:

1. *What are the small things you've noticed today?*
2. *How can you encourage yourself to do that every day?*



NUMBER SEVENTEEN

Laughing 'til it Hurts

I'll admit it right up front: I do not do this often enough. Laughter is the best medicine I know and one of my favorite things about my husband is that he makes me laugh regularly. But that side-splitting, almost-sick feeling of laughing until you cannot breathe? That needs to happen more often. And I'm not quite sure how to make it so.

Part of it has to do with my own attitude, I think. When I'm anxious, rushed, over-busy — it's much harder to see the humor in anything. And just like yesterday's post about looking for the small, I think we also have to be looking for the laugh.

Because I do believe there are things to laugh about all around us. As with so much of this life, it's having the eyes to see, don't you think?

Here is a short list of things that do make me laugh. What about you?



Men riding bicycles in church, complete with helmets. (It was for an announcement.)



Story at the steps time on Sunday mornings. Almost always there is something said or done to make me crack up. Last week, Pastor Don asked, “What do you do when you feel scared in the night time?” And one of the kids said something almost unintelligible, but Don heard it as “Lie.” “Lie?” he asked. “How in the world does that help you?” The child corrected him loudly, “LIGHT!” Ah, yes. Light. It helps every time. Smile.

Wisecracks from the director at choir practice.

Conversations with my youngest granddaughter (sorry, no picture!)
Here's a verbatim (she was 5 at the time):

Me: (*Looking for her in her other grandparents' brand-new trailer, temporarily parked on our son's front lawn*) "Lilly! Where are you hiding?"

Her: (*Peeking out from a very tight corner on an upper bunk bed*) "I'm right here, Nana, all curled up!"

Me: "Oh, Lilly! It's such a tiny little space, don't you feel funny in there, maybe a little bit crowded?"

Her: "Who me? Nope! I'm not the least bit claustrophobic!"

'Claustrophobic?' From a 5-year-old? Well, that was a first for me -- and I laughed out loud. She's very good at that. Smile.

For you to ponder:

1. *Do you think you get enough laughter in your life?*
2. *What can you do to up your laugh-quotient?*

NUMBER EIGHTEEN

Letting Go

Here is a small, but interesting lesson I'm learning right now. Sometimes when we give something up, when we let go of it, we find something else to take its place. For me these last few months, the 'giving up,' or 'letting go,' has been late night TV watching and/or reading.

As I mentioned in an earlier post in this series, our trip to Kauai in July of 2015 brought a change in my body clock after we returned home. So I can't really say that I made a conscious, sacrificial decision to 'let it go.' It just went. We were packing and schlepping right after we got home and I was beyond tired much of the time. It was also the dead of summer, when there isn't much that's decent on the television and most of my friends' new books hadn't yet been released. So if I was tired, I went to bed. And most nights, I went to sleep, pretty quickly.



I no longer needed those late hours to help me find some solitary space. I'm not sure why I no longer needed that, but I know that it's true. Instead of waiting for my usual second-wind-kind-of-experience in the evenings, I just paid attention to my sleepiness quotient and went to bed when I reached my limit.

What a novel idea!

Yes, sometimes I am unbearably slow. Or stubborn. Or something.

So most nights since the end of July 2015, I've been in bed, on my way to sleep by 10:00 p.m. You need to know that this is record-setting for me. When my children were tiny, I routinely stayed up until 1:00 or 2:00 a.m., just to have some quiet space. I often did crafts or read or watched Johnny Carson. I just needed some time in my own house when I was alone and not 'on call' to anybody else. So I took it where I could get it — and those late hours came quite naturally to me.

I do realize that three summer months do not a new person make and I began to watch and wait to see if old habits might creep in once again. Occasionally, I do stay up until 11:00 or 11:30 — but unless I'm battling insomnia (which, for me, takes the form of a maddening inability to fall asleep more than wakefulness once asleep), I am still sawing logs by 10:30.

Radical idea, right?

Yes, actually, for me — it is.

But here's the flipside, the bonus, the gift-I-wasn't-expecting: I'm up with the sun most days.

Say, WHAT???

Yup. This night owl is up with that sun. And I'm rewarded with an occasional view like the one at the top of this post. Glory in the morning, oh, YEAH. I'm liking this trade-off!

For you to ponder:

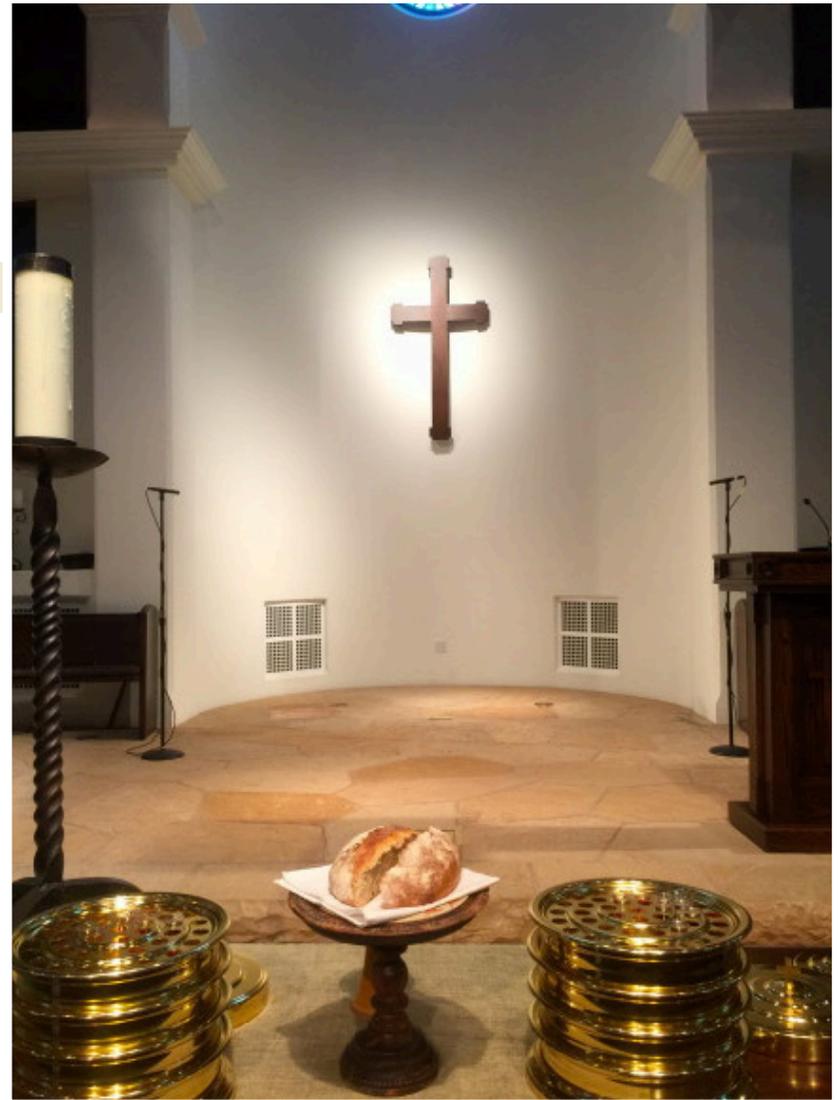
1. *What are you letting go of these days?*
2. *What do you think you might need to let go of?*

NUMBER NINETEEN

Hanging On

I am hanging onto worship these days. In as many ways and places as I can find. The older I get, the more intrinsic it becomes to who I am. I think that's how it's supposed to happen, to tell you the truth. We're slow learners, we human creatures. It takes us a lifetime to realize who we are and to whom we belong. As I move through my days, I am more aware than ever of the presence of God, maybe most especially in the details and the humdrum of life. But also, of course, where you might expect to find God.

For me, a primary place is at the Table, in the Eucharist. I relish that first-Sunday-of-the-month experience in our community. I am particularly drawn to communion by intinction — going forward to receive a piece of bread and then dipping it in a shared cup. Something about the movement brings a deeper level of worship for me — an involvement of all the parts of me, I guess.



Most weeks, the music of our Sunday services is also a primary point of connection for me, a time of worship that moves me to a different place somehow. Again, I think it's because of the body involvement.

We stand for a lot of our singing and that gives us a bit more freedom to move gently with the rhythm or to lift hands with the words (though not many of us do that; we do have Swedish roots in our denomination, after all). I had someone say, almost snidely, that most of the time an opening set of songs is designed to make us 'feel good.' I beg to differ. I think music can bring us to worship faster than words. And when you combine good melody and rhythm with good words — well, then — what's not to love?





I also move into worship quite naturally when I'm at the beach, looking at the water. The ocean has always spoken to me of God, invited me to 'bow the knee,' and express both my gratitude and my awe. As long as I'm able to get there, I want to see the ocean every week — preferably more than once in a week!

The Word is a place where worship happens, too. Both the word written and the word spoken. But maybe most of all, the Word as a living, breathing presence in my thoughts and actions. The Spirit is that Word for a Christian, bringing to mind written words, ideas, groans. And faces, names, situations for whom I need to be praying. And prayer for me does not look like it once did. I talk some. But I listen more.

And I visualize more. I also do a brief examen, or praying backwards through my day, as I drift off to sleep. All of that, as well as the time I spend reflecting on directees before I meet with them, the times I say ‘thank you’ for the gifts that are mine, the times that I am obedient to that nudge inside that says, “write her a note,” or “call that one and go to tea,” or “find a way to say you’re sorry.” All of that is communion, which is one of the dearest kinds of worship for me.



For you to ponder:

1. *Is worship something you hang onto like a life preserver? Why or why not?*
2. *Are there other things/people/places/events in your life that you cling to for their life-giving power?*

NUMBER TWENTY

Stepping Up

In these years of retirement from active pastoral ministry, I'm finding that I am stepping up to do some things that I couldn't do as easily when I was employed



and working on a church staff. And I'm having fun doing them, too. Herewith, a short list:

I am by NO means a professional photographer, but I have a fairly good eye and a moderately cooperative camera. So when I'm asked to take pictures of church activities that are then used in slide shows on Sunday mornings, I always say yes. If I'm in town and going to the event anyhow, why not?

I'm also serving on the nominating committee recently — short-term job, fairly easy. Why not?

We are doing more childcare for our local grandkids — their parents both work, we live nearby, we love those kids and they seem to like being with us, so again — why not?

If I get a call or a note from someone I've met online and they want to pursue the possibility of entering into direction with me, I always say, "yes." I enjoy this work I do and online friends generally seem to be good candidates for a monthly Skype session. Why not give it a try? If it works, great. If not, we're still online friends, right?

I am available for my mom twice weekly for lunch and to take her to the doctor/dentist or shop for her sundries. I'm here, nearby, she needs some help from me, so . . . yeah, I'll own that. Why not?

If I'm asked to assist in our church worship services, to lead in prayer, read scripture, stay after the service and pray for others — and I am going to be in town, I will always say yes. Why not?

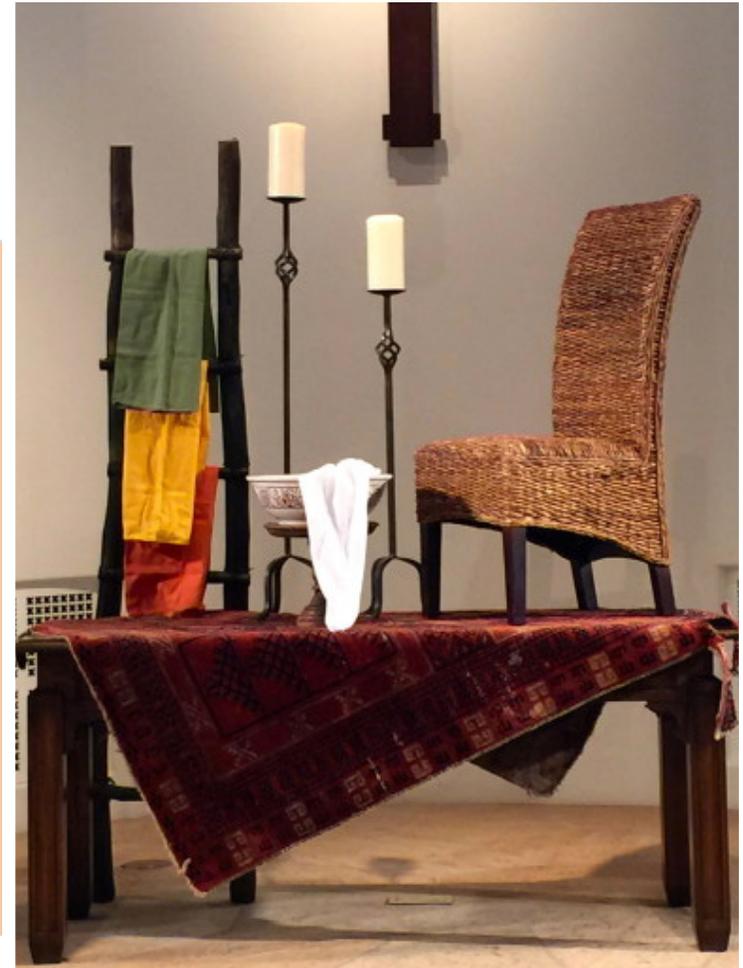
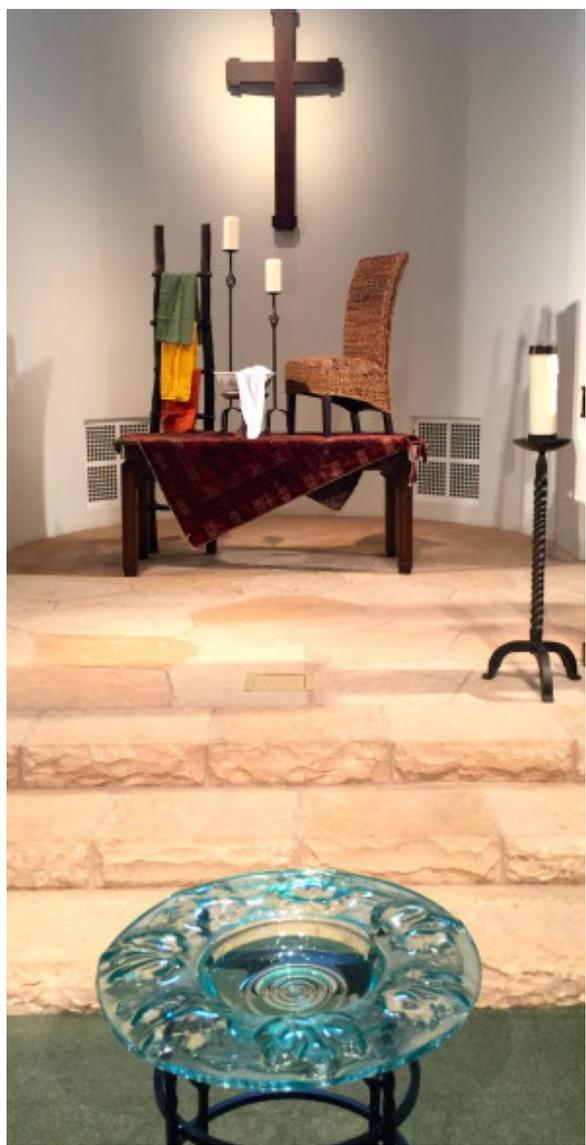
If I don't have a good answer to that recurrent question 'why not?' — I try to say 'yes.' This is a season for stepping up in ways that are both familiar and new, and I'm glad to be able to do so.

For you to ponder:

What kinds of things does your life allow you to ask, 'why not?' about these days? Not every season has room for a positive answer to that query, and I am in no way trying to 'guilt' anyone into anything. But I also want to encourage you to ask that question honestly wherever you can. And by 'honestly,' I mean looking at your whole life — all your current commitments — your energy level, your health, your marriage, if you're married, your family, if you have one. If there is space for a step-up, then by all means, take it. If there is not, say 'no,' without guilt and without worry. There will be someone else.

NUMBER TWENTY-ONE

Stepping Down



At the time of this prayer, I hadn't prayed in public for over a year. And I gotta tell you, I had a case of nerves that weekend that coulda stopped a truck! I felt badly out of practice! But the topic and the scripture passages for that morning? — well it was a privilege to be asked to pray into that particular service. And it fits this topic — the whole idea of 'stepping down' is completely counter-cultural . . . and completely Jesus.



*A Prayer for Worship
offered after a beautiful brass medley of:
“Amazing Grace,” “Just As I Am,” and “My Faith Looks Up to Thee”
October 18, 2015
Montecito Covenant Church*

After reading all three scripture passages for the morning — which were rich, indeed -- sometimes the lectionary outdoes itself — Isaiah 53, Hebrews 5 and Mark 10 — this prayer somehow got a title and this was it:

The Great Reversal

Ah, Lord of Grace. We hear these strong, joyful instruments singing out about that great gift you bring to each of us and to all of us: the gift of your love, your miraculous love, that becomes real for us and in us only because of your grace, your amazing grace.

Grace that sees us exactly as we are, and says, “Welcome. You are home here.” Grace that invites us to take a good, long look at love, the kind of love that you have for us, the kind of love that you call us to live out, the kind of love that Jesus tells us about in all those red letters in our Bibles, in the actions of his life while he walked among us, as one of us, and in the powerful ways he both invites and empowers us to live lives that are . . . well. . . lives that are completely catty-wampus to what everything else in this world tries so hard to teach us.

Grace that says, “Do it this way, the different way, the upside down way that is also sometimes the difficult way —do it my way.” The scriptures we’ve heard this morning, and the one we’ll look at in just a few minutes, they all speak about this upside-down-ness, this backward way of living lives that truly matter, that make a difference.

The two lessons we've heard read each give us word pictures that remind us that the way of grace is not what we expect. Not at all. Because we confess, Lord, we like moving up. We like being in charge. We like feeling successful. We like having people look up to us, look out for us, and count us as one of the 'in' crowd.

So when we hear these words today, we have to admit that they're more than a little bit jarring and disturbing: the one who saves us and heals us is the very one who is wounded and despised? The one who intercedes for us with the Father is the one who learned how to be obedient in the midst of great suffering?

Doesn't sound like the status quo we understand. Not at all.

And in just a few moments, we'll dig into the gospel lesson. Oh my goodness!

Well, yes. Exactly. Oh. My. Goodness.

And goodness trumps being part of the 'in' crowd, every single time, doesn't it?

Jesus tells us directly that we are to be people who model things like: servant-hood, humility, gratitude, counting others better than ourselves. That we are to happily start taking a back seat, not a front one, that we must simply chuck the whole idea of 'moving up' —in fact, we must embrace exactly the opposite kind of lifestyle.

Oh Lord, we need help here. This does not come naturally to us. Your upside down ways reach right down into the heart of us and shake us up. And make us think. And make us aware of how far we are from practicing the grace we have received. So we ask for your help.

We ask first that you will help our pastor to tell us this truth in ways we can wrap our minds around. Bless him as he brings us this hard yet wonderful word. And then help us to take what we learn and live it this week. And next week, too.

Help us to embrace the backward, upside down call of your son, and our brother, Jesus. And oh, Lord God! Breathe your Holy Spirit into your body, the church, both here and all around this aching, broken world of ours, and teach all of us this truth, again and again —

*it is in losing our lives that we gain them,
and it is in serving that we become leaders.*

Forgive us for the ways in which we forget, ignore, refute and too often, actively counteract the subversive power of your grace.

May we have eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to understand.

For Jesus' sake, *for Jesus' sake*,
Amen.

Don preached well, the congregation was engaged, and after the sermon, we sang,

“All Who Are Thirsty,” and were invited to come forward and dip our hands into the baptismal font, reaffirming our baptismal vows, agreeing — once again — to live this countercultural life, this upside-down, catty-wampus life.



For you to ponder:

- 1. Where are you learning more about living upside down these days??*
- 2. What sort of thing is hardest for you to let go of?*

NUMBER TWENTY-TWO

Being Honest

I took my mama off campus for lunch, the first time in many weeks I'd been able to do that; she had begun to tire more easily and so had I. So we settled into the routine of putting her into the smallest of her unit's wheel chairs and slowly walking over to the charming cafe that is now a part of her retirement community.

But that day, the weather was glorious, and if El Nino were to come to pass, as had been promised, it would not long be that way. So out we went.

And it was lovely. And sad, and good, and hard. One thing I've committed to doing, even though many dementia experts discourage it, is telling my mom the truth. Unlike Dick's mom, my mother knows that things are not right inside her head, and occasionally — if we've sat together quietly long enough, she will ask me about it.

And I always tell her the truth.



“How come I don’t remember that you are my daughter? How come I don’t remember being married? How come? Why can’t I think?”

So I tell her.

“Well, Mom, it’s nothing you’ve done, it’s just something that happens sometimes when brains get old. Yours doesn’t work like it once did, but that doesn’t mean you aren’t still you. And I’m here. I can be your memory for you, okay?”



She is so very dear. And so very lovely. And I love her so very much. Yesterday, she asked, “Was I a good mother to you?” And I was moved to tears to tell her how very good a mother she was, to me and to my brothers.

“Brothers? I have a son?”

“Yes, Mom, you have one son still living.”

“Oh, I’d love to see him.”

I remind her that he calls her on the phone, that he lives very far away and that he’s dealing with some health issues of his own. And she is peaceful.

In ten minutes (or less) she will have forgotten all about it.

Yesterday’s through line question centered around being sure she had my phone number. I told that she does, and when we got her back to her room, I showed her where it is. Of course, she can no longer read it, can no longer use the phone herself. But telling her the truth somehow eases her dis-ease. And if I can do that, then I am happy to be her truth-teller.

It dawned on me the other day that I am currently the only person in her life who sees my mother. Who sees her for ALL of who she is, who she is now, and who she once was. I’m it. And that makes me feel more lonely than I could have imagined.

For you to ponder:

- 1. Where in your life do you have to choose carefully to be honest?*
- 2. Where is it easy to be honest?*

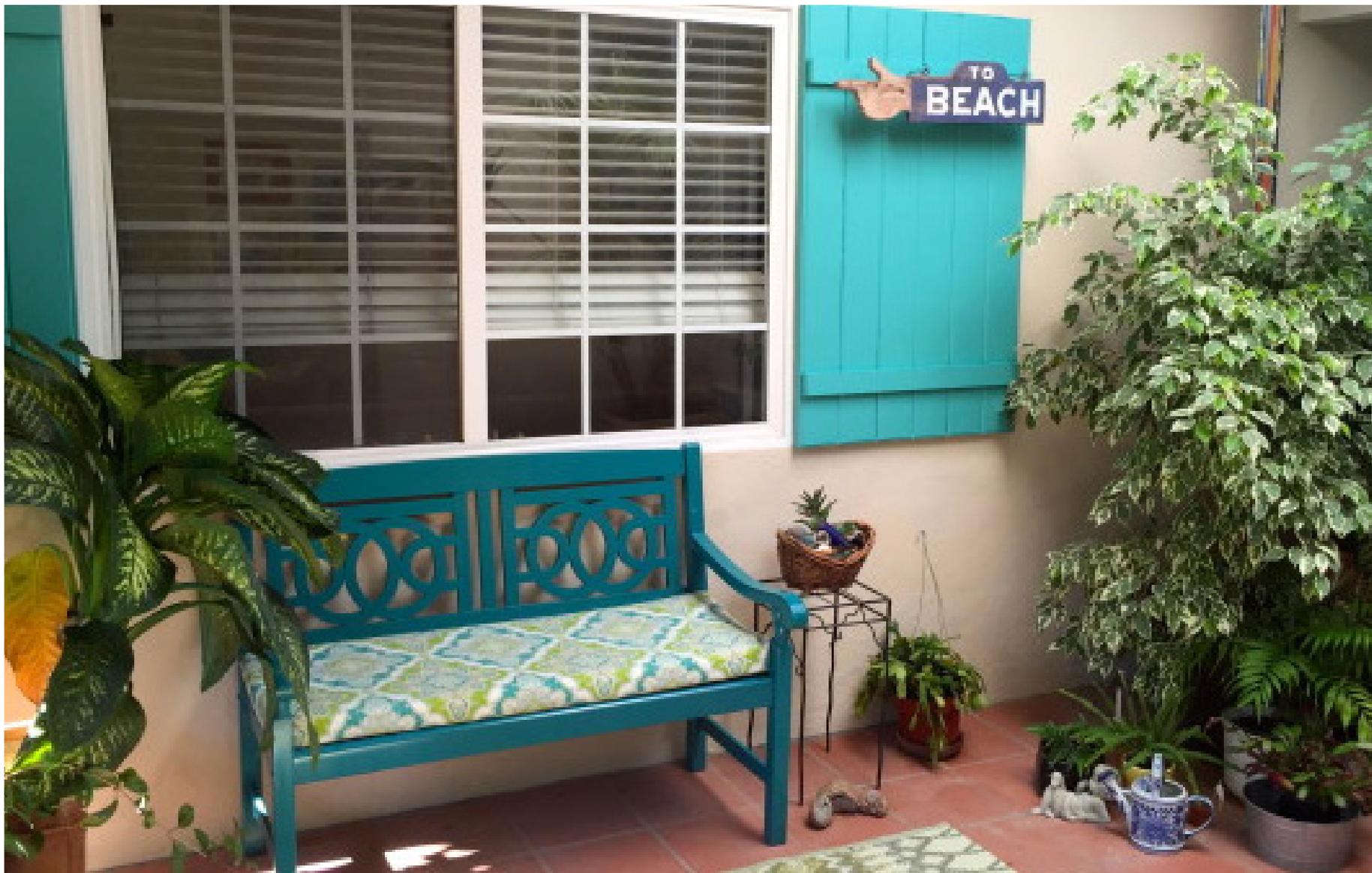
NUMBER TWENTY-THREE

Living Out Loud

Here's one of the great things about getting older — you can not only tell the truth and live it, without apology, but you can get away with living your life out loud. Don't ask me how or why that is true, but it is. I think people are more tolerant of eccentricities as we age, don't you? Remember that old poem about wearing purple when you get to be old? Well, yeah, I'm that woman! I love clear, bright colors. I know they're not necessarily de rigueur in the decorating industry (unless you look at beach cottage magazines like I do), but they make me happy. And my husband likes them, even loves a few of them, so there you have it.

And another thing, while I'm at it. Things don't necessarily have to match to still look great. We and our granite fabricator shopped several stone yards trying to find something that would match/blend with the two existing granite countertops in our kitchen. Which, it happens, do not match each other, but have the same combo of colors. I found the one we used — on sale — my son-in-law-who-is-also-my-contractor agreed, and the fabricator made our new countertop in ONE PIECE. The colors are the same as the other two, but the pattern is different. And we really, really like it.





And though we loved the basic idea of the trim color on our home, it was fading fast and had a bit too much gray in it for us. So we found a clear, beachy turquoise, and it is BRIGHT. But you know what? It makes me happy. And, of course, it will fade, too. It gets full sun all afternoon, every afternoon!

For you to ponder:

- 1. I think I'm going to like being eccentric and living out loud. How are you doing that?*
- 2. If you don't live out loud as much as you like, how might you take baby steps in that direction?*

NUMBER TWENTY-FOUR

Standing Tall

As we age, our bodies shrink, though not always in the direction we might choose. The pounds may still nag us, but that height we've carried? It's likely to change as we add on years. When I entered UCLA as a freshman in 1962, I stood 5 feet 8 inches tall. When I graduated four years later, they measured me at 5 feet 10 inches tall. I grew during college. Who knew? Not the usual pattern for most of us, but then I'm not all that usual in lots of other ways, too.

So when they told me about five years ago that I was again closer to 5'8" — I was bitterly disappointed. It took me a long, long time to live into all these inches. I was the tallest cousin on my mom's side and almost the tallest on my dad's. I had a grandmother who was 4'11," for heaven's sake, so I felt a bit like a freak when I was a teenager. But as the years went by, I began to enjoy being tall. Really enjoy it. I could reach things. I could stand next to almost anyone and be taller than or nearly equal to them. Eventually, I settled well into being a tall woman.

Therefore, that year in the doctor's office was tough for me — 5'8" felt way too short. So I began trying to stretch as much as I could every year when I had to stand on the dreaded



scale and turn backwards for the yardstick on my head. Last year, after losing about 3/4 of the weight I've been losing over these years of retirement, all of a sudden, that yardstick read 5'9 1/4" WOW. Losing weight can add inches?? Once again I ask, who knew??

I have no idea which measurement was the more accurate. All I know is I'm keeping this one.

And I'm standing as tall as I can every single day. Hopefully, that will help me to also stand tall for justice, friendship, mercy, kindness and truth. I'm a big one for metaphors!

For you to ponder:

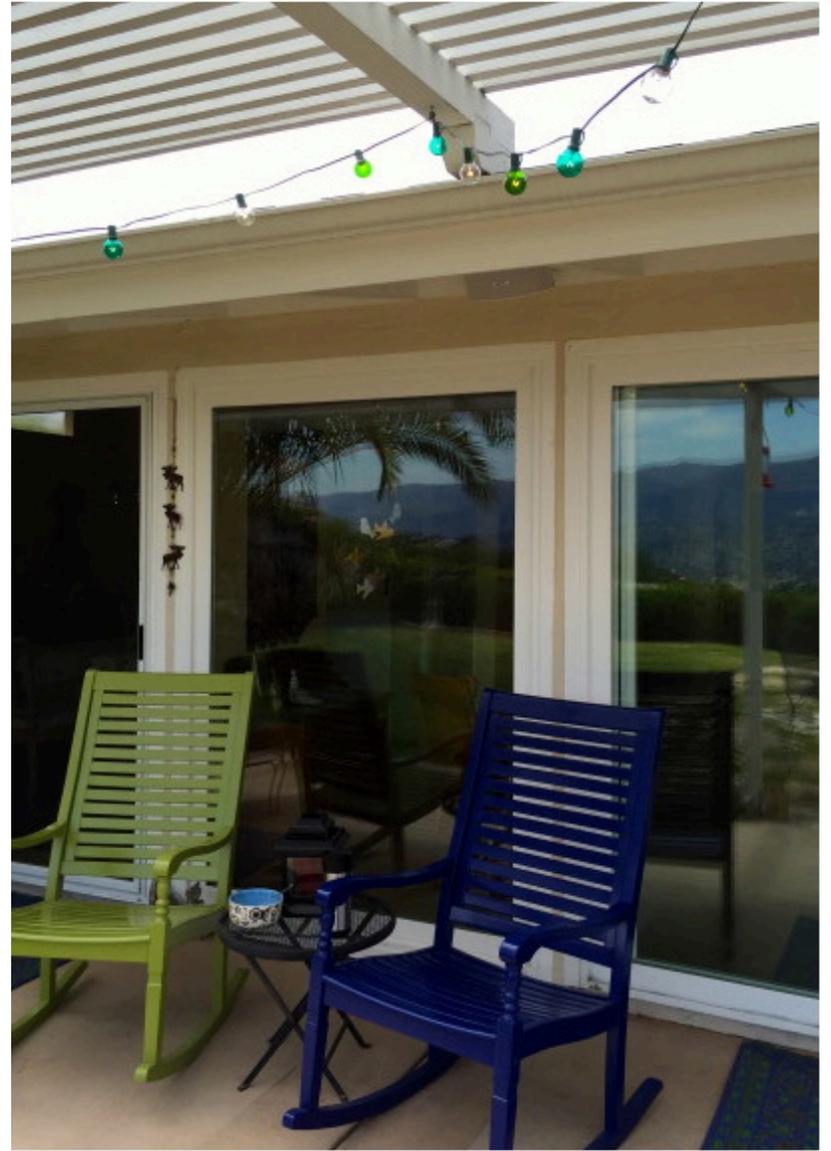
- 1. Are you tall or short? Does it matter to you?*
- 2. I have known a few short women who hate being short, even feel overlooked a lot. Yet I have a short daughter who is always gracious and grateful to be who she is. That's the way I want to live, don't you? Standing tall in who we are, no matter how many inches we carry around.*

NUMBER TWENTY-FIVE

Sitting Still

So these are a few of my favorite places to sit still these days. The demands of moving and remodeling have left little time or space for sitting still, but when I can, I choose to sit in one of these spots.

These two are my favorites. They're new to us for this house (ordered through a company new to me called Grandin Road, when they were on sale) and we both love them. We usually eat our breakfast out here and at various points during our day, you'll find one or both of us sitting here for a moment or two. We're discovering again, in a different way, that having a lovely view is a very life-giving thing.





Though we haven't had too many occasions yet to use this space at night, when we have, it's been nice. The yard is quite small, but it is just big enough for these large pavers and firepit. And the view at night is pretty terrific, too. City and harbor lights, you know?



This spot was a surprise to me when I first used it. I never thought that this particular room might have even a corner of our view, but it does! It's my study, the room I use for spiritual direction, and I am sitting in a chair that matches the one in the foreground, with my computer on my lap, looking out through our tiny dining room toward the city. When the picture was taken, the ceiling fan was on, the breeze was blowing the mini-blinds against the windows and I was luxuriating in some alone time, something which is often at a premium during retirement years.

Finding time and sacred space to sit still, be quiet, meditate, pray, read, think, dream — this is life-giving and necessary. I am so grateful that our new space allows us many options for good sitting.

For you to ponder:

1. *How do you sit still?*
2. *Do you relish it or endure it?*

NUMBER TWENTY-SIX

Enjoying Family



Birthdays are a great excuse to get together with family, don't you think? Our oldest granddaughter turned ten the week this photo was taken and she picked the restaurant for a fun dinner out with both sets of grandparents.



Earlier in the month, we celebrated with these two — one turning 17, the other 10 that year.

We also started something new that fall — SOCCER, with our youngest grandgirl. So most Saturdays, we were there, on the sidelines, trying to be encouraging as five 5-year-olds figured out what to do with their feet on a 1/4 sized field. They're so dang cute!

All but one of our eight came to our new home to celebrate those two guys' birthdays and I caught a few pictures of them all, just as the sun went down. I love the bare feet and silly grins in that dusk photograph. Each one of these people-we-love-more-than-life is unique, each one remarkable, lovely, interesting, quirky. Maybe most important, they are all kind — to each other and to the adults in their lives, too. It's a joy to be with them and we plan to take every opportunity offered to us to be together. The oldest two are moving out into full-on adulthood now, beginning romantic relationships, jobs, making choices that could impact them for several decades, if not the rest of their lives. We're not sure how long we'll be welcomed into their journey, but we want to be open and ready for whatever invitation might arise.





And, of course, central to all the rest of those family connections is the one I share with my husband of fifty years — the one that started it all. And we want to pay attention to that relationship, though sometimes that gets harder to do as we age. We're used to each other, sometimes stuck in ruts, and not as likely to take risks or venture out into the new and different. But we're workin' on it. At our advanced ages, you do have to exercise a little caution, though, right??? Well, yeah. A little.

For you to ponder:

1. *How are you enjoying your family these days?*
2. *Is it easy to do or a challenge?*

NUMBER TWENTY-SEVEN

Accepting Loss

Learning to live with loss — loss of all kinds — can happen at any age. For me, it happened later in life. For my eldest daughter, it happened way too early. The man she fell in love with in high school, married after her first year in college, had three sons with . . . he died a difficult death after twenty years of marriage. She was 40.



Other than grandparents (one died when I was 6, one when I was 18, one when I was 23, and one when I was 53!), no one close to me died until I was in my fifties. My best friend died just before we moved to Santa Barbara in 1996. And our dads died in 2002 and 2005, Dick's mom in 2014. As of this writing, my mom is still here. In the 'big picture' of my life, the loss of loved ones through death was not something I had to grapple with until mid-life.

But I'm here to tell you that there are lots of things that are lost as you move through the years, and not just to death. I have much less bounce in my step these days, not so much elasticity in my skin, either. My handwriting is nearly illegible — not that it was

ever great, but you could read it, once upon a time. Even without mentioning the excess pounds I carried for so many years, this body has had a ton of wear and tear across these decades. And don't get me started about the hair — on my head and everywhere else. Oy vey.

No one told me that menopause would be so devastating emotionally. It came as a complete shock to me to grieve the end of having periods at the age of 49. Something about removing options, perhaps? Whatever the causes may be, it did a number on me.

Now, over twenty years later, I am somewhat more phlegmatic about it all. I've learned to roll with it a bit better and not invest so much of my own personal sense of identity in how my body functions and what it looks like. Yes, there are definitely pieces or regret remaining. but overall, I've mellowed a bit . . . I hope! After all, aging is the way of nature, the way of time, the way of earth-living. And while losses need to be acknowledged and grieved, they are not the whole story.

Which is precisely why I've left this topic (and the biggest one of all — death) for the end of this particular series. Why? Because this series is about embracing and owning the truth that we all age. WE ALL GET OLD. There is no way around it. It is both the price and the privilege of living a long time. So while grief needs to be allowed to exist and run its course, it cannot rule the day.

Learning to live with loss is a necessity, a requirement for these last decades. But here's a more central truth, one that I want to live every day for however many days may be granted to me: what remains is lovely. And I am grateful for it.

For you to ponder:

1. *How do you choose to live with loss?*
2. *What kinds of loss are the hardest for you?*
3. *Which ones are surprising?*

NUMBER TWENTY-EIGHT

Learning To

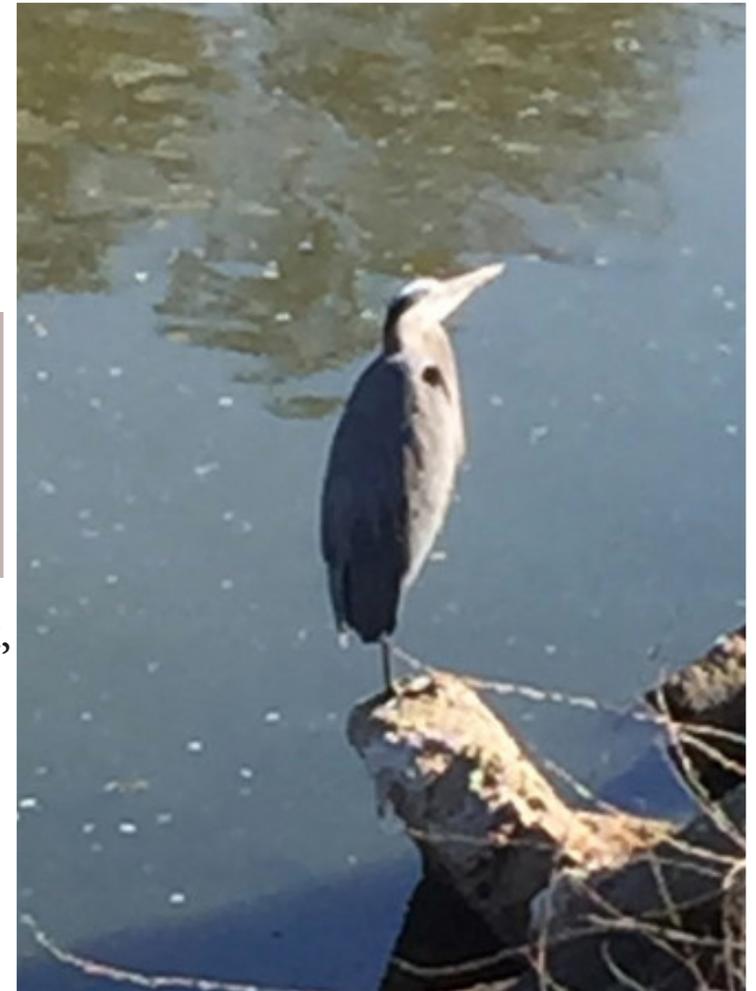
*My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.
Psalm 73:26*

Do you see that old bird over there? He's leaning on one foot,
leaning toward his strong side,
leaning so that he can stay erect.

That's exactly the kind of old bird I hope I am and will
continue to be — one who knows when to lean.

And where.

You all know I'm hoping that these sunset years are going to take a good long time for me, that the winding down will be slow and steady, that the life I love will slowly change and undoubtedly diminish, but that it will still be real and meaningful and resilient. Not one of us, however, can know what the years ahead will bring us.



In the meantime, it is good practice to be intentional about leaning. I do that in several small ways, some of them greatly enhanced by modern technology, some of them about as old-fashioned as you can get:

- I offer thanks when I arise each morning, remembering that I am dependent upon Another for the gift of this day;
- I offer thanks when I drift off to sleep each night, remembering that every moment of the day just past is a gift to be savored; I look for moments of 'consolation' and 'desolation' during this reflection - if I remember!);
- I try to practice centering prayer a few times each week, intentionally going silent for 20 minutes, learning more about resting in the Lord (using the app from Contemplative Outreach Ltd. on my phone);
- I've added Prayer Beads to my repertoire, enjoying their heft and smoothness, using the Celtic model for rote/chant-like prayer.(Available at this website: www.solitariesofdekoven.org)
- I use www.biblegateway.com for scripture reading and study, varying the translations frequently, usually during the same reading;
- I try to listen at least as much as I talk whenever I pray.

The one thing that is certain about this ever-lengthening number of years I've been given is that they will end at some point in the future.

But until that day comes -- O Lord! Help me to lean in, lean on, lean toward, *lean*.



For you to ponder:

- 1. How do you practice leaning?*
- 2. What makes it harder for you to do that?*

NUMBER TWENTY-NINE

Facing Death

*Even to your old age I will be the same,
and even to your graying years I will bear you!
I have done it, and I will carry you;
and I will bear you and I will deliver you.
Job 12:12*

This verse is a great source of comfort and assurance for me as I walk this journey toward the end of life. You know it's there, don't you? And you knew I'd have to talk about it at some point. The end of the road, on this side of glory, is the same for each and every one of us: **d e a t h**.

That last breath, the transition from this life to the next, however and whenever that happens. I don't begin to understand it, but I choose to believe that our last conscious thought on this side of the veil is of God, and our first conscious thought on the other side is not only of God, but *in* God — in a way we cannot now begin to imagine.

That means that somehow, my body will be there, too, and that it will be at least partially recognizable by others who have known me here. Timing is irrelevant, whether immediate or at some distant 'date,' as the scriptures seem to imply in all that talk about the end of time. NO clue what that all means, only that Paul assures us that we will be one moment here, one moment

there. Of course, the whole concept of ‘moment’ doesn’t really fit into eternity very well, does it?

So rather than spin my wheels deliberating about when and how, I have chosen to rest in the promise of reunion, of transformation, of a familiar but intrinsically different way of being and living. And this photograph, taken in the spring of 2015, speaks volumes to me about what the writer of Job means in that verse up there. “*I will bear you. . .*”



This is our youngest granddaughter, in rapturous delight at her new cousin, holding him tenderly and carefully and rhapsodizing over his deliciousness. I’ve written before about the revelation I received at the beginning of my training in pastoral work, that sense that dying is about being born, born into a new kind of living. So I relish this picture because that adorable infant reminds me of myself, and of each one of us, when we move from here to there.

And because Jesus himself told us to delight in little ones, to welcome them . . . indeed — to become like them, I have NO trouble imagining our loving and almighty God taking on the joyful demeanor of a young child, looking at me with the same kind of joy that our girl looks at that babe.

Can you see it? Oh, I hope so! Imagine tenderness, delight, gratitude, acceptance, welcome.

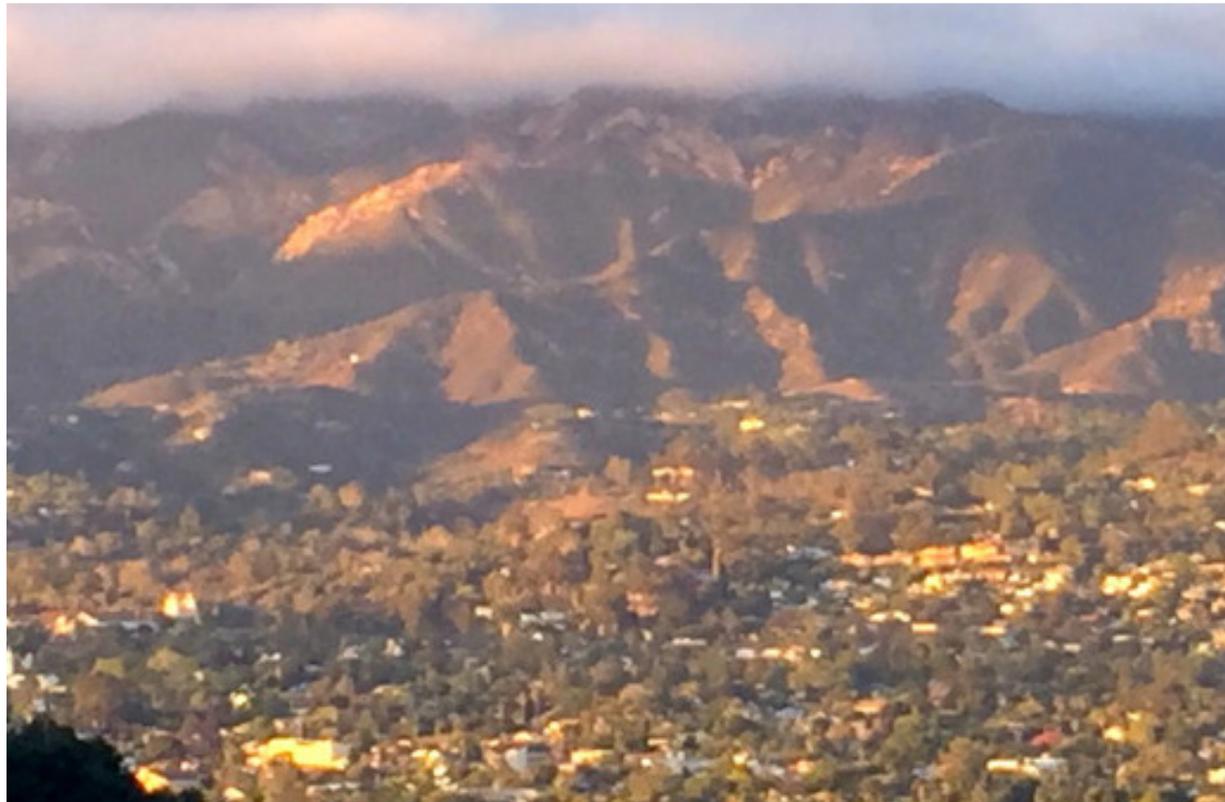
Because that's who God is, that's what God's about, that's what dying means. Glory be.

For you to ponder:

1. *If you think about death at all, how do you picture what happens?*
2. *Have you experienced much death in your own circle of family and friends?*
3. *Does walking that journey with another help you as you face your own?*

NUMBER THIRTY

Choosing Life



You know what? I'm not dead yet!

So as long as I breathe earth's air, I want to LIVE life as fully and joyfully as I can. I want to enjoy the view from our new house for as many years as the Lord may grant.



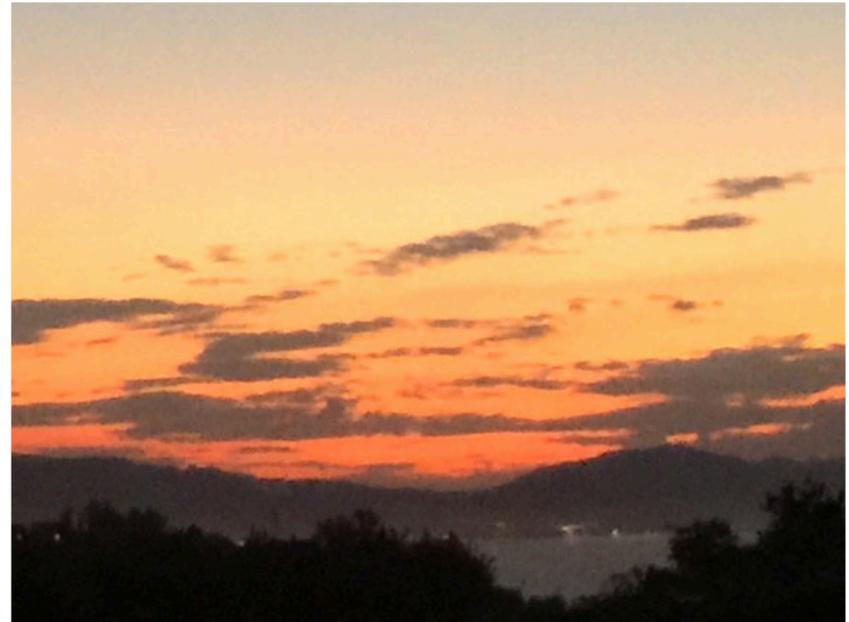
I want to watch those waves swell . . .



. . . and crash!



I want to walk on the flat, hard sand
at low tide;



I want to relish the sunset from our
backyard;



and I want to celebrate the sunrise on my morning walk.



I want to take thousands of panorama shots of the Pacific Ocean from my favorite bluffside stop.



I want to worship God in our glorious sanctuary, which I actually had something to do with building, and which brings joy to us all every time we're there.

I want to worship with our community, to push against one another when we need to, and to learn from one another always.



I want to welcome others to our home, to say 'come in and set a spell,' to order food out when I can no longer cook, and to offer a place of respite and quiet in the midst of life's noise.

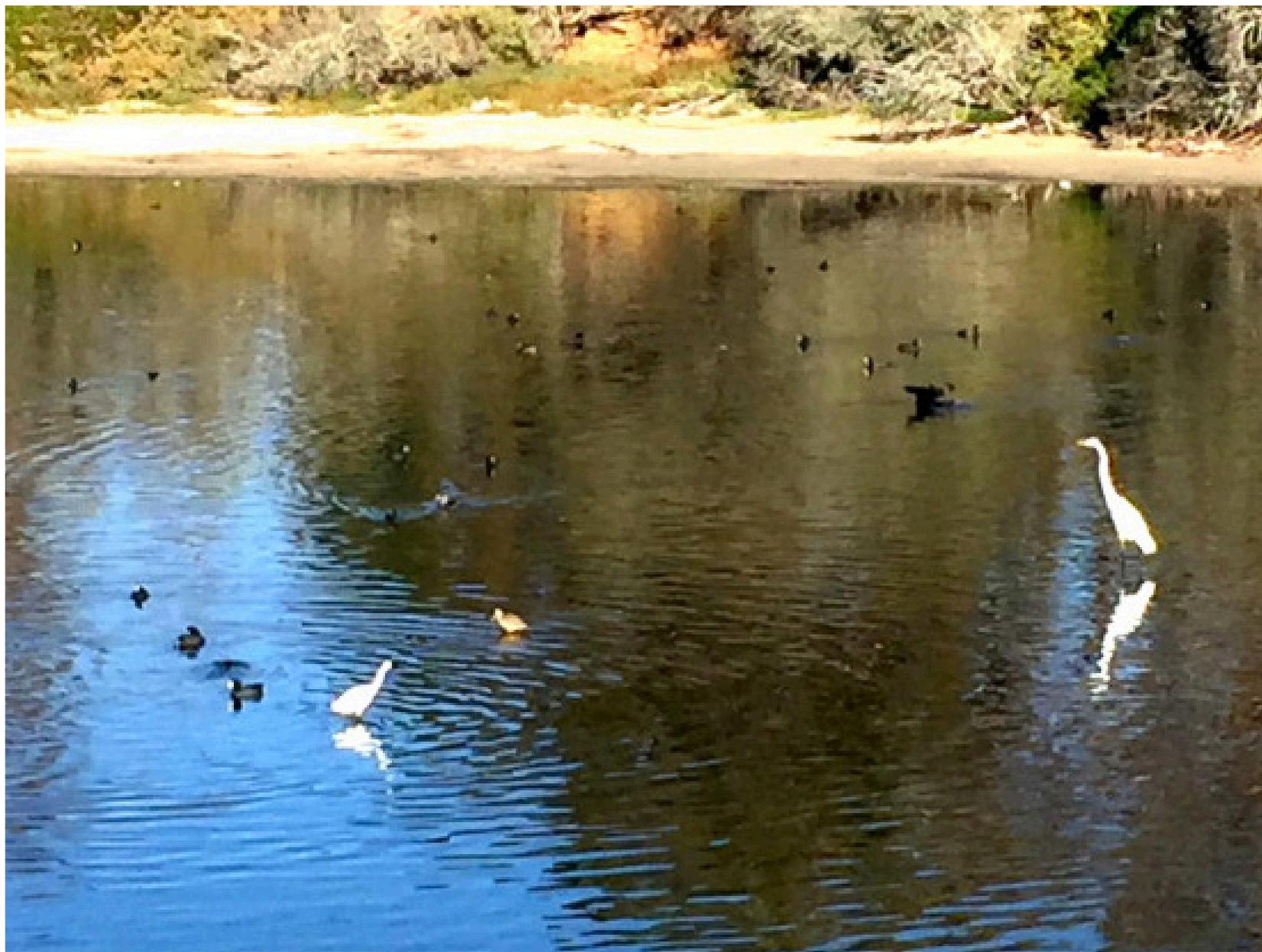
I want to enjoy fresh cut flowers and bright colors.



And good food, beautifully presented — some of it made by me, more of it made by others.



I want to celebrate the indoor-outdoor way of life that central California offers us each and every day.



I want to bird-watch and learn more about living well, living obediently, becoming who I am without worry or shame. (Ever see an embarrassed bird??)



And maybe most of all, I want to celebrate the gift of family – my cousins as often as we can manage it.



My mama, as long as she breathes — and sweet memories when she's gone.



My husband, who is most fully himself when he's helping someone else, or filling in for a missing shepherd or two!



I want to continue to thank God each and every day for each and every one of these people, gifts to me and to my husband and to the world.

I want to keep right on choosing LIFE! And then I want to step into new life, when God invites me there.

For you to ponder:

1. *What are your favorite ways to choose life?*
2. *Can you make a list and illustrate it, using drawings, symbols, photos? I highly recommend doing something like that, and then reading through it regularly, maybe especially when life feels challenging.*

30 WAYS OF AGING GRACEFULLY

There are a lot of different people woven together inside this aging body. First of all, there is Diana -- beloved child of God. I am also daughter, sister, wife, mother, grandmother, pastor (retired), spiritual director, writer, reader, solitaire player, cookie-baker, beach-sitter and walker. I have lived in southern or central California all of my life -- minus two years in Zambia, Africa as a newlywed -- and cannot imagine living anywhere else. At the end of 2016, I will have been married to the same man for nearly 51 years. And yes, that is a scary number. It is also remarkable and I am grateful. Together, we raised three kids, who are now happily married, middle-aged adults, and we have eight grandchildren, ranging in age at this writing from 25 to 6, six boys in a row, followed by two girls at the end. They are the delight of our lives.



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