

A Seeker's Journal

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"If you wait for tomorrow, tomorrow comes. If you don't wait for tomorrow, tomorrow comes."

--African proverb

PUT OFF PUTTING IT OFF

THERE COMES a time for all of us to take stock of where we are in our plan of life. Or to face the fact that we have no plan of life. At some point in our journey toward whatever end awaits us, we become aware of unfinished tasks; of things undone; of plans left on hold. And what is more sobering is to suddenly realize that the time left for us to finish these things is not unlimited. How do we make the most of the time left to us? And how do we stop putting things off?

There is a multitude of books that teach time management and organizational skills, but the likelihood that senior citizens will choose that approach is small. What then? My belief is that most senior citizens will tap their experience and wisdom to finish what they have begun. Retirees have more time each day to spend on personal goals, and whether they think in terms of accomplishing goals or of simply finishing a project is immaterial. What remains to be done for many?

First in importance is a properly executed Last Will and Testament. An alternative to this document is to dispose of all property beforehand. This can be a risky step, but it works in families where love and loyalty are unquestionable. A part of the Last Will and Testament would specify the decedent's final preferences, and for those who choose to die intestate, a written instruction to that person who will attend to final arrangements is sufficient. In my own brother's case, he made disposition of property long before his death at age 90, and a year prior to his passing, he gave handwritten instructions to his sons as to how he wanted his funeral conducted, and even how he wanted to be dressed for it. His wishes were carried out to the letter. This same sort of document would work for passing on personal items.

Another often overlooked but potentially very important item for us to consider is photo albums and personal journals. Often descendants find family photos of prior generations but cannot identify the people. This is needlessly frustrating for anyone attempting to compile a family history or photo record. We should list the names, dates, and other pertinent information such as location or occasion on the back of all family photos. Too often the only person who can do that passes away and something valuable is lost forever.

Keeping a personal journal is an excellent way for us to let those who come after know what we thought about our lives and the world as we knew it, our favorite music, books, movies, clothing, and our favorite people. In my journal I put my thoughts and ideas in the form of short essays, but formality is not required; what is relevant is our thoughts on as many subjects as we care to cover. I include my favorite poetry, quotations, song lyrics, and excerpts from newspapers, books and magazines. I write accounts of events that influenced me in some significant way, and of friends who are a part of what I am. My pets are remembered as well, and the little incidents that add so much enjoyment to life. Such records will endear us to those descendants who never knew us in life, but who are able to know us by what we left behind.

Most of us have at one time or another harbored harsh feelings toward someone. We may have felt justified at the time, but with the seasoning of the years, we realize that animosity is like a burden we cannot put down; a weight we force ourselves to carry, and we want to undo the hurt we caused to another. There is no shame in reconciliation, only in failure to make the attempt. I know from personal experience that apology is an honorable thing ... and it carries a satisfaction of having done a good thing for at least two people; maybe more. So don't neglect to mend those fences while you still can.

In the course of years, our family members may become widely separated. Some see each other only at weddings and funerals; some not even then. The family unit as it existed a few generations ago has vanished and personal visits give way to e-mail and telephones. The importance of family cannot be stressed too much to young people. They need to feel the sense of belonging, the importance of loyalty and the comfort of security that a close family unit provides. As elders, we can play a large part in bringing our families together again. I am happy to know that I was influential in reviving annual reunions for my family. Such a tradition is priceless.

Perhaps the last thing we need to stop "putting off" is preparing ourselves mentally and emotionally for our leaving. We know that immortality is not a quality of our physical body. Some of us may feel that no part of us is immortal. I do not intend to argue such points here, only to stress the importance of preparing to depart from the world we inhabit now. If a person fears death, he should seek counsel to help overcome that fear. If a person feels unable to go willingly, he should be counseled to accept the parting that death brings. Death should be no more traumatic than walking through a doorway. Those of us who will be fortunate enough to have our loved ones at our side will have the chance to show them an untroubled end, and that in itself may be the best thing we can give them. #

