

Stages of Life
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When I was a child, time seemed to be cyclical. Perhaps because I had seen so little time pass, I didn't feel that time led to permanent change; though of course I saw tiny changes happening over short times such as the days before Christmas or summer vacation. I felt time most keenly when I was away from home at summer camp and was homesick for my family. As you know from your own bouts with homesickness, you have a heightened sense of how slowly time can drag – especially when you aren't active – and how much faster time passes when you are busy and having fun.

How many of you have ever felt homesick?

When and why do campers feel homesick?

Why do older campers tend to feel less homesickness?

When you are 11, 12 or 13 years old, much of your world and your sense of self revolve around your family. As you get older, your friends become more important to you as a reflection of your identity... and those of you who are 15 or 16 tend to have a solid group of friends here who make you feel comfortable and happy and thus less homesick. Of course, that transition from homesickness to comfort in a new community and from your narrow family to a broader circle of friends is exactly what your parents hope will happen for each of you here at camp.

During your summers at camp, counsellors have the privilege of watching you grow and develop in all kinds of ways. I realized with a bit of surprise at breakfast yesterday that both little Timmy Jenkins and little Taylor Barker are now taller than I am. You grow and develop as athletes, artisans and students here. You learn and practice outdoor skills and how to help each other persevere when the rain and cold seem never ending. Above all you learn the importance of kindness, honesty and supportiveness in building friendships and this camp community. There is no greater pleasure for counsellors than to see campers learn to think about others and to give back to the camp community the things that they themselves took for granted when they were younger.

If we follow the trajectory of time for your lives, we can predict that a year or two after your 16th-year at camp, you'll be leaving your family to go away to college and to put to use again the skills of making new friends and building a personal community within a larger community. College is a wonderful place where there are thousands of new people to meet, no rules or restrictions on what you do, and more subjects than any one person could ever study. College is also an intimidating place where you are anonymous, where no one is watching out for you or protecting you with rules and where you must choose a major and begin specializing.

Making this choice of a major and later of a career is difficult. By committing yourself to one field, you must turn away from other subjects that you love. And what happens if you're not very good at the field you choose and just can't compete? We are fortunate that, most of the time, we like what we are good at doing and we fall into fields of study and careers that suit our natural talents.

Many people will tell you that your college years are the happiest years of your life. In my experience and in that of my friends, times of intense happiness alternated with periods of deep unhappiness, often due to the fact that college students have all the intellectual and emotional sophistication of adults without the restraints of adult good judgment. As a result, people in college can be very self-centered and unkind, and few voices remind them to do better.

In your twenties most of you will begin your careers, and, if you are lucky enough to find a job and a company or institution that you truly love, then there are few greater satisfactions in life than throwing yourself into your work, developing skills, learning from colleagues, earning the respect and friendship of those colleagues and making your own significant contribution to the organization. Of course, that description also applies to a good 16-year-old summer here at camp.

What happens if you don't really like your job, career or company? Then you must continue to believe in yourself and your talents (and supportive friends help in this regard) and keep searching for a better fit. Sometimes the searching goes on for years and becomes desperate, but the other extreme of settling for a safe but unsatisfying job will someday make you wonder what might have been if you had set bigger goals.

At some time in your twenties or thirties, most of you will marry and will start a family. All I can tell you about finding a wife is that first you must meet her. But I hope that each of you will experience the pure exhilaration of romantic love, followed by love that grows and deepens as you share more and more experiences together, especially the experiences that come with raising children. You should ask Mike how it feels to be a new father. Ask him now before the time he spends with Adelaide changes his answer and makes it more complex... and then ask him again later to get both answers.

Later, in your forties, you are in the thick of life, when the demands of your work and the needs of your partner and family wear you thin. Each day holds just enough time or almost enough time to do what must get done, and yet you find time to read, play silly games and snuggle with your kids. As your children get a little older, you make the time to take them to sports practices and to watch their games. And you notice the irony that as your kids grow through adolescence into the strength and exuberant athleticism of young adulthood, you yourself are not bearing lightly the passage of time.

In your twenties and thirties you could do whatever you wanted to do athletically, especially if you managed to stay in shape (and doing so is not easy once you no longer have time for exercise built into your day), but, as you move from your forties into your fifties, you find that you have new limitations. Trivial levels of activity cause injury; I

gave myself tennis elbow while weeding tennis courts 3 weeks ago and it still hurts. Old injuries speak to you every day; my right ankle still hurts in the morning from a bad sprain I got while running 'way too fast down the Lane with Kirk and Jack Boccock 20-odd years ago. Hairs sprout from nostrils, ears and eyebrows. Wrinkles spread across skin like the crazing of the glaze on an old plate. Veins emerge from the flesh that once concealed them and snake across your skin. And vision dims as you need not just glasses but also more light to see clearly.

Try to remember when you see an older person frowning in your direction that he probably doesn't mean to scowl – he's just squinting in an effort to see who you are. If the light is bad, he won't be able to tell who you are at all. At the age of 51, I find that not only is the physical act of seeing each of you more difficult but also the mental acuity to hold you clearly in mind is harder to achieve. I have taught hundreds and hundreds of students your age. When you catch me unawares, I may call you by your relative's name or I may be reminded so powerfully by something you say or do that I am taken back in memory to a different time and person. When we are doing something together, then I am fully present because your energy and personalities are so big and vital. But if you refer to specific things we did together last summer, I may be lost in the fog of too many summers spent on this hillside. They blend together. How Vinnie, Bubbles and Nelson keep all the names, dates and events straight is far beyond me.

Before a big test you may have wished to have a photographic memory, but perhaps you should appreciate the beauty and utility of forgetting. One man who genuinely can recall vast amounts of trivial data that he has seen – and that he can't help memorizing on sight – finds that he is easily and often distracted from the present by the intrusion of memories. He can no longer be fully here and now. Perhaps one way to think of senility is that very old people stop forming new memories and retreat into old, well-established memories and into sleep.

I can't tell you what life is like in one's 60's and 70's, though I hope to find out. I work with a colleague who is nearly 70 and who said to me, "I look in the mirror and I see an old man... and I can't believe it's me. How did I get to be so old?" Here he captured one of the great secrets of old age, one of the secrets that no one wants to know: to grow old, you don't have to do anything but survive. Old age just happens. And it comes for all of us far sooner than we would like.

Quite often I ask this same friend how he's doing, and his standard reply is "Getting older every minute!" He looks into his future, sees how little time is left to him, and feels the days speed past faster and faster. One of the great joys and glories of youth is forgetting about time. When we are young we cannot imagine what life will be like for us in 10 years' or 50 years' time. When we are old, we know too well what that same expanse of time holds for us.

Since we know that our time is limited, how should we live? The psalmist wrote, "So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom." Someone else has written that "Wisdom is knowing what needs to be done next while happiness lies in

taking pleasure in doing that one thing well.” Think about that. “Wisdom is knowing what needs to be done next; happiness lies in taking pleasure from doing that one thing well.” Many of life’s greatest challenges are based on choosing: choosing between friends and homework, between job satisfaction and a higher level of income, between the safety of behavior patterns that have worked in the past and the risk of attempted leadership. Not all of these examples are simple either-or choices. We need friends and well done homework; we just need the good judgment to know when to focus on each one.

Much preparation has gone into preparing a feast for you this summer. Right here. Right now. Your parents arranged for you to come, paid tuition and helped you acquire and pack your stuff. The maintenance crew worked all year to keep this beautiful place in good shape for us. Camp alumni and the council poured a great deal of sweat, labor and love into preparing the waterfront, tennis courts, shop and baseball field for your use. Mr. Vinnie and Mike worked all year to keep the organization afloat and the camp flame burning. Now the choice is yours. Will you hold back and turn away because no part of the feast tastes good to you? Or will you dive in and, in the ways dictated to each of you by your own talents and limitations, live fully for the next 5 weeks? To have a great summer, you don’t need to be elected a COI or baseball captain or even need to win your crew race. You do need to be kind and to make the camp community stronger by offering friendship to as many people as you can.

One more thing: the other great secret that old people want to share and that no one wants to hear is this: Be careful. The young have no patience with this secret because they know they must have their own experiences and learn their own lessons. But the old feel great urgency to say “Be careful!” because they know too well that the invincibility and immortality that the young rely on are lies, just lies, based on the limited experience of the young.

I do not say that you should avoid all risk because a little risk is often bundled up with having fun and, especially among young males, with competing for social status. You can’t help your attraction to risk; it is in your genes. To my mind there are 2 kinds of risk, ordinary and extraordinary and I’ll give you an example of each.

Ordinary risk happens when a benign situation in daily life suddenly becomes very serious indeed. On our last Not Joe Picnic evening, I left my teen-aged daughters and an 18-year-old guest at the Stanwood cottage to cook dinner for themselves: hamburgers and French fries. I didn’t really want them to cook French fries in deep oil, but I thought the risk was a reasonable one for an 18-year-old and a 17-year-old... so I poured out 3 cups of oil for them, explained how to cook the fries and left. I came back 2 hours later to find fire trucks in the yard. While cutting the potatoes, the 2 cooks had let the oil get too hot and had turned around to find 3-foot-tall flames shooting from the pot. The first fire extinguisher they tried was dead and the second was ineffective. The boy then filled a large bowl with water and was holding it in his hands when he paused.

What happens when you pour water on an oil or grease fire?

The water is denser than the oil, sinks to the bottom of the superhot pan and vaporizes on contact with the pan bottom. The steam expands enormously underneath the flaming oil and breaks the oil into tiny droplets which explosively react with air in a flaming fireball that erupts from the pan like a huge volcano. If there is enough oil in the pan, it will still be burning wherever it lands. When you get home google water on oil fire and see the videos; they are appalling.

For that momentary pause the boy held his future and my daughter's future in his hands. If he had thrown the water on the fire, he and my daughter would have suffered terrible, extensive burns all over their bodies, months of medical care and terrible, disfiguring scars for the rest of their lives. He decided not to throw the water, they called 911, and, as the kids left the house, the fire died down. The firefighters told them they had done exactly the right thing. Was God with those kids? I don't know. If the boy had thrown the water and they had been burned would God have been any less present? I don't think so.

Any time you take a steering wheel in your hands and leave your driveway, you enter this tricky world of "ordinary risk". You can't be afraid of driving, but surely the risks of driving – not all of them controllable by you - deserve your abiding respect.

Extraordinary risk is obvious in its high degree of danger – and in its strangely high degree of attractiveness. My father majored in petroleum geology in college and spent one of his college summers at the Colorado School of Mines. While there, a friend and he explored some of the thousands of abandoned mines that cover the Colorado Rockies; he still talks poetically of the beauty of some of those mines that contain huge chambers supported by massive timbers. Outside the town of Cripple Creek his friend and he found a shack with a mineshaft inside that went straight down. I think these mines are sealed for safety now, but they weren't in the 1950's. This shaft was 8 feet across and had a very sturdy ladder made of 2x4's; the end of each 8-foot ladder section was toe-nailed into the next section and there were periodic bolts that anchored the whole ladder to the wall of the shaft. Down they went with their hardhats and flashlights, and, since the ladder went straight down, they turned off their flashlights to conserve their batteries. When they were about 100 feet down the shaft, they noticed that the rungs of the ladder felt really dirty. When they turned on their flashlights they could see that the dirt was charcoal. Long ago there had been a fire deep in the mine and the ladder where they were had been burned completely black.

They climbed back up *very* carefully holding onto the ladder uprights all the way. When they stopped in town and asked about that mine, they learned that the shaft dropped straight down 1600 feet to the first landing.

So be careful. Don't pour water on oil fires. Be respectful of ordinary risks. And do your level best to turn away from extraordinary risks. Godspeed to you in your adventures this summer and beyond.