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Three Autumnal Tales

Written by Matias Travieso-Diaz |  Hits: 7

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I. Changes Pass Eighty

By the time you're 80 years old you've learned everything. You only have to remember it.

I often say that the life of a human is like an American football game. During the first quarter (ages 0 to 20) one grows, develops, matures, learns new things, acquires skills, tests oneself against the world. In the second quarter (ages 21 to 40), one finds a place in society, a spouse, a circle of friends, a path for the future. (At halftime one hopefully reflects on life so far, and makes small or big tweaks to optimize what lies ahead.) In the third quarter (ages 41 to 60) one achieves whatever measure of success life has in store, and starts trading physical well-being for increased personal satisfaction in one's lifestyle and accomplishments. In the fourth and last quarter (ages 61 through 80) one coasts towards retirement and the quiet enjoyment of the fruits of a lifetime of working and, hopefully, loving. For those lucky enough to stay on the field beyond the end of the regular game, there is an overtime period (age 81 and beyond) in which one continues to appreciate the beauty of life and approaches the end of the game with some trepidation but hopefully without becoming overwhelmed by pain and suffering.

I am now well into the overtime period of my life. I am arthritic, weak, with poor balance, overweight, hard of hearing, sometimes incontinent, often forgetful, full of aches and pains. Yet I still enjoy the game and hope to continue playing it as long as I have wits and enough strength to hit my laptop's keys. What drives me to want to keep going amidst all these adversities?

Let me count the ways. First, is the enjoyment of life, limited as it is, and the memory of pleasures and sensory delights from days long gone. I can still cherish the gentle caresses of a spring breeze, the warmth of a sunny summer day, the subtle hues of the turning leaves in the fall, the pristine beauty of a fresh layer of snow on the ground. I am still moved, as I was sixty years ago, by a heartbreaking melody by Schubert, the third act of *La Bohème*, the final song of *West Side Story*. The aroma of freshly baked bread, the perfume or gardenias in bloom, the pungency of roquefort cheese, will stay in my memory forever. And the tastes...ah, the memory of the delightful foods my wife used to prepare, the paellas, the orange ducks, the trifles, the Thanksgiving soups and Passover macaroons, a universe of flavors, mostly gone but still alive in my memory.

Next is love. My wife, the great love of my life, is long gone, but other sources of love and affection remain like my daughter, other relatives, a few loyal friends, my dogs. I know they will mourn me and will be saddened by my parting. I wish to spare them the pain of my departure and wish to keep the comfort of their company as long as possible. My life has been bolstered by love and I would like, to the greatest extent possible, to continue to draw upon the love of those around me to sustain me and comfort them.

There is perhaps curiosity. The world today teeters between progress and disaster, with both occurring simultaneously and trying to edge each other out. I am an unwitting witness to this drama and, even though I have little left to gain or lose by whatever happens, I strongly desire that my daughter and others in her generation and beyond get to live in a more sensible and humane world than what we are currently experiencing. Will that happen?

There is also a sense of duty. I found my true calling late in life. After many years of other endeavors, I discovered upon retirement that being a writer of limited talent but great ambition should have been my professional goal all along. I cannot make up for seventy years spent in other activities, but feel I still have more left to say and want to continue to do that saying before I am forced, by death or disability, to become silent.

Then there is vanity. Whatever little I have accomplished in my brief stay in this world and whatever meager accolades I have received for my contributions, I want to do more and elicit more praise for my efforts, a process that I wish to continue while I can still enjoy it. Posthumous praise and fame are all fine and good, but will no longer feed my ego. I want to get more done, and receive more positive feedback on it for as long as I can.

And fear? Yes, I know death is near, perhaps lurking in the room next to my office. I am not afraid of death, of the eternal absence that will occur one of these days, and accept it as something inevitable and not worth spending time pondering about. But I do fear *dying*, a process that can be prolonged, dehumanizing, painful, and burdensome on my spirit and the souls of those around me. When it comes, I would wish my death to be as rapid and painless as possible. I try to keep myself in as "healthy" a condition as I can, so that when my heart gives way it is not the result of lack of care on my part. But when the final hour comes, I hope to greet passing with fortitude and dignity.

For all those reasons, and maybe out of the quiet but potent force of habit, I would want to stick around for a few more years. Perhaps there is an afterlife but, in any case, I find numerous reasons why I want to keep myself going a bit longer.

Wish me luck.

II. Fighting Obsolescence

You are the salt of the earth. But remember that salt is useful

when in association, but useless in isolation.

Israelmore Ayivor

Everything felt wrong when he woke up that morning. His neck hurt and he had painful cramps in his legs. His vision was blurred beyond the usual condition of his eyes. His stomach growled and his heart was beating rapidly, as if he had been working out. He shifted his position so that he was sitting at the edge of the bed, wondering whether it was worthwhile to get up.

He took a big gulp of water and, as his mind cleared, he considered his options. He had no urgent matters to attend; in fact, his calendar was blank, as it had been since his wife passed away several years before. He could go back to sleep, or try to; but that was boring, and what he needed was not rest. To the contrary, he desired action, not repose. He would have some coffee and maybe a light breakfast, and then what? Now that the weather was finally good, he could go for a walk along the village – that would take at most an hour, and then what? Sit on his porch and watch the early birds dine at the feeder – maybe half an hour more, and then what? He had not even reached lunchtime and was out of things to do.

He could play games on the computer, or watch news in front of the TV. However, both were empty exercises and, in the case of the news, supplied distressing updates on the sad state of the world. He could get online and run through his correspondence and other messages. However, like the hero in the García Márquez tale, nobody wrote to him anymore; it would be just bills, solicitations, and advertisements.

His daughter was grown and gone; he had survived most of his friends. There were no work deadlines or pending social engagements to occupy his time.

He did have a cache of audio files and videos, but he saved those for the evening, to while away the couple of hours before bedtime, and hated to waste useful time going through them. And then it hit him. He had no good use to which his “useful time” could be put.

Had he been an ancient Norseman, he would have been placed on a board and cast to sea, to die of cold or starvation or become food for the sharks. Modern society was perhaps a little kinder: most people in his situation were stored away in dismal mausoleums, to rot away while waiting for the inevitable. Only the fact that he had saved some money from his work earnings allowed him the luxury of remaining at large, saved from the fate of the living dead. But, aside from preserving his independence, was he much better off?

He wondered if he had become obsolete, a relic from better times in which his efforts had provided measurable benefits to society. Today, nobody really needed him; when he left, he would be gone without a trace, probably forgotten by everyone five minutes after his corpse had been confined to the ground.

Yet, he remained available to provide love, counsel, and assistance to those of his friends and relatives who sought his advice or were in need of comforting words. These benefits might be of dubious value, yet he remained willing and able to provide them.

Also, over the years, he had developed the modest hobby of doing sketches and caricatures of people, animals, and things. He was far from masterful in terms of skill and artistry; the best he could accomplish was to make recognizable portraits of his subjects, which often seemed amusing to them and to others and brought smiles to their faces. He regarded his works as, at best, glorified doodles of no intrinsic worth. But perhaps they were just a tad useful because, to the extent that they gave pleasure to some, his works were analogous to simple pieces of candy, like chocolate-covered nuts, enjoyable and having a modicum of nutritional value.

And there was his thirst for knowledge, which remained unquenched after years of reading and studies.

And there was his dog, a small bit of fluff that slavishly followed him around, incessantly begged for treats, and curled at night in close, intimate contact with his body. It was of course animal greed, instinct without conscious emotional attachment, animal affection that would surely dissipate the moment he was gone. But, as long as he was alive, he would fill a temporary but important place in his pet’s tiny heart. To that extent, he was useful to one living being.

And there were his occasional postings on the social internet pages – his readers usually reacted positively to his commentaries, and although not making any significant contribution to the betterment of mankind, his musings might assist a bit in the enlightenment of a few people.

And he also made gifts to worthy charities and political donations where he felt his help could make a difference. Again, these monies might not mean much in practice, but nonetheless added to coffers of entities whose work he supported. However, he was leaving nothing in his will to anyone to whom he was not related, and believed it was up to his successors to decide how any assets he bequeathed to them should be used; but as long as he lived the choice and responsibility were his.

Adding it all up, he certainly was no longer a highly contributing member of society, and perhaps provided little added value to the world; but his survival was not inconsequential. If the credits and debits in his life yielded a positive balance, no matter how small, he should not feel downcast about continuing to exist and should not be questioned by his insignificance. The true tasks ahead for him in these “golden years” should be trying to keep boredom manageable, exist as well as his health and resources allowed, and enjoy the gift of being alive.

III. Making Life Adjustments

When it is becomes impossible to go back to normal,

we have to create a new normal and adjust to it.

Sabine Shah

He awoke that April morning with a sore throat and a splitting headache. The pollen season was in full swing and he suffered from an allergy strain that no antihistamines could cure. He had moved to a house that faced dense woods forty years before and, since then, every Spring Mother Nature reminded him of who was in charge.

Forty years. He and his late wife had just gotten married then, and this was the first home they owned together. They were in their thirties, vigorous and full of plans. He was looking forward to a successful professional career; she sought an exciting social life, a beautifully decorated home, cultural events, and political activism; together, they planned for children, travel to exotic lands, prosperity. Their coffers were empty but their hearts overflowed with fresh ideas.

Over those four decades, some of their projects were carried out without fail or disappointment. They travelled across the United States, Canada, Mexico, Western Europe, the Far East; London, Paris, Florence, Venice, Lake Como, San Francisco, and Santa Fe became favorite destinations. She took Italian cooking lessons in Milano and flower arranging courses in New York; he perfected his photographic skills and amassed a portfolio of pictures and slides of the spots they had visited. His professional practice

blossomed with hardly a mishap, such that he became a well-regarded specialist in his field; her devotion to worthy causes won her accolades in the organizations of which she was a member. Their home became filled with valuable pieces of porcelain, glass, and silverware. Together, they bought beautiful works of art and European furniture, planted roses, tulips, and daffodils, and undertook remodeling efforts that made their home more comfortable and inviting.

Some projects worked at first, but then had to be given up. He used to go running early every morning until his knees gave way and had to be replaced. She grew vegetables in the backyard that kept falling victim to the ravages by birds and insects, who punched holes on the tomatoes, mutilated the squash, and left only the stems of devoured strawberries that never got to ripen. They built a beach house but had to sell it after a few years because the commute to and from the shore was exhausting due to the maddening traffic, and the beaches themselves became too crowded to be enjoyable.

Other plans could never be implemented. She developed an ovarian tumor that required a hysterectomy, preventing her from conceiving children. He was hoping to lead the return of investors to his country of birth, counting on improved political conditions that would make this possible; once it was clear that there would be no change in the status quo, his project had to be abandoned.

Even where their activities could no longer be carried out as intended, there were sometimes compensatory measures that could be taken. He began taking long walks in lieu of running; instead of growing vegetables, she planted peonies, lilies, hydrangeas, and irises; they adopted a baby girl from Colombia who grew to be a beautiful and talented artist. When going to the shore became impractical, they started taking weekend trips to the country, learning to appreciate the charms of the rural sights and the simple pleasures of walking in small towns, attending village fairs, and hunting for antiques.

As they grew older, the compromises that they had to make to meet the needs of day-to-day living became more pronounced. Arthritis took hold of all of his joints, making the act of walking fraught with pain and uncertainty; he became so concerned about the risk of falling that even taking the dog out for a walk was an adventure. She, who had always prided on being quite active, was debilitated by age and now spent increasing periods of time watching soap operas on TV. For both, the quality of life was marred by a combination of low energy, decreased interest in worldly events, and recognition of their physical limitations.

It then became painfully clear to them that life only moves in one direction – forward – and that any attempts to reverse course will at best leave you still behind, struggling unsuccessfully to get back to where you once were. Success was redefined as achieving ninety percent of the level of activity attained the previous week.

Finally, things had to give way. She developed cancer and, after a short and painful fight, passed away. He attempted to resume a normal life, but the wind had been taken out of his sails. He sank into a morose state, reliving in his mind the four happy decades now gone by, waiting for his final hour to come.

It was then that a small miracle occurred. Inspired by conversations with members of his extended family, he decided to undertake a chronicle of the migration of his ancestors from a distant point in Europe: the challenges they had to face to settle in a strange land, and the satisfaction of prevailing in a difficult and sometimes hostile environment. What started as a mindless chore undertaken to while away idle time, became a monumental saga that would encompass not only his direct ancestors, but others of the same background that had to fight poverty, ignorance, and prejudice to carve a place for themselves and their children in society.

Thus, his retirement project grew into a vast undertaking that consumed the last decade of his existence. Time went by, hardly noticed, and being able to conclude his research and writing was perhaps the main objective in his staying alive. He did finish his study and, with the help of friendly editors and publishers, brought his work out into the light of day. Alas, he suffered a heart attack weeks after publication, and died before knowing whether the treatise had become a bestseller.

This couple's story exemplifies an important lesson about the human spirit. Finding new ways to live with one's increasing limitations is the recipe for prolonging life and making it more worthwhile.

THE END

Bio:

Born in Cuba, Matias Travieso-Diaz migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. Over two hundred and sixty of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in anthologies, magazines, blogs, audio books, and podcasts. One of his four novels, an autobiography entitled "Cuban Transplant," and four anthologies of his stories have also been published.



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