

## CHAPTER 2: LIVING WITH MEANING IN A SMALLER WORLD

### INTRODUCTION

In her book *Little Pieces of Light...Darkness and Personal Growth* (1), Joyce Rupp observes “Darkness can break into our inner world when we experience the natural patterns of adult growth, such as midlife, retirement, and other aging processes.” This was the experience of many of the men and women we interviewed as they entered the “smaller world” of influence, authority, or recognition of retirement. These individuals expressed feelings of loss, sadness, or lack of purpose or direction as their world became smaller in one or more of these ways.

In this session we listen to one contemporary person’s experience of entering into the smaller world of retirement: a retired teacher. Then, we consider passages of Scripture which describe individuals as they move to a “smaller world” and are separated from that which is familiar or has given them meaning or sense of purpose. And lastly, we introduce the spiritual practice of letting go of things that need to be left behind for us to see the full promise and potential what may seem a smaller world of retirement.

### EXPERIENCES OF RETIREES

Brenda Hooper (*secondary school teacher prior to her retirement*)

For twenty-four years I had seen the faces of teenagers every day and heard their cries for help or kindness or recognition. I was even able to teach them a few things about our English language on some days, though not nearly as often as I planned and hoped for. Life got in the way for them and for me most of the time. On bad days, nothing went right. On good days, there was magic in that classroom.

For years I planned my retirement, for I knew the day would come when I would hear God’s voice saying, “Now is the time to retire.” My planning was all about me and my filling my days with intentionality and purpose for God’s kingdom here on earth, and then it hit me. What about them? What about my students? Who would love them as much as I did? Who would listen to them when their mother’s new husband wanted them out of the house in favor of the new baby? Who would nurture the shyest girl or boy? Who would call their parents to say something good about their sons or daughters? Who would scold them when they needed it?

My questions kept coming because I truly cared for my students, admittedly some more than others. Some tried their hardest to keep me from reaching them, and they succeeded. I could not and did not save the world, but I tried to do my part to make it a better place and to be a good teacher every day.

So I was torn. What to do? Teaching well hardly gave me time for anything else in my life except going home so tired I could hardly get a decent meal on the table for my husband. Then it dawned on me that fatigue was taking its toll on me in every area of life. I had to come to grips with the fact that God had already said that it was time to leave my students. New questions came from God: Do you think too highly of yourself? Are you the only one who will take care of them? Do you just need to be in control? Is your concern really about them or are you feeling empty? Do you not remember that I will be going into retirement with you?

I played out these scenes in my head for months. I asked the hard questions over and over again. Then I remembered that I really had made plans to retire all along, but I had not owned them. Once I took ownership of those plans and trusted God's promises to be with me, it became easier to let go.

I'm on this side of retirement now, and my leaving hardly made a ripple in the ocean of education. New teachers have taken my place beautifully, the students are still coming and going, and so am I. It was a troublesome and bumpy journey to retire, but I thank God for it every day. God has gifted me in more ways than I could ever have imagined. My planning ahead has led me to new adventures that I never dreamed were out there for me. To God be the glory!

#### *For Discussion or Reflection*

(1) In our study of individuals retiring, the transition to a "smaller world" was described in different ways. Brenda anticipates the loss of influence on the lives of young people as the focus for her grief. Other individuals interviewed focused on the loss of authority, recognition or workplace environment. As you think about your own work life and transition into retirement, what losses come to mind? What dimensions of this "smaller world" are, or will be, most problematical for you?

(2) What consolation did Brenda experience that helped her to accept her retirement? How was God present to her through this journey? What seemed to surprise her the most?

(3) One of the consolations retirees sometimes experience is a sense of legacy, i.e. passing on to others something of value. How would you describe the legacy that Brenda is leaving behind as she moves into retirement? What legacy do you anticipate passing on to others?

#### WITNESS OF SCRIPTURE: TRANSITION TO A SMALLER WORLD

The Bible offers numerous examples of individuals who went from a larger to a smaller world of influence, authority, recognition, or status. Surprisingly enough, it's often in this "smaller world" that God speaks most clearly. Of course, these transitions were not associated with retirement as we think of it today, but they

may nevertheless offer insight as we think about our lives and God's presence throughout our lifelong journey, whether we're working or retired.

Take for example the apostle Paul, a Jewish leader and a Roman citizen, who forsook this larger world of influence and authority to follow Jesus. Read Galatians 1:16-21, which describes the years of relative solitude following his conversion, spent in Arabia and Damascus and additional years in Syria and Cilicia. This time preceded his assuming a place of prominence in the early church. Some of us may feel like we've been knocked off our horse as Paul was (Acts 9:1-9), yet it's in this downward movement that God may encounter us the most.

You may also find it helpful to read Exodus 2:11-4:17, the description of the period of Moses' life when he fled the Egyptian capital for the desert. Because of a crime he had committed, Moses went from the privilege and prestige of a king's son in the Egyptian capital to the life of a fugitive in the very remote region. The Scripture makes clear that it was here in this "smaller world" of the desert, that Moses first encountered God. It is almost as if Moses had to get away from the distractions and expectations of the larger world to be in a position to hear God clearly and subsequently, to see God work uniquely.

Finally, consider the account of the angel encountering Mary in Luke 1:26-38; 2:1-7. The point here is not that Mary has gone from a larger to a smaller world. It is instead an indication of how God can work. While the gospel writer refers to the larger world of Caesar Augustus and Pontius Pilate, he makes it clear that God can be at work in this smaller world of everyday life and poverty. God is at work, but not always in the places that we had imagined.

### *For Discussion and Reflection*

(1) In each of these examples, a "smaller world" provided the context for God to do a "new thing." What other examples can you think of from scripture or from your own life experience as to how this is so? What "new thing" might God be doing in your life as you enter the smaller world of retirement?

### SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: LETTING GO

"Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it." (Luke 9:24)

"Letting go" may not seem like a spiritual practice. After all, we all have to let go, sometimes reluctantly and sometimes with pleasure. Yet letting go can often be the way in which we open ourselves to the next thing that God has in store for us.

In her book *How Can I Let Go If I Don't Know I'm Holding On*, Linda Douty (2) provides very helpful insights on both the "why" and the "how" of the spiritual

practice of letting go. Of particular relevance in the present context is her discussion of letting go of roles we have had earlier in life but have now left (or need to leave) behind. These roles were both necessary and legitimate at an earlier stage, but we must leave these behind in order to, in her words, “use the gifts we have been given, to pursue the passionate interests that compel us, to be all that we are created to be” in this new phase of life.

Linda suggests three steps in the process. First, make a list of your losses. That may seem simple, but probe a little deeper. You miss having a project to do and even those deadlines you used to dread. What else do you miss? You miss working on the project with Joe, who always thought outside the box and forced you to think in new ways. You miss the satisfaction of being a part of a team. What else do you miss? You miss the feeling that you’ve accomplished something, and that’s what the deadline reinforced, a sense of completion.

The second step is feeling the pain of the loss. (3) Some of us have trained ourselves to stay away from our feelings. That training may have helped us be task-centered, problem-solving professionals. When we slow down, feelings are more likely to surface and for some of us we become very uncomfortable. It’s okay to take some time with this and let the feelings come.

When people retire, they sometimes throw themselves into busy work to avoid the feelings of loss, emptiness and lack of direction. If you’re like some of us, you’ve got a whole lot to unpack from all those years you worked! Linda’s advice and ours too, is to take time to experience some of the feelings that surface as you name your losses. Here again, keeping a journal can be a helpful tool in the process.

Once you’ve named the losses and given yourself time to feel the pain, the third step is asking God to help you resolve your feelings. If there is anger or resentment, ask God to help you begin the process of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a process; it takes time. You may want to write out your feelings, directed at the person or situation that caused your hurt. Here again is a place where keeping a journal can be a valuable practice. (If you write a letter to someone, you may want to set it aside or burn it rather than mail it and regret what you did later on). Many people find it helpful to write a prayer or a letter to God; God knows and welcomes all of our feelings, including feelings of betrayal! If you have unexpressed gratitude, now is the time to acknowledge something beautiful in your heart and mind. That may be a letter you want to send!

It is very helpful to keep in mind throughout the process of letting go that you are on a journey of moving on to the next good thing in life. Or, paraphrasing the words of Loretta Marshall, “When I am on what seems to be a set of dead ends and winding paths, openness to the surprises of God’s Spirit can move me from lostness to a highway of grace.” (3)

## REFEREENCES

- (1) Joyce Rupp, *Little Pieces of Light...Darkness and Personal Growth* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1994.)
- (2) Linda Douty, *How Can I Let Go If I Don't Know I'm Holding On: Setting Our Souls Free* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2005.)
- (3) Loretta L. Marshall, *The Upper Room Disciplines* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2010) pg. 354.