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Introduction



I was on maternity leave with our third child in the winter of 1994 when I bundled up baby Elliot and headed over to the senior citizen center in the small town of Luverne, Minnesota. I can still picture the gathering space filled with probably seventy-five older adults, all seated with their coffee and ready to learn from their guest speaker—me. A few months prior, they had requested the geriatric clinical nurse specialist give a talk about “Sexuality and Aging.” I was thirty-four years old and, for whatever reason, fully confident that I could speak on this topic, so I did.

Now, as I approach my sixtieth birthday and what I like to call my “third act” of life, that day twenty-five years ago makes me laugh, cringe, and want to apologize to the sweet folks who had to listen to some upstart nurse whose main concern was if her milk was going to leak in the middle of her presentation.

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(Please, Elliot, don't start crying!) That was my career at the beginning of my "second act."

I spent most of my thirties educating older adults about what happens to people as they age. I talked about how their sense of smell changes, how they should prevent falls, how to remember to take their medications, and certainly how not to be depressed about it all. Now, I'm realizing that I was the student, and they were the teachers.

My next gig as a nurse was in the world of faith community nursing—a perfect environment for Jesus-loving, church-nerd me. It required building relationships with nurses and volunteers and looking at clients as whole beings—body, mind, and spirit. I worked with the most empathetic nurses I have ever encountered, many of whom were approaching or had past their sixtieth birthdays and still giving, giving, giving.

After retiring a couple of years ago (well, you never *really* retire from being a nurse), I reached back to a passion from my middle- and high-school days—writing. I'm sure I would have become a writer or journalist had my mom (a high school English teacher) not become ill with breast cancer during my teenage years. Her death when I was sixteen rocked my world. I have often said that experiencing a loss of that magnitude can make or break you; fortunately, her death inspired me to become a nurse and launch my career.

I have already outlived my mom. My paranoia about dying at age fifty-six, as she did, has long passed. It is time for my third act, of which she was robbed. It is time for me to finally be the expert on aging because I'm doing it in real time.

Introduction

Will you join me?

Hopefully, you can find inspiration as I shuffle my geriatric nursing experience with my faith life and words of wisdom from some of my favorite sources. Ideally, we will collaborate. Whether you're in your first, second, or third act of life, the gift of more days should suggest delight and surprise—a certain magic. Some of us will recall being children of the 1960s and ask what we want our sixties and seventies to look like. We may end up with more questions than answers around the mystery of reaching a ripe old age. The dialogue will be rich and refreshing.

Feel free to write in the margins; some of my best-loved books are cluttered with pencil marks and notes. You may want to read the book with a friend or family member—someone of similar age or from a different generation—because sharing your personal stories and attitudes about aging can be a priceless gift. Consider *Turning* for a book club or Bible study group. There are suggestions for group study in the back of the book.

You're not alone in anticipating the magic and mystery of more days—unless you want to be. Stick with me for the next ten pages, or maybe even ten chapters or ten years. Together, we'll turn this next page of our lives curiously, boldly, and authentically.



“For the ear tests words as the tongue tastes food.
Let us discern for ourselves what is right; let us learn
together what is good.”

Job 34: 3–4

A Time for Everything

There is a time for everything,
And a season for every activity under the heavens:
a time to be born, a time to die,
a time to plant, and time to uproot,
a time to kill, and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,
a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,
a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain,
a time to search and a time to give up,
a time to keep and a time to throw away,
a time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak,
a time to love and a time to hate,
a time to war and a time for peace.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

Chapter One

Let's Begin Together



“Every person who dared to live the life she dreamed started by learning the explosive force of God’s lessons. Her soul was liberated from its prison, and life began to have genuine meaning.”

Lucy Swindoll

If mornings when you were eight years old consisted of Tang orange drink or a Great Shake, we may have had similar childhoods. My siblings—two older sisters, Patty and Cindy, and one younger brother, Paul—and I were heavily influenced by TV advertisements for any new convenience food, and my mom was happy to oblige our requests whenever the products were spotted at Ben’s Market in my hometown of Hurley, South

Dakota. Tang went with the astronauts to the moon; what's not to love about that? Great Shakes made you just as cool as the kids dancing on TV with their Great Shakes shakers. And don't even get me started on the cardboard records by cartoon pop band The Archies, which we would carefully cut out of Alpha-Bits cereal boxes.

Life was sweet in 1968.

I loved the music of that decade and still do, but I have to give credit to my sister, Patty, who was six years older and had a radio. My brain still retains all the words to the solid-gold hits of the '60s. One of my favorites is "Turn! Turn! Turn!" written by folk singer Pete Seeger¹ and recorded by The Byrds in 1965, and later by The Seekers (any "Georgy Girl" fans?) and Judy Collins ("Send in the Clowns")—all personal favorites. I was happy to discover that Seeger wrote the song in 1959, the year I was born. My favorite version can be found on YouTube in a classic 1966 video by The Seekers.² They're singing in an Australian vineyard while picking grapes. Look it up; it will make your day.

I always thought it was cool that the words for this song came from the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. The words are nearly verbatim, with writer Seeger adding the repeating "turn, turn, turn" and a final, hopeful line: "I swear it's not too late." Take a moment to read through the words from Ecclesiastes quoted above or play the song on your phone and sing along.

Is there any portion of life the words of these verses don't describe? At first glance, they are practical lessons—"It is what it is!" as my dad, Juel, a pragmatic farmer, used to say. You may

even read the words “one turn forward, one turn back” as pessimistic. How does one get anywhere in this life?

Throughout this book we will be observing turns of our own. The turns we take with our feet, our heads, our hands, our ears, our voices, and our hearts. What causes them to turn? When and where should we turn? When will it be our turn?

This scripture also mentions time as if there is an abundance of it—and maybe there is. As we make our next turn around the sun, do we really believe there is time for every purpose under heaven? Okay, that took a serious turn. Take a moment for a glass of wine (or Tang!) and a few deep breaths. I'd like to share the hope and promises I hear in Ecclesiastes.

First, let me ask if you see yourself as a person of faith—remember, I asked you to stick with me for at least ten pages. I suspect you are a little curious about aging, and we'll definitely address that topic. I know that you are a whole person—you have a body (you look great today!), a mind (don't worry, no quizzes here), and, most importantly, a spirit (think heart and soul, like that classic ditty you taught yourself to play on the piano).

My favorite way to define spirit is by asking the question, “What is your heart pinned to?” The answer can't be “nothing” because everyone's heart is pinned to *something*. It might be Jesus or a different higher being in your personal faith tradition, but it may also be your family, job, food, shopping, or an unending grief. I truly believe we are all a mixed bag of body, mind, and spirit stuff, and our natural tendency is to weigh it all on our birthdays.

My own mixed bag feels somehow lighter when I consider

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the commentary on Ecclesiastes 3 from theologian Martin Luther. As a teacher and pastor, Luther inspired a reformation over 500 years ago, and his plain way of speaking about God's Word is still useful today. He hears in Ecclesiastes not to turn to yesterday or tomorrow, but rather to enjoy the present things. Luther asks wisely, "How can someone who is uncertain about the future determine something about the future?"³

I can honestly say I am feeling uncertain about my next decade. Will I continue to be healthy? How much help will my children need? Should I start a new career? What will life be like when my husband and I are free to spend much more time together? I hope I'll still like him enough for that whole "time for embracing" thing.

My dad gave me great parting words from his hospital bed ten years ago (I'm sure he didn't realize at the time that they would be the last words he would say to me): "Don't take life too seriously." At that moment, the time to laugh and time to weep intersected. I treasure those words and repeat them often to myself and to my children. Luther put it this way, "Joy has its appointed time. Let us not torment ourselves about future things but enjoy present things."⁴

So, with the music of Pete Seeger in one ear and the words of Ecclesiastes in the other, let's do this together. If there truly is a time for every purpose under heaven, then that time is now.

Let's not take life too seriously.

Your Turn

1. In each of the lines of the Ecclesiastes scripture, underline the word that describes you today. For example: A time to mourn, and a time to dance. Look back at what you've highlighted and reflect. Is today a mourning day for you or a dancing day?
2. What is your heart "pinned" to today? Ponder these words from the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 6, verse 21 to better understand this concept: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Have your "treasure" or your "pins" changed over the past month? Year? Write down these different pins and see if you notice any patterns.
3. How has your mixed bag of body, mind, and spirit changed compared to ten years ago? How would you like it to look ten years from now? Write a thank-you note to yourself from the perspective of your older self. What will an older you be grateful for? What choices will you be glad you made?