

# Reinventing a Life

9 October 2005

Bible passage: **Galatians 6:5** (*The Message*)

“Each of you must take responsibility for doing the creative best you can with your own life.”

In an article entitled “New Beginnings,” writer Dee Dickinson told about putting her professional life on hold to help care for her older son Rob following a serious operation. She said that what happened to him changed the course of his life overnight. Both in the hospital and since, she has seen the power of reinventing a life.

Prior to his surgery, the young man had been a highly successful acupuncturist who helped many people who had been given up as hopeless. After his surgery, he tapped into the skills he had developed earlier in his life and set about totally redesigning a new life for himself.

One rather insensitive psychologist asked him during his hospitalization, “What is your secret? You have lost your fiancée, your career, you can no longer do Tai Chi, scuba dive or climb mountains. You are disabled and in a wheelchair. Why aren’t you depressed?” Rob was amazed at the question, and wondered if the psychologist could even understand his response. Nonetheless, he answered this way: “Well, you accept what is, then take it from there to create a new future.”

That, in a nutshell, is what reinventing a life is all about: We accept our present circumstances, and then take it from there, using the heart of what guided us in the past to reshape a life, using the wisdom we’ve gained and the experiences we’ve had to begin shaping that new future.

You see, I’ve come to the conclusion that there’s no such thing as wasted experience. Everything that is past is really preparation for what is now. In fact, I would go so far as to say that we cannot successfully maneuver our way through the present without the wealth of experience and wisdom we’ve accumulated from the past.

When I talk about reinventing our lives, I’m not just talking about getting used to new outward circumstances, although that may play a part in our reinvention. Moving into retirement, experiencing the empty nest syndrome, going through a health crisis or a mid-life crisis—all are external circumstances that may at times thrust us into a new place, and cause us to reconfigure our lives.

While those things may contribute to reshaping our lives, I’m talking about something a bit deeper that may or may not be stimulated by outside forces. I’m talking about a fundamental change within us that somehow causes us to see

ourselves, life, the world, others, in a whole new way. I'm talking about what leadership guru Ron Heifetz refers to as an adaptive challenge, rather than a technical fix.

Allow me to explain. A technical fix is when we use the same old tried and true methods to remedy a situation. We lose our job, and we fix it by finding another one, never really doing some soul searching to find out how this particular experience is changing us. We lose a loved one, and we fix it by busying ourselves so much that we don't have time to think about it. We go through a divorce, and we immediately try to attach ourselves to someone else so it won't hurt so much.

What Heifetz means by the term "adaptive challenge" is that we undergo a fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world around us. It is a whole new mindset; it is a whole new way of being. For instance, we lose our job, and instead of instantly going out to find another one, we take some time to reassess and reevaluate who we are now, and what that means for our next step. We lose a loved one, and we allow ourselves to experience the full range of emotions and grow through the grief experience into a new person. We go through a divorce, and we allow ourselves time to determine who we are now, and what we have learned from that experience, before reinvesting ourselves in another person or activity.

On a non-personal scale, St. Luke's Church (the "big" church) is undergoing a fundamental change in what it means to be St. Luke's Church. For years, St. Luke's has built facilities and brought people into the church building to become part of "the church." Until The Garden, there really wasn't any form of church that was seen or understood as being apart from the church building and people located at a specific physical site.

Now, that is changing for St. Luke's. Instead of measuring the church by the number of people who come to it, St. Luke's is beginning to talk about how many people are going from there out into the world to share God's love. While that probably should have been a given all along, it simply hasn't been articulated or lived out as effectively as it might. In the process of thinking through what all this means for the big church, it's clear that an adaptive challenge is being undertaken. As this transition begins to unfold, it will also cause many of those associated with St. Luke's to reconsider and reframe what it means to be a person of faith living in today's world.

Tom Ehrich, an Episcopal priest and columnist, wrote about this very thing a while back. Actually, it was in the context of making a visit to Garrison Keillor's Prairie Home Companion show. While he was waiting on the show to start, he began to wonder how Keillor and his colleagues stay fresh. After all, the show has become a mainstay for many, and to tinker with it and change it in any way would be unpopular. He likened changing the show to changing the menu for Thanksgiving dinner....It's a "no-no."—at least in the eyes of many people.

Ehrich wrote, “But if you don’t tinker once in a while, how do you keep your imagination fired? If you can’t change something, how can you know it? In the absence of re-invention, formula replaces life.” You may recall that Keiller walked away from the show at one point in time. He never said why exactly, and after trying other things, he started *Prairie Home Companion* again. However, it’s different, and that’s probably because Keillor is different now.

That which applied to *Prairie Home Companion* applies to us individually, too. Ehrich wrote, “‘Change for the sake of change’ is a good idea. ‘Re-inventing the wheel’ is an essential for growth.” He went on to say, “A person who doesn’t risk self-examination will lose touch with reality.”

I wonder if that isn’t a part of what the Bible passage for today is talking about. This is the writing of Paul, and version we have from *The Message* puts it like this: “Each of you must take responsibility for doing the creative best you can with your own life.”

What is Paul saying here? I’m certain there are numerous ways to interpret this passage, but the way I read it—at least at this point in time—is that it is up to us to take personal responsibility to live our lives the way God intended. That is, it is our responsibility to live our lives in tune with the fullness and goodness of the life God offers us, being our authentic selves, using the skills and abilities we have to the fullest.

The phrase “creative best” says a lot, too. To be creative means to bring newness to life. It involves seeing in a new way; in involves living differently today than we did 5 years ago, or 10 years ago, or even yesterday. As someone has said, “New times require new identities.”

I would guess that if we were completely honest, we’d have to admit that some of the old identities were not really for us anyway. Maybe we were trying to please a parent, or a teacher, or our life partner, or our kids, or we were trying to fill a certain role or position. But that may not be truly who we are.

When we’re thinking about reinventing ourselves, it seems to me that there’s a key question to ask ourselves. That question is this: “Are we really being who we are, who we were created to be, or are we playing a game of make believe?”

Forging a new identity will require some creativity for many of us, and it will also mean that we need to take some time for introspection. Maybe it’s important for us to ask ourselves questions like, “Who am I anyway, really, at the center of my being? What does it mean to be me? How do I live as the real ‘me’?”

In addition to asking ourselves the tough question, something else may be necessary. To know our real selves may require giving up who we think we are. That may well be the only way we’ll be able to see more clearly who we really are, and who we’re meant to be. Charles DuBos said “The important thing is this: to be able at any moment to sacrifice what we are for what we could become.” I think

he's right.

Please understand that I'm not talking about the job we hold or the role we might be filling. I'm talking about knowing who we are totally and completely, at the core of our being. The way I might phrase this is "Who does God see when looking at me?" God probably knows our true selves better than we do, but how can we become more spiritually attuned so that we might be able to catch at least a few glimpses of what God might see within us?

Oftentimes, when we're willing to be open enough to engage in that kind of exploration, it can seem pretty risky. We run the risk of discovering something Joseph Campbell said about self-exploration at midlife. He said, "Midlife is when you reach the top of the ladder and find that it was against the wrong wall."

Campbell may have been referring to midlife, and to the career ladder, but his statement applies to whatever "ladder" we're on. The ladder could also be the ladder of family, or a goal we'd set for ourselves. Or it may be the ladder that reveals to us the emptiness of the life we're living. We may wind up asking ourselves, "Is that all there is?" We may find ourselves yearning for a life of meaning, a life of learning what it means to live the way we were created to live.

When we're willing to ask the questions and engage in some self discover, we may in fact determine that it's time to re-invent ourselves. And you know, this may occur time and time again in our lives, as we change and grow and develop and experience more of life. When we're being creative and inventive, I really believe that's when God is cheering us on, shouting from the center of the field, "You go for it!"

### **Closing:**

What an exciting time in life it is for us! We're living the great adventure of living life on the creative edge, giving it our all. And God is with us all the way, guiding us to invent and reinvent ourselves day after day. Are we ready? I hope the answer is yes.

Have a great Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.