

Chapter 5: Growing Up and Growing Old (the 1990s)

THE CULTURE

We finally start reading the obituaries. Our sports heroes are now kids! The myth of mid-life crisis becomes reality, and it's not a pretty sight.

Throughout this book I've divided history into ten-year segments. I talked about the '50s, the '60s, the '70s, and the '80s as if somehow events shape themselves conveniently into individual, neatly wrapped, decade-long, packages for our edification. Of course, it doesn't work that way, and we all know it. Life is messy. Our attempts to categorize in order to make some sense of it all is ultimately futile. But the process has something positive going for it. It does promote a systematic understanding that can be helpful.

That aside, we need to remind ourselves that most often events take time to unfold. Something that happens early in life can wait for decades before its ramifications are understood. After all, that's what psychotherapy is usually all about. We look to the past to understand the present. Something happened back then, we repressed it, and it's only now making itself apparent. Realizing it is supposed to bring about freedom and healing.

In my experience, the '90s were all about revealing exactly that kind of process. Of course, I reached life's half-way point as the





*Triathlete — Final Triathlon at
Daytona Beach, FL (2006).*

'90s began to unfold, so I may be prejudiced. Mid-life is a time of retrospection. You are now old enough to know that your life is half over. You still have a lot of time left, God willing, but having already lived more than forty years and seen the first half fly by, you realize you can, for the first time, conceptualize the amount of time remaining. It causes you to assess things in a new way. Gone are any youthful fantasies of living forever. That train has now left the station.

Sometimes you play the “one more time” game. You want to experience a high-point one more time while you’re still young enough

or have the strength to enjoy it. Stories abound about middle aged men going off with a motorcycle, a hot car, or a younger woman in a futile attempt to relive their youth. In my case, it meant getting in better shape so I could do more long-distance bike trips. It meant participating in more triathlons. It meant becoming the full-time pastor of a bigger church that paid more money. It meant, ugh, identifying with the establishment. I even started to wear a pulpit robe when I preached after I went back to school to finally earn my master’s degree. The robe was a uniform, and I embraced it.

But it wasn’t just me who was changing. The whole country had changed as well. Take just one area of interest—America’s eating habits. We became a nation of fast-food addicts, and our weight and girth changed accordingly. From Eggo waffles to Hot Pockets, the days of a home-cooked meal while the family sat around



the dining table were long gone.

Stick with me here. This isn't a sudden course correction. It really fits in with the subject of change. We are what we eat, so if we want to understand why we are the way we are—somewhat bloated in both body and mind—it helps to consider, among many other reasons, of course, what happened to our changing diet. The change happened slowly and had its roots way back in the '50s, but by the '90s



The robe was a uniform, and I embraced it — Easter Sunrise Service at Port Orange, FL (2007).

its effects had become obvious. It's a fascinating study that helps describe what happened to us as a culture.

I started thinking about all this because I was part of the back-to-the-land movement of the '70s and '80s. Many folks my age started to grow bigger and bigger gardens and raise animals for home consumption. We lived on mini-farms, even in cities if zoning permitted it. I didn't live in a city but on a rather small parcel of land on which I found a way to grow all our vegetables, cut wood for heat, and raise three pigs, a passel of rabbits, chickens, a steer, and a lamb every year. For the first time ever, I enjoyed eating things such as tomatoes and brussels sprouts, lamb stew, and chicken dishes for which the recipe didn't begin with "fill the frying pan with oil." Fresh peas and parsnips after a hard frost were a revelation. Homegrown bacon tasted like a new food group.

I had to laugh one particular spring morning at the post office, where the town gathered to share gossip and the latest status report on the state of the black flies. We used to stand in small groups, waving our arms in front of our faces to ward off the day's gathering hoards of the pesky critters. We called it the "Royalston



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A New England garden — Roy-alston, MA (late-1970s).

Salute,” and anyone who lived there learned it rather quickly. At any rate, one fellow back-to-the-lander, a recent acolyte from New York City, of all places, had recently experienced the wonder of his former chicks all grown up and laying eggs every morning like real, live hens. He was getting a dozen a day. “That’s maximum production!” he exclaimed. Clearly you can take the boy out of the city, but you can’t take the city’s vernacular out of the boy.

I really shouldn’t have found it funny. We all ordered chicks through the mail from Sears. It was a common occurrence to find two or even three batches of cheeping, newly hatched chickens being watched over with loving care by the postmistress of our town. The first time I received mine, I, only half tongue-in-cheek, asked her, “Now what do I do with them?”

“You put them in the kitchen behind the wood stove where they’ll keep warm.”

“How long do I keep them there?”

“Until your wife says, ‘Get those chickens out of my kitchen!’”

While a few, like me, grew their own food, the rest of America started ordering out. We have yet to change that trend. American weight climbed like never before.

Bill Glass once played defensive end for the Detroit Lions football team. He was a member of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and, when I was a young boy, came to our church to speak



at a father/son banquet one night. His talk was inspirational and fun, but in the course of regaling us with football stories, he talked about some of the offensive linemen he had to block every Sunday afternoon. Some of them weighed up to 210 pounds! We were impressed. Of course, now, 60 years later, there are many professional football players that top the scales at 300 pounds or more. But back then, a 210-pound-man was gigantic. Because I weigh more than that now, I think of his speech whenever I fly in an airplane that seems to have seats much too small for comfort.

Aside from the return-to-nature experiment that quickly melted before the economic realities of the time, the '90s were a strange decade. On the one hand, it was a fairly happy time as long as you had a decent job and could feed your family.

If you had any money at all, you could invest it in ways that made more money. A five percent return on even simple investments, such as certificates of deposit, was fairly common. There was also a looming thing called the Internet on the horizon that seemed as if it might produce a few laughs before it faded. If you knew how to do it, you could find such things as weather maps that updated themselves every five or six hours. It was fun.

Everyone knew the theme song from *Friends* and watched *Seinfeld* (not that there was anything wrong with that!), so there was a sense of community. Fast food was all the rage. Dance movies were born, at least for those who had never heard of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. The Hubble Space Telescope launched. The Gulf War raged, but we were winning, so that was okay. The median household income grew by ten percent and the Dow Jones by 309 percent. Plus, for the first time in a long, long time, men could go to work without necessarily having to wear neckties. The *New York Times* has since called it America's happiest decade.

Looking back, however, there was also a hollowness to the decade. Something was missing. To be fair, at the time I thought it was just me. But now that I read reports of those times, and talk to others who lived through them, I'm convinced it was more than just my own personal experience. We all seemed to be waiting for something.



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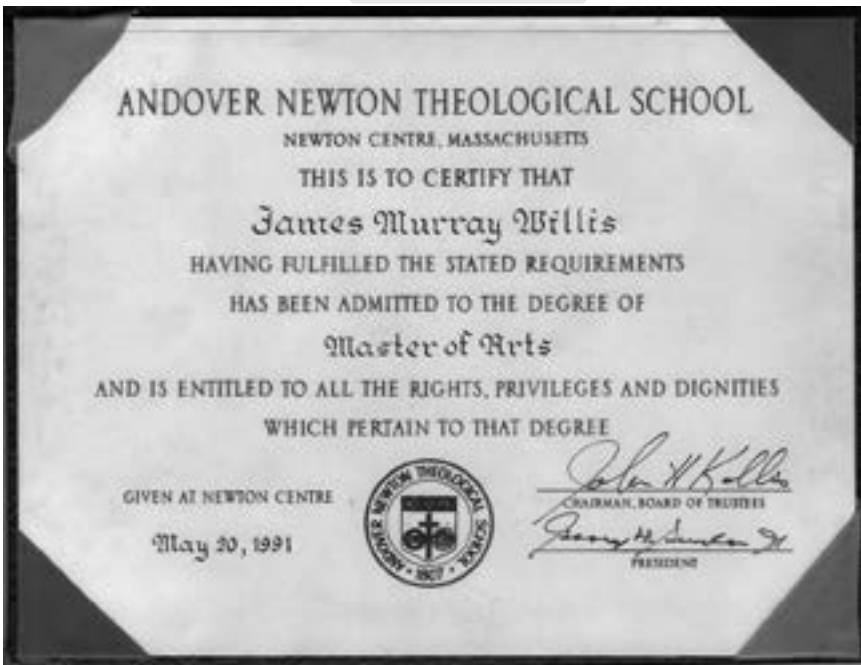
Maybe it was the coming turn of the century. What would happen to computers? Would the electric grid shut down? Were Nostradamus and the Mayans right? Would the world as we knew it come to an end? I really didn't know. I certainly hadn't built a fall-out shelter in my backyard. I suspected that nothing drastic would happen. But there was change in the air, and there was nothing anyone could do except wait.

As for me, I felt the need to somehow prepare for a future I didn't yet understand, so I went back to seminary.

There's something freeing about taking courses and realizing you have more experience in ministry than most of your professors. In some cases, I even *knew* more than they did. Their knowledge was specific. Mine was much broader and usually a lot more practical. In some cases, that kind of perspective represents a greater grasp of the subject.

So they couldn't get away with anything. Rarely could they talk about a subject I was not already familiar with, and they soon

After only 20 years!





learned they couldn't bluff their way through an answer. For the first time in my life, I started to feel comfortable in a classroom, and I actually excelled as a student. I knew what I didn't know, and wanted to correct my shortcomings in subjects I was sure would come in handy. It was liberating in every way and no doubt changed my life. In short, I began to believe in myself.

A few years after I got my new degree, I became a college professor.

THE QUESTION

*How do you wisely use the time you have left to complete your quest?
And is it worth it?*

When you begin what is essentially a new career, things change. When that change happens in mid-life or later, you have already accumulated enough varied experience so that seemingly unrelated areas of life now begin to overlap. New college professors have to learn how to stand in front of a group and lecture, for instance. I had been doing that as a minister for years. New professors must learn how to prepare talking points and then discard them at a moment's notice when your reading of the room reveals they are inadequate for that particular group at that particular time. I was well trained in that skill. New professors need to understand how to take criticism without being personally insulted. That is almost a textbook description of a church pastor.

In short, I took to teaching like a duck takes to water. And because I was an adjunct professor rather than a tenured full-timer, I didn't have to attend board meetings. I loved it. And the enthusiasm of my students was infectious. No one studies Comparative Religion unless they want to. It's not a required course, so I got the cream of the crop. And my salary didn't depend upon pleasing people. Unlike parishioners, my audience had to come back, whether they agreed with what I said or not. They were engaged. They were inquisitive. They were prepared, for the most part, and I really enjoyed working with them.