

Sermon for USNF Summer Service of 26 July 2015

“In the Autumn of Our Life”

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The Yeomen of the Guard, by Gilbert and Sullivan, takes place in the Tower of London several centuries ago, and the Yeomen of the title are semi-retired soldiers. We just heard the Yeomen's opening chorus, where they explain that they have left the uncertain and dangerous life of the battlefield and are now “in ample clover”, like stud horses. Their duties are apparently restricted to choral singing and searching for the occasional escaped prisoner. They have reliable pay and meals, and the opportunity to provide for their families, the townspeople who celebrate them. They sing “this the autumn of our life, this the evening of our day”.

What struck me about this piece when we performed it with Valley Light Opera last fall was how it places retirement as part of a natural order. The year ends with autumn, to be followed eventually by spring, and the day ends with evening, to be followed eventually by morning. Of course the autumn of our life and the evening of our day are followed by the spring of someone else's life and the morning of someone else's day. But many of us, especially in New England, find autumn to be the most beautiful time of the year, and everyone loves a good sunset. And the Yeomen are happy where they are—they “recall without repining all the heat of bygone noon”.

Lately I have been thinking more often about aging and retirement. My wife Jessica retired from teaching high school Latin a year ago. Some of my most important colleagues have retired from my department at the University. Jessica's parents, Marjorie and David, moved near us two years ago and we spend a lot of time with them, seeing them and helping them accommodate themselves to being older and being in a new place. I am not about to retire myself, however, assuming my health remains good. I'm fifty-six, the same age Jimmy Carter was when he was voted out of office, but I probably have about ten years before I choose to retire. As a professor I'll most likely be able to do that on my own terms, keeping on with the parts of the job I most like. But at some point I will be unable or unwilling to work further.

Like many of us, I find my work to be a fundamental part of my identity. My first answer to the question “Who am I?” is usually “I teach computer science at UMass”. If your work is your life, and your work ends, does your life end as well? Jimmy Carter tells us that in his youth many more people worked until they died, for lack of an alternative. Now, though, if our material circumstances allow it, the end of our working life gives us a choice. We either make a new non-working life, or we don't. Many people actually die soon after retiring, unable to make the transition. With no work, it seems that they have no direction.

King Lear famously described his plan for retirement: “to shake all care and business from our age, while we unburdened crawl toward death”. Once we start that crawl, what do we have to look forward to? Our two love songs today, written by two different young people, both say exactly what old age is for—companionship with a life partner. Both songs even mention tending the garden together—who could ask for more?

I've been married to Jessica for half my life, twenty-eight years, and we have a reasonable hope of living together for at least twenty-eight more. We've raised a daughter who is now more or less off on her own, and may someday provide us with a Vera, Chuck, and Dave for our knee. I think our marriage has been very successful, and it's taken the kind of adjustment that Jimmy Carter talked about in his marriage. We do many things together, and support one another in everything, but we attend different churches, sing in different choral groups, and each have a number of separate interests. We've been lucky so far. Many people never find the love of their life, or they die, or it doesn't work out. Almost worse than that is what happened to the man in the John Prine song, who is part of an elderly couple that find themselves still together but with nothing to say to one another.

There is a statement widely attributed to Sigmund Freud that the cornerstones of our humanness are work and love. If we live past the end of our work, or we outlive or become separated from the ones we have loved all our lives, where do we then find those cornerstones?

Jimmy Carter says near the end of his book:

“Suppose we have every material thing we need, plus a good education, a stable family, physical and mental ability, and some good hobbies. For many people, that's still not enough. Within each successful and happy life there also needs to be some concept of greatness, some superb example to follow, something on which we can always depend, something that is inspirational, exalting, transcendent.”

Of course Jimmy Carter, a lifelong Christian, is at least in part talking about Jesus, for his own concept of greatness. But his overall advice on retirement is not dependent on that, and makes perfect sense from a secular perspective. He urges us to find worthy work to do, and to do it in company, which may mean joining an organization or even forming one. He founded the Carter Center, which works around the world to “advance human rights and alleviate human suffering”. That's more than most of us will achieve in our own retirement, but most of us are not Jimmy Carter. What sort of things might we create, in organizations on our own scale?

Forty years ago my friend Bill Venman, who conducted the Gilbert and Sullivan piece just now, gathered some people together in his Amherst living room and founded Valley Light Opera. Today VLO still puts on a light opera every November, usually Gilbert and Sullivan but this coming fall ranging as far as Lerner and Loewe's *Brigadoon*. We have spring shows, Christmas caroling, and other activities, even coming together to help a member with a summer church service.

I've been with VLO for twelve years now, nearly a quarter of my life, and many of my fellow members have been involved for much longer. My fellow Yeoman Glen Gordon, who played the piano for us, has been in all but one of the forty fall shows. As time passes, peoples' abilities change. Their voices change, they learn a new skills, or they become less able to do what they once did, or they become unable to participate at all. As I've watched this happen, I've been struck by how organically the company absorbs these changes, always welcoming what each person can do and attracting new members to fulfill the new needs. Some people come and go, but enough of them discover that VLO can be a family to them and stay with us for many years.

I think that's what affected me so much when I was a Yeoman last fall, and why I wanted to share some of that experience with you today. Just as our characters were at a particular appropriate place in their military careers, and celebrated it and were celebrated for it, we singers were also celebrating and being celebrated for our place in VLO. Unlike the man in the song, we had people who cared about us.

I'm glad to have such a model of an organization that organically includes people of different ages, backgrounds, and skill levels. You might even call VLO a sort of “welcoming and inclusive intergenerational congregation”, to use a phrase from the mission statement of this Society. (The statement is printed at the bottom of the back page of your order of meeting.) I think that VLO is also “a caring community where children and adults can safely learn and grow — where we are supported and challenged on life’s journeys, called to service and to our higher selves, and inspired to better our world.” (Do we really better our world by putting on operas? I certainly think so.)

Organizations need founders, leaders, and foot soldiers. In VLO I've been a foot soldier—I hope a good one, who can be counted on to do what's needed to put on a good show. In my other theatre group, Hampshire Shakespeare Company, I've recently become president. I'm looking to VLO for lessons on the mechanics of running a theatre company, certainly. But the more important lessons I'm constantly looking for are how to make a theatre company a caring community, where children and adults can safely learn and grow.

In this Society I've also been something of a leader, serving on the Board and the Worship Committee, and I've tried to use the lessons I've learned in VLO to carry out those jobs better and help the Society run better. If you're one of our members or friends, I hope you will do the same. If you're considering getting more involved with us, I hope you'll find that caring community here. We are people who believe many of the same things and many different things, and we work together to do things, like recognizing employers paying a living wage, or marching for action on climate change, or celebrating our milestones, or memorializing our dead. Or for that matter, running summer services about aging and retirement.

Ralph Vaughn Williams' tune “The Call” is in our hymnal twice. I've used Hymn #17 before in a service, with lyrics taken from William Blake: “Every night and every morn, some to misery are born; every morn and every night, some are born to sweet delight.” But today I chose Hymn #89 with the original lyrics, from a poem by George Herbert:

*Come my way, my truth, my life:
Such a way as gives us breath,
Such a truth as ends all strife,
Such a life as killeth death.*

Ok, I read that poem in college. George Herbert was an Anglican priest, and in this poem he is totally talking about Jesus. But I'm going to take that last line totally out of context and ask you: What does it mean to lead such a life as killeth death?

Jimmy Carter founded a center to advance human rights and alleviate human suffering, and his life has most likely prevented or postponed a great many deaths. Many good people, including many in this Society, lead lives of activism for various causes, perhaps one way or another killing death. But on a smaller scale, I think we kill death when we form communities and work to keep them going. The goal of our community may be a great one, or just a valid one like producing operas or plays. When we build a community, we provide the work and the love that we need, and our fellow people need, to go on themselves. If our influence lasts beyond our lifetime, then to some small extent we kill our own death.

It's been a particular pleasure for me today to bring together two of my own communities, Valley Light Opera and the Unitarian Society of Northampton and Florence. Let me conclude with the words from our meditation, from W.E.B. Dubois:

The prayer of our souls is a petition for persistence, not for the one good deed or single thought, but deed on deed and thought on thought, until day calling unto day shall make a life worth living.