

Forty^{3/4} Going on Sixty-Five

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Black balloons, a coffee mug, and a banner all announce that today I turn 40. Although their message decries “over the hill,” I feel intrigued beginning another chapter in my life. To my parents I’m still a young man; to my peers I’m middle-aged; to my children I’m old. Twenty years ago I anticipated graduation from college; 20 years from now I’ll near retirement. I remember clearly the past; I’m experiencing the present; but what will the future hold?

Moving past this milestone has focused my thoughts on the journey ahead. What will my life be like at 50, 60, or 70? The images of several friends in those age groups flash across my mind. These seniors are not old, they just began life a few years earlier than I did. They’ve had good times and hard times in the past, but they live in the present and maximize each day. For me they are models. They are the type of people I want to become. Let me tell you about a few of them.

Ben is *Mr. Fixit*. When my wife and I bought an antique sewing machine, it was Ben who repaired the woodwork. He also built a wall rack that for 15 years has decorated our bathroom.

Ben doesn’t help just me; each week he gives time to his church and to friends. Whether it’s a cabinet that needs building or a window that needs adjustment, Ben tackles the job. He’s not a workaholic; the time he spends with Rachel and with golf testifies to that. But at his own pace he makes his tools and skill available to others.

Ethel and Norvella donate 2 or 3 days a weeks as *volunteer office workers*. Ethel assists her church by corresponding with missionaries. Novella runs the copy machine and other equipment. Other staff are more visible and therefore receive frequent recognition. But insiders know that much credit is due to the behind-the-scenes work of Ethel and Norvella.

I have also been fortunate to know Earl and Ruby, *hospitality specialists*. Though retired for a number of years, they chose to keep their relationships open with couples of all ages. They systematically invited a number of young couples into their home for dinner. They just wanted to get to know them and be available to them. Earl and Ruby demonstrate to me that in my later years I can still enjoy friendships with all adults.

Another couple, Obie and Kay, can be called *surrogate grandparents*. They have no children of their own, but they provided a vital relationship to our children when Ben and Betsy were young. Obie would swing with the baby on the porch when Mom needed a break. He would walk with toddling Ben, and when older let him hang onto the lawn mower as they walked back and forth across the grass. Kay often answered her front door to find a little tyke asking, "Cookie, Kay?"

When I think of Carl and Lydia, I think of *gentle teachers*. Periodically our family would drive out to their farm. Carl would take Ben and Betsy into the cellar and show them his arrowhead and wood collections. The gentleness of Carl and Lydia made my children and our whole family feel special.

Some of my friends are widows and widowers. When I think of Cora, I think *artist*. In her sunset years Cora has painted many picture. Some are in public buildings and some in personal residences, like the beautiful scene that adorns our living room.

Mildred is a *lover of babies*. Mildred has difficulty walking, but one of the highlights of her life is the turn she takes working in her church nursery. Mildred has found that working once a month with newborns and infants allows her to be part of a team who help younger mothers.

John uses a good portion of his time visiting others. He is *Mr. Encourager*. Though on a fixed income he drives considerable distances to visit the less fortunate or call on friends who are hospitalized. John spends time sharing lonely hours with those in need.

Then I think of Aaron and Anne, *musicians*. Anne has played the piano for years, but Aaron did not start playing the guitar until retirement. Now they play in a string band performing at parties, banquets, and nursing homes. Their music lifts the spirits of all.

As I reflect upon this list of friends, I see a common thread running through their lives. First, they are active. Their health and mobility vary, but all have chosen to engage in life. They affirm the conviction, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:13, NIV).

Second, they are content. Their security rests on internal satisfaction. Again they share the attitude of Paul who declared: "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want" (Philippians 4:12, NIV).

Third, they are giving. They have somehow managed the busyness of life, so their daily hours are not spent only on themselves. Centuries earlier Jesus Christ thought that anyone who seeks to keep his life will lose it, but the person who is willing to give his life will find meaning. (See Mark 8:35.)

I wish I had known Ben, John, Ethel, and Mildred when they were mid-lifers. I imagine they had already started practicing the principles of involvement, contentment, and giving. As I turn this milestone in my life, I look forward to an even deeper maturity, thanks to the examples from these friends.