

Turning Sixty

by

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For many years I walked six miles a day. I walked to clear my head, experience street life, dispel afternoon depression. Without fully realizing it, during those walks I daydreamed incessantly. Sometimes I daydreamed the past—idealizing remembered moments of passion and adventure—but mostly I daydreamed the future: the tomorrow in which I would write a great book, meet the companion of my life, become the woman of character I had yet to become. Ah, that tomorrow! How wonderfully its energetic projections got me through innumerable days of waste and passivity. I never tired of imagining new scenarios—depending on the hour and the mood—for any or all parts of my daydreamed life as I tramped the streets and roads and boulevards that many years of steady walking covered. Then, just as I was turning sixty, a remarkable development sent this cozy set-up into a tailspin from which I never recovered.

Walking along a lovely road at the edge of Tucson (I was teaching at the University of Arizona that spring), taking pleasure in the physical beauty that surrounded me (the mountains, the desert, the blue sky, the clear light), I was, as usual, running a movie in my head. Suddenly, a kind of visual static cut across my inner field of vision. The “story” began literally to break up before my eyes, and then it actually terminated itself. At the same time a bitter, acrid taste began to fill my mouth and, deep within, I felt myself shrinking from I knew not what.

The entire incident was so strange, so baffling, that it mystified rather than alarmed me, and I thought to myself, “An aberrant occurrence, expect no repeats.” But the next day exactly the same thing happened. There I was, walking along, another movie underway, when again: the story short-circuited itself, the acrid taste filled my mouth,

and again I felt myself blanching before some un-nameable anxiety. When on the third day the entire process repeated itself, it became clear that a sea change was taking place.

Before long I was sufficiently gun-shy—I had begun to dread that bitter taste in my mouth—to want to suppress the daydreaming; and lo and behold, it turned out that I could. Now, no sooner did the pictures start to form in my head than I found myself able to wipe them clean before they could complete themselves. It was then that the really strange and interesting thing happened. A vast emptiness, black and vacant, began to open up behind my eyes as I went about my daily business. The daydreaming, it seemed, had occupied more “space” than I’d imagined. It was as though only a narrow portion of my consciousness had ever been concentrated on the here and the now; the majority of the time spent inside my waking head, I now saw, was routinely taken up with fantasies of either the past or the future. I hardly ever occupied the actual ongoing present.

The insight was stunning. I began to realize what daydreaming had done for me—and to me.

Ever since I could remember I’d felt compelled by the fear that, inevitably, I would be found wanting. Apprehension was my advance man: if I did the work I wanted to do, it was certain not to measure up; if I pursued the people I wanted to know, I was bound to be rejected; if I made myself as attractive as I could be, I would still be ordinary looking. This anxiety never left me. As a result, I applied myself to my work, but not fully; I’d make one move toward people I liked, but never two; I wore make-up but dressed badly. To do any or all of those things well was to engage heedlessly with life—love it more than I loved my anxieties—and this I could not do. What I could do, apparently, was to go on yearning for “things” to be different so that I would be different; and this, without interruption, for decades on end.

Turning sixty was like being told I had six months to live. Suddenly, I was forced to see that retreating into the solace and refuge of fantasizing “tomorrow” had gotten me through years and years of failing to look squarely at what must be looked at squarely. Of

this I was absolutely certain; the certainty came from the fact that now whenever I started to fall into either “yesterday” or “tomorrow” the bad taste at once filled my mouth. There was no dreamy future, that taste told me, there was only the immensity of the vacated present, waiting to be filled with actuality. If to this task I did not bend myself, there really would *be* no tomorrow.

All this was ten years ago, and I think I can honestly say that most days and most nights of these years I have struggled to pay full attention to the task I have set myself. I struggle because this last part of my earthly existence is a piece of life that deserves to be lived. If I should fall into the banality of regretting that what is behind me is not before me, I would be letting it be stolen from me. Then I would have neither yesterday nor today—much less tomorrow.