

2

A Faithful Reunion

.

Reunion: the act of reuniting; a gathering of persons after separation

Faithful: steadfast, reliable, conscientious

Mentor: a wise, loyal adviser; a teacher or coach

.

THE PRECEDING CHAPTER ENDED on a rather self-assured—some might say pretentious—note. I would set aside my resistances to entering older adulthood and instead go charging into it with confidence and passion, and show the timorous ones how a professional does it. In most fields of endeavor, it takes years of concentrated effort and self-discipline to become a professional. Yet I was going to show everyone, including those who had been planning for their entry into older adulthood, how a real professional does it. The very idea that I would do this in spite of the fact that I hadn't given it any more thought than had the half-wit camper and dumbbell hiker given prior thought to how to create a forest fire seems rather ridiculous.

Clearly, I would need help in making the transition to older adulthood, and several colleagues and friends pointed out to me the various

avenues for obtaining help. These included asking people who *were* professionals to tell me their secrets, reading books on the subject, and going to talks and lectures sponsored by retirement communities near where I live. I did the first two but could not bring myself to do the third. These conversations and books were most helpful, but this chapter is about a resource that I drew upon that no one had talked to me about, and that I stumbled upon by chance. This chapter is not so much an argument for this particular resource—although I would certainly recommend it—as it is a case for developing one’s own approach or method. In fact, the resource that I drew upon stood in marked contrast to the approaches that I have mentioned, all of which tend to involve listening to expert advisers. The process began with the announcement of the reunion marking the fiftieth anniversary of the graduation of my high school class.

My High School Reunion

A few years ago I received a mailing advising that I mark my calendar for a very important event: my high school class’s fiftieth-year reunion party was approaching. The date had been set, and it was time to make reservations. A list of class members who were known to have died and another list of classmates whose whereabouts were unknown were included in the mailing. We were asked to supply any information we might have about the unknown so that they too could be sent a copy of the mailing.

As I read through the list of those who had died, I had a sickening feeling not unlike the feeling that many have when they visit the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington DC. I was surprised that so many of the members of the class were no longer living. Then I read through the names of those who could not be located, and I had another reaction: my best friend was on that list.

I recalled that the last time I saw him was at our graduation ceremony. Neither of us made an effort to stay in touch after that. Despite the fact that his grades were excellent, he had decided not to go to college, and would not be persuaded otherwise, while I was going to take courses at the local state college in the summer so that I could begin piling up credits in hopes of getting college over with as quickly as possible. I had no time for high school friends, or, for that matter, for reflecting on my high school experience.

Now, fifty years later, I was not at all interested in attending the class reunion. I sent the class-reunion committee a check to help defray the costs of the mailings, and suggested to the committee treasurer that if the check didn't bounce, she would know that I was better off now than I had been in high school. A donation, a little joke—and I felt I was off the hook.

But the mailings kept coming: there was more information about the dress code at the country club where the dinner and dance were to be held, the fact that a tour of the high school had been arranged, and more requests for information about those whose whereabouts were unknown. My best friend had not been located. In fact, the list was essentially the same as the previous list had been. No one seemed to know the whereabouts of the missing, or if they knew, they had not taken the trouble to inform the reunion committee.

The mailings—there were several more—began to weigh on me. I'd received college-reunion mailings before, but these were summarily tossed into the wastebasket without much thought. So too were reunion mailings from the schools where I had received advanced degrees. Why did I take the time to read the high-school class-reunion mailings? Why did it concern me that my best friend had not been located? After all, would I have contacted him if he had been found? I doubt it. So what was so special or unique about these class-reunion mailings?

A couple of explanations occurred to me: One was that my retirement was imminent, and the reunion mailings took me back in time to when my initial struggles to discover my vocation in life had begun. The other was that, having announced my retirement a couple years ahead of time, I was experiencing some of the same emotions that I had first experienced as a high school student: marginalization, isolation, directionlessness, and uncertainty of what the future held for me. In other words, the mailings were as much related to the present as they were to the past.

Still, I found it rather incredible that a large number of my high school classmates would soon be gathering together to have dinner, to dance to the music of "our era," and to tour the building where we had sat in classes, eaten lunch, gone to assemblies, and made fools of ourselves in the gymnasium, either trying to learn modern dance steps or to throw a ball into a ten-foot-high basket. Why would they want to relive those memories? Why would they risk meeting someone with whom they thought they were in love but who dumped them for someone else? Why would they chance seeing the guy who beat them out for a starting

position on the varsity baseball team while they sat on the bench, game after game, trying their best to put the good of the team ahead of their own personal ambition and profound disappointment? Why would some of them risk the likelihood that no one would remember who they were, or of finding themselves without anyone to talk with?

I posed these questions to a friend who had recently attended his own fiftieth-year high school reunion party. Why did he go? Well, he had grown up in a working-class part of town, and he wanted his high school classmates to know that he had made good in his professional life. But, more important, the reunion committee had mentioned in one of their mailings that several of their teachers had agreed to attend the reunion dinner, and one of these teachers was a man who had inspired him to set his personal and vocational goals far beyond his working-class status.

“Did you have a good time?” I asked.

“Yes, I was able to impress a lot of people with what I did in life. On the other hand, I got into an argument with this one jerk because he wouldn’t move to another table so that the teacher who meant so much to me could sit in a place of honor. He was a jerk then, and he’s still a jerk.”

This was not a very persuasive explanation for why someone would go to a high school reunion. But the very fact that it was not persuasive forced me to ask myself why I found the mailings not only irritating but also unexpectedly troubling, and the fact that my best friend could not be located provided a useful clue to why this was so: as the mailings kept coming, I slowly realized that the class reunion was not, after all, the issue. Rather, the real issue was that the high school boy who was somewhere deep inside me was missing too. When I left high school with such finality and determination to get on with my life, I had left him behind—wandering about the empty halls, lost, as it were, in a kind of modern limbo not unlike the medieval version where, as Dante suggests, the lamentations of its occupants “are not the shrieks of pain, but hopeless sighs.”¹

Then, however, it occurred to me that he might not be the lamentable one, for I reminded myself of the fact that many artists have portrayed Christ’s descent into limbo and, in doing so, infused its occupants with a profound sense of hope.² This being so, perhaps my need to find him was greater than his need to find me.

1. Quoted in Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, 336.
2. See Capps and Carlin, *Living in Limbo*, 7–8.

But how should I go about finding him? Photos were somewhat helpful. Recollections stored in my mind were also useful. But, in the end, I decided to consider what he wrote during his senior year in high school, specifically, a story that was written for a creative writing class and published in a national student magazine.³

In the following exploration, I will view this story from the perspective of the older man who, years later, has found it (and several other high school writings) an invaluable means to experience a reunion with his younger self, and I will relate how this younger self became my mentor in my transition to older adulthood via the story he had written. I had not read the story (of which I had a copy) in many years, and I had not known of the existence of the other writings until after my father's death in 1990 led to the sale of the family home and distribution of its contents to my brothers and me. Even then, I gave them little attention until the high school class-reunion mailings continued to appear in my mailbox.

The Story of Olav and Charlie

The story, titled "Charlie," is set in western Nebraska. Some years before I wrote it, our family had visited the Lutheran mission in Axtell, where my cousin Christine had lived since birth; my uncle and aunt had been advised that it was best to place Down syndrome children in an institution. I recall that my uncle was so distressed when he broke the news to my parents that his newborn daughter was "a Mongoloid" (the term used at the time for children with Down syndrome) that I, four or five years old at the time, asked my mother if my cousin had died.⁴

While my parents visited with Christine and members of the staff, my brothers and I remained outside the building. We were entertained by a male resident who seemed to have some sort of mental abnormality. He asked us if we were from Funk, a nearby town, and when my father appeared, the man patted my father's paunch and said, "I'll go get my ball too." His Funk query and his association of our father's paunch with a ball amused us so much that we often repeated the query—"You from

3. Capps, "Charlie."

4. In a scrapbook I compiled in 1948 (when I was nine years old) there is a typed list of 37 dates to remember, most relating to the births of United States presidents. But two entries stand out—one indicates that National Child Health Day is May 1, the other notes that the first orphanage in the United States opened on August 7, 1727.

Funk?”—when we happened to encounter one another, and we too would pat our father’s stomach and say, “I’ll go get my ball too.”

This man became the main character in my story. I called him Charlie and represented him as a former farmer who was a resident in the mission, but who left every morning to hang around in the town and then returned to the mission later in the day. I suggested that he was frequently engaged in conversation with the boys in town, who enjoyed teasing him mildly, to which he would respond good-naturedly.

But this particular morning, he was in no mood for light banter. During the night, a young boy named Olav (a variant form of Olaf, a popular Scandinavian name) had found his way out of the mission building without anyone noticing and had disappeared. A rescue party had been formed, and when it failed to find him in town, it concentrated its efforts on the prairie beyond the town. Charlie told the boys that morning that he was worried about Olav: “He ain’t too strong, especially that game leg. Someone’s got to do something.” The boys didn’t share his anguish: “Why don’t you do it? We gotta go catch rabbits. It’s been nice talkin’ with you.” After they hurried off, Charlie continued talking to himself, mainly about needing a new milkweed to put into his mouth, then told himself that he would never be able to find Olav “jest talkin’ here to myself,” and he began walking.

Meanwhile, the mission chapel was filled with vigil keepers, many of whom expressed disbelief that Olav could have gone. Maybe he was only hiding, playing a trick as he had done so many times. Did someone search the barn where the old tomcat stays? Yes, “but he wasn’t there.” Then the boys returned from chasing rabbits and found that Charlie was gone. “Hey, where’s crazy Charlie?” No one seemed to know. They asked Jake, a kid who was hanging around, if he knew anything about what had happened to Charlie. He replied, “Don’t know. My dad says he took off mumbling that he thought Olav had something he had to find and that he thought he could help Olav find it.”

The story shifts at this point to Charlie and his search for Olav. It relates that

Charlie walked on, through cornfields, over fences, and waded through streams and the Papio Creek, until he at last came to the bluff overlooking the mission. He turned, gazing back. They’ll miss me at the mission, he thought. “Maybe I oughta go back.”

Instead, he decided to keep going: “No, Olav went exploring, and he’ll find it. He knows, he’s headed somewhere special.”

At this point the narrator comments on the terrain, “One doesn’t know how long a mile can be until he’s walked a Nebraska mile, a sandy, dusty, choking mile,” and says of Charlie,

Cockleburs clung to his ankles and stung. The brush cut deeply into his leg, and he slowed down. He picked up a handful of sand and let it fall from his fingers. The prairie, rolling, rolling. A weary old man trudging, with a faraway look in his sun-squinted eyes—a look which seemed to pierce through things, deeply, compassionately. A crazy old man on a foolish trek, tired, almost to the point of giving in. He stumbled once and slowly raised himself. He looked over his shoulder and cried, “I won’t be back!” It echoed through the cornfields until it whispered through the mission gate, “I won’t be back.” Charlie’s gone. He went to find the boy, Olav. He won’t be back. He won’t be back. And on he trudged. And the sand sifted slowly through his clutching hand, the sun settled silently on the treeless bluff, and a weary man stumbled and fell to the ground with that faraway look in his tear-glistened eyes. “Olav, I’ve found you! Don’t wait for me. I’m catching up, Olav, my boy, I’ve found you.” The sun sank slowly on the quiet bluff, and the sand no longer sifted through his clutching hand.

With this, the story ends.

I am not concerned here with evaluating the story as a piece of creative writing. Instead, my interest lies in what the story tells me about the high school boy who wrote it. With this in mind, I would especially take note of the narrator’s emphasis on the fact that the boy did not wander off the mission grounds for no good reason. Rather, there was a purpose to his decision to leave the mission. He was embarking on a quest, headed, as Charlie perceived, “somewhere special.” Also, because the mission was all that he had ever known, this “somewhere special” was not the home where he had lived prior to becoming a resident at the mission. This “somewhere special” serves as an image of hope.⁵ This image is intentionally undefined. The narrator does not say, for example, that the boy’s quest was for heaven, or that he was drawn by the magnetism of God. As the reader, I am rather pleased that the narrator left the object of the boy’s quest indistinct, because an effort to identify it more precisely

5. See Lynch, *Images of Hope*. See also Capps, *Agents of Hope*, 64–71.

would have turned the story into an overtly religious story. There were already enough religious associations in the story with its references to the mission and, more specifically, the mission chapel where the vigil keepers had gathered.

A second observation concerns the relationship of the old man and the young boy. The story reverses the usual expectation that the older man is the one who leads and the young boy is the one who follows. Not here. The old man is drawn by the power of the boy who is in quest of “something special.” But, as the story comes to a close, the old man does not say that he too wants what the boy is searching for. Instead, he declares, “Olav, I’ve found you! Don’t wait for me. I’m catching up. Olav, my boy, I’ve found you.” His search is for the boy himself. But Charlie doesn’t want the boy to wait for him. Instead, he wants Olav to keep going, and he will do the catching up. As he lies on the ground, Charlie declares that he has, in fact, found the boy.

As I view the story from my own vantage point as an older man, I have a deep sense of being Charlie and of my younger self as Olav. An older man is tempted to view his younger self as struggling to discover what the older man, through time and effort, has managed to find for himself. But Charlie is far wiser than this. He understands that it is the boy who is out ahead, searching for what he knows, and that he, the older man, is the one who is trying to catch up. We might say that the older self has the benefit of hindsight, but the younger self has the benefit of foresight. And as Erik H. Erikson points out in *Toys and Reasons* in his chapter titled “Seeing Is Hoping,” a play on the familiar saying that “seeing is believing,” *vision* has two meanings, namely, “the capacity to see what is before us, here and now, and the power to foresee what, if one can only believe it, might yet prove true in the future.”⁶

The Mentor Relationship

As I have reflected on this story and the other writings from my high school days, I have come to think of this boy—my younger self—as my mentor. A brief discussion of Daniel J. Levinson’s section on “The Mentor Relationship” in *The Seasons of a Man’s Life* will help to explain what I mean when I make this claim.⁷ Levinson’s book is based on his and

6. Erikson, *Toys and Reasons*, 46.

7. Levinson, *The Seasons of a Man’s Life*, 97–101. While this book was written by

his colleagues' study of forty men who were between the ages of thirty-five and forty-five when the research study got underway. Levinson felt intuitively that the years around age forty have a special importance in a person's life, and that these years represent the shift from young adulthood to middle adulthood. In the interviews, the men were encouraged to talk about their lives in earlier years, with particular emphasis on their adult years (twenties and thirties). In the course of these interviews, one of the features of what Levinson calls "the novice phase" (from roughly seventeen to thirty-two years of age) is the mentor relationship. It is one of the four major tasks of the novice phase. The others are forming and living out the Dream, forming an occupation, and forming a marriage and family.⁸

In his discussion of the mentor relationship, Levinson states that this relationship "is one of the most complex, and developmentally important, a man can have in early adulthood."⁹ He goes on to note that the mentor "is ordinarily several years older, a person of greater experience and seniority in the world the young man is entering." He adds:

No word currently in use is adequate to convey the nature of the relationship we have in mind here. Words such as "counselor" or "guru" suggest the more subtle meanings, but they have other connotations that would be misleading. The term "mentor" is generally used in a much narrower sense, to mean teacher, adviser, or sponsor. As we use the term, it means all of these things, and more.¹⁰

The mentor relationship is often located in a work setting, and the mentoring functions are often assumed by a teacher, boss, or senior colleague. But it may evolve informally when the mentor is an older friend, neighbor, or relative. It is not defined in terms of formal roles but by the

Levinson, the title page indicates that he had the collaboration of four others (Charlotte N. Darrow, Edward B. Klein, Maria J. Levinson, and Braxton McKee), all of whom were members of his research team at Yale University. His second book, *The Seasons of a Woman's Life*, was written with the collaboration of Judy D. Levinson, who arranged for its posthumous publication.

8. Levinson, *The Seasons of a Man's Life*, 90–111.

9. Ibid., 97.

10. Ibid., 97. Agnes et al., eds., *Webster's New World College Dictionary* notes that in Greek mythology Mentor was the loyal friend and adviser of Odysseus and teacher of his son Telemachus. Definitions of *mentor* are "a wise, loyal adviser" and "a teacher or coach" (900).

character of the relationship and the functions it serves. These are the major functions of the mentor:

He may act as a *teacher* to enhance the young man's skills and intellectual development. Serving as *sponsor*, he may use his influence to facilitate the young man's entry and advancement. He may be a *host* and *guide*, welcoming the initiate into a new occupational and social world and acquainting him with its values, customs, resources, and cast of characters. Through his own virtues, the mentor may be an exemplar that the protégé can admire and seek to emulate. He may provide counsel and moral support in time of stress.¹¹

In addition to these functions, the mentor may have another function—one that, in Levinson's view, is developmentally the most crucial. This is the support and facilitation of the younger man's realization of his Dream. In its primordial form, the Dream is a vague sense of self-in-adult world. It has the quality of a vision, an imagined possibility that generates excitement and vitality. Initially, it is poorly articulated and only tenuously connected to reality, but as time goes on, the developmental task is to give it greater definition and to find ways to live it out.¹² This is where the mentor can be of great importance as he “fosters the young adult's development by believing in him, sharing his youthful Dream and giving it his blessing, helping to define the newly emerging self in its newly discovered world, and creating a space in which the young man can work on a reasonably satisfactory life structure that contains the Dream.”¹³

Levinson emphasizes that the mentor's primary function is to be a transitional figure, and this means that he cannot be the young man's father (or mother).¹⁴ In early adulthood a young man needs to shift from being a child in relation to parental adults to being an adult in a peer relationship with other adults. This means that the mentor represents a

11. Levinson, *The Seasons of a Man's Life*, 98. Levinson refers to the mentor in the male gender because this reflected the fact that all the men in the study had had male mentors. He adds, however, that “a mentor may be either the same gender or cross gender” and a “relationship with a female mentor can be an enormously valuable experience for a young man, as I know from personal experience” (98).

12. *Ibid.*, 91.

13. *Ibid.*, 99.

14. Levinson is implicitly drawing here on D. W. Winnicott's concept of the “transitional object” as presented in his article “Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena,” originally published in 1953 and republished in his *Playing and Reality*, 1–25.

mixture of parent and peer and cannot be entirely one or the other: “If he is entirely a peer, he cannot represent the advanced level toward which the younger man is striving,” and “if he is very parental, it is difficult for both of them to overcome the generational difference and move toward the peer relationship that is the ultimate (though never fully realized) goal of the relationship.”¹⁵ Normally, the mentor who serves these transitional functions is older than his protégé by a half-generation, roughly eight to fifteen years. It is possible that one can function as a mentor even if one is twenty or even fifty years older if he is in touch with his own and the other’s youthful Dreams. Conversely, a person who is the same age or even younger may have important mentoring qualities if he has unusual expertise and understanding, and if both have the maturity to make good use of the mentor’s virtues. But, generally speaking, the mentor is a half-generation older than the one who is mentored.

The mentor relationship itself changes over time as the young man who is being mentored gains a fuller sense of his own authority and his capability for autonomous, responsible action. As Levinson puts it, “The younger man increasingly has the experience of ‘I am’ as an adult, and their relationship becomes more mutual.”¹⁶ This very shift plays a crucial role in the development of the younger man, as it signifies that the younger man has entered the adult world and is no longer a boy in a man’s world.

Levinson notes that in his discussion of the mentor relationship he has described it in its most developed and constructive form, but the reality may be very different. Mentoring, he observes, is not a simple, all-or-nothing matter: “A relationship may be remarkably beneficial to the younger person and yet be seriously flawed. For example, a teacher or boss cares for and sponsors a protégé, but is so afraid of being eclipsed that he behaves destructively at crucial moments.”¹⁷ On the other hand, a relationship may be very limited and yet have great value in certain respects. For example,

Some men have a purely symbolic mentor whom they never meet. Thus, an aspiring young novelist may admire an older

15. Ibid., 99.

16. Ibid. D. W. Winnicott uses the term “I AM” in his essay “The Value of Depression,” in *Home is Where We Start From*, 71–89. Also, Erik H. Erikson discusses the individual’s sense of *I* in *Identity, Youth, and Crisis*, 216–21. I will refer to Erikson’s discussion later in this chapter.

17. Levinson, *The Seasons of a Man’s Life*, 100.

writer, devour his books, learn a great deal about his life, and create an idealized internal figure with whom he has a complex relationship.¹⁸

Also, although Levinson does not make this point, the creation of an idealized internal figure is typically a feature of all mentor relationships, including those in which the two are in regular physical contact with one another.

Levinson concludes his discussion of the mentor relationship with the observation that where the relationship is “good enough,”¹⁹ the young man feels admiration, respect, appreciation, gratitude, and love for the mentor, and these feelings outweigh but cannot entirely prevent the opposite feelings of resentment, inferiority, envy, and intimidation:

There is a resonance between them. The elder has qualities of character, expertise and understanding that the younger admires and wants to make parts of himself. The young man is excited and spurred on by the shared sense of his promise. Yet he is also full of self-doubt. Can he ever become all that both of them want him to be? At different times—or even at the same moment—he experiences himself as the inept novice, the fraudulent imposter, the equal colleague and the rising star who will someday soar to heights far beyond those of the mentor.²⁰

Also, as a transitional relationship, it is destined to terminate, usually in two or three years on the average and eight to ten years at most. It may end when one of them moves, changes jobs, or dies. Sometimes it comes to a natural end and, after a cooling-off period, develops into a warm but modest friendship. In other cases, it ends totally, with a gradual loss of involvement. Most often, though, an intense mentor relationship ends with strong conflict and bad feelings on both sides:

The young man may have powerful feelings of bitterness, rancor, grief, abandonment, liberation and rejuvenation. The sense of resonance is lost. The mentor he formerly loved and admired is now experienced as destructively critical and demanding, or as seeking to make one over in his own image rather than fostering one’s individuality and independence. The mentor who only

18. Ibid.

19. His use of the term “good-enough” to characterize the mentor relationship is derived from D. W. Winnicott’s concept of the “good-enough mother” as presented in “Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena.”

20. Levinson, *The Seasons of a Man’s Life*, 100.

yesterday was regarded as an enabling teacher and friend has become a tyrannical father or smothering mother. The mentor, for his part, finds the young man inexplicably touchy, unreceptive to even the best counsel, irrationally rebellious and ungrateful. By the time they are through, there is generally some validity in each one's criticism of the other. And so it ends.²¹

And yet, Levinson notes that much of its value may be realized after the termination. The conclusion of the relationship itself does not put an end to the *meaning* of the relationship: "Following the separation, the younger man may take the admired qualities of the mentor more fully into himself," and, conversely, "He may become better able to learn from himself, to listen to the voices from within," and "His personality is enriched as he makes the mentor a more intrinsic part of himself."²²

The Younger Self as Mentor in the Transition to Older Adulthood

In light of the foregoing presentation of Levinson's understanding of the mentor relationship, I realize that it seems rather odd to suggest that my younger self has served as my mentor in my entrance into and continuing experience of older adulthood. After all, an important characteristic of the mentor is that he is typically eight to fifteen years *older* than the young man who is the recipient of his mentoring. And even if we note Levinson's observation that the mentor may possibly be younger than the person who is being mentored, he makes it clear that this is quite rare, and, furthermore, it is very unlikely that this younger person would be able to perform all the functions of the mentor.

On the other hand, there is a sense in which one's younger self is older than one's contemporary self because this younger self represents an *earlier* stage in one's life. Thus, while my younger self is, in this instance, a high school student who is about to embark on the journey from boyhood to adulthood, he is older in the sense that he represents an earlier era and expresses convictions that I, the older man, have found invaluable in my own journey from middle to older adulthood. From *his* perspective, the fact that the older man in the story, Charlie, believes in the boy Olav and in his capacity to realize his goal in life is self-affirming.

21. *Ibid.*, 100–101.

22. *Ibid.*, 101.

Thus, in a sense, Charlie plays the mentor role to Olav—and to the story’s author—because he believes in the young boy and in his sense of direction in life. From *my* perspective, as the older man reading the story, the fact that the young author presents the older man as having found the young boy who knows where he is going is also self-affirming, for this means that I will find my way as I embark upon and continue on the path of older adulthood.

As Levinson points out, the mentor’s primary function is to be a transitional figure, one who helps his protégé make his own transition from boyhood to adulthood. The very fact that the story of Olav and Charlie is about a journey from the place they know—perhaps all too well—to a place that they envision makes it a story of transitions, both for the young man and for the older man as well. Levinson also points out that the mentor relationship can be a symbolic one, as when an aspiring young novelist devours an established author’s books, learns a great deal about this author’s life, and creates an idealized internal figure with which he has a complex relationship. I rediscovered the younger self, who became my mentor during my own transition to older adulthood through a story that he had written. Others have found their younger self through diaries that they wrote when they were in their teenage years. For me, however, the fact that my reunion with my younger self occurred through the agency of a fictional story was significant. I believe—and tend to think that he would concur—that we would have found a more direct reunion—one more overtly autobiographical—a rather awkward encounter and one less likely to result in the creation of an idealized internal figure. This has and will enable us to maintain the relationship as time goes on, as neither of us feels any pressure—external or internal—to terminate our relationship and go our separate ways.

The Will to Believe and Looking Forward to Tomorrow

In the box containing a scrapbook, my high school writings, and other items that were among the miscellany in my father’s home, there was a poem that I wrote when I was in fourth grade—thus, at nine or ten years old. This is the poem:

Winter

Winter is a joyful season.
 It is joyful—there's a reason.
 Ice and snow and outdoor fun
 Cozy nights when play is done.
 Each day more fun than all the rest.
 I know—for this day is the best.
 But Mother now has called us in.
 I wish tomorrow would begin.

In this much younger boy's poetic world, we have the rather unanticipated affirmation of winter as a joyful season, one filled with days of outdoor fun. This fun is interrupted by Mother's call to come in, presumably for the evening meal, but the speaker does not complain or intimate that he tarries. For, after all, he anticipates a cozy night when play is done.

It would be easy for me, the older man, to say that he is in for a rude awakening, that there will come a day when the anticipated tomorrow is worse—much worse—than today, which is already bad enough. But why should I assume that he is utterly naïve when, more than likely, he is simply a boy with an irrepressible will to believe?²³ In this regard, it may well be that he is the older boy's mentor, the sponsor, as it were, of the older boy's tendency to communicate a similar will to believe as exemplified in the story of Olav and Charlie.

This suggestion has bearing on Levinson's reference to the younger man's increasing experience of a sense of "I am" as the mentor relationship changes over time, and as the younger man gains a fuller sense of his own authority and his capability for autonomous, responsible action.²⁴ In his chapter titled "Theoretical Interlude" in *Identity: Youth, and Crisis*, Erik Erikson seeks to clarify what we mean when we refer to ourselves as "I." In the course of this discussion, he suggests that the *I* is composed of various selves that make up our "composite Self."²⁵ Erikson goes on to note the constant and often shock-like transitions between these selves, and invites us to consider the nude body self in the dark or suddenly exposed to light, the clothed self among friends or in the company of

23. See James, "The Will to Believe."

24. Levinson, *The Seasons of a Man's Life*, 99.

25. Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis*, 217.

higher-ups or lower-downs, and the just-awakened drowsy self or the one stepping refreshed out of the surf.²⁶

I suggest that we might also view the *I* as composed of selves that emerge in the successive decades of our lives, and in my book *The Decades of Life* I draw on Erikson's own schedule of virtues (which will be discussed in chapter 3) to identify the selves of the first and second decade. These are *the hopeful self* and *the willing self*.²⁷ I believe that *the hopeful self* is evident in the poem on winter, and *the willing self* is evident in the story of Charlie and Olav. Also, this *willing self* is an extension, as it were, of *the hopeful self*. This means that the *I* draws on these earlier selves to facilitate the transition to older adulthood. And, as I have suggested, what these two earlier stages especially offer in this regard is the will to believe.

A central feature of this will to believe is, as Levinson notes, a belief in oneself. But Erikson also suggests that the selves that compose the sense of *I* interact with others, an interaction that, as we have seen, occurs, for example, in the mentor relationship. In fact, the mentor relationship illustrates the fact that the interaction between the *I* and other *I*'s involves a mutuality of belief—a belief in one another. This fact is implicit as well in Erikson's suggestion that the individual's sense of *I* is ultimately confirmed by God, who, when Moses asked him who should he say had called him, answered, "I AM THAT I AM," and then ordered Moses to tell the multitude, "I AM has sent me unto you" (Exod 3:13–14, KJV).²⁸

From Mentor Relationship to Traveling Companionship

While my younger self was especially important to me in the years of my transition to older adulthood—during which I perceived him as performing all of the functions of the mentor—my relationship to him has changed in subsequent years. This change has not been accompanied by negative feelings. If anything, my feelings have become even more affectionate. It's simply that I now think of him less as my teacher and more as my faithful companion along life's journey. And here I find our mutual enthusiasm for John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* an invaluable

26. *Ibid.*, 217.

27. Capps, *The Decades of Life*, 3–41.

28. Erikson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis*, 220.

resource for understanding what we mean to one another.²⁹ In Bunyan's story, Christian sets forth from his birthplace, the City of Destruction, and eventually arrives at the Celestial City. In the first half of the journey he is accompanied by Faithful, but Faithful is burned at the stake by the city fathers of Vanity Fair because he is having a disruptive effect on its dishonest, greed-driven business practices. Another person, Hopeful, is among the eyewitnesses to the tragic events that occur in Vanity Fair. Inspired by Faithful's witness and also impressed by how Christian "played the man" on this occasion, Hopeful joins Christian on the rest of the journey. He is there to hold Christian's head above water until he feels solid ground underfoot as they cross the River Jordan to the Celestial City.

As my younger self assumed the identity of Christian long before my older self joined the journey, it makes sense to see the two selves as the central character in the story. This, in turn, frees me to think of my younger self as Faithful and my older self as Hopeful, as my older self experiences life much as the young poet who wrote "Winter" does. The fact that older adulthood is often viewed as the winter of life is worth noting in this regard. But more important, I find that in my identity as an older man, I focus more and more on the day at hand and less and less on what lies miles and miles down the road. I also find myself agreeing with the young poet that "this day is the best." This agreement is not based on the fact that I can claim that, after all, I am still here, but on the conviction that the most recent day truly is the best of all. This does not, of course, mean that one should not reminisce about the past out of fear that this will invite invidious comparisons between what was then and what is now. It simply means that intrinsic to hopefulness is the fact that one's basic orientation to life is anticipatory, and central to this anticipatory orientation are the dual affirmations of "This day is best" and "I wish tomorrow would begin."

In the revised version of *The Pilgrim's Progress* that I experience today, Faithful and Hopeful are not identified with successive stages of the journey of life but are traveling together. And this is one of the ways I have experienced growth and development in my older adult years, as I feel the vitality that derives from the feeling that my younger self is with me and that we are like the two travelers on the road to Emmaus. As we

29. Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

walk together, we find ourselves “talking with each other about all these things that had happened” (Luke 24:14).³⁰

SAMPLE

30. Among my high school writings that came my way following my father’s death there was a poem titled “Roads to Emmaus.” I discussed this poem briefly in my chapter titled “Close Friendships,” in Dykstra et al., *The Faith and Friendships of Teenage Boys*, 100–102.