

COLUMNISTS

Life unfolds in succession of stages

The transition from one year to another is instantaneous. Unlike the Easter triduum, when Christians observe a three-day transition from the death of Good Friday to the new life of Easter Sunday, at the stroke of midnight New Year's Eve yields immediately to New Year's Day. There is no ritual observance at all of the fact that life proceeds for us according to stages.

We witness this most readily in the case of children, who move from infancy to toddlerhood, from elementary to high school, from childhood to adolescence. Parents are often quick to diagnose new patterns of personality development in their children with the explanation: "He's going through a phase." We all understand what they mean. Growth patterns among younger human beings are physically evident and very visible, so it is hard to miss the successive growth stages as new sides of an individual's personality are activated and honed.

Historians train us as early as high school to view time in this way. They describe for us characteristics of the Victorian era, the medieval period, the Stone Age. We know that the worlds of art and music unfold this way, as we consider Picasso's blue period, or his transition to cubism. Development is sequential, it happens in recognizable stages, it calls forth distinct gifts from us, it often brings unexpected twists and turns.

We all, children and adults, experience time as a succession of life stages.



the moral life

By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

This is true for all of us, adults as well as children. If the stages of interior evolution are less visible to others as we grow older, they are nonetheless real. Interaction between the external events that affect us and our own interior energies and resources call forth different responses from us as we move through life. Adults, no less than children, struggle with the process of personal growth and maturation. Oddly, it wasn't until Gail Sheehy's book *Passages: Predictable crises of adult life*, published in 1976, that much of our culture began to acknowledge that developmental stages are present in adult life just as they are in childhood.

The growth stages we move through affect the choices we make, the difficulties we undergo, and often determine the joys that we experience as well. An example from my mother's life illustrates this. My mother was already 72 years old when my father died. Many of us would assume, I think, that 72 is hardly the age at which new lifestyles are taken up. We

would also conclude, I think, that widowhood is one of life's real "downers." The death of a spouse ranks among life's most traumatic events.

In my mother's case, everything had to change. She had to make all sorts of decisions on her own now, she had to learn new skills in finance and car maintenance, she had to learn how to make small household repairs by herself. One of her greatest difficulties was putting a new social life in place, since her former social contacts had been built almost entirely on a culture of couples. There were many significant struggles and quite a few "bumps in the road" for her in the years immediately following my father's death.

After some time, however, it became clear that my mother had established some new contacts, skills and relationships that, while different from before, gave her considerable happiness. She cultivated the help of new "buddies" at Home Depot who advised her on home repair matters, she secured a new stock broker and made some terrific investments. She got a deal on a new car that still seems unbelievable to her three somewhat skeptical offspring. Most importantly, my mother developed a new set of friendships. A committed bridge player and golfer, she cultivated relationships with several groups also interested in these activities. After some time, it was clear that she was flourishing and that the new patterns she was adopting were helping to introduce her

to new ideas, attitudes and to a level of contentment and accomplishment that I would never have considered possible. At the time of her death, I invited several of her new friends, whom I didn't know well, for lunch. I commented to them about my mother's apparent happiness in her last years, and how she had seemed to thrive among her new friends.

One woman, Marge Sanzi, replied, "You know, many of us have discovered after a life of serving our husband's interests and our children's needs, that we can have a life of our own now. For lots of us, we don't come into our own until this stage of life. And for many of us, this is, strangely, a wonderful time."

Like all of ours, my mother's life was marked by the particulars of her own situation. She married after the war, she lived out the social roles assigned to women in those times, she knew the benefits and limitations of her own economic situation. The growth and "liberation" she experienced at the end of her life would have seemed impossible to her at earlier stages, I think. It might even have seemed incomprehensible in some ways.

As we move into a new year, it might be helpful for all of us to recall that life does unfold in stages, that sometimes even when circumstances might appear to dictate a decline in possibilities, new growth is still quite possible.

Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's Institute.

Kids' Answers from page 12
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 6. Daniel, 9. Micah, 10. Jonah

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