

Live

UNTIL YOU DIE



LEAVING A LEGACY OF
COURAGE AND FAITH

RANDY L. BOTT

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Chapter 1

IF IT IS TO BE, WHY NOT START WITH ME?

In a world shrouded with death, destruction, uncertainty, and illness, it is easy to develop an attitude of helplessness and hopelessness. This book will not fall into those self-defeating mindsets. From the very onset of this book, you should know I am simultaneously an optimist and a pragmatist. Having worked with the terminally ill for a number of years and also being a professional educator for four decades, I may have had experiences that have forced me to look more closely at the process of dying than most people. I do not claim to have all the answers. Indeed, I do not even know all of the questions. However, if we wait until one comes who knows everything there is to know, he or she may well arrive after all of us have exited from this life.

You will notably detect a “next world” orientation to my writing. Having been a lay minister for most of my adult life has convinced me that life consists of a much greater spectrum than the narrow confines between birth and death. Although my orientation is religious, this book is not intended to be a theological treatise. Only Chapter 16: “On the Other Side of Death’s Door” will deal directly with what the Holy Bible teaches about life after death.

From the very beginning of recorded history, God gave the command to Adam and Eve to “be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and **subdue it**: and **have dominion over** the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth (Genesis 1:28, emphasis added).

Would a fair and loving God give a commandment that we are unable to keep? Webster defines “subdue” as “to conquer and bring into subjection; to bring under control especially by an exertion of the will.” The dictionary definition of “dominion” is “domain; supreme authority; absolute ownership.” Its synonym is “power.” As we begin to explore the options available to us as we advance in age and as our physical and mental faculties begin to diminish, we may be consoled to realize that we (not the environment) are still very much in control. Perhaps aging is one of the supreme blessings of life. While we were young and foolish, we may have taken for granted our ability to command and have our bodies respond. Our minds were more like sponges, absorbing information at an admirable rate. Many will remember the days when we were too smart to be taught because we knew everything there was to know. Heaven only knows how much more than our parents we had learned before we even exited the teenage years.

One of the blessings of growing older is the ability to realize and prize the physical and mental resources we really have. No longer do we run to the top of a mountain to enjoy the sunrise. We may still get there, but it may be more to enjoy the sunset or the heat of the day. As children run by us on the trails, they may arrive at the top of the mountain long before us, but almost all of them have missed the beauty of the wildflowers, the bugs and insects, the animals and birds, the breathless beauty of the waterfall, or the puffy, lazy white clouds that float effortlessly in the azure sky above us. It may even be that we never make it to the top of the mountain, but the rewards found at the lower levels far offset the panoramic view we had to forfeit because our legs and lungs would not take us to the summit. In fact, the times we are required to pause to catch our breath may be the most rewarding episodes of the entire journey.

Perhaps as children we may not have appreciated the muscles and flexibility we enjoyed. Now a very little unusual exertion results in our muscles and joints telling us loudly whether we are in condition to do the desired task. Sometimes it isn't until later that evening or even the next morning that we gain a real appreciation for the strength and flexibility of youth as our joints set up and

our muscles cramp and rebel.

As pain becomes a more constant companion, it is tempting to take the easy road and not exert ourselves. That hardly sounds like a positive response to the initial command to “subdue” and take “dominion” over our world. As our population ages, more attention is being focused on the problems associated with old age. Doctors have concluded, documentaries have been produced, and living testimonials not a few are available to testify that it is never too late to get in better shape than we are in at the present.

Although there is almost always an invitation to “see your doctor before beginning any exercise program,” the inference is that after consulting your doctor, you should be able to participate to the level of your abilities in some program of getting in better shape. It would not be wise to try to regain your youthful physical condition too quickly. Hopefully, the aging process has helped us learn to use more adult wisdom in metering our self-improvement program. There may indeed come a time when you will no longer be able to participate in strenuous outdoor activities. That time may be years after you originally thought. Give it a try and see if by increasing the amount you do by small incremental steps; you can't see self-rewarding progress almost immediately.

If we begin by telling ourselves it is impossible, chances are very high that we will become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Not that we can't accomplish our goal but that if we don't have faith and confidence in ourselves, we probably won't expend the energy and take the chance necessary to ensure success. So, the first thing to do is eliminate all the negative self-talk. Replace it with positive, reinforcing comments.

Since it is always more fun to do things with someone, find someone in about the same physical shape you are in and start together. If you have a spouse, chances are he or she is the one who will become your exercise partner. Start slow and work up. This old business of “no pain, no gain” may be fine if you are training for a marathon or a body-building contest, but for those of us who would just like a little more energy at the end of the day, that motto is pure garbage. You don't need to be sore and stiff after a workout session.

If you are in doubt as to how to start, there are community service organizations who would be more than willing to get you started. Nose around the senior citizen center, a church, the city and/or county offices, or other places the seniors might congregate. Be willing to ask questions, and don't be satisfied with non-committal answers.

Assuming you have either determined to improve your physical condition or are in relatively good shape, be willing to branch out into the other areas of life. Although a few suffer from mind-destroying or limiting diseases, most of us lose our ability to think and reason because we fail to use our minds on a regular basis. Anything from chess to "Wheel of Fortune" affords opportunities to stretch your mind. Books are a dime a dozen at a used bookstore. Although it is true that most books are not worth the paper they are written on, many great, mind-expanding books have been written and yet collect dust at the local libraries and bookstores. Book clubs organized by seniors fill many pleasant hours as round table discussions of books provide mental catalysts for thought-provoking conversations. Once the dust is swept out and the cobwebs eliminated from old, unused minds, wonderful things happen.

Even as a small boy, I remember listening for hours to my ninety-six-year-old great-grandmother tell about harrowing experiences her family had endured as they homesteaded a farm in the middle of Indian country in an isolated part of Idaho. If we could get Great-grandmother going, she was good for a lot of stories. Her wit and humor amazed our young minds. Her reminiscence of her early days when life was so different from our world kept us spellbound for hours. I have overheard discussions among seniors that rival any panel discussion I have ever participated in on a university level. Don't underestimate your mental abilities just because you may not have attended college. There is something about the wisdom accumulated by riding the earth around the sun a few dozen times that makes the puny knowledge and understanding of youth pale in comparison. More will be suggested later on how to use your wisdom to bless your family and acquaintances.

Old age does not need to be equated with loneliness and isolation. Until your mind makes you unaware that you are alone, you are able to develop

social relationships. Two lonely people can easily make a happy duo. If necessary, a short ad in the newspaper or a public service announcement on the local radio or television station could generate the much-needed company. It is definitely true that seldom does anyone sense the responsibility to make something happen for us. If we expect someone to inconvenience themselves for us and they don't, we tend to get bitter and cynical about the world. However, if we expect absolutely nothing and someone does sacrifice for us, we are overwhelmed with feelings of appreciation.

While I am very much in favor of meeting the needs of individuals through welfare, I resent being forced to pay by an inefficient government. If someone asked me to contribute to the needs of the elderly or poor, I would do it in a heartbeat and without any feelings of resentment. The same is true of service. When people serve us because they feel obligated, they send a silent message that they resent the time they spend with us. However, if we can help people voluntarily donate time and means to the cause of the elderly, both they and the elderly grow in respect and love for each other. Even though there may be organizations who shun the offered help of the elderly, there are many others who welcome your help. Acting as substitute grandparents for children born addicted to drugs or alcohol is a demanding but rewarding opportunity for service. With your love (which doesn't require a great deal of physical strength) a child can feel what immature or uncaring parents are unwilling to provide. If children grow up in an environment void of love, is it any wonder that they become a hostile element in society which in turn threatens our security?

My mother was well into her nineties and still flitted around like a woman half her age. She was about as selfless a person as I know. If she was not serving, she was not happy. She was sensitive to those who may not welcome her offers for help, but anyone who had tasted her homemade pies never withdrew the welcome mat when they saw her coming. She passed away just shy of her one-hundredth birthday.

Perhaps growing up a people watcher has made me more observant than many. I see some of Mom's friends who adopted the attitude that "the world owes them a living," and they seemed to shrivel up socially when their needs

were not met. Mom seemed to be just the opposite. The more she forgot her own needs, the more radiant and fun to be around she grew. She continued to hold family dinners, host clubs, and take meals to the ill or those who had just had babies. She was always crocheting an afghan or tying a baby quilt, or working on a hundred other projects. We tried to get her to come and stay with us for a week or two, but it was rare when she would. She had too many things going. Too many people depended on her. Flowers needed watering, visits needed to be done, pies needed to be baked. The list was virtually endless.

The final area to be considered for taking dominion over your world during the twilight years is the spiritual. Perhaps now more than ever before, questions need to be asked and answers sought. For those who believe that life ends when death closes one's eyes, asking difficult questions about the next life may not have the same appeal. When physical strength disables you from sports or travel or even being out and about too much, it has a positive flip side. You are rewarded with additional time to ponder the real meaning of life. You may find that many of your friends will be more than anxious to discuss your thoughts about life after death.

There may be service you can render in your church or civic group. There are always those who need a listening ear or a shoulder to cry on. When we get outside ourselves in our quest to help others, the scope of our interest broadens and life becomes more meaningful. Quiet hours of thoughtful meditation often result in deeper insights into the real meaning of life. The rush of modern living renders it an almost impossibility to enjoy the silence. It requires real effort to exclude the detractors that rob us of that inner serenity that makes saints out of common people.

Is attitude toward growing old the main differentiating factor? If we could change our attitude, could we change the world? If the answer to those questions (in your own mind) is "yes," then don't you alone hold the key? What could possibly hold you back from controlling your own world, if you once determine you are going to change it?

Until twenty-five years ago when he died, I had a maternal uncle who was

paraplegic from the time he was eighteen months old. He had contracted polio before there was any vaccine. Not to be denied his share of joy in life, he made those with far greater physical abilities look like wimps. He graduated from high school by being carried on people's backs from class to class. He later married my aunt (who was quadriplegic from polio). He supported his wife, played the guitar, was an artist, built a cabin, was on the city council, and then was the mayor of the city. He was active in civic and church affairs, and was a homespun philosopher. No one ever said, "Poor Clyde," after having been around him for five minutes. On the contrary, one would often leave his presence in a state of self-condemnation for being so weak when given so much.

During his last few years when his twisted spine and collapsing rib cage began to make breathing a full-time chore, he was the most active. I surmise that he realized his days were numbered. He did not want to leave life with a half a tank of gas. He finally collapsed, having given his best to the very end. He was not perfect. But he was an example of a gutsy person who would not allow the environment or the ill twists of life to deter him from enjoying life to the max. From his story and others like him, much of the logic and rationale of this book will come forth.

One of my wife's favorite sayings is, "God never gives us a wish without giving us the ability to achieve it." Maybe that is a little too cutesy, but maybe it is a profound truth. How disappointing it would be to arrive in eternity only to find that we had the power to create our own world in mortality and we shied away because we didn't believe in ourselves or our abilities.

Whether it be our physical, social, intellectual, or spiritual world, we are the only one who holds the key to determine the quality of existence we will enjoy during those final golden years. No matter where you are in the aging process or whatever habits you may have established, isn't now a good time to take control of your world and make things happen that will leave friends and family standing with mouths open as you exit on to the next exciting adventure in another dimension?

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