

After 33 years of appearing on the television show *60 Minutes*, Andy Rooney stepped down last Sunday. He said he wasn't retiring, that writers don't retire. I was somewhat alarmed to hear that. He is going to stop his weekly television commentaries, but keep on writing. I met Andy Rooney several years ago. He was waiting to give a speech, so we were passing the time talking about woodworking, and he became upset with me for not knowing what a "flitch" was. I had commented on his desk and he said it was made from the flitch of a walnut tree. When I asked him what a flitch was, he snapped, "Look it up," then turned and walked away. I went home and looked it up. A flitch is a longitudinal section of a tree trunk. It is also a side of meat, so when the word is used, you have to know whether you're discussing trees or meat.

In his most recent book, *60 Years of Wisdom and Wit*, his son Brian Rooney talked about his father's favorite saying. "The same things always happen to the same people." The same things always happen to the same people. I don't know if that's always true, though I do have a friend whose life seems to move from one difficulty to another. Just when he seems to be moving forward, something happens to set him back. And I have another friend whose life is a history of one good thing after another, one blessing after another.

I have thought of my friends often and have wondered why the same things often seem to happen to them. They are both educated people, have access to sufficient resources, are alike in many respects, but one seems usually to move forward while the other seems usually to fall back. I've often wondered why that is.

We've been talking about growing old, about growing as we age, and the qualities we need to cultivate now to help us do that. We've talked about the importance of *adaptability*, of being able to adjust one's self to different conditions or a new environment. We've thought about the *value of work*, of continuing to engage in meaningful labor that blesses us and blesses others. We've discussed the importance of *knowing the date*, of not living in the past, or fearing the future. And the last time we were together, we talked about the importance of *humor*, of the ability to keep matters in proportion, in balance, of being fluid, which you'll remember was the original meaning of the word *humor*.

Today, I would like for us to think about *learnability*. Because I suspect the chief difference between my two friends, between my friend who moves forward and my friend who falls back, is *learnability*. My friend who moves forward has had, for as long as I've known her, the habit of learning something from every situation and growing from it, while my friend who falls back, for as long as I've known him, doesn't

I was talking with Mary Dooley after meeting for worship a few weeks ago. Mary used to be a nun and I'm still just Catholic enough—just because one joins another denomination, Catholicism still remains imprinted on his or her genes—to listen carefully when a nun or former nun says something. Mary said, “There is no circumstance from which we can not learn and grow.” There is no circumstance from which we can not learn and grow. For the purposes of this message, I want to call that *learnability*, and I want to say that if we wish to grow as we age, we need to develop *learnability*, the capacity to learn from and grow in every circumstance.

The poet Archibald McLeish said, “There is only one thing more painful than learning from experience, and that is not learning from experience.”

*Learnability—our commitment to learn and grow in every situation and circumstance.*

One of the more intriguing characters in the story of Jesus is Nicodemus. While he doesn't play a central role, his appearances are significant and interesting. He first appears in the dark hours of the night to seek spiritual counsel from Jesus.

It's one of the few instances in the Bible when a person in power, Nicodemus was a leader in the ruling council, possesses both the curiosity to ask a question and the humility to admit to not understanding the answer. Jesus had been talking about being born anew, and Nicodemus was mystified. "How can this happen? How can a man be born when he is old?"

Think of our tendency, as we age, to lose our curiosity, to fall back on pat answers, to insist we know what's best. Think how we can even become angry when asked to think in a new way. I was talking with a man recently who was still mad that Pluto had been demoted from a planet to a dwarf planet. Fifty years ago, he'd learned there were nine planets in our solar system, had memorized them employing a mnemonic device using the first letter of each planet—My Very Elderly Mother Just Sat on Uncle Ned's Parrot. He'd learned the planets that way, and didn't want to have relearn them.

I said, "Look, it's easy. If your very elderly mother just sat on Uncle Ned's parrot, pretend the parrot is dead and have your very elderly mother just sit on Uncle Ned."

But he wasn't buying it. He'd learned something at an early age and couldn't be dissuaded. No *learnability* there.

Met a great man the other day. Great guy. In his mid 60's. After graduating from high school, he'd worked his way into business, but didn't find it satisfying. He'd always wanted to be a nurse, but 45 years ago men weren't supposed to be nurses, so he became a businessman. Fifteen years ago, when he was 50, my age, he decided, finally, to become a nurse. Shut down his business, went to college four years to study nursing, then worked as a home health care nurse. Now he's a hospice nurse, providing comfort to dying people.

I said, "You quit your job at the age of 50 and went to college? Wasn't that hard?"

"Sure it was hard," he said. "I had the time of my life."

And I remember just last month, Joan had asked me to sign up for a book study with her, it was an hour a week, sitting in a circle, having an intelligent conversation about a book. And I'd told her, "I just don't think I can do it."

*Learnability.* Are you willing and eager to learn as you age? Or are you content with stale, dated half-truths that hold you down and keep you back? Can you learn from your experiences? Can you, in every circumstance, learn and grow?

Nicodemus slipped through the night, maybe a bit too embarrassed to be seen, but too curious not to ask. He wants to learn, he has to know. He asks Jesus, “How can this be? What does this mean?” He’s asking, you see, he wants to learn. He’s probably an older man, he’s on the ruling council after all, but he knows there are still things to learn. He’s a teacher, but he’s also a student. The best teachers always are.

Remember Mary Dooley: There is no circumstance from which we can not learn and grow.

And Archibald McLeish, remember him: There is only one thing more painful than learning from experience, and that is not learning from experience.

Learnability. Never stop learning. The Apostle Paul had it right. We see in a mirror dimly. We’re never seeing all there is to see. We know in part. We never know fully. So ask, and learn, and grow.