

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

■ June 2003

In Praise of Old Age and Aged Marriages

Rochet and Thom Blair

"I am sorry he's gone, but I am not surprised. He had lived a long life, and his time had come."

That could be a pretty average response to the obituary of someone born in 1920. The assumption would be that he was getting old; his best days were behind him and therefore his death was not a catastrophe.

I was born in 1920, and I think that is a dreadful response. I may die in 2003, but if I do, I don't want anyone to say or think that it was "good," a sort of mercy killing, carried out by Mother Nature. I would rather have everyone understand that this last year has been the best year of my life. Rochet also agrees that this last year has been the best of the sixty we have lived together.

Many people, probably young, have assumed that if you plotted the quality of your life on graph paper, the result would be some sort of "bell curve." It would start at zero when you were born, peak at age 49, and then nosedive into a steady decline until it bottomed out at zero again when you died.

We are old and we show it. Rochet had a devastating stroke some 37 years ago, and now is either in her recliner beside her books and crossword puzzle or in a wheelchair. I have two cancers, one of which is lying low; the other is showing signs of life. Apart from that, and the normal aches and pains that come with the years, we feel fine. We live in an apartment in a retirement center, and have never been happier to be alive. If we drew a graph of our lives together, that curve would be headed up and show no signs of decline. Even if the bottom drops out of our life tomorrow, today is a high plateau.

What has made old age so good for us, and our aged marriage so much fun? Our oldest son is a clergyman and can say a lot in a few words. He says, "*The greatest diamonds are found under the deepest piles of ____ (manure).*"

I am sure he is right. It takes years of living and years of marriage to get that pile deep enough to hatch real diamonds.

Marriage seems designed to produce a pretty big pile of something, at least as a by-product. It begins when a male and a female are put in a room together, the door is locked, and the key is thrown away. That is a design for sure and certain trouble. The only way to avoid very serious marital troubles is not to get married. My encouraging word is that the first 50 years are the hardest. After that it gets easy. I submit that this is so because those early years are spent working through the impossibilities of this thing called marriage. Once that is done, life can begin.

As soon as the honeymoon is over, you have to decide who is in charge. That is never really decided. It takes years to stumble into an unspoken compromise that divides responsibilities and seems somehow to work. But the rocky path that leads to that compromise is part of the process that leads to the diamond.

- As the years go by, you might decide you are too tired to keep up the struggle to be the one in

charge. You decide that it is easier to muddle through, being thankful when you get your way, but knowing it won't last long.

- As the years go by, there is always the chance that you each might give up your hope of reforming the other. You could even accept each other, warts and all.
- As the years go by, time or medicine or surgeons may well have done sex in. That is bad. But if you can find some way to live without sex, life starts to get simpler.
- As the years go by, the need for more money, a bigger house, a bigger job, and a better name are likely to expire. You might be able just to relax and enjoy living.
- As the years go by, the children go off on their own, no longer occupying center stage. You don't want to live with them. They don't want to live with you. That uncomplicates life.
- As the years go by, you know that no one is going anywhere. The old man isn't going to take off with some trophy blonde. The old girl isn't apt to find some prince charming. In the midst of some really hot exchange, both will break out laughing, because you both know you wouldn't leave the other for anything in the world.
- As the years go by, you have been through better and worse, sickness and health, richer and poorer, hell and high water. What binds you together is deeper and broader and higher than you ever imagined was possible. Now you can begin to know what love is.
- As the years go by, the notion of immortality dies and the fact of mortality becomes obvious. You know you have only a finite number of days left, so you don't want to mess up any more days than you have to.
- As the years go by, a lot of the old has died, and made way for new life to appear.

I am pretty sure that this always comes to us as a surprise. C. S. Lewis called one of his books *Surprised by Joy*. That is the way it is. Much to our surprise, these last years of our lives turn out not to be some sorrowful tapering off, but rather a time of joy in a new life.

The particular turning point in our lives was Rochet's stroke. That changed the whole way we looked at life. We expected it would be the end. It was. It was the end of the old way of living together. Much to our amazement, the new life, which then began, was better than the old ever had been. The stroke took place on March 13. We celebrate that date every year. It is our Easter.

We would not wish that same path on anyone. We share it to underline the fact that, amazingly enough, life can and does come out of death, in whatever guise death may assume.

You never can tell what is around the next curve, and it can be great.



Rochet and Thom Blair live in a retirement center in Charlottesville, VA. This article is an adaptation of one first published in *The New Harmony Journal*. Thom was rector of Trinity Church in Boston when he retired in 1981. He says he now "plays golf, watches birds, catches fish, makes some furniture, and ministers to patients in the nursing wing."



CHURCH

**The Church
Pension Fund**

445 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10016