

Taking the Plunge
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Well, if you hadn't noticed it before this weekend, it's pretty hard to miss now today that things are starting to pick up around here. Kitty Hawk Road is open now, but a few hours ago it was full of runners—including at least one of our own. . . This very weekend motorcyclists are rallying, mystery writers workshopping, artists selling, restaurants and shops re-opening, and any number of other signs that The Season is beginning.

The busy time is coming on, and one way or another most of us are going to be affected by it. Something's bound to change, whether it's more traffic or the chance for summer income you depend on for the rest of the year; whether it's longer lines at the grocery store or more people to enjoy watching when you take a walk on the beach, whether it's earlier departure times on the way to church or the return of migratory friends you've missed for months. It's coming. Are you ready?

Whether you welcome and look forward to it all, or dread it every single year, whether it actually changes your daily activities or just affects the environment you move around in, most of us probably have some sense of preparing ourselves for what's coming.

That's certainly true in the businesses around us, who are laying in inventory and changing their signs, bringing on staff and reopening or gradually extending their hours. Folks are sprucing up parking lots and finishing their remodeling or expansion projects. Downtown Manteo is frantically trying to finish up that flood drainage redesign and a State Highway Department repaving project before the real influx of people gets started.

How about you? Are you doing anything to get ready before we all take the plunge?

Are you having a last few meals at a favorite eatery before the lines start, enjoying the last of the winter clearances at the beachwear stores? Maybe you're making sure to get in a couple of long lonely walks on the beach or in Nag's Head Woods, or taking a drive down to Buxton or Frisco while the road's still pretty empty and fun to be on?

Maybe this is actually a time of delight for you, because work that was hard to come by last month might become more available, or because the music scene is picking up, the Farmer's Markets and produce stands are reopening, the festivals and fun runs and rallies are starting up again. Maybe you're excited about the return of the seasonal features and activities that were part of the reason you fell in love with the Outer Banks in the first place.

However you feel about it, this is an annual time of preparation around here, when we all take a deep breath and get ready, because things are going to be different. It's a regular cyclical moment for folks who live here and in other places with seasonal population swings, but it's also an experience that happens again and again in many other ways in our lives—the time when

some things' coming, and we know things are going to be different from now on. We have to get ready. What's your way?

Say you've got a long bit of travel coming up. Are you one of those people who likes to finish everything before you go? I remember once calling a friend I was going to take a weekend trip with, to ask what time we'd get started in the morning. "Well, I'd like to start about 7, but it will probably be about 10 or 11, because there are still a few things we need to finish before we go. You know, the living room needs vacuuming; I want to clean out the refrigerator and the oven; we need to pay bills. . . ." OK, does all this seem perfectly reasonable to you? Or are you one of those people who likes to just drop everything and go? Do you spend hours online or with maps and guidebooks, so that you know before you start where you're going to stop for food, gas, and rest, or would you rather take things as they come, follow your impulses and instincts where they lead you along the way?

We all have our ways of getting ready—whether what's coming is something simple and temporary, or one of the great threshold events that permanently alters the landscape of our life. Joyful or hard, we will all know some of those events. The lovely Dr. Seuss book we shared earlier is often given for one of them: It's a beloved graduation gift, given to young people embarking on the first great leg of life's journey that they will navigate alone. What have some of your thresholds been?

The beginning of a marriage—or the ending of one. . . . a momentous change in the work we choose to do in the world. . . . committing yourself to a great cause of justice and equity. . . . living through an illness, or a loss of capacity. . . . the joyous arrival of a child in your life. . . . the decision to retire. . . . arriving in a new home, a place of yet-unknown possibilities. . . . deciding to confront an addiction that has distorted our experience of life for too long. . . . discovering a faith community that invites you to look at life in a new way. . . . and of course the last great event we all will experience, the journey back into the mystery that awaits across the threshold of the only life we know. . . .

How do we prepare for those?

The first thing I want to say is to trust your own way. You know what you need. If you're a planner, make plans. If you leap into breaches, trust your instincts. If you're a studier, learn everything you can in advance. If you're a tie-up of loose ends, get those knots fastened. Let me also say, though, that if in your particular situation you're the partner, spouse, parent, or child of someone whose way is different from yours, you'll be better off if you find a way together that recognizes what each of you needs. Those of you who are now carefully not looking at the person sitting next to you know what I am talking about.

A lot has been said about the importance of attitude as we face the more momentous changes and transition times of our life, and it's worth keeping in mind. Outlook does affect outcomes; it matters whether we approach what's coming with optimism or with dread, with curiosity or with the expectation that things should happen a particular way. It matters whether we're Bilbo Baggins, who thinks adventures are nasty messy things that make you late for dinner, or Walt Whitman, who takes to the open road afoot and light-hearted. If I'm always looking for the

worst, my chance of finding it is better than if, like Dr. Seuss, I start out thinking that success is 98 and $\frac{3}{4}$ % guaranteed.

Yet we know that sometimes, events will refuse to follow even the most careful plan; sometimes, the outcome we get is not going to be what we might hope for. In the end no amount of optimism can promise us the road will always be smooth, the mountain always moveable, the destination exactly what we had envisioned. No preparation can guarantee, even 98 and $\frac{3}{4}$ %, that we will successfully navigate all the adventures, events, and transitions of our lives, or that we will finish our journey without being profoundly changed by it.

Perhaps you've known life events like those. Maybe you're even living in one of them now. For moments like those, we need a deeper preparation, stronger than any power of positive thinking; we need something more than a good plan, something strong enough to sustain us in any turn of events. For the events we cannot plan for, we need assurances as powerful as those that come from the world's traditions of faith; we need touchstones to remind ourselves who we are, what we can rely on, where the home of our heart lies.

Remember Alla Renee Bozarth's voice of God, whispering to the Hebrew people as they prepare for their journey: "Pack nothing. . . . Surrender to the need of the time I will send fire to warm and encourage you. . . . Touch each other and keep telling the stories. . . . I am with you and I am waiting for you."

These are the kinds of assurances we need to meet even the most demanding of events, the most uncertain of journeys. Whatever language of faith is native to you, this is how I would name some of them:

I would say that: Life is far larger than the confines of our body's brief span; it is a fountain from which we drink for a short while; it is an ocean in which we rise and fall like waves.

I would say that: Each of our lives gives us resources of courage and strength, imagination and vision, compassion and connection.

I would say that: In each of our lives there is an immeasurable reservoir of possibility and promise.

It does not matter what name we give the voice that whispers within as we set out to meet the need of the time—call it God, Truth, Justice, Compassion. What matters is that we know what we can rely upon to hold us. This is the preparation that makes us ready for whatever may come.

When the bundle of joy develops a habit of being awake and charmingly talkative—or inconsolably upset—between 2 and 5 a.m. night after weary night, there is an inexhaustible reservoir of compassion to remind us that the love between us and this child matters more than our need to solve this problem right now. When the delights of campus life and the demands of studies are in direct conflict, there are people who will help us find balance; there is wisdom within to reassure us that choosing discipline in this moment doesn't really mean we will never have fun ever again.

When the married life or the single life shakes our sense of identity, we can hold onto the deep certainty that we never stop being who we truly are, and that if we keep faith with ourselves we are never alone in a world rich with love. When the freedom of retirement sometimes leaves us feeling isolated, we can remind ourselves that we are surrounded by possibilities, that when we are willing to take the risks of commitment, connection is always waiting for us.

When the good and just cause of inclusion and equality to which we have given so much seems to take as many steps backward as forward, we can remind ourselves in our discouragement that the moral arc of the Universe is long, and that we are not called to complete the arc but to bend it just a little more toward justice. Even when the threshold we're facing leads toward the mystery at life's very edge, and the way ahead feels more fearful than inviting, we can know that love walks with us to the door in our circles of kinship and friendship, and that even as we step across, love never leaves us.

If we name our Source of hope, if we find the Wellspring of our courage and strength, then whether we're facing the return of the busy season or the most profound and inescapable of life's great events, we can drink deeply from that Wellspring and entrust our very life to that Source. And then we can take a deep breath, and take the plunge.

When our heart is in that holy place. . . we are ready to be on our way.