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## On the Brink of Everything: Grace, Gravity, and Getting Old

by Parker J. Palmer

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### 43 Highlights

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 152

Age brings diminishment, but more than a few come with benefits. I've lost the capacity for multitasking, but I've rediscovered the joy of doing one thing at a time. My thinking has slowed a bit, but experience has made it deeper and richer. I'm done with big and complex projects, but more aware of the loveliness of simple things: a talk with a friend, a walk in the woods, sunsets and sunrises, a night of good sleep.

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 167

Old is just another word for nothing left to lose, a time of life to take bigger risks on behalf of the common good.

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 184

"I don't want to fight the gravity of aging. It's nature's way. I want to collaborate with it as best I can, in hopes of going down with something like the grace of that setting sun. For all the wrinkles and worry lines, it's a lovely thing simply to be one of those who's lived long enough to say, 'I'm getting old.'"

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 247

no . . . But now that you mention it, a book on

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 258

I. The View from the Brink: What I Can See from Here probes some things I'm learning as I age, especially the importance of keeping my eyes open to the experience and asking the right questions about it.

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 302

I've long thought of old age as a time when all that's left is to tell the truth—trying to remember to tell it in love. It's liberating to be at a point where I no longer need to posture or pretend because I no longer feel a need to prove anything to anyone.

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 329

I went downstairs, turned up the thermostat, and began heating water for coffee. Twice-warmed by the whispering furnace and the hissing burner on the gas stove, I was thrice-warmed as I reread a handwritten letter that had arrived the day before, thanking me for a book I published when I was in my early sixties. “What you wrote about your experience of depression,” said my correspondent, “helped save my life.” As I laid the letter down, I thought back on all the early mornings when, in my haste to get back to my writing, I’d failed to pause for even a few minutes to take in the loveliness of an awakening world. I’ve long been an obsessive writer, and before age slowed me down, my impatience about hitting the keyboard kept me from seeing the beauty around me. Part of me regrets that. And yet, back in the day—focused laser-like on surveying and mapping what’s “in here” while ignoring what’s “out the window”—I wrote something that helped a stranger find new life.

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 376

Here’s the poem that opened my eyes, by the Nobel Prize–winning Polish poet Czesław Miłosz: Love Love means to learn to look at yourself The way one looks at distant things For you are only one thing among many. And whoever sees that way heals his heart, Without knowing it, from various ills. A bird and a tree say to him: Friend. Then he wants to use himself and things So that they stand in the glow of ripeness. It doesn’t matter whether he knows what he serves: Who serves best doesn’t always understand.

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 399

Speaking of the ego, the first few lines of Miłosz’s poem are a direct challenge to its lust for center stage: “Love means to learn to look at yourself / The way one looks at distant things / For you are only one thing among many.” Ah, yes, now I remember: I’m not the sun at the center of anyone’s solar system. If I keep trying to put myself there, insisting that I am special and my life must have some sort of special meaning, I’ll die in despair or in delusion.

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 438

Coming to terms with the soul-truth of who I am—with my complex and confusing mix of darkness and light—has required my ego to shrivel up. Nothing shrivels a person better than age. That’s what all those wrinkles are about.

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 464

These days I say “enough” without hesitation to anything that’s not life-giving—whether it’s frenzy and overwork, a personal prejudice, an unhealthy relationship, a societal cruelty or injustice, the feckless exercise of power in fields from religion to politics, or the racism, sexism, xenophobia, and crypto-fascism sickening the US body politic. When I was young, saying “enough” often seemed risky. I’ve known people who lost favor, friends, reputations, money, and livelihoods for saying, “This far and no more.” But risk looks different from the vantage of old age. More than fearing the cost of taking risks for the things I care about, I fear aging into subservience to the worst impulses in and around me.

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 470

I'm among the very fortunate ones whose material needs are largely met, so I don't have to worry about losing things that some folks require for survival. For people like me, the notion that old age is a time to dial it down and play it safe is a cop-out. Those of us who are able should be raising hell on behalf of whatever we care about: freedom's just another word for not needing to count the cost.

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 487

But the junk I really need to jettison in my old age is psychological junk—such as longtime convictions about what gives my life meaning that no longer serve me well. For example, who will I be when I can no longer do the work that has been a primary source of identity for me for the past half century? I won't know the answer until I get there. But on my way to that day, I've found a question that's already brought me a new sense of meaning. I no longer ask, "What do I want to let go of, and what do I want to hang on to?" Instead I ask, "What do I want to let go of, and what do I want to give myself to?" The desire to "hang on" comes from a sense of scarcity and fear. The desire to "give myself" comes from a sense of abundance and generosity. That's the kind of truth I want to wither into.

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 569

Let's stop talking about "passing the baton" to the young as we elders finish running our laps. Since most of us are more skilled at sitting than at running, let's change the metaphor and invite young adults to join the orchestra. As we sit together, we can help them learn to play their instruments—while they help us learn the music of the emerging world, which they hear more clearly than we do. Together we can compose something lovelier and more alive than the current cacophony, something in which dissonance has a place but does not dominate.

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 581

Age and experience have taught me that mentoring is not a one-way street. It's a mutuality in which two people evoke the potentials in each other. To borrow a phrase from theologian Nelle Morton, mentoring is about "hearing one another to speech."<sup>2</sup> Equally important, mentoring gives us a chance to welcome one another into a relationship that honors our vulnerability and our need for each other.<sup>3</sup> Mentoring is a gift exchange in which we elders receive at least as much as we give, often more.

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 646

Regarding your friends' lack of a sense of purpose, you wrote, "We don't wake up every morning and leap out of bed for work that is easy to express in a sound bite and directed and in pursuit of one clear goal." Honestly, if someone told me she woke up that way, I'd tell her to stop marketing her life and start living it. I'm one of those "diffuse" people you wrote about—I have a lot of irons in a lot of fires. When I'm asked for the "elevator speech" that sums up my work, I respond, "I always take the stairs, so I don't have an elevator speech. If you'd like to walk with me a while, I'd love to talk." I don't know of a life worth living or work worth doing that can be reduced to a sound bite. The only story I know well is my own, so let me return briefly to the thrilling days of

yesteryear. When I was in my thirties, “purpose” was very unclear to me—my vocation didn’t begin to feel coherent until I was in my early fifties. At thirty, all I knew for sure was that I didn’t want my life and work to be defined and bound by big organizations. So I worked in marginal places, turning down invitations that might get me embedded in “centers of power.”

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 730

When you acknowledge and embrace all that you are, you give yourself a gift that will benefit the rest of us as well. Our world is in desperate need of leaders who live what Socrates called “an examined life.” In critical areas like politics, religion, business, and mass media, too many leaders refuse to name and claim their shadow because they don’t want to look weak. With shadows that go unexamined and unchecked, they use their power heedlessly in ways that harm countless people and undermine public trust in our major institutions. If you value self-knowledge, you will become the leaders we need to help renew this society. But if, for some reason, you choose to live an unexamined life, I beg of you: do not take a job that involves other people!

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 747

Fourth, take on big jobs worth doing, jobs like the spread of love, peace, and justice. That means refusing to be seduced by our cultural obsession with being effective as measured by short-term results. We all want our work to make a difference. But if we take on the big jobs and our only measure of success is the next quarter’s bottom line, we’ll end up disappointed, dropping out, and in despair. Think of someone you respect because he or she lived a life devoted to high values: a Rosa Parks, a Nelson Mandela, or someone known only to a few. When that person died, was he or she able to say, “I’m sure glad I took on that job because now everyone can check it off their to-do list”? No, our heroes take on impossible jobs and stay with them for the long haul because they live by a standard that supersedes effectiveness.

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 763

violence is what happens when we don’t know what else to do with our suffering.

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 766

At my age, I know many people who’ve suffered the loss of the dearest person in their lives. At first, they go into deep grief, certain that their lives will never again be worth living. But then they slowly awaken to the fact that—not in spite of their loss but because of it—they’ve become bigger, more compassionate people, with more capacity of heart to take in other people’s sorrows and joys. These are brokenhearted people, but their hearts have been broken open rather than broken apart. So every day, exercise your heart by taking in life’s pains and joys. That kind of exercise will make your heart supple, so that when it breaks—which it surely will—it will break not into a fragment grenade but into a greater capacity for love.

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 772

Finally, I quote Saint Benedict, who said, “Daily keep your death before your eyes.” That may sound like a morbid practice, but I assure you it isn’t. If you hold a healthy awareness of your own mortality, your eyes will

be opened to the glory and grandeur of life. And that will evoke all of the virtues I've named, as well as those I haven't, such as hope, generosity and gratitude.

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 849

contemplation is any way one has of penetrating illusion and touching reality.

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1040

During my first forty years, I'd been driven by the notion that "Up, up and away" was the right direction to go. I had worked hard to achieve altitude because . . . Well, because higher is better than lower, right? Wrong. Living at altitude is dangerous. When we fall, as we regularly do, we have a long way to fall, and the fall may kill us. But a life on the ground—a life grounded in the reality of our own nature and our right relationship to the world—allows us to stumble and fall, get back up, brush ourselves off, and take next steps without doing ourselves great harm.

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1084

Memo to myself: stay on the ground, turn around, ask, and listen. True self is true friend—it's a friendship we ignore at our peril. And pass the word: friends don't let friends live at altitude.

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1087

Arrived in midafternoon at my rented cabin in the snow-covered Wisconsin countryside. Went inside, lit a fire, and unpacked the car, quickly, motivated by the subzero wind-chill. Outside, acres of bright fields and dark woods. Inside, just me. Plus enough clothing, food, and books—body and soul sustenance for a week of silence and solitude. Yesterday, as I was packing, a friend asked if I liked being alone. "It depends on who shows up," I said. "Sometimes I'm my best friend, sometimes my worst enemy. I'll see who's there when I get to the cabin."

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1102

Rumi's "beyond" was right: peace comes from embracing the interplay of shadow and light, and a good breakfast doesn't hurt. After eating, I read the January 12 entry in *A Year with Thomas Merton*, a collection of daily meditations: It seems to me that I have greater peace . . . when I am not "trying to be contemplative," or trying to be anything special, but simply orienting my life fully and completely towards what seems to be required of a man like me at a time like this.<sup>20</sup> Simple and true, that, but so easily lost in Type A spiritual striving. What was required of me this morning was simply to make breakfast, despite my well-documented ineptitude. The deal is to do whatever's needful and within reach, no matter how ordinary or whether I'm likely to do it well.

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1127

In solitude, I can empty my boat. Can I do it when I'm in the company of other people? Maybe: Solitude does not necessarily mean living apart from others; rather, it means never living apart from one's self. It is not about

the absence of other people—it is about being fully present to ourselves, whether or not we are with others.<sup>23</sup> That quote comes from a book I wrote, so I should probably give it a try.

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1170

I recall a story that my businessman dad told me about how he dealt with pressure. In his office, he had a pedestal desk with five drawers in the right-hand pedestal. He'd put today's mail in the bottom drawer, after moving yesterday's mail up to the next drawer, and so on. He'd open letters only after they had made it to the top drawer. By that time, he said, half of the problems people had written him about had taken care of themselves, and the other half were less daunting than they would have been if he'd read the letters the moment they arrived.

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1214

Every year, I take a weeklong solitary winter retreat.

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1225

As we grow older, it's important to get clear about the difference between a job and a vocation. Too many older folks, especially men, fall into despair when their jobs end, because they lose not only their primary source of income (and often have to pick up part-time and poorly paid work) but their sense of identity as well. They had a job to make their living, but they didn't have a vocation to make meaning of their lives, the kind of vocation a person can pursue to the end.

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1243

"Begin Again" is about the fact that I'm not really a writer: I'm a rewriter who throws away many pages for every one he keeps. This is not only the story of my writing but also the story of my life. More often than I like to admit, I've forgotten lessons learned and had to start over from scratch, relearning what I thought I knew. One advantage of age is the chance it gives us to learn and relearn until we truly know.

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1255

Every now and then, someone asks me for advice on how to become a writer. If I'm on my game, I don't offer advice. Instead, I ask questions in hopes of evoking my conversation partner's inner teacher, the most reliable source of guidance anyone has. If he or she presses me, the best I can do is to tell part of the story of my own life as a writer, letting the questioner decide whether there's anything in it for him or her.

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1343

Why do so many well-educated people understand precisely how the material world works, but are clueless about their own inner dynamics?

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1360

Speaking of fakery, one of the great temptations of being a writer is to absorb the projections of readers who think you're an expert on some subject just because you've written a book about it. When I was young, my ego often became bloated with those projections. I forgot the counsel my father gave me when I was a kid: "Remember, Park, today's peacock is tomorrow's feather duster."

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1633

Our youth-oriented culture sends a message to elders that can discourage and defeat us: "It's time to withdraw from serious engagement with a world that's changing so rapidly you can't possibly keep up. So take up harmless hobbies and hang out at home." There are only three problems with this message: (1) It robs older folks of sources of vitality, meaning, and purpose. (2) It robs the world of the gifts elders have to offer. (3) It's ridiculous. Other than that, it's a great idea.

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1934

My three bouts with depression were such "somethings" for me. For long months, I lived in closed rooms with the shades pulled down. When a friend told me to get outside more, I said, "I can't. The world feels like it's full of knives." In my fragile mental state, even casual encounters felt perilous, and overhearing the news of the day made me feel utterly unfit for life in this world. I exaggerated life's dangers and underestimated my own resilience. But recalling the bad old days when my world was all sharp edges reminds me that in a violent culture, it's easy to die the death of a thousand cuts.

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2002

From elementary through graduate school, we receive little guidance for the inner journey, even though Socrates—the patron saint of education—regarded self-examination as key to a life worth living. When we're young and wholly engaged with the external world, we may manage to feel "alive" for a while without an inner life. But when we experience diminishment and defeats—the kind that can come at any age and are inevitable when we get old—we run the risk of feeling dead before our time if we lack inner resources.

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2044

The Guest House This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival. A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. Welcome and entertain them all! Even if they're a crowd of sorrows, who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture, still, treat each guest honorably. He may be clearing you out for some new delight. The dark thought, the shame, the malice, meet them at the door laughing, and invite them in. Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond. —RUMI4

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2182

protect my

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2202

What can we do with our pain? How might we hold it and work with it? How do we turn the power of suffering toward new life? The way we answer those questions is critical because violence is what happens when we don't know what else to do with our suffering.

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2285

Today, as I weather the late autumn of my own life, I find nature a trustworthy guide. It's easy to fixate on everything that goes to ground as time goes by: the disintegration of a relationship, the disappearance of good work well done, the diminishment of a sense of purpose and meaning. But as I've come to understand that life "composts" and "seeds" us as autumn does the earth, I've seen how possibility gets planted in us even in the hardest of times. Looking back, I see how the job I lost pushed me to find work that was mine to do, how the "Road Closed" sign turned me toward terrain I'm glad I traveled, how losses that felt irredeemable forced me to find new sources of meaning. In each of these experiences, it felt as though something was dying, and so it was. Yet deep down, amid all the falling, the seeds of new life were always being silently and lavishly sown.

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2332

At some point in my forties, I was introduced to the Rule of Saint Benedict, a spiritual classic, "written by Benedict of Nursia (c. AD 480–550) for monks living communally under the authority of an abbot [or abbess]."1 The Rule became the basis for the Order of Saint Benedict, a community very much alive today around the world.<sup>2</sup> One of Benedict's precepts instructs the monks to "keep death daily before one's eyes."<sup>3</sup> The first time I read that line, it struck me as a bummer. Why should I look away from my vital and engaged life to contemplate my mortality? Now that some years have passed, I know at least two good answers to that question. One comes from Brother David Steindl-Rast, himself a Benedictine monk: The finality of death is meant to challenge us to decision, the decision to be fully present here now, and so begin eternal life. For eternity rightly understood is not the perpetuation of time, on and on, but rather the overcoming of time by the now that does not pass away.<sup>4</sup> Brother David's version of "eternal life" is one I can embrace, now that I understand the rewards of being "fully present here now." No need to wait until you die to collect your rewards in some heaven on high. Pay attention to what's right here, right now, and you'll be rewarded immediately—the Beloved Community is in our midst. Rightly understood, keeping death "daily before one's eyes" does not mean looking away from one's life. It means looking more deeply into it.

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Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2484

Why Should I Ever Be Sad Why should I ever be sad, knowing the aspens are always here dancing along this trail, slim as willowy girls, swinging their arms, tossing their hair, swaying their hips in rhythm with the mountain wind. Above the aspens, intensified sky, a dream of blue seen only as cities fade from view. Below them a rocky slope covered with clotted clumps of leaves and fallen, rotted branches, laying down a love bed where Indian Paintbrush and white violets grow amid a flourish of green. All of the tumbled boulders and rocks have found their angle of perfect repose, so why should I ever be sad? All of this waits for me when at last I stumble and fall, waits for me to join in this dance with all that turns and whirls—a dance done to the silent music of our dappled, singing, swaying world. —PARKER J. PALMER

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