

This is 50

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [February 20, 2013](#) issue



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At the end of the fall semester I turned 50. My birthday always arrives just as the push to finish the semester fades into the beginning of the week before Christmas, so it tends to sneak up on me and to pass quietly. But this year I began to feel my birthday approaching weeks in advance. I felt unsettled, in the way that birthdays ending in a zero can unsettle us. But I also felt excited, as if there were some as-yet-unknown change on the horizon. Turning 50 was a reminder that I wouldn't accomplish everything I once dreamed of doing. But that sober knowledge brought with it a glimpse of freedom—the freedom to turn my life toward what matters most, to concentrate my energies in one direction.

How to seize upon this possibility?

Providentially, the fall issue of *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* arrived, with an article by Edward Kaplan on journal entries that Trappist monk Thomas Merton wrote around the time of his 50th birthday. Merton called his 50th year his jubilee year. His journal entries reflect his desire to clear away accumulations of projects and illusions and begin anew. He longed for more authentic solitude; he settled into his hermitage; he pondered his sexual past and acknowledged that he gave up sex before he understood the role it could play in human life. He pledged his 50th birthday as “a turning point” in which he would turn away from projects and toward solitude, away from self and toward God. But a persistent question troubled the

dichotomies on which he built these resolutions: “Who am I?” he asked.

Kaplan’s article made me curious about what other people thought about turning 50 and sent me searching. In the spring of her 50th year, Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker movement, wrote in her journal about a dream in which she was nursing two babies—proving, she noted, that “the sap is flowing even in those of fifty.” The dream stayed with her for days, filling her with joy. Eventually, though, she began to worry about it. Did the dream mean that she was fooling herself, trying to sustain a movement on breasts no longer full of milk? Was she giving herself to others at the expense of caring for those closest to her? Her writings reflected both the deep joy she took in her work and an underlying anxiety about whether she was doing her work well. With more than half her adult life over, she felt that she had done very little. Although she’d given up possessions, privacy and even love in order to live closer to the poor and to God, the goal of jubilee seemed just out of her reach: “I can never give up enough,” she wrote.

The novelist Virginia Woolf sounds a bit like Thomas Merton. At 50, she wrote of her desire to concentrate her life, to turn it away from the trappings of fame and toward the things that made her literary and political work possible: the happiness of her daily life with her husband, Leonard; the deepening of her friendships; the long walks she took every afternoon. She wrote of feeling poised on the verge of freedom and of feeling conscious of her power. These, she noted, are “the soul’s changes.”

Ever since I was a teenager I’ve been reading the journals of others for clues about how to live my own life. In the weeks before and after my 50th birthday, it felt like a very great gift that these writers had taken the time to record the changes wrought in their souls at 50. They encouraged me to see this birthday as a new beginning—and to live my 50th year as a year of jubilee. Like Merton, Day and Woolf, there are things I need to turn from, things I need to clear away.

Nine days after my 50th birthday, my daughter had a big birthday of her own: 16. As she ventures further out into the world, I realize that one of the things I will be asked to give up in my jubilee year is the little child who prefers my company to any other’s and looks to me to meet all her needs. That child is becoming a young woman poised on the threshold of her own changes, with the way before her broad and open.

The way before me is more narrow yet marked by questions like the ones my daughter is asking. At 50, Thomas Merton asked: Who am I? Dorothy Day asked:

How can I best serve God and my neighbor? Virginia Woolf asked: What form of living will support my very best work? Their 50th birthdays were not the first time they had asked these questions, nor the last. Thank God we are offered not just one turning point in this life, but as many as we have the courage to imagine.