Living into our histories

by L. Gregory Jones in the July 4, 2001 issue

Once upon a time, there was a woman who discovered she had turned into the wrong person." So Anne Tyler begins her latest novel, *Back When We Were Grownups*. The woman is 53-year-old Rebecca Davitch, a grandmother who, at least on the surface, is outgoing, joyous and "the life of the party." But Rebecca is beginning to ask herself whether she is an impostor in her own life. Is she living her own life? Or is it someone else's?

How do you cope with the tensions between how you imagined your life might turn out, and how it in fact does? Perhaps you have met significant oppression or unexpected tragedy. Perhaps your life has brought material success but personal emptiness. In middle age, can one find a way to reclaim the lustre of an optimistic youthfulness?

In many ways, Davitch's middle-class questioning makes her the mirror image of the Delia Grinstead in an earlier Tyler novel, *Ladder of Years*. Forty-year-old Delia is acutely aware that she is living her own life, but it is one she disdains. While on vacation at the beach with her physician husband and three almost-grown children, Delia suddenly decides to keep walking down the beach until, eventually, she settles in a strange new town and invents a new life.

Delia wants to become an impostor in her own life, a free-spirited and unencumbered "Ms. Grinstead" with no responsibilities, no past, no relationships. She wants to escape her present life and likes the thought of "beginning again from scratch." She wants to try living someone else's life, or perhaps living as if she has no life at all.

One reviewer described *Ladder of Years* as "everyone's secret fantasy." Perhaps we all imagine that there might be a way to flee our past and find a world where we can live without any burdens. Whether it is an idyllic small town, a luxurious beautiful island, a mountain retreat or a bustling anonymous city, we like to imagine a world that will offer us unmitigated happiness and give us unconstrained power to determine our own days.

But rarely does anyone actually live out that fantasy. Is it because we lack the courage to try? Or is it because we have a lurking awareness that if our fantasy were to become reality, it would begin to assume its own encumbrances and histories? Do we know that, even though we might try, we cannot escape our present life, our past and the persons we have—for better and worse—become?

Rebecca Davitch and Delia Grinstead present contrasting ways of trying to escape their present lives. One woman concludes that she has been an impostor in her own life, and so needs to assume a different character; the other wants to assume a different character by becoming an impostor.

Yet neither succeeds. Nor should we expect to succeed if we try to walk around rather than through our relationships, our encumbrances and our histories. Character cannot be invented simply by will or fantasy. It is formed over time.

A few days ago my wife and I were at a wedding. As I listened to the two people eagerly make lifelong vows to one another, I also noted the preacher's words to them, "By the grace of God, you will grow old together." It was a joyous occasion.

But what will happen to the couple as they begin to grow old together? Will they accumulate histories of grievance and bitterness, boredom and routine, encumbrances that will lead them to fear that they have become the wrong persons? Or that they need to leave and try to begin again from scratch?

Or are there resources within the Christian tradition, including practices related to marriage, that might help prepare them for the inevitabile reality that life will not turn out the way they imagine?

Could it be that our willingness to anticipate lifelong commitments will inevitably be challenged by the ways that "better or worse," "richer or poorer" and "sickness and health" turn out? Can we live into our histories even if life turns out to kill the dreams we have dreamed? Can we find ways to accept what we do and what happens to us in life's joys and griefs, successes and failures, and even its routines and boredom?

Perhaps Tyler's characters struggle with such questions because they lack the habits or practices of forgiveness and repentance. Although it is difficult to receive and offer forgiveness and repentance, these acts are central to relationships. They are also critical to learning to accept the past without being bound by it.

Forgiveness does not undo or deny the past; it offers the opportunity to redeem it. The discovery of repentance as a gift linked to forgiveness is crucial so that we can learn, over time, how to cast off those things we have done and had done to us. Repentance and forgiveness give us a daily opportunity to accept the truth of who we have become without binding us to it forever. By God’s grace, the past can be redeemed and our character can be shaped in renewed ways. As a result, a forgiven and forgiving people need not try to escape the present.

As I sat in that wedding service, I wondered whether—or when—either member of this newly married couple would develop a fear that he or she had become the wrong person, or entertain a fantasy of walking away and trying to start again from scratch. But I also wondered whether their Christian convictions and practices might school them into recognizing that, although they cannot flee the past or escape the present, forgiveness and repentance might enable them to grow old together, truly by the grace of God.