

# *Barely Begun At 70* — A Call to Service

BY DR. JOSEPH L. WHEELER, CLASS OF 1954

Three weeks ago, as we cruised the Chilean Fjords (just north of Antarctica) on the *Norwegian Sun*, Connie received an e-mail message on her Blackberry from Charlotte Henderson. It informed us that we should be at MBA on April 25—and why.

That e-mail turned our thoughts back in time to when we studied here: I from 1952–1954 and Connie from 1954–1958. When Charlotte asked me to share with you whatever was on my heart, I made it a matter of prayer—for to get up to speak without knowing every word you're going to say, I consider to be an insult to one's listeners.



Seven months ago, I lay in a Denver hospital bed. My liver system had all but shut down on me and my skin had turned yellow with jaundice. Unless modern medicine could discover what to do about it—quickly—my life would be over. In fact, the hospital's hospitalist solemnly informed me that three of the five most likely scenarios were “too horrible to even talk about.” Never in my life has a clock's minute-hand moved slower than it did during those long days and even longer nights. But thanks to many prayers and caring doctors and nurses, I stand before you this morning. Clearly, God was not through with me yet.



Just before I hit 70—and I cringed because Bible writers measured lifetimes by just four words: “three-score and ten,” I came across a quotation in an old *Youth's Instructor* that enabled me to break that time-barrier with a smile on my face. It reads:

*A life may be over at 16—or barely begun at 70.*

*It is the aim that determines a life.*

Just a few years ago, my esteemed friend, Dr. James Dobson of Focus on the Family, wrote me these words: “Don't even *think* about retirement, Joe—you have at least 50 books left in you.”



While directing an Adult Degree Program at Southwestern Adventist University, I came across a study that jolted me to my core. The conclusion:

*The average American dies within seven years after retirement.*

Beloved, God did not create us to close shop, shut down, at 65 as so many—sadly—do. Should any of us do so, the brain instant-messages our armies of white blood cells with this command: *It's time to demobilize, for there are no more dreams left to protect.* As a result, unless we establish new dreams, new goals, new directions, we begin to die. How fascinating this miraculous contraption we call “our body”. God created the body (through daily exercise of the body and brain) to re-create itself every 100 days. Result: There are no plateaus in life, as so many mistakenly assume: The end of every 100 days finds each of us either measurably stronger or measurably weaker than we were before. *We* determine the direction.

Last weekend, at my 50<sup>th</sup> class reunion at Pacific Union College, my wife and I listened to classmates tell us what they were doing with their lives. Afterwards, on our own, Connie and I arrived at the same conclusion: Why were so many of them just waiting to die? Puttering around, staring glassy-eyed at TV screens, taking half-hearted swings with golf clubs. More specifically, what had happened to \_\_\_\_\_, once vibrantly alive in every inch of him, now dull, colorless, uninformed, and disconnected from the flow of life? It was a relief to turn to other classmates who were still alive.

Dylan Thomas, in his great poem on aging, *Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night* urges each of us to rage—rage—“RAGE against the dying of the light.”

Tennyson referenced Homer's *Ulysses* to remind of us how dull it would be to ever “rust unburnished, not to shine in use!” That though Death closes all, “some work of noble note may yet be done” during the last days of our lives. And even though we are made weak by time and fate, we must determine, to that last dying breath, “to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”

Kalidasa, India's greatest poet, 1500 years ago in his “Salutation to the Dawn,” postulated that each day is a miniature lifetime—with a beginning, a middle, and an end. That only as we treat *each* day as though it might be our last, will we be ready to account to God (however we perceive Him) for what we did with His most precious gift to us—Time.

My paternal great aunt, Lois Wheeler Berry, PUC's oldest alumnus, never grew old, though she passed away several weeks ago at 105—almost 106. She remained vibrantly alive, fully connected with the Zeitgeist. Over 300 from all over America

attended her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday party. When she was asked, “Aunt Lois, how old do you have to be before you’re old?” Without missing a beat, she answered, “‘Old’ is anyone who’s fifteen years older than you are.” Thus, according to Aunt Lois’s yardstick, we’re not old until we hit 120.

My beloved mother, Barbara Leiningner Wheeler, had a near photographic memory, and memorized thousands of pages of stories, poetry, and readings. Yet—and I shudder to relive that terrible, terrible day—one day when I came to see her, and looked into her eyes, she’d gone. I shared that experience in my story, “Even When Nobody’s Home,” in *Christmas in My Heart* 16. Each of you now, look to your left, look to your right. One out of every five of us—including you, including me—is destined to die mentally of dementia or Alzheimer’s before we die physically. And we won’t even know what happened when that last glimmer of light dies in our eyes.

Perhaps it’s because I lost my mother long before she died that I’m so conscious of how little time we are granted in which to make a difference!

As the *Norwegian Sun* plowed its way north to Valparaiso, Chile, I envisioned seeing emerge from out of the mists that legendary windjammer, the Flying Cloud, that raced through these waters under full sail in 1851, setting a world speed record of 89 days and 21 hours between Boston and San Francisco, around the Horn. Every inch of canvas was stretched tight all the way.

What I’m groping to say, I’m borrowing from my dear friend Randy Fowler’s scrapbook:

*Life is not a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in a pretty and well-preserved body, but rather to skid in broadside, thoroughly used up, worn out, and loudly proclaiming, “Wow, what a ride!”*

— Author Unknown



Now, let’s return to us sitting in this beautiful mission-style sanctuary. What can all this possibly have to do with us?

The answer: Adventism has lost way too much of the educational dream that flourished for the first century and a half of our history: 20% fewer in our schools than only a generation ago. When Connie attended here, over 400 students shared

the campus with her; and when our daughter Michelle attended, over 500 students. Today, there are barely 200. Why do we, MBA’s alumni, permit this to happen? We attend alumni weekends, revel in each other’s company, walk on the beach once again, listen to progress reports and challenges brought to us by administrators and teachers, return home, and say, in essence, *Let somebody else worry about it, someone younger than me. I probably couldn’t make much of a difference anyhow. After all, I’m old.*

I challenge each MBA-ite to never again refer to yourself, or let anyone else do so, as “old.” We’re not 120 yet! Neither Connie nor I ever plan to retire. “Retire” means that we’ve given up on life—given up on making a day-to-day difference. What a difference we could make if every last one of us made of ourselves a committee of one (recruiting new students, raising money, personally contributing), and vowed to help reverse MBA’s long enrollment slide and bring it back to its glory days! Implausible? Not when we consider that Christ turned the world upside down with only twelve!

In conclusion, I feel impressed to reach back into medieval times to when knights challenged each other to combat by hurling a gage to the floor; just so, I challenge each alum to throw off the debilitating shackles of inertia and rally with me on this great crusade—whether you’re 20 or 75 (keeping in mind that today 70 is the new 55)!

And lest there is even one of you who is ever again tempted to resort to those now outlawed words, “old” or “retired,” let me close with that quotation I shared with you earlier: “A life may be over at 16—or barely begun at 70. It is the aim that determines a life.”

Now, let’s conclude by all saying it together:

*A life may be over at 16—or barely begun at 70. It is the aim that determines a life.*



*When asked to supply us with a printed text to his extemporaneous remarks (a number have requested copies), Dr. Wheeler prayerfully strengthened it by judicious deletions and additions.*