

LIVING ALONE

By Lewis Perry

- For 93 of my 96 years, I lived with parents, siblings, college roommates, Navy buddies, two wives, 3 daughters, various grandchildren, various step children, student tenants, and foreign refugees. I confess I have always had some trepidation about living alone. I can fry an egg, but that is about the extent of my cooking skills. I enjoy reading aloud and love having guests around a dinner table. I shared my bed with two successive wives for 66 years. I made joint decisions about time management with others for 93 years. I have always been worried. What would happen if I ended up living alone?
- My topic today is to say I am now living alone and doing well. I give my second wife, Liz, credit for our having moved to Piedmont Gardens where I have a community of friends. But what have I learned in the last three years since the death of my second wife? I am now fully responsible for my use of time and this talk is my accounting for the stewardship of my time.
- What do I have to show for my use of time? I would like to describe five different aspects of my life while living alone:
 - Reading
 - Writing poetry
 - Music
 - Family
 - Community

READING

- In the last three years all reading has been done with a Kindle reader.
- I have indulged my interest in crime fiction:
 - Michael Connelly, Sheldon Spiegel, David Baldacci, Donna Leon, and others
 - Also John Grisham, who writes legal thrillers.
- Reading out loud was a favorite recreation in the past. I read hundreds of books aloud to my first wife over a period of 50 years.
- In 2016, I had a chance to do this again. A resident here was ill, confined to Skilled Nursing, and I read aloud to her for an hour a day, 4 mornings a week, for 7 weeks and ended after she recovered in the summer of 2016. I read her some short stories by James Thurber and “A Spool of Blue Thread” by Anne Tyler.
- Another reading adventure included me as a listener. A friend here was reading aloud to another resident with macular degeneration and I was invited, along with a third woman, to listen. This went on for more than a year but was suspended after the deaths of two of the women. We read several books during that period, books which we mutually agreed upon.
- Right now I am reading a David Baldacci novel called “Total Control.”

WRITING POETRY

- I am a poetry ignoramus. Until 2016, I had never read poetry or written poetry or paid any attention to it. I was a poetry zero.
- My first poem was written on September 9, 2016 as a private message to a friend, in anticipation of Sept. 11, the 15th anniversary of the “9/11” attacks.
- I had no idea of writing or publishing anything, anytime.
But the new issue of “The Crest” then registered with me. If Fran and Flossie and Matt could write and publish, why couldn’t I? So I tried a short poem and Nina published it Oct. 1, 2016. Since then, I have had a new poem in every issue, about 30 to date.
- What I love to do is to read it out loud. That’s the point of writing it—to read it out loud.
- On previous public occasions I have read poems about my trigeminal neuralgia, about my surgery and the recovery, about my wife’s death, and about my spiritual journey.
- On this occasion, I have selected three new poems to read about new subjects, such as my style of writing, my motivation, and my inspiration.
 - Read “Stream”
 - Read “Space for Grace”
 - Read “Inspiration”

Stream
By Lewis Perry

This is a stream, a stream of words,
Words about poems and poetry,
About poets writing poems
Based on their conscious experiences.

The poets are two, Lewis and Billy.
Billy is Billy Collins, USA poet laureate.
Lewis is an aging poet who lives
In Oakland, CA, USA. He's learning.

He has written poems for less than two years.
Billy has written and published for decades.
Lewis hardly knew Billy's name.
He certainly hadn't read any of Billy's poems.

Somebody said Billy writes like Lewis.
How could that be? Billy wrote first.
Yet somebody said what Lewis just wrote.
Billy's style is like that of Lewis.

Lewis sees and looks, feels and thinks,
And out comes a stream, a stream of words.
That's what Billy does. The words cover
Mundane, every day, commonplace things.

The rising sun, the morning fog,
The songs of birds, the sounds of trucks,
The morning news, the national events,
The fate of the world, the love of God.

That's the subject matter
That Lewis pays attention to.
Billy does the very same thing
And he has universal respect.

Lewis will never catch up
With Billy, nor should he even try.
For Lewis it is enough to know
That somebody thinks the two are similar.

Space for Grace
By Lewis Perry

The other day I heard these words.
They make a title begging for a poem.
So this is my humble effort
To fill the available void.

Three years ago in December
I lost Liz, my second wife.
My life seemed drawing to a close
With nothing left worth living for.

But that was not to be, thank God.
I was saved by the grace of finding
Things to do that got me
Outside myself, like a snake, with new skin.

To name them all is tedious.
You won't believe them all.
But the fact is I found the space
And time to do these things for others.

The secret was finding other-centered
Activity, not self-centered.
What I do for friends and community
Is what makes my life worth living.

Such a conclusion may seem
Obvious to those who have already found it.
I hope you are one of those.
But I had to learn it for myself
By making space for grace anew.

Inspiration
By Lewis Perry

Today I heard a piece of music
By the Gypsy Kings, called "Inspiration."
It set me to thinking about my work.
What inspires me to try to write verse?

Music is such a ready source
Of beauty, of harmony, of virtuosity,
Especially when the human voice is
Accompanied by harps and violins,
By guitars and mandolins.

But words alone can give the urge
To write lines that carry weight,
That flow with grace from human tongue,
That lift the spirits of all who hear.

My experience these past two years
Is that all it takes is a word
Or phrase to set the mind in motion,
Going where the imagination pleases.

One friend gave me the phrase,
"Sacred Time." Not knowing what was meant,
I pushed the idea to a prayer
For grace in this sacred time.

Inspiration is like a gift from the blue,
From the blue sky, from outer space,
From the recesses of the mind,
From the ultimate source, God.

I can't predict it, I can't control it,
I can't design it, I can't suppress it.
All I can do is express it, share it,
And walk humbly with God's grace.

MUSIC

- I have been a consumer and producer of music all my life and that has continued during the last three years.
- As a consumer, I attended most of the live musical events here, both classical and popular. We have such an extraordinary opportunity here to hear good music, free.
- As a producer, I played both violin and oboe as a child and sang in a barbershop quartet briefly and in my church choir for many decades. I even met my first wife in the church choir. When I stopped driving in 2013, I thought my singing days were over, because I couldn't get to choir rehearsal. Not so! I was able to continue singing, thanks to the Hootenanny group. Singing with the Hootenanny has become the replacement.
- But there's more. My family prevailed on me to get an iPhone in 2016. With the help of my granddaughter, I learned how to access Pandora. I became a fan of Latin jazz and popular guitar music. I use it to stimulate and regulate my exercise program for my legs. I do physical therapy exercises for my arthritic knees. With a blue tooth speaker, I can take the music up to the roof, in the summer.
- My first artistic endeavor was to prepare a program of recorded music by Antonio Carlos Jobim, that my family helped me present here at PG on Father's Day 2017.

- My second artistic endeavor was a composition, a song entitled “Waltzing with Joy.” It was a simple tune, in the key of C in $\frac{3}{4}$ time. The words were based on the lecture by Dr. John Chuck, “The Three Keys to Contentment.” The Hootenanny learned the song and sang it here several times.
- My third artistic endeavor was another song entitled, “Waltzing with Love.” The music was similar to a Jobim song in the key of C with $\frac{3}{4}$ time. The lyrics were based on my poem, “Never too Late.” That song was sung in a church service at my church, First Congregational Church of Berkeley (FCCB), in 2018. I gave the song to Derek Tam, the choir director at FCCB, and he arranged it for piano and soprano and then performed it with Julie Greer, the singer. What a thrill!
- My fourth artistic endeavor has been the reading of the poem “Never too Late” out loud, as part of the Hootenanny concerts, thanks to Vangie. I have read it three times now and it has been the most gratifying experience of my recent life. It’s never too late to be creative and to share joy and delight with others.

FAMILY

- To say I am living alone, is only superficially true. I have three daughters living in California, 2 in Berkeley, and one in Yreka. I see all daughters frequently. I also have four grandchildren, all living in California.

- I still own my house in North Berkeley. My middle daughter lives in it and takes care of it. A typical weekend has her picking me up on Friday afternoon and I spend two nights in Berkeley, go to church in Berkeley on Sunday morning and return here for Sunday dinner at noon. She and I discovered a recreation I will call “wheel chair bird walking” There are many accessible paths along the East Bay shore, from Coyote Hills Regional Park to Point Pinole. My daughter keeps a wheel chair in the car and brings her digital camera, I have binoculars, and we look at birds and photograph them.

- With her help and driving, we have taken four long trips in the last three years.
 - In 2016 and 2017 we drove to Yreka to visit my eldest daughter and then went to Ashland to see plays at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival.
 - In 2018, my two younger daughters and I drove to Bishop, in Inyo County, on the east side of the Sierras. We were able to find and visit the ranch in Mono County, just north of Bishop, where my family had lived from 1912 to 1922, before I was born. It was the fulfillment of my ambition to show my daughters the place where my parents had lived. That trip included a detour to see the Bristlecone Pines and another side trip to picnic along the Merced River in Yosemite Valley.

- The other big trip in 2018 was a trip to Mt. Shasta. My eldest grandson, who now lives in Redding, got married at the Mr. Shasta Resort Hotel on Lake Siskiyou. The marriage was notable, for two reasons. It occurred during a wild fire, when the atmosphere was smoky, and we had to take a 2-hour detour to get there since Interstate 5 was closed. Nevertheless the guests all showed up in the smoke and it was a great occasion. I was asked to say something at the reception, and I wrote a poem for the occasion honoring the groom, his bride, and the mother who raised him. I now have a grand daughter-in-law.

- The other big family occasion in 2018 was the marriage of my eldest granddaughter. She went to India, to marry a native of India, whom she met in graduate school at UC Berkeley, who now lives in the U.S. They now live in San Francisco and are expecting their first child, so I may be a great-grandfather before the year is out. So in just one year I have seen two grandchildren married and acquired a granddaughter-in-law and grandson-in-law. Talk about joy and delight!

- Fortunately, I see my family members frequently because they still gather for dinner around the dining table in North Berkeley. My iphone has also helped me stay in touch. My grandchildren even respond to my texts!

COMMUNITY

- There are three activities I want to talk about under the heading of Community here at PG: Film Committee, Resident Foundation Committee, and GEAR.
- I have served twice as a member of the Film Committee, for a total of four years out of eight. First time was for two years when Harriet Williams was Chair and then again for the last two years. The Film Committee has two jobs. The easy one is choosing films. The hard one is running a theater every Thursday night. The first period I was on the committee, the challenges defeated us. We couldn't run the theatre, and we all quit and gave up. By buying new equipment and turning the theatre around, the job was resumed successfully. Now we are going through another crisis, requiring new projectionists and theatre management. I hope it works out.
- The Resident Foundation Committee, formerly the Benevolent Support Committee, engages in fundraising activity to support the Resident Endowment Foundation. This is the source of funds for the subsidies that enable Piedmont Gardens to fulfill the promise of support to the end of life for those who exhaust their funds through no fault of their own. This is the ultimate promise we made to each other and nothing is more important here, in my view. I have served three years on the Committee, including two years as Secretary, and my term will end this year, 2019. It has been an honor to serve you.

- GEAR: What is GEAR? It's an acronym, an activity, and a Godsend.
 - G is for expressing Gratitude.
 - E is for Exercise, both body and mind.
 - A is for Accepting change and Adapting.
 - R is for cultivating old and new Relationships.
- The idea and theory of GEAR came from Dr. John Chuck, the son of a former resident, Rev. James Chuck. Part of his work is the continuing education of doctors and health care workers in the Kaiser system in Northern California. Dr. John says that medical research and literature support the idea that there are four variables that distinguish people that age successfully from those who don't. The four variables are: GEAR – Gratitude, Exercise, Adaptability, Relationships.
- The practice of GEAR was started here by Rev. James Chuck, Coordinator, and Doris Pummill. The work of GEAR is done in wellness circles that meet weekly to talk about GEAR. At the present time there are seven such circles here that are active. I have succeeded James as the Coordinator and a successor for me needs to be found.
- I say GEAR is a godsend. It was for me after my second wife, Liz, died. I needed a focus, an activity, the support of friends, and a job. It gave me a responsibility, something that was regular and demanding, that I couldn't just drop, willy-nilly.

- I now facilitate two circles, Monday at 3:30pm and Thursday at 3pm. It was my number one commitment to the community here.
- If you want to know more, talk with me anytime, anywhere. Call me, stop me in the hall, and talk to me over dinner. My mantra is:
 GEAR today, GEAR tomorrow.

In closing, I would like to acknowledge the assistance and friendship of many people here at PG who have helped make this transition to living alone not only bearable but fun. The staff members who know my name and smile in the hall or bring my favorite food before I place an order. The nurses who attend to my cuts and bruises. The many people I have the pleasure of conversing with over dinner. The movies, musical concerts, GEAR circles, and outings. My last three years have been more fun and more rewarding than I could have imagined. I have experienced an awakening of sorts. I have not had to consult with anyone about my time management. I have tried new things, gone new places, and made new friends. And at 96, I still am looking forward to more fun!

The end.

Never Too Late
By Lewis Perry

It's never, not ever, never too late,
To mend a silly mistake
Or even one that was serious,
It is never too late to express regret.

It's never, not ever, never too late,
To say that you are sorry
For your mistake, especially the serious one.
It's never too late to apologize.

It's never, not ever, never too late,
To feel affection, to want attention,
From someone you wish you knew better.
It's never too late to feel love for the other.

It's never, not ever, never too late,
To heed the call to love one another,
To love your neighbor as yourself.
It's never too late to feel God's love.

It's never, not ever, never too late,
To become a person who loves the other,
A person who loves the neighbor,
A person who loves God and all others together.

It's never, no never, never too late,
To receive respect and love from the other,
To receive love from one another,
To share joy and delight with all others.

It's never, no never, never too late,
To express gratitude to the other,
To feel grateful for all the others,
Who praise and thank God for God's love.