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As I turn 80, I feel as though I am guiding the fragile watercraft of my life across a metaphorical lake. I find myself facing down the mist, hesitating before I enter it, as I cannot see what lies on the other side. I want to believe it is a beautiful place. But there is trepidation. I sailed easily through my 50th, 60th and 70th birthdays. Why does this one feel so different?

Being a chronically spiritual person, I look on this moment through the eyes of my soul. People wiser than I have spoken and written of spiritual "stages" that we pass through in our lives. How might I identify stages I have lived through? Am I now standing on the brink of a new one?

Looking back, I see clearly two stages: regulation and integration. Looking forward, peering into the mist, I sense a fearsome but refreshing invitation: transformation.

When I was a child, the words "religion" and "rules" occurred in the same thought, the same breath. Do not lie, do not steal, do not cheat, do not call others bad names, honor Mom and Dad, and go to church on Sunday. Go to the right church, and Jesus will love you.

One second grade morning, I was accosted by a classmate who demanded to know if I was a Protestant or a Catholic. Hands on hips, I sternly declared that I was neither. "I am a Methodist!"

In my New York high school, I was one of three Christian students in our group of college preppers. The others were the smart Jewish kids who got together after school to help each other with homework. I envied them, but was not one of them. I firmly believed that various groups of God-followers were separated from one another by deep, uncrossable chasms.

As I entered adulthood, such regulation moved into integration. After four years of majoring in religion at a Methodist university, I became a Catholic (a story for another time) and took a job as a full-time parochial liturgy director, directing the arts and ministries of the parish. I was also an improvisational sacred dancer, and taught dance groups around the United States and in Australia in a wide variety of denominations: Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Episcopal, Catholic, Congregational, Unitarian and Mennonite.

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After retiring from the liturgy work, I became a certified music practitioner and served for 15 years as the "chaplain with a harp" in a hospice inpatient unit. There, I played my harp for, prayed with, and learned from persons of multiple spiritual paths, now adding Baha'i, Mormon, Buddhist, Jewish, Sikh, questioner and nonbeliever to the list.

Ten years ago, in our summer RV park, four of us — two Christian and two Jewish women — formed an informal Faith Club, meeting every week to share, ask each other questions and learn from one another, forming an unbreakable bond that endures today.

Needless to say, my walls came down. On Sundays, you will still find me in a pew at my local Catholic parish, but now my heart has no boundaries. Integration has allowed my spirituality to expand beyond labels, and drawn me into the One Source of life and love.

Now, at the big 8-0, I sit on the proverbial lake in my fragile craft, and the mist before me beckons. I retired late, at age 72, but for years have clung tenaciously to my former identities to maintain a sense of self-worth. Now I feel drawn to let go: let go of my imagined self-importance, my need for control, my need to be "something" in the eyes of others rather than simply someone who lives and loves and is grateful for each person, each day, each breath. For years, I have talked and written about "Let go, and let God." Good intentions. But I haven't yet done a very good job of it.

I remember the words of Benedictine Sr. [Joan Chittister](#) in *The Gift of Years*: "It is in our later years that the real subject of religion — the relationship between the human being and the Creator ... and the consequent surrender to the spiritual meaning of life — becomes real."

I don't dance like I used to. I no longer need to schlep a harp hither and yon. I am no longer obsessed with whether or not a liturgy is done with rubrical correctness. I write, and pray, and love, and walk and wonder. I am ready to "surrender to the spiritual meaning of life." Not without trepidation. But it is time.

I pick up my paddle. Holding it firmly, I push it deep into the water and press forward into the transforming mist ...

I now know. I am coming home.