

A thought about retirement, Tuesdays, and paradise

A life does not become meaningful by escaping change; change may be what lets meaning happen.

A few weeks into retirement, I've discovered that "having time" and knowing how to inhabit it are not the same thing.

For forty years, my life was organized around future rewards: the next promotion, a larger retirement account, paying off the house, helping the children through college, and eventually earning permission to relax. Now the permission has arrived-and an ordinary Tuesday can feel strangely difficult to receive.

I'm not depressed, and I'm not looking for financial advice. I'm trying to understand what remains when achievement is no longer required to justify the day.

Wallace Stevens's "Sunday Morning" has been helping me think about it. The poem begins with coffee, oranges, sunlight, and the comfort of a quiet morning. But that comfort is interrupted by "the dark / Encroachment of that old catastrophe": the awareness of death, inherited religious promises, and the question of whether earthly abundance is enough.

That interruption feels familiar. A garden, a meal, a conversation, or a morning with my wife can be entirely pleasant-and still be shadowed by the knowledge that none of it can be held permanently.

Stevens does not solve this by demanding that we "live in the present moment." That phrase can sound like one more performance goal. Instead, the poem asks a harder question: why should we surrender the living world to the dead? Why assume that fulfillment must be somewhere else?

Its answer is not simple pleasure. It is a kind of earthly spirituality:

- Divinity must live within human experience.
- Rain, snow, loneliness, flowering forests, and autumn roads can become measures of the soul.
- A bird testing a misty field before flight can contain both contentment and the fear of disappearance.

- Paradise, if it means anything, should participate in labor, pain, love, and change-not imitate the earth from a safe distance.

The most arresting idea is that "Death is the mother of beauty." At first, that sounds severe. But perhaps it means that impermanence is not merely the enemy of value. A summer morning matters partly because it passes. Fruit ripens and falls. Birds leave the field. A conversation ends. The fact that an experience cannot be preserved may be part of what makes it fully real.

This does not eliminate the longing for something enduring. Stevens admits that even in contentment, there remains a need for "some imperishable bliss." I recognize that tension. I want to receive an ordinary Tuesday without turning it into a project, while still wondering whether a life built from passing moments can be enough.

For now, I'm experimenting with a smaller understanding of fulfillment: not escape from change, but fellowship with it. The people who perish, the summer morning, the garden, the weather, the evening birds-all belonging to one world, without a guarantee that anything stands outside it to certify our lives.

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