

Thomas G. Palaima REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

Life is a 50-50 proposition

I am fast approaching 50 years of age. Those of you who have reached or passed this milestone will agree with me upon two things. The rest of you, take heed.

First, I should be precise. I am faster and faster approaching 50 years of age. Time has a surreptitious way of accelerating into and through middle age more smoothly than Mike Hammer's latest sports car. It was really just yesterday that

I walked into Rootin' Ridge to order their wooden toy train pieces with my newborn son's initials specially made in the Linear B script I study. But yesterday — in real time — I took a sample car of Emmett's to

order a set for the newborn twin sons of a longtime scholarly friend and was astonished to hear myself say, "I bought these here six years ago."

Second, you cannot escape practicing what Solon preached more than 2,500 years ago: "I grow old always learning new things." For one thing, your friends and neighbors, spouses, ex-spouses, partners, ex-partners, children, grandchildren, employees, co-workers, bosses, ministers, guiding philosophers and all those other human beings out there — and the one inside your own body — won't let you do anything else. On those rare humdrum days when they all cancel their intensive refresher classes in Human Existence 606, the American-Statesman, your Web navigator or your television

screen readily offer alternative distance learning.

As if constant inescapable remedial education about yourself and your fellow *hominines sapientes* were not enough, you also develop an avid interest in ancient history. You ponder events that took place 20, 30, 40 years ago or more. You can grasp and analyze all the data so clearly that you think seriously about offering your services to the Bush White House or the Perry capitol. And well you should. Such savvy about human behavior is useful in all areas of domestic or foreign policy, and even the briefest historical review of the odd chances and missed chances of your own life produces vast reserves of compassion, if not conservatism.

Of course, just start tapping these reserves for the benefit of your nearest and dearest, your colleagues or lucky chance passers-by, and you realize they think what you are pumping is lots of natural gas. Better to use that in federal, state or local government.

Where did I learn my most useful lessons? Not in the classes and seminars I took for 25 years from kindergarten through graduate school, nor in the many lectures, colloquia and workshops I have attended or conducted in the past 20 years. During high school and college, I worked summers on the garbage and street repair crews of the village of Broadview Heights, Ohio, and as a janitor at the local public high school.

Would my life, I wonder now, really have been incomplete without the Proustian stench of Glad trash bags full of lawn clippings, kitchen garbage and standing rain water, fermented five days in the hot summer sun, sitting curbside and ready to

burst when hoisted? How would I have learned to drive a stick shift, except on those regular Friday afternoon roadkill retrieval runs in the old Jeep pickup with Dennis Kiesel and Tony Jurkiewicz? I learned by experience that Bob Belovich's advice that half-clutching was good for the engine because it smoothed out the gears was not going to be a lifelong guiding principle, to say nothing about the entertainment factor of skunks and squirrels with rigor mortis, and the pathos of a family dog whose collar had to be removed and returned to its owners.

I do know that I would not have acquired what veterans like my good friend Joel Cryer extracted from their military service, antennae for b.s. in any form and from anyone, respect for fellow human beings of any station in life — because that station, even if reached by hard personal effort, is almost always one of life's most supreme ironies — and a real appreciation for those above me in any chain of command who behave decently and humanely, who look out for the common good, and who resist the extreme temptations for tyrannical self-indulgence that power over others always offers.

I also learned, working as a janitor, that teen-age boys do not surpass teen-age girls in the art of graffiti and that "Genghis Khan, but Emmanuel Kant." But that and other lessons from the walls of life will have to wait for another day. And it will be here faster than I think.

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