

Wyoming Tribune Eagle, May 19, 2016: “Rethink direction from time to time.”
Casper Star Tribune, May 22: “Seeing ourselves in new light.”

A Mother’s Day surprise arrived by way of a dozen roses, given by brothers who are my temporary lodgers. The two are under a month’s contract at the Laramie Power Plant.

The brothers, whose children range from grade school to high school to college, are originally from Ukraine. Twelve and fifteen years ago each immigrated to the U.S. with wife and children.

“You are like a mother to us,” they said as they extended the bouquet. At first I was taken aback, not keen on having two good-looking males think of me as Mother. Then I remembered my age. And the roses are lovely.

(My adult children are under a moratorium as concerns the obligatory flowers. I prefer to grow my own—and leave them blooming outdoors.)

What makes the brothers think of me with filial affection even though they don’t partake of my cuisine? (Apart from the occasional home-baked cookie or slice of bread, they bring their own home-country meals.) I do listen to their stories, though both are self-conscious about their accent, probably because they’ve heard snide remarks directed at “foreigners.” Between themselves and with their families, they speak Ukrainian. The Pentecostal church service they attend in Denver is in Russian.

Having been an immigrant myself, I readily accept another’s inflection. Further, I like to elicit personal stories, often by sharing my own, and I have developed the habit of close listening. Over the years I’ve acquired an ear for inflections ranging from Japanese to Chinese to Sudanese to Spanish, French and German—and now, Ukrainian.

I did advise the brothers to use English with their children. “It’ll make your speaking more confident,” I said. “Your children will love you for showing interest.”

When they protested that they can’t match my linguistic finesse, I reminded them that I began English at ten while they learned Russian; moreover, English is related my native German. “Your English is quite good,” I assured them.

As the brothers lost their bashfulness, they began telling me about the hardships their compatriots suffer back home, now more than ever. Their mother died young, of cancer. Their dad passed even earlier, of “too much drink.” As for themselves and their older brother, it was divine intervention, they said, that helped shake off their dependency on smoking, drinking, and fighting, though they carried on wildly in youth.

To get back to my initial reaction to the roses. As we move through life, now and then we must rethink a direction or self-image. Though we may prefer not to consider ourselves as sexual beings, we ought to give thought to our sexuality as to any other aspect of life. In this regard, it’s instructive to acquaint ourselves with other people’s experiences.

“About halfway through my seventies I stopped thinking of myself as a sexual being.” This comes from a woman who, on the eve of her 98th birthday, published the book that contains the above quote. She continues that, to love a man “without wanting to go to bed with him” provided her with a “new sort of freedom.”

A British writer and former editor, Diana Athill describes it thus: “It was like coming out onto a high plateau, into clear, fresh air, far above the antlike bustle going on down below me.”

Her snippets of autobiography reveal decades of hedonism that may not be to everyone’s taste. Still, we can learn from her observations.

“My doctor took me off testosterone,” a friend recently confided in tones mournful and morose. “It’s been terrible. No energy. No libido to speak of.” The change has upended his image of himself. He struggles with depression.

I think that, whatever roles he may have played in his decades of adult life—Man about town? Don Juan? Rebel-rouser?—to be at peace with himself, something will need rethinking. Should my distraught friend find it within to revise himself, he’ll discover: changing our thoughts about ourselves can bring experiences that revitalize and render life interesting.

The decision-making that comes with re-evaluating ourselves can be complicated. Often we don’t recognize that we have several options; at other times, social norms impose restrictions. In the Song of Songs, the bride says to her bridegroom that she used to wish he were her brother, “that I might kiss you without shame.” One time, when I embraced a friend who is Muslim, he cringed noticeably.

Is there a better way? What else could we do? Accustomed ways of functioning tend to trap our thinking in narrow frames, which blinds us to the choices we have, advise authors Chip Heath and Dan Heath in “Decisive.” When we take time to “attain distance before deciding,” we widen our options and allow novel approaches.

Can female-to-male encounters evolve beyond mother, lover, wife? Diana Athill is certain they can—and do. In England, anyway.