



An Excerpt from Parker J. Palmer's *On The Brink of Everything*

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Every day, I get closer to the brink of everything. We're all headed that way, of course...but when a serious illness or accident strikes, or someone dear to us dies—or we go to a class reunion and wonder who all those old people are—it becomes harder to ignore the drop-off that lies just over the edge of our lives.

I'll be nearly eighty when this book is published, so it shouldn't surprise me that I can sometimes see the brink from here. But it does. I'm even more surprised by the fact that I *like* being old.

Age brings diminishment, but more than a few come with benefits. I've lost the capacity for multitasking, but I've rediscovered the joy of doing one thing at a time. My thinking has slowed a bit, but experience has made it deeper and richer. I'm done with big and complex projects, but more aware of the loveliness of simple things: a talk with a friend, a walk in the woods, sunsets and sunrises, a night of good sleep.

I have fears, of course, always have and always will. But as time lengthens like a shadow behind me, and the time ahead dwindles, my overriding feeling is gratitude for the gift of life.

Above all, I like being old because the view from the brink is striking, a full panorama of my life—and a bracing breeze awakens me to new ways of understanding my own past, present, and future. As one of Kurt Vonnegut's characters says in *Player Piano*, "out on the edge you can see all kinds of things you can't see from the center."¹

Looking back, I see why I needed the tedium *and* the inspiration, the anger *and* the love, the anguish *and* the joy. I see how it all belongs, even those days of despair when the darkness overwhelmed me. Calamities I once lamented now appear as strong threads of a larger weave, without which the fabric of my life would be less resilient. Moments of fulfillment I failed to relish in my impatience to get on to the next thing now appear as times to be recalled and savored. And I've doubled down on my gratitude for those who've helped me along with love, affirmation, hard questions, daunting challenges, compassion, and forgiveness.

Looking around at our shared world, its suffering and its promise, I see the courage with which so many live in service of the human possibility. Old age is no time to hunker down, unless disability demands it. Old is just another word for nothing left to lose, a time of life to take bigger risks on behalf of the common good.

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