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Life stories

Susan Ager says good-bye with gratitude

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My father taught me there's no such thing as a stupid question, so I am daring to ask myself this one:

Who am I besides who I've been?

After 25 years at the Detroit Free Press, I decided to view the paper's latest buyout offer as a gift, an opportunity to explore and rediscover myself in middle age.

My own dad is fit and healthy at 78. But years ago, I learned that in Confucian times in ancient China, tradition demanded that when a man's father died, he was to go into the woods for a year to live as a hermit, to take, in effect, a midlife break to reassess and regroup and renew.

"You're too young to retire!" people have told me. But I am not retiring. I am a journalist to my core: curious, questioning, eager for stories, and eager to retell them.

Henceforth, when I meet strangers at parties, and they ask what I do, I will tell them I'm a journalist on indefinite sabbatical.

I made the decision a month ago, nudged by no one. At first, my mood swung wildly, from "Oh boy, this will be fun!" to "What have I done?" My job has been among the best in the world, being paid to have adventures, meet fascinating strangers and say whatever I want whenever I want to.

And there I was abandoning it, in a place where thousands of others are being laid off against their wills, or struggling to get up each morning to go to work they hate because they must, for the money.

I am blessed to be able to reject a job I loved.

I have noticed in the past few days a significant lightening of my spirit. The room where anxiety lives in me is being swept clean. Out goes anxiety about what I'll write next, and next week, and next Thanksgiving, and next Christmas. Out goes anxiety about whether

I'm meeting my bosses' expectations, and my readers'. Out goes the chronic anxiety about whether I'm washed up and don't know it.

My husband predicts that I will discover in the corners of that room new little anxieties, like spiders.

I hope he is wrong, but fear he is right.

My main concern: Meaning. Every day of my adult life I have hitched my horse to the same post, one that makes me feel significant and appreciated. Now I've pulled up the post! Me! Pulled up my own post!

My steed and I will have to nose around to find new places to tie up where we feel meaningful. Some days we will be lost, I guess. Other days we will be found.

I have no specific plans. One friend in his mid-50s, my age, sent a stunned question: "How will you spend the rest of your life?!?!?" I don't know. I don't want to know. I want some emptiness and silence to see what arises out of me. I look forward to being in the moment, looking people in the eye, actually hearing their words without secretly asking myself, "Can I turn this into a column?"

I carry in my purse a small notebook where for the past month I've been jotting notes about what I want to explore and learn now that I'll have time. The list reads: "personal finance, conflict resolution, stars, mosaic, MSU teach, ears, hospice, Planned Parenthood, naturalist, pickling, yogurt, drive cross-country." I'll let those remain as cryptic as they are, except to confess that "ears" means it's time to get my hearing checked.

Gabe and Gary, Barb and JuJuan

But enough about me!

You should know that if not for you, I could not have done what I do. Your letters and phone calls and, in recent years, your flood of e-mails have kept me going. Whatever you said, your responses meant you were reading and reacting, and that's all any writer wants: to know that her words weren't carried off by the wind, but settled somewhere, like seeds.

I know some of you so well by e-mail alone that my heart lifts to see your address in my inbox, correspondents like Gabe and Gary and RockJack, Carrie and Barb and JuJuan.

Plus, thousands of you took my phone calls, answered my questions and trusted me with the fragile details of your own life stories, trusted me to retell your stories fairly. Your faith was a great gift to me, and to all of us.

Because in sharing our stories, we share our humanity, stirring our tales together in a wonderful, spicy stew.

Listen to what my living hero, Garrison Keillor, has to say: "Stories are basic currency, the dollar bill of conversation. ... You go to the grocery store and the checkout woman tells you that she wasn't at work yesterday because her dog had to be put down, the dog she's had for 13 years. That's a story right there, whether she amplifies on it or not, and her willingness to tell it to you is what moves her out of the ranks of the nameless and makes her real to you.

"And if we're not real to each other, then we're dangerous to each other." Stories, he said, "give us that simple empathy that is the basis of the Golden Rule."

For every story I've told over these 25 years, readers have offered up their own. Hearing a story prompts a story, in a splendid chain.

Finally, here's a line from May Sarton's "Journal of a Solitude" that I am repeating to myself during this transition. It might help all of us in times of change.

"I think of the trees and how simply they let go, let fall the riches of a season."

That's the basic story of life on Earth: As one season ends, another begins.