

## **The Lives We Lead**

*This program is designed for mature adults who would like to know more about, and even share with others, the lives they lead. The number of participants are preferably up to 15 to 20 individuals in a comfortable space. A circle of chairs works well. If there are more people interested, this author is happy to extend his invitation to conduct free additional future presentations.*

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Dick Sederquist is a motivational speaker and the author of four memoirs of enlightening and motivational short stories and reflections. His memoirs include discussions on surviving depression, his prison program, life, hiking, humor, science, travel, spirituality, and contemporary topics. Since publication of his first memoir, *Hiking Out: Surviving Depression with Humor and Insight Along the Way*, Dick began making presentations to hospital depression support groups, libraries, church adult enrichment groups, and as a volunteer for the Connecticut Department of Correction, one-hundred-forty-four “Life Change” group workshops, mentoring over two-hundred inmates in four Connecticut prisons over a ten year period. Based on these programs and his life experiences, Dick is offering a one hour presentation and introduction to his “The Lives We Lead” program. Participants are offered the opportunity to share with their fellow attendees, if they like, the identities they have created and would like to lead in their own lives. If they are satisfied to just listen, that is fine too. This introduction can be followed up with a more in depth session to those interested in continuing this process of discovery. If you are so motivated, this is also a program you can continue on your own. The following is an introduction and guide to this process. Attendees will also receive a complementary first edition copy of *Hiking Out* from the author.

### **Introduction**

If I were to be interviewed, I thought about the questions that would be asked. Who am I? What motivated me to write my books? I started thinking about me the person and what defined me. I realized that a lot of what defined me was strongly influenced by my twenty plus years of membership in the Unitarian Universalist (UU) Church in West Hartford, Connecticut. Based on my own writing style of remembering things about myself, I took what I define mentally as “Taking a Walk.” Out of that walk through my life, I came up with seven separate identities or lives that define who I am. These are not multiple disturbing personalities like in the 1957 film and dark mystery drama “The Three Faces of Eve” starring Joanne Woodward, who won an Academy Award for her performance, but identities I and my family and friends are familiar with and would certainly describe me. You will learn from this introduction, I call them *Hiker*, *Rocket Man*, *Survivor*, *Writer*, *Volunteer*, *Patient*, and *Time Traveler*. Most of my identities are happy people. The more I thought about the lives I lead, I realized we all have lives that we lead.

If we were to be interviewed, they would probably come out in the conversation. These are lives we lived since long ago, some we left, others we retained, others we wish we had lived, others we are still growing into.

This is a fun exercise on the lives we lead or want to lead. Who are the interesting and unique principal defining characters in your personal, including your spiritual life, not other people, mentors, heroes, or role models, we are talking about you, the lives you lead? Give them names and briefly describe them. This is an introductory reading assignment (homework), and easy to follow directions for this exercise. This is not a writing assignment, just an invitation to verbally share your experiences. You will get more out of today's presentation if you read this introduction ahead of time.

I invite you to explore and share the lives you lead. I identify mine as interesting and unique characters, protagonists, personas, or roles in my life. Those roles in my life came, some by choice, some by circumstances, some came with age and aging, some self-directed, some representing rare chances that just came along, opportunities to grow, to be creative, to understand myself, and even reach out to help others. One of your lives may have not been that pleasant, like being a patient suffering from depression or physical ailments, but rather than feeling like a victim, you came out of it stronger, more reflective, with increased understanding, strength, humility, and acting like a survivor.

I'm offering in this exercise the opportunity for you to identify, explore and share the lives in your life. Paraphrasing my own minister's words, "Throw open the doors. Invite yourself and others into yours and their lives. Be an invitee and a host." Many of us have been cooped up too long. It's time to share what's going on in your life. You may come to realize you are more of a multi-talented or multi-dimensional individual than you thought. You may find that not only are you a learner but also a teacher, not only a follower, but also a leader and facilitator, like I am doing today. You can do more than following one singly focused track which you find yourself in right now and open yourself to parallel and satisfying paths to pursue in your life. I guess I am an example of that strategy. Recognize the lives you have created and those within your grasp. Seek a greater fulfillment in your life. It all starts with thinking about where you have been and remembering what you have seen along the way.

I call the beginning of this process "**Taking a Walk**" like the title of my fourth memoir, slowing down and thinking where you have been and where you want to go. Walk out that front or back door when you were a kid and walk around the block. What did you see? What impressed you. Walk through your life slowly, one stage, one career, one period at a time. What did you do? What were you good at? What would you change? What paths excited you that you followed? What paths were not accessible, but may be accessible now? Make a list. This is not an invitation

to make a chronology of your life. It's meant, as you take that walk, to identify the highlights and name the key identities in your life that define you.

Taking a Walk is a mental exercise of remembering and evoking positive flashbacks or memories, like photographs falling out of an old, overstuffed photo album. You pick one up and exclaim, "Hey! OMG! I remember that or would like that to happen again, or for the first time." The flashbacks may represent past visions or dreams for the future. Some of those flashbacks are memorable and want to be saved. Some need to be discarded; some you want to act on. Maybe, it's time to move on, cut old ties, and start something new.

From the prologue of my fourth memoir, "As I recalled my own walks, I suddenly remembered as a child the tar bubbles that grew on the side of the street on a bright hot summer day before they invented blacktop, when they used tar and gravel and a steam roller for re-surfacing the rural roads. The tar bubbles were full of superheated water, which when poked with a finger or stick would emit a jet of hot liquid and steam as the bubble collapsed."

My son was a percussionist in a high school band forty years ago and hadn't held a drumstick since. He's 56 and just started drum lessons, realizing that he had forgotten how to read music. Some of the instructional books he used in high school are still being used. It's all coming back. He's the manager of physical, occupational and speech therapy services for a major nursing home and rehab company. He's beyond busy, but he recognized that he needs more fulfillment in his life. He's joined a small community band and recently joined a small rock band. This *percussionist* is resuming a life he led before.

I have seven interesting and unique lives, protagonists, or persona I identify with in my life. These are not hidden unconscious multiple personalities. They are well known to me and others who know me. They define who I am. Like one of my son's lives who I would call the *percussionist*, I have given myself these names: *Hiker*, *Rocket Man*, *Survivor*, *Writer*, *Volunteer*, *Patient*, and *Time Traveler*. These examples should help you in giving your various lives a name, unique ones if you can.

I've been a *Hiker* all my life, as a lonely child, seeking meaning and solace in the woods, as an adult sharing friendship and camaraderie with friends and family, metaphorically hiking through life, on step at a time, finding hope, purpose, and fulfilling goals in what I call the "hiking cycle" of the repeating steps of planning, hiking, and reminiscing, a process that saved my life from depression.

*Rocket Man* is the dreamer and scientist in me, the youthful builder of homemade rockets, designing and firing rocket motors as a real job, the engineer and consultant, the lover of science and scientific method and its benefits to humankind, solid ground for understanding the Universe and my place in it.

I am the *Survivor* of a mid-life emotional crash, recognizing my lifetime of depression, coming out of the depression closet, stopped feeling and thinking like a victim, and started acting like a survivor, creating my own “**Rules for Survival**”, teaching it to others like my depression support groups and inmate friends, and applying those rules to other setbacks in life.

I was always the *Writer*, starting as an engineering technical writer, then creating hiking inspired stories, becoming a memoirist, publishing four memoirs in the form of short stories and reflections, starting with one anecdote at a time, opening up forgotten memories by a process I call “Taking a Walk.” I can teach you that. Spiritually, although I had never been able to meditate or pray, I have found that writing is my form of prayer.

I became a *Volunteer* by being a writer/author/presenter to libraries and depression support groups and, growing from that, became a volunteer for the Connecticut Department of Correction, mentoring over 200 inmates with my Life Change motivational program in four correctional facilities over a ten-year period. Due to Covid, the end of prison visitations, my back issues, and missing a lot for the last three years, even I know it is time to use my talents, get back in the game, and start helping out again.

I’ve been a *Patient* more times than I care to count. It’s probably the only life I would like to discontinue and drop from my repertoire. I humorously call it, “home improvement, or fixing the mind and body we live in.” That includes the long process of surviving depression and countless surgical procedures, the last one (my seventh back surgery since 2012) in December of 2023 to stabilize and fuse vertebrae in my thoracic and lumbar spine. As you can see, I’m still working on, rehabilitating that one. My new motto, “I’m bent but not broken.” I’ll never be able to fix everything, but I can work on improving the quality and fun in my life.

*Time Traveler* is my spiritual side, the lay minister in me. In fact, three of my personas, *Writer*, *Volunteer* and *Time Traveler*, happened as a result of joining the church, discovering my spirituality, began writing, and volunteering in the prisons. Much of my writing has been influenced by and talks about by my UUism. I’m fascinated by this thing we call time. Time is real. It allows change and free will. One of my prior summer lay ministry sermons and memoir essays is called “A God of Love and Time” whose domain is time and patience. Love, connections, and commitments evolve and grow over time. The flow of time weaves the fabric and meaning of our lives. I’ve learned that we are timeless, ageless, the product of all the time we have spent on earth. I’ve learned the most important thing in the world is family, including church families. As I wrote in the epilogue “Good Grief” of my second memoir, *Inside and Outside*, regarding our lives and fears of death and dying. “Death was no longer a black hole but a transition from remembering to being remembered.”

I ask myself, how do my various lives coexist, complement, and/or compete with each other? Clearly, the *patient* has interfered with the hiker at times, including the need for knee joint replacements and all my back issues. All of my personas have been the source and complemented my writing. The *hiker* helped save my life, the *survivor* in me. *Rocket man* and *time traveler* often gave a sense of purpose and stability to the *survivor*. Altogether, the synergy of my lives have created and sustained me.

Proceeding this session, you will have read and thought about this introduction. Take a Walk! Where are you now in life? What is your short story? Name and describe your interesting, important, and unique lives, past and future. What changes are you going to make, how will you proceed? What new life or renewal do you see, what is the next chapter?

### **Steps in Today's Program**

#### **Preparation**

Read this introduction and "Take a Walk." As you meander through life, what characters pop up. Which ones did you leave behind, which ones have persisted, which ones emerged and exist today, and what characters would you like to resume or begin.

#### **Questions**

1. Did you take a walk? Did it bring back any memories that you had forgotten?
2. If you like, share the names of your lives you have led or presently leading and give a short description of each one. Have any of your names been associated with or influenced by a church membership and activities?
3. Like my example about my son, what lives from the past would you like to resume, or what new lives would you like to begin? What suggestions do you have for those contemplating resuming a life or starting a new one? Feedback can be very important, especially when considering life changes.
4. How do your various lives coexist, complement, and/or compete with each other?
5. Would you like to participate in a future free program?

#### **Taking a Walk (the prologue from Dick's fourth memoir)**

For years, I have been writing and saving interesting and illuminating material for a rainy day. It's been like taking a walk, collecting different views, perspectives, vivid snapshots of life, gifts for my readers by painting pictures with words. In my volunteer prison ministry, I said, "For your homework for our next session, mentally walk out the door of your house or apartment as a kid. Go down the walkway and turn right or left at the sidewalk and walk around the block. Think about things you see on your mental excursion, the streets, the houses, the view, the people, your friends,

and the pets. Or just think about and explore any vivid memories from your childhood or youth, even recent memorable ones. You may remember things you have totally forgotten. Recalling good memories, or ones you would like to have, is a way of starting a habit of looking for the positive, filling up your photo album, and creating new hope in your life.”

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As I recalled my own walks, I suddenly remembered as a child the tar bubbles that grew on the side of the street on a bright hot summer day before they invented blacktop, when they used tar and gravel and a steam roller for re-surfacing the rural roads. The tar bubbles were full of superheated water, which when poked with a finger or stick would emit a jet of hot liquid and steam as the bubble collapsed.

You may want to try taking your own walk, thinking about, and bringing back good memories, following pathways old and new. Do like I taught my inmate friends. I’ll share with you my collection of stories and reflections. It may start the process of your own walking tour, while I start mine. You will find one-hundred remembrances, reminiscences, snapshots from my photo album. They are organized in four parts, Old Pathways, A Short Introduction to Fiction, Commentary on Contemporary Issues, and New Pathways, covering stories and reflections written and collected over the last twenty years up to the beginning of 2022. Covid-19 has changed the perspective and order of how we look at things in the past and towards the future. What seemed unimportant and taken for granted at the time has now taken on new significance. As I tell my stories, think of yours. At the end, we’ll get together and compare notes. You may find we have much in common.

### **Rules for Survival (from Dick’s first and third memoirs, *Hiking Out* and *Hiking Out Again*)**

Depressed, psychotic, suicidal, losing your mind, or just having a very bad hair day? I have a recipe for survival. This is a lesson in behavior management. It’s time tested on a party of one. I swear by it. It got me through some tough times. It won’t solve all your problems, but it will help you put them into perspective, put them on hold, on the back burner, break them down to smaller bits, while you deal with them, one at a time. If you lack insight and a coping strategy, this will give you time to regroup your forces and let others help, not drive them away. In a couple of years, you’ll be just fine. You need patience. These simple rules will help:

1. Even during the worst of it, keep busy, even at a mindless task. I painted shutters. You can do something right.

2. Let the anger and anguish roll. Feel the pain. But, don't let it get out of control. Stay outside of yourself. Listen to what you are saying. See how others are reacting to you. Appreciate how your reactions affect others.

3. Think of your problem like a gigantic wave. Don't try to stand up to it. Duck under it. Hunker down. Let it wash over you and dissipate itself. Don't try to solve all your problems. Take one small step at a time.

4. Learn and appreciate humility. Don't be a superman. Give in to it. Depend on others. Some of them want to help. Some problems go away and solve themselves. Even though you don't believe it now, you are over exaggerating your problems.

5. Tell people, in spite of your state, that you love them. Don't give up on them, and they won't give up on you. Reach out for friendship.

6. When you have an outburst and swear, other people will think you have lost control. So, remember to smile, or at least grimace a little while you are doing it just to let them know that you are doing your best and you still want their support.

7. If some thought or some facet of your behavior really upsets or scares you, then say to yourself, "STOP", to remind yourself that you are ultimately your own mental policeman. You do have the power to stop things. You just need practice.

8. Stop beating up on yourself. There are plenty of insensitive people who will take care of that. If I made you laugh, then remember that humor is the best medicine.

9. Wait it out. Give it a rest. Take a break and stop thinking and worrying about your problems. Let them work themselves out.

10. Be proactive. Think of the positive things that help you and add them to this list.

When you have become wise beyond your years and have licked your problems, or at least are holding them at bay, you can reach out to others and help them through their personal anguish. What better way to remember these simple rules for survival than to teach the course. Right now, you are probably exhausted just thinking about all these rules, so get some rest and take one at a time. This is a little like hiking. The end is far away, but you get there one step at a time.