

To Learn is to Change

By Dennis Payton Knight

This morning I learned something new. It's the word divagate. It means to wander or stray from a course or subject. To save you from looking it up, the first syllable sounds like 'dye.' It will be useful for me, as chair of several groups and committees. The next time a meeting runs off the track, I will have just the right word to put it to a stop. "Mortimer, please," I will say, "You're divagating again," and put an exclamation point on it with the gavel.

But I divagate. The point is that I just learned something. I do it every day, and you do to. We never stop learning. Big lessons or small, everything we learn changes us. And if it doesn't, then we haven't learned anything.

We started the process as babies when our first lesson in life involved a nipple, and it set us on a lifetime of learning. We learned and changed some more when we grasped a finger, heard a heartbeat. Our eyes began to focus and our intellects began to form. We learned the difference between sweet and bitter, wet and dry, soft and hard, soft and loud, light and dark, warmth and cold. We experienced and learned happiness, sadness, joy, anger.

We learned to play and to laugh. We learned to manipulate with a smile, we learned to manipulate with tears, and we learned to make choices. We learned from our parents and grandparents, if we were fortunate enough, sometimes the best stuff, the juicy stuff, we learned from a sibling.

We learned and changed through the directed lessons of kindergarten, primary and secondary grades. The leaps and bounds we made in high school changed us profoundly, if not always for the better, but it was learning just the same. We learned by study, we learned by lecture, we learned by doing, and sometimes we learned by goofing off. Every experience is a learning, every experience is a change.

Our school years, sometimes including college, transitioned, fast or slow, into the working years. We chose one direction or another, and sometimes one after another, sometimes with success, sometimes with regret. Sometimes a direction chose us, but we never stopped learning, whether we knew it or not.

And then another phase evolved, the golden years, the time of life when some think we are no longer in a state of learning, or that we need to be. But we still read the paper, make a call, take a walk, watch some television and change a bit with every experience. Then we open a book to learn a word like divagate.

One thing I have managed to do with all those years of learning and changing is to accumulate a pretty fair vocabulary. When an unfamiliar word surprises me, it reminds me again that we are all, whether we mean to be or not, lifelong learners, lifelong changers.

Divagate, divagate. Dammit, Dennis, you're divagating again.