

Spiritual
Essentials
for Life's
Second Act

LET THIS
BE *the* TIME



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CONTENTS

Introduction..... 1

Some Facts and Foundations..... 6

THE 12 NEEDS OF THE ELDERING

1. The Need to Live a Life of Meaning and Purpose.... 17

2. The Need for Love and Relationships..... 30

3. The Need to Ask and Explore Questions..... 41

4. The Need to Continue to Learn and Grow..... 50

5. The Need to Navigate Change and Transition 60

6. The Need to Cope with Losses..... 72

7. The Need to Be Grateful 86

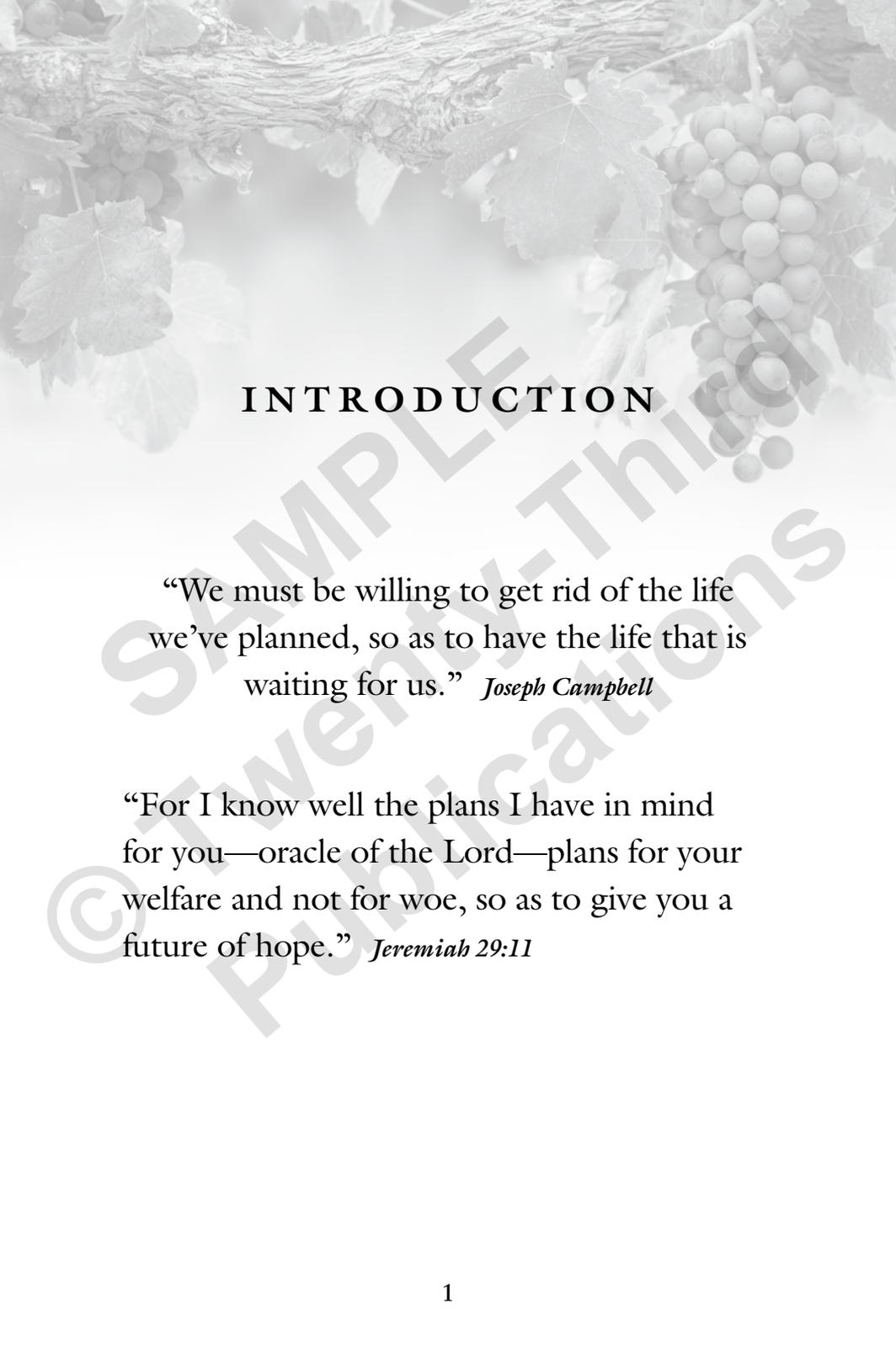
8. The Need to Forgive: The Need for Forgiveness..... 95

9. The Need to Give112

10. The Need for Spiritual Integration.....122

11. The Need to Let Go: The Need to Simplify.....134

12. The Need to Prepare for Dying and Death.....144



INTRODUCTION

“We must be willing to get rid of the life we’ve planned, so as to have the life that is waiting for us.” *Joseph Campbell*

“For I know well the plans I have in mind for you—oracle of the Lord—plans for your welfare and not for woe, so as to give you a future of hope.” *Jeremiah 29:11*

As I was going through airport security, I told the TSA agent that I was 75. He smiled and said, “Wow, you look great.” He probably meant it as a compliment; yet it reminded me of our society’s perception—and misperception—of aging. How is 75 supposed to look? To feel?

You’ve probably picked this book up because something has occurred that tells you you’re getting older: creaking bones, a significant birthday, making lists to remember things, less energy, retirement, squinting to read the fine print, more doctors’ appointments, doctors who are younger than you, gray (or less) hair. Dick Van Dyke (in his book *Keep Moving and Other Tips and Truths about Aging*) said he became aware of his aging (at 94) when he was rejected for AARP’s magazine cover. At 94, Van Dyke was too old for AARP.

Many people mention how the awareness of getting older crept up on them. A friend of mine said to me, “It was like I was cruising through life, thinking/feeling like 40 and suddenly I’m 70 plus. When I was employed from age 18 into my late 50s, time was just a page on the calendar, one year after another. It didn’t register with me very often that with each passing year, I was getting older. Suddenly it’s time to apply for Medicare! Friends started sending me supposedly funny emails about being a senior citizen, or how we act strangely and start breaking down in mind and body. I didn’t find them funny. Why are they sending me this stuff? I’m not old! So finally, around age 67, I realized changes in myself and succumbed to the physical fact that, yes, my body was aging—but not my spirit!”

You, too (or you wouldn’t be interested in this book), know that this second half of life offers hundreds of opportunities for growth, discovery, and new meaning.

The journey of aging is a gift for each eldering person—and a challenge for all of us together. Richard Rohr reminds us that at the second half of life we have three options: to be the pathetic old fool, the embittered old fool, or the holy old fool. Which journey will we take? Because of God’s promise, are we empowered to embrace the journey of eldering toward “a future full of hope” (Jeremiah 29:11)?

As we explore this journey of the spirituality of aging, will we be able to proclaim the words circulated often via social media today (and attributed to several different people): “Life is not a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in a pretty, well-preserved body. Rather our goal should be to skid into eternity broadside, thoroughly used up, totally worn out, and loudly proclaiming, ‘Wow! What a ride!’” (Some versions include “skid in sideways with chocolate in one hand, a glass of wine in the other.”)

About this book

Since the journey of aging is different for each person, this book certainly doesn’t say everything. Hopefully, our view of and appreciation for the journey deepen each day as we listen to our own lives and as we observe and listen to the experiences of others.

The thoughts and reflections here come from my awareness of aging, from the insights of others, throughout the ages, and from privileged conversations and sharing with others. In preparation for this book, I invited several friends, family members, and colleagues to respond to a short survey about their feelings and experiences of aging. Their insights and depth of sharing—which you will find interspersed throughout the

book—were a precious gift, enlightening and expanding my perceptions and experiences.

Part I of the book summarizes a few facts and foundations—some realities that are at the core of the journey of aging as well as this book. Because they are foundational, they will weave in and out of all of our explorations in Part II.

Within Part II we will explore twelve needs of people in their maturing years. Many of these needs are prevalent throughout all the stages of life. In the second half of life, they often take on a different, deeper hue because of time and perspective. All of these needs are interconnected; in reading about them—and reflecting on your own life—it will be obvious that they overlap and intersect with each other in multiple ways.

As I talked with others, read about the experiences and research of others, and reflected in my daily prayer, one imperative continually jumped out in various ways over and over again: Do it now! Don't wait until...! "Let This Be the Time" (a song by Lori True). The time is now!

Picasso challenged: "Only put off until tomorrow what you are willing to die having left undone." Meister Eckhart joyously affirms: "And suddenly you know: it's time to start something new and trust in the magic of beginnings." Psalm 118:24 proclaims: "This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice in it and be glad."

Thus, as I was reflecting on and beginning to write about the various needs, I became aware that each need impels me (us) to do something, to be someone—right now; this is the time. The second part of each chapter, then, explores a significant call—"The Time Is Now"—that flows from each particular need.

In addition to "The Time Is Now," each chapter concludes

with “To Ponder, Wonder, and Converse” and “To Practice, Celebrate, and Live.” Perhaps these sections are the most important parts of the book because, hopefully, in your own reflections and conversations with others and with a new dynamic practice in your daily (weekly) life, you will review, question, and reassess; you will incorporate and strengthen new skills and new values. Pick and choose what’s helpful for you (and at another time, during another reading/reflection, you might want to visit with and pursue different ones).

SAMPLED
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Publications



THE NEED *to* LIVE
a LIFE *of* MEANING
and PURPOSE

“A person is not old as long as they
are still seeking something.” *Jean Rostand*

“He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you but to
do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk
humbly with your God?” *Micah 6:8*

Researchers and observers of human nature remind us that the number-one fear most people have is the fear of having lived a meaningless life. As in every stage of life, our eldering years bring many challenging fears: health concerns, financial worries, etc. The most important challenge, though, seems to be finding or continuing to find meaning in life.

Often our early and middle adult years have not prepared us for the new reality of being an eldering adult. During the first half of life, our jobs, careers, and family dictated how our time was spent; these roles and responsibilities gave shape to our identity. The meaning of life was often sought and fulfilled through success, achievements, and recognition. We had a sense of who we were because of what we did.

When things change—when children don't need as much care from us, when we retire from a fulfilling career—it is only natural to ask: Who am I now? Where do I belong? Am I still worthwhile and valued? If I'm not productive, not industrious, not responsible for others, not engaged in many things, what is my role? This transition from eventful doing to more tranquil being (which often is an immense transition) may elicit feelings of gloom and depression.

Christina captures the experience of many: “The events of this past year created the ‘perfect storm.’ I turned 70; it probably wouldn't have been a big deal except that five months earlier I suffered a medical situation that turned my life upside down with pain, treatment, and medications with many side effects. Because I was out of work for months and used up my sick time, I was encouraged to retire. If I wasn't ready to be 70 and temporarily disabled, I sure wasn't ready to be retired. There were so many times in the preceding years when I thought how won-

derful it would be to stay home and write, paint, and garden instead of squeezing them into an already full working/family life. I never thought of myself as a person who was defined by his or her job, but it turns out I sure was. In addition to dealing with medical issues and recovery, I also struggled with the purpose and meaning of my life.

“God and my spirituality have always been my main source of strength,” Christina continues, “and that was/is certainly true this past year. I clung to God desperately. God’s gift to me was my daughters, who helped me through the worst of times. I am now recovered physically, though aware of my vulnerability (I am not 32 anymore, and I am not invincible), yet I still struggle somewhat with the purpose and meaning of my life at this time of my life. I still teach part-time and am involved in my parish, but...is this it? It never occurred to me that the spiritual tasks or perspective might be different in the second half of life—or the last third or fourth of life—than in the first.”

Even in the midst of our questions and sometimes pessimistic feelings, though, we, at the same time, experience that older age is not a time of fading away but an unending journey in wholeheartedly living one’s purpose. Perhaps the Old Testament commandment to “Stand up in the presence of the aged, show respect for the old, and fear your God” (Leviticus 19:32) is not only an admonition for the young to respect their elders but a call to us to “stand up in the presence of age,” continuing to live the passion and meaning of our lives.

Browsing websites or library or bookstore shelves today, we find many articles and books giving answers to the question of how to be happy. Eldering adults, though, have discovered that this is the wrong question. The right question involves mean-

ing. Is there meaning in my life? Happiness and meaning are different. Being happy is about feeling good; meaning is the consequence of giving to others or to the world. Researchers into happiness have found that it's the difference between being a taker and being a giver. Scientists measure self-reported happiness by asking questions like, "How often did you feel satisfied?" and "How often did you feel interested in life?" They test whether participants feel their lives have meaning with questions like, "How often did you feel that you had something to contribute to society?" and "How often did you feel that you belonged to a community/social group?"

As adults grapple with this new life of eldering, the reality of happiness and/or meaning is prevalent. When our identity isn't defined by what we did and who we were caring for, we can discover a new freedom, a new gift. We have the opportunity (perhaps a challenging one) to find meaning in who we are without all the externals. Often, exploring and living meaning in a different but enhanced way brings a new kind of happiness.

A life of meaning gets us through the transitions, questions, and challenges of life. We often hear people say they can live with any "now" if they have meaning in their lives. It seems that some people are able to navigate the continuous changes, the inevitable difficulties, and the troubling uncertainties with more ease, hope, and strength than others. Are these not those who are rooted in a sense of who they are, their call and vocation from God, their purpose and meaning?

A life of meaning is about continual growth. A simple way of understanding our purpose in life is in knowing that it brings

forth the best that is within us. The goal of the journey of life is to become our most authentic self.

The growth that can occur in later years comes from moving from a life of success to a life of significance. Because we are more than our roles, these later years call us to not place our core identity in accomplishments or our titles and roles. Continually growing, we discover that it's about nurturing a new meaning in our lives, the essence of our lives—our worth, dignity, and value.

Our eldering years provide the time to explore those parts of ourselves we may have left behind while we concentrated on raising a family or navigating careers in the working world. In *At Seventy*, author May Sarton relates that once when she said, “This is the best time of my life—I love being old,” she was asked why it is good to be old. “Because I am more myself than I have ever been.”

Often it's not about finding meaning; it's about recognizing what our purpose already is and living it. At 75, Jeanne has found that “my life has meaning in simply how I treat and help others (family, neighbors, anyone). As a teacher I was geared to helping all students and especially those having difficulty academically and socially, making learning fun, and dealing with conflicts immediately. As I age these things have not changed. I just help when I see the possibility of doing so and not making a big deal about it.”

As Cathy was discerning retirement, the move from success to significance, she says she “struggled. Our children were grown and most of them lived out of the area, so we do not have our grandchildren close by. I was so used to my career that I wasn't

sure who I would be! I continue to be a wife, mother, grandmother, volunteer, teacher...and beloved of God. I continue to 'do,' as that is innately who I am, but in deeper ways."

In later life, meaning can include both being and doing, and doing often in a new way. The reflections of many people who responded to my survey indicate this reality. Ruth remarked, "I think I would have described my life as having meaning because of my work in the past. Now it has meaning by just being who I am and not having to produce every day. When I was about to retire, the main question was "what will you do now?" Now, every day feels much richer in meaning as it enfolds my past and looks to the future."

Todd said: "Meaning is different now in that I no longer need to be busy to be me. What a relief! Life is not all about doing although this aspect still exists. Rather, life now is to become more fully aware of God's presence in creation, humanity, and all living things."

A musing from Michelle revealed, "In my younger years, I have always been a Martha/the doer; now I am learning that it is OK to be the receiver and try to receive help, graciously"

Bill expressed, "It's so important to keep our spirits strong with a lifestyle that gives us meaning and purpose. To just sit around and vegetate takes years from one's life. We need to keep moving, keep thinking, keep doing. Pick something and make it your passion. Share it with others. This second part of our lives is not meant for resting on our previous accomplishments. Get out there and do something meaningful and with purpose!"

Marilyn responded, "Especially now as a senior adult, my life grows more precious with each passing year. Its meaning is

made clearer—that I must continue to improve in how I love and serve the Lord and love and serve others.”

As Ed pondered his older years, he said, “My life has meaning now in giving to others. Thirty to forty years ago, it was all about me and what I could get out of life.” Peg reflected that her engagement in her job for thirty to forty years was so energizing. “Today my energy and passion come from interaction with people.”

The second half of life is often a time of “I choose to” rather than “I have to.” In choosing a life of meaning people find that these (sometimes) quieter years are never quite entirely their own. Meaning flows from using our gifts, experiencing and utilizing the essence of who we are, for something bigger than ourselves.

Meaning doesn't entail finding a cure for cancer or brokering a world peace plan. It can be found in simple things. We can make the mistake of envisioning it as something earth-changing. Our purpose in later life will probably never be equivalent to the surprising call of God for Abraham and Sarah's purpose in later life. Yet in living who we are, in responding to God's call, what we might do will be important for all those we touch... rippling down to other generations.

The challenge, then, the awesome responsibility for the second half of life, is to know the gifts of our lives and discern how we can give them in continuing ways, to discover previously undeveloped gifts and discern how we can share them in new ways.

Beverly recounts, “When I visited my mother in the nursing home, there was an old woman who sat in a wheelchair at the

end of the hall. Every day, when I came to visit Mom, though hunched over, Marie would give me a little wave. She spoke no English, but her wave spoke for her. One day, Marie wasn't there. I got very uneasy and checked at the desk. 'Marie has a cold today. She is resting in bed.' It was a vivid lesson for me of the gift of presence. Marie could do very little, even for herself, but she was a reassuring presence to me, a gift from God. I try to remember that when I'm restless and thinking I should somehow be saving the world."

Beverly relates another story, "In the nursing home, my mother had a habit of thanking a nurse or aide by saying 'Thank you—I love you.' One day an aide told me how miserable her home life was. 'Your mother is the only person in my life who says I love you.' My mother died fifteen years ago. Recently, I bumped into this aide, who is still working at the same nursing home. She said she still remembered my mother. 'Your mother's kindness and love got me through the most difficult time of my life. I will never forget her.'"

The time is now

The need to understand and live our purpose, our meaning in life, reminds us that the time is now to reclaim who we are, our authentic self, responding to our deepened vocation, intensifying the journey from success to significance.

Many writers talk about the false self and the true (authentic) self. The false self usually refers to our roles and titles, the image we have of our self. The true self is a metaphor for the unique self that lies beyond our ego; it is who we objectively are from the very beginning in the mind and heart of God. God

has given us who we are, our true self. In the words of Meister Eckhart, “Each human soul is the footprint of God.” Blessedly, we are given time to discover our authentic self, to live it to the full. We don’t manufacture our identity, our authentic self; we just grow it up.

One day, a pastor asked a little boy: “Can you tell me who made you?” The youngster thought a moment. Then he looked up and said: “God made a part of me.” Wondering what they were teaching in faith formation, the pastor asked: “What do you mean, ‘part of you?’” “Well,” answered the little boy, “God made me little. I grew the rest myself.”

Growing the rest is a lifetime job, and it is our job. Certainly, God guides, strengthens, and helps, but God has placed the call in us, has left it in our hands. One of the blessings of aging is the opportunity to finally become, be, and enjoy the person we truly are. One of the functions of aging is to become comfortable with who we are instead of mourning who we are not.

Kathy reflects: “I think that once people reach their 60s moving into the 70s and 80s, they know their true selves. They know who they are, mentally, physically, and emotionally, and readily admit their shortcomings, even their failures in life along with their accomplishments like being good parents/grandparents. At my age it would be impossible for me not to know my true self. I cannot pretend to be someone I am not. I know my accomplishments and shortcomings; I’m glad to have done the accomplishments as well as I could. I see the real me when I look in the mirror.”

The older we become, the more our authentic self can emerge. In letting go of our productive self—our roles, our expertise in our career, our skills or professional reputation—who we really

are, enmeshed in God, can give birth to a whole new vision and living of life. We face the questions: Is this really who I am now? Is this how I want to be now? Who is the me in me? What do I dare to dream? Who might I be now that I don't have to be who I was?

A Jewish story tells us that before his death, Rabbi Zusya said, "In the coming world, God will not ask me: 'Why were you not Moses?' God will ask me: 'Why were you not Zusya?'" Our authentic self is the living of who we are, living all we can be.

A new vocation

Our vocation never ends. Meister Eckhart, centuries ago, told us, "There is no stopping place in this life—no, nor was there ever for any [person], no matter how far along the way [they'd] gone. This above all, then, be ready at all times for the gifts of God and always for new ones."

One of these gifts of God is a new call, a deepened call to listen and watch for God in the everydayness of life, to respond to the inner urges we will always have to give away our gifts. We just have to look at Scripture to be reminded that God continues to call throughout life; age has nothing to do with the call of God: Moses on Mount Nebo, Abraham and Sarah, Elizabeth and Zechariah. God has dreams, calls, and work for people to do, irrespective of age.

The journey from success to significance

Significance isn't about success or failure; it's about meaning. Success—our goal and reason for the first half of life—is most often defined externally (power, position, prestige, property). Significance involves all that has meaning, import, and influ-

ence. It grows from within; it is what we build our lives around.

Success is fleeting; it is usually relative and short-term in nature. Significance offers contentment because it can be accomplished only outside of one's self through efforts to improve other people's lives. Significance, in most cases, involves the giving of ourselves, giving that which is most valuable to others and to ourselves—our time, our presence, our care, our unconditional love. The yearning for significance is really the desire to be remembered for something that counts.

Karen has learned that “the journey from success to significance is a journey toward a differing emphasis: one focused more on interiority, a personal, deeper, spiritual, and heartfelt evolution and involvement whereby former obligations and responsibilities are shed, whether these be familial, career, work, etc., and a more self-centered, and yet unselfish, core is born.”

Jeremiah exhorted the people of his country to look toward the future expecting significance with these words from God, “For I know well the plans I have in mind for you—oracle of the Lord—plans for your welfare and not for woe, so as to give you a future of hope.”

TO PONDER, WONDER, AND CONVERSE

- What gives your life meaning? What makes life worth living for you? Why do you get up in the morning?
- Are there callings, longings, you have ignored? What has prevented you from acting upon them?
- If God described the purpose/meaning of your life, what would God say?
- Who are you beyond the functions you've served?
- What are you doing now that you didn't have time for when you were younger?

TO PRACTICE, CELEBRATE, AND LIVE

- Naming our purpose can help us overcome the worry of having lived a meaningless life. Make a list that illustrates: "This is what I am about." During prayer, visit it periodically; what would you add? What are you called to do because of what you've listed?
- Spend time during the next month taking photos of people and things (places, pets, objects) that make your life meaningful. If you're not able to take pictures of the actual people or things, take photos of reminders of them (souvenirs, other photos, website pictures/descriptions). Periodically, reflect

on one during prayer: what does this photo represent? Why is it meaningful in my life? How does it remind me of the purpose of my life?

- In the second half of life, one of our frequent questions is, “Who am I now?” Jesus asked his followers a similar question (Luke 9:18–20). Turn the situation around and ask Jesus, “Who do you say that I am?” Your identity might be spouse, daughter, teacher, dad, coach, caregiver, volunteer, consultant; throughout your life you might have had many roles and many names. What do you think is God’s name for you?