

Growing as We Age

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An epic recorded on a clay tablet some 2,500 years ago in Babylonia speaks of Gilgamesh. He was a warrior whose quest for the secret of immortality led him to dive into the sea in search of a plant said to have strong powers of rejuvenation.

He got his prize and started home in triumph. Alas, on the way a snake snatched away the magic plant and all that Gilgamesh gained for his pains was some advice from the goddess Siduri. She told him to forget immortality and live life to the fullest. "Make every day a day of rejoicing. Day and night do thou dance and play," she said.

Gilgamesh followed Siduri's prescription to the letter. In doing so, he acted in accord with later Old Testament exhortations. "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in the grave, wither thou gust." (Ecclesiastes)

How we value longevity and immortality! The Old Testament rewarded men of virtue with long lives. The New Testament promises followers of Christ a hereafter. The Hindu is promised a life of everlasting rebirth. The Taoist reaches for hsien (immortality) through an austere diet, various sexual practices, and breath-holding. Each is thought to retard the aging process.

The fear of extinction...indeed expungement...is rife, it would seem, for all but the Humanist. Even in Oceania, of Orwell's *1984* (1949), Winston Smith is told that eventually he will be turned into a gas and that there will be no record of him. "Nothing will remain of you. You will never have existed."

If not death, then old age worries humankind. Writing through the ages reflects a dread of old age. Aristotle advised those who address the elderly to recognize they are 'cynical' and 'given to subtle but feeble fits of anger.' Youthful Cicero thought old age intolerable, but at age 42, he was upset with the Roman preoccupation with youth and wrote, "Nations have always been ruined by young men, saved and restored by old."

Alchemists in the Middle Ages searched for a fifth essence—beyond fire, water, earth, and air—to end senescence.

In the Reformation, Erasmus, the man who brought together Christianity and the Humanism of Greece and Rome, wrote, “the exemplary older person has no white hair, wrinkles, or spectacles.”

The Puritans of the 1700s agreed with Increase Mather, of Boston, who stated flatly, “If a man is favored with long life, it is God that has lengthened his days.” At first sight, this may seem a blessing on the old, but we must remember that it is from the form of Calvinism which also preached that God blessed the good with material possession and [it] was usually spoken by the rich in an age when there were more old people in alms houses than not. Our societies have had a hard time recognizing the virtues of old age.

The imagination of authors leaving no doubt what they think of the elderly. In Myrna Mannes' *They* (1968), America's young use the pretext of an imminent war in China to seize all power in the coup of some kind; they wreak vengeance on the elders who stumbled into an Asian conflict. “They force people to retire and enter isolated communities at 50; at 65, seniors face either 'self-disposal or compulsory liquidation.'

The scene is repeated in Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). People at the age of retirement are brought to disposal centers. Again, in the movie *Soylent Green* (1973), the main character gives in to that against which he has struggled all his life. We watch as he enters a strange room all set up for his enjoyment, playing his favorite music. Temperature, smells, the cloth of his bed have all been chosen by him. He lies on the couch. Music heightens. We are aware of his anxiety. We are drawn back and forth between the favorite scenes flashing on the screen before him, the intensity of the music and his face, and a needle mechanically making its way toward his neck

The image of the elderly is not enticing us toward old age with hopeful expectations and a feeling of having a safe home on this Earth. The reality of many nursing homes would move Eudora Welty's short story *A Visit of Charity*, a grim portrayal of an old woman in the nursing home, from fiction for nonfiction. Having waited with many families as a sick and elderly person makes up [his or her] mind to live or die each day, I know that occasionally Albee's short savage play about uncaring children will wait for their 86-year-old mother to die can be real.

The problem of place in this world is so real for the aging. When they lose it, they often die. I visited Alicia. Her spirit, at 95, was irrepressible, her humor sharp, and her sensitivity keen to what others were thinking. Alicia's place was to live alone with her housekeeper. She could afford to remain in the home [where] she had lived for 50 years with her husband, who had died several years before. There was a place in this world! Alicia broke her hip and was placed in a nursing home, her companion let go by family members trying to save money. The house was put up for sale. I knew she would die. Indeed, within 3 weeks she gave up, her the last bit of dignity removed.

Modern fiction has its share of elderly heroes. We remember Katharine Hepburn and Henry Fonda together from the film *On Golden Pond* (1981) where the frailties, and deep loyalties and pride of age, became a struggle before our eyes, [equally as] endearing in humorous as sad and wrenching.

Margaret Laurence treats character of Hagar Shipley in *The Stone Angel* (1964). On her death bed she has stoney grace. Her son, Marvin, comes in, takes her hand, and asks for forgiveness. [He says,] “If I've been crabby with you these past years, I didn't mean it.” Hagar says, “You haven't been cranky, Marvin. You've been good to me always. A better son than John.” Then she overhears Marvin talking with the nurse as he leaves the room. [The nurse says,] “She's got an amazing constitution, your mother. One of those hearts that just keeps on working no matter what else is gone.” A pause, then Marvin replies, “She's a holy terror!” Listening, Hagar thinks, “I feel like it is more than I could now reasonably have expected out of life, for he has spoken with such anger and such tenderness. Moments later, her stubborn pride surfaces as she offers a prayer, “Ought I appeal? It's the done thing. Our Father... No. I want no part of that. All I can think is, Bless me or not, Lord, as you please, for I will not beg.” What sensitivity, what grace, what grit for a woman over 95.

May Sarton's book, *Kinds of Love* (1970), is a classic where the wisdom and memory of age provide close attention between people of vastly different backgrounds, at times sharing insecurities and jealousies which came with wealth and poverty. Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) places grit and tenacity in the soul of an aged fisherman. Saul Bellow gives us the tough, Polish-born scholar and Holocaust survivor in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970). At 70, Arthur Sammler, born to comfort in Krakow, but reduced [to being] a refugee in New York [City] to the elderly's world of 'the busses, of the grinding subway, and lunch at the automat,' he darns his own socks and scours his own sink. Sammler looks upon those routines as part of his youthfulness—a youthfulness sustained with certain tremors of disbelonging. Sammler knew these tremors of disbelonging and longing were found in old women wearing textured tights and old sexual men. It was a quiver of vivacity which belied their obedience to the youth-style. No one knew when to quit, Sammler said. No one knew when to make decent terms with death.

How far from the search of Gilgamesh for the sacred herb are some of the allegiances we all pay to the god Youth?

That is a different sermon, but one which I promise to preach, for it may well be the terms we keep with death and the jaundiced eye our culture gives us toward aging which turns our eyes backward and sideward in the face of ongoing life as we age.

All these examples we have of the courage and creativity with which older people face life. Age need not be a scourge. British author Florida Scott-Maxwell, in writing of

her 83rd year, observed, "...age puzzles me. I thought it was a quiet time, but my eighties are passionate. I grow more intense with age."

Carl Rogers [repeats] Scott-Maxwell by writing, "It is often said that the older years are years of common and serenity. Though I think I am more objective, events touch me more personally. When I am excited, I get very high. When I am concerned, I am more deeply disturbed. Hurts seem sharper. Pain is more intense. Tears come more easily. Joy reaches higher peaks."

In his book, *A Way of Being* (1980), Carl Rogers speaks of two problems he has had with aging. The first is physical deterioration:

"I greatly enjoyed throwing the Frisbee. Now my right shoulder is so painfully arthritic that this kind of activity is out of the question. In my garden I realize that a task which would have been easy five years ago, but difficult last year, now seems like too much, and I had better leave it for my once-a-week gardener. This slow deterioration informs me that the physical portion of what I call 'me' is not going to last forever. Yet, I still enjoy a four-mile walk on the beach...do all the shopping, cooking, and dish washing when my wife is ill, carry my own luggage without puffing. The female form is still one of the loveliest creations of the universe...I'm delighted that I am still sexually alive, even though I can sympathize with the remark of the Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes upon leaving a burlesque house at age 80: "Oh, to be 70 again." From the inside I'm still the same person in many ways, neither old nor young, just myself."

Rogers encountered a second problem. He has, as many of you, as will many of us, taken care of an ill spouse for many years. He describes his alternating hope and despair, her courage in meeting the challenges of pain. Then he shares his decision to broaden his life to include more independent activities—something for the survival of his own soul.

"I have baffled and hurt Helen by my own independent life. While she was so ill, I felt heavily burdened by our close togetherness, heightened by her need for care. So I determined, for my own survival, to live a life of my own. She is often deeply hurt by this, and by the changing of my values as I continue to grow. On her side, she is giving up the old model of being the supportive wife. This changing brings her in touch with her anger at me and at society for giving her that socially approved role. On my part, I am angered at any move that would put us back in the old complete togetherness...So there are more tensions and difficulties in our relationship than ever before, more feelings that we are trying to [resolve], but there is also more honesty as we strive to build new ways of being together."

Rogers wrote that material when he was 75. His wife died 3 years [later], both still

searching out their new beings.

To struggle is one route people choose...but there is more to life than searching, from time to time we rest more tenderly with ourselves. In *Kinds of Love* (1970), May Sarton writes of Christina and her husband, Cornelius, who has had a stroke:

“When Cornelius goes off into a doze he is not really absent, just withdrawn...hasn't the energy to exteriorize...she comments. Talking about the people of his town, Cornelius says, “We are among the extraordinary people, Christine. What makes us so? Who is like Old Pete, Miss Lummer, Ellen, Nick, of Jane Tuttle—even Ed Taggart? Maybe it is that whatever they are has had to be created from the inside out, and against great odds. They have had to overcome a lot to exist at all. Christina says Cornelius is becoming an extraordinary person now because he has been stripped down to his essence here. I sense that he has reached a point of something like despair...With people who are ill, imagination is everything. I feel I have failed Cornelius often because I could not imagine myself into him and he never complains. When he is cross with me, it is only a sign that he is battling with himself against depression, against—perhaps—fear. Even in this time of our greatest intimacy...there is still so much we can't [discuss], so much [with which] each of us must come to terms.

Then, we are treated to the knowledge that while Cornelius lies disabled in his bed, his wife is seeing Eben, a friend of theirs, having a life of her own.

Christina says, “Cornelius teases me about Eben, but I think it is only a way of telling me that he loves me, a kind of flirtation. Could it hurt? Should I not see Eben at all? No, that is absurd, truly absurd, when we are also old. Of what am I thinking?

What a difference between this couple and Carl Rogers. Neither is right...one must struggle...the other is able to take life as it comes with more grace. Neither without thought and loving concern.

In *The Challenge of Aging* (1983), John Mcleish extolls the Ulyssean...the person who has verve for life...the verve I found in Alicia and [of which I] read in Carl Rogers, and in Christina, and even in Cornelius. McLeish calls us delivered in creativity

“How is the older adult to break free from the immobilizing encirclement of blocking forces: increasing physical inertia, psychic despair, failure of nerve and confidence? The answers are not easy because each self has its own complex history, often calling for the therapies of love and understanding; for the therapy of patience and individual self-forgiveness; and occasionally for the therapy of an extraordinarily sensitive listener who can reflect back the words.

The first step in creativity is acceptance. This means greet each day lovingly, and live its precious hours as though yesterday's sorrows and tomorrow's hazards were what they mostly are—chimeras luring us from the day-to-day actualization of the self.

The second act is one of recognition, the acknowledgement that high potentiality remains to human beings in all stages of life.

A great gift given to the person in later life is that of time. Where the young are involved in other pursuits, those in later life have the opportunity to manage their time and use it to grow, to further their thoughts and creativity.

Robert Butler's Pulitzer prize-winning book, *Why Survive?: Being Old in America* (1975), speaks to the issue of time...a matter of perspective for us all. For when we are young, we count the birthdays we have had. At some point we notice the other end of the scale and turn thoughts to how much time there is left. Such a glance ahead has led Elizabeth Kubler Ross [*On Death and Dying* (1969)] to seek knowledge of life after death...but that is only one response to looking toward the end.

A more satisfying resolution is found amongst those who look to the quality of time. In Philadelphia, I had the honor of being the minister of Edna Davenport. She was a tiny black woman whose mother left 124 descendants when she died. Edna will be over 100 years old at the turn of the century—and she intends to see the century turn. She is 85 years old and has just begun painting in the last several years. Her paintings have commanded several one-person shows, sell as fast as she can finish them, and the attention she is getting quite mystifies her, though she loves every minute of it. Edna may live to the turn of the century...and she will put many a 25-year-old to shame with her vigor toward life.

I believe in the importance of having an interest in what goes on in the world around you. That world may be small or expansive, it makes no difference; that world may be filled with years or only days. I regularly visited a woman named Cynthia. She was dying of Hodgkin's disease and had not even days left, but each time I went to see her, she rallied and asked me how I was doing, what was I doing that day, how were my children? The world had narrowed down...no energy, a body frail and shaking, voice only a whisper...she still wanted to know about things in the world.

The same is possible for each one of us. Today, I have talked about aging. Frankly, if aging has given it is because of the way we live. To each of us [are] given opportunities to lift our lives to the fullest. Regardless of age, let us begin today asking ourselves how to become one of the extraordinary people.

Everything from fatigue to despair may bring dullness to infiltrate our lives. Our task is to keep dullness from infusing our lives. We summon courage for trying out new

territory, for remembering the past with joy, using it as a springboard for better living today...then...then...we can make of the later years a time to which we all look forward for its opportunities.

We are uniquely situated with Unitarian House next door, a congregation with a fair number of very active and creative retired members.

If old age has a bad name, it is because of how we lived our lives.

How we fare in the years ahead will depend just as much on what the 35-year-old does with life as with what the 95-year-old does with life. We can end our years whilst sitting on a park bench like bookends, newspapers blowing at our feet, with nothing but memories. We can take the road of Gilgamesh, looking for the sacred herb of youth. We can take the road of Cornelius, Edna Davenport, or Alicia, of Carl Rogers, of Cynthia, and make of each day the best we possibly can. Whether you are 35 or 90, the choice is yours in how you live each moment.

Notes:

Reverend Brian Kopke died in 2007.

<https://www.firstunitarianottawa.ca/death-notice-and-memorial-details-for-members.html>

Unitarian House is a not-profit residence for seniors in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.
www.unitarianhouse.ca