



Growing Older (Gracelessly?)

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Some events from my past summer: I turned 43. My oldest sister was diagnosed with breast cancer when she turned 43. Seven years later she is fine, but 43 was her year. Then there were two realizations: I have age spots that will not go away and my left eye is too dry to wear contacts now. These might be permanent conditions. Mid summer my father was diagnosed with prostate cancer. I went for a physical, my cholesterol was high. Then I moved in with a teenager and that friends, is the fastest way to age a decade. But I thought I was fine, really. Then I decided to whiten my teeth. Why you ask? I don't know. That should have been my first clue.

So there I was at the dentist having my teeth whitened. The technician put a large mouth guard inside my mouth so that the chemicals used to whiten my teeth did not burn my lips and gums. Part way through the hour procedure, the chemicals caused stinging pain in my gums so the technician ended the procedure early. Another technician walked by and said "Oh, I get the stinging pain too; I have had it done three times." The dentist came in like Svengali and said "Yes, your teeth look wonderful." When my technician held up the stained teeth rack so customers can see how many shades of yellow they have lost, I could see that I had lost one shade of yellow, one bleeping shade and \$400. My gums stung for the next day and I was informed on the way I out that for 48 hours I could not have coffee, chocolate, berries, or tomatoes.

But I was not done. Next I went to have my first treatment of micro-dermabrasion. It is the facial treatment of choice for people who want to reduce wrinkles and age spots and rejuvenate skin without injections. I went; it was fine. On the way out I was told I should wear a hat and sunscreen and stay out of the sun for several days, if not a week. It was July. My YMCA has an outdoor pool and my seven year old

wanted to go there. What was I doing? This should have been my second clue. I am sitting in my house with a hat on, not drinking coffee while the sun shines.

The last was the best. I tried a cream to reduce circles under my eyes. After using it for three weeks with no noticeable improvement, my eyes started to swell, and swell, and develop spots. Let's just say I tripled the circles under my eyes. I had to go to the doctor to get steroids. People came up to me and asked "Are you OK." Well, no actually, I was not OK. It took three times, but I finally realized I felt old and I was not handling it well.

It was the cancer, and the cancer, and the skin, and eyes, and children, and as much as I tried to fight it, up to and including ridiculous measures, there was a crack in my denial, in my illusion of control. Control was slipping away, and I could see the signs as well as feel them. As much as the shock of aging is poignant and at times funny, it is not silly. Our stories of aging tell much about our struggles to acknowledge life and death, control and our lack of it, the continuity of change, the challenge of flexibility and our dance with all of this.

I preached this sermon because it was on my mind. I hoped it would be relevant to you. Your multiple responses indicate that it is much on your mind too. I received responses from almost twenty people, a mix of men and women, from their 30's to their 90's, the most (I think) I have ever received on an upcoming sermon – and certainly the most gender balanced. Your responses were so sincere and thoughtful, deeply touching. Some of them were very funny. All of them were human. Common themes ran through our words; denial, loss, fear of aging, the benefits of aging, and the benefits of flexibility during aging.

Some of my favorite comments started with denial. "Denial stories" often had funny punch lines. One person wrote me "When I read your request for aging stories, I nearly dismissed it at first – surely you weren't speaking to me!! Then I remembered some stories and with reflection realized I am among the group your question was directed to. I do have a Golden Buckeye card after all." This person went on to tell this story

One day a co-worker asked me what color my hair USED to be. I was shocked – of course – it is brown and has been since I was about 8 years old . . . But why was she confused by a few gray hairs? That night I asked the man I was dating what percentage of my hair was gray. He got the deer-in-the-headlight look, realizing this could be a trick question. But I sincerely was just interested in how others saw it, since to me it was clearly brown with some gray. He said

about $\frac{3}{4}$ - I was amazed. I guess that's part of our ability to deny reality when it doesn't 'fit the picture' we have of ourselves.

I always remember my paternal grandmother saying to me "I don't know how I got this old. I don't feel that old." She was in her 80's and 90's when she said this. Think about it, inside we are still the human we have always been, but then our bodies start to change (which we notice) and then we start to physically change appearance (which others notice). Many of you wrote to me about shocking moments when either you realized you were older or someone else pointed it out to you. For one person "it" happened when she was in her 40's and couldn't read the tiny print in the phone book. For another person it happened when he turned 80. He wrote "I couldn't possibly be 80 years old –those people are OLD people, and I'm not old." Another person wrote

I found denial to be the best strategy for aging. I was the youngest in my family, married young, had children young. Therefore, I was YOUNG and I found the signs of aging: arthritis, skin spots, high cholesterol, etc., amusing in someone so young. Like a good Unitarian I read books on aging and found them a comfort – for the time that I might need them. However, when my children became middle-aged, I could not longer be in that category.

Aging itself is not so hard for us. Even for me, it is not so much the change in my looks. What is hard, what really digs at us, confounds and scares us, is what can happen as we age. Almost half the stories you sent concluded with your thoughts and feelings, your fears about aging, loss of control, and death. It's like the minute we breakthrough denial to "I am growing older" we also move towards the fear that built the denial.

To continue with the words of our previous author, "However, when my children became middle-aged, I could no longer be in that category. It was a bleak and frightening moment when I realized that "old age, sickness and death" were my lot in the near future." The man who turned 80 wrote "So, how much time is left? Two years? This seems easily within reach. Five? Hope so. Ten? I could settle for that, I guess . . . The money should last unless there is hyperinflation or – HORRORS – a nursing home."

Another person wrote to me "My mom suffered increasing dementia during the last 10 years of her life. I'd much rather die suddenly than feel myself deteriorate mentally. I've told my wife, only half joking, that if I develop dementia to put me in my canoe and send me over Niagra Falls instead of letting me deteriorate in bed." Another person wrote about becoming a widow many years ago

Now I know that dying is the easy part, or at least it was for him. I was left with my fears about aging. I fear that I will never find love again, or even enjoy a sex life. I fantasize about having plastic surgery in order to feel more attractive. I am concerned about my physical health, knowing that I need surgery. I want to be able to dance and fear that I may never be.

Aging creates losses. The loss of a loved one is a deep loss. Someone recently described early grief to me as never ending because the mind can't get away from it. Putting up decorations, making a favorite meal, going down a familiar road can all bring back painful memories of a loved one who used to be here but is now gone. When the grief is fresh there is no respite.

One of you wrote to me "I don't think I am adapting to aging very well – pretty much fighting it all the way without getting too stupid about it (so far). While there are a number of advantages to being older, I view aging as a loss or series of losses and I think we need to acknowledge it as such and grieve." Absolutely.

Whether it is the moment someone asks you about what your hair color used to be, or the day you can't read the fine print, or turn 80, or your children reach middle age, or your beauty treatments betray you – whatever it is that tells you that you are aging, when you come to the immediate corollary of loss and fear, if you can, let the grief out. We have to grieve to be real, to be honest, to make good decisions, and to find new ways to age rather than just our fears. Roy Oswald writes "In death and grief, we do not so much need protection from painful experience as we need the boldness to face it. If we choose love, we must also have the courage to grieve." We need the boldness to face aging and grief. We have loved life, our skills, and what we controlled, and some of it is releasing whether we let go or not.

Aging also involves physical losses. I know someone who loved to play her violin, for years and years since childhood a great joy and release. Now approaching retirement she is contemplating selling her instrument because her arthritic hands will never play it well, or in a way that brings her joy, again. She is devastated. I know someone else who runs. He is quite aware that running helps his emotional, physical, and spiritual health. He also knows that he runs while he can. And a day will come, probably in the next decade when his joints will no longer enable him to partake of something that sustains his health. He will make an enormous adjustment when this happens.

All of us have hobbies and coping skills that can fail us as we age due to health changes. Maybe you can't dance or sew or read or walk or bike due to health changes that have come with aging. Someone confessed to getting sore muscles when she

plays Wii with her grandchildren. One of you wrote to me “I’m sorry to miss the service. Many of us will be fighting the forces of aging by biking the Loveland trail on an overnight camping/biking trip offered through the Heart & Hand auction. This will be my first time on the bike since my herniated disc made itself known to me. We shall see what this middle-aged body can do (in the company of other middle-aged UU bodies).”

It’s not that we lose everything as we age. But we can lose anything, sometimes something quite dear. One of the great tricks then, a life skill worth acquiring at any age, is how to reinvent oneself, how to lose an old pleasure and gain a new one, how to let something go in order to let something else in, how to ask for and receive physical, mental, and emotional help (whether its rehab exercise, visits to a therapist, or a few more pills), and to enjoy simple beauty and pleasure without needing to control it – which we can’t, and by an act of grace exists anyway. One of you wrote

Growing older involves letting go of our youthful image of ourselves and adjusting to constant change in our personal life, involving illness and death of family and friends. However, as long as I am able, I will hold onto the following quote by May Sarton, “One thing is certain, and I have always known it – the joys of my life have nothing to do with age. They do not change. Flowers, the morning and evening light, music, poetry, silence, the goldfinches darting about ---.”

One of my role models from this congregation is someone who gave up exquisite needlepoint when she lost her eyesight, but did so with good grace, which I so admire. She let it go. I hope to be like this person. But I am not sure. Currently I am not managing age spots so well (which seems a much smaller loss). Flexibility, letting go, of a house, a car, driving, a hobby, a locale, foods, physical activity, favorite clothing styles, looks, this is not only a life skill, it is part of a transformative faith life. Life, ultimately, is letting go, reaching for the new and then releasing to let go, over and over again to the final release of death. Someone wrote to me

I am in the midst of what I am realizing is probably a “mid-life crisis.” I always thought the mid-life crisis was something that happened to some vain kind of person and invariably involved Corvettes and affairs, but what I realize it is all about is the breathtaking, sudden understanding at how short it all is . . . And I have no control over any of it, really.

No control. I have seen it repeated time after time, that those of us who can let go of control, live and die easier, and as we age, we lose control over things we used to think we could control forever. As one of you quoted to me from a yogi “Life on

earth in a body is an exceptionally rare opportunity for transformation.” Those of us who can let go of some control and adjust to constant change age easier.

My guess is that most people who enjoy aging have manageable health issues, financial resources, and a flexible spirit. Missing one of these qualities, I think you will still be OK, but missing two of these qualities, and aging will be harder, potentially a great burden and challenge. We have some choices, but not all, and we get to grieve over this too.

Many of you really enjoy growing older. One person told me that he finally feels worthy of respect. Several of you wrote to me about the delights of not having to work, being free of the need to make money and follow a tight schedule or scripted work life. One of you cries more easily, and although embarrassing for you, I think this is good. One of you wrote to me that you can finally speak your mind. Many of you wrote to me that aging lets you be you. For example, “What followed (After thoughts of sickness and death) was the notion that I did not have to struggle to prove something any more. If “it” was over, then I could just be myself and do my best. Being important was not important anymore.” What a gift, not of regret, but release.

Those of you who wrote and seemed happiest about aging were those who liked to try new things. You wrote me all about them. One man wrote “I have not been bored. There is always something to do today, and tomorrow will be another day and it’s going to be a good day. Another day to experience and learn.” Several of you were happy to have traveled when you did, and now like to remember all the places you have seen, readily admitting you wouldn’t have the energy to go today.

One of you though noting your memory was not as good as it had been, relished the new experiences of retirement. You wrote “growing old means getting used to not having work schedules. Making new friends who are also retired. Deciding how to keep active and busy . . . volunteering becomes a way of life. Children, grand children and friends need some of our time. Exercise replaces work or volunteering becomes work.” I was so interested in this perspective about aging. For this person, aging was mostly about new things, new friends, schedules, habits, and the enjoyment of this change. Someone here, in her 80’s, has just taken on a new piano student who is older than she is. That’s curiosity and flexibility. Fantastic.

Someone else wrote to me that she enjoyed aging because she got to make new friends, young people in their 60’s. Her recommendation for everyone aging was to get young friends. Though she was sad to give up the independence of driving, she enjoyed moving to a retirement community and grew to love the one she is lives in.

Do you hear the flexibility? As we age, many of us still have many choices. As Victor Frankl counsels us, the last freedom is the freedom to choose one's attitude.

With aging also came a greater understanding of the gift of life. One of you wrote to me "I wouldn't mind my face, body, and eyes of my pre-motherhood thirties . . . but I would never trade my experiences, my heart, or my mind to have them back." Someone else wrote "I feel greater appreciation for the fragility of life and the need to enjoy it while we are able to do so." One of you wrote "Holding my great grandson made me aware, at depth, of the continuity of life and was an extraordinary gift. I came back to First church, in part, to be with people my own age and to learn how to manage this stage of life. And what wonderful role models there are! What terrific companions! I am able to be an old woman with pains and fears, but also with joy and gratitude for what I have."

I hope First Church is a wonderful place for you to age, to meet people of different ages, to ask questions, receive support during changes, makeovers and losses, make cross generational friends, celebrate childhood and learn from our elders. Aging is harder for those of us with more losses, and less resources. But it is not horrible. Nor is it a horror. It is natural and always interdependent. As a community minister recently said to me "There is no such thing as 'independent living.'" We all depend on some things, love, hope, friendship, help, things we find in community. Aging may be graceful or graceless. It is always a challenge with the potential for extraordinary positive transformation. It is sometimes a joy, sometimes a deep sorrow, and always easier when we are flexible. "Blessed are the flexible, for they will not be bent out of shape." Amen.