

Sermon Young at Heart

I like to think of myself as conscientious about avoiding –isms, so the fact that I'm loaded with them is a constant and unwelcome surprise. I never thought of myself as anything-aged until the first time I voted for a president who was younger than I was. After that, let's just say the opportunities kept coming and coming.

(Story about meeting my daughter's first grade teacher for the first time.) I've seen more ageism pointed at the young; at children who are neglected, or if not neglected and treated as precious, then children who are not treated with respect. I've see how hard it is to parent and teach teenagers – how difficult it can be to give them more and more responsibility when their failures will have consequences. I've seen my younger colleagues treated as if they were less than their peers.

I'm one of those people who heard the call to ministry when I was in my fifties. It was not an entirely welcome call, and I resisted for quite a while. Who the heck was I to think I could do this at my stage in life? Matriculating at Boston University School of Theology was a real awakening. One-third of the class was men and women in their twenties, fresh out of college. One-third was in their thirties and early forties, looking for a second career or a doctorate. And one-third was like me, in their 50s, 60s and 70s. We were headed toward a third or fourth career, or retired and looking forward to engaging in something deeply meaningful – perhaps for the first time in their lives. Looking back on it, I think my cohort may have had the most fun. Overlooking our lack of stamina for all-nighters; our kids were older, we had more life experience to test our theology against, and we seemed to be more willing to admit we were wrong. It was sheer delight to learn!

But the biggest advantage we had was we weren't young. When it came to being seen in the pulpit as having authenticity and gravitas, well, we had gravity on our side. I'm not saying my younger colleagues were less informed or powerful in their preaching. I'm saying that as often as not, they weren't given a fair shake – and that's ageism. Here were these amazing and dedicated individuals who, and completely unlike me at their age, knew exactly where and how they needed to be in the world. Yet, despite their shining convictions, their perceived inexperience weighed unfairly against them. They had to be more forceful, more intellectual, more demonstrably wise and compassionate than their older counterparts.

So here I am, in a calling that up to a certain point respects my gray hairs. How many of us have careers where they can say the same. You've got to reach pretty far for the positive.

First, let's look on the bright side:

Source: [Top ten selected] Perks of reaching 50 or being over 60 and heading towards 70! (amended)

1. Kidnappers are not very interested in you.
2. In a hostage situation you are likely to be released first.
3. No one expects you to run--anywhere.
4. People no longer view you as a hypochondriac.
5. There is nothing left to learn the hard way.
6. Things you buy now won't wear out.
7. You can eat supper at 4 pm.
8. You quit trying to hold your stomach in no matter who walks into the room.
9. You sing along with elevator music.
10. Your supply of brain cells is finally down to manageable size.

(author unknown, earliest posting November of 2008)

I know you're of a certain age when you get the joke – and you're too young or too old to know what we're laughing at. Laughter in the face of age is a blessing we can give ourselves and each other.

There's an old-time ballad that starts with "The man in the looking glass, who can it be. Man in the looking glass, can it possibly be me?" and ends with "Life is worth living if once in a while, you can look in the looking glass and smile."

(music and lyrics by Bart Howard)

I listened to that song hundreds of times growing up from one of my dad's favorite Sinatra Albums, "September of My Years." My dad died young in the October of his years, so the song still resonates a bit with me. I'm coming up to the time when I'll be older than he ever was. It makes you think.

Sometimes, like Joan Lester, I'm dismayed by my reflection. But then I think, someday I may meet my grandchildren – my dad never had that chance. There are worse things than aging.

I know some of us think otherwise, even I do from time to time. So let's look at that downside. I'm not going to dwell on our culture's infatuation with youth. The fact of the matter is, that infatuation, and its attendant disrespect for age, has been a universal attitude forever. Children and elders do not capture our respect and compassion. Our ancient Hebrew, Christian and Muslim scriptures admonish us to show mercy to children and deference to our elders – as if we clearly needed a scolding.

Despite that infatuation, we still imagine that there will come a time when we've got the perfect job, the right spouse, the well-behaved children, a home to call our own, and think we've reached some pinnacle of life. But for most of us, adulthood isn't all it's cracked up to be. We start to lose the ones we care about, jobs, a luminous and well-toned body. We hit 40 or 50 or 60 and think, instead of success, it's all downhill from here.

The time that comes to us after we've reached "adulthood" can be a time of disturbing inner unequilibrium. Our relationships, our work, our bodies – they don't follow the path we expected. We may end up in the mud – otherwise known as a mid-life crisis – even if we still have jobs and a family and a place to hang our hats. All the assumptions we made about how to avoid the bad things in life and control our destiny don't hold true. We can end up sinking in a morass of insecurity and doubt. As a consequence, we may question what's important, or why *we* are important, in this life and to this life.

James Hollis, in his book *Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life*, describes it like this:

"Fate, the movement of the deep forces of nature, the autonomous powers of our history, and our choices will take us to swamplands from time to time, and no amount of right thinking, right behavior, right theology or even right psychology will spare us from such descents. ... (p.232)

We all have those moments from time to time. Most of the time, barring bad luck or depression, or in spite of them, we know they will pass.

Hollis offers an alternate way of looking at the mud. "[W]e need instead to see that the swamplands are an inevitable and necessary counterpart to our conscious fantasies of power[.] The ongoing curriculum of life does not demand that we avoid suffering; it asks instead that we live more meaningfully in the face of it. ... Despite the blandishments of popular culture, the goal of life is not happiness but meaning. ... Life is not a problem to be solved, finally, but a series of engagements with the cosmos in which we are asked to live as fully as we can manage." (Ibid)

When I first read that ten years ago, I thought I knew what he meant; after all, the essence of my theology is that we are meaning-seeking and meaning-making creatures. Theology is simply one way of accomplishing

that task. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that seeking meaning, making meaning out of all the good and the bad that comes our way is what gives us a quality of life, and may even keep us alive. Aging can be a way of gaining clarity on where we are in life. Ageism, far from simply being aimed at others, can bring us to despise and fear our own age. It makes us vulnerable and alone and trapped. That shines a whole new light on making sure we have the wherewithal to get out of the mud.

Hollis' point that there will always be mud – in fact there has to be for us to make the best out of life, is echoed in Max Coots' *Seasons of the Self*:

When did we ever learn that life was always
summertime and spring and harvest time?

...

What sort of quaint, mistaken almanac said
Spring could come without December—

...

Even Winter in ourselves may be the poor soul's fertilizer,
and spring within can come
only if some Winter has come first—

Can come, if something like a seed is kept alive
through wintering, to sprout and grow.

Like earth, we have our seasons too

“Seasons of the Self” Boston : Skinner House © 1994, p. 24

Something like a seed can be kept alive through wintering to sprout and grow and bring us back the spring. What is that seed within us, within you, that can bring back spring? What is in the core of you that helps you to nurture that seed and keep it alive?

What seeds, what understandings, within us can bring back spring?

- We are part of life and life means change. We are something new every moment, our brains can change as we learn and grow even with age. Right now, we are not who we were a moment ago, and we are not who we will be a moment from now. That is physics, that is biology, that is philosophy, all possibility, that is life. Every moment is an opportunity, a potential, for growth. We are meant to let go of all our attributes that helped us be who we once were, but will be useless for who we will be in the future.

- We are part of death, and death means change. And when our time finally comes, we'll be ready to let the world fall away. But not until then. Our mortality, and our knowing of it, is still a seed that can bring back spring and make it more precious.

- We are meant to be imperfect.

“One of the basic rules of the universe is that nothing is perfect. Perfection simply doesn't exist ... without imperfection, neither you nor I would exist.”

Stephen Hawking

Ageism blinds us to the basic fact that we were meant to be imperfect. We are more than our bodies.

- We are meant to hope. Spring will come if we let change, imperfection and hope bloom within us.

What truth lies within us to keep the seed alive?

- We can laugh at ourselves. How do we integrate the message that we are more than our bodies? Look for the places, the times and the people who give you that message. Give that message to others.

- We can find honor and integrity and compassion for ourselves and others.

- We are not alone. Trust we have the strength to do it. We can do this in community.
We are part of a community, not alone. Break through our fear of vulnerability.
What kind of support would be helpful to us as we cope with aging? What will enable us to cope?
We need to be able to ask for help at every stage of life.
What do we need from our communities when we finally realize that we can't do it all?
We are only alone if we choose to be.

Questions:

What were our families' attitudes toward aging?
What were our relationships with our grandparents and other elders?
What did we learn about aging – was it good? Bad? Respected? Feared?
How were older people treated in the neighborhood?
What were the messages from the media while you were growing up?

Chances are, we have to unlearn our attitudes toward aging that we inherited from our nearest and dearest. Age is a gift, no matter where we are on this journey of life. It can be as great and as sweet when you are examining that first wrinkle as when you are taking your first step without holding a hand.

Finally, as you get up tomorrow morning and get ready to start your day, remember
“Life is worth living if once in a while, we can look in the looking glass and smile.”