

Coming Of Age...? On Turning Sixty

a sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene
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Reading

In the Western world aging is not generally considered a cause for celebration. While honored in some societies, all too often we North Americans view it as abhorrent. Getting older, we joke, is just a bit better than the alternative. One wonders if someday aging might even show up on the diagnostic list of characterological disorders!?

When people who have lived by such values first discover themselves neither young nor old, neither middle aged nor yet elders, they may feel depressed, sure that they have lost their identity. The old persona masks no longer fit. The youthful face and figure, the former acuity of mind, the stamina and flexibility of the body, all seem to be vanishing. Sexual seductiveness, even if present, is no longer the same?. For those acculturated to value the beauty, sexuality and style of young adulthood, this is a difficult time?(8)

No one tells us that it might be our old way of being in the world that must die to make way for the new? Most of us, unguided and untaught, flee in fear from the life that precedes our old age and death. (9)

People who struggle to go through the transition of their fifties and sixties with an increase of consciousness often become reconciled with their long and sometimes painful history, knowing that it has tempered their spirits and shaped their lives and that it will continue to do so as long as they live. (132) (Pretat)

Sermon

This sermon is dedicated to all who died in the New York City bombing, all who lost loved ones and friends, and everyone in the world, for all of us are forever changed. May we all, of whatever ages, learn the wisdom we will need to create a better world from this catastrophe.

Betty Friedan is a brilliant, gutsy woman. She wrote *The Feminine Mystique* over thirty years ago, providing the catalyst for the modern women's movement. She has been in the thick of social change her entire life-or, more like the vanguard. Here's an anecdote from the first chapter of her 1993 book, *The Fountain of Age*:

When my friends threw a surprise party on my sixtieth birthday, I could have killed them all. Their toasts seemed hostile, insisting as they did that I publicly acknowledge reaching sixty, pushing me out of life, as it seemed, out of the race. Professionally, politically, personally, sexually?. I was almost taunting in my response, assuring my friends that they, too, would soon be sixty if they lived that long. But I was depressed for weeks after that birthday party, felt removed from them all. I could not face being sixty. (13)

There are the jokes, too. Like the one about the couple in their sixties who had company for dinner. The hostess went into the kitchen to finish dinner and the others were talking, the husband telling guests about a place he and his wife had gone for their anniversary-but he couldn't remember the name. He said, "What's a name that's a flower, it has thorns, lovers send them??" The reply "rose" came back. The host turned toward the kitchen and shouted, "Rose, what's the name of that place we went to for our anniversary?"

I laugh, too-I know that man's feeling.

And, more seriously, I know Betty Friedan's response.

There is a major part of me that is resisting-big time-admitting that I will be sixty years old tomorrow, a part of me that hates that fact. For my fiftieth birthday, I received a card that said, "When times are troubled, smile. When disaster threatens, laugh. When asked your age LIE!!!" It's tempting. I can still "pass" for a lot younger than the ordinary stereotype of sixty.

But there's something wrong with that solution, since I will only be putting off the inevitable. Something pushes me to speak openly about getting older, while I still seem moderately "young"-before I can be dismissed as just an old broad whining about lost youth.

Betty Friedan would agree, and her book has been an enormous inspiration. Her response to her personal trauma at "getting older" was to throw herself into studying the subject. She studied at Columbia University, Harvard University and the University of Southern California under grants from the Ford Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

A couple of truths emerged.

The first was that older people are absent in popular culture's depictions of reality. She analyzed advertising images in popular, wide circulation, magazines, always finding a tiny percentage of people who were over fifty. In one Time issue, "there were no faces over sixty in the ads. Of 125 people in the news photographs, 12 men might have been over sixty, and another five-at least mature-were world leaders. There were no faces at all of older women." (38) Movies and TV showed the same men and women, all young. Apparently, the only people who exist are under fifty, certainly under sixty.

The second truth she found is that everything, even attitudes of specialists in aging, conspires to paint older age as a time of decrepitude and uselessness.

In studies over the past twenty years, young people, middle-aged people, doctors, occupational therapists, nurses, institutionalized older persons, and even *gerontologists* [emphasis Friedan's] saw older people as childlike, mentally incompetent, unattractive, lonely, dependent, and powerless. A survey? of public and private sector decision makers who made policy for the elderly in Los Angeles

County found that they vastly overestimated the dependency of people over sixty-five: they thought five times as many were in institutions compared to the actual statistic of 4.9 percent. (50)

She also found that literature on, and treatment of, aging persons manifested "compassionate," patronizing, contemptuous images of the "poor childlike senior citizen." Some restaurants offer kiddie plates for people under ten and over 65: "peanut butter and jelly sandwiches" for senior "kiddies."

Well, no wonder I don't want to admit turning sixty! Sixty is perceived as old. I may be able to fake it for awhile, given my good genetic heritage and healthy lifestyle, but I gotta face it: today, I am 59, on the late edge of middle age. Tomorrow, I'm sixty. Old. Which means that I am infirm, forgetful, fearful, out of it, pathetic, devoid of sexual attractiveness, irrelevant, powerless-probably drooling in the corridors of a ghetto for the aged. No wonder Betty Friedan and I run kicking and screaming from being sixty.

So, what do I do with the next third of my life?

Well? I'm not sure. It will take awhile to figure it out. But-I have glimmers of ideas from which to work.

Besides Friedan, several other people, writers and personal friends, have given me insight, courage and a great deal of food for thought.

Jane Pretat is a Jungian analyst, a depth psychologist, and she writes of the spiritual challenges that arise when we are sojourning through our late 50s, our 60s, and into our 70s. Each age has its spiritual and practical challenges: youth, to bring newness to a world that may be jaded or overcautious; middle age, to consolidate the insights learned so far, and create new spiritual outlooks that will serve the changes beginning to happen in our families and bodies and lives; old age-well, I'm not sure, since nobody's talked to me about it much. Pretat reminds us that sixty and even seventy are no longer old, and that we are among the first generations that have twenty or twenty-five years of being neither middle-aged nor old. We are "coming *to* age." [Emphasis mine]

Her counsel rings true with what I sense when (rarely!) I am able to transcend or get below my culture-driven youth obsession. It is a time when we genuinely begin to know, in our bodies and spirits, that we are going to die-and yet we are still relatively fit and productive. Because we know death is real, we have the chance to face it, and hence appreciate life so much more dearly.

Pretat counsels going deep, cherishing pain and confusion and physical limitation as Shadow signals, leading us to deep wisdom, if we have the courage and the strength to stay with them.

Underlying and infusing this late-liminal time is a most exciting and demanding task: that of re-imagining ourselves, of journeying beyond our present limitations so that we may welcome the spark of a new consciousness as it slowly emerges from our deepest darkness. (55)

She sees the purpose of this "coming-to-age" time as "growth in consciousness, which means 'knowing together with another.' In religion that other is God." (75)

I am very engaged in the Jungian take on my stage of life, and intend much of my spiritual life to move toward those ends. I do many of the things depth psychologists advise: prayer, journaling,

dream analysis, body work and attention to my body (including losing weight), drawing, painting, singing. I long to know God.

At the same time, you can't spend all your times plumbing the depths. People like Friedan-no-nonsense, practical, in this world-are also of great comfort. She went searching for what she thought would be the exceptional few who were aging vitally-as though for the Holy Grail. She says, "I found that *they were everywhere*." [Emphasis hers.] What an assurance that matter-of-fact statement is.

And a marvelous writer, Carolyn Heilbrun, lifted my spirits immensely with her book, *The Last Gift of Time: Life Beyond Sixty*. (Loaned to me by a much-admired friend who saw her sixtieth birthday over two decades ago.) Heilbrun, like Friedan (and me, reluctantly) noted that impersonation of youth is unlikely to provide us with meaning and purpose, and she also noted, as others have, that the genuine sense of mortality comes to us in our fifties and sixties-a visceral, inescapable knowledge. That knowledge has given her-as it has given me-an intensity of appreciation, what she calls "that constant awareness of newness and brightness." (207) That awareness has been the greatest gift of my fifties.

Heilbrun, a keen-nay, formidable-mind, had decided to take her own life when she was seventy, going out when the going was good. To her surprise, she found her sixties to be her happiest decade, and has postponed the euthanasia until another time. (Keeping the option open, however.)

Heilbrun appreciates the vital importance of younger friends' wisdom, staying in touch with their ideas and thoughts and attitudes. Her son once had a friend in law school, a woman his mother's age. The woman, ranked first in their class, was fretting guiltily because her adult son had written to her, lamenting, "Who will bake the Christmas cookies?" Heilbrun's son, upon being consulted, gave the woman a new perspective by replying, "F--- the Christmas cookies." On her own, she probably would not have come up with quite that response.

Thanks, Heilburn, for your scholarly, poetic practical story. Thanks, Pretat, for reminding me that one of my sacred jobs is to come to a new and deeper relationship with the Mystery, so that I may understand old age when I get there. Thanks, Friedan, for naming the elephants in the living room, the unconscionable attitudes our culture takes toward age, and for finding lots of old people, real people, living dynamic and growth-filled lives. I am inspired, comforted, and grateful.

And thanks to my friends who are in their seventies and eighties, and bear no resemblance to the decrepit wreck or invisible old drooler of the stereotype. Thanks, Elaine Durbin, for continuing the feisty work you do for our beloved church and for your community, even after nearly-fatal health events. Thanks, Jo Douglas and Eugenia Loyster, for remaining gracious and literary and open-minded and thoughtful-and remembering characters from novels better than I do. Thanks, John Harms, for doing the work that needs to be done, day in and day out, dependable as clockwork. Thanks, Howard Johnson, for your questing, scientific mind and acceptance of others' different ideas. Thanks, Helen Langworthy and Phyl Hower, for never abating one whit your passion for justice and what is right. Thanks, Ward Hower, for creating an embracing spiritual vision, and for going toward death with grace and dignity. Thanks, Vi Harms and Catherine Hopper and Bob Hamill; and Jo Hamill and Jim Hopper?.

With all this inspiration, I would love to tell you that I am fine now, completely comfortable that I'm

going to be sixty tomorrow, celebrating my new-found wisdom and depth. Alas, it's not quite so simple?. Some part of me still suspects, with one of my e-mail correspondents, that age is a very high price to pay for maturity.

I'm glad I have chosen to speak directly about getting older, because it is the only path I can see that has integrity. At the same time, I am not secure about going around trumpeting my age to a society that thinks sixty is old, and that old is in the way. Betty Friedan, bless her ground-breaking heart, says it better than I:

It was not easy to break through my own denial of age. Pangs of doubt, pain, and fear kept erupting, clouding a vision of new freedom that I glimpsed, making me lose hold of that grounding in new reality. But I began to sense, more and more surely from the experience of those who had already accepted that reality, that it is *the affirmation of age on its own terms*, the embrace of our own aging in its new reality, that enables us to face and deal with the genuine problems [that arise with the older years]. (69)

I hereby solemnly resolve to come to the point, in the next however-many years, where I can affirm aging on its own terms. Well, maybe not entirely solemnly, given the memory lapses and other breakdowns that absolutely require a sense of humor. (What's that word that means what you do with apples, at Halloween, you know, in a tub of water? Oh, yeah: "Bob"! That's my husband's name!)

I resolve to speak my age, whenever I have the courage and the wisdom, and not to accept that I'm OK mainly because I don't appear to be my age. I resolve to be myself, however old I become, and to hold on to that proud sense of self-wrinkles, bad memory, and all. I resolve to face all who would disappear and pathologize us old folks, and say to them, "You're wrong, and we're not going to put up with it."

I hope you will join me.

Sources consulted

Friedan, Betty. *The Fountain of Age*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993.

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