

The Stranger in My Mirror

A Sermon Delivered for
First Parish in Needham, Unitarian Universalist
Sunday, February 24, 2008
The Rev. Gwen Langdoc Buehrens, Guest Preacher

First Reading
from *I Feel Bad About My Neck*
by Nora Ephron

Sometimes I go out to lunch with my girlfriends --- I got that far into the sentence and caught myself. I suppose I mean my women friends. We are no longer girls and have not been girls for forty years. Anyway, sometimes we go out to lunch and I look around the table and realize we're all wearing turtleneck sweaters. Sometimes, instead, we're all wearing scarves, like Katherine Hepburn in *On Golden Pond*. Sometimes we're all wearing mandarin collars and look like a white ladies' version of the Joy Luck Club.

It's sort of funny and it's sort of sad, because we're not neurotic about age -- none of us lies about how old she is, for instance, and none of us dresses in a way that's inappropriate for our years. We all look good for our age. Except for our necks.

According to my dermatologist, the neck starts to go at forty-three, and that's that. You can put makeup on your face and concealer under your eyes and dye on your hair; you can shoot collagen and Botox into your wrinkles and creases, but short of surgery, there's not a damn thing you can do about a neck. The neck is a dead giveaway.

Our faces are lies and our necks are the truth. You have to cut open a redwood tree to see how old it is, but you wouldn't have to if it had a neck.

Every so often I read a book about age, and whoever's writing it says it's great to be old. It's great to be wise and sage and mellow; it's great to be at the point where you understand just what matters in life. I can't stand people who say things like this. What can they be thinking? Don't they have necks?

Of course, it's true that now that I'm older, I am wise and sage and mellow. And it's also true that I honestly do understand just what matters in life. But guess what? I still hate my neck.

Second Reading
Psalm 90: 1-12, ending,

The span of our life is seventy years, perhaps in strength even eighty;
yet the sum of them is but labor and sorrow, for they pass quickly away and we are gone.
. . . So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.

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The most engaging way with which to start this reflection on aging is to tell you about our dear friend, Ruth Martin, in Knoxville, Tennessee, where John served his first ministry in 1973. Wacky and wonderful, wherever she worked as a social worker, she kept the place hopping.

Her Christmas card this year was a particular hoot. At 87, she has a new beau and writes “We are spending many good hours sharing an uncanny set of tastes from the Brit comedies on PBS to studying the Democratic candidates for president. Nothing much better (with apologies to Marquez) than ‘Love in the Age of Arthritis.’ Oh, and by the way, for those of you who might be concerned about our coming together, don’t worry. Thirty years ago, I was the executive director of Planned Parenthood in Knox County!”

Yes, we are all getting older, and can’t get away from all the daily reminders that tomorrow——next year, in a few years, all too soon, true decline will be the name of the game. Note: every day of our lives, our bodies are somehow in transition.

For example, what miffed me last summer was the CVS expansion near Trader Joe’s on Highland Avenue. Its larger space now includes what seems like miles and miles of various potions, creams, and oils all meant to cure—or slow down—the enemy lurking within. Yes, they claim, this enemy, called the “Aging Process” is out to get us, is out to make our necks even flabbier, our skin even splotchier.. As Lady MacBeth exclaimed, “out damned spot, out I say.”

Hmmmm—perhaps the brown spots on my hands haven’t received the right cream or did not respond to that incantation; Yup, they are still there, coming and disappearing according to their own plan, as I watch.

For a moment, think back to your childhood. How did you (or do you) perceive your grandparents? What message did they send you about what it is like being older? What kind of message do any of us send about our own aging process?

In my own case, my maternal grandmother was full of creative energy, she enjoyed life, and was very astute about people and the ways of the world. At 98, she moved to a nursing home. At 99, when I visited her there, I asked her if there were anything she didn't particularly like about her life in the home. She pondered this question, then responded, ""Yes, this place doesn't have steamy novels in big print!" (A new niche industry, perhaps, for an ambitious entrepreneur?)

My paternal grandmother? Grumpy, she didn't give a whit about her own grandchildren. She prided herself on NOT having a sense of humor. My most vivid memory was when I told to kiss her, her chin was full of scratchy whiskers. (Notes to my daughters...if/when I am disabled and need daily care, PLEASE mind the whiskers)

One of the harder parts of aging is that our self-perception does not quite match the perception others have of us. For example, if you have always been a good conversationalist, and then are stopped cold by being unable to find a word, a name, an idea, it is quite, quite.....quite... disconcerting. When this happens, one small comfort is that our peers do understand and wait, as we wait for them. Heh, heh, "senior moments." Billy Collins, poet laureate of this country, wrote about this reality in his poem, "Forgetfulness:"

The name of the author is the first to go
followed obediently by the title, the plot,
the heartbreaking conclusion, the entire novel
which suddenly becomes one you have never read, never even heard of.

As if, one by one, the memories you used to harbor
decided to retire to the southern hemisphere of the brain,
to a little fishing village where there are no phones.

Long ago you kissed the names of the nine Muses good-bye
and watched the quadratic equation pack its bag,
and even now as you memorize the order of the planets,

Something else is slipping away, a state flower perhaps,
the address of an uncle, the capital of Paraguay.

Whatever it is you are struggling to remember,
it is not poised on the tip of your tongue,
not even lurking in some obscure corner of your spleen.

It has floated away down a dark, mythological river
whose name begins with an L, as far as you can recall,
well on your way to oblivion where you will join those
who have even forgotten how to swim and how to ride a bicycle.

No wonder you rise in the middle of the night
to look up the date of a famous battle in a book on war.
No wonder the moon in the window seems to have drifted
out of a love poem you used to know by heart.

Mary Pipher, author of *Another Country: the Emotional Terrain of our Elders*, states that there are two levels of elderhood.. One is the “young old,” in which older folk, generally healthy, continue their lives as they had been, and two, the “old-old,” in which elders are limited by serious physical problems.

As Sherwin Nuland writes, “On the one hand, we recognize that age is every increasing its effects on us and now requires not only acceptance but a gradually changing way of thinking about ourselves and the years to come; on the other, some narcissistic genie within us cannot give up, clinging to bits of the fantasy that we can *still* call on vast wellsprings of that selfsame undiminished youth to whose ebbing our better selves are trying to become reconciled.”

This takes us back to the stranger we see in our mirror; how our bodies look and function do not match how we wish they would look and function. The dissonance can be painful and discouraging. Self images from an earlier time are not easy to give up, even when putting them aside frees us up to care for our present selves. And we all know that grief is inherent in our saying good-bye to what used to be.

As we age, our horizons become much closer and we find that our expectations are newly limited to the possible. Our wings feel clipped. Also, aging brings home the fact that we are not always in control, which is a helluva note to our previously self-reliant, independent souls. Whether the aging process is genetically programmed or results from the gradual wear and tear of a lifetime of internal and external banging around, it is characterized by a journey toward increasing frailty and disability. Joints, bones, hearts, brains, and every other part of us lose their zip, and worse.

Indeed, there are many ways to lessen this journey of getting older. Exercise, physical activity, eating well, working with one's doctor to be as healthy as possible, medication, etc. Nevertheless, we find ourselves slowing down.

Nuland continues, "It is well known that our ability to adapt, learn, and then accept our limitations, is a determinant in what is called 'successful aging.' Yet, 'adapt' doesn't quite fit. 'Attune' may, in fact, better describe our response to the aging process than 'adapt.' 'Attune' in the sense of being newly receptive and open to whatever inner and outer changes are taking place, thus achieving a kind of harmony with the real circumstances of our lives.

Another determinant is having developed an inner sense of one's innate value. In middle age, we are so caught up in the doing of life, schedules, responsibilities, that finding time to dwell and meditate on where we fit into the larger scheme of the universe would appear impossible, yet remains so vital in our older years.

This personal inner core of self-worth, of centeredness, of hope will be with us as a source of strength and acceptance as we enter our later years. We are so much more than just our physical bodies. Aging, of course means losing, in part, what we have known ourselves to be. Yes, it means loss many times over, but it does not necessarily mean personal failure.

It is our attitude toward our losses as much as the nature of our losses that will determine the quality of our old age.

There are elderly men and women, for instance, who regard every ache and pain, every physical decline or limitation, as an outrage, an assault, a humiliation. But there are also those who manage to take a more positive view—“my body may be falling apart, but my spirit still prevails.”

The difference between these two attitudes is the difference between “body preoccupation” and “body transcendence,” between aging as our enemy or making some sort of reasonable peace with it.

Thus, what kind of spiritual identity and value one may have can become the core of one’s sense of growing wisdom and is the filter through which our lives are understood.

A very wise woman, Maya Angelou, once explained, “I’ve learned that even when I have pains, I don’t have to be one.”

Ronald Heifetz, of Harvard, describes two ways of being in the world: One is being on the dance floor where everyone is physically involved, having a good time, involved in a common pleasure; Two is being in the balcony, watching the dancers whirl around the floor; looking on, while less physically involved, but able to observe a broader understanding of what is taking place.

As we age, more and more of us will find ourselves in the balcony, observing, watching, yet still involved and tapping our toes to the music.

In conclusion, I wish to pose a question for each of you. As you age, and watch those around you getting older as well, is there any one image or icon that sums up your feelings or fears?

My image is that of tulips. In fact, I am tulip-philic. Once John asked me why I felt such a connection to them. I responded, “well, I like them because as they age, and begin to fall apart, they do it with such grandeur and grace—sort of like what I hope to be doing as I age.”

Then some weeks ago, John suggested that we should throw away the languishing bouquet of tulips on the dining room table. “Oh, no,” I replied. “They are still very beautiful!” To which he replied, “Oh, yeah, now I remember: they’re on hospice!”

In the name of all that brings hope, love, and caring into our lives

AMEN

