From Elbert Hubbard, Scrap Book, 1930

“To have a beautiful old age, you must live a beautiful youth, for we ourselves are posterity, and every [person] is their own ancestor. I am today what I am because I was yesterday what I was… We often hear of the beauties of old age, but the only old age that is beautiful is the one [we have] been long preparing for by living a beautiful life.”

Sermon

All of us are aging all the time. When we are young, most of us look forward to each birthday, eager to move ahead. But at a certain point in the journey, the eagerness fades--our culture teaches us to approach the second half of life with dread. We hear jokes about being “over the hill,” and a thousand advertisements offer us products to enhance our youthfulness.

Sometimes we imagine that earlier cultures treated elders with more respect, but a look into folklore shows that society has often had a negative attitude towards aging. According to one story, when God created the world God gave the donkey, the dog, the monkey, and the human each their appointed life-span. The donkey, the dog, and the monkey, all knowing that theirs was to be a hard existence, asked for a shorter life. God had mercy and took away some of their years. The humans, however, considered the thirty years assigned to them to be too brief, and they petitioned for a longer life. Accordingly, God gave them the years not wanted by the donkey, the dog, and the monkey.

Thus, humans live eighty years. The first thirty are their human years. Here they are healthy and happy; they work with pleasure, and enjoy their existence. The donkey’s twenty years follow. Here one burden after the other is laid on them; and their faithful service is rewarded with kicks and blows. Then come the dog’s twenty years, and they lie in the corner growling, no longer having teeth with which to bite. And when this time is past, the monkey’s ten years conclude. Now the humans are weak headed and foolish; they do silly things and become a laughingstock for children.

According to this story, once you pass thirty life just gets worse and worse, and after fifty, why bother? But still, aging just keeps happening. As I overheard one woman remark, “It’s better than the alternative.” We laugh, and make jokes, but with such an undercurrent all around us, no wonder people might approach each new decade with dread.

I began to think more about this topic when I marked my fiftieth birthday a couple years ago, while I was living on Cape Cod. In contrast to the negative images held up for my imagination, I found myself surrounded by wonderful role models. I knew people living vibrant and amazing lives in their sixties, seventies, eighties, and nineties. In fact, in that context, fifty seemed pretty young. In the midst of the discomfort and dread of our society, I saw people choosing another approach to aging. I would call it Aging with Grace.
What does it mean to age with grace? How do we do it? We start at the very center of our values. Our values teach us that life is good, that all of life is sacred. Aging is a dynamic and inevitable part of life. This means that every age is a good age. All the seasons of our bodies have inherent worth and dignity. Every age will bring its own gifts and challenges. Our goal can be to embrace each age as we enter it.

Some religious traditions have identified distinct spiritual goals and responsibilities for different stages of life. The Hindu tradition says there are three stages of life. In youth and young adulthood, one is a student. The spiritual task of the student is to learn about life. Then one enters the time of the householder, busy with work and parenting. The spiritual task of the householder is to serve. Finally, one retires from these roles, and enters the time of the pilgrim. The spiritual task of the pilgrim is to study and meditate on the Absolute. In the Hindu wisdom, to age with grace is to embrace each stage and seek to fulfill the spiritual tasks appropriate to its time.

The Celtic pagans sanctified the stages of life in their images of the Goddess. The Goddess had three aspects: the Maiden, the Mother, and the Crone. Each age of life had a sacred counterpart that gave it meaning and holiness. The image of the Crone as Goddess has been a powerful one for modern women in reclaiming the dignity of old age.

Our society is particularly harsh in its prejudice against old women. A woman’s perceived value has been affected by beauty and fertility. The post-menopausal woman can be seen as less desirable, making her vulnerable to rejection and loss of status. But women began fighting back against these oppressive attitudes, claiming more positive attributes of this third stage of life. The Crone is a symbol of wisdom and power. One of the gifts of aging can be to lay down old responsibilities, to let go of restrictions and expectations and live with more freedom and genuineness.

In 1961, an Englishwoman named Jenny Joseph wrote a poem that became famous in the 80’s. It starts out, “When I am an old woman
I shall wear purple
With a red hat which doesn't go and doesn't suit me.
And I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer gloves
And satin sandals and say we've no money for butter….
And make up for the sobriety of my youth.”

Her poem sparked a small revolution of women over fifty celebrating their age with enthusiasm. They formed hundreds of branches of the Red Hat Society, whose members gather for tea and outings, wearing, of course, red hats and purple outfits. When I was still exploring whether to come to Allen Avenue, I saw a picture of the A2U2 women in red hats and purple outfits. I figured that meant I could look forward to a great bunch of lively, smart, and powerful women… and I haven’t been disappointed!

In my search for wisdom about how to age with grace, my favorite advice came from the writer Edith Wharton. She tells us, “In spite of illness, in spite even of the archenemy, sorrow,
one can remain alive long past the usual date of disintegration if one is unafraid of change, insatiable in intellectual curiosity, interested in big things, and happy in small ways."

Her advice is useful at all ages: Be unafraid of change. Be insatiable in your curiosity. Be interested in big things. Be happy in small ways.

Life is all about change. As one song puts it, “Something’s lost but something’s gained in living every day.” To live with grace is to let go of what is passing, and to welcome what is coming in. Letting go isn’t easy. There are small losses, and major losses. To live with grace is to honor all of the feelings that those losses awaken in us: grief, anger, sadness, emptiness… Aging brings endings and disappointments. It increases the potential for illness, and greater aches and pains can afflict us.

And yet there are gains, too. Florida Scott Maxwell wrote, “I want to tell people approaching and perhaps fearing age that it is a time of discovery. If they say ‘Of what?’ I can only answer ‘We must find out for ourselves, otherwise it won’t be discovery.’” Curiosity is an eager opening to the new. Curiosity can be an antidote to fear. Curiosity keeps our hearts and minds supple.

All life is full of this rhythm of losing and gaining, giving and receiving. Time moves forward like a river rushes to the sea. Water that does not move becomes stagnant. I experienced a lesson on the beauty of transience through the art of Andy Goldsworthy in the movie Rivers and Tides. Andy Goldsworthy is an environmental sculptor who works with natural materials in their own surroundings. His pieces are often quite ephemeral. His sculpture might last only days or even seconds.

He says, “When I work with a leaf, rock, stick… it is an opening into the processes of life within and around it. When I leave it, these processes continue. Movement, change, light, growth and decay are the lifeblood of nature, the energies that I try to tap through my work. Nature is in a state of change and that change is the key to understanding. …Each work grows, stays, decays. Process and decay are implicit. Transience in my work reflects what I find in nature.”

One of the most strikingly beautiful of his images, for me, was a chain of beech leaves, fastened together by small thorns, forming a spiral of green in a small rock pool. Slowly the current of the water unwound the spiral and the leaf chain floated down the rushing stream dipping and twisting with the water, dancing towards its eventual dissolution.

I found myself imagining some divine artist glancing at our lives with such wonder and appreciation. We are born, we may flourish, we may flounder, we grow and reproduce, we shift form and we also decay, we dissolve back into the other elements around us. All of it is beautiful.

We can let ourselves become aware of this beauty, or we can close our eyes in dread, and miss the wonder. We don’t have a choice about aging, but we do have a choice about our
awareness. We can choose to let our aging be a dance we do. We can dance with the changes of our bodies, dance with the rhythms of time.

The Buddhists encourage us to focus our awareness on our breath going out and coming in, going out and coming in. On the one hand, this is a way of quieting the mind. Yet it is also a lesson on the losses and gains of time. Each breath is a letting go and a welcoming in. The rhythm of this process is unceasing, until we die. Our breathing can be a daily raising of awareness, opening our hearts to letting go as we breathe out, opening our hearts to welcoming the new as we breathe in.


What are the big things she is referring to? One older woman “decided that wisdom is ninety-five percent fatigue; you get so tired of dealing with inconsequential things that don't really matter that you just drop them from your psyche as not being worthy of attention anymore.” Our lives are a small part of a larger whole. If we look at ourselves as isolated entities, we lose a whole lot more with aging. But if we see ourselves in community, as part of the web of life, our lives have a deeper meaning. When we can look beyond ourselves, we are tuned into the larger energies of life, and that energy keeps us lively.

We also need to be able to be happy in small ways—the chirping of a chickadee, the white bark of birch against a blue sky, the smell of good coffee. The cycles of life include new love, and the ending of relationships. They include times of growing stronger and times of dealing with illness and injury. We cannot know what life will bring to us. We cannot expect to avoid loss and sorrow. But small joys are available in the midst of any season. If we open our eyes to them, they give us nurture and sustenance for the difficult times. The Dine people say, Beauty is before me and beauty is behind me.

Elbert Hubbard reminded us that to have a beautiful old age, we must prepare for it by living beautifully today. We are all aging every day. Each year—if we are lucky—we get another trip around the sun. Each year brings new adventures, and new struggles. Each year is the only time we have to live fully.

Be unafraid of change.  
Be insatiable in your curiosity.  
Be interested in big things.  
Be happy in small ways.  
These are tools that can help us age with grace in 2006.

*Meditation on the Decades of Life*  
I invite you into a meditation on the decades of life.  
So first of all, I invite you to get comfortable in your seat. Breathe deeply.  
Since we are all different ages, some of these decades will be past for you, and some may be future. This is an exercise of memory and imagination.
Imagine that we are boarding a train which travels through time. We can look out the windows of the train to see pictures from our lives. While on the train, you will be perfectly safe, no matter what is happening in the pictures outside. On the train, you are surrounded by loving compassion. The train is traveling back into the past, through the years of your life.

Imagine that you see yourself outside the window, at the age of 10.
Where are you living at the age of 10? What fills your days? …. Take a snapshot of yourself at 10, to bring with you as the train moves forward through your life.

Now you see yourself outside the window, at the age of 25.
Who is in your life at 25? What is important to you? …. Take a snapshot of yourself at 25, to bring with you as the train goes on.

Now you see yourself at the age of 40.
Where are you living at the age of 40?
What have you lost or gained since the age of 25? What is important to you? …. Take a snapshot of yourself at 40, to bring with you as the train goes on.

Now you see yourself outside the window, at the age of 55.
What fills your days at 55? What is important to you?
What have you lost and gained since the age of 40? …. Take a snapshot of yourself at 55, to bring with you as the train goes on.

Now you see yourself at the age of 70.
Where are you living at 70?
What have you lost and gained since the age of 55? What is important to you? …. Take a snapshot of yourself at 70, to bring with you as the train goes on.

Now you see yourself outside the window, at the age of 85.
What fills your days at 85? What is important to you?
What have you lost and gained since the age of 70? …. Take a snapshot of yourself at 85, to bring with you as the train goes on.

Now, imagine you see yourself in your final year of life.
None of us can be sure when that year will be.
What is important to you in that year? … Take a snapshot of yourself in your final year, to bring with you as the train goes on.

Now the train is turning around, and traveling back through the years of your life.
The train is bringing you to this very day, today, and you see yourself at the age you are.
What is important to you today? …

Imagine that you carefully pack up all these images.
Every decade of your life is sacred.
Your journey is your very own sacred journey of life.
Gather together your thoughts and feelings, to prepare to leave the train.  
As you disembark, remember that you are surrounded by a community of love.

*Benediction, from the Dine/Navajo people:*

Beauty is before me, and
Beauty behind me,
above me and below me
hovers the beautiful.
I am surrounded by it,
I am immersed in it.
In my youth I am aware of it,
and, in old age,
I shall walk quietly the beautiful trail.
In beauty, it is begun.
In beauty, it is ended.
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4 The Measure of My Days, 1968.

5 Andy Goldsworthy, "A Collaboration with Nature".

6 Quote from unnamed woman in The Women's Wheel of Life, Elizabeth Davis and Carol Leonard, Viking 1996.