



## **“Aging & Life Changes”**

**Rev. Paige Getty**

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As Robin shared earlier, many of us have memories of when we first felt—or were described as—“old”. Two distinct memories for me are both UUCC-related.

One was early on—I'm pretty sure I'd been serving the congregation for less than five years at that point—and we did a youth summit where an outside facilitator came in to help us strategize about how better to serve our teenagers. One of the pieces of feedback from the teens themselves was that they would benefit from having a youth minister—someone charged explicitly with serving needs of adolescents, someone young whom they could relate to. I was momentarily horrified (“What?! I'm young! And I'm your minister, too—not just those older people's!”) and then I quickly moved to a sense of gratification—after all, if the teens thought I was old, I must have made it over that hump of being “too young” to be a minister, which had been the perception of some adults when I first started.

The second memory is from just a couple years ago when a man who was working in Whole Foods asked to take a selfie with me in my Black Lives Matter shirt. He posted the photo on social media and captioned it, beginning with the words “This older white lady...” Ouch. That word “older” stung initially.

And why is that? I think it's as simple—and as complicated—as the fact that, culturally, we idolize youth, worshiping the characteristics we associate with youth. But it doesn't have to be that way. I don't think it should be that way.

As I prepared for this service, I drew inspiration from multiple sources, including parts of each of these three books: Aging (Maitland), The Fountain of Age (Friedan), and In Later Years (Marshall). This one—subtitled “Finding Meaning and Spirit in Aging”—is full of personal stories from self-identified seniors, most of them Unitarian Universalist, and including members of our own congregation.



One of the people who is quoted in the essay about “Change” is Peggy, who, “As a Chinese American, ... misses the respect shown in her culture for those who have grown old. American culture is different, she observes; youth is valued, not age.” The writer goes on to say, “She had absorbed those attitudes herself, assuming that her senior years would be a time in which she would withdraw from the life she had created. So it has been a pleasant surprise to find herself creatively engaged as she makes her way through her 80s.” (40)

Maybe we can’t change the whole culture, but each of us does have the power to make choices about how we talk about, make judgments about, and adapt to our own aging.

As I approach my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, I do not feel old. Oh, that first line of the Kayla Parker poem rings so true—“This body is not what it was.”—but there’s so much still to learn and do; I feel so vital and alive; I perceive myself as young in so many ways.

Still, for much of my life, I’ve been hearing from respected elders—women, in particular—that there is a point at which one becomes invisible to the world. No longer turning heads, no longer being sought out, perceived as tired and worn, out of touch.

These perceptions are real, but they are not necessarily true—at least, they don’t have to be. And at the heart of this morning’s message is my hope that all of us, of whatever age, might shift perspective a little to recognize, embrace, honor the richness that our later years can offer. Because this attitude shift has the potential to make everything about aging and change more manageable. It’s like the counter-intuitive advice about hitting a slick spot on an icy road—turn into the slide; don’t try to resist or overcompensate.

In the conversation that Carlton and I shared weeks ago—the one that inspired this service—the underlying question was, *How do we deal with all the challenges and losses and changes—the deaths of parents and other loved ones, the medical challenges and bodily changes and newly discovered limits that come with age?*



And the wisdom that is reiterated over and over by writers like Betty Friedan, who applied a scholarly approach and actively researched “The Fountain of Age”, as well as the living, thriving seniors whom Bruce Marshall interviewed for his book, is that *attitude matters*. For example, in one story, Marshall wrote,

Grace found ways to connect to life, even though the form of these connections was different than it was in her earlier years. She adjusted to the changes that age brought. In so doing, she made this phase of life a happier time than had her sister [who stubbornly refused to adapt]. She reached a level of acceptance, of contentment. Even though she could not do many things she had previously enjoyed, her life continued to have meaning.

Many, if not most, of those I talked with said that finding ways to adapt to change is necessary for aging well. But the strategies they employed varied from person to person. (46-47)

Specific tactics will vary, but an attitude of acceptance and adaptation is key.

Betty Friedan's [The Fountain of Age](#) is more than 600 pages of exploration of this very premise. In her introductory words, she writes,

By denying the real infirmities of age, we become its passive victims, forfeiting choice.

...what do we actually experience as we go through the process of growing old? How much of what we see is imposed by our society's views, how much is self-imposed? What do we see when we look at age in its own terms? What do we see when we look at vital women and men who neither deny age nor wallow in its victim state but continue to develop and grow? If, in fact, new visions, new values, new states of personal realization emerge in this stage of life, what are the implications for our own and society's approach to the “problem” of age? What further reaches of human growth can we envision? And what public policies in health care, housing, education, in labor, industry, church and synagogue and government, might nourish the emergence and societal use of these new dimensions in human vitality? What paths can we all take to defy the self-fulfilling prophecy of decline? (30-31)



This book is nearly 3 decades old—its premises, its questions are not new; but also, they might be even more relevant today, in our steadily growing, aging population, than they were when first published.

There's that statement that is often credited to activist Angela Davis (but who probably did not originate it): "I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I am changing the things I cannot accept." There is, of course, a time and place—many times and places, in fact—for applying that philosophy. We don't simply accept injustices and inequities because we perceive ourselves to be powerless to change them. We work and we organize and we take risks to make change.

But this sentiment is not universally applicable to every aspect of our lives. There are some things—like the incredible ways that our bodies and brains and lives naturally evolve over time—that arguably are better accepted than forcefully changed. We can make choices that enhance or detract from those natural changes—doing things (or not) to nourish ourselves and stay healthy—but to actively resist or deny inevitable change is likely to contribute to unhappiness and discontent, rather than a continued vitality.

With age comes change, and sometimes that change feels like loss—loss of identity, loss of functionality, lost opportunities. And as with any loss, we are wise to allow ourselves to grieve—to name the sorrow and the pain and the regret, to allow it to be, and to heal. Despite the temptation to ignore, deny, avoid the grief, it is still there. And perhaps with age comes the wisdom to know that it doesn't go away just because we want it to. We accept loss, we mourn, we heal. We are not the same as we were before, but we also are not broken.

And we have choices about what to do with the loss and the change. One of Bruce Marshall's interviewees offered the perspective that nostalgia can be more than just "Oh, woe is me!" for what I no longer have. One person shared about how important hiking and the mountains had been in their life. "In my first living will, I wrote that if I can't hike and climb anymore, don't do life-extending things: just keep me comfortable. But now I'm in my 70s; hiking is not so damned important to me anymore!" (49)



That simple phrase—*my first living will*—was important for me to read. We adapt to new circumstances, and we're allowed to change our minds, even about things like legal documents and living wills!

Over and again these values were reinforced in my reading: Acceptance of what is. And adaptation to new ways of being and doing and seeing things. One senior advises that we should adjust our thinking away from “how do I get over this infirmity [whatever it might be, even just age itself, which is too-often perceived as infirmity]?” and instead ask “how do I maintain my quality of life?” (Marshall 50)

I am choosing to adjust my attitude about aging—even I, who hasn't particularly been dreading getting older, am aware of some reluctance and fear. So I will choose to interrogate my own reluctance and fear, and to experiment with different perspectives, seeking out opportunities for new and renewed vitality and engagement; focus on the gifts of maturity, growth, and wisdom.

And the other great thing—we don't have to do this alone, nor depend only on our own internal wisdom. We have a community here; a group of Seasoned Souls who gather regular for fellowship and support and learning; there are great essays like those in Bruce Marshall's book *The Later Years*. We can companion one another on this journey.

In a piece written for a collection intended for young adults who are just beginning to navigate the world of independent adulthood, writer Raziq Brown reflects on “the f-word” ... *failure*. The final lines of his essay say, “I am not the child I was, the teen I was, nor the man I was then. I am the man I am now. It is all I can ever be. It's all any of us can be.”

Similarly, poet Kayla Parker writes,

This body is not what it was  
Or what it will be  
And thankfully, right now  
It seems to just fit me



At the beginning of the service, I shared Ken Nye's poem "Einstein on Time". The poet closes with the lines,

If Einstein was right,  
and I think he was,  
where is the throttle?  
How do I slow this thing down?

Perhaps that's a sentiment shared by many of us who are now older than we are young. But I invite you to consider a shift in perspective—not to slow this thing down, nor to speed it up, but rather to enjoy the ride, for what it is. "I am the [person] I am now. It is all I can ever be. It's all any of us can be."