

First of all, let's be clear: "I am not old." Nope - I am not. Of course when I was a teenager and my mom was half the age I am now, I thought she was old.

I, of course, am not really old... my older friends...my much older friends tell me I am just a pup.
Never-the-less I am growing older - fortunately.

My son was born 31 years ago. He is half my age. The same old age I previously assigned to my mother. He is the same age I was when my father died, who was ten years younger at his death than I am today. My daughter, now this one startles me, is the same age I was when I was ordained - in 1982. These things are on my mind as I stand here - between Father's Day and my son's upcoming birthday.

But hey...the same songs are still played on the radio that were played when I was in high school. Last week I heard "When I'm 64"
"Will you still love me, will you still feed me when I am 64?"
That's getting kind of close!

The reality is I am not "old" at least not in a traditionally accepted sense - but I have grown older. I have known losses that bring curtailed ability and a sense of diminishment. I have also known aging's advantages: more time for my priorities, deepening relationships, a broader perspective and a greater appreciation for others.

When I was in my 20s and 30s, unaware of these gifts of aging, I would close many of my Wednesday night services at the Wesley Foundation with Rod Stewart's song "Forever young."

May the Good Lord be with ya down every road you roam
And **may sunshine and happiness surround you** when you're far from home
And may you grow to be proud, dignified, and true
And do unto others as you would have done to you
Be courageous and be brave
And **in my heart you'll always stay**
Forever young (forever young)
Forever young (forever young)
May good fortune be with you, may your guiding light be strong
Build a stairway to heaven with a prince or vagabond
And may you never love in vain
And **in my heart you will remain -**
Forever young (forever young)

I am no longer convinced of the wisdom of Forever Young. There is of course the disjunct between Rod Stewart's life and the words - I think at the time his wife was younger than his children. More importantly, if I were to offer a "blessing" I would shout "build your way on earth" rather than building a stairway to heaven. And I certainly would not wish my friends to remain "forever young."

A ripened peach is glorious.

I am not the same person I was when I was spouting "Forever Young."
I am not the angry young man I was in my 20s. I am not the driven workaholic I was in my 30s and 40s. I am not the evangelical Christian of my high school years, nor the angst-driven searcher of my college days. I am no longer the overprotective dad freaking out over my son's

painted fingernails and my daughter's rather creative language. (In her defense she takes after her father and grandfather.)

Like all of you, I have learned that to age is not only to lose but also to grow. To age is to experience change - to engage change - even to seek change. My striving has been born of a drive to understand...both the world around me and the people I love; both the beauty I cherish and the injustice and cruelty I abhor.

I am suggesting that, not only is change a constant - perhaps the only constant of the universe; "changing" is an active pursuit of being alive, of living a more joy-filled life, of creating meaningful lives.

In the decades between my younger self and today...I have pursued change as a vision on the distant horizon. I have looked forward to a positive evolution of my skills, my comprehension and my compassion.

In the years to come, I will continue to look to the horizon. Change will, with increasing veracity, bring loss and limitations. The horizon will move closer and living well...will require an increasing attention to the glorious moment.

Winnie, Virginia and I participated in a discussion last spring on issues related to aging. Fourteen of us met over several weeks and mulled over various issues related to aging, its challenges, its opportunities...and yes our eventual deaths. As You might imagine, a lot of the discussion was about loss, after all many of us are at the stage in life where we are losing networks and friends to both death and retirement. We are losing skills and capabilities we once took for granted. Gravity and time do take their toll.

Most profoundly, I heard many of my friends asking, "In the midst of loss, who am I?" "Who am I, if not the active player of my youth? Who am I, if not the whip-smart academic? Who am I, if not the spouse of my deceased partner? Who am I, in the midst of all this loss? What of me remains?"

(Smile to indicate joke)

I am familiar with these questions. By any measure I come up a couple feet short of my younger self. 😊

In our culture, identity is bombarded by images of young, muscular bellies; sparkling hair and TIGHT skin. Identity is likened to accomplishment. But who are we if you are not muscular and whip smart? ...who are we if our hands no longer knit or carve, or create wealth? Too often as we age, we become the butt of jokes...ignored...dismissed.

Who are you amidst the loss that defines all of our lives? (long pause)

Six weeks ago, I spoke of loss in the context of suffering. I referenced William Stafford's poem The Way It Is. His words relate perhaps even more to identity and aging.

The Way It Is
by William Stafford

There is a thread you follow. It goes among things that change. But it doesn't change.
(breath)
People wonder about what you are pursuing. (slight space)
You have to "explain" about the thread.

But it is hard for others to see.
 While you hold it you can't get lost.
 Tragedies happen; people get hurt
 or die; and you suffer and get old.
 Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
 You don't ever let go of the thread.

Stafford wrote this poem in the last months of his life. He does not define the thread. Nor will I. It is yours to define, to pursue ...to hold onto.

Stafford does insist that retaining the thread is an active endeavor. Living is a verb - an on-going activity of **attention** and **intention**. **Stasis is death**.

As we age, Mary Pipher argues in Women Rowing North; it is critical that we distinguish between choosing to live lovingly and intentionally – and a life of denial.

We have all known people who seem to be in denial of Times' march, people who are waiting on something to happen to them - and when it does not, they shrivel a bit more, withdrawing in bitterness, isolation and self-absorption.

We also know people who are attentive and intentional. People who, **staggered by the grace of it all** have become: Adaptive. Generous. Empathetic to their own struggle and that of others.

(Pause)

We cannot declare ourselves happy. However, having aged a bit, I understand now more than ever that the construction of our lives, our understanding of meaning, our experience of joy or the lack there of, while contextual, is ultimately an expression of the choices we make. Our joy is an expression of the choices we make.

William Stafford's poem Waiting In Line speaks of the joy and the magnitude of the choices we must make to live fully as we age. I want to reread the closing lines again in particular...

There have been evenings when the light
 Has turned everything silver, and like you
 I have stopped at the corner and suddenly
 staggered with the grace of it all: to have
 inherited all of this, /// or even the bereavement
 of it /// and finally being cheated!—the chance
 to stand on the corner and tell it goodbye!
 Every day, every evening, every
 abject step or stumble has become; heroic:-
 You others, we the very old have a country.
 A passport cost everything there is.

Stafford is in awe, caught in wonder...dumbfounded. He scarcely can take it in...he feels himself expanding and expanding - at one with the whole and...he is in awe. He also grieves in that moment - Knowing even as he experiences the moment it changes - Knowing nothing remains the same. **Knowing this is all the more reason to cherish the moment.**

I have known such moments; The color of a sunset, the ridiculous joy of children. Look at them taking note of the dew on the spider web and the earthworm on the sidewalk. As a

parent I hurried them along - now I more often than not join them on the ground poking at some new delight!

Now that we see, there is hardly time! The moment slips away. This time, this place, is the precious and sacred!

We count the blessings, and yes - the losses.

We see now...we begin to understand... the privilege...the honor.. The awe of being alive in this moment. A passport costs everything...

Mary Oliver, in her poem, When Death Comes expresses the passport's cost.

When it's over, I want to say all my life

I was a bride married to amazement.

I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

None of us can nor should we aspire to define Stafford's thread for one another. What we do know is the strongest threads are made up of a multitude of strands. What we can say is pursue ALL that you are with ALL that you have. The distance of the horizon does not matter. The existence or nonexistence beyond the horizon does not matter. What matters most is that you **not stop dancing** with the reality between here and there.

No, you will not be the person you were at 20 - and thank the gods...but you will be the most exquisite you that you can bring to bear in this moment. Grieve the losses but embrace the here and now. A ripened peach is glorious.