

## DO NOT GO GENTLE INTO THAT GOOD NIGHT

Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,  
Because their words had forked no lightning they  
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright  
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,  
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,  
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight  
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,

Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray.

Do not go gentle into that good night.

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

I first came across this poem by Dylan Thomas many years ago – probably in college. And I remember being struck by its message. At the time, I recall thinking it reflected my own views – or perhaps it was just that 60s attitude – one more excuse to protest! In any event, this poem was one of the first things I thought of when I began to prepare this talk. As I re-read it, from the perspective of some 40 more years, I realized I had a very different view. It seems to me now to paint a terribly sad picture – of loss, of opportunity missed, of frailty and grief, of anger. ‘Do not go gentle into that good night...’ ‘Rage, rage against the dying of the light...’ While I still find the message of the poem powerful and poignant, it no longer speaks to my heart about how I want to approach the end of life. I want to look forward to years ahead of hope and connection and discovery, confident I’m doing the best I can with what I have, where I am, and to find myself at the end of the days I have ready to move gently into the next dimension.

Certainly we each have different thoughts about what it means to age – and those thoughts are formed and colored largely based on our own experience

– what we have observed of those around us who have lived through the process. Think for a moment -- what comes to mind when you think of aging? \*\*\*\*\* Is it joy and gratitude for waking up another day? Is it excitement and anticipation of opportunities for exploration and adventure in the new day? Or is it concern for loss of physical or mental ability? Dismay over new aches and pains? A general state of worry, anxiety and unhappiness?

For those of us for whom the latter perspective dominates our thinking, the question we might want to consider is ‘what is it about aging that we fear’? Is there any way to accept – or even embrace – the changes inherent in getting older? \*\*\*\*\* From the moment of our birth, we are aging. In those first years, every milestone is a triumph to be documented and celebrated. When does the process turn from a celebration of new accomplishments and anticipation of opportunity to something else? Something darker, something fearful, something about which we don’t like to think and rarely discuss?

It seems pretty clear that our culture leads us to fear aging and sometimes the old themselves. And we may have reason to do so based on what we

have experienced or observed of the aging process. But what if we decided to change our perspective? Observation and awareness can give us insight, tools and opportunity to do things differently. Let's create a reality where we can 'go gently into that good night' with our dignity intact and a sense of worth about what we can share with and leave for those who are following after.

As I've noted, in our current culture the connotation of aging is not generally positive. Much has been written about our youth oriented culture and every other commercial we see or hear is for a product or medication or activity or procedure that will delay, reverse or otherwise counteract aging or the appearance of aging. On the other hand there is, in many cultures, a great reverence for elders, a sense of respect for their achievement of age, for the knowledge and wisdom that can come from the experience of many years. I suggest we can and should exercise our right to choose in this area and that by making a conscious decision about how we perceive aging and what we expect as we age, we can, at least in some measure, change our experience of it. The process starts and ends with openness, understanding, and acceptance.

Mary Pipher, psychologist, author and UU from Lincoln, Nebraska says in her book [Another Country: Navigating the Emotional Terrain of our Elders](#), “We know less about the aged than we think we do. There is a lack of good information about the developmental, psychological, social and spiritual needs of the old. We can empathize with children because we have been young. We remember some of what happened and how it felt. However, we haven’t had experiences that allow us to understand the old.” This clearly suggests to me that we each have the opportunity to be the artist, architect, engineer – in a word, expert – of our own aging process.

What is old? I have a friend who does a mostly humorous presentation on aging and he points out that at 40 we are considered ‘older workers,’ at 50 one can join AARP, at 55 we qualify for the senior discount at Perkins, at 60 we qualify for services under the Older Americans Act, at 62 Social Security becomes an option and at 65 there is eligibility for Medicare. Others suggest that ‘old’ is 10-15 years older than whatever age we are now. My kids, at 20 and 18, seem to delight in telling me I’m old, but except for the things I know now that I didn’t know then, and an occasional twinge here and there, when I overdo at yoga class, I don’t feel noticeably different than I did at their age.

So if we have to agree that we're not going to be able to answer the question of 'what is old,' the challenge becomes how do we do this aging thing differently? Is there a way to continue to anticipate the future and to celebrate up to and including the moment of our death? Can we create a reality in our own lives where aging need not be a fearful thing to be ignored, rejected or denied?

Oh, there's a catch – the death part. None of us gets to ignore, reject or deny that in the end. Perhaps it is not so much the aging process that we fear – though that can be problematic as we experience changes in body and mind. Perhaps it is the end of the process – death – that causes us angst and anxiety as we approach it. If that is so, then part of this re-evaluation of attitude and approach should include addressing that taboo topic as well.

As Unitarian Universalists most of us have no particular expectation of what comes after death. So if we are not anticipating an afterlife in heaven or hell what happens when our physical body and mental processes cease to function?

Poet, novelist and essayist May Sarton says, “I would like to believe when I die that I have given myself away like a tree that sows seeds every spring and never counts the loss, because it is not loss, it is adding to future life. It is the tree’s way of being. Strongly rooted perhaps, but spilling out its treasure on the wind.”

I’m with May on that one. In my view, we live on in the sense and spirit and awareness of those whose lives we have touched. The late Reverend Forrest Church puts it this way, “For us to be here in the first place, for us to earn the privilege of dying, more than a billion billion accidents took place. Even the one in a million sperm’s connection with the equally unique egg is nothing compared to everything else that happened from the beginning of time until now to make it possible for us to be here.

What a luxury we enjoy, wondering what will happen after we die, even what will happen before we die. Having spent billions of years in gestation, present in all that preceded us—fully admitting the pain and difficulty involved in actually being alive, able to feel and suffer, grieve and die—we can only respond in one way: with awe and gratitude.

We see little of the road ahead or the sky above. And the dust we raise clouds our eyes, leaving only brief interludes to contemplate the stars. All we can do, every now and again, is to stop for a moment and look.”

I have actually thought quite a lot about aging and dying, especially as I have watched my parents' come to terms with aging and recently death. While my own end is, at least to my knowledge, not imminent, I don't think I fear it. I hope I'll be around in good health for some years yet, and when the time comes, I hope I'll feel satisfied with what I have done and what I am leaving behind.

You've probably realized by now that I am no expert. I'm not much of a philosopher and only a wanna-be poet, so I am grateful to those like May Sarton and Mary Pipher who have considered these topics deeply and offered thoughtful and sometimes profound reflections on this process of aging that – if you really stop to think about – we only get to experience if we are lucky. And so why not try our darndest to enjoy it??

In terms of aging, I have some experience that extends beyond my 58 years of walking – sometimes skipping, sometimes trudging – the earth. I have seen relatives and friends age in very different ways. I lived for a number of years with the challenge and opportunity of aging parents in great need of support to maintain the independence and dignity that is so important to

them; spent 6 weeks caring for my mother at the end of her life and the last few months trying to support my Dad in his grief and adjustment to the loss of his life partner.

In my professional life I have worked closely with older – aging – individuals for over 15 years and have observed a great variety of perspectives and approaches to the reality of aging. I've seen, as I'm sure many of you have, situations where people really do stop living, or where they become rigid in mental as well as physical ways. I have seen others for whom aging seems to remain about expansion of ideas, interests, opportunities – and I sincerely hope that I can follow that path, continuing to learn, love, and share in the blessings of the ordinary as well as the extraordinary; that I will wear purple with a red hat – and do other sometimes inappropriate things that will embarrass my daughters but reaffirm my commitment to life and love.

Until earlier this fall, Stephen and I – in our late 50s – had all four of our parents living. My Mother was the youngest at 84. My Dad is 85 and Stephen's folks are 86 and 95. My Mom was the most physically impaired and suffered increasing dementia over the last seven to 10 years of her life

and increasingly needed assistance with every aspect of daily life. My father's health is generally good, he has been active, interested in the world, still playing golf; my mother-in-law is also mostly healthy – somewhat less active but able to care for herself and spouse; my father-in-law has significant physical challenges but is mentally alert,

I realize this varied experience doesn't qualify me for much of anything except my own opinion but those of you who've known me for awhile, know I generally don't shy away from expressing an opinion. It also seems that Stephen and I had better be particularly well prepared since our gene pool is evidently balanced toward longevity – but I am convinced that if we take the time to consider, thoughtfully, our perspective on aging and death, and to have a plan or at least the idea of a plan, we might then be able to focus more on our lives and truly living them to the fullest as we age and up to the end of our lives.

One way to do that is to recognize and acknowledge reality as it changes for us and adapt to those changes in a thoughtful way – to make our own choices while we can. It is my experience that putting off those decisions

can lead to crisis decision making which more often than not means fewer and poorer choices.

It was my father's commitment, and sheer strength of will that kept my mother at home for the last several years. He managed with increasing levels of help to care for my mother at home. His commitment, determination and caring was nothing short of extraordinary – and his choice in this situation would not have been feasible if it did not also extend to my siblings and myself. My sisters and brother live 1-1/2 to 2 hours away from our parents, and I am half the continent away. We all still have children in college and at home, varying levels of employment and other obligations. Even so, a great deal of our 'extra' time is spent in consultation about or direct assistance to our folks. It is a blessing to be part of this process and it is sad and exhausting. And it could be easier on all concerned had there been earlier acknowledgment of the painful realities and willingness to consider alternatives. The greatest hardship and most painful part of the experience of my mother's last years and weeks was the dementia which in essence took her from us long before she died and kept us from talking openly about the reality of her dying.

May Sarton wrote, “It is only when we can believe that we are creating the soul that life has any meaning, but when we can believe it – and I do and always have – then there is nothing we do that is without meaning and nothing that we suffer that does not hold the seed of creation in it.”

How do we go about continuing to ‘create the soul’ even in the face of deteriorating physical and mental capacity and in the face of anxiety and exhaustion and the knowledge that the end if not in sight is nearer than it is far? Mary Pipher suggests, “The old must search for the right mix of comfortable habits and new experiences. Without the former there is chaos; without the latter there is ossification.” That seems simple, but in my experience it’s huge – especially the new experiences part.

In her book, Pipher refers to distinctions between the young-old and the old-old. While there are various factors that may influence the stage of old-ness, Pipher believes that loss of health is what delineates the two stages of old age. She observes that most people enjoy being young-old – generally in the 60s and 70s and I suspect that many of us are lulled into a sense of security by those years. And then something changes – illness or injury intervenes, or mental capacity begins to diminish and suddenly or slowly we adjust to

living with less – less activity, less interaction, less connection, less community.

One of the maxims with which I grew up and have used frequently with my children is that practice is necessary to do anything well. It may be that we who are approaching or in our young-old age should practice – or in another way of looking at it – have a workout routine related to our aging. We’ve all heard the advice to stay active physically and to keep our minds engaged and active. Great advice, but if we take that approach with the idea of defeating or somehow circumventing aging, we’re bound to be disappointed. Staying physically and mentally active are certainly important components for a healthy, happy life – equally important is the need to maintain connections. Pipher says, “...the search for the right place is a search for the right people. It’s a search for love and respect. What’s important is a community of friends and family.” And I would add, a community with whom we have had conversations about how we want to live out our lives.

Near the end of her book, Pipher comments, “I learned the importance of connections and control. I witnessed the incredible calculus of old age – that as more is taken there is more love for what remains. The great lesson to be

learned in this last developmental stage is acceptance. That lesson well learned brings serenity. In the end everything is about love.”

So how do we come to acceptance and serenity? Living fully...not afraid to die...afraid only to have left something unsaid or unexperienced. Several years ago when the husband of a good friend died very suddenly – he just didn’t wake up one morning when he was 52 – I had a revelation of sorts or at least a suddenly clear understanding that any day, any moment may be our last. It made me think very hard about how I live each day and I resolved to do so in a way that if this connection, this interaction with friends, family or the grocery store checkout person is my last it will be o.k. We should never pass up an opportunity to be kind, to be helpful, to share positive, hopeful energy with a hurting world and to cement our connections to one another so we have reserves of love and strength on which to draw. I have to admit that I am not always successful in this attempt, but I continue to practice.

That planning I referenced earlier? It’s about connections and community.

As things stand now, many elderly, especially in the old-old stage, find themselves having to give up their community and their lifestyle and accommodate the schedules and priorities of others. I have had

conversations with friends about creating communities as we get older.

Pooling our resources, our experience and our ability to take care of one another in surroundings and in the company of our choosing. Those of us of a certain age might think commune...the idea always appealed to me though I had no direct experience at that time. The concept still appeals and I think that or some other as yet untried model could serve to make our aging years more meaningful, more connected.

There is certainly far more that could be said on the topic of aging gracefully and maintaining our inner and outer connections as we do so – my brief summary at this point in my life is that in the end, our challenge is to know and accept that our time is our time. That every connection is a treasure, every pleasure no matter how small should be savored for none are insignificant. Keep anticipating, appreciating, learning from and sharing, the moments and the days for they become your life and your legacy.

I'll end with this quote from a web site that I neglected to properly annotate:

“The real challenge that defines our humanity is this: how do we take on reality as it unfolds, navigate it, and truly stay awake and alive in this moment of life, whatever its contours. And here is the silver lining if you

will, of Buddhism's frank insistence on suffering as a feature of life: a parallel insistence that equanimity and even joy are within our grasp in every moment, without anything at all needing to change. The stakes for getting this right are high. As Thoreau said, in one of Jon Kabat-Zinn's favorite lines, "Only that day dawns to which we are awake."

"The Dance of Time"

by Kenneth W. Collier from Our Seven Principles in Story and Verse

Does the rose envy the sunset for its orange  
Or the sea envy the lake for its calm?  
Does the sky blame the earth for being brown  
Or the whale blame the fish for laying eggs?

Does the redwood disregard the sorrel for being small  
Or the desert think less of the marsh for being wet?  
Does the bird laugh at the snail that cannot fly  
Or the otter tease the rock that meditates in the river?

Are the stars embarrassed at the brightness of the moon,  
Or is the rain afraid of the cold of the snow?  
Does the pine turn its head from the nakedness of the oak  
Or the corn, row on row, from the wild grass?

And am I less than the trees and stars and rose  
That I should turn my face from the soul of another?

And the dance of time goes on without stop or pause.  
The dance goes on. Day after turning day,  
Night after spinning night on it goes and on and on.  
Leaping minutes, pirouette, grand jete,  
Plie, turn and spin and lift and leap,  
On and on without end or pause.

Silent music rising out of the heart,  
Turning the hours, moving the dancers  
Each to a private music unheard by others,  
Each turning and spinning alone yet joined  
To the others by invisible threads of dance that weave  
A pattern of exquisite, profound beauty.

And all of this happens around me at every moment,  
As the hours move, turn, and spin through my life.