

Dancing from the Inside Out

*GRACE-FILLED REFLECTIONS
ON GETTING OLDER*

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1

Dancing to Every Other Beat

Getting from Here to There

It was my sister on the phone. “I’m lost.”

My friends and I looked at one another wondering what to do next (this was before texting, GPS, and Siri). She had driven upstate to meet me in a city where I was visiting. No one in the house was from the area, so we were essentially of no help. Finally, Kathy came up with a great idea.

“Tell her to drive around until she gets to someplace where we know where she is, and then call us back.”

We all laughed hysterically, more at our own predicament than my sister’s. Eventually, we were finally able to figure out where she was, and someone volunteered to hop in their car and lead her back.

I thought about that story while visiting a dear friend recently. While she began preparing lunch in her kitchen, I slid on a stool at the counter. Elbows propped on counter, chin resting in hands, I eagerly awaited not only for the meal but also for whatever else would be served up in conversation.

“The other day, someone told me, ‘You know in another three years, you will be eighty.’ Now what do you suppose she meant by that?” my friend asked with raised eyebrow. “And what am I to do with this information, where do I go from here?” she pondered, clearly perplexed.

Yes, I do sometimes wonder what one does with one’s age. At my great aunt’s 97th birthday dinner party, we began to ask one another questions around the restaurant table: What was your favorite year? What year would you like to forget? Which was the hardest birthday for you? Which birthday was the best?

Everyone had different answers, and it was both fun and insightful to hear their responses (“the last day I was twenty-nine”; “the last year of my marriage”; “the first year with a grandchild”; “the day I started my

new job”). Endless responses, none more right than wrong. Yet each of us were watching the days, weeks, months, and years slipping by as we prepared for whatever lies ahead. My favorite answer was from a newly retired sixty-five-year-old who laughingly replied, “My best days are yet to come; I’ve only just begun and I don’t know where life is taking me.”

It reminded me of a conversation I once had with my friend Daniel. He had just returned from a vacation in the hills of Georgia. He, like my sister, became lost on some back road. Fortunately, he came upon an elderly woman who was sitting in a rocking chair on the front porch of her house. He stopped and told her where he wanted to go, looking for directions.

“Can you help me out?” he asked.

“Why sure,” she replied confidently as she rocked away. “See, here’s what you need to do. You just follow this here road a ways, and then when you feels like you’re almost there, just stop and you *asks* somebody.”

She then nonchalantly leaned over her chair, spit her chewing tobacco out of the side of her mouth with a well-practiced aim into the strategically placed spittoon, and kept on rocking. Daniel and I later laughed over her directions, but then on a more serious note we remarked on the wisdom of this elderly woman. So often in life, that’s exactly how we get from Here to There. We just go along until it feels like we’re almost There, and then we stop and ask: Are we There yet? How close is Far Away? Have we left Here on our way to over There? Or are we still on the road to There?

And every time, the answer is always the same: “You just goes along until it feels like you’re almost there, and then you stop and you *asks* somebody.”

By the way, my sister who couldn’t find her way lo’ so many years ago, went zip-lining the other day to cross one more thing off her bucket list at age 70. (“Just walk to the edge, drop right off, tuck and zip,” her instructor told her.) That’s one way certainly to get from Here to There!

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“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to.”

“I don’t much care where—”

“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go.”

—Lewis Carroll

This Is What 60 or 70 or 80 Looks Like

A few years ago, I went to a yoga retreat center to study with my favorite teacher. When the yogi asked me—as he asks all of the attendees at the beginning of each workshop—why I was there, I wondered what I might say that was different or new.

“Next month, I will be sixty years old,” I gulped in confession. “I am here to embrace and love myself into sixty.”

The yogi nodded his head and gently responded, “Next month you will be sixty.”

No, no, no. I was there to embrace *my* being able to say that I would be sixty. I had not come to hear *someone else* say that I would be sixty!

You see, it was the first time that I had ever been sixty. I never envisioned that I would one day be sixty. As one friend told me a few years back when her husband reached this milestone, “I don’t mind that he’s turning sixty. I just never imagined that I would be married to anyone who was sixty.”

Well, today not only am I married to someone seventy-plus, but I am now seventy! When I was fresh out of college and teaching second grade, I naively thought that anyone over the age of thirty was, well . . . old. And sixty or older? Then you were really, really, really old. (And someone please tell me how AARP can begin stalking you at fifty, and then send out a congratulatory note when you turn fifty-five! Is this legal?)

Back then, if you began teaching at age twenty-one and taught for thirty years, you could retire in your early fifties. Not too soon after, you would begin to smell like my late grandmother (who wore Chantilly as her fragrance of choice), jiggle when you walked, and wear false teeth that you took out at night and put in that glass of water by your bed. You had that funny blue rinse in your hair to hide the gray; wore support hose

to cover your varicose veins; and you carried a big pocketbook stuffed with cough drops, rubbing liniment, S&H Green Stamps, penny candy, a tube of ruby red lipstick, a compact with mirror, and a monogrammed lace-trimmed handkerchief. Social Security, senior citizen housing, and a tombstone could not be far off.

That's what I thought before I finally could even embrace being sixty. It took me awhile but my understanding and image of what it means to be a senior citizen have changed dramatically: I still am working, have all of my own teeth, go stocking-less, retired to the South where the weather is kinder, and wear my pedometer to get in the required 10,000 steps per day.

Then came the day that I finally began to use my senior discount card for the MTA in New York City. (I did the math: a senior reduced fare was half the base fare and, well, I would be foolish *not* to take the discount.) I've even swallowed my pride and now ask for the senior discount at movie theaters and restaurants. I gladly take the seat on the subway when some young person offers it to me; believe Social Security and Medicare are well-earned benefits; prefer the early-bird specials (smaller portions and less expensive); and enjoy the early boarding offered for seniors on Amtrak. Oh, and those AARP discounts? Let me tell you, they are the bomb!

Someone once said that "I thought 'da' Nile' was a river in Africa until I saw the truth." Yes, my friends, I was certainly in denial. Truth be told, I am now a senior citizen, and with that comes privileges and benefits which I gladly accept!

Because I entered kindergarten at age four (they did that back then), most of my friends are older than I am and have been waiting eagerly to welcome me into the world of the seventies. We are one another's role models on how to age with grace and good humor, and we are promised that it will only get better.

To quote one of my "she-roes," Gloria Steinem, in response to a reporter who commented that she did not look her age at forty—and who has gloriously embraced her eighties: "We've been lying for so long, who would know?" (She also replied once when I complimented her on her hair color, "Really? I have so many colors in there; I have no idea *what* color it is.") Only our hairdressers know for sure. Another privilege of growing older!

And, ahem, happy birthday to my two Pisces sisters (March babies),
from your middle Scorpio sister.

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“Fifty was a shock, because it was the end of the center period of
life. But once I got over that, sixty was great. Seventy was great.
And I loved, I seriously loved aging.”

—Gloria Steinem

Trust Me

We had just returned from a visit to the assisted living facility to look at a one-bedroom unit. Ever since my great aunt moved into her two-bedroom, two-bath villa in this senior living community three years ago, we have laughingly referred to the facility as “the big house.” An excellent facility and reasonably priced, they offered around-the-clock care, three meals a day, recreational activities, and what seemed like endless outings. Part of the reason we selected this particular housing arrangement was that it would be easier to provide her more care over time.

Unfortunately, on the first night of my visit with her, we ended up in the emergency room until 4:30 a.m., after she fell in the bathroom in the middle of night and thought she had broken her shoulder. Thank goodness, nothing was broken, but it was becoming increasingly apparent that she needed more care and attention. As a concession to me, she had agreed at least to look at the unit. Now back in her villa, I was sitting beside her on the couch, patiently waiting for her evaluation.

“Everyone is so old over there,” she said, shaking her head and shuddering.

I quietly reminded her that with her birthday, at the time, coming up in less than a month when we would celebrate her 98th year, she most likely would be the OLDEST person in the facility.

“You know what I mean,” she whispered conspiratorially. “They’re just so o-l-d.”

God love her, my great aunt’s vim and vinegar have kept her young at heart, and we should all take notes on how this four-foot, eleven-inch and barely 110-pound woman is living her life so fully and with such determination. Holding tightly to her walker as she scurries around her

apartment, Life Alert swinging from a cord around her neck, her age is none of her business . . . nor mine nor anyone else's, apparently (although she has quietly confessed that she no longer buys green bananas).

I remember when I turned thirty and was spending the night with her and my great uncle. She happened by the bathroom as I prepared for bed.

"No night cream on your face?" she asked with eyebrows raised.

"No, why?" I responded.

"Trust me," was all she said as she walked by.

And so, I began my nightly routine of washing my face with Neutrogena and then liberally applying Ponds cold cream (which my grandmother used so that's what I decided to use). Religiously, every night the same routine. When I was approaching forty and had come for a visit, she interrupted my nightly routine with eyebrows raised yet again, asking, "Aren't you applying it to your neck too?"

To my inquiry of why, she once again simply replied, "Trust me."

Over the years, through her gentle prodding, I have added hands and feet to moisturize daily, still using my Ponds. Indeed, I've been known on business trips to hurriedly hop in a cab or order a car service or take a quick walk to the nearest drugstore to purchase a forgotten jar of Ponds. Ponds in the morning, Ponds when I come home from work, and Ponds before I go to bed. Always Ponds, generously applied after washing my face and then brushing and flossing my teeth.

I'm not so sure that she is still moisturizing her face and neck at night, but I do know that she still goes to her weekly manicure and hair appointments, and that her new nightly routine now includes consuming three homemade Butterfinger cookies, accompanied by her scotch on the rocks with a splash of water to wash down the cookies. She keeps a stash of three zipped plastic bags of baked cookies stored in her freezer, making sure that her supply lasts until the next baking venture. And there is always plenty of scotch on hand. (See end of reflection for the cookie recipe. I will leave it up to you on choice of beverage to wash them down.)

Yep, she has emphatically put her petite size-six foot down, and said she's not moving. Not now, not ever. Not in her lifetime if she has anything to say about it. End of discussion.

Because over in “the big house,” they are all just so *o-l-d*. And so, here I sit on the couch next to her, waiting for her to cock her head, arch her eyebrows, and say to me yet again, “Trust me.”

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“The idea is to die young as late as possible.”

—Ashley Montagu

Betsy's Butterfinger Cookies

Ingredients:

- 1 3/4 cups all-purpose flour
- 3/4 teaspoon baking soda
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 3/4 cup granulated sugar
- 1/2 cup salted butter, softened
- 1 large egg, at room temperature
- 8 fun-sized Butterfinger candy bars, chopped

Directions:

1. Preheat oven to 375°F.
2. Combine flour, baking soda, and salt in small bowl and set aside. With an electric mixer, beat sugar and butter until creamy. Beat in egg until just combined.
3. Gradually beat in flour mixture. Stir in Butterfinger pieces by hand. The dough will be very thick. Drop by slightly rounded tablespoons onto ungreased baking sheet.
4. Bake for 10–12 minutes or until lightly browned. Allow to cool on the baking sheets for 5 minutes, then transfer to a wire rack to cool completely.
5. Make-ahead tip: Cookies stay fresh covered at room temperature for up to one week. Baked cookies freeze well—up to three months. Unbaked cookie dough balls freeze well—up to three months. Bake frozen cookie dough balls for an extra minute, no need to thaw.

It's a Little Difficult, But We Must Learn

I had only been living in New York City for about a year when I was stopped one day on a subway platform by an elderly Eastern European couple. Seeking directions in a language clearly not his own, I surprisingly could help him out (having only ventured on the R for the first four months and then finally learning the Lexington Line before moving to the Seventh Avenue Line, not daring yet to try any of those other “alphabet” lines).

“Just take this subway to 42nd Street, and then follow the signs for the shuttle, which you will take over to the west side to catch the No. 2 or 3 to 72nd Street,” I advised him with some confidence.

He nodded in appreciation while his wife clung to his arm with teary eyes. He patted her hand and whispered reassuringly in halted English, “It’s a little difficult but we must learn.”

His words of encouragement have inspired me for now thirty-plus years: It’s a little difficult but we must learn.

I recalled those words last week when my beloved decided that not only must I move from Earthlink and Microsoft Office to Gmail and the Mac, but also to do away with cable TV and use instead Apple TV, Hulu, and Netflix . . . a range of decisions all put into action within seventy-two hours. Yep, I had entered technology purgatory!

Listen, I spent the last thirty years working in a corporation or in a not-for-profit where there was always a knowledgeable IT department. All you had to do was call them up and say “Help” and someone was on the way. I did not need to know *how* things worked. I just needed to know *how to call* someone who knew how things worked.

For problems and mishaps that I did not even know how to describe (“I can’t begin to tell you what’s wrong, I just know I used to be able to

send emails and now I can't"), no sooner than I had hung up the phone, some wonderfully knowledgeable person would magically appear and voilá, my computer was fixed! Alas, retirement does not offer a "technology genie" unless you pay an annual retainer fee like my sister does: this guy drives over to her house and fixes it every time she calls him. Smart woman.

While my beloved was trying to show me how to convert my Earthlink address book to an Excel file to export, and then how to save and retrieve documents on a Mac, and oh yes, how to find the programs I used to enjoy watching on cable now on my Apple TV, and etc., etc., etc., I could actually feel my hair turning gray as I thought to myself that at this rate I was going to need a color touch up weekly rather than my usual every six weeks! (You did hear me when I told you that we did this all within seventy-two hours, right?)

I've heard that you can't teach an old dog new tricks, but I refuse to accept that I am *that* old and I know that I am not a dog. Besides, I have as my inspiration, my Great Aunt Reigh, who lived to the ripe old age of 96, God rest her soul. I remember visiting her one morning out in rural Ohio when she was about 92 years old. I found her not only smoking a cigarette, but also drinking coffee laced with Harvey's Bristol Cream and eating a slice of cherry pie for breakfast.

"Go on, say something," she dared me as she puffed on her cigarette, sitting at the kitchen table in her bathrobe. "Just say something."

"Not me," I said, hands shooting up involuntarily to ward off her unexpected verbal attack. "It all seems to be working for you. Have some more pie."

This same great aunt became so intrigued with fax machines that on one hot summer day in the mid-1990s, she had me drive her down to the local Mom and Pop store (with a two-pump filling station) located on some gravel back road which happened to have a fax machine—all so that she could have someone send her a fax and she could see how it worked. By cracky, if Aunt Reigh could learn how to use a fax machine at ninety-two years of age, smoke cigarettes, drink coffee laced with Harvey's Bristol Cream, *and* eat cherry pie for breakfast, then I know I can figure out how to use a Mac and an Apple TV. Besides, I have a framed needlepoint hanging on my wall—lovingly made and presented to me, from my dear high school friend Marty on the occasion of my receiving my doctorate eons ago—that reads "Learning Never Ends."

As Richelle Goodrich indignantly admonishes us all in *Making Wishes*: “Who told you it was too late? And more importantly, why did you choose to believe them?”

Yes, it may be a little difficult but we must always continue to learn. And, scouts honor, I promise to learn how to use my new Mac and Apple TV . . . sooner rather than later. Meanwhile, I'm inviting all prayers to get me out of this temporary technology purgatory and accepting all contributions for my anticipated monthly hair coloring.

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“Never stop dreaming,
never stop believing,
never give up,
never stop trying, and
never stop learning.”

—Roy T. Bennett, *The Light in the Heart*

The Better to Hear You, My Dear

Ever since I was about seven years old, I have had to wear glasses, being frightfully nearsighted with astigmatism (you know it's bad when you have to find your glasses on the bed stand before you can read the time on the clock). I was so grateful when they finally made lenses that were thin enough that I didn't have thick eyeglasses *and* I could afford them.

Fifteen years ago, I had Lasik eye surgery and it felt like I was in Steve Martin's movie *Leap of Faith* as he laid hands on me, crying out "Healed, you can see!" Oh, I still needed readers for the fine print, but gosh did I enjoy picking up a variety of inexpensive reading glasses (+2.00) at three for \$25. Lately, however, I have begun to notice that I was squinting to read the type on my electronic devices and finally resigned myself to purchasing readers at +2.25.

The better to see you, my dear.

Over the past couple of years, I could also tell that my hearing was not as acute as it had been. What convinced me finally to have my ears checked was the evening I was out to dinner with a mentee of mine. While having dessert and coffee, I thought I heard her say, "I've decided that I would like to have a boat."

I began to wonder how I could help her find a boat—and by the way, when did she become interested in sailing?—and I asked her as much. To which she placed her hand over her heart, gulped, and replied, "I said

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that I've decided that I would like to have a beau . . . not a boat. "But," she continued, "I am more distressed that you think it is more likely that I will get a *boat* than a *beau*!"

Well, that urgently took me off to my ear, nose, and throat doctor who in turn referred me to an audiologist, and we learned that I do have a slight hearing loss in BOTH ears. I no longer hear some of the higher ranges, which is where the consonants are (hence hearing boat, not beau). No need for a hearing aid yet, I was reassured; this seems to be one of the natural occurrences of getting older.

I dutifully reported back to my beloved. "It seems that we are both vindicated. You say that I am not listening. I say that I cannot hear you. And guess what? We are both right!!!"

The better to hear you, my dear.

When I still lived in Brooklyn, I would take a long, leisurely walk at least three mornings a week. One Saturday morning, I was walking along Furman Street in a slight summer drizzle when I saw an older gentleman ahead of me. He was facing the Promenade, looking up, with his arms spread wide open. Suddenly, he began to hug himself while doing a little jig, and he seemed to be shouting to himself.

I slowed down, not sure what to do because after all it was New York City, and you can never be too careful, but he seemed to be actually happy. As I came closer, he smiled at me and gleefully shouted, "I just called out 'I don't even know if there is a God' as I raised my fists up to the sky. And just then that beautiful woman up there with an umbrella stopped, looked down, and began to wave at me."

I looked up and there indeed was a pretty young lady with an umbrella who was smiling and waving at both this gentleman and now me. And we waved back.

"Any time a pretty lady waves at an old man like me," he declared with a big smile on his face, "I *know* there is a God."

And so, my dear friends, please be assured that God can hear you—and she is listening.

.....

"Grandmother, what big ears you have!"

"All the better to hear with, my child."

—Brothers Grimm, *Little Red Riding Hood*