

Aging Gracefully

January 21, 2007

The Reverend Roger Fritts

Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church

Bethesda, Maryland

Reading by long Cedar Lane member Dorothy Bothe. She moved to San Antonio, Texas, in the spring of 2004.

Wine may become excellent and valuable simply by aging. Life is not that easy. Unlike wine, aging is not enough. Effort is required. Once, discouraged and in my middle years, I said, "I've got to grow up before I grow old." Since then the race has been a close one all the way. Now it seems I have been granted overtime. To stay on track I have jotted down these notes to myself.

Keep an open mind to the ceaseless changes in my inner and outer world. Be informed. Have confidence in my own thoughts and risk stating them. Well thought-through convictions are fun and hasten groundedness.

Recognize my need to be creative, knowing this neglected side may possibly, even at this late date, have buds waiting to bloom.

Become more conscious of my prejudices and biases; know my dark side so I may decide what to do about it before it decides what to do about me.

Walk in the cleansing rain and let the tears fall as I forgive myself for all that I so passionately wish I had done differently.

Remember that love sometimes comes as a blessing; more often as the result of hard work and personal growth; and sadly, at times, not at all.

Be present in the moment and aware of the world around me: the sunlight filtering through trees, the ruby red of the flowers blooming outside the window, the scrubbed cup returned to its rightful place.

Accept that life offers no graduation ceremonies and no arrival at a final destination with bands playing.

Be still and feel the interwoven kinship with all of life.

Keep in mind that even at the last there is no coasting for life continues to hand out difficulties, sorrows and defeats along with times of contentment and moments of joy.

Life is an unfinished business. My task is to work toward becoming as I give thanks for these extended days.

Sermon

Yesterday I celebrated my 56th birthday. I am a Baby Boomer, one of 77 million people born between January 1, 1946 and 1957 or 1960 or 1964 depending on how you count generations. "The reason there were so many of us," in the words of Dave Berry, "was that our parent's generation, having endured the misery of the Depression and the horror of the war years, evidently spent much of 1946 in the sack."

In 2006 the first members of the boomer generation turned 60. President George W. Bush, President Bill Clinton, Cher, Donald Trump, Sylvester Stallone and Dolly Parton all turned 60 last year.

Here at Cedar Lane we have many programs for integrating older members into the life of the church. I lead one aging support group and Heather Janules leads two other such discussion groups. In the past year we have had special meetings with the Unitarian Universalist residents of Asbury Village, Leisure World, Collington, and Riderwood, looking for ways to better meet their needs. Now in my mid 50s, I try to imagine myself at 75 or 80 years of age. If I am lucky enough to survive that long, where will I live? What will my life be like? What can I learn from the older members of our congregation?

In the fall of 1993 I asked for advice from older people in this congregation regarding the fears people in my generation have about growing older. I received 28 letters, which I turned into a series of five sermons on aging. This week I went back and looked at those letters. All the advice still applies today.

One letter was from Jean Alexander. In 1993 she wisely wrote:

Dear Baby Boomer: So you have reached the age at which one begins to notice that there is more to life than sex and the perfect body? Youngsters already regard you as ancient, and, with people living longer now, those many years stretching ahead do not look very golden. Scary, maybe? Do you also fear the winter you know is coming? No, you prepare for it. So why all this talk about fear of aging?

You want to stay out of nursing homes? Stay healthy; start now. Make a habit of not dieting but eating sensibly and couple that with lots of, also sensible, exercise. Cut way back on alcohol and caffeine and avoid all other recreational drugs. Practice monogamy; a one-and-only partner is the only safe partner. Invest in preventive medicine that includes regular checkups and early treatment along with good dental care. And get involved in the ecology movement. You will live longer and better in a healthy environment.

I have followed Jean's advice with regard to cutting back on alcohol, practicing monogamy and getting good dental care. However, I could do better at exercising.

In 1993 Carl Groum wrote from the perspective of a 71-year-old male. He said:

Having survived the depression and two and a half years in the jungles of India and Burma in World War II, I feel lucky to have survived this long. . . . Do your difficult traveling while you are younger. As you age, your physical ability is reduced and rock climbing, exploring caves, and even long trips on aircraft or vehicles can become more difficult. Eat well, exercise, get periodic checkups to find out problems early and take corrective measures. The keys to

older age to me are picking healthy parents, using our minds to their fullest, enjoying nature and the world around us and mingling with persons who have curious minds and are looking forward to the next day and its activities.

I am following Carl's advice when it comes to travel, trying to do more now in my 50s, although I am very impressed by the amount of travel done by members of this congregation who are in their 80s.

Many of the people who wrote to me have since died. Marcella McGee is an example. She told me stories about her husband who was one of the first African American Unitarian Universalist ministers. She used to sit on my left each Sunday. She was hard of hearing. When we did responsive readings Marcella would read slower than the congregation. She could not hear the rest of the congregation, so they would finish and then by herself in a strong beautiful voice Marcella would finish the reading at her pace, as a kind of echo. I miss her voice now. In 1993, at the age of 89, Marcella wrote:

In growing older, I think I have followed the thoughts as expressed by me in my early twenties or late teens. "I hope I shall meet each age and accept it and not try to be older or younger than I am." I've had a healthy approach to life and didn't worry about getting older. I've been thankful that I've kept my health as much as I have. I have arthritis, which is a bother and makes for some changes in my life style. However, even at the age of 89 I'm doing well.

She said "I shall meet each age and accept it and not try to be older or younger than I am." It is good advice for my 56th birthday.

I invite all of us to listen to the positive, affirmative, optimistic words from members of this congregation. In 1993, Katharine Swift¹, who died last year, wrote me:

I have found the 60s and 70s were great decades and even the 80s are good so far! . . . Good health is basic to joyous living. One man is quoted as having said, 'If I'd known I was going to live so long, I would have taken better care of myself.' We can do much to ensure our good health over the years, and we all know the guidelines: proper nutrition, rest and exercise. However, there are many things over which we have little or no control—accidents, inherited diseases, a general slowdown of the body and sometimes of mind. But much disability comes on so gradually that we adjust unconsciously to it. A healthy attitude is important; our friends grow old along with us. We do what we can and, interestingly, our desires usually adjust to our energy level.

“There are many things over which we have little or no control.” All of us in the Boomer generation were introduced to this reality on the same day. In my case, I was a seventh grade student at R.E. Simpson grade school. The school was near my house, so I would walk home at noon each day and have lunch with my mother. One Friday I came home at

¹From the NSA web site: “Katharine Swift, a teacher from Michigan, came to Washington, D.C. to help the war effort in 1942. She started out at Arlington Hall working weather codes and quickly moved into codebreaking when she expressed interest to an analyst working on a machine run of a French code book. Ms. Swift then became a premier linguist and codebreaker at NSA, reconstructing many codes during her career. Well known for her manual "Standards & Techniques of Code Reconstruction," Ms. Swift was awarded the Exceptional Civilian Service Award by NSA in 1972. Ms. Swift retired in 1972 after a distinguished 30 year career. She worked for two years after retirement as a reemployed annuitant at the National Cryptologic School teaching code reconstruction.”

noon and Walter Cronkite was on television. Without his suit coat he was saying that the President had been shot. My mother was ironing, and listening to the news.

I went back to school that afternoon. The writer Dave Berry captured the mood that day as I remember it. He said:

. . . on some incredibly self-centered adolescent level I think we were excited that something dramatic was happening in our lives. . . . But we also felt uneasy; we were getting our first strong dose of craziness, the sense of events whirling out of control, that was going to be with us, stronger and stronger, through the rest of The Sixties. . . . A few guys, proving how cool they were, tried to joke about it, but most of us just stood there, not sure how to act. . . . nobody did anything for the next few days except watch TV, which showed the most amazing and shocking and desperately sad things. . . . when it was finally over, all of us who went through it had a set of memories and images permanently engraved in our brains.

On that day we started asking the question, what happens when we die? How do we Baby Boomers age gracefully with death the final outcome of the process? Of course denial is one possible answer. Consider an optimistic book by the Baby Boomer, Ray Kurzweil and a medical doctor named Terry Grossman. The book is called *Fantastic Voyage, Live Long Enough to Live Forever*. Kurzweil writes

Whereas some of my contemporaries may be satisfied to embrace aging gracefully as a part of the cycle of life, that is not my view. . . . I view disease and death at any age as a calamity, as problems to be overcome.

Kurzweil argues that the rate of health care progress is itself accelerating. Between the year 2000 and the year 2020 we will make as many advancements in health care as we did the 100 years of the 20th century. We will make another 100 years progress by 2034. And we will make another 100 years progress in health care by 2041 as the rate of medical discoveries continues to accelerate. According to this theory people like me who are now in our 50s are the last generation in which the vast majority will die in the more or less old fashioned way. I am skeptical of

this approach, although I did order a bottle of the vitamins that Kurzweil recommends, just in case he is on to something.

Few of us live with the hope that science will overcome death. In a survey 22 percent of Baby Boomers said they want to live to be 100 years old, but only 9 percent of us believe we will actually live to see our 100th birthday.

What wisdom do older church members have to offer us on the subject of death?" Before he died Julius Allen wrote:

Fear of dying has little place in my life now. I remember having a great fear of death in my college years when I, mistakenly, thought I might be infected with tuberculosis. The fact that death is a normal occurrence at my age of 77 is something I take for granted. In a dream-world fantasy, I have for quite a while thought I would like to live to see the next century begin. I'd be 84 then. Having seen the limited capacities of many in their 90's (my mother lived to be 93 and my father 97), I have no interest in living that long. The much more real fear is that medical measures will be taken when I have become incapacitated to prolong life even if the prospects of a productive useful life are no longer there. The implicit belief in much of the medical profession that death is a sign of mental failure is one to which I object. Death is a normal part of the life cycle and at my stage of life should hold no fears.

Willis Thomas, who was in the Navy and at Pearl Harbor in 1941, died in 1993. A few days before his death he wrote to me saying:

My 31 years in the US Navy took care of my fear of death. I survived Pearl Harbor, a tidal wave, earthquakes in Japan, and a mountain climbing mishap. As a passenger I survived several dangerous flights and rough landings of Navy aircraft in the Aleutians, in the Orient, and Vietnam. The diagnosis of my lymphoma around my 80th birthday has not changed my feelings about death. However, it did lend a greater sense of urgency toward getting the family's affairs in order and ready for any eventuality.

At the age of 83 Katharine Swift wrote:

It is natural that death is feared in youth and middle age when there is still the energy and desire to fulfill dreams. However, as we get older, have fulfilled most of those dreams, and see our friends and loved ones leave us one by one, death seems less fearsome. Often where there has been suffering, it is viewed as a friend. As with every other stage of life, there is a gradual acceptance of reality.

When it comes to death, older people in this congregation say they want their pain eased by drugs and they want no heroic measures taken to prolong their lives. Meanwhile, for as long as possible they said that they want to enjoy their lives.

Yesterday I celebrated my 56th birthday. I continue to learn from the members of this congregation. The older people in this church have the wisdom learned from life experience. Listen again to their words, based on years of living:

- Eat sensibly.
- engage in lots of sensible exercise.
- Cut way back on alcohol and caffeine and avoid all other recreational drugs.
- Practice monogamy; a one-and-only partner is the only safe partner.
- Invest in preventive medicine that includes regular checkups and early treatment along with good dental care.
- Do your difficult traveling while you are younger.
- And get involved in the environmental movement. You will live longer and better in a healthy environment.
- Accept each age and do not try to be older or younger than you are.

And Finally: "It is natural that death is feared in youth and middle age when there is still the energy and desire to fulfill dreams. However, as we get older, have fulfilled most of those dreams, and see our friends and loved ones leave us one by one, death seems less fearsome."