



Jeannie in her "old lady" glasses.

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Aging Is Life's Way of Helping

by Jeannie Zandi

THE ALMOND TREES IN BLOSSOM

Endlessly I gaze at you in wonder, blessed ones, at your composure,
at how in eternal delight you bear your vanishing beauty.

Ah, if only we knew how to blossom: our heart would pass beyond every
small danger, and would find peace in the greatest danger of all.

— *Rainer Maria Rilke*

At a public gathering in my town's plaza, two women pass me. The elder, who seems about 85 to 90, walks slowly, unsteadily, on sensible shoes. One of her slender, thin-skinned legs, bruised and dotted with age spots, is partially covered in knee-high panty hose, while the other is bare, the stocking fallen and gathered around her ankle. Her sparse white hair, somewhat disheveled, is loosely gathered at the back of her neck. Her frail arm stretches out, with her bony hand firmly grasping the arm of the other woman, who I assume is her daughter. The younger woman takes in the scene around her, while making herself wholly available to the older woman, putting aside any agenda she might have for herself. The mother relies utterly on her daughter's strength, kindness and slowed pace. A tender closeness between them is palpable in the willingness of the daughter and the dependency of the mother as she clings to her daughter's arm in much the same way the daughter must have clung to hers when she was too young to

walk on her own.

Only a week before, my 7-year-old daughter, Sophia, brought up the topic of aging while we were walking. "Mama," she observed, "old people are kind of like babies." I asked her why. "Because they need help like babies. They cannot do things on their own. Sometimes they need help walking, some need helping eating, and some have to lie in bed and be changed like babies. It 's so sweet." I asked her what she thought that would be like, and she replied, "I think it would be nice — like having servants."

Most people experience being dependent as a humiliation rather than a treat, like my daughter does. Sophia 's innocent and positive view stands in marked contrast to the response of many people I know to the prospect of getting older and becoming dependent: "Shoot me first!" they exclaim. It 's as if the idea of becoming dependent on other human beings is so abhorrent that one would rather die a violent death than consider it.

How we value our independence, our strength and capability! How we prize our ability to do things for ourselves on our own, thank you very much. How we fear the fact that aging requires us to let down our walls, our protections, our pride, our privacy, and ask for and accept assistance. It lays wide open and bare the simple fact that we are not perfect islands unto ourselves, but fallible, sweet, interdependent beings in need. Aging asks us to open, to trust, to let go. It asks us to let others into our most private worlds and see us in our naked humanity.

Aging is life's way of saying, "Last chance to realize what this is all about!" If one hasn't been lucky enough to be humbled, softened and opened to one's place in the interconnectedness of all things by parenthood, midlife crisis, illness, a failed relationship or two, or some other of life 's challenges, aging certainly offers the opportunity in spades. Aging asks us to radically redefine who we take ourselves to be, after a lifetime perhaps of defining ourselves by what we can do. It invites us either to start defining ourselves by what we cannot do or to drop the defining altogether and allow ourselves to explore what it means to exist outside of definition, within the whole rather than separate from it.

Why should I write about aging? While I have not yet hit the deeper parts of aging that others around me have, despite my 44 years of experience in getting older, I have tasted enough to be intrigued by the rub of loss of youth that is just beginning for me. I felt like I was just about to find my groove until I gave birth to my daughter at the age of 36. Over the next few years it slowly dawned on me — as the soft saggy skin from my pregnant belly hung during yoga class, as I dropped into bed at the end of a working-mother day, as I glimpsed the chicken skin and wrinkles in the sunlit rearview mirror, as my child grew up and I grew tired — that gravity was calling me. Age spots like my grandmother's started to appear on my face. The skin on my shoulders is turning from soft to dry and rough from the years of sun exposure. Now, I hold small print away from my eyes and have just purchased my first pair of "old lady" glasses, marking my entry into the realm of the aged. I started to hear inside my head something I 'd

never anticipated: "You are too old to do that . . . to wear that . . . to say that . . ." When I ride my bike to work, I feel more like the Toto-hating Miss Gulch than I do a soaring bird or fit athlete.

I can feel the field of limitless possibility that is youth slipping away. The baseball players and movie stars on TV are starting to look like babies; the newscasters were born after my baby brother. The world is being taken over by the next generation, and I am not part of it. I am slipping out of it. I will not be world famous, I will probably not be much more of anything than what I am now. I am as beautiful as I will ever be, as strong as I will ever be, as capable as I will ever be. And I am fading into the past, while my daughter rises to greet the world. The world is going on without me — it does not need me to function, and I will likely disappear without having made much of a mark on it at all.

Oh, the small person in me does not like this. She was unconsciously betting on some future glory that would prove her excellence and importance. She doesn't want to be one of the many unknown faces, one of the multitudes that live and die with little trace. She wants to be bigger than life, someone to take note of, making history. She wants superlatives: biggest, best, strongest, most beautiful. Life is a continual assault and insult to this one because unless we are lucky or delusional, we do not get to be the best at much of anything, or at least not for long. And aging is the final and most definitive insult. If we held out until now — either by large amounts of external success, achievement and prowess, or by ignoring the obvious fact that we as persons are insignificant grains of sand among the many — age and death will certainly rectify that. At some point there is no ignoring this, and the final settling with reality begins.

Do I need cheering up? An exercise program? A list of the pros of aging? Examples of women playing basketball, running marathons, looking smashing in their 70s? A lecture on rejoicing in my cronehood? Not at all. I want to face the gritty details of being in an aging body and touch that reality with tenderness. I have not found it useful to wave the flag of the bright side when darkness looms; darkness doesn't go away by patting it on the head and telling it to go to its room, and the brightness of cheer is not the deep light for which I live. Aging is loss. Anything that I hold dearly that passes will invite my loosened grip. Aging is about getting weaker, saggier and wrinklier, losing faculties, and eventually dying and one's body rotting. I want to embrace this darkness; I want to hear the voice of loss, weakness and dying. I want to hear what it has to say and be reborn as a light that is not birthed of reassurance, but of synchronizing myself with what is real and surrendering to it. I want to be it all and know it all and kiss it all.

Aging is not a stranger, it is simply a more dramatic version of the same old friend whose face returns to us all throughout life in little and big ways — loss, death and resurrection. Rainer Maria Rilke advised: "Be ahead of all parting." The more one has kept pace with the invitations that life offers along the way to grieve, open, be humbled and let go, the less settling of accounts must occur in order to meet the greatest invitation of all: to lose one's strength, prowess, capability and, finally, life. And to open and soften one's heart in the face of it. Old age lays bare

our vulnerability, our longing, our fear of each other, of ourselves. We cannot run, we cannot delude ourselves; we have to sit still and wrestle with and come to terms with the great mystery that this life is.

One invitation of being infirm is to be tender with ourselves. Not impatient, rejecting and judgmental, but tender. Aging invites us to learn self-acceptance and, with that, acceptance of all the parts of life as holy and worthy of our love. We are not worthy of love only for what we do and contribute, but worthy of love and tenderness because we are. Another invitation is to be humbled: we return to beginners, to not knowing. There is nothing we can use as a crutch to prop ourselves up and say, "See? I am worthy because I ____." And we find ourselves worthy, as Sophia says, just because.

We lose it all. If life let us keep it, we would not soften. We soften into the arms of life, into the arms of our caretakers. We let them love us. We let them have us. We let ourselves return to what we belong to, though we walled ourselves off from ever knowing that all along it owned us, this life, this clock ticking, this symphony of birth, death, living, dying, crying and loving.

We let it go, we open our hands, we let the bird fly away, we find the heart that lives through us, we find that we do belong, that we always did, that we are part of it, that it is OK. We are not special. We are not gods. We did not win a gold medal, write a famous novel; we will not go down in history. And it's enough to have lived, to have done the best we could do, to have loved the best we could love, to be part of it all. Aging invites us to open to the truth that we are one, we belong to each other, we are here to be loved and to love.

Sophia and I play a game, where we take turns closing our eyes and leading each other around the neighborhood, up hills, through vacant lots, up onto the curb, down off the curb. She observed once during the game, "Mama, I trust you more than you trust me." May I surrender and grow in this trust as I grow in years.

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