

AGES AND STAGES!
I'm Too Damn Old For That!
Aging!

How many of you remember the movie, *On Golden Pond* for which Katherine Hepburn and Henry Fonda both won Academy Awards? Doesn't it seem like it just came out a few years ago? It was released in February 1982.

How many of you went to see *The Force Awakens* in hopes that it would be more like the originals that you saw when they first came out, you know, the ones now known as episodes 4, 5, & 6?

How many of you, if you go to High School reunions, would rather not remember which reunion has recently happened or is coming up next?

Aging happens to the best of us, whether we want it to happen or not! Year after year, we add year after year to our age, our experience, our span of life. If only we had known then what we know now! Getting older is not for the faint of heart, for even though most of us still think of ourselves as young, (mirror images not registering sufficiently to the contrary) we tend to have more health problems each year. The older we get, the longer it takes to recover from many injuries to joints and bones, and even bruises may bother us for a longer period of time. No, aging takes courage, stamina, and well, getting older!

Some people age marvelously, becoming either wonderful curmudgeons and witches, or wizards and crones! We can be annoyances or fonts of wisdom and comfort to younger persons! So many choices for how to enjoy our latter years! But not quite as many as when we were younger, or healthier, or stronger, or less feeble! So sad that youth is so often wasted on the young, who just don't appreciate it!

It's hard to be carefree when we have to keep track of so many Doctor and Dentist appointments! I can already see that retirement won't be quite the time I imagined, and I'm only 59! First I will have to manage to live long enough to retire! It will be another 8 years before I can even think about doing it, and at least 11 before I can afford to do it! I just didn't imagine it quite this way!

When I was young, I didn't even smoke pot. Today, I take far more dangerous drugs, by prescription! What wonderful poisons there are to keep us alive in our elder years! And I have my very own defibrillator, right here with my pacemaker—fortunately it hasn't gone off, yet! I understand that can be a real trip! And then there's the trip to the ER to check it out afterwards! Ah yes, it's a wonderful life, but not quite what I imagined!

Of course, before I hit 29 I wasn't really expecting the world to still be in one piece by the time I hit 30! Naturally, I had to rework some things after that turning point, and each turning point since! But here I am in the beginning of the year in which I will hopefully turn 60—that would be a double dose of over the hill for any of you under 30! I like to think I have gained a certain amount of wisdom along the way, and I try to share with you and my children and grandchildren some of those learnings. I have certainly lived long enough to have heard all the political promises way too often, so in the beginning of this election year, when the campaigns have all gone on far too long already, I thought I might comment some on the stages of life.

Many philosophers, educators, psychologists and moralists have written about the stages of moral, psychological, and philosophical development. The stages have been described somewhat differently by various authors, but they generally proceed from an infantile narcissism to a level of community and other-centered altruism. The highest level is reserved for a few exemplars such as Jesus, Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi, and the Buddha. The lowest levels cover those least able to explore abstractions or to think of helping another. Now, not all politicians are at levels zero or one, but if you consider the prevalence of narcissism, self-certainty, self-aggrandizement, and downright lies, you might begin to wonder. I certainly have often wondered, when will they ever learn? Now the one candidate who sounds like he may be at a higher level of development probably won't win, but at least someone is voicing some of the unpleasant truths that currently plague our society. Without saying more about what level of development some of the other candidates may be at, I will pose the question, what level of development do they think we, the American voting public is at? I would like to think, and I certainly hope that American voters will show a greater level of maturity than many of the current crop of candidates are evidencing! But of course, politics is only one facet of life!

In regard to personal relationships, I've had a few, as I imagine you all have had. In my home life, I probably have evidenced some early onset curmudgeonry, which has not always helped relationships to thrive! I can at least be in the same room with both of my ex-wives, though preferably not at the same time! I do get along pretty well with all three of my kids and their spouses or significant others, dogs, cats, and grandchildren.

And then there is the matter of lifestyle, you know eating, drinking, and exercising! I don't know about you, but I don't get enough exercise and I eat and drink more of the stuff on the bad list than on the heart-healthy, long-life, be healthy list. Why can't spinach, broccoli, and kale taste more like fried chicken, French fries, or chocolate? My hairline hasn't moved that far even if the hair is a different color now, but I do have some of that belly creep expansion thing going on. I do think pretty regularly about going out biking or canoeing, it's just so hard to get up off of the couch to do it! I do try to keep up on my fridge opening stretches and my arm bends with appropriate liquids!

They, and I'm not sure whether that would be the plural or singular they, but they say you can't teach an old dog new tricks. If anything that probably applies to us two-leggeds even more than the four-leggeds, because if you have the right treats I have seen dogs do a lot of things later that they didn't do earlier. Teaching an old fool, like me, to eat healthily by threat is just hard to pull off, no matter how many people may vouch for the idea. Now, if the broccoli were breaded and fried or dipped in cheese or chocolate it might get some traction! I'm not saying I won't try, and I know lots of you struggle to eat and drink healthily and to get enough exercise, but damn I wish it were more fun! I grew up eating at the Golden Arch Dining Club, and I still like it!

As we get older, I have discovered, that I and probably most of us just don't have the energy that we did when we were younger. That means that we need to be more selective about where we expend time and energy. That can open doors for creativity and new experiences, though it can also dissuade us from trying some new things. If we have things that we really like doing, it may be harder to start doing new things. Of course, if the changes in our bodies prevent us from doing many of the things that we have enjoyed in our earlier years, we may be more open to trying things that require less energy or stamina.

As I mentioned, this growing old thing isn't for the faint of heart! Now what I had envisioned was a time of travel and exploration, going off to see the world. And I still hope to do some of that, but I also know that being away from home takes way more effort when we have to make sure we have all our pills, comfortable shoes and sandals, layers of clothes for different temperatures, and all in a small enough suitcase to manage travel! That's is a big part of why I take most of my trips driving, with my traveling suitcase! Fortunately, there are lots of beautiful things to see in America without even leaving the lower 48. I really do want to take a cruise to Alaska though and I wouldn't mind going back to Hawaii. Train travel is of course another possibility, though until I retire I don't have the time to do too much of that, either.

Another way to measure the stages of life is in certain things that we believe. When we are very young, we believe in Santa Claus, then we come to understand that our parents usually bring most of our gifts, then as our beards whiten, many of the males begin to also look like Santa Claus. Similarly, in our understanding of God or Gods, we may be open to almost anything as children, but become disillusioned when we find no evidence of God answering prayers or making things better for those who suffer. Some of us may come to believe that there is no God, but that caring for others rests primarily in the hands of people of good will. Whether there are heavens beyond this plane or whether our souls come back into future lives are things we just can't know for certain, but the ideas may offer levels of hope for those who believe.

The older we get, the more that most of us understand the importance of respect and responsibility. The more respect we show for others, the more respect others tend to show us. Not as easy a concept as it might seem, though, because others may hold beliefs so different from our own. It is often a challenge to respect some people when their values and practices seem unhealthy or to work against the best interests of civilized society, but showing as much respect as we can may help to encourage better beliefs and practices. And of course, we are responsible for our own actions. When we speak of others without respect or in ways that lack love, we are likely to cause hurt to others in ways of which we are not sufficiently aware. As we mature, we tend to realize how much we all are connected which hopefully leaves us less judgmental and more accepting.

Interactions within our own families and religious community may be challenging enough at times, but extending our love to the larger community may be even more of a challenge. Still, that is what our principles call us to do. The words that remind me best of these responsibilities are respect, responsibility, acceptance, compassion or love, and justice. These represent the core ideas of Unitarian Universalism as well as other religious and philosophical traditions. None of these words are exactly new, but as we mature, they take on new significance for our beliefs and actions. They remind me, us, of what it is we are about if we seek to exemplify the best of humanity, humanism, personhood. The matter of what if any God we believe in is really secondary to the actions that exhibit our humanity to our fellow beings, and that my friends is the message for today!

No matter how curmudgeonly we may want to be, we are called to interact with others in ways that show respect, evidence mature levels of responsibility for our actions, and result in acceptance, love, and justice toward others. Even if our advanced ages limits some things we might want to do, we can still do a better job of living out our Unitarian Universalist Principles and helping to shape a better, healthier, more wonderful world!

Go out there and do good! Peace and Amen!