

Some Thoughts on Getting Older

I was surprised to discover that in a couple of years – well actually a little more than a year – from now, I will be seventy. Being sixty was something of a milestone. It meant that I could collect early Canada Pension, not feel too guilty about asking for a seniors' discount and such. Sixty-five brought with it the Old Age Pension, Drug Plan for Seniors and oddly enough, a discount on my home insurance; an interesting perk from the insurance company that defies logic – but I will get to that. But seventy, although it is just another decade, scares the dickens out of me. Brought up in a Bible reading household, three score years and ten was the end of the world and the shadow of that belief is still there. And so it came to me the other day, that just perhaps, I am getting old.

My first clue could have been the onset of high blood pressure, but that afflicts even the young. It could have been the double bi-pass surgery that I had last spring and the replacement of arteries in my legs that could have suggested to me that it was possible my body was wearing out. But getting old – never.

After much persuasion, and feeling it was my civic duty, I began to attend the monthly English Seniors' Day Programme – they have thankfully dropped the word 'Care' from the name of the programme or I would have felt I should be driven to it in a wheelchair van. I say much persuasion, as I really didn't feel that I was old enough to be going to such a gathering but if new recruits weren't found, the programme would be discontinued so my attendance would serve a purpose. The programme is government sponsored in part to provide service in English to the few remaining Anglos in the area. There are two Occupational Therapist, a Nurse and a volunteer that come every month from Quebec City to encourage us in a healthy regimen, feed us a nourishing lunch, do a health check, do exercises with us for an hour and provide us with some mental stimulation.

Now all of this sounds not too bad and to be honest it isn't, except that all the people there are old. One of the exercises we were taught at the last session was how to get up from our chair. At an earlier session, the nurse wanted to know where I kept my medications. That question took me so much by surprise that I wasn't sure how to answer. Is this some sort of a trick question to find out if I have all my marbles or is she wondering if I keep them in a shoe-box under the bed. When I did finally answer she nearly

patted me on the head for being so organized.

And I think that is what bothers me – the figurative, verbal pats on the head.

As a twist on that question, 'have you hugged your child today?' this group subscribes to the thought 'have you hugged your granny today?' We are all given a hug by everyone to show how the young people who run the programme hold us in affection. Well I was raised in a most undemonstrative family and find these casual expressions of affection most trying. A pleasant greeting, a bit of conversation about what is going on in the world rather than whether my bowels move regularly would be much more appreciated. Just to let me know that I am considered still involved in the world and life around me and not fixated on my health or the inconveniences of getting older.

I mentioned an insurance discount because of age. I was lead to believe that elderly people were a greater fire hazard because of their failing memory, eyesight, coordination and so on. I shudder whenever I don't turn a burner off on the stove the instant I remove the pot that was on it. I am just terrified that someone will catch this momentary lapse and assume that I am loosing it. I am becoming positively dotty about slippers wedged under the electric heater by my back door for fear they ignite and burn the house down. I am obsessed with the batteries in the various smoke detectors around the house and probably shorten their life span by testing to see if they are still effective. My fear is not so much that I will burn down the house but that someone will view one of these brief failures and assume that I am getting to that stage where consideration must be given to "What will become of mother?" and "We must start making plans." So it reassures me that the insurance company has determined that I am not as great a risk as myth has lead me to believe.

It is something of a shock to wake up one morning and realize that all those on whom you depended and who depended on you are gone. In my case, my husband had died, my children were well launched into lives of their own, I was retired and there was nothing to fill the days that had any great meaning other than survival, and survival in emptiness didn't seem to have all that much of an appeal. For a time I floundered around in this gumbo of grief and purposelessness. In our society, grief is not tolerated. It is not discussed and one is generally left with the message that life goes on and one must get on with it. That others have gone through loss and survived and so will you, so stop snivelling and don't bore us with your moaning and dripping. And perhaps it was the harshness of this realization that got my back up and made me actively look for purpose for the rest of my life.

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