

## HOMESTRETCH: The Art of Finishing Life Well

One of life's premier challenges, it seems to me, is to face up to who we really are: at 20, at 40, at 60, at 80 and above—indeed, everyday to look in the mirror, and renew vows...with yourself: Who am I? Where am I going? And who's traveling with me?

Whenever you perform this daily ritual—gazing leisurely at yourself in the mirror—you can readily identify with Ashleigh Brilliant, the comic, who mused: “I may not be totally perfect, but parts of me are excellent!”

A grandmother was receiving congratulations on her birthday. And her grandchild said to her, “Grandma, you're beautiful!” Without a moment's hesitation she replied: “Well, I ought to be. I'm 82. So my beauty isn't decorative anymore, it's structural.” That's the kind of attitude I'm encouraging today...so, whatever your age, may your beauty become structural rather than merely decorative!

Unfortunately, few folks in our American culture are so willing to embrace our oldness.

And yet we see an old wall, an old teacup, an old village, an old tree, and we appreciate such things precisely for their oldness, the increased beauty of their years and the memories they contain. *Things* seem to gain in value when they age, whether or not they're even useful or beautiful, but we often deny, in our Western society, this same appreciation to *human beings*.

That's why, every October 13th, on my natal day, I try to do at least two things.

First, I lavishly salute my family and friends. For there's no way I could manage from year to year without abundant goading and unearned caresses. And my birthday's

the fitting day to declare my unconditional thankfulness to other folks; for my birthday clearly marks my having endured another year, bruised yet intact.

Second, I confess to spending some quiet moments alone, just celebrating myself. For if I can't sing my own praises—wishing myself a resourceful today as well as rewarding tomorrows—I'm in more trouble than I thought.

So my sermon today, in late-November, as we migrate toward winter, would offer notes on ways to gray gracefully, whatever your age might be. And, of course, gray really fits in my case, because, for better or worse, I've chosen to go on home without painting my hair or a facial makeover. There's nothing noble about that announcement; it's merely a personal choice.

So, here are some seven lessons for graying gracefully or the art of finishing life well. My goal is simply to resemble my own remarks in the homestretch ahead!

### **I. Live in the Present**

Put simply, I charge us to live while being alive. Remember that your life won't be measured by the number of breaths you take so much as the moments you seize that take your breath away. Find such moments, create such moments, multiply such moments.

Instead of being trapped in sentimental bygones, people who gray gracefully focus upon the irrepeatable present. Because if we're mentally trapped or romantically fixated on the past, we'll never surrender fully to living in the now. We must emotionally outgrow our pasts: its grudges as well as its glories. You're not there anymore, so don't take up residence there!

Live your impulses to be more loving now. Unitarian Universalist troubadour, Ric Masten, while living with incurable prostate cancer, wrote: “I ask God: ‘How much time do I have before I die?’ And the answer came: ‘Enough to make a difference, Ric, enough to make a difference!’”

## **II. Say Yes to Your True Self**

I resonate with the words of poet May Sarton, who, in her later years, penned: “Now I’ve become myself. It’s taken time, many years and places. I’ve been dissolved and shaken, worn other people’s faces, but now I want to become myself.” We’re so adept, aren’t we, at protecting ourselves by wearing masks, controlling other people’s access to the real me? So, I say to all the lone rangers (male or female) in our congregation today: “Dare to un-mask yourselves.” From here on out, try to wear only your own face!

I believe in growing old as naturally as possible and along with Orwell, claim “that everyone has the face they deserve.” My face, brows, chin(s), gaze and nose, hair color, wrinkles, skin marred by periodic cancer—my face is mine.

So, my friends, may it be a welcoming face during the homestretch. Not always smiling, fuming when necessary, yet seldom hiding when in view. May it be a true face, one that reveals my interior. May it be a face that can be met head-on, and, always, whatever the state of either my soul or the world...may my face be able to radiate ample compassion and joy.

I urge you, wherever you reside on the continuum of time, to come out from hiding, to live outloud and in the open, to proudly wear your face—to embrace the being you’re going to the grave with! To be nobody but your self in a world that’s daily trying

to have you duplicate somebody else—that’s the job of mature adulthood, that’s what it takes to gray gracefully!

When a young Rabbi succeeded his father, everyone began to tell him how completely unlike his dad he was. “On the contrary,” replied the young man. “I’m exactly like my old man. He imitated no one. And I imitate no one.”

Remember becoming older is a gift, not a curse, for it’s that wonderful season when we can have longer and more passionate conversations with the self we spoke to only briefly in our younger years. When I turned 60, seven years back, I saluted the Chinese tradition where 60 is explicitly recognized as a second birth. You see, in China, at age 60, a person begins again at 1. So, my friends, if I live to be 80, like so many in our amphitheater today, I’ll be celebrating a second 20th birthday. Not a bad way to look at the aging process, don’t you think?

### **III. Update Your Intimacies**

Let me get right to it. Are your bonds of affection—which, after all, are what matters most—among friends and family as current, clean, and cemented as possible? Do you feel blessed by your intimates and are you actively blessing them? To the fullest extent mutually possible?

Now, at this stage in your adult journey, is the assignment to spend enriching time with those whom you cherish. Write the notes, repair the breaks, make the phone calls, and take the languorous walks necessary to update your intimacies. Time’s running out, or certainly running on, for all of us; hence, our bonds must be chosen and cultivated carefully.

My friends, be current with your companions of the heart.

#### **IV. Grow Bolder (not merely older)**

The Canadian novelist Robertson Davies liked to say: “You’re not getting older, you’re getting nosier. When we’re young, we yield to noisiness; when we’re older, we can focus on nosiness!”

Life may be more uncertain and health less stable as we mature, but expectations and pressures are lifted in our aging years, so we can become curious, nay brazen, adventurous. We’ve earned the right to be freer and fiercer, to take chances, even some wild ones.

Growth, my friends, is the only evidence of life. An American poet was asked how he kept young in spirit, and he pointed to the cherry tree in blossom, asking in turn, “Where are the blossoms?” The answer was, “On the new wood.” You see, it’s the young branches that have the blossoms and bear the fruit. The tree keeps on going only by growing new life.

That’s clearly what I’m trying to do at this stage in my life: to find new branches and to grow fresh blossoms. It’s magnificent to grow old, if one keeps young. Young for freedom, young for adventure, young for service, young for play, young for love.

When we retire (or graduate from work as one teenager mused) it’s not the time to lie fallow but the season to explore fresh realities—perhaps gardening, tutoring, bird-watching, or assisting grandchildren in their maturation. As for me, when I finally close up ministerial shop, I’m looking forward to singing in nursing homes, performing magic shows for youngsters, brothering marginalized kids, as well as continuing to play with my grandkids as long as they’ll have me.

My aim's to be a bringer of hope, in places of little hope, as long as I'm blessed to walk this earth.

### **V. Make Life Worth Living**

I've lived long enough, and most of you in Founder's Hall have too, to know that worthwhileness isn't found in a book or movie, under a rock or in a foreign land. You don't find life worth living; you make it so.

In the suffragist and abolitionist era, women such as Sojourner Truth and Clara Barton remained enterprising well into their senior years. In large measure, these feminist spirits lived energetic, lengthy lives. Why? Because they were occupied with sizable challenges. They exuded the gift of intelligent rage, knowing what things to fight and what things to disregard, what stuff to oversee and what stuff to overlook. These women kept harvesting until the end.

You see, we humans aren't the sum of our toys or trophies; rather we're the sum of our gifts, our choices, our commitments. Graying gracefully, then, banks utterly on our being generous and generative all the way home—ever pursuing the gratification of seeing wrongs battled, prejudices countered, sadnesses lightened, joys shared, institutions upheld, relationships fed.

One of my favorite scriptures on maintaining an evergreen awareness is Psalm 92: 14: “In old age they still produce fruit; they are always green and full of sap.” Our final laps should in fact be dynamic ones, “always green and full of sap,” at least usually green and full of sap.

## **VI. Simplify, Simplify, Simplify**

I'm tired of the pervasive commercial hype in our culture that urges young and old alike, almost requires us, "to have it all." Hogwash.

I don't want to have or be it all. There exist lots of things I could care less about, especially as I age. There are plenty of experiences that merely distract or detour my better self. There are lots of qualities that are either inane or rotten. I don't want to have it all. In fact, at this stage in my life I want to be more discriminating. I want to make wise choices about what's important and what's not. I want to start pruning, shedding, simplifying.

Sam Levenson said that when he was a boy, he used to have to do what his father wanted, and then, as a parent, he had to do what his children wanted. When did he get to do what *he* wanted? Well, that's a fair question, and the answer's really rather simple: the maturing years comprise, at long last, the best season to do what Sam Levenson truly wants to do and be! You and I as well.

Finally, as aging adults, I think that you and I have earned some rights—such as the right to quit receiving report cards, the right to either dance or recline whenever we want, and the right to raise some holy hell when called for.

And as for me and my body, I've felt better before and I've looked fresher. But, you know what, I'm definitely a fuller—make that a better—version of personhood than at 20 or 40, even 50. So, I refuse to be traded in for any two 33 year-olds.

## VII. Letting Go and Letting Be

Psalm 90 announces that humans are akin to grass, that the years of our lives may be three score and ten, or, with luck, four score. Yet everyone dies, sooner or later, so the Psalmist goes on to admonish: “Teach us to number our days that we might apply our hearts unto wisdom.” This passage bids us to engage every hour of existence—its sorrows and joys and blends thereof—with faithfulness and courage...yes, “to number our days...applying our hearts unto wisdom.”

Whatever our view following death might be—resurrection of the body or immortality of the soul, reincarnation or an eternal abyss—there comes a time when we no longer walk this singular earth in our present bodily form. Our mortality cannot be dodged. At some juncture, we must admit that death is natural, sometimes even safe, and that we cannot fail at it.

When we make peace with death’s inevitability, we’re frequently filled with a feeling of serenity; we’re able to surrender to the cosmic mystery, to let go and let be.

Yet surrendering is such an awkward art to master, excruciatingly so for high-control, tight-fisted, hyper-questing Westerners. Surrendering furnishes a delicate mixture of being passive yet staying active. It demands emptying. It entails giving ourselves over to another person or principle, place or process without giving ourselves away.

Surrendering means letting ourselves be who we truly are, rather than clinging to what we used to be or might have become. It means permitting ourselves to just be our own age, as robustly as possible.

Surrendering dwells at the core of the Hindu greeting, *namaste*, roughly translated: “I bow to the eternal spirit of existence that dwells within myself as well.” I’ve found that as long as we possess consciousness, no human being is too weak or wretched to utter some version of *namaste*, as a fervent blessing to the Creation.

During the homestretch we finally get the message that every love relationship ends in a loss: through divorce, departure, or death. We will die, and so will our comrades and loved ones.

Yet we can surely experience those we’ve cherished living on in our souls after their earthly sojourns. We can stay connected with the land of the dead, the territory of the ancestors, through the medium of love.

And there’s more comforting news. Just as we were graciously ushered into being, as a gift beyond our earning, so also there will be Love surrounding us after we die. That conviction dwells at the heart of our Unitarian Universalist gospel.

There’s no need to discuss or debate the particular form such Love might take. No one knows. It’s only important that we know with unshakable fervor and hope that the very Love that created us will caress and comfort us beyond our death into seasons beyond counting. “Rest assured”, as our Universalist forebears put it.

And so, my dear ones, may yours be a happy, hearty, and holy December, laden with the giving and receiving of thanks, thanks, and more thanks...starting with a rousing cheer of gratitude for your ever-aging, singular, precious self.

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