

20 April, 2008 * “A Bridge Across Generations”
Rev. Erika Hewitt * Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Congregation

When I find myself striking up a conversation with a stranger – on an airplane, say, or at a party or even getting my hair cut – it’s not always in my best interest to give a 100% honest answer to the question, “What do you do?” In those moments when “outing” myself as a minister seems hazardous, I reach for a different truth: “I’m a writer.”

Since I do consider myself a writer, it’s through that lens that I do much of my reading. That’s why I wasn’t just instantly impressed, but also *jealous*, when I came upon David Shields’ book; a book that, for my money, wins the prize for “best book title of the year.” It’s called *The Thing About Life Is That One Day You’ll Be Dead*.

Fear not: I’m not going to talk about death today, as I did last Sunday. I’m going to talk about the life-long journey that precedes it: what it’s like to move through different ages; the hidden gifts – and invisible curse – of those ages; the assumptions we make about different age groups.

* I have to remind myself, once in a while, that religious communities are one of the last remaining institutions to invite people in across generations. Congregations are just about the only place – aside from extended families – where the very young, the very old, and everyone in between are fully accepted on the same terms. Our spiritual home of Live Oak is enriched, in part, by the relationships that form across the generations; we value this so deeply that we have expressed that value in our mission statement:

Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Congregation is a liberal religious community welcoming all. Our generations join together to nurture spiritual growth and personal transformation, that we may be inspired to transform the world with love, hope, compassion and justice.

Because of how intentionally we weave our lives across the generations, it’s important to examine the unconscious beliefs that we hold about different ages. We can’t see one another as we truly are, and appreciate one another fully, unless we take the time to know and embrace the full breadth of our community.

During our Message for All Ages, I asked what you believe to be the “perfect” age. The question comes from the aforementioned wonderfully-titled tome by David Shields: “If you could live forever in good health at a particular age, what age would you be?”¹ He goes on to reveal that “as people get older, their ideal age gets higher.” If you ask very young adults (18- to 24-year-olds) that question, they report a “perfect” age of 27, but “for 25- to 29-year-olds, it’s 31; for 30- to 39-year-olds, it’s 37; for 40- to 49-year-olds, it’s 40; for 50- to 64-year-olds, it’s 44; and for people over 64, it’s 59.”

On one hand, this is a delightful piece of news, demonstrating that life seems to get better as we age, and reveals unanticipated gifts to us. On the other hand, it reveals that we sell short our future satisfaction, and find it difficult to imagine being as happy at 50 as we are at 30.

* How *do* we feel about our age? How do we feel about the ages we've outgrown? How do we view the ages that we have yet to reach? What are the joys and the peeves of different age cohorts? These questions were at the heart of a deep conversation at a recent Pacific Southwest District gathering, one that's stayed with me for the past several months. Your contributions have also stirred my reflections, and so here I reflect to you the thoughts and feelings of different age groups.

For reasons of time and simplicity, I've distilled our congregation – which spans ten decades – to three broad categories of age. (If you'd like to explore the finer categories, I encourage you to do, whether that happens informally, at coffee hour or lunch, or formally, in your covenant groups.) Those three cohorts are *young* adulthood, *middle* adulthood, and *mature* adulthood.

* **Young Adults (20-40)** *

Our broad category of “young adulthood” encompasses people from twenty to forty years old. (Our UU Association defines “young adulthood” as 18 to 35 years old. Perhaps it's because I outgrew that UU category last year that I'm using my ministerial license to extend young adulthood by a few years!) To me, this age group represents this mid-morning to noontime, when the sun is gathering strength and scope as it arcs across the sky.

You can imagine, or remember, the **joys** of young adulthood: there's a freedom in approaching the world, with its myriad possibilities, and many young adults enjoy exploring that freedom and independence. The consequences of making poor choices can be less severe that they are at a later age. While not all young adults are in good physical health, they often exercise the luxury of living into their immediate future, and putting off thoughts of mortality.

Perhaps you remember, though, that young adults **struggle** with freedom. There are so many options available to us, and in today's world it can feel daunting to flex our independence and make satisfying choices. Twenty-somethings, in particular, can feel unsettled and unstable, in realms from economic to professional. (It's an incorrect assumption that young adults have never been knocked against life's hardest edges.) Other peeves that I've heard several young adults list include society's sometimes narrow expectations for how we create families, and the fact that people are likely to take greater freedom in commenting on a young adult's appearance.

* Middle Adults (40-60) *

The next category is one I call “middle adulthood,” which includes all of you from about forty to sixty years old. I think of this age group as the early afternoon hours of the day, when the sun is strongest and brightest.

From all the “middle adults” I’ve listened to, one of the greatest **joys** of being in this age group is having a stronger sense of self. As one of you put it, “learning who the real me is and what she wants, learning to say no to the things I don’t want, has taken a few decades.” At this age, many people have gained clarity about what’s important in life (again, a Live Oak member told me: “Your friends, not money, not things, not pretty looks, not a great body, but friends.”)

There are other joys of middle adulthood: many people find a vocational “groove,” or the confidence to take their skills from one professional arena to a completely new one. As adults move through middle adulthood, they take great joy in watching their children grow into adults, “and being young enough to look forward to the empty nest stage of life with excitement and a sense of adventure.”

The **struggles** of this age group are well-known to many of you, too: it can be trying to find the delicate balancing between the demands of work and the needs of family; even more exhausting is the fact that caring for “family” might include aging parents. Some of you report that it’s harder to keep up with technology. Many of you are confronted with a range of physical preoccupations, from forgetfulness to menopause, to discovering that Bob Hope was right when he said, “Middle age is when your age starts to show around your middle.” As one colleague in her late 50s put it, “I suddenly feel invisible to the rest of the world.”

* Mature Adults (60-100) *

That invisibility sometimes pursues people into the age bracket that I’m calling “mature adulthood:” all of you who are sixty-one years old and older. This age group reminds me of the sun as it turns an intense gold and begins to blaze toward the horizon.

For many of you, the many **joys** of mature adulthood pale in comparison to the happiness of finding a new role as grandparent. Beyond that change, people in their 60s and 70s – and beyond – have ripened over time into a bold authenticity. As a friend of mine said, it’s too late to die young, but it’s also too late to pretend that your personality and faculties are as malleable as they were during young adulthood.

Mature adults also express satisfaction in finding new depths of self-reflection, and self-awareness. For example, when she was 92, author Rebecca Lattimer was asked² what the most noticeable change of aging was. She replied that she likes everyone now: she finds interest in every person she meets, and that if someone is rude or short with her, she’s able to wonder what wounded them that makes them who they are, instead of getting

offended or defensive.

There are, of course, **struggles** inherent to mature adulthood. Chief among them is the imbalance between an inner, ageless spirit and an aging “outer” body. A Live Oak member captured this bewildering phenomenon in these whimsical words:

A very mysterious happening has been going on in my life, lately. An older woman has moved herself into my apartment. I don't know how she got in or where she came from. All I know is I didn't invite her. She's pretty clever. I never see her, except when primping my pretty self in a mirror. I catch a glimpse, and before I know it she is hogging the mirror. She rearranges my hair with gray streaks and obliterates my gorgeous face and body with scars and wrinkles...The nerve of her, at night before I go to bed she (oh, this is so embarrassing) takes my upper teeth right out of my mouth and puts them in a cup of bubbling blue water...Something else annoying: she gets to magazines and books before me and blurs the print. More tricks: plays around with the volume controls on the television and radio...Lately, she must be putting bricks in my laundry and the vacuum cleaner and gets to the groceries before me because the lids are glued shut.

As another of my 60-something colleagues puts it, aging leads to a lot of “organ recitals”! A more sobering aspect of aging is that mature adults grieve the loss of lifelong abilities and independence. Although there might be a new need for others' help, it's hard to accept that help, you've told me – and even harder to *ask* for it. There's even more loss and grief in store for mature adults who survive their friends and family members.

And yet: an **assumption** that I hear countered over and over by mature adults is that, for all the struggles and loss inherent in living, they'd rather be younger. As one of our most “mature” members said, “my motto is the first three lines of Robert Browning's poem: *Grow old along with me! / The best is yet to be, / The last of life, for which the first was made:...*”

* We might not all embrace life's last chapters – you might not share this optimism for your life's glowing, fiery sun to merge with the horizon. You might even fear growing older, or have anticipatory grief about what your later years hold for you. If that's true for you, remember two things:

First, no one's journey of aging is uniform, or identical to anyone else's. “We do not grow absolutely, chronologically,” writes Anais Nin. “We grow partially. We are relative. We are mature in one realm, childish in another. The past, present, and future mingle and pull us backward, forward, or fix us in the present. We are made up of layers, cells, constellations.”

Second, remember the power of this vibrant, glorious congregation of many generations: we're all growing older together, and growing more fully into our lives. We also, in this community, strive to see each other as not just an age, but as fully human – knowing that the “inherent worth and dignity of every person” applies to all, from the cradle to the grave. Live Oak is a place where we listen deeply to one another, and share our authentic stories. We meet people where they are, as those stories unfold, and accept one another with good humor, and gentle company; part of our work at Live Oak is to invite each other to view life with a combination of hope and zest, for all that might be.

I close with the words of my friend Dana, who captured this “zest for life” perfectly in an email about her 13-year-old daughter:

I was singing and dancing this morning and my dear hormone-enhanced (love that puberty!) daughter asked me to please STOP because she didn't want that song going through her head all day, forcing visions of ‘old ladies dancing.’ What a charmer she is. I told her that if she learns nothing else from me in life remember this: your time being an old lady is much, much longer than your time being a young one and if you're really lucky and work really hard you may be an old lady who can dance despite what others think or say.

May we sing and dance our way towards the horizon, leaving behind few regrets and many smiles.

Note: this sermon ended with a phenomenal boogie-woogie piece, played by accompanist Heather Levin.

Endnotes

1. *The Thing About Life Is That One Day You'll Be Dead*, David Shields, p. 87.
2. On “To the Best of Our Knowledge.” The interviewer was Jim Fleming. Lattimer's book is called *You're Not Old Until You're Ninety...Best To Be Prepared, However*.