Growing Old
A View From Within
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR  Born and educated in England, Norma Jacob came to Pendle Hill with her family in 1940. They had served during and after the Spanish Civil War with the child feeding work of English and American Friends but were expelled by the victorious Franco forces. From Pendle Hill in 1941 they went to Vermont for a short-lived experiment in a commune.

Now retired from the profession of social work, she lives at Kendal-at-Longwood, a community for older people in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, one of several Quaker-administered life care communities in the greater Philadelphia area. Recently she edited Quaker Roots, a book telling the story of early Friends in southern Chester County, written largely by the present-day descendants of William Penn’s original settlers.
What is it like to grow old? What is it really like? As a social worker, I of course read many books on this subject. I knew about the increasing numbers of older people in the nation’s population, the sociological and economic causes and effects of this increasing top heaviness in the population pyramid. My own professional specialization was in a different field, but I sympathized with those who felt unwanted and left aside, and discussed and wrote about plans for making their lives happier and easier within the rather limited boundaries of the possible. Naturally I thought, too, about the approach of my own old age, decided where and how I wished to spend my declining years, opened a savings account and made a considerable effort to get together the necessary resources. But the actual experience of aging, what the books can’t tell, this was closed to me.

One day, suddenly, it arrived. On my sixty-fifth birthday I left my job and took off for my chosen place of retirement. The State of New York, my employer at that time, did not enforce retirement before the age of seventy and I didn’t hate my job; in fact I liked it very much. But I was eager to find out about being old, to enter on the last of the seven ages of man while I was still vigorous enough in mind and body to make the most of it. Perhaps, too, I was aware that major changes in life ought to be times of evaluation, when important questions demand an answer. What have I done thus far with the original endowment given to me, for which I must answer? Where do I go from here? What resources, material but especially spiritual, are available for me in the part of the journey still ahead?

That was seven years ago. What have I learned since then?

A great deal — some of it unexpected. My reading had not told me much about the realities of advancing age. Like almost everybody else, I had unconsciously classed all old
people in one undifferentiated category. They were humans for whom the best was over, who could now only hope to put a brave face on the inevitable. That their state in many ways might be enviable I had barely considered. Yes, I expected a good time for myself but sixty-five isn’t old. The genuine satisfactions in aging formed an important part of what many had learned before me but had not been able to tell me. As a social worker, of course, I had seen chiefly old people who were in some kind of trouble; mental health was my field, and before an older person came to my attention he or she was having a pretty difficult time getting along. And having come from a very small family, I had few personal memories of relatives who had grown old. Essentially, I was starting from scratch in understanding the new phase of life upon which I had so eagerly (some said, so hastily) embarked.

The First Discovery

Growing old, first of all, is liberation. No longer must one be in one’s appointed place from nine to five, five days a week, with up to a month’s paid vacation each year. One could, and I did, continue to do very much the same kind of work but without being paid for it. Of course it is very important to do this in a different place of work, if possible in a different community; executives who retire should go far away, in space and in emotion. I had learned this the hard way in my own agency some years earlier. Now, if a mistake was made, I had not been a party to the decisions which led up to it and I had no responsibility. The bottom of the pecking order was a peaceful place to be.

Freedom from specific responsibilities is a very fine thing, though of course one never escapes those which go automatically with being a member of the human race. People who want to escape those have taken decisive
measures, one way or another, long before they grow old. But not to have contracted to perform a particular task or service, not to have to deliver by an appointed day — what a glorious feeling that turned out to be. As a volunteer worker I did, of course, realize that I had assumed an obligation, and I tried to honor it, but on days when I didn’t feel well I had less compunction about calling in and saying I was sorry, but could they manage without me? — as they always could.

Liberation from the obligation to behave well was another joy. If I desired to picket the Pentagon or dress in an outlandish style or write subversive letters to the daily press, there was no one to call me to account, no one to hint that such behavior was unbecoming and might endanger my promotion or even my job. No younger workers with careers to make looked to me for a good example or role model, as we say nowadays. Not even for a lesson in what to avoid.

And how about liberation from the constant pressure to enhance rewards? To earn more, to increase production, to go further in some direction, to leave the present behind? My income now came in as regular as clockwork at the beginning of every month and no amount of taking thought would add a penny to it. Of course, if not too indolent, I could get one foot back on the treadmill by taking a part-time job, but this was a free choice. I could set myself other goals and pursue them with a light heart.

Actually, things are not quite so simple. This is perhaps one of the situations in which the modern world is increasingly giving women an opportunity which most men still do not enjoy.

For those of us now approaching old age, the reality faced by our own mothers and grandmothers was of a very circumscribed existence; they bore and raised children, and when the children were grown and independent, they didn’t feel liberated. They felt forsaken and lost, because in most
cases their lives had no other reason. They had not been allowed the freedom to develop the interests and talents which so many of them possessed, and for which society would have given them rich rewards. The women of my generation, however, had a choice. They could be mothers and grandmothers, they could have careers, and very often it was perfectly possible to have both, perhaps not both at the same time, but both within a reasonable span of years. They almost never became so trapped in only one of these possible roles that there was nothing left if that one for any reason came to an end.

For a man today there is very often only the one role, that of chief working member of the household, the one without whose earnings life would be very difficult for himself and those dependent on him. The society in which he lives has expectations which he must meet, not only to provide for a family and earn the respect of his peers, but to give himself first and foremost to whatever has turned out to be his career (perhaps not the one he would have chosen had the choice been free). If something has to give, in most cases it cannot be the job. And the job comes to an inexorable end on a date set without any regard to his ability to continue or his emotional needs. How should he feel liberated? Many do, but they are the fortunate ones who managed not to get entirely swallowed up by the demands placed upon them.

Having, then, the built-in advantage of sex, I feel a little reluctant to boast about my freedom in the new life after retirement. The date is set just as inescapably for women with jobs as for men, whether or not it is raised to seventy as is now proposed in many quarters. Even postponed by an act of Congress, the day is coming sooner or later. But an older woman’s life is not quite so subject to the cruelty of the calendar, or so it seems in the present day. How can we bring to men the same kind of freedom which women are now beginning to enjoy? I do not know
the answer to this very large question and neither, I suspect, does anybody else, but I am sure it is an aspect of aging which deserves a great deal more attention than our society is giving it today.

**Another Side to the Coin**

Nothing, of course, is ever quite as one-dimensional as it may seem.

Between the idea and the reality . . .
Falls the shadow.

So wrote T. S. Eliot in “The Hollow Men.” To set against increased freedom is the undoubted fact that growing old means losses which cannot be avoided, though surprisingly many of them can be postponed. A friend calls these “diminishments,” and it is a good name for a wide variety of small and large ways in which the body and mind no longer function as they have done so competently for so many years.

One of these diminishments, extremely annoying though not really grave, is losing words, most often proper names. Suddenly, after years of familiarity, there is an empty space where they should be. This happens rather early in the process of aging and it can be baffling and frightening. A recent experience of my own with this phenomenon occurred when for two days I could not remember the name of the road that runs past the gate of Pendle Hill. Forty years, and I forgot Plush Mill Road!

Response to this varies with different individuals, or even the same individual at different times, running a gamut from despair to a wry amusement. In fact it is a kind of in-joke between older people who are at ease with one another. We discover that we are not losing our minds after all, the words are not gone forever; they reappear quickly when the immediate need for them is past, with
what might almost be called an air of injured innocence. If there is a name that it is especially important not to forget, one can often devise a kind of mnemonic which will allow it to be retrieved. This almost always works.

A rather more frightening thing has been happening to me lately: putting something down and being unable to find it five minutes later. This usually occurs because of my bad habit of working on two or three projects simultaneously. I have learned to look and see whether the missing sheet of paper is at the bottom of a pile other than the one to which it belongs.

Growing old is slowing down. This can be infuriating, but the psychologists tell us that at 65 or later we are able to do almost everything we could do at 14, and equally well; it just takes more time. The gears do engage, but not with quite the alacrity of youth. Older people who have gone back to college have often found that they actually do rather better than those of the regular college generation. They see things in deeper perspective, and are more able to appreciate relationships between ideas or things with the help of a lifetime of experience. In the past few years, the Elderhostel movement has gained great popularity. This is a plan whereby older people with academic interests can attend some college or university for weeklong residential courses given during the summer months. The teachers are young, capable and full of enthusiasm and no student is under sixty. Everybody is filled with euphoria by the end of the week. Everybody, too, has made new friends, visited new places and generally had an agreeable shaking-up.

Physical slowing down is often rather hard to accept. The mind runs ahead of the body and feels a furious resentment at times against muscles which don’t answer immediately to directives from the brain. But again, allowing more time is the answer, provided of course it is not our ambition to climb Everest this year. As one who
recently took up bicycle-riding again after fifty years, I discovered that the muscles had to be allowed to get in trim again and they protested at first. But the basic ability to ride was still there. I had the advantage over the beginner that whereas to him the whole thing at first appears clearly impossible, a violation of natural law, I knew it could be done, and done by me.

And what if there is a wheelchair in my future? Well, I see many people these days who get around with a freedom which would hardly be believed by those who don’t see it. Recently some of my neighbors were politely asked to slow down, in order to accommodate those of us who are still on foot. It had taken them a little while to get the hang of it but then they were off and away. Some wheelchairs are self-propelled, for other more modest kinds one must rely on a friend to furnish propulsive power, but a great deal of the world is still open and there to be enjoyed. Museums take a lot of trouble now to make their treasures accessible.

It is undeniable that losing a degree of mobility, seeing or hearing less well, things like that do mean less of things one used to enjoy. This may, however, be one of the situations where small is genuinely beautiful. This was a catchword not so long ago, and there were and are many who distrusted it, as rather sweepingly applied to almost the whole range of human experience. Deliberately to give up a large world for one with limited horizons seems a sin against life. But what if the smaller world to be felt and known by the more reduced senses is one which we must accept without any choice? Then indeed this smaller world can be one that is enriched from within by people who draw upon resources that formerly they scarcely knew that they possessed. I know people who are blind or unable to talk but who are nevertheless wonderful examples of intellectually and spiritually enriched existence.
These diminishments are one very good reason for making the choice of living among older people. We all suffer a degree, usually an increasing degree, of lessening of capacity with advancing years. We understand, and we are kind to one another. How can the young people know? How can they keep from becoming impatient at our slowness of response. They try hard, many times, but we and they know of the strain imposed on them. Our contemporaries are different, and much easier to be with.

Growing old is realizing, reluctantly, that some changes are permanent. Young bodies heal themselves or can be restored as good as new by the wonders of modern medicine. Older ones no longer have the necessary reserves. These pills — I am not going to become independent of them, but must remember to take one a day for as long as I live. My friend’s hip has mended enough to allow her to walk again — but she will always need the cane. Possessions wear out and a new question arises: for how long should I expect the replacement to last? Something guaranteed for ten years may not be worth it. This is hard especially for Americans to grasp. There has always been something new to replace what wore out: a new car, a dress with the right length of skirt for the coming year. Even perhaps a new mate in place of the one who somehow failed to live up to expectations. We are a nation devoted to the new. The hoped-for future is always just waiting for time to bring it to pass, and this belief persists even when the particular thing hoped for and expected inexplicably fails to arrive. The idea of ending, of nonrenewal, is a very hard one to accept, and the do-it-yourself books rather noticeably fail to offer any help here. They can — and do — try extremely hard to persuade us that we really can bring back the past, be young again, regain the slim waistline and grow new hair. Not to accept this is un-American. Thank goodness we are not merely what our publicity makes us seem! We do know better in
our hearts, and most of us do try most of the time to live by the reality we know rather than by the myth which is constantly being sold to us. It’s more and more necessary as we age; we keep trying and succeeding for a good part of the time.

Growing old is making things last longer instead of encouraging them to wear out. And this is not only because there may not be money for a new one, whatever it may be, or time enough to enjoy it to the full, or even because this year’s model offends us in so many ways. It is also because we and these objects are aging together and there’s a kind of fellow feeling. I am not about to discard in a hurry something which has been with me for a number of years. Discarding, whether things or people, is something one now thinks twice about doing. What if somebody, somewhere, should decide tomorrow to discard me? And there are memories which these possessions carry with them. The piece of jewelry which was once a gift of love; the shabby bureau where the children kept their toys in the bottom drawer; the book which opened up a new world of the imagination, many years ago: these are things not to be lost, because the memories may be lost with them. And memories are coin which gains in value, like gold.

Sadly, though, the outcome of this entirely natural feeling is apt to be a cluttered life. Most people as they approach old age move into smaller living quarters. The old family homestead is simply too much of a burden to maintain, when the children are grown and have homes of their own. What to keep, what to throw away or sell or pass along? A great deal of secret unhappiness is hidden inside these questions, from which there is ultimately no escape. The over-furnished room is a puzzle to the younger relatives, who in any case tend to travel light. They worry constantly that a loved older person will trip over something and do herself a mischief.
One of the many ways in which I count myself lucky is that I have moved so many times — first from country to country, then from state to state — that only a few very small objects have been carried with me from the more distant past. The only thing that really hurt was having to abandon a library, not once but twice. The first time was in England, the second time in Spain, where we actually had to burn some of our books — many of which we’d never had time to read — because they were of a liberal complexion and Hitler’s army was thought to be approaching. (The books we had not time to burn, we buried in a grove of cork trees behind the house. Some were irreplaceable; I wish I could go back and dig them up now).

Growing old is loss and relinquishment. Some losses come gradually, can be seen coming and prepared for to a certain extent. Others are fierce and cruel, like the death of a child or much-loved younger friend. These cause so much suffering because they are outrageous, they should not happen. They violate what everybody feels to be the natural order, that the old and less useful should go first. But age is, must be, a time of loss. How to bear it is what is to be learned.

Relinquishments are more subtle. Does this bright color no longer become me, now that my own natural coloring has faded? Can I no longer walk five miles without wishing I hadn’t? I love to wear high heels — but is this a childish vanity and a rather dangerous one at that? Should I give up driving the car? I know, though others may not, that my vision is no longer really adequate for the harsh conditions of highways today. If I am honest I know that I am increasingly a danger to myself and others who ride with me or even meet me on the road. But it is very, very hard to do. Giving up this particular bit of selfhood, of
independence, is like having a limb amputated. I saw this in a number of people before, by an act of will, I invited it upon myself. To many aging Americans, the car is part of the self-image. It says to the owner, “This is who I am”. To lose it is to become a different person, and inevitably a lesser one.

Other things are less clear-cut. Those who play musical instruments come gradually to realize that stiffening fingers or shorter wind mean more and more distortions of the melody. Those who swim a mile at a time learn to be satisfied with half a mile. People who used to love parties that went on until dawn become sleepy before midnight. Fine needlework is harder now that needles so tiresomely resist threading, and too much knitting makes the shoulder muscles ache.

These are the diminishments so hated by the friend whom I mentioned earlier, and she fought against them. Much energy is wasted that way, and personal energy is more and more a precious commodity. We have to school ourselves to let them come easily. I have a mental exercise which I use from time to time, that of imagining the hands gently opening and letting what was clutched so desperately go free. It is hard, but it has to be done. These are the voluntary relinquishments — voluntary, in order that they may not be forced upon one in the end.

**Being Alone**

Growing older means, for many, the fear of loneliness. It is inevitable that this should be so, because family, friends and lovers will die or drift away. And yet there are compensating realities which are often a most happy surprise. We lose our old friends, and nothing can really replace them. But if we are open to them, we make new
friends, often in quite unexpected places. The willingness is all. What if these new friends are people of a different kind from those to whom we have grown accustomed, with interests that do not entirely march with ours? They are still fellow human beings with lives and interests to share, and what we learn from talking to them can open up other worlds of experience. We can always find ourselves unexpectedly enjoying something or somebody new. People do form very solid and deep relationships in their older years, and marriages between those who have raised families and retired from careers happen more and more often these days.

Pets are, of course, a wonderful source of companionship if new people seem a little bit too much like hard work. Alas, in some living situations it is not easy to manage with a dog or cat. Even if the landlord doesn’t object, keeping them properly exercised and fed may become an increasing burden, and unless one pays rather large sums to board them, it is difficult to go on trips. Birds have fewer of these drawbacks — but it is hard to reconcile oneself to seeing a winged thing in a cage, even if it was born there and would be helpless anywhere else. Tropical fish? Well, as I have learned from the experience of my grandchildren, they are not nearly so trouble-free as they appear.

People who have not been great readers probably do not fully realize what joy is to be gained from books. They provide windows on the world, opportunities to live imaginatively in places we have never visited and probably never will. Many can remember literary families in which they have felt really at home — Jane Austen’s Bennetts, or the Whiteoaks of Jalna. There are people in the TV world, too, with whom many have come to feel a real intimacy. For myself, I confess that when my set is out of commission, some of the friends I most miss are Big Bird and Kermit of Sesame Street. What if Kermit never actually speaks to me? He doesn’t need to; we understand each other so well.
A Catalogue of Riches

Grow old along with me.
The best is yet to be.

Robert Browning was only fifty-two when he wrote these famous lines. He had another quarter century to go at that point, and some have thought he was just whistling in the dark, either deceiving himself or trying to deceive others. But the poet in him had an intuitive knowledge which he expressed in a phrase which has captured the imagination of generations coming after him. He certainly knew older people, and was able to project himself imaginatively into certain aspects of their lives, guessing at what he did not yet know at first hand. And there is some solid twentieth-century evidence which confirms that he was right.

A great deal of what is believed about growing old simply isn’t so. In the bicentennial year the National Council on Aging put out the results of a survey contrasting what people as a whole saw as the condition of the aging in our society, and what those older people themselves said about it. The disparity between the two pictures was enormous; in the case of one of the factors they used, there was a difference of 48% between how the general public rated it and how it was rated by those who actually were old. One cannot help but be a little skeptical about statistics of this kind, setting out to measure intangibles with a slide rule, but still it did appear quite clearly from this study that old people don’t see themselves at all as younger people see them. “The American public,” says the pamphlet, “has a distorted and unrealistic negative view of what it is like to grow old.”

Growing old is emotion recollected in tranquility. By the time one reaches seventy or eighty, one has accumulated an enormous store of memories. The beautiful thing about this is that so many of the bad memories are
softened (fears of dreadful things which after all never happened, embarrassment at stupidities which in fact other people treated with good-natured tolerance). The good things, on the other hand, keep a kind of freshness which does not tarnish with age. Perhaps they seem even lovelier in retrospect than they were in actuality. They can be taken out, treasured, flashed on the screen of the mind in their primary colors with many of the shadows removed.

Some twenty years ago Elaine Cumming and William Henry, in their book, *Growing Old*, put forward the theory of disengagement. It is somewhat discredited now, but I do not quite understand why. That driving emotions should drive a little less relentlessly, that the worries one used to lie awake with for many nights should lose some of their gnawing quality — are these not good things? One does not achieve so much when the spur of strong emotion is blunted, but does this really matter, in a world in which achievers abound? Let *them* struggle, it’s their turn and they are eager to do it, as eager as we once were, before we found out how little we did really achieve over the longer perspectives of life.

Another very pleasant aspect of growing old is discovering the younger generation. What interesting companions they turn out to be, one’s own or one’s friends’ children, now that they are adult and responsible for their own lives! There is so much held in common, so many shared memories and hopes, such a community of interest in literature, music or the visual arts. And the differences are valuable too. I may always have seen a particular situation in one way, and been unable to escape from this limited vision. A son or daughter necessarily has seen it from another angle and can throw a new and often startling light on what had seemed settled and dull.

I had the good fortune (or the foresight) to plan for myself a living situation where I am freed from the
likelihood of ever becoming financially or emotionally dependent upon my children. This is something which many people as they grow older should think about very seriously. I can manage by myself this year — but what about five years from now? Is there some way of making as sure as possible that the burden of caring for me doesn’t fall on those whom I cared for as children, and for whom their own children’s care must be the first necessity now? The idea of the extended family has never appealed to me. Needs of different generations can be met only with difficulty under one roof. I don’t accept that there is some magic about these generations having each other constantly present. Young children should not be expected to defer to the quirks of old people, and old people should not be trying to gain a false youthfulness from having children always around them. Visits are wonderful; aside from these, let us by all means lead our separate lives. One needs to be able to meet one’s children and grandchildren on a basis of equality, not one of dependency. Some years ago, I used to say (having seen it too often), “My children will never have to sit around wringing their hands and trying to decide to put Mother in a home. Mother is going to put herself in a home.” And essentially, that’s what she did.

It isn’t only the younger people that one knows personally who acquire new value, because growing old is coming, like Blanche Dubois in A Streetcar Named Desire, to rely on the kindness of strangers. At least our civilization does appear still to respect grey hair. The young certainly don’t venerate us, or call upon our wisdom, as we are told is the case still in some other parts of the world. What we say they don’t feel they need to hear. But they are almost unfailingly kind. When one of us is in trouble, they will come cheerfully and gently to help us out, even when they think (and they may be right) that it was our own ineptitude which landed us in this predicament.
Older people, too, are kind to one another. If an older person is seen to be in distress in a public place, others will come forward to stand by and provide what comfort they can. Sometimes this reminds me a little of the camaraderie which existed in the fifties between the drivers of Volkswagen Beetles. There weren't so many in those days, but if one broke down beside the highway, it seemed that only a few minutes would pass before another would pull up and offer assistance.

Most touching of all, though, is the way older friends cherish one another. I find it very moving to watch lifetime companions, one of whom has gradually grown feeble or confused. Patience is boundless, nothing is too difficult or too tiresome. This to me is one of the most real manifestations of love.

Growing old is finding other things, not only people, much more precious. It was not for nothing that poets in Europe exhorted their readers to enjoy, enjoy. Robert Herrick echoed Francois Villon when he wrote:

“That same flower that smiles today
Tomorrow may be dying.”

They had that poignant sense of the transience of everything beautiful which we seem somehow to have lost, with our porcelain flowers that never need anything but dusting and our masterpieces of art reproduced so perfectly that in some cases we might not know the difference unless we were told. Gorgeous books come out in editions of many thousands, no longer made one by one by a craftsman’s hand and eye. Why worry about lovely things disappearing when so many of them no longer do? They may not — but the eye that sees them, our eye, will be gone. We were never aware of that when we were young; we cherish beauty now that we are old.
Another real but rather unexpected blessing in old age is learning to live in the present. This is hard at first because we are all accustomed, when things get uncomfortable, to take refuge in either the future or the past. Why else do we read romances or science fiction, turn over the pages of photograph albums, or watch *Star Wars* or the late, late show? If things weren’t really better in the old days, then maybe the future will put everything right.

This is a harmless enough delusion provided that a lifestyle is not built upon it. Still, for those of us who are aging, the temptation to escape must be withstood to a greater extent than when we were younger. Realistically speaking, there is no longer very much prospect of a future which will bring us what we have not been able to achieve so far. And living in the past too much can be a deadly trap. Often we find ourselves pushed in that direction by the young people of today and their unconcealed belief that the way they do things is the only right way. Well, we thought so too, and if the truth were known we still do. It has always been so, as world literature from the near and remote past reminds us.

Haven’t we all, however, seen older people for whom the past is so real that the present hardly exists? We offer to share something which we have found to be rewarding, only to see it rejected, perhaps angrily, because it is not in the form which was familiar and loved in childhood, adolescence, or early married life. When we see this we can hardly fail to become aware of how much such people are losing, and feel anger or pity, according to our own nature or the way in which we relate to the person involved. Perhaps the more we care about them, the more we care about what is being lost to them for the want of willingness on their part to open up the doors and let today in, without for that reason having to feel that yesterday is rejected or scorned.
And yet we who reproach our friends are, if we too are aging, almost surely doing the same thing in more subtle ways. It is difficult to see this clearly when the problem is one’s own. I don’t enjoy much of modern music, and certainly there is an abundance in the world of the kind of music which does lift my spirits. But am I losing something of value? Perhaps I should look for someone who can help me find out.

When I have managed, either by my own effort or with another’s help, to free myself from total dependence on the standards of excellence set for me in my formative years, what riches I have discovered! My grandfather, a man of many and huge talents who had a profound influence on my life, loved Browning and recited him in a way never to be forgotten (he was the darling of the literary ladies’ groups). But he poured scorn upon T. S. Eliot. Fortunately I was able to understand that he was cheating himself by taking this position, and it was a warning to me to avoid similar self-inflicted wounds.

It’s been a struggle to win any reward from looking at the work of many contemporary painters, and some still defeat me altogether. But visiting the new East Wing of the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. along with groups of older people has brought home to me that I am being nourished spiritually by paintings or sculptures which some of my fellow-travelers impatiently dismiss.

I try to remind myself that the present grows organically out of the past. If something was good then, its results will be good now. And conversely, things which seem bad today have their roots in what happened years ago. To insist that the past was good while the present is horrible — this is the way we build barriers between ourselves and our children, our friends and the world which surrounds us every day and provides the reality of what must be dealt with. No such simplistic explanation for the uncomfortable
and unfamiliar can be allowed for long to cloud our perception of what we must live with and learn to rejoice in if we are not to abandon ourselves to despair. Continuity is my sheet anchor, to which I cling as I try to understand and accept so much that is puzzling about the world I see around me now.

Government and how it functions is a frequent source of anger and disappointment among older people. We rail against politicians without remembering that they are trying their best to make something out of a mess which we helped to bequeath to them. The choices we made, the policies we supported, the men we elected to carry out those policies — these built the present, and if there is blame to be distributed, we cannot avoid our share. Staying home on election day to register a protest is just compounding the error. Young people may do it because they don’t know any better. We do know better, and “a plague on both your houses” is really just a curse upon ourselves. It is reassuring to see how many older people do actually take the trouble to vote and try in this way to keep influencing events. In my precinct, we regularly turn out 90% or over of the voters, even in those years when the national percentage sinks disgracefully into the fifties. But how hard and carefully we think about our vote, how honestly we weigh the real issues, I wish I knew.

Growing old is, indeed, making an opening for new things. A fair number of aging people do not realize this, because they are so preoccupied with not losing the good things they now have that they never get a glimpse of other potentialities. But Emerson told us, “When the half gods go, the gods arrive.”

I was reminded not long ago that Sophocles wrote one of his greatest plays when he was 89, while Oliver Wendell Holmes never found the time to study Greek until he was 92. Creativity indeed can be ageless. Look at the painters
who did some of their finest work in old age, or at orchestra conductors who seem to be untouched by the passage of time (when a conductor does retire, or die, one is apt to feel that there must be some mistake).

Almost everybody has a secret wish, something they have never had the time or opportunity to do. For me, it chanced to be weaving. I got help in setting up the loom, then worked away happily and for the most part serenely (except that I had chosen a material in which broken threads happened half a dozen times a day). The dress length for my daughter was meant to be a Christmas present; she didn’t get it until the end of January, but it was a triumph when finally finished. Alas, by then I was involved in so many other things that in six years I have never found my way back to the loom to start my next project. But it is there, I know, waiting once again to give me the joy of making something beautiful.

Weaving, making something satisfying out of time, patience and yarns of different colors, is an experience I have had now and I can have it again. So is playing the recorder in a small group. I shall never be any good as a performer, but I can sustain one of the lower parts without disgrace and the pleasure is indescribable. I know other people who have reached a great fulfillment, after they were already old, through painting or working in clay. One finds that one has talents never suspected before.

And what about books? I have shelves of books bought out of interest but never read. Now there is time and new worlds open. Even when I need large type or a magnifying glass, this pleasure will stay with me. Somebody will read to me if I become quite blind. And music, of course, is a friend which will not play me false until I lose my hearing altogether, which day seems fortunately still to be a long way off. One must prepare for it, however, having seen it come to so many. Oh yes, they hear still with electronic
aids, but clearly it isn’t quite the same. Some resonance is missing.

Growing old is being lazy and enjoying it. The habit of always being regulated by the clock is a hard one to break; one may manage it only for short periods, as when one’s watch is being repaired, but what a surcease from anxiety is there! An interlude of going to bed and getting up with the sun might be a real surprise to many who have lived highly regulated lives carefully synchronized with other people’s unalterable schedules. I say “might be” because it is something I have never so far had the fortitude to try, but it’s nice to think about in a theoretical way. I have sometimes managed to beg off from suggested activities with no excuse other than that I just don’t feel like it today. There are snags here, however; people may think one is ill and become concerned, or even feel insulted and rejected themselves. I once blatantly used my advancing age as the reason why I refused to drive to the airport and pick up somebody arriving from Canada; but I felt guilty about it and some people had problems because of my defection. All the same perhaps we need to practice simply saying “I don’t want to — I’m too old.”

However, one does not somehow expect at the age of seventy plus to find oneself the youngest in a group of lively people, the one who is automatically expected to do what is necessary to keep things going. I have had moments of wishing the day might come when I should be allowed to be old. But this is one of the things which go along with what I sincerely believe to have been a wise choice — the decision to live among people of my own age or older, not in the kind of age-integrated group which some people in a sociological line of work used to consider so desirable (I thought so myself, back in the days when I was one of them and had no firsthand experience.) Old people are a very varied group
with an age span which may cover as much as thirty years. When I was sixty-five, I spent many stimulating evenings talking with intelligent and thoughtful nonagenarians. Better arrangements for group housing of old people — this is what we need.

Another thing that I have had occasion to observe, with pleasure and some surprise, in the past seven years is the kind of change produced in so many older people by the advance of time. Was it not Sir Walter Raleigh who called the first Queen Elizabeth “a lady whom Time hath surprised”? One sees so often that a lovely and gentle lady grows more gentle and lovely as the passage of years smoothes away some of the firmer lines of body and spirit. And people who (perhaps like the queen) were driven and drove others, often without mercy, are driven no longer so that other traits, like a sometimes delicious sense of humor, are free to appear. Of course one is sometimes the unwilling witness of the gradual fading of a loved personality. But what was once known can never be really lost.

The Unanswered Question

We were not wrong, those of us who welcomed the coming of old age as an opportunity, an opening into the potential of a new life. We do not pretend that everything is good; only too clearly, there are real losses and handicaps to be met. But the good and the less-good are intermixed, as they have been, deliberately, in this short essay. Many of the good things were quite unexpected from the perspective of the thirties, forties and fifties. They are real, though, and deserve to be celebrated.

Eventually, of course, we must all meet the final question: what comes next? This seems to me another strong reason for preferring to live among one’s contemporaries. For us, the coming of death is a reality to which
we must all adjust our thinking and our emotions. We cannot hide any longer, and so perhaps we experience less disabling fear.

“Time must have a stop,” said Harry Hotspur, one soldier toward whom even Quakers must surely have some feelings of affection. Hotspur saw an early unexpected death approaching on the battlefield and he met it with courage and acceptance. Aldous Huxley, in a novel with this title published just after World War II, took up the phrase and enlarged it with a meditation springing out of his own spiritual voyage of discovery:

It is only by taking the fact of eternity into account that we can deliver thought from its slavery to life. And it is only by deliberately paying our attention and our primary allegiance to eternity that we can prevent time from turning our lives into a pointless or diabolic foolery. The divine Ground is a timeless reality . . .

I think it was reading this which first made me see time as essentially an artifact, something invented by man as a device to impose some order upon the flow of experience. How would I ever get anywhere unless the railroad or the airline and I had some common frame of reference supplied by a clock? Beyond that, I feel that I owe it to Huxley (though the idea of course is not in any way new) for bringing me to accept that time had no real existence, that in fact it was ultimately something from which one could and must escape.

In the twenties there was a flurry of interest in J.W. Dunne’s notion that time might go backwards as well as forwards. At first this had a great attraction and we were anxious to believe it; but doubts soon began to creep in. If one could go back in time, would one carry along the memory of what had happened, and thus be able to opt for
something different and perhaps better? If so, then there would be the problem of millions of other people all similarly trying to remake things nearer to each individual heart’s desire. And if one carried back no memories in reverse — what could prevent things from turning out the same all over again, the elements being the same and nothing learned from experience? Yes, the idea had its appeal, but closer inspection seemed to tell us that it simply wouldn’t work. Time is a one-way street, leading eventually to a predictable end.

A Place to Stand?

For older people, the end of life gains increasing imminence with each year. There seems no other message for us, finally, except that the imperative is hope. “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”

Everybody arrives at the possibility of hope in his or her own way. For me, one way has always been through words, through literature or much-loved biblical texts. I must refer once again to my grandfather and a sermon which he preached one Christmas morning when I was a child. He was a powerful preacher in the Church of England, just another of his remarkable array of talents. I don’t remember anything of the sermon, but his text was this, from the Epistle of James:

Every good thing, and every perfect thing, is from above, and cometh down from the father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.

That struck on my ten-year-old heart with the hammer of reality; I knew that it was true. Like the young Mark Twain, whom we saw recently in a TV movie becoming a
riverboat pilot: “I don’t think so; I know so.” That early certainty of my own has in the intervening sixty years been very often obscured, but somehow it never is lost for good and it comes back at the most unexpected times.

Latterly, though, this kind of knowledge of reality comes to me more and more through music. With words one has to do a certain minimum of interpretation, but musical communication is direct. It was Aldous Huxley, again, who in Music at Night introduced me to the Benedictus from Beethoven’s Missa Solemnis. Since then I have acquired other pieces of music which carry similar weight for me, such as Bach’s “Bist Du Bei Mir,” many of the heavenly airs of Mozart, the strange and triumphant last movement of Beethoven’s Quartet #135 in F major, and above all the slow movement of his piano sonata, Opus 109. Beethoven is special for me. The only thing in my life which I would venture to call a mystical experience happened totally without warning, in Oxford Town Hall, as I listened for the first time to the opening bars of his Quartet in C# minor, op. 131. A door opened, and I went through. What was beyond the door I do not know, only that it permanently changed my world. It was not until later that I read what J.W.N. Sullivan in his book, Beethoven, His Spiritual Development, had written about this quartet:

The opening Fugue is the most superhuman piece of music that Beethoven has ever written. It is the completely unfaltering rendering into music of what we can only call the mystic vision . . . Nowhere else in music are we made so aware, as here, of a state of consciousness surpassing our own . . . to which even our highest aspirations, those that we can formulate, provide no key.

One of the great modern composers has said that what he wanted to hear on his deathbed was the slow movement
of Brahms’ quintet with the two cellos, op. 111, and this I can well understand. These things tell one something about the nature of man and God which it is hard for me to imagine in any other way.

What part does formal religion play in all this? For millions of people throughout history, beautiful music and inspired words within a framework of ritual have been the ways in which contact was made with what they felt to be ultimate truth. A Friends Meeting can serve this purpose too, though it achieves its success largely through the interaction of like minds brought together in one impulse of worship. I have never, however, been able fully to accept the English philosopher John Macmurray’s thesis, which he set out in the thirties, that religion can only be real when it is experienced in fellowship between people sharing a common faith. What we learn alone, we deepen and widen and enrich through sharing with others in some form of religious observance.

There are many religions which offer an escape from death with a promise of everlasting life. For me, this has never been anything in which I could take comfort. It is the word “everlasting” which makes the mischief. Nothing should be everlasting not a flower, not a symphony, not a human life. Life that goes on, in one direction, into an indefinite future is an idea which causes a cold shudder to run down my spine.

When I was a senior in college, a close friend fell very ill and I asked myself, for the first time, “What if she dies?” The answer came back clear and final. We should not see each other again, at least not within the frame of reference forced upon living human beings by their imprisonment within the flux of time. To escape from bondage to ongoing time is what we need and must hope for. What friends have of each other is outside time and cannot be lost.
Humans are conditioned to time and can hardly conceive of any kind of existence outside it. Rupert Brooke in his poem “The Fish” poked gentle fun at this human trait:

Fish, fly-replete in depth of June,
Idling away their watery noon,
Ponder deep wisdom, dark or clear,
Each secret fishy hope or fear.
Fish say, “We have our stream and pond,
But is there anything Beyond?”
This life cannot be all, they swear,
For how unpleasant, if it were!

Whether or not we subscribe to any definite religious creed, growing old makes it impossible any more for us to turn away from seeking out some support of this nature. What was immediate is now less significant than formerly, while by contrast, what was far away and indefinite has become close and increasingly real. The focus of our souls, like the focus of our eyes, changes as we age, and we change with it.

So we who are aging can never know, any of us, what is coming next, though we must wonder more and more. The kind of unquestioning certainty which they had in the Middle Ages about heaven and hell is forever lost to us, and surely that is on the whole a very good thing. But we can have intimations, flashes of seeing in a dark wood.

For me only two things now seem sure. One is that time must have a stop, and the other is that whatever lies over and around mortal time is not to be feared.

With that, I shall have to be content.