

Do You Look Forward to Old Age?

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Marta Monteiro

Do you ever think about growing old?

How do you imagine your life to be when you are 65, 80 or older? Are there things that scare you about growing old? Are there things you look forward to?

In [“The Joy of Being a Woman in Her 70s,”](#) Mary Pipher, a clinical psychologist, writes:

When I told my friends I was writing a book on older women like us, they immediately protested, “I am not old.” What they meant was that they didn’t act or feel like the cultural stereotypes of women their age.

Old meant bossy, useless, unhappy and in the way. Our country's ideas about old women are so toxic that almost no one, no matter her age, will admit she is old.

In America, ageism is a bigger problem for women than aging. Our bodies and our sexuality are devalued, we are denigrated by mother-in-law jokes, and we're rendered invisible in the media. Yet, most of the women I know describe themselves as being in a vibrant and happy life stage. We are resilient and know how to thrive in the margins. Our happiness comes from self-knowledge, emotional intelligence and empathy for others.

Most of us don't miss the male gaze. It came with catcalls, harassment and unwanted attention. Instead, we feel free from the tyranny of worrying about our looks. For the first time since we were 10, we can feel relaxed about our appearance. We can wear yoga tights instead of nylons and bluejeans instead of business suits.

Yet, in this developmental stage, we are confronted by great challenges. We are unlikely to escape great sorrow for long. We all suffer, but not all of us grow. Those of us who grow do so by developing our moral imaginations and expanding our carrying capacities for pain and bliss. In fact, this pendulum between joy and despair is what makes old age catalytic for spiritual and emotional growth.

By our 70s, we've had decades to develop resilience. Many of us have learned that happiness is a skill and a choice. We don't need to look at our horoscopes to know how our day will go. We know how to create a good day.

We have learned to look every day for humor, love and beauty. We've acquired an aptitude for appreciating life. Gratitude is not a virtue but a survival skill, and our capacity for it grows with our suffering. That is why it is the least privileged, not the most, who excel in appreciating the

smallest of offerings.

The article continues:

There is an amazing calculus in old age. As much is taken away, we find more to love and appreciate. We experience bliss on a regular basis. As one friend said: “When I was young I needed sexual ecstasy or a hike to the top of a mountain to experience bliss. Now I can feel it when I look at a caterpillar on my garden path.”

Older women have learned the importance of reasonable expectations. We know that all our desires will not be fulfilled, that the world isn’t organized around pleasing us and that others, especially our children, are not waiting for our opinions and judgments. We know that the joys and sorrows of life are as mixed together as salt and water in the sea. We don’t expect perfection or even relief from suffering. A good book, a piece of homemade pie or a call from a friend can make us happy. As my aunt Grace, who lived in the Ozarks, put it, “I get what I want, but I know what to want.”

We can be kinder to ourselves as well as more honest and authentic. Our people-pleasing selves soften their voices and our true selves speak more loudly and more often. We don’t need to pretend to ourselves and others that we don’t have needs. We can say no to anything we don’t want to do. We can listen to our hearts and act in our own best interest. We are less angst-filled and more content, less driven and more able to live in the moment with all its lovely possibilities.

Students, read the entire article, then tell us:

— Do you ever think about growing old? How do you imagine your life will be when you are 65? 80? Or older? Will you be wiser? Happier? Lonely? Something else altogether?

— Were you surprised by Ms. Pipher’s statement that “most of the women I know describe themselves as being in a vibrant and happy life stage”? What aspects of old age, as described by the author, do you find most appealing? Why?

— Do you have older adults in your life? The author describes how she has learned a lot about life and happiness as she has grown older; [what life lessons have you learned from older adults](#) — especially older women?

— Ms. Pipher writes, “In America, ageism is a bigger problem for women than aging.” Do you agree? Have you ever witnessed ageism? If yes, tell us what happened?

— Do you think we spend too much attention in our society on the young and youth? Why do you think many older adults people feel undervalued and ignored?

Students 13 and older are invited to comment. All comments are moderated by the Learning Network staff, but please keep in mind that once your comment is accepted, it will be made public.