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The Sunset Years

Bill Elgersma

An aged man is a paltry thing, a tattered coat upon a stick. . . .
(William Butler Yeats)

“There’s something great about getting old,” my sister said wistfully on the phone, her smokey voice rising with inflection at the end of the statement, almost as if to ask rather than tell.

“Ha,” I immediately thought, but after a moment’s reflection sprinkled with a smattering of reality, responded, “You know, you’re right.”

We fight age—at least I do. On our refrigerator door at eye level, fixed by a magnetized, miniature wooden shoe, is a faded, printed placard that asks, “How old would you be if you didn’t know your age?” I like that question. It gives me a pass to be 16 again and turn the radio up and blast great tunes from 40 years ago for all the neighborhood to hear—without apology. I get to be the same age as my grandkids, and we can sing their songs at the top of our lungs anywhere, anytime, and do “see you later alligator, bye bye butterfly” and every other trite expression for hours.

I don’t want to be old old, like “Dad, close your mouth, you’re catching flies with it” old. I don’t want a blue tag hanging from my rear-view mirror, announcing to the world that, yes, I can’t walk that far so I need to park up close to the store, and by the way, my neck isn’t flexible enough to check for other cars in the immediate vicinity, so the door-ding or fender-crunch is inevitable. I won’t buy shoes with Velcro straps because I have lost flexibility, and there is no bloody way I am taking an elevator when stairs are available. When I am in airports, the guys with those carts, the ones who shuttle old people between gates, circle like vultures and eye me like steak. Without exception, they cruise up beside me as I hobble down the concourse to say, “Need a lift?” to which I respond, “No thanks, I’m good.”

Yup, I’m that guy, and if my hearing was good enough, I am confident I would hear their snicker as they watch me totter along my way, betting their fellow cart-jockeys that I am not going to make it, but me and Dylan Thomas—we “will rage against

the dying of the light”—I am not that old.

But I like comfortable-old. I have gotten over vanishing hair and bushy eyebrows and earlobes, and although I don’t like the boxcars under my eyes, I don’t look in the mirror much anymore because there’s not much to see, and that which is much to see just annoys me and gives the doctor more ammunition about health and weight loss and diets. But I have made peace with me, and that has only come through the process of growing old with myself.

I don’t remember what my first indicator of change was, but I think it was hair. My father was balding as long as I can remember, and some of my siblings had hair that went on vacation early as well, but my first realization came in the shower in my early 30s. No, I wasn’t shedding clumps of hair that plugged the drain screen and restricted the flow of water; it was the temperature of the water on the back of my head that was the messenger.

In some houses, I am told, the shower is instantly warm. Turn on the tap and *voila*—hot water! I know this must be possible because I have stayed in motels where this has been the case—but never in a house I have owned. My hot water has to wake up, do a few laps, stop for a coffee, and then deliver something that morphs into warmth out of that spray-ie thing. So, in the magical world of disappearing hair, what a person feels immediately is cold water—depending on when that person enters the shower. I just turn it on and get in, then proceed to hyper-ventilate when the ice needles stab so vehemently, they suck my breath away and I am on the verge of passing out. Several sharp breaths later I have acclimated. I consider it my defense against aging lungs and pulmonary disease. Nothing like a little hyper-ventilation to activate those suckers and wake my heart up. Eventually, the water warms up. But the sensory receptors of a follicle-less scalp are quite keen, and instantly, I am acutely aware of just how cold that water is.

When I owned respectable hair, hair that required styling, hair that had to be cut with some-

thing other than the shortest attachment on the clipper, this was not the case. Enough hair and the water sort of sheds like “a duck’s back.” Not the case when what’s left of your hair resembles the spikey stems in a soybean field after a particularly fierce hailstorm. In all of this, the thermostat in your head instantly knows when the warm water has arrived, and with less hair comes earlier transmission of data so-to-speak.

Perhaps we fight aging because we don’t want to become our ancestors. Their sunset years weren’t necessarily sunset-on-the-prairie years where the sun goes down and the sky glows for the better part of an hour, creating silhouettes and painting the horizon in the Bob Ross fashion of pastels with the glow of a sunfire beneath. These sunsets give us another hour, maybe two, to finish what we are doing. That would be us presumably, but our parents’ sunset was more like a sunset in the Rockies where the sun drops behind the mountain, and it’s lights out. Everything seems to occur quickly and definitively. No lingering, no long good-byes—the sun simply falls out of the sky and collapses into darkness.

My parents would read the obituaries in the local paper, and one would turn to the other and go, “Hunh. Eldon Philips died. Dropped dead of a heart attack. Well, what do you know? I saw him last week down at the feed mill. Seemed okay. A little gray I guess, but what do you expect from someone with a bum ticker?”

In that time, everyone knew everyone else’s health problems, and dying-suddenly was just part of life. Kind of like running out of gas. Maybe you sputter a bit and then nothing—side of the road going nowhere.

Today, we expect to live out our lives, and then we want a life after that life. I’m not talking theologically—this is not new-heaven, new-earth thinking; I am talking pragmatically. When we hit those sunset years, we are not thinking about funeral buns at the church at 11 a.m., served by Ladies Aid; we’re thinking about some place where we don’t shovel snow and scrape windshields. Some place where we look thin compared to those around us, and some place where we are considered young, relatively speaking, so much so that we are asked to help with activities requiring some level of physical ability while the old guys sit and watch because that is about all they can do—and they are fine with that. That is the redundant

reduplicative—*old old*.

One of the great things about being old is the experience we have to support our vintage. I am no longer the 25-year-old trying to figure out how to impress my boss, my neighbors, the people in my church, or most importantly—in marrying up—my wife. Pretension is out the window. No sports car, boat, tennis racquet, cabin in the mountains, not much is going to impress anyone, but our wisdom from experience just might. And the great thing is we do not feel the need to share it with others unless they ask. We don’t need to beat anyone to the table for something to say. We’re not being stingy with our words or hoarding our ideas in case someone is trying to one-up us. We just look at the situation, think back on our lives, and know what is good and what is bad, based on our experience. Somewhere life stopped being a competition, and we are trying to figure out how to live without having something to gloat about at the expense of someone else.

But our experience does talk. Not often politics, sometimes church, mostly family, and always the local community. And part of experience is being selective about the company we keep, so we choose to hang out at the Cenex station, while that bunch of liberals who think the government should pay us to stay home and give us a living allowance beyond our pension—and free healthcare to boot—go to the Shell station for coffee. There is an expiration date on me, and life’s gotten too short to spend time arguing with a sack of hammers, although I could agree on free health care. Experience says I don’t have to hang around with you, and if I don’t, neither of us is insulted. I like that.

There is no more posturing, and I have the freedom to do or not do whatever sounds good to me. Sometimes I can just stay home—for weeks if I want—and I don’t have to answer the phone. Sure, someone might think I’m dead and come by to check, but if the birdfeeder is full, the garbage can is out, the lawn is cut, or the driveway cleared, that’s pretty clear evidence that I am still seeing the ceiling every morning.

In the world of my backyard, I have discovered that birds like old people. I am pretty convinced of that. When we were young, we didn’t have much time for them. They’d eat the neighbors’ cherries and collectively strafe the side of the house on a fly-by so you had to get out the power washer to clear the residue or the house would look like a Grateful

Dead tee-shirt; create a racket in the morning; build nests in the eavestrough; crap on your car—just a nuisance. Now, we buy 20 lbs. of bird seed each week because they show up like old folks for free hot dogs. And the longer we do this, the more upscale the birds. We have had a pair of cardinals for about four years who show up at around 7 a.m. and 6 p.m. Often the male cracks sunflower shells and places the seeds in the female's beak while she patiently waits for him. There is something remarkably touching about that gesture, but I wouldn't have noticed this when I was young. The Baltimore Orioles are skittish, and the Bluebirds rarely show, but we get them. Paradoxically, our powers of observation have developed even as our sight has diminished. The song of a wren draws me to the window, and the birds seem to know it—as long as the feeder has seed. No seed, and they are fair-weather friends, and we are left looking for them while they have gotten a better offer.

We also develop petty allegiances to things. I like that the Cardinal refuses to yield to the Blue Jays, who are mean-spirited and aggressive—a little like those people in the office that constantly push, snipe, back-stab. Mostly the male Cardinal sits in the background while they squawk, but occasionally he has had enough, and the feathers fly. I always thought Doves were subdued birds with only melancholy thoughts until I saw one take a round out of a Robin. Bad day for the Robin—good day for the Dove.

Cats and squirrels are another source of entertainment. The squirrels rip up our hummingbird feeder, and hummingbirds are our gold. Do not move while they are at the feeder. Do nothing to frighten them. Plant as many hummingbird flowers as possible in hopes of attracting them. So, when Mr. Squirrel rips up the feeder, Oreo, the cat, stalks the squirrel. I root for Oreo, knowing that his chances are slim to none, but Oreo doesn't know that, and the ensuing hour is consumed with strategy on his part and incredulity on mine. I see him sitting plainly in sight in the tree where the feeder hangs, hoping for the squirrel to show up—flatout stupid. This cat might starve to death unless he can find a Youtube video on how to catch a squirrel, but the ferocity of the squirrel's chatter, the indignant lecture that he gives Oreo, is observation-time well spent, resulting in a great deal of pleasure for me.

Our neighbors to the east have a dog whose

name is Ralph—at least I think his name is Ralph, and if it isn't, he's okay with me calling him that. Ralph is a dog dog—one of those who, if he ever got motivated, could tear large roasts off my legs. But he never gets there. Ralph likes me. We are buds, and to that end, he goes over the wall whenever possible to sit beside me when I am outside and lick the salt off of my sweaty, balding head. And I let him.

I'm not sure if his owner is upset because the dog is a free spirit or because he is being disrespectful by using my scalp as a salt lick; either way the dog gets results. We can spend hours with me scratching his ears and his chest or simply rolling around on the grass wrestling where he occasionally breaks free to do a couple of hot laps and dives back on me, and we grapple and growl until both of us are worn out. Maybe the neighbor is most frightened that I will die of over-exertion, and she will be held responsible because old Ralphie killed me. Wouldn't be a bad way to go, but I am not on the 9-1-1 watch list, and Ralphie knows it. Besides, he needs the exercise as much as I do.

But what is really great about Ralph is that he despises the Kleenex-box dog at the end of the cul-de-sac. Some poor excuse for crow bait who does nothing but yip all day. When I am walking and I pass the house, the dog goes off like the noon whistle in a Midwest town. Old Ralphie doesn't think much of that sorry excuse, and one day, when that genetically modified rodent slipped his collar in a moment of laughable courage to show up on Ralph's lawn, old Ralphie laid a chomp on him that set him back a few weeks. That soupbone limped back to his house to frantically scratch and whimper at the front door while Ralphie sat on the sidewalk and gave him the laser death glare. I could almost hear him chuckle, and when he turned to trot down the sidewalk, he did a sort of gloating, happy-dance dog-trot—as if to say, “stay in your lane mutt.” That's what I like about the dog. We share sentiments that I can vicariously live out through him.

While there are many other benefits of aging, perhaps the greatest is grandchildren. Anyone with grandkids knows the power they possess over us and our willingness to acquiesce. All the corn in Iowa might not get me out of a chair when I am reading a good book, but a small voice standing in front of me asking, “Grandpa, will you go outside with me to see the kitties?” slams that book shut

in an instant and has me moving like I did three decades ago—well, intending to move like I did three decades ago, and eventually we get there, a little hand wrapped in mine.

I watch them come in, kick off their boots at the door, drop their coats on the floor, and proceed to dismantle the house, and all is good. Mostly our place looks like a toy-store bomb has gone off in the place by the time the day is over, and life couldn't be better. The Mac n Cheese—"I only like the curly ones from the blue box"—are scattered on the floor around the table, and even though "you don't make them as good as my mom," they are gone along with raspberries and fruit snacks and half a banana and some orange sections.

Grandma has been sledding with them, and they take her so that she can slide down with them and then pull them up the hill so they don't have to climb. Hot chocolate follows that, and then they need a blankie and someone to read yet another book while they fall asleep—even though "I'm not sleepy," and grandma softly wheezes beside them. Grandma will spend time soaking in a very hot tub after they are gone, but for right now, they are all little, including her.

We have time now, lots of time, to live in their world, listen to them speak, and think about what they say—"Grandpa, I saw you behind my eyes last night..." and "Grandma, I want the house to smell like cookies...." and "Grandpa, where's grandma? You don't know how to babysit."

Some lines might be offensive if they didn't own our DNA and our blood didn't run through them, but because they do, all is well. We watch them count their friends and give their reasons; we know when they are tired and about to melt down; we listen to their lengthy explanations with the minutest details, and in all of it, we are content. They have no agenda beyond themselves, and we are invited to be a part of that country because of our passport—grandparents—and it makes our day brighter.

Last summer my grandson and I went fishing quite regularly. Fact: I don't fish. I understand fishing when this was considered survival. Fish fed people—families, communities. But that is not what we are doing. We fish like we watch hockey—for entertainment. There is no imminent survival resting on our success, just a few drowned worms and some frustrated individuals watching

fish wave to them on the monitors as we fail to entice them. But my grandson loves to fish. And for something as simple as that, I bought passes to two county parks with ponds—even bought a new rod and reel for the first time since '95.

Didn't catch much then, don't catch much now, but I get to bait his hook and take off his fish, and best of all, listen to his endless strategies on where they are biting and what lure to use. He speaks with confidence about how many fish he is going to catch, and then it happens. Somewhere through the ages, we lose that assurance, and we think about what is not going to happen rather than what does. Life has had disappointments, and reality is an honest colleague we don't always appreciate because it pokes holes in our dreams. His youth trumps my experience in the world of possibilities, so I get to dream. Maybe I will catch something.

My granddaughters come from a planet where Elsa, Anna, Sven, HeyHey, and Chase all rule. The girls glide into the house to snuggle up beside me and shyly say, "Hi Grandpa," as they crawl under the shoogily-soft couch blanket. After they have acclimated, the house turns into a town with a kitchen, gym, school, house, fort—anything that has roles they can play. I listen as their voices change with their characters, and sometimes I get to be a part of this world, but mostly not.

When they have exhausted their dream world, they shuffle over with a book in their hands and whisper, "Grandpa, will you read to me?" And I love to. But I stink at it. Age forces me to adlib where I shouldn't. Some of those books are absurd, so I find myself asking questions of the author out loud, and that is not part of the book. They know the book; they know the script, and sooner rather than later, they say, "No grandpa, read what the book says." And I only have one chance to get it right. When I deviate again, they find grandma because she reads the words on the page with inflection and examines the pictures and asks them questions, where I want to querulously debate the philosophy of the writer and challenge rather than acquiesce. They don't care what I think. I am simply an old coot. The books rule.

But every time they come, they try again, I suppose because they have not given up hope that I might change. I love their optimism, and even though I try to accommodate, I fail again, but they know I am good for dessert, so they work me.

Grandma may be great with books, but we know Grandpa comes through with ice cream with all kinds of toppings and Cool Whip, so after the books are done, treats materialize and a plea for just one more book.

Who denies just one more book, especially from a cherubic face with a wispy, earnest, pleading voice? They count on that, and then it is time for bed with hugs all around and “love you’s” and “don’t let the bedbugs bite.” The ants’ nest of activity disappears, and we go through withdrawals as the house falls silent until morning, when it all starts again.

As an English major, I have read way too

much from way too many authors who have wrestled with what aging means, and now I feel old enough to weigh in. With the loss of speed, the inability to remember, inadequate vision and hearing, too much of this and not enough of that, I may be Yeats’ “tattered coat upon a stick,” but to all of that I say, “So what?” I don’t need to be what I am not—I have already lived it, and I am okay. Another diet plan, another face lift, an upgrade in car, home, or vacation doesn’t change my date of birth or decrepit body, so whom am I fooling? As long as the grandkids, birds, and Ralphie show up, I am in great shape.