

The Vintage Voice

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Like Trees Walking

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Starting with Yes

There are stepping stones in our garden. They form a path through the perennial beds, around a green bend of grass, and into the woodland with its floor of matted leaves. Keene, our six year old grandson, helped me lay the stones, talking all the while about the bugs he found, the acorns on the ground, how worms were good for the garden, how Papa was going to build him a tree fort, and how a boy at school broke his tooth on the side of the bathtub. "He won't get another one until he's in the second grade."

It was a good day.

Keene has grown up now. He's taller than I am, and not particularly interested in tree forts. The stepping stones have settled into place, separating the walk into distinct segments. With each segment, the garden changes. The sunshine perennials give way to azaleas; azaleas give way to shadowed ferns; ferns give way to lichen clinging to dead branches in the undergrowth.

The walk gives me a perspective on the garden, marking where I've been and where I'm going. It reminds me of Shakespeare's description of the seven stages of life, from the infant "mewling and puking in its nurse's arms," to the "whining schoolboy," to the lover "sighing like a furnace," and finally to the aged one, "sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything" (William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act II, scene 7, lines 142-149).

Like stepping stones, the seven stages mark distinct segments of our path through life, and each segment leads inevitably to the next. We're moving through the sequence at varying rates, but the progression is universal. So, unless we die prematurely, we have no choice about entering old age. And old age brings with it a relentless series of losses — sight, energy, health, memory, touch that has the power to delight, friends who are dear to the heart. But, again, we have no choice. It's the next stepping stone. It comes right after the one marked "late adulthood."

But we do have a choice as to *how* we enter old age. We can complain bitterly the way the Israelites did in the desert: "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread" (Exodus 16:3). Alternately, we can put a spin on the reality of our situation and pretend that the older years truly are golden. Or we can dig in our heels and refuse to change our habits and expectations. After all, Peter Pan insisted, "I'll never grow up," so why can't we say, "I'll never grow old?" We do have some choices.

But to complain too much, or spin too wide, or refuse to change habits and expectations, can cause one to suffer what psychologists call "arrested development." No one wants to suffer "arrested development." It has a nasty, contradictory sound to it. Like our development got caught speeding on the interstate. And it renders one childish in a foolish sort of way. Hermann Hesse, in his essays on art and life, said, "A man who hates being old and gray, who fears the nearness of death, is no more worthy a representative of his stage of life than a strong young

person who hates and tries to escape his profession and his daily tasks. . . . To fulfill the meaning of age . . . one must say yes to it.”¹

And besides, if we refuse to say yes, eventually the winter rain will come, and there we’ll be, standing out in the open, shivering with cold, “sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.”

So instead of seeing myself as a victim of old age, being swept down the path by unseen forces, I’d like to see myself and all my older friends for who we really are: a people diminished in strength but still standing tall with the sun warm against our faces. Given a choice as to how to enter old age, I choose to enter it with a “yes.”

And maybe even with hope. As Hermann Hesse said, “Old age is a stage in our lives, and like all other stages it has a face of its own, its own atmosphere and temperature, its own joys and miseries. We old white-haired folk, like all our younger human brothers, have a part to play that gives meaning to our lives, and even someone mortally ill and dying who can hardly be reached in his own bed by a cry from this world has his task, something important and necessary to accomplish. Being old is just as beautiful and holy a task as being young.”²

That’s what Sarah discovered when three strangers appeared at the Oaks of Marmre. Before she met them, there had been nothing “beautiful” or “holy” in her life. She suffered the cultural shame of having never given Abraham a child, and “Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women” (Genesis 18:11). So life was just leftover life—without meaning or purpose.

Then, one day in the heat of the afternoon, the strangers appear. Abraham greets them and rushes back to the tent where Sarah is sitting, fanning herself with the Sunday paper. She wonders how long the strangers planned to stay. Abraham says, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes” (Genesis 18:6).

Sarah does as she is told, and just as she leans over to put the cakes in the oven, she hears one of the strangers say that she, a barren woman of ninety, will have a child. That definitely would not be good news for us in our old age. But it was for Sarah. If what the stranger said was true, she would be restored to dignity and her older years would have meaning and purpose. Sarah laughs at the absurdity of God’s grace.

And so do we. We laugh with Sarah because the stranger’s words promise that in the absurdity of God’s grace, being old will be just as beautiful and holy a task as being young. And even though we’re approaching the end of the garden path, the ground beneath our feet is holy ground. Perhaps I’ll take off my shoes the way Moses did. Then nothing— not even leather— will separate me from the One who taught me how to walk.



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¹ Hermann Hesse, “On Old Age,” in *My Belief: Essays on Life and Art*, 1952. Oxford Book of Aging, page 56.

² Hermann Hesse, 56.