

Quotes on Aging

The Art of Subtraction at Midlife

Midlife is the point at which the artistic metaphor for your life should change from a canvas (you add the brushstrokes to the painting of your life) to a sculpture (in which the work of art appears as a result of chipping away, not adding). This can be difficult. For many, the most important impediment to chipping away is a belief that success = more. In middle age, this is bad math. Endeavor to change your objective by reevaluating old responsibilities, conceits, and encumbrances that might have served you in the past but now do not. This might include houses or other possessions; distractions that once were fun; commitments that are supposed to increase your social standing; and relationships you don't enjoy but that are "good to maintain."

Arthur Brooks

On Turning Eighty

If at eighty, you're not a cripple or an invalid, if you have your health, if you still enjoy a good walk, a good meal (with all the trimmings), if you can sleep without first taking a pill, if birds and flowers, mountains and sea still inspire you, you are a most fortunate individual and you should get down on your knees morning and night and thank the good Lord for his savin' and keepin' power. If you are young in years but already weary in spirit, already on the way to becoming an automaton, it may do you good to say to your boss — under your breath, of course — "F... you, Jack! You don't own me!" ... If you can fall in love again and again, if you can forgive your parents for the crime of bringing you into the world, if you are content to get nowhere, just take each day as it comes, if you can forgive as well as forget, if you can keep from growing sour, surly, bitter and cynical, man you've got it half licked.

Henry Miller in On Turning Eighty

What You Can Learn from a Child and a Thief

From a child you can learn

- 1) to always to be happy;
- 2) never to sit idle;
- 3) to cry for everything you want.

From a thief you can learn

- 1) to work at night;
- 2) that if you cannot gain what you want in one night to try again the next night;
- 3) to love your co-workers just as thieves love each other;
- 4) to be willing to risk your life even for a little thing;
- 5) not to attach too much value to things even though you have risked your life for them — just as a thief will resell a stolen article for a fraction of its real value;

- 6) to withstand all kinds of beatings and tortures but to remain what you are;
- 7) to believe that your work is worthwhile and not be willing to change it.

Bob Dylan

Aging

There is only one solution if old age is not to be an absurd parody of our former life, and that is to go on pursuing ends that give our existence a meaning — devotion to individuals, to groups or to causes, social, political, intellectual or creative work... In old age we should wish still to have passions strong enough to prevent us turning in on ourselves. One's life has value so long as one attributes value to the life of others, by means of love, friendship, indignation, and compassion.

Simone de Beauvoir

Kind People

When I was young, I used to admire intelligent people. Now I admire kind people.

Abraham Joshua Heschel

The Old Need Wisdom

The old need wisdom, philosophy, poetry, and a sense of being connected to something meaningful. Their lives become more sacred, as I define the word. To me, sacred is that which moves towards wholeness. Resilience means growing from experience and becoming more who one truly is.

Mary Pipher in Another Country

The Resilient Old

The resilient old carry on despite losses. They tend to be practical, sensible, and well organized. All have interests and relationships that sustain them. They aren't bitter or sulky, and in fact, they are all appreciators, grateful for the fresh muffin, a phone call from a friend, or a good sunset. They discover pleasure in small moments.

Mary Pipher in Another Country

On Being Useful

Endless leisure leads to apathy and despair. What feels good to most people is being useful. Rest feels good only if it contrasts with work. What makes life enjoyable is pacing. A work/ rest cycle is stimulating. Rest all the time grows wearisome, as many discover when they retire.

Mary Pipher in Another Country

Grandparents and Grandchildren

Margaret Mead recognized the universal value of grandparents. She noted that grandchildren and grandparents were close partly because they were united against a common enemy--the parents. They were partners in crime.

Mary Pipher in Another Country

The Almost Dead

The most beautiful Americans I've been around are people who are almost dead. They are not busy lost in their identities--rich, poor, fat, smart, needy, Buddhist, the adult child of an alcoholic. Those things aren't too important when you are dying, and you're whittled down to an essential level of being.

Dale Borglum

Don't Raise Your Hand

W. H. Auden introduced his lectures by saying, "If there are any of you in the back who can't hear me, don't raise your hands, because I am also nearsighted.

Mary Pipher in Another Country

Old Pictures

One of the best ways to update old pictures is to ask open ended questions about the present and then really listen to the answers. Denial is really another way to hold on to old pictures long after their realities have disappeared.

Mary Pipher in Another Country

The Importance of Home

Because of the importance of home, the decision to move into a new place is often one of the hardest ones associated with this stage of life.

Mary Pipher in Another Country

Tolstoy on Ordinary Man

Tolstoy said that the life of an ordinary man, if accurately captured, would be the best and the most complex piece of literature ever written.

Mary Pipher in Another Country

Topsy Turvy View of Mental Health

We have become the "I'm dysfunctional, your dysfunctional" culture. People who claim to be happy are viewed as either in denial or hypocrites. If you say you had a happy childhood, you are less likely to be believed than if you say that you were traumatized by cruel parents. We now believe that there are no well-adjusted people, only those who are skilled at masking their pathologies. We live by a topsy-turvy model of mental health where the sick are well and the well are sick. We trust the miserable and doubt the perky.

Mary Pipher in Another Country

Interdependent

We make it almost impossible to be dependent yet dignified, respected, and in control...The greatest challenge for many elders is learning to accept vulnerability and to ask for help...Good mental health is not a matter of being dependent or independent, but of being able to accept the stage one is in with grace and dignity. It's an awareness of being, over the course of a lifetime, continually interdependent.

Mary Pipher in Another Country

Never Retire

Work helps prevent one from getting old. I, for one, cannot dream of retiring. Not now or ever. Retire? The word is alien and the idea is inconceivable to me. I don't believe in retirement for anyone in my type of work, not while the spirit remains. My work is my life. I cannot think of one without the other. To "retire" means to me to begin to die. The man who works and is never bored is never old. Work and interest in worthwhile things are the best remedy for age. Each day I am reborn. Each day I must begin again.

Pablo Casals

The Easy Path of Aging

The easy path of aging is to become a thick-skinned unbudging curmudgeon, an old buzzard, a battle-ax. To grow soft and sweet is the harder way. Character is refined in the laboratory of aging. You don't get it right the first time. Each day brings another opportunity to strike the right mix, neither too malleable nor too rigid, neither too sweet nor too dry, giving the older character its power to bless with a tough-minded tenderness.

James Hillman in The Force of Character

Grandparenting

Because grandparents have little time left, they generally relish this world and its beauty. Yet they have one foot in another world, they can see the angel in the child, and its calling. They can imagine the child beyond its childhood. Even if this insight becomes techy and opinionated, the

idea behind the insight is precious, for it affirms the reality of angel, calling, character, and destiny lifting the child from his toys to the skies. Inspiration also belongs to grand parenting.

James Hillman in The Force of Character

Life Grows More Fascinating

On my last birthday I was ninety-three years old. That is not young, of course. In fact, it is older than ninety. But age is a relative matter. If you continue to work and to absorb the beauty in the world around you, you find that age does not necessarily mean getting old. At least, not in the ordinary sense. I feel many things more intensely than ever before, and for me life grows more fascinating.

Pablo Casals

An Internal Mutiny

Irritability points to something more: The central control apparatus of personality is breaking down. Memory lapses are only part of this. Your feet stumble, your eyes misread, your gut belches and farts; dribbles and drips, sudden tears at unexpected kindness and just as sudden violence over an interruption; words won't come to mind. You cannot hold it together. A mutiny is going on. The crew no longer obeys the captain. Each one starts doing his own thing in its own way. Sporadic desertions rather than a concerted mutiny; anarchy rather than revolution. Or to shift the image, it is as if older age moves the spotlight from the ringmaster with his top hat, megaphone, and whip over to the animals and freaks in the sideshow.

James Hillman in The Force of Character.

Leaning Left

Later years find us often leaning towards the left as we are more often left out and left behind. Weak, defective, and clumsy, my body is already picking up leftist tendencies, and my mind has begun to move down crooked paths and to engage in strange encounters with nonconformist thoughts and feelings. I find myself becoming a fellow traveler of the oppressed, the underdogs and marginals.

James Hillman in The Force of Character

Life Review Is for the Old

The purpose of life in earlier years is to live it. Knowing comes later. Life review doesn't belong to earlier years and probably shouldn't be touched before sixty. Premature life review produces inflated subjectivity, not character, the empowerment of one more big fat "me" graduating from high school into a world that, already crowded with expanded egos, rather needs the modesty and reticence of the apprentice embarking on an adventure.

James Hillman in The Force of Character

The Seven Dwarfs of Aging

Aging brings out all sorts of contradictions in human nature. All the complexes composing personality leap out of the basket. You become an unpredictable hydra--smiling, snapping, happy, grouchy, grumpy--all seven dwarfs. A religious believer might say this multitude of moods foreshadows another world where all is welcome and nothing can be predicted, where the lifting to heaven is simply lifting the lid from the fullness of character, the whole jumble of unpredictable dwarfs risen in flesh, just as they are, with no apologies.

James Hillman in The Force of Character

Forever Young

A recent statistic revealed that one third of all adult males in the United States, and one quarter of all adult women would choose to stay permanent at the ages between fifteen and nineteen: a life sentence in high school.

James Hillman in The Force of Character

The Joy of Repetition

I once interrupted a garrulous uncle in his eighties in the middle of one of his boringly familiar travel stories. "You already told me that," I said. Quick as a wink, and just as irritated as I, he shot back, "I like telling it." (Under his breath he probably also said, "And what the hell is wrong with telling it again? Don't you know anything about the pleasure of telling the same stories?") He refused to allow the eye and ear of youth to judge a characteristic of later years. He knew the joy of the groove.

James Hillman in The Force of Character

Retirement

Retirement also contributes to decrepitude, because the idea of retirement removes older people from useful social functioning. Retirement tends to congregate the retired into their own communities, isolating them from society at large and reinforcing single-issue political positions for their own protection and advantages. Of course, individual older people find ways to be engaged, but the idea of retirement tends to foster a sense of entitlement rather than a sense of service.

James Hillman in The Force of Character

Killing the Old

Of the ninety-five societies studied by research gerontologists Albert and Cattell, twenty killed old people. Of the seventy-five that did not, only seventeen had legal sanctions in place. Some societies confront longevity violently by beating, burying, strangling, or stabbing the elder who has become decrepit... Modern progress lowers the value of older people at the same time as it adds

years to our lives. The longer we live, the less we are worth... Esteem for the old is less a function of modernization than of the vitality of a tradition that maintains links with another, invisible world, whether through religion, custom, superstition, or folklore, or by means of common poetic speech.

James Hillman in The Force of Character

Your Person Inside

Your inside person does not have an age. It is all the ages you have ever been and the age you are at this very moment. As soon as you get used to being some extremely advanced age that you used to think of as ancient and hoary, you will get even older, God willing. Random teeth will fall out of your mouth as you walk to your car. You will rarely feel as old as you are, except when you have just returned from traveling overseas or are in line at the DMV.

Anne Lamont in Almost Everything

Unpacking the Word Old

Far better than comparing "old" with external ideas like "fresh" and "young" would be teasing apart the web of ideas stuffed into that one short syllable. The Bible needs at least nine different Hebrew terms plus many variations, while our English language compacts them all together.

James Hillman in The Force of Character

What Nourishes Older Years

Earlier years must focus on getting things done, while later years consider what was done and how...We should fund what nourishes older years; companionship, freedom, all of the arts, nature, silence, service, simplicity, and safety.

James Hillman in The Force of Character

The Twin Gremlins

Each morning the twin gremlins of fear and lethargy sit at the foot of our bed and smirk. Fear of further departure, fear of the unknown, fear of the challenge of largeness intimidates us back into our convenient rituals, conventional thinking, and familiar surroundings... The daily confrontation with these gremlins of fear and lethargy obliges us to choose between anxiety and depression, for each is aroused by the dilemma of daily choice. Anxiety will be our companion if we risk the next stage of our journey, and depression our companion if we do not.

James Hollis in Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life