

Reading the Vanishing Volumes While You Still Can

Reading through online headlines I often see a story entitled, “Demi Moore at 58 Hasn’t Aged Well.” Though I’ve never clicked on that link, I did google “Demi Moore at 58” and thought she looked pretty darn good. Sure, she’s probably gone under the plastic surgeon’s knife a few times—those high cheek bones seem a dead giveaway—but most online comments about her are complimentary, telling us she’s still a physical beauty in her sixth decade.

But who cares? Go to any Walmart or grocery store and you’ll see platoons of people who haven’t “aged well.” Unable to walk, some of the elderly ride through the store aisles in motorized carts. Others teeter along, clinging to their shopping buggies for balance as they hunt for coffee, soup, and ground beef. Some older folks even work in these establishments, bagging groceries and pushing carts from the parking lot back to the store.

By our societal standards of youth and beauty, none of them has “aged well.” Nor have I, for that matter. Compare me to the guy I was at 35, half my current age, and you’ll find in the former a solid oak and in the latter a weather-beaten, time-gnarled old tree. But hidden behind those gray hairs, barnacles, and wrinkled faces are gifts that younger people ignore at their peril.

Many of the cognitive elderly are walking, breathing libraries, flesh-and-blood encyclopedias of knowledge and wisdom. They remember when racism was real in America, not some theory concocted by academics. They recollect the days when the Vietnam War divided Americans, when fights broke out over gasoline in the long lines at service stations in the 1970s, when the Iranians held Americans hostage during the

Carter administration.

Even more importantly, these old people have witnessed the heartaches and hardships brought by death, divorce, broken relationships with family and friends, debt and bankruptcy. And with any luck, they have also waltzed with love, joy, and laughter, and do so even today.

In having trekked through some 25,000 days, a good number of these men and women have acquired wisdom. They know that what so many regard as crises—failure to gain acceptance at a certain college, a broken engagement, the loss of a job—are just small-arms fire on the battlefield of life. They recognize that the little things, like the hug of a grandchild or a pat on the shoulder from a friend, count for a lot. They have reached an age where they understand that people matter more than money, that character and a good name are worth more than mansions and gold, and that gratitude is the grace that keeps on giving.

And if you talk to some of these wise folks, you may well find in them this description taken from the film *Secondhand Lions*: “A man’s body may grow old, but his spirit can still be as young and as restless as ever.”

So much of the time, however, no one seeks out or listens to that spirit. I keep a 1988 “Peanuts” cartoon beneath glass on my desk, featuring Charlie Brown and Linus playing in the snow. “Yesterday was my Grandpa’s birthday,” says Charlie Brown. “I asked him what the most important thing was that he learned in life...” Charlie pauses, then adds, “He said, ‘I’ve learned that even when people ask me that question, they aren’t going to listen.’”

One of my great regrets is that in my younger years I failed even to ask such questions. What, for example, did my beloved Grandma Helen count as success? What did she love—and she loved him deeply—about my grandfather, who died when I was a

boy? What was the secret to their happy marriage? But she passed on more than 30 years ago, and I'll never learn the answers to such questions.

So, a bit of advice to any younger people reading this column: My regrets need not be yours. Open up the living books that surround you before time closes them forever. Ask questions. That 75-year-old aunt who sits so quietly at family gatherings might just be a treasure house of stories and insights.

Who knows? Her words might even change your life.

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