

*Book Notes #75 2.0*

October 2021

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence  
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*More Thoughts and Corrections on Turning 75*

**CORRECTION**

Originally this week's **Book Notes** was slated to take a look at James Shapiro's *Shakespeare in a Divided America*, but we will save that for next week because I want to do two things in this very short **Note**. I know, I know – I frequently violate the caution that brevity is the soul of wit. A friend once told me that if you ask me the time, I'll tell you how to make a clock – but this **Note** will be short. First, I want to thank all those readers who emailed me their enjoyment of last week's **Book Notes #75** "On Turning 75." Your comments, insights and sometimes critiques are always appreciated. Thank you!

Next, exercising the Editor's "**blue pencil**," there are several technical corrections and one significant addition I want to make to last week's **Note** "On Turning 75." The technical corrections are necessary out of respect for the poets I quoted, but the addition is essential for it was somehow omitted and was the major point of the essay.

In last week's **Note**, the formatting for quotations from Rolfe Humphries' "Polo Grounds" and Jenny Joseph's "Warning" were inadvertently smooched into italicized and prosy looking paragraphs. Out of respect for Humphries and Joseph, here is how they should have appeared:

*from Polo Grounds* by Rolfe Humphries

Time is of the essence. The crowd and players

Are the same age always, but the man in the crowd  
Is older every season ...

The complete “Polo Grounds” can be found [here](#).

*from Warning by Jenny Joseph*

When I am an old woman I shall wear purple  
With a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me.  
And I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer gloves  
And satin sandals, and say we've no money for butter.  
I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tired  
And gobble up samples in shops and press alarm bells  
And run my stick along the public railings  
And make up for the sobriety of my youth.  
I shall go out in my slippers in the rain  
And pick flowers in other people's gardens  
And learn to spit ...

The complete version of Jenny Joseph's marvelous “Warning” can be found [here](#).

Also, the correct title of Dylan Thomas' third poem cited last week is not  
“His In My Craft or Sullen Art,” but simply “In My Craft and Sullen Art,” the  
complete version of which can be found [here](#).

More important to the sense of the essay was the accidental deletion of three  
paragraphs at the very end that attempted to summarize what to me is the most  
important lesson to be learned from the unescapable realization that one dies.  
And that is, that meditating upon the inevitability of one's own death can lead to  
either despair or an affirmation of life as one answer's Shakespeare and Camus'  
“To be or not to be ...” with a resounding “Yes” to life. Which then leads, as the  
first of the omitted paragraphs begins, to the question “How to live?”

Here are the omitted paragraphs (I have intentionally italicized them to set them  
off from the body of this **Note**):

*So, in thinking about life, the question becomes “How to live?” Only you can  
answer that question for you, but the Buddha gives as good an answer as any.  
Probably apocryphal – I've not been able to find it or any close approximation  
in **The Dhammapada** or any of the sutras – the Buddha is alleged to have  
replied after being asked if God existed, “Since unprovable, that is an  
uninteresting question; the task is, in the absence of an answer to that question,  
to live an ethical life and to die with no regrets.”*

*Sounds simple; it isn't. It's the work of a lifetime.*

*From my admittedly limited and, being human, imperfect perspective, I suggest  
that in thinking about aging and death, which is really thinking about living, one  
ought (a moral word) to live by caring for others, particularly those for whom  
one is responsible; to make such amends as one can and to atone for such  
wrongs as one has done, especially those lapses in caring for those in one's care;  
to find something one loves to do and someone with whom to share it, so that, as  
Ovid says, “When death comes, let it find me at my work.” [1]*

As noted, it “sounds simple,” but it isn’t. All of the world’s major religions have as their fundamental ethic the exhortation to treat other people as you would have them treat you. If only it were that easy, but as history gives eloquent and often tragic testimony, it may be the most difficult thing humans are tasked with doing.

So, what to do? You could do worse than Socrates, of whom Montaigne writes, “There is nothing more notable in Socrates than that he found time, when he was an old man, to learn music and dancing, and thought it time well spent.” [2]

And, of course, you can always learn from Mary Oliver, who said:

*from Wild Geese*

You do not have to be good.  
You do not have to walk on your knees  
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.  
You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
love what it loves. [3]

The complete “Wild Geese” can be found [here](#).



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### End Notes

1. Montaigne, Michel. “*To philosophize is to learn to die*,” in **The Complete Essays of Montaigne**, Tr. Donald M. Frame. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1958), p.62.
2. Montaigne, Michel. “*Of Experience*,” in **The Complete Essays of Montaigne**, Tr. Donald M. Frame. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1958), pp. 851-852.
3. Oliver, Mary. “*Wild Geese*,” in **New and Selected Poems**. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), p. 110.

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