

Book Notes #75

September 2021

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
Dr. Andrew Roth

On Turning 75

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.

“Sonnet 73”

William Shakespeare [1]

Raymond Carver many years ago wrote a short story entitled “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love”, but today I want to ask you “What do you think about when you think about death?” Or, with a touch less melodrama and slightly less startling, “What do you think about when you think about aging?” And I do mean this very personally, your death and your aging, for however young you might be death is unavoidable and you will age. You are aging. You are older today than you were yesterday and you will be older tomorrow if you get to tomorrow than you were today.

In an age when grocery shopping has become an existential act (cf. the recent shooting in a Kroger Store in Collierville, Tennessee or the Wal-Mart massacre in El Paso, Texas a few years ago), these are not idle questions. Nor are they ever, for as Camus observed in *The Plague* (I think it was in *The Plague* but it might have been elsewhere) the only valid philosophical question is Hamlet’s “To be, or not to be, that is the question”. [2] Interpreted variously, the line can be taken to ask does one silently suffers wrong or does one take action to correct it. Camus sees it in a broader existential context – does one choose to live or to die. If one chooses life, then the question becomes “How ought that life be lived?”

Ah, as Shakespeare illustrates in the soliloquy in which the line begins, it is a deceptively simple question with no simple answer.

These philosophical musings, for as Montaigne wrote “To philosophize is to learn to die” [3] result from an odd series of coincidences. This is Book Notes #75 appearing for the first time on Thursday, September 30, 2021, which is also my 75th birthday. Now this may or may not be “remarkable” – one of the definitions of coincidence is “a remarkable occurrence of events or circumstances without apparent causal connection” [4] – but it inspired my Jefferson Society colleague Angela Beaumont to suggest that I write something about turning 75, which is a number one can neither “bull_____” nor, more genteelly phrased, finesse.

“It is”, as the current cliché goes, “what it is”.

One can take the somber approach, noting that I am now in Bonus Time having exceeded my Biblical three score and ten and having outlived my father by almost two years and counting. Or, picking up on a suggestion by reader John re a previous Book Notes, one could take the whimsical approach, exploring all the ways as one ages, one becomes increasingly out of sync with younger people, which in our righteousness riven age can often be hurtful in both directions, but, fortunately, more often is only humorous.

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. . . [5]

Working for over half a century in higher education, I for years misquoted Humphries poem, saying “The crowd never ages”. It resonated with me, as it will with anyone who spent or spends their life working with young people, for the students are forever young. In my campus world, the students are forever nineteen or twenty and one of the profession’s pleasures is the perennial refreshment one gets from their enthusiasm, from their energy, from their joy at discovering and learning new things. It keeps you young, but, also, in all the ways, little and large, their world differs from mine and yours, it also reminds one of time’s passing. For while they remain forever young, one can feel oneself receding from them.

Whimsically reminding us of that fact, for many years Beloit College in Beloit, Wisconsin published an annual **Mindset List** pointing out to faculty members across the land how the incoming First-Year Class’ “mindset” – a set of cultural references – differed from the faculty. Beginning with the first **Mindset List** in 1998 for the Class of 2002, most of whom were born in 1980 (it’s sobering to realize they are now 41), the list pointed out the trivial – “there have always been red M&M’s, and blue ones are not new”, “they cannot fathom what it was like not having a remote control”, “they never owned a record player” and “the expression ‘you sound like a broken record’ means nothing to them” – to the profound – “their life has always included AIDS” and “they have never feared a nuclear war. ‘The Day After is a pill to them – not a movie’”. [6]

Given that 1998 was 23 years ago and many of those things might be dated for all of us, let’s consider the last Beloit College **Mindset List** from 2019 for the class of 2023, most of whose members were born in 2001 and are now entering their junior year of college. The list’s trivial observations include “The Lion King has always been on Broadway”, “Teachers have always had to insist that term papers employ sources in addition to those found online”, “If you say ‘around the turn of

the century,' they may well ask you, 'which one?'" and "They have avidly joined Harry Potter, Ron, and Hermione as they built their reading skills through all seven volumes." Its more profound ones include "Among those who have never been alive in their lifetimes are Princess Diana, Notorious B.I.G., Jacques Cousteau, and Mother Teresa", "The announcement of someone being the 'first woman' to hold a position has only impressed their parents", "'No means no' has always been morphing, slowly, into 'only yes means yes,'" and "First Responders have always been heroes." [7]

The original Beloit College **Mindset Lists**, all of which can be found [here](#), while they had some faculty involvement, were largely the creation of the college's Public Affairs Department, from which, not taking themselves too seriously, its humor derived. It has since been taken over by Marist College and is now entirely a creation of several faculty members in English, Art and Criminal Justice, who, as faculty members are prone to do, in their touching earnestness, have drained it of all of its humor transforming it into a series of reading and writing assignments. The assignments include "Bringing awareness to veteran college students", "Adapting to a virtual college experience", "Enduring an unprecedented public health crisis on campus", "Experiencing a re-emergence of White Supremacy in America" and, God love 'em, one for which I might actually do the "Further Reading" assignment, "Starting a poetry renaissance". [8]

I wish them well. The topics, while bordering on the tedious, have their merits (the pun on 'Marist' feeble but intentional), but the lists are now devoid of their wonderful ability to make one sensitive to the differences in world view and experience between oneself and those whom one would teach. The Marist faculty are apparently either incredibly "with it" (which expression itself might require translation for some south of 40, certainly younger than 30) or oblivious to the learning potential in my recent experience extolling the virtues of Gracie Slick of the Jefferson Starship nee Airplane, who refuses to do rock 'n' roll reunion tours because old people doing rock look stupid and she, nearing 80, refuses to look stupid and my dawning awareness that the person to whom I was speaking had no idea who Gracie Slick, much less the Jefferson Airplane, might be or have been!

You can't communicate if you aren't speaking the same language, which perhaps the Marist faculty intuited and decided to have the students engage in faculty-speak!

If whimsy one wants in contemplating turning 75, then let's leave the Marist faculty to their papers and turn to poetry, for aging and death have engaged poets since long before there were such things as colleges and universities, printing presses and books, since, well, since the beginning. One of my favorites is Jenny Joseph's "Warning", sometimes referred to by its first line "When I am an old woman I shall wear purple". Joseph, who studied literature at St. Hilda's College, Oxford, escaped the academic trap, became a journalist and a highly accomplished poet. [9] She wrote "Warning" in 1961 when she was 29:

from Warning

*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. . . [10]

A 1996 BBC poll voted Joseph's "Warning" Britain's 22nd favorite poem of all time [11]. Although her poem inspired women to wear purple and indirectly inspired Sue Ellen Cooper of California to found the popular Red Hat Society, Joseph herself, who died in 2018, never endorsed the Red Hat Society nor ever wore purple, saying "I can't stand purple. It doesn't suit me". [12]

A video of Helena Bonham Carter reading "Warning" by Jenny Joseph can be found [here](#).

While Joseph's poem is delightful in its whimsicality, most poets contemplating their own mortality and Shakespeare and Camus' existential question tend towards the defiant, the ironic, the ennobling resolute, or the dour if not outright despairing. Perhaps engulfed in his own death wish, he died at 39 of respiratory disease aggravated by incipient alcoholism and never actually experienced aging, Dylan Thomas', the last of the Romantics, adolescent yelp against the end we all must face remains the English language's most defiant (and futile) protest against death's inevitability:

from Do not go gentle into that good night

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night. . ." [13]

Rather than Thomas's defiant rant, I much prefer his life-affirming poem "The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower", which begins:

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees
Is my destroyer.
And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose
My youth is bent by the same wintry fever. . . [14]

Or from His In my Craft or Sullen Art:

Not for the proud man apart
From the raging moon I write
On these spindrift pages
Nor for the towering dead
With their nightingales and psalms
But for the lovers, their arms
Round the griefs of the ages,
Who pay no praise or wages
Nor heed my craft or art. [15]

Among the ironic or ennobling resolute are Tennyson's "Tithonus" and "Ulysses". Based on the Greek myth of Eos, goddess of the dawn, and her Trojan consort

Tithonus, Tennyson's "Tithonus" tells their ironic story in which Eos so loved Tithonus that she granted his wish for eternal life, but Tithonus forgot to ask her for eternal youth. So he lives on and on and on and on growing older and older and yearning for death's release. It begins:

from Tithonus

The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,
The vapours weep their burthen to the ground,
Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,
And after many a summer dies the swan.
Me only cruel immortality
Consumes: I wither slowly in thine arms,
Here at the quiet limit of the world,
A white-hair'd shadow roaming like a dream
The ever-silent spaces of the East,
Far-folded mists, and gleaming halls of morn. . . [16]

Of all the poems, novels, plays, songs – whatever -- celebrating those who fail retirement preferring not to rust out but to wear out, Tennyson's "Ulysses" is most often quoted. Tennyson tells the tale of Odysseus (Ulysses), the triumphant trickster at Troy with his Trojan horse – 'beware Greeks bearing gifts' – who, having sailed the seas for twenty years, confronted the cyclops, escaped Circe, defeated all those who would thwart him and finally returned to Ithaca, slain the suitors, once again lain with his wife, the heroically cunning, steadfast Penelope, restored peace to his kingdom and installed his son Telemachus on the throne, is now bored and restless. Ulysses says "It little profits that an idle king/By this still hearth. . . I cannot rest from travel. . ." [17] So, he proposes to his mariners that while they are now old men:

from Ulysses

Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;
Death closes all: but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done. . .
. . . Come, my friends,
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world. . .
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield. [18]

Although the stiffening of Tennyson's Victorian spine has inspired numerous people – the phrase "to seek a newer world" was a particular favorite of Robert F. Kennedy, who would use it to challenge the notion that we must accept the world as it is – not all poets of either Tennyson's time or before or later saw aging as something to defy. Some saw it as something to bewail, maybe not bewail but certainly to bemoan or even to whine about; for example, in that quotation from Shakespeare with which this Note begins, there is the hint of a whine that now that the poet grows old the lover to whom the sonnet is addressed may love him less. Speaking of bemoaning, Thomas Hardy, who in "I Look Into My Glass" bemoans the sad truth that while he still feels desire's twinge he is less able to act upon it, sings "I look into my glass/And view my wasting skin/And say, 'Would God it came to pass/My heart had shrunk as thin'"! [19] Or W.B. Yeats in "Sailing

to Byzantium” lamenting “That is no country for old men. The young/In one another’s arms, birds in trees/Those dying generations – at their song. . . [20]

Jack Gilbert, a wonderful late 20th, early 21st-century poet wavered between angry defiance at death’s intrusion, writing in “The Lost Hotels of Paris” “The Lord gives everything and charges/by taking it back. What a bargain./Like being young for a while. . .” [21] and a profound acceptance of it in a series of poems about the death of his wife, the sculptor Michiko Nogami, about whom he wrote:

Michiko Dead

He manages like somebody carrying a box
that is too heavy, first with his arms
underneath. When their strength gives out,
he moves the hands forward, hooking them
on the corners, pulling the weight against
his chest. He moves his thumbs slightly
when the fingers begin to tire, and it makes
different muscles take over. Afterward,
he carries it on his shoulder, until the blood
drains out of the arm that is stretched up
to steady the box and the arm goes numb. But now
the man can hold underneath again, so that
he can go on without ever putting the box down. [22]

While Gilbert restores some of my faith in my fellow males, still all this male ego strutting and fretting about aging and dying gets tiring. One looks for calm and finds it in Emily Dickinson, who wrote of grief “I measure every Grief I meet/With narrow, probing, eyes – /I wonder if It weighs like Mine -- /Or has an Easier size.” [23] As she writes:

from I measure every Grief I meet

The Grieved – are many – I am told –
There is the various Cause –
Death – is but one – and comes but once –
And only nails the eyes – [24]

Dickinson, who for the last several years of her life was seriously ill, speaks of death with that calm reassurance only someone completely comfortable with their Self can command. She writes:

from Because I could not stop for Death

Because I could not stop for Death – He kindly stopped for me – The Carriage
held but just Ourselves – And Immortality.
We slowly drove – He knew no haste And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too, For His Civility . . . [25]

So, in asking what we think about when we think about death and dying, Dickinson understood what Montaigne meant when he wrote that “Cicero says that to philosophize is nothing else but to prepare for death. . . (for) all the wisdom and reasoning in the world boils down finally to this point: to teach us not to be afraid to die”. [26] It’s what you do after you realize that Humphries’ observation

that the crowd never ages does not apply to you, for its eternal youth only offsets your gathering years. You can laugh at it, as did Jenny Joseph, only to realize in the end purple is not your color. Or you can yell at it as did Dylan Thomas and perhaps have the wit to realize no one's listening. Or you can chuckle at poor Tithonus who asked for eternal life but forgot to ask for eternal youth. Or you can flex your wannabe Victorian spine and, like Ulysses, sail to where the sun sets in the enchanted isles. Or, like Hardy, Yeats, and the younger Gilbert, you can bewail it for whatever comfort wailing provides. Or like the later Gilbert and the preternaturally calm Dickinson, you can accept Horace's advice:

If but my faults could trick and please
My wits, I'd rather seem a fool at ease,
Than to be wise and rage. [27]

Which is to say you can deny them and defy them, but you cannot escape aging and dying. The only wise route is to face them and facing them accept them. As Montaigne says "no kind of armor protects you" for, quoting Propertius, "death will drag his (your) head out at last' – (so) let us meet it steadfastly. . ." [28] And in so doing, interestingly enough and with a touch of irony, you answer Shakespeare and Camus' question – you choose "to be", you choose to live. Camus believed you only begin to live when you realize you die, when, unlike the young, you begin to understand that there is not time enough.

So, in thinking about aging and death, ironically, one is really thinking about living. Since, as Montaigne suggests, all humans suffer two indignities – you are born and did not enjoy it, but you don't remember it, and you will die, perhaps unpleasantly, but being dead will not remember it, why brood about it and in brooding darken your days, darken your life, the only one you'll ever get? In choosing life, think of Horace when he said "Look on each day as if it were your last/And each unlooked-for hour will seem a boon" [29] and like Montaigne and Benjamin Franklin, tell yourself "Whatever can be done another day can be done today". [30]

Or, more pointedly and at the risk of a bit of preaching, one ought to strive to live one's life so that when death comes you can say with Mary Oliver:

from When Death Comes

When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking a world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world. [32]

Rather than just reading the names of songs, for a more complete experience of these songs listen to Episodes #13 and #14: "*Songs of Protest Seeking Freedom*" of my *The American Tapestry Project* on WQLN/NPR which can be found on WQLN's website [here](#), and on NPR One [here](#).



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End Notes

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