

Older and Wiser?

Veronica and I have been noticing things lately, things that make us feel, how can I say it, older than we used to feel. Yes, older than we used to feel. It's not so much that our inevitable deterioration has increased dramatically in recent days, it hasn't. I think that it's the cumulative effect of aches, injuries, less sleep, vague anxieties about the world and specific worries about our girls.

I must admit, I had never figured on this. All my life I have been above the fray, far from the madding crowd. I was sympathetic when someone else succumbed to the vicissitudes of life but secure in the knowledge that those eventualities did not apply to me. I would live for as long as it made sense and then somehow, magically come to the end, robust and wise and ready for it. Funny how real life gets in the way of one's ideas about life. They are not always the same are they, reality and our notion of reality?

I received a note from my brother the other day. It was a note that only my brother could send. He has a way of disappearing for a while and then appearing again as if nothing were amiss. He says he needs a new liver and that he is on a list of candidates. It will take two or six months. It will be dangerous or routine. He will live or die. My brother is like that. It is very important for him to have the last word, not to be made a fool of. He will not be made a fool of, even by the prospect of his own death. I should say, especially by the prospect of his own death. He has a proud man's syndrome wherein it must never appear that you didn't know the answer. Surprise is embarrassment. Embarrassment is the enemy of proud men.

Lawyers suffer from this. They defend people whom they know to be guilty and all the while, outside of court, they will let on, cryptically, that they know their client did it. It's natural, I guess. "I want you to know that I know and that I'm nobody's fool". It was true with O.J. Simpson's defense team and it is true with my brother. He intellectually hedges the life bet. Nothing is terribly wrong but he won't be surprised if he dies.

We older folks whistle past the graveyard and suppose that it fools the uninitiated even though most of the folks we associate with are, precisely, the initiated.

There is a strong feeling that denial of reality is the best defense, pretending that the end is unforeseen is the way to be. Pretending to be six when you're sixty is only natural, I suppose. Life is a circle, after all. The older we get the more we revert to positions we took as callow youths. We tend to say, "No one lives forever... except maybe me."

I wonder if there is a trick to this. Is there a game you can play with yourself to be honest about what you feel but not indulge temerity to the point of surrender. I mean really, there is no point to giving up unless you really do plan to end things. It is a question which should be easier for us to face but we live in a world that has no room for the challenge. But aside from the final choice, is there a way to be more at ease with the inevitable decrease of one's strength while reveling in the increase of one's wisdom? It seems to me that this should be the essence of aging, gracefully.

At it's simplest it might be put this way; what is the point of growing older if you can't be sure that you are growing wiser? If the lessening of one's physical power is not inversely proportional to the growth of one's emotional and intellectual maturity one more easily understands Hemingway's choice. I wouldn't want to try it but I do begin to understand it.

Ah, wisdom. I would say that in the early part of the twenty-first century wisdom, particularly the wisdom of age, is pretty far down on the list of things that we hold to be precious. It's down there way behind wrinkle cream and a Blackberry. Indeed, technology in general and the tools to 'appear' young are pretty high on that list of valuable commodities. It would be nice if the ability to "Twitter" was somehow connected to having something important to "Twitter" about. I don't know if you've seen those instant messages from the president's first speech to the joint session of Congress. Some of our elected representatives in the audience were busily using the latest communications tools to complain about where they were seated. Important stuff.

What if the wiser you got, the more techno savvy you got? What if, as we got older, we also got magically prepared to share our wisdom with the latest in informational tools? What if the more you had to say the more and faster ways you would have to say it? The world would be upside down. What if we had video phones and twittering and the kids had newspapers and snail mail?

What if my 92 year old mother were comfortable texting me about her latest insight into the nature of life? We could share the wisdom of the wise.

On the other hand maybe we'd just complain about where we got seated.