

EMBRACING THE OLD ONE OUR YOUTH-ORIENTED CULTURE URGES US TO HEED

By Michael Ventura

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Age. For most of human history, to be old has been a mark of honor. Today it's a source of fear, even shame. Yet my 50th birthday was strangely joyous. It began as my days usually begin: I walked to the corner cafe, drank my coffee, read my New York Times, watched the world go by for a while. (Tough life, right?)

Usually, after this languid beginning, I do what writers call "work:" a kind of restless hunting, tracking a strange beast in the jungle of oneself. In my case, this looks like hours of pacing up and down, smoking lots of cigarettes, and drinking many cups of strong tea while staring out the window. (When the beast is finally found, the writer-hunter must then refrain from killing it; rather, you sit very still and let the creature devour you.)

But on my 50th birthday I gave myself the day off (very tough life), and I walked. And walked, and walked. I set myself the walking-task of remembering every birthday as far back as I could. I focused my thoughts until I could recall at least one specific thing about each: a friend, a song, something said or left unsaid. The quiet girl who sat at the next desk in fifth grade. The fight with Ginger on the way to the Springsteen concert. Me alone in the Mojave reading the poems of George Seferis. Chris in a witch's wig. Mama pretending she wasn't ill when the heat got shut off on Decatur Street. Mama, when I was 7, screaming, "Your birthday is a day like any other!" Our senior-class Halloween party for the little kids, where a dark-eyed, scared-eyed, tiny girl came straight up to me and took my hand and wouldn't let it go for the whole party. I wouldn't have imagined it possible, but I "saw" something of every birthday all the way back to age 5.

Once a specific bit of memory was retrieved, it became easier to see who I had been that year. In this way I met long-gone Michaels I'd forgotten - it was painful how many, and why I'd needed to forget them. I was embarrassed by some, ashamed of others; a few I even feared. But some were still my pals, and of three or four I was very proud.

They walked beside me, that gang of Michaels, many of them strangers to each other, but walking together, for this one day, with a grateful feeling of companionship.

When I told this to a friend, she said I was forgiving myself, but I don't think so. I don't think we have the right to forgive ourselves. Forgiveness can come only from those we've sinned against, if they find it in their hearts, and perhaps from God, if God is interested.

Rather, that walk was a look into my own eyes - the eyes of the many I'd been and the one I was. I suspect that looking into your own eyes, or another's, is a tougher task than forgiving: looking, seeing, and living with - or choosing to live without - what you see.

When that walk was over, I recalled something my brother Aldo had once said to me: "Unless you practice seeing yourself, you become invisible to yourself." I felt less invisible to myself that day. Lighter and darker, both. It was a good way to pass my half-century mark.

But ... well, sometimes you try to see yourself and you see someone else, someone you didn't expect at all. He is you and not you, or perhaps a you who has always been waiting within. This was the lesson (learned not for the first time, and probably not the last) of my most recent birthday, my 52nd.

On this day, too, I planned nothing. I've learned to leave birthdays unplanned, or almost so, to let the day unfold on its own, because a birthday is a teaching day; it has something to reveal.

Too many plans constrict its ability to speak. Left to itself, any day will at some unexpected moment find its voice and deliver its message.

This is especially true of birthdays, for, as Thomas Hardy once observed, your birthday exists in relation to another day, a day that is impossible to know: We pass silently, every year, over the anniversary of our death.

At 40, you may have half your life in front of you. At 52, it's not likely.

In your 30s you may worry about losing your looks. In your 50s you worry about losing your capacities.

At 30 you have maybe 35 years before serious deterioration sets in. At 52, you have ... 15 years left of reasonably adequate strength? Less? Ten, maybe? If your bad habits don't get you first?

Every age has its wisdom (youth knows truths that middle age can no longer bear), but one difference between being young and no longer young is this: The young don't know they are going to die, not really; the no-longer-young know.

We know, consciously or not, that one day of the year is the anniversary (the counting-backward anniversary, if you like) of our death. So we walk more softly through our days, or more bitterly, or even more recklessly, depending on our natures, but our walk does alter, because, as James Baldwin wrote, "there will come a day you won't remember" - the day you die.

There is an Old One inside that helps with this. One of the tragedies of America today is that it ignores and shames this Old One.

It's become a cliché that inside everyone there's an "inner child." Pop culture is an enormous, omnipresent machine designed to tantalize and trick this Young One within.

The Young One seems the only part of you that our commercial culture takes seriously. Your Young One is seduced into consuming like an adult while remaining too young to think like one. Your Young One is flattered into thinking it's your true self, the one you must never leave behind.

This gives the Young One burdens and responsibilities beyond its capacities, making your Young One all the more insecure, all the more vulnerable, and thus all the more susceptible to the lies it is being sold. And selling is the object of this delusion.

As we age, we're frightened into buying all manner of chemicals, operations, and concoctions to retain some ghost of the Young One. Few see that what they're really doing is devoting lots of time and money to being afraid, or that this only feeds their fear and makes it stronger.

The most insidious result of our buying into this cult of the Young One is that we insult and shame the Old One.

The Old One has been in us from the beginning, just like the Young One. You can see its expression sometimes even in the face of an infant. Or in your own face in a childhood photograph. Or in the unexpected wisdom of a grade-school or high-school kid - something utterly true and perceptive, completely beyond their experience, yet there nonetheless.

It's the Old One talking. The Old One is in us, waiting to take over from the Young One when it is time.

When adults of other eras taught their young to "respect your elders," they were also respecting the Old One who lived within each young person, strengthening the Old One,

giving the Old One a source of pride, so that it would be up to the task when it was needed.

But our culture insults and shames the Old One at every turn and sells the idea that, to be accepted, we must insult and shame our Old One by trying to stay young.

After 50 years or more of insult and shame, our Old One is weak and frightened and riven with self-doubt. It's no wonder we are afraid of aging, for how can such an Old One come forth in us and be strong when its time comes?

So we are left with only the Young One with which to face infirmity and death. But the Young One is unprepared for this, for the Young One is incapable of believing in death.

You might say that its job is not to believe in death, not to value, much less respect, death. That's part of the Young One's beauty. With its audacity, the Young One gives us great strength, at the proper time. But that time passes. And after it passes, only the Old One can give us the strength we need. But it's difficult to be strong after a half-century of ceaseless shaming.

When I turned 52, my Old One came to me. Not-yet-me, but me, my Old One counseled me not to be repelled by the changes in my face and body, by the graying and loss of my hair. He bade me to respect him, feed him, sing to him, speak to him, listen to him, walk with him; to cease shaming him, to keep others from shaming him, and to comfort the shamed parts of him; to make a place for him to occupy, so he can do his job, when it's time.

For time doesn't kid around. It will come soon enough, the day when I'll awake and be very lonely and frightened if the Old One isn't there or isn't able.

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