

REFLECTIONS ON TURNING 52

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," off and on all day and way into the night (when these columns get written).

A writer's work is 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 get very still and let the creature devour you.) But on my 50th birthday I gave myself the day off (very tough life), and walked.

And walked, and walked, and set myself the walking-task of remembering every birthday as far back as I could. I focused 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 a Springsteen concert. Roy Orbison singing "The Eyes of Texas" at Soap Creek. Alone in the Mojave reading the poems of 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 kids, and a dark-eyed, scared-eyed tiny girl, and how she came straight up to me and took my hand and wouldn't let it go for the whole party.

Once a specific bit of memory was retrieved, it became easier to see who I was 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 some, some I even feared; but some were still my pals, and of three or four I was very proud. "That 13-year-old Michael saved my life, and how did he know to do it, what did he have to go on? I like that kid." That kind of thing. I wouldn't have imagined it possible, but through searching for something specific about each day, I "saw" something of every birthday all the way back to age five. My life walked beside me, a 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 is for those we've sinned against, if they find it in their hearts, and perhaps for God, if God is interested. Rather, that walk was a look into my own eyes -- the eyes of the many I'd been and am. 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 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 walk past my half-century mark.

But... well, sometimes you try to see yourself and you see something else, something you didn't expect at all. It is you and not-you -- or perhaps a you that 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 planless, or almost so, letting the day unfold on its own. For 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, give its message. This is especially true of birthdays. For, as Thomas Hardy once observed, your birthday exists in relation to another day, a day which it is not possible to know: We pass silently, every year, over the day that will mark the anniversary of our death.

At 40 you may have half your life in front of you; at 52, it's not likely. At 30 you have maybe 35 years before serious deterioration sets in. At 52, you don't. In your thirties you may worry about losing your looks; in your fifties you worry about losing your capacities. Ten years left of reasonably adequate strength? Less? Fifteen, maybe? If your bad habits don't get you first?

Every age has its wisdom (youth knows truths that most of the middle-aged can no longer bear), but one difference between being young and no-longer-young is: The young don't know they are going to die, not really; the no-longer-young know. We know, consciously or not, that one unknown day of the year is the anniversary (the counting-backwards 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 a child -- an "inner child," as they say. Pop culture is an enormous omnipresent machine for tantalizing and tricking 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 truest self, the one you must always look like, the one you must never leave behind.

This gives the Young One burdens, 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 you are being sold. And selling is the object of this delusion. As we age, we're frightened into buying all manner of chemicals, operations, 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, nor that this only feeds their fear and makes it stronger.

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

The Old One has been in you 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 sudden wisdom of a grade school or high school kid -- something utterly true and perceptive, completely beyond their experience, yet theirs nevertheless. It's the Old One talking. The Old One is in you, waiting to take over from the Young One when it's time.

When other eras taught their young to "respect your elders," they were also respecting the Old One who lived in the young -- strengthening the Old One, giving the Old One a source of pride, so that it would be up to its tasks when it was needed. But our culture insults and shames the Old One at every turn -- and sells the idea that, in order to be accepted, you too must insult and shame your 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. And then 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 has come?

Much fear of aging, in our era, is our intuitive sense that both we and our culture have conspired to degrade the Old One within to such an extent that our Old One is useless to us, crippled. What it was born knowing, it no longer knows. It has absorbed too many insults, and is too full of doubt. So we are left with only the Young One with which to face infirmity and death. But that's not something that the Young One is prepared for, 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 its beauty. With that audacity, the Young One gives us great strength, at the proper time. But that time passes. And, when 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.

52... the 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, in my body, and the graying and loss of my hair. Bid me to respect him, feed him, sing him, speak to him, listen to him, walk with him. To cease shaming him, and to not allow others to shame him, and to comfort the shamed parts of him. Make a place for him to occupy, to 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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