

THE MARK OF AGE

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Years ago, when I was just finding myself, discovering who I am (like many of us do), I was bold enough to just show up at the offices of well-known persons and simply ask to see them, or phone them without an introduction. I did this with folks like Mircea Eliade, Hannah Arendt, and many others. Some of them were too stiff to share, but with others we shed tears together and laughed about life.

One particular memory I have is that of Kenneth Boulding, the famous economist. I just showed up one morning at his office at the University of Michigan and asked to see him. I told him what I was going through and instead of freaking out, getting all formal, or refusing to speak with me, he welcomed me into his office where we talked with one another for a long time, and shared deeply. He even read me some of his poetry, and I read him mine. The takeaway from that meeting that I will never forget is his line "We learn to fail successfully." What a brilliant idea, to fail successfully!

Of course, that is what each of us who is growing older must do. Fail we will, but we can learn to do it gracefully and, as Boulding mentioned, successfully. Yet, no one ever said it would be easy. Aging has its problems. To borrow from the poet Robert Frost, "There is something that doesn't like" aging. That is an understatement.

Prejudice of any kind is hard to take, especially if you end up on the short end of the stick, and there is plenty of it to go around. Age and the elderly are a particularly easy target, one that each of us, if we are lucky to live long enough, will no-doubt encounter. We may never suffer racial or religious prejudice, but the shunning and ignoring of the aged we may well experience. It my recent 10-day retreat, I wrote a poem on just this topic.

MIXED MESSAGES

Now that I am old,
I carry,
Etched in my face,
A message of impermanence,
That anyone can read.

However,
If you will look,
Into the eyes,
Of my heart,
You will find that I am,

Forever young.

Please Don't Shoot the Messenger.

I had the very good fortune of working with a great spiritual teacher back in the 1960s. His name was Andrew Gunn Mclver and he had been a traveling Rosicrucian initiator. I met him at the very end of his life and he taught me deeply about who I was spiritually. In fact, as talkative as you know I am, I seldom said a word in his presence, and I would be with him for much of the day. When he died, I saw to his things, his burial, and even designed his headstone.

Andrew was in love with the Sun and he imprinted that love onto me. This explains the symbol of the Sun on his gravestone. Andrew Mclver was 82 years young when he died on April 9th, 1969. All I can say is that he was a perfect teacher, one who cast no shadow of any kind. He was a heavenly apparition that appeared in my life when I most needed him as a guide. He cared for me more than I know how to care for myself.

My point in mentioning Andrew is that he showed me by example how to grow old successfully. Heaven help you if you spoke to him as if he were just an old man. He was younger than you or I will ever be and the flame of his spirit was like a beacon for me.

There is one story about when the governor of Michigan was visiting Ann Arbor and shaking hands with anyone he could. For some reason, he spotted Andrew, approached him, stuck out his hand, and in a paternalistic obsequious way said to Andrew "How are you?" Andrew, with his brilliant blue eyes, looked back at the governor and said, "It is not 'how' you are, but 'who' you are that is important." The governor actually stepped back from the intensity of Andrew's glance.

So I know for a fact that we can go "gently into that goodnight," and I intend to do so. From your comments, it is wonderful to know that I have company in this!