



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

RUMInations on Ageing and Death

Barbara Thomborson © 17 November 2024

Ageing and death are two timeless themes, universal to our human experience. Our culture's near phobia about death has created unneeded anxiety and irrational fear about "passing on, passing away, kicking the bucket, giving up the ghost, breathing your last, losing your life, expiring (like a use-by date), or just plain croaking". That's a small sample of the euphemisms English has for dying. In her book *The Coming of Age*, Simone de Beauvoir says, "The vast majority of humankind looks upon the coming of old age with sorrow and rebellion. It fills them with more aversion than death itself".

Our youth-oriented culture has created another near phobia that tries to deny and defy ageing. Many people are obsessed with looking young, especially in media and entertainment. This has contributed to ageism, or prejudice against older people. Researchers have found that over the past 20 years, for more "mature" people, looking considerably younger than your age allows you to work longer and even have more choice in your employment.

Consider these industries profiting from our fear of looking older than we are: hair dyes, false eyelashes, painted eyebrows, plastic surgery, Botox, antiwrinkle creams, injections, pills, medicine patches, and potions. Most of these target skin conditions, especially the dreaded wrinkles. On the horizon is epigenetic reprogramming or longevity biotech to slow down our genes' natural ageing activity.

More than men, women feel the pressure to keep looking young and, no surprise, buy these products to keep the appearance of youth. In all my research on this topic, I never once read or heard that this is sexism; many women obviously have bought into it. It is certainly lookism- valuing people for their looks rather than their humanity or value they bring to the group. It is also oppression. The term lookism has been around since the 1970's. The Korean Webtoon "Lookism" had a following of 8.7 million fans in 2014, yet launching it on Netflix has been delayed for over 2 years, with flimsy excuses. If lookism is a new idea for you, it's worth integrating into your social awareness and values.

This photo of Jane Fonda at age 88 exemplifies most of the 10 products in the list.



I wish I looked half as good when I was **48!** Frankly, it just ain't natural. All this industry and activity to cheat ageing and dying stem from the related phobias and feed them as well. It obstructs a graceful acceptance of the natural progression of ageing and dying. It is certainly incompatible with finding the spiritual aspects of senescence and preparing for the whole experience of death – physical, emotional,

mental, and spiritual. We have only one chance at dying, and most of us will have enough warning to prepare for it, so let's make the most of it.

In the newsletter description of this service, I promised you words of sages on ageing and dying, not a rant on ageism, youth culture, and lookism. The 13th century Sufi mystic poet Rumi was my inspiration for this service. He wrote a lot about the process of death and its meaning. He says death is not merely the end of physical existence and can be a transformative journey towards spiritual enlightenment. For Rumi, death is metaphor of the physical body's impermanence and the soul's eternal nature. While he never professed to an afterlife, Rumi had a strong intuitive sense of somewhere that our spiritual energy goes after it leaves our physical bodies. In his Ode 911, he wrote,

“Death has nothing to do with going away.

The sun sets and the moon sets,

But they're not gone.

Death . . . Is a coming together.

The tomb looks like a prison, But it's really release Into Union.

Your mouth closes here And immediately opens

With a shout of joy there.”

In this excerpt from his poem *The Pickaxe*, Rumi advises us to accept the inevitability of loss and grieving that most of us will experience as we age:

Our death is a wedding with eternity.

The moment you accept what troubles you've been given, The door will open.

Don't run away from the grief, o soul,

Look for the remedy inside the pain.

Loss always involves death, but while we're living, death/loss events force us to learn and grow with acceptance and sometimes new possibilities. How we grow through senescence is often up to us. I knew people who, as they aged, only grew depressed, angry or bitter; they missed the chance to expand themselves to be deeper, wiser, more compassionate, mellower, even more spiritual. They could not make the most of that one chance to try to create a good death.

We **can** pass through or mitigate the despair and fear of ageing; our last years or days can bring **at least** a sense of completeness and self-acceptance. We can consolidate our experience and learning to use ageing as a process of sageing. Gay Luce, in her book *Longer Life, More Joy*, writes that "elderhood is a time to discover inner richness for self-development and inner growth. It is also a time of transition and preparation for dying, which is at least as important as preparation for a career or family. Out of this time come our sages, healers, prophets, and models for the generations to follow". I repeat her salient philosophy that elderhood "is also a time of transition and preparation for dying, which ...

I'll end this talk with a selection of quotes on ageing and dying:

Eleanor Roosevelt: Today is the oldest you've ever been, and the youngest you'll ever be again.

Leo Tolstoy: Man cannot possess anything as long as he fears death. . . . If there was no suffering, man would not know his limits, would not know himself.

Woody Allen: You can live to be a hundred if you give up all things that make you want to live to be a hundred.

Henri Nouwen: Befriending our death is a life-long spiritual task.

Bill Bryson: "There are only three things that can kill a farmer: lightning, rolling over in a tractor, and old age."

Franz Kafka: The meaning of life is that it stops.

And with that, I'll stop.

Meditation / Conversation starter

What are your biggest challenges in preparing to accept death and make the most of this one chance?

What do you think of Gay Luce's idea that preparation for dying is at least as important as preparing for a career or family?