

Turning Sixty

The Prime of Our Lives

Leigh Donaldson

Books have always had a strong influence on the way I look at life and my surroundings, so when I ran across a copy of “Sixty: A Diary of My Sixty-First Year/The Beginning of the End, or the End or the End of the Beginning?” by Canadian author Ian Brown, I felt I had hit pay dirt. The long title itself captured my personal angst.

Beyond its reflective and heart-warming honesty, the book’s greatest gift is the author’s embracing of the universality of aging; the creaking joints, memory lapses, social invisibility and especially the emotional conflicts growing older causes so many of us, but also how it can be cherished as a lifeline. Instead of preparing for the “quiet years,” Brown, like many of us, gives voice and power to aging and how our strengths can be shared to benefit others around us. While we have little control over how long we shall live, we do have the upper hand on what we do while alive.

It must be a very different experience for each individual when 60 or more years have gone by. For some, it is gradual, for others it’s a sudden jolt, and for people like me, a slow walk up or down the stairs of a classroom building when I returned to college to pursue an associate degree in business administration at a community college. Twenty-year-olds, plus or minus a few years, raced up and down the steps, mostly ignoring me. Yet many offered looks of sympathy and concern. “Excuse me sir. Can I open the door for you?”

“No, thank you, you go ahead. I’ll be just fine.”

I was variously asked by the younger generation if I was someone’s parent, the new instructor in the African-American studies department, with apologies for having to be late for my class, as well as being told by an elderly jogger that “You’re too old to be in school!” These weren’t mean-spirited observations, but not necessarily comforting ones either.

My status as a so-called non-traditional student had a great deal to do with the fact that I didn’t look like the fresh-faced post-adolescents featured in the college brochures. Even with a lingering baby-face, at 61, I clearly don’t appear to still be living in my parents’ house and am certainly past being dormitory material. Yet, my age gives me a certain confidence. At least I’ve learned the hard way how to be resourceful, and focus on the task at hand.

My experience and cultural knowledge is broader. Like many older people, I tend to have a firmer grasp of what I want and especially what I *don’t* want out of life. I’ve held down jobs and paid bills. In most cases, the choices I make are at least informed and directed. I can more often cut through red administrative tape and solve problems with the bigger picture in mind. I’ve been there and done that. However, I am always open to the fresh ideas that many young people continue to have.

Billie Burke, an accomplished stage and film actor, was perhaps destined to be remem-

bered for her role in the 1939 classic film, “The Wizard of Oz,” as the vivacious Glinda, the Good Witch of the North. Few of us realize that she was 54 years old when she played the role. One of her most memorable quotes is: “Age is something that doesn’t matter, unless you are a cheese.”

“You’re never too old,” said blues singer Alberta Hunter. “As long as you’ve got a mind, as long as you’re willing to think, as long as you’re willing to work, help yourself and help others, there’s no age limit.”

Ageism, found in all cultures, remains a troubling social obstacle, along with racism, sexism, classism, anti-Semitism and homophobia, as it continues to stereotype and marginalize people. Yet, all younger people will get older as time goes by. The aging process is still joked about or avoided entirely, while being consistently associated with ill-health, dementia, depression, anxiety and so on. “Long in the tooth,” “over the hill,” “past her sell by date,” “old dogs can’t learn new tricks,” are among the many socially acceptable jibs linked to aging. Most societies are still obsessed with youth, good looks and physical stamina and have ambivalent notions about older people.

Age bias is especially exhibited in the work force. Employers pass over older job candidates for younger ones because they want ‘new blood.’ Older workers are systematically turned down for promotions and often targeted for early retirement plans. Many employers still perceive older workers as potentially less productive, unwilling or even incapable of learning new skills especially related to technology and too expensive to keep on their payrolls.

In America, the Age Discrimination Act was established in 1967 to protect certain applicants

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and employees 40 years of age or older from discrimination based on age in hiring practices, promotion, discharge, compensation, or terms, conditions or privileges of employment. These laws stipulate that an employer cannot fire, refuse to hire or treat you differently because of your age. Job advertisements and recruiting materials must not mention age preferences and training programs are not allowed to have age limits.

In short, age may not be a decision factor regarding pay, promotion or layoffs. Employers cannot

take action against workers who charge age discrimination in court. And, with some exceptions, employers aren’t allowed to force employees to retire at a certain age.

“Baby boomers” started off as a phrase that characterized the peaks in birth-rates in the US and UK. It has since exploded into a reference point for economic, social, political and demographic changes throughout the globe. Baby boomers have survived postwar generations and nearly 10,000 will turn 60 every day for the next 15 years. We seasoned souls are alternatively described as being healthier, wealthier, and occasionally wiser than previous generations, if not very useful otherwise. We often are also said to be more informed, rebellious, and anti-establishment, even in our maturity.

Advancements and innovations in health care, medicine and technology have made it possible for people in our age range to anticipate a longer life span. There are better diagnostic tests available, more information about nutrition, and medications. Baby boomers, for the most part, also didn’t have to live through the Great Depression, World War II and the Korean War, not that we haven’t had to witness our share of pain, hardship, corruption political

upheavals and inhumanity. Far from it.

In 1970, a charismatic woman named Maggie Kuhn, disgruntled about being forced to retire from her career with the Presbyterian Church at age 65, spearheaded the Gray Panthers, a grassroots activist organization that would inspire older people to seize more control over their lives and be instrumental in significant national reforms involving nursing homes, forced retirement provisions, pension rights, age discrimination and health-care fraud against the elderly. They also co-sponsored the Black House Conference on Aging to call attention to the lack of African-Americans involved with the first White House Conference on Aging, and joined students in opposition to the Vietnam War.

“Leave safety behind. Put your body on the line. Stand before the people you fear and speak your mind, even if your voice shakes,” she is quoted as saying to enthusiastic crowds.

In 2010, I attended The Age Boom Academy, a weeklong seminar in New York, sponsored by the International Longevity Center (ILC) at Columbia University, the New York Times, Atlantic Philanthropies and a variety of other organizations. The panelists and speakers who addressed our group of about 20 writers represented an exceptional range of institutions related to aging issues including the Elder Justice Coalition, the Alzheimer’s Drug Discovery Foundation, the US Department of Health & Human Services, Mt. Sinai School of Medicine’s Geriatrics & Adult Development Department and AARP.

From both a professional and personal viewpoint, the event was nothing short of a life-altering experience for me and most of my colleagues. The late Dr. Robert N. Butler, who was president of the ILC and founder of the National Institute on Aging, left us all, regardless of age or background, with a profound message about how vital it is that we must understand the stag-

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es of aging, take an active control of our physical health, sleep, exercise and eating habits, social interactions, mental and emotional well-being, in order to more fully enjoy the “bonus years ahead of us.”

The late vocalist, Phyllis Hyman recorded a song that remains a kind of anthem of perseverance. In “Prime of My Life,”

she gives extraordinary life to lyrics written by Preston and Gina Glass, such as: “It’s been a long time coming. Years I was running from my destiny. Finally found the direction. No need to fear rejection, now I have some faith in me.... Whatever the challenge... I’ll hold steady. If it’s love, if fortune, if fame. I’ll be ready...”

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Leigh Donaldson’s writing on international/national/regional politics, business, social issues, history, art, culture and travel have appeared in publications such as The Guardian US, Humanist Perspectives Magazine (Ottawa, ON), The Working Waterfront (ME), The Montreal Review, Gastronomica: The Journal of Food & Culture, Sojourners Magazine, The Greenwich Village Literary Review, Art Times Journal, American Legacy Magazine, Progressive Media Project, American Songwriter Magazine, and Portland Monthly Magazine.